

1991

Dominance, Marginality, and Subversion in French (Post)colonial Discourse.

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**Dominance, marginality, and subversion in French (post)
colonial discourse**

Chester, Suzanne Mary, Ph.D.

The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical Col., 1991

U·M·I

**300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106**

**DOMINANCE, MARGINALITY, AND SUBVERSION
IN FRENCH (POST) COLONIAL DISCOURSE**

A Dissertation

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
The Department of French and Italian**

**by
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August 1991**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines a selection of fictional texts by Marguerite Duras, André Gide, Assia Djebar and Tahar ben Jelloun. In my readings of these colonial and post-colonial narratives, I explore the textual strategies which transform marginalized positions based on colonialism, gender, sexual orientation and class into positions of dominance. In Gide and Duras, for example, this is evident in their complicity with dominant ideologies of colonialism. By contrast, the second section of the dissertation focuses on the oppositional strategies in the work of Djebar and ben Jelloun, two post-colonial writers from North Africa. Here, I analyze the ways in which the factors of gender and colonialism affect the "identity" of the post-colonial subject.

Introduction

Introduction

This dissertation will explore the relationship between positions of marginality and dominance, and the ways in which such positions are transformed, reinforced or subverted in fictional texts by Marguerite Duras, André Gide, Assia Djébar and Tahar ben Jelloun. All four writers lived, or live, in a colonial or post-colonial society, and their texts raise issues pertinent to the historical experience of colonialism from the perspective of both the colonizer and the colonized: Duras' early novel Un barrage contre le pacifique and her later work L'Amant, for instance, are both set in French colonial Indochina and represent the experience of colonialism from the point of view of a young, lower-class French girl raised in the colonies. Similarly, Le Vice-consul takes place within the French and British diplomatic enclave of colonial India; Gide's narrative L'Immoraliste portrays French colonial North Africa from the perspective of a traveler from the métropole. By contrast, the Algerian Assia Djébar's L'Amour, la fantasia and Ombre sultane are concerned with the history of French colonial domination as experienced by the colonized North African population, and with the cultural, linguistic and political problems of the post-colonial period. Like

Djebar, the Moroccan ben Jelloun is concerned with the effects of the imposition of the French language and culture on the colonized, and the consequent erosion of the identity of the Maghrebian peoples, issues which he explores in L'enfant de sable.

While the texts of all four writers constitute different forms of colonial discourse--the narrative of French colonialism and/or its legacy in the post-colonial period--they are of particular interest to me in that they not only represent the disenfranchised position of the colonized and the dominant position of the colonizer, but they also explore other forms of oppression--or in some cases privilege--based on gender, class and sexual orientation. My concern, then, is to explore the tensions between these positions, and the ways in which marginalized subject-positions are transformed in writing through recourse to ideologies which valorize and support positions of strength.

My dissertation also addresses questions concerning the relationship between autobiography and positions of marginality. Both Duras and Djebar themselves of this genre in their respective attempts to construct a position of strength for the sexual and/or cultural Other. While both Un barrage contre le pacifique and L'Amant draw on many autobiographical aspects of Duras' life in French Indochina, Duras' use of the autobiographical "I" in

L'Amant enables the narrator to create a position of dominance which radically transforms the representation of the objectified female protagonist in Un barrage. Central to my reading of L'Amant is the notion of the fictional, constructed character of autobiography, and the rhetorical strategies it deploys, as opposed to the traditional view that the genre offers a **true** representation of reality and lived experience. Likewise, Djébar's autobiography L'Amour, la fantasia is of interest to my project in as far as she makes use of certain textual strategies in order to contest and subvert the dominant narrative of French colonialism. Moreover, in exploring how Djébar's critique of the subjugation of women in Muslim society is central to the novelistic Ombre sultane, but peripheral to L'Amour, I maintain that this shift in emphasis is necessitated by an Arabic woman-writer's incursion into the autobiographical genre, and by the colonial politics of women's emancipation. In this fashion, I suggest that the autobiographical act does not offer unproblematic access to the real but is itself constructed by language and by the events of history.

The critical apparatus of my project combines a broad and varied range of theoretical approaches. For the most part, I draw on those elaborations of feminist, cultural and deconstructive theory which I consider most productive for an understanding of the relations between language,

history and the body. As far as cultural theory is concerned, Edward Said's Orientalism has been particularly influential in shaping my reading of the relationship between the historical enterprise of European colonialism, and "Orientalism", which he defines as the hegemonic discourse of colonialist and imperialist domination produced by the West about its cultural Other. My conception of a hegemonic discourse, like that of Said, draws on Gramsci's notion of hegemony. In Marxism and Literature, Raymond Williams elaborates on this as follows:

Hegemony is then not only the articulate upper level of "ideology", nor are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as "manipulation" and "indoctrination". It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and our assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. (110)

Such a notion of hegemony allows for an understanding of the coexistence of oppositional forms of politics within the dominant culture or political order--a point which is central to my own readings of different forms of oppositionality in Duras, Gide, Djébar and ben Jelloun.

The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society.... That is to say, alternative political and cultural emphases, and the many forms of opposition and struggle, are important not only in themselves but as indicative features of what the hegemonic process has in practice had to work to control.
(113)

Luce Irigaray, Eve Sedgwick, Teresa de Lauretis, and Alice Jardine are among the feminist theorists whose work informs my analysis of forms of oppositionality based on gender, and the imbrication of sexual politics with the politics of colonialism and decolonization. In Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un, Luce Irigaray addresses the economic exploitation of women. Through her reading of Marx, she argues that woman's subjection to man is due, in part, to her reduction to an object of economic exchange in capitalist society. Irigaray's theorization of the "prostitution" of women in patriarchal, capitalist society has enabled me to address the relations between women's experience of their bodies in such a society, and the ways in which writing reinforces, or subverts, this commodification of the female body. Likewise, Eve Sedgwick's notion of "homosociality" in Between Men was influential in shaping my reading of the exclusion of women in patriarchal society. Expanding on Heidi Hartmann's definition of patriarchy as "relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women," Sedgwick uses the term "homosociality" in order to posit a continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual. Indeed, Sedgwick maintains that "in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male

homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an active structural congruence" (25). This notion of homosociality is central to my own reading of the ideological homosexuality which informs Gide's L'Immoraliste. I have drawn upon de Lauretis' Technologies of Gender in my exploration of the relationship between the violence experienced by real women and the rhetorical violence deployed by Duras and by certain post-structuralist critics who read the female body as a metaphor or discursive trope, and thereby elide the referential suffering of women. In this connection, Jardine's Gynesis, with its exploration of the feminization of the notion of alterity in contemporary theories of modernity has been very suggestive.

Jacques Derrida's notion of "logocentrism" is central to my reading of Gide's legitimation of male homosexuality within a colonial situation. Derrida uses the term "logocentrism" to designate a metaphysical system of thought which posits the logos as the ultimate source of truth. According to Derrida, not only is Western philosophy logocentric in its desire for a self-present, identical truth, divinely guaranteed and inscribed in nature, but as a consequence it is structured by hierarchical, binary oppositions--nature/culture; male/female; activity/passivity--which deny the fact that

the trace of one term is always recoverable in the other. My reading of the masculinist ideology valorized by L'Immoraliste draws upon Hélène Cixous' insightful analysis of the solidarity between logocentrism and phallogentrism. According to Cixous, logocentrism depends on the exclusion of the difference represented by femininity in order to consolidate its own identity as self-presence. Likewise, because it stresses the necessity of deconstructing the logocentric notions which inform traditional conceptions of sexual and cultural identity in the Arab world, Abdelkebir Khatibi's Maghreb pluriel, itself informed by Derridean theory, has enriched my interpretation of ben Jelloun's L'enfant de sable.

Given the extensive range of Marguerite Duras' literary production which spans almost fifty years, Un barrage contre le pacifique (1950), Le Vice-consul (1965), and L'Amant (1984), need to be situated within the context of the larger oeuvre. The autobiographical novel of the fifties belongs to the earliest phase of Duras' work, a period when she drew on many of the conventions of the realist novel, namely--linear narrative, a clearly defined plot, in-depth character development and the overt discussion of political and social issues. Le Vice-consul, by contrast, must be considered in the context of the nouveau roman and the experimental forms also explored by Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Claude Simon and

Nathalie Sarraute. Typical of the nouveau roman is the way in which Le Vice-consul reduces action and character to a minimum, and replaces the chronological development and clearly defined frame of the realist novel with fragmented narrative, repetition and the erasure of textual boundaries. Although L'Amant returns to a more linear narrative, no doubt a factor which accounts in part for its enormous popular success, this text marks a new development in terms of genre. For the first time, Duras deploys the autobiographical "I" and rewrites the material dealing with her childhood in French Indochina, much of which had already been explored in Un Barrage and the theater script L'Eden Cinéma. At the same time, however, L'Amant refuses strict generic categorization as the "I" of autobiography shifts to the novelistic "she".

Although Duras' oeuvre includes many genres-- narrative, theatre, film--the same concerns recur throughout: feminine erotic desire and its relationship to violence and death, the haunting memories of the suffering of her childhood in colonial Indochina, and the themes of maternal loss, separation and abandonment, articulated through the recurring figure of the Indian beggarwoman. Un barrage, Le Vice-consul and L'Amant approach these themes in different ways, restaging them within a complex web of intertextual repetition.

Since Gide's L'Immoraliste, Tahar ben Jelloun's

L'enfant de sable, and Assia Djebar's L'Amour, la fantasia are set in colonial and post-colonial North Africa, the literary and historical context of their work can best be understood by considering the relationship of these texts to the larger body of literature dealing with the Maghreb, produced by writers indigenous to France, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Such literature can be divided into three broad categories: first, the "écrivains touristes" of the nineteenth and early twentieth century such as Flaubert, Nerval, and Maupassant. For these French writers, the "Orient" represented an exotic locale, an atmospheric land where one could find literary inspiration, and a place which lent itself to an exploration of the erotic. Indeed, as Edward Said notes, these "literary pilgrims" from France had a tendency to "equate the Orient with private fantasy" (176). It is in this category that Gide's confessional récit belongs, with Michel's discovery of his homosexuality attributed to the spontaneity and masculine vitality he associates with the North African landscape, a perception based on a private fantasy which later changes dramatically.

The second category includes the literary productions of French Algerians--the colons of French origin, born or living in Algeria. Albert Camus is undoubtedly the best-known of these authors, many of whom claimed to be committed to the creation of a regionalist literature.

Despite their claims however, they tended to ignore the history of the Maghreb and the Arab-Muslim heritage of the autochtone population. As Albert Memmi has noted, these writers seemed to be more concerned with exploring their own alienation from France than exploring the concerns of the Arab people. Typical of this are Camus' L'Etranger in which Mediterranean Algeria figures above all as a décor for an exploration of philosophical concerns--namely, Mersault's rejection of the values, attitudes and conventions of French colonial society--and his later novel La peste which, according to Camus himself, is an allegorical treatment of French collaboration during the German occupation of France.

The third category is the literature produced by autochtone Maghrebian writers writing in French between 1910 and the present. Whereas the works produced between 1910-50 emphasized the "ethnographic and folkloric aspects of North Africa, thereby appealing to the Frenchman's yearning for the exotic" (Monego 17), the literature produced after 1950 dealt with a broad range of political and social issues, and was considerably more innovative in form. While the period of the Algerian War of Independence saw the emergence of works which described the nationalist struggle with patriotic fervor, there was also an attempt to explore a national identity with its roots in ancestral myths, as in Kateb Yacine's Nedjma, a work which also

articulates bitter criticism of the violence of French colonialism.

During the years after the decolonization of Algeria, and the acquisition of political independence by the former French protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia, literary texts tended to focus on the future development of Islamic, North African society, and the direction this should take. While some writers continued to relive the heroic exploits of the war and to glorify their heritage, others, like Driss Chraïbi in La civilisation, ma mère (1972) were critical of the shortcomings of their own society, and inveighed against its hypocrisy, superstition and subjugation of women.

Much of the recent literature produced by Maghrebian writers has accorded a central place to the question of language, and the tensions inherent in writing in French, the tongue of the former colonizer. Abdelkebir Khatibi's Amour bilingue and Djébar's L'Amour, la fantasia are particularly concerned with this issue. Extending these linguistic concerns in a metaphoric sense, ben Jelloun's L'enfant de sable explores the languages of masculinity, femininity, and cultural identity, within the context of French colonialism and decolonization.

Despite their relatively small numbers, North African women writers were among the first writers to publish novels in French in the Maghreb. While Assia Djébar is the

best known of these women, Marguerite Taos from Tunisia, the Moroccan Khanata Bannûna, and Marguerite Taos and Zoubeida Bittari from Algeria, also published novels, short stories or essays during, or after, the period of French colonial domination. While these writers often drew upon autobiographical material, only Bittari and Djébar employed the "I" of autobiography. Central to all these texts is the exploration of broad social, political or personal issues--namely, "the relation of women to the question of Arab-French biculturalism, the problem of the solidarity of women, and the complex interrelation of women's liberation and Arab nationalism" (Accad 33).

Some, such as Taos in La rue des tambourins, and Djébar in La Soif, offer purely personal solutions to the social and cultural dilemmas which confront them as French-educated women in Arab, Muslim society; others, such as Bannûna in her nouvelles à thèse, and Djébar in Les enfants du nouveau monde and L'Amour, la fantasia, seek forms of resolution in the broader political context of Arab nationalism. Although their fictional treatment of these problems vary, most of these women writers opted for the same solution to the tensions between their French education and their status in Muslim society, and chose to live and write, at least temporarily, in France--a country which afforded them considerably more freedom than Algeria, Morocco or Tunisia.

Within the framework of my problematic, namely, the relationship between marginality and writing, I make the following arguments. In Chapter One, I submit that although the protagonist of L'Amant belongs to the dominant group of French colonials, her own subject-position is also defined by her gender and by her class, both of which marginalize her within colonial, patriarchal society. As I make clear, the rhetorical strategies which the narrator deploys in order to build a position of dominance for herself belong to the discourse of "Orientalism", and are used to subordinate her Chinese lover. With Gide, the textual dynamics are somewhat similar, as my reading of L'Immoraliste in Chapter Two makes clear. In order to legitimize male homosexuality--a position of relative disempowerment--the narrator of L'Immoraliste makes himself complicitous with oppressive ideologies of gender difference and colonialism, and takes advantage of his situation of economic privilege as a French colonial in North Africa. In Chapter Three, my analysis of Le Vice-consul draws attention to the fact that, despite its apparent decentering of the subject, Duras' text ends up maintaining the West in a dominant position as subject of knowledge, while simultaneously erasing the history of India's resistance to colonialism. This chapter also includes a critique of post-structuralist critics who, in their reading of the figures

of Anne-Marie Stretter and the beggarwoman, elide the materiality of the gendered body.

Chapters Four and Five focus on the oppositional strategies deployed by Djébar and ben Jelloun. In my reading of Djébar's L'Amour, la fantasia and Ombre sultane, my concern is to analyze how she negotiates the tensions of her double marginalization as a woman in post-colonial, Muslim society, and the problems of writing in the language of the colonizer. With ben Jelloun's L'enfant de sable, I take up the question of the relationship of cultural identity to sexual identity, suggesting the ways in which different forms of marginality, in this case oppressions based on gender and race, are structurally related. I argue that ben Jelloun's text suggests new paradigms of identity, both sexual and cultural, which go beyond logocentric, oppressive definitions of sexual identity, and avoid a mere reversal of the colonizer/colonized hierarchical opposition.

Section 1
French Colonial Narratives

Chapter 1
Writing the Subject: Eroticism/Exoticism
in Marguerite Duras' L'Amant and Un Barrage contre le
pacifique

Until now, the main body of critical work on Duras has explored the relationship between her writing and the category of the feminine--defined variously in cultural, linguistic and psychoanalytic terms.¹ However, the colonial aspect of Duras' work has been largely ignored and is, I argue, crucial to a reading of sexual difference and the construction of a gendered writing subject. This chapter will focus on Duras' representation of the particular power relations emerging from the confrontation of the female Other with the "exotic" Other in a French colonial situation. In my reading of Un barrage contre le pacifique and L'Amant, I will examine the relationship between structures of dominance and strategies of representation, especially as the latter pertain to autobiography.²

Since my analysis of Duras lays special emphasis on the notion of a gendered writing subject, my reading of colonial discourse is to be distinguished from Abdul JanMohamed's theory of "colonialist literature." Basing his analysis on Frantz Fanon's account of the Manichean structure of the colonizer/colonized relationship, JanMohamed identifies "colonialist literature"--writing

produced by the European colonizer--as a monolithic discourse constructed around the central trope he calls "Manichean allegory."³ He defines this trope as "a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object" (63).

While JanMohamed's approach is important in that it emphasizes the historical, social and political context of colonial discourse, his argument is ultimately reductive in so far as it suggests that colonial power is possessed entirely by the colonizer. As a result, it cannot account for the conflicting textual strategies occasioned by a split in the colonial writing subject, a split which may occur when this subject is a woman, and as such, already defined as the Other of patriarchal society. Because JanMohamed's analysis relies on an absolute opposition between colonizer and colonized, it cannot engage with what I consider the specificity of writing produced by certain women in a colonial society. I maintain that the factors of gender and class produce a split in the colonial writing subject which challenges the fixed opposition between subject and object and the stable process of othering central to JanMohamed's conception of "Manichean allegory."

Another pitfall in JanMohamed's approach to colonialist literature lies in its tendency, as Tzvetan Todorov has observed, "to elicit a similarly manichean interpretation, with good and evil simply having switched places; on your right the disgusting white colonialists; on your left the innocent black victims" (178). My analysis of two texts written by, and dealing with, the female Other in the patriarchal society of French colonial Indochina, examines how the intersection of gender and colonialism in Duras's writing avoids the trope of "Manichean Allegory," thereby generating readings which escape the moralistic tendencies of Manichean interpretation. In Un barrage and L'Amant, the factors of gender and class problematize the relationship of the colonizer to the colonized, and consequently the economy of colonial discourse as defined by JanMohamed.

Published in 1950, Un barrage is Duras' third novel. As she makes clear in interviews with Michelle Porte and Xavière Gauthier, this novel contains many autobiographical elements dealing with her childhood and adolescence in colonial Indochina. In 1914, Duras was born into the family of two French school teachers attracted to French Indochina by colonial propaganda, tales of exotica, and the promise of making their fortune. When Duras was four years old, her father died, leaving her mother with three young children. After teaching in a French colonial

school by day and playing the piano in a cinema by night for twenty years, the mother put all her savings into the purchase of a concession from the colonial cadaster. Realizing that the administration had deliberately allotted her an unworkable piece of land which was periodically flooded by the salt water of the Pacific, she employed a group of local peasants to help build a series of dams to prevent the sea from invading. After the collapse of the dams, the mother's anger and bitterness at her exploitation by the colonial administration plunged her into depression and near-insanity. Duras spent her first seventeen years in French Indochina, now southern Vietnam, and received her education in the Lycée de Saigon. In 1931, the family moved to Paris where Duras obtained degrees in law and in political science before embarking on her career as a writer.

As a roman à thèse, Un barrage is an ironic indictment of the French colonial administration, from its corrupt policy of allocating infertile concessions and its collusion with the colonial banks, speculators and property holders, to its callous refusal to alleviate the abject poverty of the indigenous population. The novel also contains an implicit critique of the status of women in patriarchal, colonial society, structured as it is around the endeavours of Suzanne's mother and brother to secure her marriage to a series of white colonial suitors:

Mr. Jo, son of a wealthy planter; John Barner, sales-representative for a cotton factory in Calcutta; and Jean Agosti, local pineapple farmer and opium smuggler.

L'Amant, published in 1984 and an international best-seller, explores the issues raised in Un barrage through an autobiographical account of Duras' childhood in Indochina and her relationship with her family. Centered around the affair Duras had with a Chinese man, L'Amant rewrites the cultural and sexual politics of Un barrage. This rewriting is exemplified by a shift from the representation of the protagonist as an object of prostitution and of male desire in Un barrage to the construction of a female subject with an active relationship to desire in L'Amant. Related to this transformation of the status of the female protagonist is the move from the overt anti-colonialism of Un barrage to the feminization and subordination of the exotic Other in L'Amant. An analysis of the representation of the female protagonist in Un barrage as an object of prostitution and of male desire provides the backdrop for an understanding of the subversive strategies at work in L'Amant. Un barrage is a narrative in which the protagonist has no active relationship to desire. As a commodity in a colonial, patriarchal society, Suzanne shares the characteristics of both virgin and prostitute, neither of whom has the right to her own pleasure.⁴ Suzanne's status

as a young girl with neither money nor looks emerges from the following exchange concerning plans for a visit to Ram, the capital city of the colony.

"Ce n'est pas ce soir qu'on ira à Ram," dit Suzanne.

"On ira demain," dit Joseph, "et c'est pas à Ram que tu trouveras, ils sont tous mariés, il y a qu'à Agosti."

"Jamais je ne la donnerai à Agosti," dit la mère, "quand même il me supplierait."

"Il ne demande pas mieux," dit la mère, "je sais ce que je dis, mais il peut toujours courir."

"Il ne pense même pas à elle," dit Joseph. "Ce sera difficile. Il y en a qui se marient sans argent, mais il faut qu'elles soient très jolies, et encore c'est rare." (35)

Occurring early in the novel, this exchange among Suzanne, her brother Joseph, and their mother establishes class as one of the determining factors in the quest to find a husband for Suzanne. It also points to important hierarchies within the dominant group of white colonialists. Since the family's poverty severely limits their choice, the chances of finding Suzanne a suitable husband are slim. What emerges from this conversation is that the mother and Joseph will ultimately decide whom Suzanne will marry. Therefore, although the father is absent from the novel, his traditional function within patriarchal society as the one who controls the daughter's sexuality, is assumed by the mother and the older brother.

Once Mr. Jo falls in love with Suzanne, her status is radically transformed from that of a liability to that of

a highly lucrative asset. As the only son of a rich colonial speculator, Mr. Jo represents a potential source of enormous wealth for the family. Consequently, the mother does everything in her power to expedite his marriage to her daughter. Referring to Mr Jo's daily visits to the house to see Suzanne, the narrator observes: "Ces tête-à-tête enchantaient la mère. Plus ils duraient et plus elle espérait. Et si elle exigeait qu'ils laissent la porte du bungalow ouverte, c'était pour ne laisser à M. Jo aucune issue que le mariage à l'envie très forte qu'il avait de coucher avec sa fille" (68).

The mother recognizes the role Mr Jo's desire plays in the family's quest for a suitable husband. Such desire is the basis upon which a daughter's value is established, as Luce Irigaray argues in her elaboration of the commodified status of women in patriarchal society. Since a woman's value in society lies in her capacity to be exchanged, her value is not intrinsic to her but is a reflection of a man's desire/need for her: "La valeur d'échange de deux signes, deux marchandises, deux femmes, est une représentation des besoins-désirs de sujets consommateurs-échangeurs: elle ne leur est en rien 'propre'" (176). This dynamic is clearly at work in the bathroom scene in Un barrage. As Suzanne prepares to take a shower in the bathroom, the frustrated and pathetic Mr. Jo begs her to open the door and show him her naked body.

While her first reaction to Mr. Jo's entreaty is a decisive refusal, Suzanne gradually begins to wonder if her body is not, after all, intended to gratify the male gaze.

Il avait très envie de la voir. Quand même c'était là l'envie d'un homme. Elle, elle était là aussi, bonne à être vue, il n'y avait que la porte à ouvrir. Et aucun homme au monde n'avait encore vu celle qui se tenait là derrière cette porte. Ce n'était pas fait pour être caché mais au contraire pour être vu et faire son chemin de par le monde, le monde auquel appartenait quand même celui-là, ce M. Jo." (73)

Suzanne is on the point of opening the door when Mr. Jo promises to give her a new record player. Realizing that he is trying to prostitute her, she opens the door only to spit on his face.

Although the young girl rebels against this overt prostitution of her body, she does not recognize that the marriage which is being arranged for her is an institutionalized form of prostitution orchestrated by her mother and Joseph. Thus, despite her initial rebellion, Suzanne comes to appreciate the value of her body when Mr. Jo, his humiliation notwithstanding, presents her with the promised record player. While a glimpse of her body was enough to secure the record-player, the sexual favors demanded and the rewards offered begin to increase in direct proportion. Next, Mr. Jo promises her a diamond in exchange for a three-day visit to the city with him. Suzanne's perception of her body as a valuable entity temporarily blinds her to the alienation inherent in her

new commodified status: "C'était grâce à elle qu'il était maintenant là, sur la table. Elle avait ouvert la porte de la cabine de bains, le temps de laisser le regard malsain et laid de M. Jo pénétrer jusqu'à elle et maintenant le phonograph reposait là, sur la table" (76).

Similarly, in L'Amant, the narrator repeatedly acknowledges the ways in which the white colonial woman becomes the object of the gaze and desire of both the indigenous and colonial male: "J'ai déjà l'habitude qu'on me regarde. On regarde les blanches aux colonies, et les petites filles de douze ans aussi. Depuis trois ans, les blancs aussi me regardent dans les rues et les amis de ma mère me demandent gentiment de venir goûter chez eux à l'heure où leurs femmes jouent au tennis au Club Sportif" (26). Her awareness of the objectification of the white woman by the male gaze of both colonizer and colonized indicates that sexual difference functions in a particular way in a colonial situation.

While the narrator of L'Amant alludes to the male gaze which constructs the young girl as an object of desire, Un barrage vividly stages the negativity of her self-alienation and indicates that, far from being in the dominant position of the subject, as JanMohamed's argument implies, the lower-class white colonial woman is objectified and prostituted by the male gaze. This self-alienation emerges clearly when Suzanne goes to the

colonial capital to sell Mr. Jo's diamond. Carmen, the resident prostitute in the Hotel Central, suggests that, since her marriage prospects are limited by the family's poverty, Suzanne earn her living through prostitution, thereby forcing on the young girl a certain image of her precarious status. Unaware of the class divisions within the colonial capital, Suzanne wanders alone through the fashionable district, attracting the attention of the wealthy white residents and unwittingly making a spectacle of herself: "On la regardait. On se retournait, on souriait. Aucune jeune fille de son âge ne marchait seule dans les rues de haut quartier" (185). Furthermore, as Suzanne walks through the white, upper-class district, her consciousness of herself as an object of another's gaze causes her to see herself as she believes others see her: "Plus on la remarquait, plus elle se persuadait qu'elle était scandaleuse, un objet de laideur et de bêtise intégrale (185). Finally, the price of being the object of the male gaze results in the fracturing of any residual sense of identity as Suzanne's perception of her body now centers around its fragmentation, each part an object of shame, revulsion and ridicule⁵: "C'était elle, elle qui était méprisable des pieds à la tête. A cause de ses yeux, où les jeter? A cause de ses bras de plomb, ces ordures, à cause de ce coeur, une bête indécente, de ces jambes incapables" (187).

Subjectivity is further denied to the protagonist of Un barrage as a result of the omniscient narrator who, like the proverbial fly-on-the-wall, effaces its own subject position within the text while aligning the reader with its disembodied point of view. Although there is an implicit critique of the objectification of the young girl, the omniscient narrator also contributes to her objectified status by remaining a hidden observer of this process. Duras' use of a realistic, novelistic convention which depends on an unproblematic narratorial gaze makes both narrator and reader of Un barrage complicitous in the voyeurism which objectifies the female protagonist.

JanMohamed's "Manichean allegory" is further problematized by the class divisions within white colonial society--divisions which reveal the structures of dominance which exist within that society. In Un barrage, Suzanne's body becomes the site of the class conflict between her family and the colonial powers. When Suzanne's brother Joseph refuses to allow Mr. Jo to have sex with her before marriage, he is not interested in the morality of the issue but in the measure of power such an interdiction affords the family. Helpless in the face of the colonial powers which have thwarted them, namely the administration and the banks, their only remaining power lies in the control of Suzanne's body. By forbidding her to sleep with this wealthy planter's son, Suzanne's

mother, situated at the bottom of the colonial hierarchy, finds a way to avenge herself psychologically on the whole colonial system. Joseph brazenly tells Mr. Jo where they stand on the issue of his sister's sexuality: "C'est pas qu'on l'empêche de coucher avec qui elle veut, mais vous, si vous voulez coucher avec elle, faut que vous l'épousiez. C'est notre façon à nous de vous dire merde" (96).

This censorship of Suzanne's relationship to her body reaches a climax when her mother physically beats her, refusing to believe she has not slept with Mr. Jo in exchange for the diamond he has given her. In fact, it is this diamond which really arouses the mother's wrath, since for her it symbolizes an object which has no use value, only exchange value: "Il n'y a rien de plus dégoûtant qu'un bijou. Ca sert à rien. Et ceux qui les portent n'en ont pas besoin, moins besoin que n'importe qui" (135). The mother's revulsion at the diamond is related to her ambivalent feelings about her own part in the prostitution of her daughter, feelings which alternate between shame at handing her daughter over to Mr. Jo who epitomizes the worst aspects of the dominant white colonials, and pride in the economic rewards which result from the relationship. The mother's ambivalence is symptomatic of her own alienated position within this colonial society since it is the family's impoverishment--

a direct result of colonial corruption--which predisposes her to use Suzanne's body as bait to lure Mr. Jo into a marriage with her daughter.⁶

As an object of pure exchange value, the diamond symbolizes the commodification of the daughter by a society in which a woman's value is realized in exchange. The final sale of the diamond at the end of the novel coincides with Suzanne's first experience of sexual pleasure with Agosti, the local pineapple farmer, an experience which is above all a "useful" one in bringing to an end the circuit of exchange, violence and prostitution in which the young girl has been involved.

La mère le savait. Sans doute pensait-elle que c'était **utile** à Suzanne. Elle n'avait pas tort. Ce fût pendant ces jours-là, entre la promenade au champs d'ananas et la mort de la mère que Suzanne désapprit enfin l'attente imbécile des autos des chasseurs, les rêves vides." (357; emphasis mine)

However, Suzanne's sexual pleasure with Agosti is itself a direct result of the mother's authority in relation to her daughter's sexuality: "Pourtant ils avaient fait l'amour ensemble tous les après-midi depuis huit jours jusqu'à hier encore. Et la mère le savait, elle les avait laissés, le lui avait donné pour qu'elle fasse l'amour avec lui" (360). While Un barrage ends with the sexual awakening of the protagonist, her life remains circumscribed by the desires and authority of her mother, lover, and brother. After the death of the mother, Suzanne must choose between remaining with Agosti or leaving with

Joseph.

"Ca n'a pas d'importance qu'elle soit avec moi ou un autre, pour le moment," dit brusquement Agosti.

"Je crois que ça n'a pas tellement d'importance," dit Joseph, "elle n'a qu'à décider."

Agosti s'était mis à fumer, il avait un peu pâli.

"Je pars, lui dit Suzanne, je ne peux pas faire autrement." (365)

Although the protagonist of Un barrage achieves some small degree of autonomy, and a real, if circumscribed, relationship to sexual pleasure, the overriding emphasis of the novel, both formally and thematically, is on the young girl's body as the site of domination by both colonizer and colonized, and on the marginalized position of the lower-class, white colonial woman.

More than thirty years later, Duras rewrote the autobiographical material of Un barrage, this time availing herself of the possibilities offered by the autobiographical "I" in order to establish her own subjectivity and an active relationship to desire. In 1984, L'Amant appeared--the "exotic, erotic autobiographical confession" which, I maintain, radically transforms the subordinate status of the female protagonist of Un barrage.⁷ Given that some critics regard the genre of L'Amant as ambiguous, vacillating as it does between a confessional mode in the first person, and novelistic narration in the third person, I will first suggest a reading of the text which resolves what Sharon

Willis calls "the text's doubleness" and its refusal "to be pinned to the conventional confessional or fictional modes" (5).

The narrator of this text both adheres to and transgresses the conventions of confessional autobiography. On the one hand, in typical modernist fashion, she points to the impossibility of transposing her life into a story with a consistent identity at its center, saying: "L'histoire de ma vie n'existe pas. Ça n'existe pas. Il y a de vastes endroits où l'on fait croire qu'il y avait quelqu'un, ce n'est pas vrai, il n'y avait personne" (14). The use of the novelistic third person is also evidence of Duras's departure from a traditional, autobiographical mode, a point I shall return to later.

On the other hand, the text is presented as a traditional autobiography in that its goal is the seemingly unproblematic reconstruction of personal identity. Alluding to Un barrage in her reference to the autobiographical content of her previous work, Duras indicates her intention to fill in the blanks, and restore the omissions necessitated by the conditions of her life as a writer at that time.

L'histoire d'une toute petite partie de ma jeunesse, je l'ai plus ou moins écrite déjà, enfin je veux dire, de quoi l'apercevoir, je parle de celle-ci justement, de celle de la traversée du fleuve. Ce que je fais ici est différent, et pareil. Avant j'ai parlé des périodes claires, de celles qui étaient

éclairées. Ici je parle des périodes cachées de cette même jeunesse, de certains enfouissements que j'aurais opérés sur certains faits, sur certains sentiments, sur certains événements. J'ai commencé à écrire dans un milieu qui me portait très fort à la pudeur. (14)

Despite the narrator's claims of merely elucidating what had previously been concealed, Duras' rewriting of this "one small part" of her youth radically transforms her own subject position within the economy of sexual desire.

By designating herself as the subject of L'Amant, Duras avails herself of the autobiographical "I" in order to realize her own subjectivity. As Emile Benveniste has observed, language provides the possibility of subjectivity because it is language that enables the speaker to posit herself as "I", the subject of discourse.⁸ Instead of being subjected to the voyeuristic gaze of the omniscient narrator/reader, Duras claims control over the representation of her body, transforming it into an active display of her life as spectacle. Referring to the image of herself as a young girl, Duras writes: "Elle aurait pu exister, une photographie aurait pu être prise, comme une autre, ailleurs, dans d'autres circonstances. Mais elle ne l'a pas été.... C'est à ce manque d'avoir été faite qu'elle doit sa vertu, celle de représenter un absolu, d'en être justement l'auteur" (17).

Duras's image of herself is thus likened to a non-existent photograph. It is this non-existent photograph which allows Duras to create her own image of herself, an

image in which "I" and "me" coincide and subjectivity is realized:⁹ "C'est entre toutes celle qui me plaît de moi-même, celle où je me reconnais, où je m'enchante" (9).

Whereas the reader of Un barrage is aligned with the disembodied point of view of the omniscient narrator, the reader of L'Amant, by contrast, is a spectator whose presence and gaze are actively solicited. "Regardez-moi" (16), commands the narrator as she constructs a new image which replaces the negative self-alienation of the young girl in Un barrage.¹⁰

The narrative vacillation between "I" and "she" which occurs at different points in the text has provided some critics with evidence of the failure of the narrator's search for identity. Sarah Capitanio, for example, argues as follows:

Quant à la focalisée toutefois, sa désignation comme 'elle' à ce moment marque une séparation définitive entre elle et la narratrice et, par là, la non-résolution de cette recherche si fondamentale. (18)

I read the question of narrative identity differently: the autobiographical "I" allows Duras to posit an identity between the narrator of L'Amant, the young girl in the non-existent photo, and the protagonist of Un barrage, thereby enabling her to reconstitute an identity fragmented by her experience as a white woman in the colonies. By designating herself alternately by the pronouns "I" and "she," Duras in fact undermines the objectification to which she was subjected. She

appropriates the masculine position of the observer and, as we shall see, she rewrites the traditionally feminized position of the observed. In the following description, for instance, the actions of the Chinese man, later to become her lover, take place as though before the eye of a moving camera. Through this discursive strategy, the narrator ultimately appropriates the position of the mastering gaze as she watches the man from Cholon watching the young girl: "L'homme élégant est descendu de la limousine, il fume une cigarette anglaise. Il regarde la jeune fille au feutre d'homme et aux chaussures d'or. Il vient vers elle lentement" (42).

In the narrative shift to the third person, the young girl is also designated in the way white, colonial society perceives her; that is, as "the little white slut". However, through the device of reported speech, Duras subverts the tone and meaning of the original utterance by permeating the reported speech with her own ironic intonation.¹¹

Quinze ans et demi. La chose se sait très vite dans le poste de Sadec. Rien que cette tenue dirait le déshonneur. La mère n'a aucun sens de rien, ni celui de la façon d'élever une petite fille. La pauvre enfant. Ne croyez pas, ce chapeau n'est pas innocent, ça veut dire, c'est pour attirer les regards, l'argent. Les frères, des voyous. On dit que c'est un Chinois, le fils du milliardaire, la villa du Mékong, en céramiques bleues. Même lui, au lieu d'en être honoré, il n'en veut pas pour son fils. Famille de voyous blancs.... Cela se passe dans le quartier mal famé de Cholen. Chaque soir, cette petite vicieuse va se faire caresser le corps par un sale Chinois millionnaire. (108-10)

By drawing attention to the clichéd speech, dogmatic world-view, and racist doxa of colonial society, Duras undercuts its tone of scandalized self-righteousness.

The representation of her lover as the exotic Other constitutes the second discursive strategy which enables Duras to appropriate the position of the subject. This construction of subjectivity is inextricably linked to her position of domination and power as she constructs it in relation to the Chinese man. In L'Amant, the narrative strategies which effect the subordination of the cultural Other belong to what Edward Said terms the discourse of "Orientalism."¹² The most significant of these strategies are: the eroticization of the exotic; the feminization of the figure of the Other; and the representation of the Orient as an ontological and unchanging essence. The Orient of L'Amant figures as a set of topoi which Duras deploys for aesthetic and personal/political reasons. Thus, her exploitation of Orientalist discourse is instrumental in the textual transformation of the subordinate status of the poor, white woman in French colonial, patriarchal society and the construction of a female subjectivity. Although L'Amant exemplifies many aspects of "Orientalism," the text is not structured by the "Manichean allegory" that JanMohamed sees at the heart of colonialist literature. Rather, Duras' inscription of many of the themes of Orientalist discourse is in service

to the constitution of a subject position for the female protagonist of Un barrage who, although she belongs to the group of French colonizers, is already defined as object/Other.

The eroticization of the exotic--figured by Indochina and the lover's Chinese heritage--is a key element of Duras' text. In Orientalism, Said identifies the association of sex with the Orient as a persistent motif in orientalist discourse (18). The formal structure of the text reflects the binary opposition of intellect and sensuality which informs the representation of Europe and the Orient. While the erotic theme dominates in Indochina, intellectual and political affairs take place in France.

While Mr. Jo in Un barrage and the man from Cholon in L'Amant represent two different versions of "the rich man in the black limousine," the transformation of the European Mr. Jo into an Asian is particularly important. By making the lover a Chinese man, Duras takes advantage of the erotic topoi associated with the Orient. Indeed, the exotic and the erotic are so inextricably merged in the text that even Duras' French schoolfriend, Hélène Lagonelle, is imbued with Eastern eroticism. As object of the young girl's homoerotic desire, Hélène is "orientalized" through association with the Chinese lover: "Je la vois comme étant de la même chair que cet homme de Cholen....Hélène Lagonelle, elle est la femme de cet homme

de peine qui me fait la jouissance si abstraite, si dure, cet homme obscur de Cholen, de la Chine. Hélène Lagonelle est de la Chine" (92). Here, the geographical referent, China, disappears and is appropriated as a trope for the private, sexual fantasy of the narrator. Nor is it insignificant that this orientalized body provokes fantasies of sadistic power: "[Hélène Lagonelle] donne envie de la tuer, elle fait se lever le songe merveilleux de la mettre à mort de ses propres mains" (91). Similarly, the conflation of the erotic with the exotic, and the related dynamic of sexual domination, are implicit in the narrator's incestuous desire for her younger brother, whose body she compares to that of an Indian servant: "Même le petit corps de petit coolie de mon petit frère disparaît face à cette splendeur" (89).

A similar configuration of power and desire is suggested by the feminization of the Chinese lover. This feminization results from the description of his body and his role during sex. In the former, the emphasis is on traditional markers of femininity: smooth skin, fragile physique and hairless body. The only sign of virility, the penis, is undermined by the lover's inability to carry through the initial seduction: "La peau est d'une somptueuse douceur. Le corps. Le corps est maigre, sans force, sans muscles. Il pourrait avoir été malade, être en convalescence, il est imberbe, sans virilité autre que

celle du sexe, il est très faible, il paraît être à la merci d'une insulte, souffrant" (49). Far from being a passive object of this man's desire, the young girl orchestrates and controls her initiation into sex and pleasure: "Il lui plaît. la chose ne dépendait que d'elle seule.... Elle lui dit qu'elle ne veut pas qu'il lui parle, que ce qu'elle veut c'est qu'il fasse comme d'habitude il fait avec les femmes qu'il emmène dans sa garçonnière.... Elle lui dit ne ne pas bouger. Laisse-moi. Elle dit qu'elle veut le faire elle. Elle le fait. Elle le déshabille" (48-50). The act of penetration, traditionally associated with activity and virility, is reduced to an elliptic "Et pleurant il le fait" (50), with the emphasis more on his feminine tears than on the act of penetration itself.

The lover's feminization also results from his position in relation to the discourse of love. As Roland Barthes has noted in Fragments d'un discours amoureux, this discourse has historically been elaborated by Woman in the absence of her beloved: "Historiquement, le discours de l'absence est tenu par la Femme: la Femme est sédentaire, l'Homme est chasseur, voyageur; la Femme est fidèle (elle attend), l'homme est coureur (il navigue, il drague)" (Barthes, 20). In Duras' text, these roles are exchanged: the female protagonist speaks from the place of desire, and the Chinese lover elaborates that of love and

passion (passion as suffering): "Il a commencé à souffrir là, dans la chambre, pour la première fois, il ne ment plus sur ce point. Il lui dit que déjà il sait qu'elle ne l'aimera jamais....Il dit qu'il est seul, atrocement seul avec cet amour qu'il a pour elle" (48). Moreover, the young girl's identification with the transgressive behaviour of the woman of Vinhlong, the adulterous wife of a French diplomat, reinforces this exchange of roles. Whereas both "la Dame du Vinhlong" and "la petite blanche" experience intense sexual pleasure with their respective lovers, the suffering of the "young man from Savannaket" is so great that he kills himself when the older woman leaves him.

Similarly, the fickleness of the traditional male lover is transposed onto the narrator as a young girl as the Chinese man anticipates her future unfaithfulness: "Il dit qu'il a su tout de suite, dès la traversée du fleuve, que je serais ainsi, après son premier amant, que j'aimerais l'amour, il dit qu'il sait déjà que lui je le tromperai et aussi que je tromperai tous les hommes avec qui je serai" (54).

This reversal of the gendered economy of the discourse of love is also effected by the shift in roles related to the traditional departure.

Les départs. C'était toujours les mêmes départs.
C'était toujours les premiers départs sur les mers.
La séparation d'avec la terre s'était toujours faite
dans la douleur et le même désespoir, mais ça n'avait

jamais empêché les hommes de partir, les juifs, les hommes de la pensée et les purs voyageurs du seul voyage sur la mer, et ça n'avait jamais empêché non plus les femmes de les laisser aller, elles qui ne partaient jamais, qui restaient garder le lieu natal, la race, les biens, la raison d'être du retour. (132)

Whereas men were traditionally the ones who left, it is the female protagonist of L'Amant who sails away on the boat to France, and leaves behind her lover. In this way, the narrator also usurps the position of the man who travels, leaving behind a woman who suffers from his absence. With the gendered roles reversed, it is now the Chinese man who occupies the feminine position of the one who waits and suffers: "Il s'ensuit que dans tout homme qui parle l'absence de l'autre, **du féminin** se déclare: cet homme qui attend et qui en souffre, est miraculeusement féminisé" (Barthes, 20). Furthermore, the father's authority over his son and his refusal to allow him to marry "the little white slut" place the Chinese man in the feminine position of the women entrusted with the care of the domestic hearth and the perpetuation of the race. Reinforcing the young girl's position of dominance as she constructs it in relation to her lover is her explicit identification with the authority of his father: "Alors je lui ai dit que j'étais de l'avis de son père. Que je refusais de rester avec lui" (103). Later, the narrator confirms the finality of the young girl's decision: "L'homme de Cholen sait que la décision de son père et celle de l'enfant sont les mêmes et qu'elles sont sans

appel"(119). In this manner, Duras' text constructs a subordinate position for the Chinese lover through a variety of textual strategies which contribute to his feminization. By placing him in the traditionally subordinate feminine position, Duras appropriates a position of dominance for herself.

This configuration of power is also related to the racial politics of the text. The transformation of the European Mr. Jo of Un barrage into "the man from Cholon" in L'Amant is significant in that race is integral to the balance of power in the relationship. Although the young girl prostitutes herself to the Chinese man, and thereby places herself in what is typically a subordinate position, the fact that he does not belong to white colonial society relegates him to the subordinate position in the eyes of her family, who maintain their sense of superiority by believing the girl is only sleeping with the "Chinese scum" for his money. The young girl's failure to disabuse her family of their assumption that she is with the Chinese man for his money only, allows her to continue to enjoy the intense sexual pleasure she enjoys in her relations with him.¹³

Mes frères ne lui adresseront jamais la parole. C'est comme s'il n'était pas visible pour eux, comme s'il n'était pas assez dense pour être perçu, vu, entendu par eux. Cela parce qu'il est à mes pieds, qu'il est posé en principe que je ne l'aime pas, que je suis avec lui pour l'argent, que je ne peux pas l'aimer, que c'est impossible, qu'il pourrait tout supporter de moi sans être jamais au bout de cet amour. Cela,

parce que c'est un Chinois, que ce n'est pas un blanc. (65)

Although the narrator exposes and denounces her complicity as a young girl in her brothers' exploitation of the Chinese man, it is troubling to note that she reinscribes this exploitation through the discursive strategies she deploys in her own representation of her Asian lover. Belonging to the discourse of "Orientalism," these strategies reinforce the subordinate racial status of the "man from Cholon."

Moreover, the lover's superior economic status--that which enables him to "colonize" the young white girl through prostitution--is specifically connected to his Chinese origins. The wealth of "the man from Cholon" is tarnished through his association with the colonial history of the Chinese in Indochina, and their continuing financial exploitation of the the French colony. By drawing attention to the colonialist activities of the father, and his son's complicitous attitude, the narrator transforms the superior economic power of her lover into a position of moral inferiority.

Je lui demande de me dire comment son père est riche, de quelle façon. Il dit que parler d'argent l'ennuie, mais que si j'y tiens il veut bien me dire ce qu'il sait de la fortune de son père. Tout a commencé à Cholen, avec les compartiments pour indigènes. Il en a fait construire trois cents. Plusieurs rues lui appartiennent.... La population ici aime bien être ensemble, surtout cette population pauvre, elle vient de la campagne et elle aime bien vivre aussi dehors, dans la rue. Et il ne faut pas détruire les habitudes des pauvres. (60-61)

In L'Amant, the significance of the gaze further reinforces the Chinese man's subordinate position, as constructed by the narrator. Duras rewrites the semiotics of the gaze by transforming the negative associations of the gaze, which subordinates and reifies its object in Un barrage, into an action which signifies the recognition of the value of the other in L'Amant. Referring to the hostile relations within her family, the narrator observes:

C'est une famille en pierre, pétrifiée dans une épaisseur sans accès aucun. Chaque jour nous essayons de nous tuer, de tuer. Non seulement on ne se parle pas mais on ne se regarde pas. Du moment qu'on est vu, on ne peut pas regarder. Regarder c'est avoir un mouvement de curiosité vers, envers, c'est déchoir. Aucune personne regardée ne vaut le regard sur elle. Il est toujours déshonorant. (69)

To be looked at, then, is to enjoy the privilege of exciting interest and curiosity. The Chinese lover, however, is denied the recognition of this gaze because his liaison with "la petite blanche" transgresses the racial arrangements of French colonial society. "Mes frères ne lui adresseront jamais la parole. C'est comme s'il n'était pas visible pour eux, comme s'il n'était pas assez dense pour être perçu, vu, entendu par eux" (65). By contrast, the narrator flaunts the heroine's transgressive behaviour in the face of the reader/spectator by actively soliciting the latter's attention with her imperious "regardez-moi," thereby demanding the recognition implicit in this gaze.

Duras' naturalization of the young girl's French identity further contributes to her position of authority over her lover. The narrator both relates the young girl's mockery of the Chinese man's French pretensions: "Je lui dis que son séjour en France lui a été fatal. Il en convient. Il dit qu'il a tout acheté à Paris, ses femmes, ses connaissances, ses idées" (62), and undercuts these pretensions through the use of irony: "Il parlait. Il disait qu'il s'ennuyait de Paris, des adorables Parisiennes, des noces, des bombes, ah là là, de la Coupole, moi la Rotonde je préfère, des boîtes de nuit, de cette existence 'épatante' qu'il avait menée pendant deux ans" (45). This ironizing of the lover's predilection for things French stems from the split between the narrated "I" and the narrating "I". While the former--the subject of the narration--refers to the white fifteen-year old born and raised in colonial Indochina, who has never been to France, the latter--the narrating subject--is the narrator whom the text explicitly associates with the authorial identity of Marguerite Duras--the embodiment of a certain Frenchness. It is this split which both authorizes the mockery of the young girl, and enables the narrator to undercut the Chinese man's pretensions by infiltrating his reported speech with ironic authorial intonation.

Another textual strategy which effects the

subordination of the cultural Other is the representation of the Orient as an unchanging essence of which the lover clearly partakes. That he remains nameless is the first sign of his lack of individuality, a characteristic which is reinforced by the generic nature of the epithets used to designate him--"the lover," "the man from Cholon," and "the Chinese man". Although an individual, the lover functions as a representative type who embodies the atmosphere of the Orient. Years later, when he calls the narrator in France, his fear and his trembling voice are represented as belonging to the very essence of the Orient: "Il était intimidé, il avait peur comme avant. Sa voix tremblait tout à coup. Et avec le tremblement, tout à coup, elle avait retrouvé l'accent de la Chine" (142).

The idea of the Orient as timeless and unchanging is conveyed by the absence of a history to which the lover can lay claim since his affair with the young girl. In contrast to the narrator's development as a writer, his life is defined by his love for her, which dissolves the future into an inescapable, eternal present: "Il savait qu'elle avait commencé à écrire des livres, il l'avait su par la mère qu'il avait revue à Saigon.... Et puis il n'avait plus su quoi lui dire. Et puis il le lui avait dit. Il lui avait dit que c'était comme avant, qu'il l'aimait encore, qu'il ne pourrait jamais cesser de l'aimer, qu'il l'aimerait jusqu'à sa mort" (142).

In this display of her life as spectacle, Duras is also the ultimate spectator. By exploiting the possibilities of autobiographical discourse, Duras appropriates the privileged masculine position of observer and rewrites the feminine position of the observed. By constructing a position of dominance in relation to the "man from Cholon", the author of L'Amant radically transforms her relationship to both desire and prostitution in order to establish a female writing subject.

Because JanMohamed's trope of "Manichean allegory" posits a stable process of othering where the colonizer occupies the position of subject and the colonized that of object/Other, it fails to account for the ways in which gender and class affect the economy of colonial discourse. As a lower-class woman in the patriarchal society of French colonial Indochina, Duras was **already** in the position of Other. Her subordinate status as object of both prostitution and the male gaze is clearly represented in Un barrage. In L'Amant, Duras establishes a female subjectivity through the appropriation of the masculine position of the observer, the construction of an active relationship to desire, and by recourse to a variety of Orientalist topoi--the eroticization of the exotic, the feminization of the Asian lover, and the representation of an unchanging oriental essence. Despite Duras' overt anti-

colonialism in Un barrage, and her occasional contestation of the discourse of colonialism in L'Amant in which the narrator both satirizes and explicitly denounces the racist doxa espoused by her family and by French colonial society, nonetheless, she also **reinscribes** a variety of Orientalist/colonialist themes in order to transform her own marginalized position as Other, and to achieve a position of power and dominance in relation to her Chinese lover. Through her participation in colonialist politics in service to a "white" female subjectivity, Duras engages in textual strategies with disturbing implications for the politics of women's autobiography.¹⁴ This gendered subject position is also constructed through Duras' use of the rhetorical strategies made possible by autobiographical discourse. Just as the non-existent photograph provides Duras with the means to authorize her favorite image of herself as a young girl, so too does autobiography afford the possibility to **create** a self/subject liberated from the oppressive realities of poverty, prostitution, and the patriarchal order of French colonial society.

Notes

1. For a psychoanalytic reading of the feminine in Duras' oeuvre, see Sharon Willis' Marquerite Duras: Writing on the Body. Willis uses hysteria as a metaphor for Duras' narrative discourse and analyzes how her texts explore "the limits of narrative representation"--a discursive space coded as feminine within a particular historical moment. See also Michèle Montrelay's "Sur le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein" in L'Ombre et le nom. Situated within a psychoanalytic framework, Montrelay's article offers a reading of Duras' Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein as an example of a text which gives a place to femininity defined as non-sense, silence and non-speech. In Territoires du féminin avec Marguerite Duras, Marcelle Marini reads Duras' disruptive writing style and her creation of silences and gaps as a feminine space which attempts to circumvent women's oppression within patriarchy. Trista Selous in The Other Woman: Femininism and Femininity in the Work of Marguerite Duras offers a cultural critique of the representations of women in Duras, challenging the claims that Duras' work is truly feminist.

2. All citations will be from the following editions

except where otherwise noted. Marguerite Duras, L'Amant (Paris: Minuit, 1984); Marguerite Duras Un barrage contre le pacifique (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), hereafter cited as Un barrage.

3. In The Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon notes that "the colonial world is a Manichean world" (41). He demonstrates the mechanism of this Manichean world in Peau noire, Masques blancs.

4. For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see Luce Irigaray, Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un. Irigaray describes women's censored relationship to desire as follows: **"Mère, vierge, prostituée, tels sont les rôles sociaux imposés aux femmes.** Les caractères de la sexualité (dite) féminine en découlent: valorisation de la reproduction et du nourrissage; fidélité; pudeur, ignorance, voire désintérêt du plaisir; acceptation passive de l'activité des hommes; séduction pour susciter le désir des consommateurs, mais s'offrant comme support matériel à celui-ci sans en jouir;... **Ni comme mère, ni comme vierge, ni comme prostituée, la femme n'a droit à sa jouissance"** (181).

5. For a more extensive discussion of women's relation to their bodies in patriarchal society, see John Berger, Ways

of Seeing. According to his analysis, a woman is constantly accompanied by her own image of herself because she is the object of the male gaze. Consequently, a woman's sense of self is split into two and "she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman" (46).

6. See Marianne Hirsch's The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, esp. "Feminist Family Romances" for an illuminating reading of the mother-daughter relationship in L'Amant. Hirsch argues that Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic reading of Duras in "The Pain of Sorrow in the Modern World: The Work of Marguerite Duras," ends up "eclipsing the mother's own voice, her own story, allowing her only the status of object, or of 'Other'" (Hirsch, 152). I concur with Hirsch that the figure of the mother in Un barrage and L'Amant needs to be read in the political and economic context of colonialism in order to avoid "conflating [the political dimensions of women's lives] with the psychological" (152).

7. The June 9, 1985 issue of the New York Times Book Review carried an advertisement for The Lover which includes a Saturday Review comment that "this exotic,

erotic autobiographical confession will deservedly become one of the Summer's hottest books."

8. For more on the relationship between subjectivity and language, see Benveniste's Problèmes de linguistique générale esp. 258-65.

9. In her essay "Fiction and the Photographic Image in Duras' The Lover," Susan Cohen notes that "the story [of The Lover] is essentially one of creativity, in particular the self-making of a woman and of a writer whom we watch in the process of creating out of that very initial non-presence" (59). Cohen's article explores the relationship of absence to seeing and creativity.

10. Duras' L'Amant needs to be distinguished from the definition of "feminist confession" offered by Rita Felski in Beyond Feminist Aesthetics. Whereas Felski's examples of feminist confession belong to the realist convention and continually refer to the question of truth as their ultimate legitimation, Duras is less concerned with producing an image of herself faithful to a pre-existing reality, and is clearly more interested in the rhetorical and creative possibilities offered by the autobiographical genre. Felski makes the interesting observation that

feminist confession is a rare phenomenon within the Catholic and rhetorically conscious French tradition on account of the strong Protestant element in the feminist preoccupation with subjectivity as the discovery of an authentic self (114).

Clearly, Duras' writing of the "subject" differs from the pervasive quest for truth and self-understanding which Felski finds in the protestant tradition of feminist confession. As Sharon Willis remarks in Writing on the Body, "part of the appeal of The Lover lies in its duplicity, its pretense to confession coupled with its refusal to swear to truthfulness" (5). In L'Amant, the autobiographical "I" uses a variety of formal and rhetorical strategies in order to create a subject position for the female Other within a specific sexual and cultural economy. Rather than seeking validation through an appeal to authenticity, Duras's construction of a female subject relies on the colonialist politics of L'Amant, and a specific use of the autobiographical mode, both of which rework the sexual and cultural economy of Un barrage.

11. See V. N. Volosinov Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, esp. 115-23, for an analysis of the infiltration of reported speech with authorial intonation.

12. As Edward Said demonstrates in Orientalism, the Orient represents "one of Europe's deepest and most recurring images of the Other"(1). For political and economic reasons, the relationship between the West and the Orient has been one of power and domination. Said defines "Orientalism" as the discourse produced by the West about the Orient, a discourse in which the Orient is less a place than "an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary, that have given it presence and reality for the West"(5).

13. Although the relationship between the young girl and her lover is a form of prostitution in that it involves monetary exchange, it needs to be distinguished from Suzanne's prostitution in Un barrage. In L'Amant, it is the exchange of money which makes the young girl's relationship with the Chinese man tolerable in the eyes of her family. Consequently, it serves as a screen for the sexual pleasure which the young girl derives from the affair, and thereby enables her to continue the relationship. Such sexual pleasure was noticeably absent from Suzanne's relationship with M. Jo in Un barrage.

14. In "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of

Imperialism," Gayatri Spivak argues that a certain body of liberal feminist criticism "reproduces the axioms of imperialism" through "a basically isolationist admiration for the literature of the female subject"(243). I concur with this argument and have emphasized the colonialist politics involved in Duras' constitution of a female subject position.

Chapter 2
Centering the Subject: Marginality and Authority
in Gide's L'Immoraliste

As a male homosexual in France at the turn of the nineteenth-century, André Gide wrote from a position of oppression. Reviled by the dominant culture, classified as a perversion and subjected to various forms of social control, male homosexuality was the marginalized other of the hegemonic discourse of heterosexuality.¹ However, as Michel Foucault argues, it would be mistaken to believe that the strong advance of social controls into the area of homosexuality was only inhibiting and repressive: rather, "the appearance in nineteenth century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality...made possible the formation of a 'reverse' discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged" (101).² Exemplary of Foucault's claim is Gide's oeuvre which exhibits an overriding concern to construct a male, homosexual identity which can be legitimized in the patriarchal, homophobic society of France at the turn of the century.³ From the panegyric to hedonism in Les nourritures terrestres (1897), to the account of his North African experience in Amyntas (1904),

from his confessional autobiography Si le grain ne meurt (1920, 1926) to the naturalization of his sexual orientation in L'Immoraliste (1902),⁴ Gide's work constitutes an implicit or explicit defence of homosexuality which culminates in the subversive dialogues of Corydon.

Published at the turn of the century, L'Immoraliste belongs to the genre of the confessional récit, sharing many of the formal and thematic characteristics common to Prévost's Manon Lescaut, Chateaubriand's René, and Constant's Adolphe.⁵ Embedded within a frame-narrative, the récit is a first person "confession" in which a male protagonist tells the story of his "failed" life to other men. Although a woman is central to the protagonist's experience, her marginalization and suppression is essential to the narrative.⁶ In L'Immoraliste the first person narrative is spoken by Michel, the formerly respectable married scholar of the Collège de France, to a group of male friends, shortly after his discovery of his homosexuality and the death of his wife in colonial North Africa. The frame narrative opens with a letter written to a high-ranking member of the State by one of Michel's friends, soliciting an "occupation" on his behalf. The frame narrative ends with the friend's response to Michel's tale of self-discovery, followed by the latter's final appeal for help. As in the récits of the eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries, the fictional narrator tells his story over the dead body of a woman. Michel's story of self-discovery, then, is also that of his wife's effacement. Whether or not one subscribes to the view, shared by many critics, that the fictional narrator of L'Immoraliste is a thinly-veiled portrait of the author himself, Michel's quest for an "authentic" identity may be read in the context of Gide's concern to legitimize male homosexuality.

My analysis of Gide's L'Immoraliste will explore the relationship between the marginalized figures of the male homosexual and of women in patriarchal society in order to show how the legitimation of a male homosexual identity has recourse to the ideology of gender difference, and consequently replicates the homosocial power structures which exclude women. My reading focuses on how misogyny provides a means of empowerment against homophobia for the male homosexual subject. Furthermore, it will emerge from my thesis that, as Eve Sedgwick puts it, "the whole question of gender is inscribed in the structure of relationships that seem to exclude women--even in male homosocial/homosexual relationships."⁷ Although I will read Gide's legitimation of male homosexuality "against-the-grain" in order to expose its violent suppression and exclusion of women, I do not subscribe to the notion that male homosexuality is a cause or effect of misogyny. Nor

do I assume that women and gay men automatically share a transhistorical alliance as a result of their oppression.⁸ I submit, however, that at a particular historical moment, a certain ideology of homosexuality avails itself of the ideology of gender difference, and consequently reinscribes the subordination and exclusion of women. My reading of Gide's L'Immoraliste will also examine how the legitimation of male homosexuality is related to the hierarchical differences produced by colonialist discourse as it existed in France during the early years of this century. Indeed, the logocentrism which informs the ideology of gender difference in Gide's text also informs the construction of cultural difference. Thus, we shall see that the logocentrism remains constant even as the ideological framework shifts from gender to colonialism.

As a transgressive narrative constructing a male homosexual subjectivity, L'Immoraliste has recourse to what Ross Chambers calls the "power of seduction". Chambers defines this as the power of the storyteller to produce the involvement of the narratee, and to achieve authority within a situation of relative disempowerment--in the case of L'Immoraliste, that of the marginalized male homosexual.⁹ Chambers maintains that "the power of seduction is by definition a power of persuasion: it cannot rely on force or institutional authority for it is

a means of achieving mastery in the absence of such means of control"(212). In L'Immoraliste, authority is produced by various rhetorical and narrative strategies which serve to enlist the sympathy and complicity of the reader addressed. Here, I make a distinction between the reader called for by the text, figured by the male narratee in the text, and a reader reading. It is this split which enables me, as the latter, to interpret the function of the narratee in L'Immoraliste, a point I shall return to later. Among the strategies instrumental in the production of this authority are the following: the appropriation of the category of the "natural" from the dominant culture; an implicit appeal to the ideology of gender difference and to the hierarchical oppositions of colonialist discourse; and the explicit construction of a complicitous narratee.

An analysis of Michel's quest for self-discovery will illuminate how the textual construction of a male homosexual subjectivity remains inscribed within what Derrida refers to as the logocentrism of western philosophy as elaborated by Aristotle, Plato, Descartes, Rousseau and others. Derrida uses the term to designate a metaphysical system of thought which posits the logos (a word, presence or essence acting as the foundation of all thought, language and experience) as the ultimate source of truth. The logocentrism of western philosophy reflects

a desire for a self-present, identical truth, divinely guaranteed and inscribed in nature. As Michel relates his story to his friends, he describes his quest for authentic selfhood in terms of a search for an original, true identity: "L'amas sur notre esprit de toutes connaissances acquises s'écaille comme un fard et, par places, laisse voir à nu la chair même, l'être authentique qui se cachait" (61).

Michel compares his self-discovery to an interpretative project whose aim is to distinguish an essential self guaranteed by nature from an inauthentic social persona.

Ce fut dès lors celui que je prétendis découvrir: l'être authentique, le "vieil homme", celui dont ne voulait plus l'Evangile; celui que tout, autour de moi, livres, maîtres, parents, et que moi-même avions tâché d'abord de supprimer.... Je méprisai dès lors cet être secondaire, appris, que l'instruction avait dessiné par-dessus. Il fallait secouer les surcharges. (61-62)

This essentialist conception of an original identity subsequently obscured by culture is inscribed in terms of a struggle between conventional morality and a way of being ratified by nature. Michel's intention to strip away the layers imposed by culture and Christian morality recalls Descartes' resolve to "faire table rase" in his attempt to posit the self-presence of the subject: "Mon seul effort, effort constant alors, était donc de systématiquement honnir ou supprimer tout ce que je

croyais ne devoir qu'à mon instruction passée et à ma première morale" (63).

This notion of culture obscuring and debasing the original "text" of nature echoes Rousseau's conception of the corrupting influence of culture on "l'homme naturel", and his opposition between technical, fallen writing and the natural, divinely inspired writing inscribed in the soul.¹⁰ Just as Rousseau condemns technical writing as derivative, secondary and lacking in interiority, so too does Michel reject the "textes récents"--"the secondary, learned being" which education and culture have imposed upon his "true" identity. In the same way that Rousseau extols the divine voice inscribed in nature as a good, natural writing, Michel valorizes the "être authentique" hidden beneath the "fard" of culture. As Derrida has shown in his critique of the metaphysics of presence underlying western philosophy, this desire, evident in Rousseau and in the fictional narrator of L'Immoraliste, for a divinely-guaranteed, transparent identity is based on the hierarchical opposition between nature and culture. According to Derrida, conceptual oppositions like this one are predicated on the belief in the pure self-present identity of each of the terms and the denial of differance.¹¹ The hierarchical opposition nature/culture which informs the concepts of an "authentic being" and "a secondary being" in L'Immoraliste belongs

therefore to the same tradition of logocentrism which posits the pure presence of each term of the binary and implicitly denies that the trace of one is always recoverable in the other. Whereas Descartes attempted to constitute self-presence within thought ("I think, therefore I am") with God as the guarantor of an absolutely transparent self-knowledge, Rousseau elaborated a new model of subjectivity--the subject's self-presence within feeling" (Derrida, Grammatologie, 146-7). In L'Immoraliste, Michel elaborates a third model. The model of presence which informs his project of self-discovery is a return to the senses whose truth is guaranteed by nature:

Du fond du passé de ma première enfance se réveillaient enfin mille lueurs, de mille sensations égarées. La conscience que je prenais à nouveau de mes sens m'en permettait l'inquiète reconnaissance. Oui, mes sens réveillés désormais, se retrouvaient toute une histoire, se recomposaient un passé. Ils vivaient! n'avaient jamais cessé de vivre, se découvraient, même à travers mes ans d'étude, une vie latente et rusée. (47)

As Jonathon Dollimore has shown, Gide's appropriation of the dominant culture's category of the natural needs to be read in the historical context of the marginalization and oppression of male homosexuals. Dollimore argues that "the centrality of an essentialist concept to the dominant ideology has made its appropriation by a subordinate culture seem indispensable in that culture's struggle for legitimacy" (36). Although I agree with the premise of his

argument, I am disturbed by his apparent blindness to the question of gender when he globally characterizes Gide's writing as part of "a progressive cultural struggle". While it is true that this logocentric notion of identity which enables the narrator to present as natural and innocent what the dominant culture regards as unnatural and corrupt, the dominating and subordinating effects of this ideology of homosexuality in L'Immoraliste also need to be addressed.

What is of particular interest to me here, then, is the relationship between the logocentrism inherent in Michel's construction of self-identity, and the exclusion of femininity on which it depends. As Cixous has shown in La Jeune Née, there is a basic solidarity between logocentrism and phallogentrism in that the former depends on the exclusion of the difference represented by femininity in order to consolidate its own identity as self-presence. While Cixous identifies the couple male/female with its superior/inferior evaluation as the paradigm underlying the hierarchical binary opposition culture/nature which informs the discourses of patriarchy, I hope to show how femininity remains associated with the denigrated term even when the opposition is reversed as in L'Immoraliste with nature the valorized term and culture the denigrated one, the former now associated with masculinity, the latter with femininity.¹² The radical

split between the identity which Michel posits as his true one, and his cultural persona, is relayed by a series of oppositions: nature/culture; Africa/Europe; spontaneity/morality; virility/effeminacy; health/sickness; life/death. In the text, the valorized terms of each pair are intimately connected to a homosexual identity and are represented as the essential attributes of masculinity. Femininity, on the other hand, in the figure of Marceline, is denigrated through association with the devalorized terms of the binary--Christian morality, illness, death and the conventions of European bourgeois society.

A pertinent illustration of the gendered nature of the opposition between spontaneity and morality is to be found in the episode of the theft of Marceline's scissors. When Michel sees Mektir, one of the young Arab boys, stealing his wife's scissors, his reaction is one of joy and amusement in the face of what he regards as a blatant transgression of Christian, bourgeois morality. The value of Mektir's action lies in the recognition it affords Michel of his autonomous self--a self liberated from religious and cultural constraints: "Un matin, j'eus une curieuse révélation sur moi-même...." (53). Whereas Michel's recognition of his true identity in another male makes Michel and Mektir complicitous, his anticipation of

Marceline's reaction as a moral one prefigures her eventual exclusion.

Marceline aimait beaucoup cet enfant; pourtant ce ne fut pas, je crois, la peur de la peiner qui me fit, quand je la revis, plutôt que dénoncer Moktir, imaginer je ne sais quelle fable pour expliquer la perte des ciseaux. A partir de ce jour, Moktir devint mon préféré. (54)

Similarly, after Michel's symbolic baptism of his new sensual being, Marceline is envisaged as an obstacle to the development of this "nouvel être". "Il m'importait qu'elle ne troublât pas ma renaissance"(70). Later, as Michel assumes the authority of the cartesian scientist in his project of self-discovery, Marceline embodies the elements--moral and cultural constraints--which threaten the success of his experiment.

Il me semblait alors que j'étais né pour une sorte inconnue de trouvailles; et je me passionnais étrangement dans ma recherche ténébreuse, pour laquelle je sais que le chercheur devait abjurer et repousser de lui culture, décence et morale. (156)

Clearly, Marceline is not just a woman, she is also a wife. Attached to her husband through a bourgeois cultural and religious institution, Marceline is the custodian of "culture, décence et morale."¹³ It is her role as a wife which precipitates her cruel suppression and eventual effacement.

The change in Michel's attitude toward his farm in Normandy, "La Morinière," is also related to the exclusion of the conventions of bourgeois morality. At first, Michel is hopeful that the newfound domesticity with his pregnant

wife and the cultivated fertility of the land will exert a calming influence upon his restlessness: "Nul doute, pensais-je, que l'exemple de cette terre, où tout s'apprête au fruit, à l'utile moisson, ne doive avoir sur moi la meilleure influence" (84). As he contemplates this idyllic picture of a productive, maternal nature whose abundance is harnessed through man's intervention, Michel espouses a capitalist doctrine of accumulation, exchange, and restraint.

Et je me laissais rêver à telles terres où toutes forces fussent si bien réglés, toutes dépenses si compensées, tous échanges si stricts, que le moindre déchet devint sensible; puis, appliquant mon rêve à la vie, je me construisais une éthique qui devenait une science de la parfaite utilisation de soi par une intelligente contrainte.(82)

However, Michel's encounter with Menalque, and the latter's profession of what Thomas Cordle calls "a doctrine of risk, expenditure and egoism" leads the Norman land-owner to a deliberate perversion of the very notions of property and ownership as he makes himself an accomplice to his thieving farm-hands and poaches on his own land. As his farm manager points out, Michel's insistence on "stealing from himself" represents a failure of his moral duties as a property owner: "Qu'on ait des devoirs envers ce qu'on possède....Il faut prendre ces devoirs au sérieux et renoncer à jouer avec...ou alors c'est qu'on ne méritait pas de posséder" (148). Michel's refusal of the moral order underlying a bourgeois,

capitalist economy leads him to put "La Morinière" up for sale. Like Marceline, "La Morinière" is an embodiment of the domesticity and morality which threaten his project of self-discovery.

Because Michel's emergent homosexuality depends on the rebirth of an authentic identity guaranteed by nature, his quest for this "être authentique" translates into a pursuit of an essential masculinity, self-present and identical to itself. In order to assure this self-presence, femininity as difference must be excluded. This characterization of homosexuality as an essential masculinity may be read in historical terms. The popular association of homosexuality with effeminacy during the nineteenth century, the entrenched ideologies of masculinity and femininity during this period, and the oppression of male homosexuals at this time, may all be seen as factors overdetermining the association of homosexuality with masculinity in L'Immoraliste.¹⁴ This conception of homosexuality, then, transforms the historical marginalization of the homosexual into a position of discursive strength by associating it with a masculinist ideology.

The exclusion of femininity, however, also needs to be related to the exclusion of women from the homosocial relations which structure patriarchal society. As a woman, Marceline mediates between men, but is also excluded from

these homosocial/homosexual bonds. In her position as wife and mother--roles in which her participation would appear to be central--she is in fact the excluded mediator of relations between men. Her marriage to Michel is not a relationship between partners but is a transaction between father and son in which Marceline is a pretext for a display of filial affection.

Je l'avais épousée sans amour, beaucoup pour complaire à mon père, qui mourant, s'inquiétait de me laisser seul. J'aimais mon père tendrement; occupé par son agonie, je ne songeai, en ces tristes moments, qu'à lui rendre sa fin plus douce. (18)

As an object in this exchange of filial and paternal affection, Marceline is the excluded woman who mediates relations between men. Marceline is also the excluded mediator of Michel's relations with the young Arab boys. Although she is the one who brings her husband and the African children together, she must be excluded from their relationship once they become the object of Michel's desire:

Des Arabes passèrent; puis survint une troupe d'enfants. Marceline en connaissait plusieurs et leur fit signe; ils s'approchèrent. Elle me dit des noms; il y eut des questions, des réponses, des sourires, des moues, de petits jeux.... Mais ce qui me gênait, l'avouerais-je, ce n'était pas les enfants, c'était elle. Oui, si peu que ce fût, je fus gêné par sa présence.... Et puis, parler aux enfants, je n'osais pas devant elle....

-- Rentrons, lui dis-je; et je me résolus à part moi de retourner seul au jardin. (42-43)

Marceline's pregnancy and prospective motherhood illustrate the double bind implicit in women's role as

mediators. The familial domesticity prefigured by her pregnancy epitomizes the trap Marceline represents for Michel. In his conversation with Menalque, Michel riles against the constraints of a wife and child. However, the birth of a son is also presented as the crucial element which Michel persuades himself might compensate for the restrictions of marriage and domesticity: "Je me penchais vers l'avenir où déjà je voyais mon petit enfant me sourire; pour lui se reformait et se fortifiait ma morale" (123). But, as a result of her miscarriage, Marceline fails to give birth to this son. Her failure as a mother now hastens her imminent suppression. Marceline must die because she is guilty of embodying the cultural and sexual constraints of bourgeois marriage, and ironically, as a result of her inability to produce the child who could transform the marital alliance into a relationship between father and son.

Not only is Marceline a mediator in her social function but she also represents a figure of mediation itself. In a text based on a logocentric view of identity, Marceline embodies the mediation which threatens such an essentialist view.¹⁵ Marceline's passage from health to sickness illustrates this point. Of the two journeys which structure the novel, the first one takes place immediately after Michel's marriage with Marceline. Beginning with Michel's tuberculosis and near brush with death--symbolic

of his lifeless, academic existence in France--it traces his literal and symbolic rebirth into life and sexual desire in Algeria. Ironically, it is this "honeymoon" journey with his wife which precipitates Michel's discovery of his homosexuality. By contrast, the second journey is the narrative of Marceline's gradual decline from bodily health to physical and spiritual death. As Michel insists on dragging the ailing Marceline back to North Africa, he is restored to health while her condition rapidly deteriorates.

Nous défaisions pas à pas notre premier voyage, remontions vers le début de notre amour. Et de même que de semaine en semaine, lors de notre premier voyage, je marchais vers la guérison, de semaine en semaine, à mesure que nous avançons vers le Sud, l'état de Marceline empirait (164).

This opposition between strength and weakness, life and death, is reflected in the effeminacy of European society by contrast with the personal regeneration Michel sees mirrored in the vitality of the North African landscape.

Cette terre africaine, dont je ne connaissais pas l'attente, submergée durant de longs jours, à présent s'éveillait de l'hiver, ivre d'eau, éclatant de sèves nouvelles; elle riait d'un printemps forcené dont je sentais le retentissement et comme le double en moi-même. (55)

Because of its associations with frailty and death, Marceline's opulent salon in Paris typifies what Michel regards as the moribund nature of French culture: "Il me prit une furieuse envie de pousser tous mes invités par les épaules. Meubles, étoffes, estampes, à la première

tâche perdaient pour moi toute valeur: choses tâchées, choses atteintes de maladie et comme designées par la mort" (113).

Marceline's miscarriage places her on the interstices between life and death: "Puis la phlébite se déclara: et quand elle commença de décliner, une embolie, soudain, mit Marceline entre la vie et la mort" (125). Michel, also positioned between life and death--that is, between the spontaneity associated with a male homosexual identity and the bourgeois morality championed by Marceline--egotistically opts in favor of what for him is health and life, once confronted with his wife's illness. His choice of life, as radically distinct from death, involves the rejection of Marceline's illness as a figure of mediation and difference. The narrative thereby equates illness with the in-between, Michel's own mediated position, but transfers it from Michel onto Marceline. Henceforth Michel sadistically inflicts sickness, and in due course, death, onto Marceline. She becomes a kind of living death, a metonymy of her salon and effeminate society. As her husband chillingly notes, "la maladie était entrée en Marceline, l'habitait désormais, la marquait, la tâchait. C'était une chose abîmée" (127). Like the stained furniture which Michel despises, Marceline is forever spoiled and contaminated in his eyes. As Emily Apter notes, the adjective "abîmée" used to describe his wife's

deterioration also contains the "abîme" or abyss associated with the feminine body. Michel's horror in the face of Marceline's illness is indicative of his fear of falling into the abyss of femininity and the threat this represents to the transparent masculine identity to which he aspires.

Hitherto a figure of "culture" itself through her association with moral and cultural constraints, Marceline now embodies the encroachment of nature--in the form of the embolism--upon culture, and the traces of death within life. As a result of her embodiment of both life and death, nature and culture, Marceline is a figure of mediation. Consequently, her presence suggests the futility of Michel's attempt to make absolute distinctions between life and death, nature and culture, thereby revealing the impossibility of his quest to attain an essentially masculine identity.

Michel and Marceline's different relations with the young Arab boys also illustrate Marceline's status as an embodiment of mediation. Whereas Michel deliberately seeks out the company of the strong, independant boys, Marceline has a special affection for the weak, docile children: "Ceux que Marceline choyait étaient faibles, chétifs, et trop sages; je m'irritai contre elle et contre eux et finalement les repoussai. A vrai dire, ils me faisaient peur" (53). Clearly, Michel feels threatened by the

frailty and obedience of these boys because they are now marked by Marceline's femininity, instead of personifying the vitality and spontaneity he associates with Africa. For Michel, the boys are frightening evidence of the traces of sickness and morality within health and spontaneity, thereby attesting to the impossibility of an identity defined by self-presence.

While Marceline's death is necessary to the logic of Michel's self-discovery, Michel's "délivrance" from his wife fails to produce the liberation he had expected: "Arrachez-moi d'ici à présent, et donnez-moi des raisons d'être. Moi, je ne sais plus en trouver. Je me suis délivré, c'est possible; mais qu'importe? je souffre de cette liberté sans emploi" (179). The effacement of femininity does not lead to an essentially masculine identity but results in Michel's feminization: "J'avais, quand vous m'avez connu d'abord, une grande fixité de pensée, et je sais que c'est là ce qui fait les vrais hommes; je ne l'ai plus" (4). This diminution in virility is attributed to the climate and landscape of North Africa, no longer associated with vigor and vitality, but with a listlessness and ennervation which now debilitates the strength of the European male.¹⁶ As Michel remarks to his friends: "Mais ce climat, je crois, en est cause. Rien ne décourage autant la pensée que cette persistance de l'azur. Ici, toute recherche est impossible, tant la

volupté suit de près le désir" (179). Michel's appeal to his friends is a plea to be delivered from this feminized state and restored to the masculine identity to which he still aspires: "Arrachez-moi d'ici: je ne puis le faire moi-même. Quelque'chose en ma volonté s'est brisé; je ne sais même où j'ai trouvé la force de m'éloigner d'El Kantara. Parfois, j'ai peur que ce que j'ai supprimé ne se venge" (179). In this way, the emasculating effects of the Orient represent the return of what Michel had attempted to repress through his exclusion of Marceline. Whereas Marceline's femininity was the previous source of the threat to his masculinity, it is now North Africa which is responsible for sapping his virility and strength.

Whereas the inner narrative--Michel's récit--is structured by the binary opposition Africa/Europe, with Africa the valorized term, the frame narrative reverses this opposition. Algeria is now denigrated through its association with traditional attributes of femininity, with France becoming the locus of strength and power.¹⁷ The latter is figured by the letter in which Michel's friend asks his brother "Monsieur D. R," an eminent servant of the state, to find a position for Michel which would harness "l'emploi de tant d'intelligence et de force" (13).

Although the frame narrative reveals the non-essential character of the attributes of masculinity and

femininity by reversing their associations with Europe and Africa, Michel still entertains the dream of a masculine identity as he appeals to his friends to rescue him from the debilitating effects of the Orient. Michel's reaction to the Orient prefigures that of the "well-developed western mind" extolled by Gide himself in his colonialist observations about the alleged superiority of western civilization.

L'Orient peut apprendre de l'Occident à s'organiser, à s'armer, à se défendre, peut-être même à attaquer.... Il y a lieu d'espérer que certains esprits occidentaux bien formés, loin de se laisser dissoudre par cette civilisation étrangère, réagiront à son contact (ce qui est la meilleure façon de se laisser influencer par elle)--et grâce à elle sauront acquérir une conscience plus vive de leur valeur et du rôle particulier qu'ils ont à assumer.(emphasis mine)¹⁸

Clearly, it is an effect of discursive power in L'Immoraliste which produces the binary oppositions nature/culture, Africa/Europe in a hierarchical order. They are also reversed by an effect of power. While culture is denigrated through association with Marceline's femininity and conventional morality, it is valorized when figured by the intellectual strength and virility of Europe by contrast with the debilitating effects of North Africa. The construction of a male homosexual identity now draws on the power relations which produce and are produced by colonialist discourse. Thus, the logocentrism remains constant, but the ideological framework shifts from gender to colonialism. Echoes of this colonialist

discourse spoken by Gide, with its belief in the supremacy of European civilization, are also heard in Michel's récit, pointing to the multiple factors which defined Gide's, and Michel's, subject positions. Although Gide's sexual orientation marginalized him within society, his historical situation was also defined by his race and class, and by French colonial supremacy. As a member of the French bourgeoisie during a period of enormous colonial expansion, Gide wrote about colonial North Africa from a position of political and economic dominance. Although L'Immoraliste contains few overt references to the social and political realities of French colonialism in North Africa, Michel's relations with the young Arab boys is inextricably connected to his position of economic and colonial privilege. As commodified types instrumental in Michel's discovery of his homosexuality, the young arabs are eminently expendible and interchangeable:

"Ashour and Mektir nous accompagnèrent d'abord; je savourais encore leur légère amitié qui ne coûtait qu'un demi-franc par jour" (56). "Quelque exquis que me parut Bachir, je le connaissais trop à présent, et j'étais heureux de changer" (45). Despite Michel's decision to divest himself of his wealth and retain only a small part of it, he still remains in a position of economic superiority in relation to Ali, the new object of his desire.

Je voudrais me débarrasser de ce qui reste de ma fortune; voyez, ces murs en sont encore couverts. Ici je vis de presque rien. Un aubergiste mi-français m'apprête un peu de nourriture. L'enfant, que vous avez fait fuir en entrant, me l'apporte soir et matin, **en échange de quelques sous et caresses**. (180; emphasis mine)

Whereas male homosexuality, in all of its forms, was the object of a growing body of social and legal sanctions in France at the end of the nineteenth century, North Africa and the other French colonial possessions were places where such sexual experiences were easily available.

Edward Said notes in Orientalism:

We may as well recognize that for nineteenth-century Europe, with its increasing embourgeoisement, sex had been institutionalized to a very considerable degree. On the one hand, there was no such thing as "free" sex, and on the other, sex in society entailed a web of legal, moral, even political and economic obligations of a detailed and certainly encumbering sort. Just as the various colonial possessions--quite apart from their economic benefit to metropolitan Europe--were useful as a place to send wayward sons, superfluous populations of delinquents, poor people and other undesirables, so the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unavailable in Europe. (190)

At this point, it is relevant to note that Gide's later work Voyage au Congo is frequently hailed as a scathing indictment of French colonialism in North Africa. Without detracting from the force of Gide's criticisms, it is important to make a distinction between his denouncement of the corruption of French colonial rule, and opposition to colonialism itself.¹⁹ Whereas the author/narrator of the travel notebooks published as Voyage au Congo is vehement in his condemnation of the

concessionaire companies and their brutal exploitation of the African workers, he himself explicitly endorses a benevolent, paternalistic form of colonial rule. For example, as Gide and his companion arrive in a village outside Bosoum, he is thrilled by the Africans' assimilation of French culture and language, and implicitly attributes their prosperity to the benevolent influence of French colonialism:

Après avoir circulé longtemps dans le sauvage, le larvaire, l'inexistant, joie de retrouver un village net, propre, d'apparence prospère; un chef décent, en vêtements européens point ridicules, en casque blanchi à neuf, parlant correctement le français; un drapeau hissé en notre honneur; et tout cela m'émeut jusqu'à l'absurde, jusqu'au sanglot" (Voyage 173).

Moreover, Gide's critique of the white man's attitude toward the Africans leaves intact the ethnocentric assumption of the superiority of European intelligence over the alleged "darkness" of the African mind:

Je continue mes leçons de lecture à Adoum, qui fait preuve d'une émouvante application et progresse de jour en jour.... De quelle sottise, le plus souvent, le blanc fait preuve, quand il s'indigne de la stupidité des noirs! Je ne les crois pourtant capables, que d'un très petit développement, le cerveau gourde et stagnant le plus souvent dans une nuit épaisse--mais combien de fois le blanc semble prendre à tâche de les y enfoncer. (Voyage 130)

As Raoul Girardet makes clear in L'Idee coloniale en France, "this hierarchical vision of the world which put Europe at the top and African societies at the bottom" was an integral part of what he calls the "credo colonial"

elaborated in France at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

As a story which depends on the "power of seduction", L'Immoraliste has recourse to a variety of narrative strategies in order to enlist the complicity of the reader addressed. Central to the seductive intent of L'Immoraliste are the implicit and explicit denials of seduction by the implied author of the Préface, and by Michel, the narrator of the récit. The preface contains an explicit refusal to pass judgement on Michel's action. "Mais je n'ai voulu faire en ce livre non plus acte d'accusation qu'apologie, et me suis gardé de juger"(8).

Moreover, with the traditional rhetoric of sincerity appropriate to confessional narratives, Michel emphasizes the truthful nature of his récit and rejects all forms of duplicity. "Ah! Je pourrais ici feindre ou me taire, mais que m'importe à moi ce récit, s'il cesse d'être véritable?"(175). These claims to neutrality and to the production of truth are undermined, however, by the status attributed to art by the implied author of the preface. "A vrai dire, en art, il n'y a pas de problèmes--dont l'oeuvre d'art ne soit la suffisante solution"(8). The solution which L'Immoraliste offers to the "problem" of Michel's sexual orientation is the act of narrative seduction itself, an act which constructs the narratee--figured by the assembled group of male friends and

addressees--as complicitous in Michel's "crime" against his wife. After he narrates his story, Michel's friends find themselves incapable of condemning him: "Il nous semblait, hélas, qu'à nous la raconter, Michel avait rendu son action plus légitime. De ne savoir ou la desapprouver, dans la lente explication qu'il en donna, nous en faisait presque complices" (178; emphasis mine). This complicity of the narratees points to the persuasive power of narrative, and its capacity to transform the marginal position of the male homosexual into one of discursive authority.

The reader addressed, then, is presented with the choice of identifying either with Michel's male narratees who are unable and unwilling to pass judgement on his actions, or with the philistinism of the bourgeois reading public denounced in the preface.

Le public ne pardonne plus, aujourd'hui, que l'auteur, après l'action qu'il peint, ne se déclare pas pour ou contre.... Je ne prétends pas, certes, que la neutralité (j'allais dire: l'indécision) soit signe sûr d'un grand esprit; mais je crois que maints grands esprits ont beaucoup répugné à...conclure--et que bien poser un problème n'est pas le supposer d'avance résolu.(8)

By means of this somewhat facile ruse of associating the reading public with the desire for a moral conclusion, the text seduces the reader addressed and offers him the opportunity to distinguish himself from this vulgar, moralizing attitude towards "art", and to identify with

the "neutral" attitude of "les grands esprits", exemplified by Michel's friends.

As an oppositional form of writing seeking to legitimize a marginalized position, L'Immoraliste exemplifies Richard Terdiman's notion of a "counter-discourse".²⁰ Terdiman employs this term to refer to the linguistic and cultural forms of resistance which contest the hegemony of the dominant ideologies in modern society. Moreover, Gide's counter-discourse projects what Terdiman calls the "dream" of replacing its antagonist--the dominant heterosexual discourse. That is to say, L'Immoraliste authorizes male homosexuality in the same terms used by patriarchal discourse to legitimize heterosexuality, namely by an appeal to the category of the "natural". The substitution of the dominant heterosexual discourse by a specific male homosexual ideology--the "dream" of this counter-discourse--is evident in the hierarchical binary opposition nature/culture which underlies the legitimation of homosexuality in L'Immoraliste. Just as patriarchal society is complicitous with the ideology of gender difference, so too is the "counter-discourse" of L'Immoraliste naturalized, and hence legitimated, by this ideology. That the hegemonic patriarchal discourse valorizes heterosexuality by constructing it as "natural", while the misogyny inherent in the same discourse

denigrates women by associating them with the "natural" is an indication of the contradictions at work within ideology.

To read L'Immoraliste as a counter-discourse is to analyse the rhetorical and narrative strategies which legitimize a masculinist ideology of male homosexuality. Furthermore, such a reading reveals how misogyny, and the discourse of French colonialism, both of which were ideologically incised within the social and political context of Gide's text, serve as the rhetorical means for transforming a position of marginality into one of authority. The oppositional strategies of L'Immoraliste clearly have their own subordinating effects in that they reinscribe the exclusion of women from homosocial relations and their subjugation within patriarchal society, and the hierarchical oppositions of French colonialist discourse.

Notes

1. My conception of a hegemonic discourse draws on Raymond Williams' elaboration of Gramsci's notion of hegemony. In Marxism and Literature, Williams argues as follows:

"Hegemony is then not only the articulate upper level of 'ideology', nor are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as 'manipulation' and 'indoctrination'. It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and our assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values--constitutive and constituting--which, as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives.... The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society.... That is to say, alternative political and cultural emphases, and the many forms of opposition and struggle, are important

not only in themselves but as indicative features of what the hegemonic process has in practice had to work to control" (110-113).

2. While I concur with Foucault's critique of social controls in the area of homosexuality, I strongly object to his inclusion of pederasty as a form of behaviour whose legitimacy should be acknowledged. In our society, to oppose the penalization of this form of behaviour is to support the sexual exploitation of children. In Technologies of Gender, Teresa de Lauretis articulates a critique of Foucault on similar grounds. Responding to his proposal that rape "should be treated as an act of violence like any other, an act of aggression rather than a sexual act", de Lauretis argues that "to speak against sexual penalization and repression, in our society, is to uphold the sexual oppression of women" (37).

3. Decadent writers such as Huysmans in France, and Oscar Wilde in England, also celebrated male homosexuality in their writings in the second half of the nineteenth century.

4. All future references will be to the following edition: Andre Gide, L'Immoraliste, Paris: Mercure de France, 1902.

5. Here, I rely on Naomi Segal's Narcissus and Echo: Women in the French Récit for her analysis of the formal and thematic characteristics of the confessional récit.

6. For an analysis of the fatal effect of the male protagonist on the heroine in Chateaubriand's René, see Margaret Waller's insightful article "**Cherchez la Femme: Male Malady and Narrative Politics in the French Romantic Novel.**"

7. In Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire, Eve Sedgwick posits a continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual as a strategy for marking historical differences in the structure of men's relations with other men. She expands on this point as follows: "We can go further than that, to say that in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on a an inherent an potentially active structural congruence. For historical reasons, this special relationship may take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological heterosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structured combination of the two" (25).

8. Eve Sedgwick notes that most of the analyses of the relation between women and male homosexuality subscribe to one of these assumptions (Between Men, 19-20).

9. For further discussion of fiction's "power of seduction," see Ross Chambers' Story and Seduction esp. Chapter 9, "Authority and Seduction: The Power of Fiction."

10. For an elaboration of these theories of writing, see Jacques Derrida's De la grammatologie: 11-41; 143-444.

11. Derrida coined the term différance to convey the sense of how meaning in language is constituted through difference and deferral. In Positions, he explains how the notion of différance effects the classical philosophical oppositions. "At the point at which the concept of différance, and the chain attached to it, intervenes, all the conceptual oppositions of metaphysics (signifier/signified; sensible/intelligible; writing/speech; passivity/activity; etc.)--to the extent that they ultimately refer to the presence of something present...become nonpertinent (29)."

12. For more on the way that a mere reversal of this hierarchical order does not change the structural model, see Luce Irigaray's Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un, esp. Chapter 2.

13. In André Gide and the Codes of Homotextuality, Emily Apter argues that Michel's repudiation of Marceline is partially effected through the rhetorical negation of her words, which Apter reads as a metonymy of her entire person. See esp. 120-121 for Apter's analysis of how Michel progressively "bankrupts" Marceline's discourse.

14. For an overview and analysis of the different constructions of male homosexuality throughout history, see David Greenberg's The Construction of Homosexuality.

15. See Ross Chambers' article "Irony and Misogyny: Authority and the Homosocial in Baudelaire and Flaubert," for a discussion of the textual production of women as the site of mediation.

16. This disenchantment with North Africa is developed in depth in Gide's Amyntas (1904).

17. In Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French, Christopher Miller notes that "Africanist discourse shares the same will-to-knowledge seen in Orientalism but find [its] will and desire pitted against an otherness that appears to have no 'actual identity,' that refuses to be acquired and domesticated" (23). As an example of Africanist discourse, L'Immoraliste does indeed represent North Africa as a form of alterity which does not have a consistent identity. However, I would argue that the sudden feminization of Africa constitutes a way of containing and domesticating this difference.

18. These observations are part of a survey conducted by the editors of the journal Les cahiers du mois in 1925. The editors solicited the observations of various French writers on the relationship between the Orient and the Occident.

19. In L'Idée coloniale en France, Raoul Girardet makes the point that despite the abundance of works published during the inter-war years denouncing the abuses of colonial rule, it stopped short of actually challenging the legitimacy of the principles of colonialism.

20. See Terdiman's introduction to Discourse/Counter-

Discourse for further theoretical elaboration of this concept.

Chapter 3
The Decentered Subject: Modernity and Colonialism
in Le Vice-consul

In 1954, France returned the last of her colonial possessions to India, bringing to an end the final chapter of the history of French colonialism in the region. Eleven years later came the publication of Le Vice-consul (1965), the first in a series of texts by Marguerite Duras to be set in colonial India. During the decade following Le Vice-consul, Duras wrote the screenplays for, and directed two films, India Song (1975) and Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert (1976), both of which take place against the backdrop of a recreated colonial past. My reading of Le Vice-consul as an example of colonial discourse will address the following questions: Who is speaking? How are the historical circumstances of the production of the novel inscribed within the text? How is India represented? How does the text construct the reader? Does the subaltern speak?

As soon as one attempts to interrogate Le Vice-consul in these terms, however, one discovers that the text undermines the very categories implied by these questions. As we shall see, Duras' novel problematizes the possibility of representation by continually alluding to the unknowable--Anne-Marie Stretter, the beggarwoman of

Calcutta, and the vice-consul are all constructed as unknowable, figuring a "relation of the feminine, to the border of the unrepresentable, to death"¹; Le Vice-consul undermines the referential status of India and the subaltern woman by putting into question the distinction between text and referent²; furthermore, the text dismantles the notion of self-identity in speech, tearing apart the Cartesian concept of a unified subject. What are the stakes involved in this dismantling of the classical notion of representation, the decentering of a unified subject and the devalorization of knowledge based on mastery? Does Le Vice-consul make possible a new distribution of cultural and sexual difference? What are the implications of the fact that the most signal elements of contemporary theories of modernity in France are at work in a text dealing with a decolonized nation?³ I propose that the "decentering" effected by Le Vice-consul results in a displacement of India and the subaltern woman as referential categories, and in the valorization of a new kind of subjectivity for the decentered subject of modernity. This subjectivity, however, reinscribes the central position of the West and the specular relationship whereby the West presumes to know itself through the figure of the Other. My reading will show how the Le Vice-consul exhibits the same characteristic that Spivak identifies in French post-structuralist theory in her

article "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Here, she argues that "the much publicized critique of the sovereign subject actually inaugurates a Subject," claiming that the post-structuralist theory of "pluralized subject effects" gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for the West as subject of knowledge(272).⁴

In Le Vice-consul, the demise of the mimetic notion of representation and the decentering of the speaking subject are figured through the textual production of the book which Peter Morgan is writing about the Indian beggarwoman. From the beginning of the novel, Duras renders problematic the identification of a unified speaking or writing subject, the possibility of representation and the stable distinction between language and its referent. The thematics of the opening passage indicate that the issues identified by theorists of modernity are already staged both thematically and formally in Le Vice-consul.

Elle marche, écrit Peter Morgan.
Comment ne pas revenir? Il faut se perdre. Je ne sais pas. Tu apprendras. Je voudrais une indication pour me perdre. Il faut être sans arrière pensée, se disposer à ne plus reconnaître rien de ce qu'on connaît, diriger ses pas vers le point de l'horizon le plus hostile, sorte de vaste étendue de marécages que mille talus traversent en tous sens on ne voit pas pourquoi.(9)

Problematizing the identification of a unified speaking or writing subject, this passage oscillates between a

multiplicity of subject positions--elle, Peter Morgan, je, tu, on--as the possible points of enunciation.

Consequently, the question of narrative voice becomes impossible to answer since Peter Morgan, the narrator of Duras' Le Vice consul, the Indian beggar woman, her mother and finally, the reader, are variously positioned as the possible subjects of the énonciation and the énoncé. The passage demonstrates what Derrida calls écriture--writing as différance-- with the speaking subject no longer identifiable with a fixed "self" but dispersed along a series of subject positions. Furthermore, the tearing apart of the distinction between narrative voice and its object--categories which inform the classical notion of representation--is evident in the way the paragraph subverts the initial positing of "elle" as object of Peter Morgan's writing: "Elle marche, écrit Peter Morgan." The multiplicity of pronouns which follow problematizes the referent by constantly displacing it and thereby rendering it indeterminate. Does this passage signify the modern "stream of consciousness" of the Indian beggar-woman as she confronts ostracization by her family and exile into the unknown? Are these the musings of Peter Morgan as he considers the book he is about to write? Or is this an instance of the self-referentiality of the text and as such, a general trope for the various theories of modernity: for instance, the notion of writing as

dispossession: "il faut se perdre"; the idea that "the specificity of writing" is "intimately bound to the absence of the Father"; the valorization of "the language of writing" as the "vacancy of the 'self'"; and the desire among contemporary theorists and writers for new ways of knowing which involve a valorization of non-mastery: "Il faut être sans arrière-pensée, se disposer à ne plus reconnaître rien de ce qu'on connaît."⁵ Through its espousal of ways of knowing based on mastery, the colonial enclave represents those attributes related to the Cartesian subject: reason, thought, law and self-identity. Duras' text however, undermines these ways of knowing espoused by the French Ambassador, the Director of the European Circle, Anne-Marie Stretter's "cercle des intimes", and the collective "on" whose commentary punctuates the reception at the French Embassy. As we shall see, it does so by exploring new possibilities for knowledge in the figure of Anne-Marie Stretter who embodies a new relationship to alterity and a decentered subjectivity.

The various attempts to know and explain the vice-consul's actions at Lahore--firing a gun at the lepers in the gardens of Shalimar in Lahore, shooting at his own reflection in the mirror--exemplify ways of knowing based on the notion of mastery and a subject capable of knowing and representing the Truth. Logic, Psychology and History

are the instruments of knowledge of which the colonials avail themselves in their quest to reveal the motivation for the vice-consul's actions. The French Ambassador, the Director of the European circle, and colonial society as figured by the collective "on", all attempt to reconstruct the vice-consul's past in order to shed light on the reasons for his actions in Lahore. Their approach implies a belief in the possibility of assembling a personal history and a psychological profile for the vice-consul which could adequately explain his aberrant behaviour. As the Director questions him about his past, his approach functions as a parodic mimicry of the psychoanalyst who, like the figure of the detective, believes in the ultimate resolution of the mysteries that temporarily confront him. Intent on shedding light on the mystery which surrounds the vice-consul, the Director strives to render his actions comprehensible to the colonial enclave and to enable Jean Marc de H. to "give an account" of his behaviour, since the latter has confided to the Ambassador his inability to do so: "Simplement je me borne ici à constater l'impossibilité de rendre compte de façon compréhensible de ce qui s'est passé à Lahore" (39).

However, the knowledge pursued by the Director in his meetings with the vice-consul is constantly deferred as their respective stories are confused with each other, questions go unanswered, monologues prevail over

dialogues, sentences are left unfinished, and communication is irremediably blocked.⁶ The closing words of the novel epitomize the futility of this quest to know all. In response to the director's question concerning his future transfer, the vice-consul remarks:

"Je pense que ce sera quand même Bombay. Je m'y vois, **indéfiniment** photographié sur une chaise longue au bord de la mer d'Oman."

"Rien d'autre, vous n'avez rien d'autre à me dire, monsieur?"

"Rien, non, directeur." (212)

Since the meaning of the vice-consul's actions in Lahore remain as elusive and **indeterminate** as the projected photograph in Oman, this final exchange annuls the possibility of resolution through the discovery of the "Truth" of Lahore. In this way, the knowledge sought by the Director is displaced by the self-referential issue of representation as exemplified by this dialogue in which meaning escapes language, and by the elusive photographic image which will also fail to represent, and thereby know, the vice-consul in an unequivocal fashion.

The endeavour to restore intelligibility to that which escapes understanding is exemplary of the Cartesian subject's confidence in the possibility of total knowledge, and the mastery such knowledge implies. In Le Vice-consul, it is the radical otherness of India which constitutes the challenge to this western mode of knowing which posits a rational, thinking subject separate from, and in control of, nature and the external world. When the

vice-consul's aunt suggests that the reasons for her nephew's conduct might be related to Lahore itself, the Ambassador prefers to remain on familiar ground and to explore the aberrant behaviour through recourse to psychology: "Je préfère qu'on en reste aux conjectures habituelles, qu'on cherche dans l'enfance, dit l'ambassadeur"(42). His refusal to address the question of Lahore is indicative of the threatening alterity which India represents in the colonial imaginaire. Whereas psychological problems are ultimately amenable to correction and control: "Mais il y a des remèdes contre... la nervosité, contre... tout ce qu'on appelle ainsi, vous le savez?"(118), constant vigilance is necessary to control the radical otherness of India which threatens the self-possession and sanity of the colonials. This threat is evident in the following passage which illustrates Charles Rossett's difficulty in adapting to Calcutta: "Lumière réverbérante dans la chambre, aveuglante. Avec la lumière, la nausée. Désir chaque jour de téléphoner à l'ambassadeur: Monsieur l'Ambassadeur, je vous demande mon changement, je ne peux pas, je ne peux pas me faire à Calcutta"(47). And the advice the ambassador gives him: "Il faut aller aux Iles, conseille M. Stretter, il faut prendre l'habitude d'y aller si on veut tenir le coup à Calcutta" (44).

But the alterity embodied by the vice-consul is not the only form of difference which threatens the colonial enclave. The pervasive presence of grillages in the text is a concrete symbol of the colonials' attempts to ward off the poverty, the madness, and the untamed nature which India embodies for them, to maintain the boundaries between identity and difference, self and other, inside and outside. Typical of this attempt to preserve boundaries is the island on which is situated the Prince of Wales, a colonial hotel frequented by Anne-Marie Stretter and her entourage: "L'île est grande, à l'autre extrémité il y a un village très bas qui touche la mer. Entre ce village et l'hôtel un grand grillage s'élève et les sépare. Partout, au bord de la mer, dans la mer, d'autres grillages contre les requins" (177). On this island, railings are built to keep out the sharks which threaten the inhabitants, and to ward off beggars like "la femme de Calcutta" who represents some of the most threatening elements of India for the white colonials. Ostracized from her family and homeland, Cambodia, on account of her pregnancy, she wanders through India in permanent exile, scavenging for food to feed herself and her newborn child, eventually handing the infant over to the care of a white woman in Vinhlong. Descending further and further into madness, she continues to repeat this cycle of conception, childbirth and abandonment during her

ten-year journey to Calcutta. Within Le Vice-consul, the beggarwoman figures the dissolution of the rational consciousness of the self-present subject into madness, animality, and total abjection.

The threat she poses to members of the colonial enclave is evident in Charles Rossett's reaction when he encounters her by chance on the island. Emerging like an animal out of the water, the mendicante bites the head off a fish she has hunted, laughing like a madwoman and insanely repeating the word "Battamabang".

Charles Rossett pense qu'il ne sait pas ce qui lui arrive mais qu'il va quitter les Iles, les chemins deserts des Iles où rencontrer **ça**. La folie, je ne la supporte pas, c'est plus fort que moi, je ne peux pas... le regard des fous, je ne le supporte pas... tout mais la folie... (206)

Confronted by this insane, beast-like woman under the oppressive heat of the Indian sun, Charles Rossett loses control of his thoughts as reason gives way to paralyzing terror in the face of the radical otherness of this utterly destitute and dehumanized "ça": "La sueur, le corps source de sueur, ruisselle, c'est à devenir fou cette chaleur de la mousson, les idées ne se rassemblent plus, elles se brûlent, elles se repoussent, la peur règne, et elle seulement" (206).

In as far as the vice-consul is a living embodiment of madness and death within the colonial enclave, he exemplifies the dangerous consequences which result from contamination by the absolute otherness of India. Having

witnessed the intolerable suffering and poverty of the lepers in Lahore, Jean-Marc de H. loses control and shoots at this terrifying alterity, as well as the otherness within himself when he sees his own reflection in the mirrors of his residence in Lahore. Whereas the beggarwoman constitutes the absolute Other for colonial society and therefore leaves intact the categories of self and other, the vice-consul figures the presence of difference within identity: "une voix ingrate comme greffée... La voix d'un autre?" (131), death within life: "cet homme au regard mort" (119), and the coexistence of madness and sanity, and is intolerable for a society predicated on control, rationality and the maintenance of boundaries. Because the vice-consul transgresses these boundaries, he is condemned to exclusion from Anne-Marie Stretter's entourage within "la blanche Calcutta": "Ce n'est pas possible, dit Peter Morgan, excusez-nous, le personnage que vous êtes ne nous intéresse que lorsque vous êtes absent" (147).

In similar fashion, Peter Morgan's interest in the mendicante can only be sustained at a certain distance from the madness she embodies. At first, his desire to know "the pain of India" is predicated on a naive desire for knowledge through participation: "Peter Morgan est un jeune homme qui désire prendre la douleur de Calcutta, s'y jeter, que ce soit fait, et que son ignorance cesse avec

la douleur prise"(29). Soon, however, this desire to experience "la douleur des Indes" is replaced by an attempt to know vicariously India's "pain" through the beggar woman whose story he is writing: "Je m'exalte sur la douleur des Indes. Nous le faisons tous plus ou moins, non? On ne peut parler de cette douleur que si on assure sa respiration en nous... Je prends des notes imaginaires sur cette femme"(157).

Ultimately, however, Le Vice-consul constructs the referent--the beggarwoman of Calcutta--as unknowable. Her madness having "abolished" her memory, she has neither a history to tell, nor the language with which to communicate it, exiled as she is from her native Cambodia. Since "la douleur des Indes" cannot be spoken by the beggarwoman, Peter Morgan attempts to articulate it through his own creation of her story: "Peter Morgan voudrait maintenant substituer à la mémoire abolie de la mendicante le bric-à-brac de la sienne. Peter Morgan se trouverait, sans cela, à cours de paroles pour rendre compte de la folie de la mendicante de Calcutta" (73). In his attempt to know this "douleur de Calcutta", Morgan would maintain a strict division between the subject and object of knowledge: "Elle est sale comme la nature même, ce n'est pas croyable.... je voudrais analyser cette crasse...."(182). His declaration to his friends illustrates this refusal to be contaminated by the object

of his interest: "Je l'abandonnerai avant la folie, ça c'est sûr, mais j'ai quand même besoin de connaître cette folie"(182). Like Freud's fear of the contamination of his psychoanalytic discourse by Dora's hysteria, Morgan's desire for narrative mastery is a defence against being touched by the mendicante's madness.⁷

Duras' text, however, subverts this desire for narrative mastery through the dissolution of the boundaries between the framing récit--Morgan's story about the mendicante--and the récit about the vice consul. Refusing to stay within the confines of Morgan's book, the beggar woman, and her madness, invade the literal space of the colonial enclave--Charles Rossett flees from her "folie"--and the figurative space of the vice-consul's story. That Morgan's story of the mendicante occupies the same narrative status as her "real" interventions in the vice-consul's story-- the past which Morgan creates for her is as real, or as fictional, as her appearances in the second récit--is exemplary of the way Le Vice-consul breaks down the distinction between text and referent underlying the classical notion of representation and the mastery that it implies. By problematizing the distinction between text and referent, the text forces a requestioning of the opposition between fiction and truth and dismantles the hierarchy implicit in the mimetic notion of the text as a copy of an anterior reality or model.

Another important element in the denigration of ways of knowing based on mastery is the implicit critique of the colonial diplomats' attitude towards India. The following exchange illustrates the complacent and supercilious attitude of the privileged young Englishmen "au coeur du saint synode de la blanche Calcutta".

"Il y a mes Indes, les vôtres, celles-ci, celles-là," dit Charles Rossett--il sourit--"ce qu'on peut faire aussi, ce que vous faites, semblerait-il, je ne sais pas, remarquez, je ne vous connais pas, c'est de mettre ses Indes ensemble."

"Le vice-consul a-t-il des Indes souffrantes?"

"Non, lui, même pas."

"Alors, qu'a-t-il à la place?"

"Mais rien."

....

"Oh! après... après... nous sommes bien plus dépayés par le vice-consul que par la famine qui sévit en ce moment sur la côte de Malabar. N'est-il pas fou, tout simplement fou?"

"Quand il criait on pensait à Lahore... de son balcon. La nuit, il criait."

"Anne-Marie a des Indes à elle aussi, mais elles ne sont pas dans notre cocktail" (157-158).

Here, India becomes the creation of the colonials, no more than the sum of the personal ideas and reactions experienced by Charles Rossett, Peter Morgan, Georges Crawn, Michael Richard, the vice-consul and Anne-Marie Stretter. The suggestion that the vice-consul's actions are related to India is expressed in terms of a personal

illness, with his idea of India the afflicted organ. As soon as the question of Lahore threatens to impose itself, with its disturbing implications for the possibility of maintaining a boundary between European, colonial society and the unspeakable squalor, suffering and leprosy of India, Georges Crawn directs the conversation back to their reassuring, abstract and personalized ideas of India. The text reveals the complacency of this attitude through the metaphor of the cocktail--symbolic of an affluent society--which contrasts starkly with the famine in Malabar, the precious nature of the pun: "Le vice-consul a-t-il des Indes souffrantes?", and the supercilious tone of the exchange.

Despite its implicit critique of various forms of knowledge and consciousness based on mastery, Duras' text ultimately reinscribes a relationship between West and East which is also predicated upon mastery--the way in which the text presumes to "know" India. As I will show, this violence is related to the new form of subjectivity explored in the figure of Anne-Marie Stretter. Since the new kind of subjectivity elaborated in Le Vice-consul is inextricably related to a certain notion of the feminine, Alice Jardine's notion of "gynesis" in modernity is pertinent to my analysis. Jardine uses the term to designate "the putting into discourse of "woman" as that process beyond the Cartesian Subject, the Dialectics of

Representation, or Man's Truth"(58). In her analysis of contemporary French theory and fiction, she identifies "a space coded as feminine" which represents the text's own "non-knowledge" and the limits of its mastery. This feminine space is not synonymous with the concept of woman as a gendered subject but is "a reading effect, a woman-in-effect, never stable and without identity". This valorization of woman and the feminine is intrinsic to the new and necessary modes of writing, knowing, and speaking explored by the theorists of modernity. Jardine offers Lacan's notion of the "unconscious", Derrida's notion of écriture, and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of le devenir femme as examples of the abstract spaces of alterity gendered feminine in contemporary French thought (24-25). Through their relationship with madness and death, the mendicante, the vice-consul, and the wife of the French Ambassador figure what Jardine would call the "text's own non-knowledge and the limits of its mastery," and thereby entertain a relation to that space of alterity coded as feminine within modernity. But while the beggarwoman and the vice-consul ultimately pose a threat on account of the alterity they embody, Anne-Marie Stretter represents a domesticated form of difference, a valorized mode of consciousness and an alternative subjectivity radically different from the self-presence and rationality of the Cartesian subject. This "reine de Calcutta" is a constant

source of fascination for her entourage of young English diplomats, colonial society and the Indian beggar woman. In an interview with Michelle Porte, Duras expresses her own admiration for and fascination with the enigmatic Anne-Marie Stretter.

Je pense que c'était ça, elle, Anne-Marie Stretter, le modèle parental pour moi, le modèle maternel, ou plutôt le modèle féminin.... J'ai dit qu'elle était Calcutta, je la vois comme Calcutta. Elle devient Calcutta, il y a un double glissement, Calcutta va vers la forme d'Anne-Marie Stretter et elle va vers la forme de Calcutta.... C'est en étant le plus largement ouverte à tous, à Calcutta, à la misère, à la faim, à l'amour, à la prostitution, au désir, qu'elle est le plus elle-même. C'est ça, Anne-Marie Stretter. Quand je dis: "La Prostitution", je veux dire: la prostitution en passe par elle, comme la faim, comme les larmes, comme le désir; c'est une forme creuse et qui reçoit, les choses se logent en elle, c'est ce que j'appelle la libération d'Anne-Marie Stretter. (65,73)

Here, the figure of a western woman is conflated with Calcutta, a rhetorical device which renders "Calcutta" transparent while simultaneously emptying the signifier of its geographical, cultural and historical referent.⁸ The radical alterity of Calcutta, figured by the mendicant in Le Vice-consul, is thereby domesticated, with Anne-Marie Stretter becoming a trope for a new western subjectivity based on the valorization of non-mastery, passivity, political quietism, and fatalism.

Je pense qu'Anne-Marie Stretter a dépassé l'analyse, voyez, la question. Elle a dépassé tous les préjugés à propos de l'intelligence ou de la connaissance, de la théorie. C'est un désespoir, il s'agit d'un désespoir universel, qui rejoint au plus près un désespoir politique profond, et qui est reçu comme

tel, avec calme... Je ne dis pas que c'est une femme libérée, je dis qu'elle est sur une voie très sûre de la libération, une voie très personnelle, individuelle de la libération. C'est en embrassant le plus général du monde, si vous voulez, la généralité du monde, qu'elle est le plus elle-même.(73)

The transformation of India, a nation with a cultural, historical and political specificity, into an empty signifier to be filled with western ideas about the East is dependent on the modernity of Le Vice-consul in as far as the text displaces the referent through its subversion of the classical concept of representation. Exemplary of this appropriation of the historical specificity of India is the way in which Anne-Marie Stretter is conflated with the signifier "Calcutta" in order to suggest her relationship to alterity. In this way, the wife of the French Ambassador becomes a metonymy of India as a trope for alterity. But whereas "L'Inde est un gouffre d'indifférence dans lequel tout est noyé", Anne-Marie Stretter embodies a domesticated, yet seductive form of indifference. The vice-consul alludes to her as a woman among "celles qui ont l'air de dormir dans les eaux de la bonté sans discrimination". Her receptivity is illustrated by her refusal to discriminate, to pass judgement: "Tout le monde a complètement, profondément raison"(143). Furthermore, her way of knowing is intuitive and is antipodal to "the rational and scientific knowledge of the Cartesian subject where 'certainty' is located in the ego"(Jardine,106). By intuitively understanding the

alterity which India represents, Anne-Marie Stretter becomes one with the pain and sorrow of India: "elle donne le sentiment d'être maintenant prisonnière d'une **douleur** trop ancienne pour être pleurée" (198). Since Le Vice-consul constructs India as the unknowable Other⁹, comprehensible through intuition only, India as referent disappears, leaving in its place the fictional articulation of issues also explored by western theories of modernity: the exploration of a new relationship to alterity, the crisis in representation and the critique of the Cartesian subject. This undermining of subjective sovereignty, therefore, ends up conserving what Spivak calls "the subject of the West."

Indeed, with its valorization of fatality, passivity and quietism, characteristics invariably attributed to the East in orientalist discourse, the new subjectivity explored through the figure of Anne-Marie Stretter is absolutely dependent on the demise of representation which the text enacts. To attempt to represent India in the classical sense of mimesis would mean addressing the historical referent of Indian nationalism. Whatever the shortcomings of a mimetic representation might be, the inclusion of Indian nationalism--India as an active subject--would "wreak havoc with orientalist conceptions of passive, fatalistic and subject races".¹⁰ Instead, the text valorizes Anne-Marie Stretter, a metonymy of India,

as "une forme creuse qui reçoit" and the alternative she proposes to the vice-consul's actions in Lahore: "C'est très difficile de l'apercevoir tout à fait" elle sourit "je suis une femme... ce que je vois seulement c'est une possibilité dans le sommeil"(127). By conflating the figure of a woman with the orientalist notions of India as essentially passive and fatalistic, Duras' rhetoric transforms India into a trope for a new subjectivity for the decentered subject of modernity and completely obliterates the history of Indian nationalism and Independence, and the two hundred year struggle against French and British colonial rule. This imperialistic appropriation of India as an arena for the exploration of western concerns constitutes a form of colonization, in language, of the history of India's resistance to European colonialism.¹¹

Furthermore, the conflation of the alterity of India with the femininity embodied by Anne-Marie Stretter has troubling implications for the representation of gender. Duras' treatment of India and of femininity engages in what De Lauretis calls "the violence of rhetoric".¹² De Lauretis uses the term to refer to the violence perpetrated against women by male philosophers who transform the question of woman into a question of style, language, writing or philosophy, thereby ignoring the ways in which the social construction of sexuality has

historically positioned "women and men in an antagonistic and asymmetrical relationship". Just as the transformation of India into a trope for a valorized subjectivity for the decentered subject of modernity is effected through the elision of how the historical reality of colonialism has positioned India and Europe in an unequal relationship, Duras' privileging of Anne-Marie Stretter's passivity and fatality as a space for the exploration of this new subjectivity completely ignores how the historical fact of gender has placed women in a subordinate position through the very ideologies which valorize feminine passivity, receptivity, and silence. Indeed, it is these very traits which encourage Charles Rossett's masochistic phantasies of beating Anne-Marie Stretter.

Il voudrait l'avoir fait. Quoi? Qu'il voudrait, ah, avoir dressé sa main... Sa main se dresse, retombe, commence à caresser le visage, les lèvres, doucement d'abord puis de plus en plus fort, les dents sont offertes dans un rire désgracieux, pénible, le visage se met le plus possible à la portée de la main, il se met à la disposition entière, elle se laisse faire, il crie en frappant...(203)

Duras' characterization of this woman as a "modèle féminin" valorizes the gendered positions occupied by Anne-Marie Stretter and Charles Rossett, the latter being the perpetrator of violence, the former the recipient.¹³ In privileging Anne-Marie Stretter as the embodiment of a feminized masochistic subjectivity, Duras' text ignores the gendered nature of the real violence--rape, battery and incest--which men have perpetrated against women's

bodies throughout history.¹⁴ Because it reinscribes, and valorizes, these historically gendered positions, Duras' representation of femininity engages in a violence of rhetoric.

In "'L'affaire Gregory' and Duras' Textual Feminism," Verena Andermatt Conley explores some of the political tensions which arise when Duras' fascination with negativity, dispossession and death "brushes against the 'reality' of the social" (73). Recalling an actual event which occurred in France in 1984, Conley recounts how Duras publicly extolled Christine V. for the alleged murder of her child, describing it as a "sublime" act in the national newspaper La libération. In so doing, Duras influenced the opinion of the community, including those subsequently responsible for deciding the fate of this woman who denied having committed the act of which she was accused. As Conley astutely notes: "Textual dispossession does not necessarily go with that of the author." As the child in her silk dress in L'Amant was said to control her lover, so Marguerite Duras does control her stories and the fate of Christine V. Duras never strips the body of all its clothes. She still keeps the robe of high priestess" ("L'Affaire Gregory" 74).

Similarly, when one of Duras' characters--the young girl in L'Amant--brushes up against the reality of the author's life and her prostitution in colonial society--it

is interesting to note that the autobiographical text, unlike Le Vice-consul, does not valorize dispossession and masochistic desire. Instead, it constructs a dominant subject-position for the narrator, and valorizes erotic pleasure in the absence of violence: "elle va se faire découvrir le corps par le milliardaire chinois, il la lavera sous la douche...il l'embrassera de plus en plus partout et elle demandera toujours encore et encore, et après elle rentrera à la pension, et personne pour la punir, la battre, la défigurer, l'insulter" (L'Amant 112).

But while Duras' textual complicity with violence against women may be disturbing, it must also be noted that the recurrent linking of eroticism, violence and masochism is one of the fascinations of Duras' writing, and one which partially accounts for the attraction her texts hold for many readers, among them feminist critics. Although the erotic is closely linked to violence and death, Duras' female characters, like Anne-Marie Stretter, do accede to their desire and, in so doing, break through the social and cultural constraints which are responsible for controlling and censoring desire. Regarding Duras' narratives, Conley observes the following: "Her protagonists are not feminists militating for women's rights. Rather, her women accede to their desire and undo conventional barriers restricting or censoring the body. There is no vindication. Uncensoring of the body is

parallel to a myth of unleashing vital, ultimately creative, forces" (103).

In her discussion of the status of the feminine in contemporary theories of modernity, Jardine notes the danger that this kind of theoretical inquiry may end up treating the figure of woman as a metaphor or discursive effect, and thereby efface the materiality of the gendered body.¹⁵ This tendency to elide the referential status of women is particularly evident in post-structuralist and psychoanalytic criticism on Duras. Sharon Willis' book, Writing on the Body: Marguerite Duras and Madeleine Borgemano's article "L'histoire de la mendiante indienne," are two pertinent examples of this tendency. Although she produces an illuminating reading of Duras' writing as a "hysterical" discourse and attempts to take the referent into account by showing how this discourse is "propped on the body", Willis ultimately elides the specificities of race and class, and the materiality of the gendered body. In relation to her project, Willis states:

What raises the interrogation in my own discourse is the suspicion that my fascination with these texts is related to an appeal, a pull or sollicitation, that is mapped in them, and that, correspondingly, maps a position for the reader which I find it hard not to occupy. (14-15)

Because Willis allows her position as a reader to be constructed by the text, she is led here to read Le Vice-consul on the terms proposed by the text. That is, she is seduced into a reading which, like the Le Vice-consul,

elides the referent. For example, Willis reads the beggarwoman's alternance between eating and vomiting as a metaphor for the process of mourning the mother. By transforming the vomiting related to pregnancy into a trope for the failure of mourning and the related failure of representation, Willis paradoxically loses sight of the historical specificity of the beggarwoman's material experience of pregnancy. Willis attributes only minimal importance to the woman's attempted abortion through expulsion, preferring instead to read it as an attempt to forget, and thereby mourn, the mother (98). This psychoanalytic reading dehistoricizes the beggarwoman's poverty and relegates the position of the mother to that of the threatening, uncontrollable Other, a gesture Marianne Hirsch reminds us is typical of psychoanalytic feminism.¹⁶

To read this instance of vomiting primarily as an attempt to abort the foetus in order to assure her own survival is to restore to the mendicant as mother a position of subjective agency. Such a reading maintains the historical specificity of the beggarwoman in that it explores her behaviour within the context of her pregnancy, her poverty and her race. The first version of the story of the Indian beggarwoman, occurring in Barrage contre le pacifique, supports such a reading.¹⁷ In the

following passage, the beggarwoman persuades Suzanne's mother to buy her child.

Elle disait qu'elle aimait tellement son enfant qu'elle avait fait trente-cinq kilomètres en marchant sur la pointe du pied malade pour venir la lui apporter. Mais elle n'en voulait plus.... Pendant trois jours, la femme avait dormi sur une natte à l'ombre du bungalow.... Puis elle avait fait ses adieux à la mère. Celle-ci avait voulu lui rendre son enfant, **mais la femme était encore jeune et belle et voulait vivre. Elle avait refusé avec obstination.** (119-120 emphasis mine)

Here, the woman's attempt to assure her own survival, as well as her child's, is evident in the steps, literal and figurative, which she takes to resist the fate to which motherhood, a gangrenous foot, and dire poverty threaten to reduce her. For similar reasons, the beggarwoman in Le Vice-consul attempts to abort her unborn child, figured as a parasite within her body.

Elle vomit, s'efforce de vomir l'enfant, de se l'extirper, mais c'est de l'eau de mangue acide qui vient...nuit et jour l'enfant continue à la manger, elle écoute et entend le grignotement incessant dans le ventre qu'il dechaîne, il lui a mangé les cuisses, les bras, les joues...(18)

Unable to survive herself and feed her newborn baby, her instinct for self-preservation wins out over her maternal "instincts" as she pursues a white woman in Vinhlong and gives her the infant in order to assure her own survival: "L'intelligence revient à la jeune fille, ruse, habilité, elle flaire sa chance.... Elle suit la dame. La dame se retourne, chasse. Mais à côté de garder l'enfant rien ne l'effraie" (55).

Willis' interpretation, on the other hand, obliterates the historical and material specificity of the woman from Savannaket in order to produce her as an illustration of an apparently universal psychological process of mourning. Consequently, by ignoring the specificities of race and class, and minimizing the importance of her struggle for survival, Willis' reading silences the traces of the subaltern woman's voice and evaporates the evidence of her resistance to the material conditions which threaten to destroy her.

Later, Willis reads the Indian mendicante as a figure of writing, an interpretation which repeats the tendency of the text to transform the beggarwoman into a discursive trope. Echoing Peter Morgan's remark in Le Vice-consul, "elle marcherait et la phrase avec elle" (180), Willis observes the following: "In this respect, the 'elle marche' is also the figure of writing as it unfolds, doubles and repeats itself. For Peter Morgan, the desire to write this story is bound up with a kind of death in discourse" (104). Such a reading allows Willis to explore some of the concerns of modernity--the relationship between writing, memory, death and the unrepresentable--but obliterates the gendered and cultural specificity of the subaltern woman.

Like Willis, Borgemano displaces the mendicante in order to focus on the self-referentiality of the Le Vice-consul. She reads the beggarwoman's story as "la cellule

génératrice" of Duras' entire oeuvre, seeing in her "périple" across the Indochinese plain a trope for writing: "La mendiante, "lieu de l'écrit", comme Anne-Marie Stretter--lieu aussi où se révèle l'impossibilité de l'écriture--devient ainsi ce vide, ce creux vers lequel se précipite l'écriture, dans un élan vers sa propre perdition"(484). Like Duras herself, Borgemano conflates the mendiante and Anne-Marie Stretter through their figuration of writing.¹⁸ The transformation of the destitute Cambodian beggarwoman and the privileged wife of the French Ambassador into a trope for writing totally dehistoricizes their radically different subject positions. Indeed, Borgemano conflates almost all of the female characters in Duras' work with the wandering figure of the mendiante. In this way, the affluent Anne Desbaresdes, Anna the rich American in Le Marin de Gibraltar, and the bourgeois Lol V. Stein are seen to share an essential identity with the beggarwoman:

Cette errance dénuée de sens entraîne dans son sillage presque toutes les femmes durassiennes et quelques personnages masculins; ébranlées par on ne sait quoi, instables, inquiètes, elles marchent. Comme l'écrivait Peter Morgan: "la marche semée a pris".(487)

Clearly, the elision of the referent effected by Le Vice-consul and repeated by Willis and Borgemano, is evidence of a certain intellectual imperialism manifest both among

writers of fiction, like Duras, and certain varieties of post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theory.¹⁹

Through my analysis of the text's implicit critique of the Western Cartesian subject, I hope to have drawn attention to the ways in which Duras is concerned to undermine and expose ways of knowing and writing based on Cartesian rationalism; to elaborate a notion of a subject, not separate from, but constructed by language; and to deconstruct the conception of language itself as a transparent instrument with which the referent can be unproblematically represented. While Duras' attempt to problematize the referent is a valid and necessary one, the concern of my own reading is to show that in Le Vice-consul, the referent is not merely problematized but is actually elided, a gesture which is repeated in the critical readings of Willis and Borgemano. In analyzing the relation that Duras' text entertains to the colonial history of India, and the relation of Willis' and Borgamono's readings to the subaltern woman, my concern is to explore the political implications of this elision of the historical referent. By taking the issue of referentiality as the basis upon which I develop a critique of Duras' text, I am not artificially imposing political concerns from outside the text onto Le Vice-consul in order to chastize Duras for not being politically progressive, but rather I am analysing the

disturbing implications for both colonialism and gender raised by the "decentering" which is such an integral part of the formal and thematic composition of the text. To refuse to critique a text, be it fictional or critical, is to accord an incontrovertible authority to what it says, and to make oneself complicitous with its silences.

Notes

1. Sharon Willis makes this point about all of Duras' narratives in her book Marquerite Duras: Writing on the Body, esp. 24.

2. Throughout this chapter I will use the term "referent" to refer to the symbolic construction of the real, namely: historical events such as Indian nationalism and Independence; I will also use the term to refer to historical subjects such as the Indian beggarwoman with the gangrenous foot whose baby Duras' mother bought when she lived in French Indochina, and whose story recurs in Duras' texts.

3. By the term "contemporary theories of modernity", I refer to those French theorists (Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze, Barthes, Blanchot, etc) whose work is the focus of Alice Jardine's Gynesis. In general terms, these writers are concerned with the human and speaking subject, signification, language and writing. More specifically, they explore, in different ways, the collapse of the notion of representation as mimesis--diagnosed in France as being "at the very roots of our Western drive to know all, and shown to be inseparable from the imperial

speaking subject". According to Jardine, modernity (or what Lyotard designates as "the post-modern condition") is defined by a crisis in the status of knowledge, and consequently a crisis in the master narratives of philosophy, history and religion.

4. In her article "Can the Subaltern Speak", Gayatri Spivak argues that "some of the most radical criticism coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject." In this context, she critiques Foucault and Deleuze for "ignoring the question of ideology and their own implication in intellectual and economic history" (272).

5. These theories have been elaborated by Barthes, Blanchot, Deleuze, Derrida and others. For further discussion, see Alice Jardine's Gynesis, esp. "The Speaking Subject: The Positivities of Alienation", 105-117.

6. For a more extensive discussion of this blocked communication, see Mieke Bal's Narratologie, 74-80.

7. In her discussion of the relationship between women,

madness and narrative, Susan Suleiman observes the following: "(Freud's) desire for narrative mastery is not only a therapeutic device for the cure but also a personal and intellectual defence against the "contamination" of psychoanalysis and of the psychoanalyst's discourse by its object" (130).

8. In Les Parleuses, a series of interviews with Xavière Gauthier, Duras draws attention to the fictitious nature of the geographical references in Le Vice-consul: "Faut que je dise tout de suite que la géographie est inexacte, complètement. Je me suis fabriqué une Inde, des Indes avant...pendant le colonialisme" (169).

9. In The Other Woman: Feminism and Femininity in the Works of Marguerite Duras, Trista Selous notes that Duras reinforces the traditional image of "India the Incomprehensible" in as far as Le Vice-consul constructs India as the great unknowable Other.

10. In Orientalism, Edward Said makes the point that the impact of historical development in the Orient was never taken seriously enough by Orientalists to complicate their essentialist conceptions of the East (105).

11. It is interesting to note that Benita Parry critiques Spivak in similar terms in her article "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse": "Thus while protesting the obliteration of the native's position in the text of imperialism, Spivak in her project gives no speaking part to the colonized, effectively writing out the evidence of native agency recorded in India's 200 year struggle against British conquest and the Raj" (35). I take up the issue of subaltern agency again in my critique of Willis' reading of Le Vice-consul.

12. For a more extensive theoretical discussion of this issue, see Teresa de Lauretis' Technologies of Gender, esp. 31-50.

13. One may object that the vice-consul, feminized through his relationship with madness, death and alterity, occupies the masculine position of perpetrator through his violent actions in Lahore. In response to this objection, I would argue that Duras' texts ultimately valorize the position occupied by Anne-Marie Stretter as the ideal of femininity. Furthermore, the passive alternative which she proposes to the vice-consul's behaviour in Lahore naturalizes the relationship between passivity and femininity: "Je suis une femme... ce que je vois seulement

c'est une possibilité dans le sommeil". Whereas the vice-consul remains ill at ease and alienated on account of the alterity--gendered feminine--which he embodies, Anne-Marie Stretter is at one with her own femininity.

14. The Bureau of Justice Statistics show that 95% of all assaults on spouses or ex-spouses were committed by men. (Cf. "Reports to the Nation on Crime and Justice", October 1983.) As Wini Breines and Linda Gordon note in their review essay "The New Scholarship on Family Violence, statistical studies agree that in cases of incest and battery, 92% of the victims are females and 97% of the assailants are males.

15. While de Lauretis is clearly opposed to the transformation of woman into a metaphor or reading effect, Jardine's position is ambivalent in that Gynesis is an open-ended exploration of the feminization of otherness in contemporary French theory. Indeed, in her article "Feminism and Postmodernism," Toril Moi has taken Jardine to task for "sitting on the fence" and not taking a clear position.

16. In The Mother/Daughter Plot: Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Narrative, Marianne Hirsch suggests the limitations of

a psychoanalytic perspective through her critique of Kristeva's recent article on Duras: "Kristeva's internalization of the political, and her location of its force in the figure of the mad, abandoning and unfaithful mother is symptomatic of the moves of psychoanalytic feminism (especially in so far as it is allied with French deconstructive theory, but also in its American object-relations incarnation). In eclipsing the mother's own voice, her own story, and allowing her only the status of object, or "Other," Kristeva, and to an extent Duras also, eclipse the political dimensions of women's lives, conflating them with the psychological" (152).

17. I am grateful to Madeleine Borgomano for locating the different versions of the beggarwoman's story in Duras' texts. For an analysis of their significance, see Borgomano's article "L'histoire de la mendiante indienne".

18. In "L'Histoire de la mendiante indienne," Borgomano draws our attention to the fact that Duras uses the same metaphor "le lieu de l'écrit" to designate both the mendicante and Anne-Marie Stretter (484).

19. For a post-structuralist critic who finds a great deal

of force in the historical referent in Duras' India Song,
see Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier's Le texte divisé.

Section 11

Post-Colonial Fiction From North Africa

Chapter 4

The Impossible Genre: Autobiography and the Post-Colonial Woman Writer

As a woman from a Muslim society writing in the aftermath of one hundred and thirty years of French colonialism, the Algerian Assia Djébar occupies a doubly marginalized position. Subjected to patriarchal ideologies in their French colonial and Islamic forms, and to the legacy of colonialism in post-independence Algeria, this North African writer is situated at the crossroads of a cultural and sexual colonization. Djébar, however, is not merely "an overdetermined pawn of a post-colonial world" but is also a writing subject with the power to contest, and subvert, the dominant ideologies which construct her as the sexual and cultural Other.¹ This chapter will explore Djébar's L'Amour, la fantasia and Ombre sultane in order to examine the ways in which they subvert the colonialist and patriarchal discourses which have silenced the voices of Algerian women and/or men.² My reading will relate the oppositional strategies of Djébar's texts to her use of autobiographical discourse in L'Amour, la fantasia in order to reveal the linguistic and political tensions inherent in the genre for this Francophone woman writer from post-colonial Algeria.

Published in 1985, L'Amour, la fantasia is the first volume in what Djébar calls her quatuor romanesque dealing

with the Maghreb, and the first of her works in which she deploys some of the conventions of the autobiographical genre. It is also the only work of hers which she openly designates an autobiography.³ Ombre sultane, published in 1987, is the second volume in this quartet. Whereas L'Amour deals predominantly with the narrator's life and the history of her country--the French conquest in 1830 and the Algerian war (1956-1961)--Ombre sultane is set in Algeria after independence and elaborates a critique of the status of women in this Muslim society through an exploration of the lives of two women, one of whom Djébar describes as "completely traditional," the other as "westernized."

As a genre, autobiography enjoys a special status among feminist critics who have produced a considerable body of critical literature on the oppositional character of women's autobiographies with respect to traditional autobiography and the latter's imbrication with power and authority.⁴ In their "Introduction" to De/Colonizing the Subject: Gender and the Politics of Women's Autobiography, Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith define traditional autobiography as follows:

One of those "master" discourses that has served to power and define centers, margins, boundaries, and grounds of action in the West, traditional autobiography has always been implicated with and in the old imperial "self of essences." Certain presumptions of meaning circle around this notion of "self." Its core is understood to be unitary, irreducible, atomic; its boundaries separating inner

from outer well-defined, stable, impermeable; its relationship to the world unencumbered. A Cartesian "self," its vision is rational, totalizing, and appropriative as well as uncontaminated by the anarchies of embodiment.... The "I" of autobiography is the marker of the "self of essences".... But that "I" is gendered and it is male. Fundamentally, the "self of essences" is what Alice A. Jardine describes as the "self" of the "paternally conceived ego," or what Jane Gallop describes as "the self of the same, that is of man." (2-3)

Consequently, women's incursion into the genre has been read as an attempt to construct a female subject. As Domna C. Stanton explains: "In a phallogocentric system which defines her as the object, the inessential other to the same male subject...the **graphing** of the **auto** was an act of self-assertion that denied and reversed women's status" (15). Furthermore, the subject constructed in women's autobiography has been read as different from the unitary "I" of traditional autobiography whose boundaries are separate and distinct. Instead, the female "I" is seen as constructed through its relations with other people, with no absolute separation between self and other. Stanton notes that "the female 'I' was thus not simply a texture woven of several selves; its threads, its lifelines, came from and extended to others. By that token, this 'I' represented a denial of a notion essential to the phallogocentric order: the totalized, self-contained subject present-to-itself" (16).

While women from Europe and America have made use of the autobiographical genre in order to challenge the

phallocentric order of patriarchal society, this genre has also been widely adopted by writers, both women and men, from the post-colonial world. Michelle Cliff, Huda Shaarawi, Abdelkebir Khatibi, and Leila Khaled, are among those who have explored autobiographical discourse in order to contest the hegemonic historical narratives of both French and British colonialism through an articulation of the hitherto silenced voices of the colonized. Smith and Watson describe this "explosion of post-colonial autobiographical activity" as follows:

And so despite their 'subjection' as the colonial Other, women of the first, second and third worlds have begun writing autobiography in increasing numbers. They too have pursued the discursive economies of self-narrative. And they have done so because they are not merely overdetermined pawns of a post-colonial world but also creative sign-makers, not merely 'subjects' of ideology interpellated inside discourse but agents of contestation. The ideologies of the Other may attempt to script difference (sexual, racial) according to 'nature' or 'God-given' distinctions, but those cultural distinctions remain vulnerable to destabilizations that rupture their coherence and hegemony.... To write the life is to resist the total inscription by the colonizer, the imperialist, whether white or male, whether white and male. But to write autobiography is also to enter into a tradition of colonial practice. To write autobiography from the Other's position of subjection is to contest the colonial regimes governing the constitution of subject peoples. (4-6)

Belonging to this recent proliferation of post-colonial autobiography is Assia Djebar's L'Amour, la fantasia, with its contestation of French colonialism in Algeria, and of the patriarchal order of Arab, Muslim society. The opening paragraph of Djebar's text explores

the question of identity in a post-colonial nation by establishing the cross-cultural identity of the narrator and her father:⁵

Fillette arabe allant pour la première fois à l'école, un matin d'automne, main dans la main du père. Celui-ci, un fez sur la tête, la silhouette haute et droite dans son costume européen, porte un cartable, il est instituteur à l'école française. Fillette arabe dans un village du Sahel Algérien.(11)

The father's attire illustrates this cultural mixture: along with the fez--a former part of the traditional garb of a Muslim man in North Africa and the Middle East--the schoolteacher wears a European suit and carries a French-style satchel as he goes to teach in the école primaire of his native village in colonial Algeria. Just as the father's dress points to an identity in which Arabic, Muslim society and the culture of the French colonizer stake their claim, so too is the young girl positioned at the confluence of cultures as her father leads her to the school in which she, a young arabic child, will learn the language and culture of the métropole.⁶

Toward the end of the book, Djébar returns to this image of herself as a little girl hand-in-hand with her father making their way to the French école in the village of the Algerian Sahel. To convey the fraught nature of the relationship she now entertains with the French language, the narrator refers to it as a "mariage forcé" (239). In the same way that traditional Muslim fathers abandoned their prepubescent daughters to unknown men in marriage,

so too did her father give her away to the language of the conqueror: "Ainsi, le père, instituteur, lui que l'enseignement du français a sorti de la gêne familiale, m'aurait "donnée" avant l'âge nubile--certains pères n'abandonnaient-ils pas leur fille à un prétendant inconnu ou, comme dans ce cas, au camp ennemi"(239). While the vexed nature of her subsequent relations with the French language is suggested by the emphasis on the part played by the authority invested in the father by Muslim society, the narrator also speaks of her "cohabitation avec la langue française"(239). In contrast to the traditional, authoritarian overtones of the forced marriage, the metaphor of cohabitation connotes a modern, egalitarian partnership, thereby suggesting the advantages of speaking the enemy tongue--namely, the opportunity for a girl to be educated beyond puberty, and, in Djébar's case, the chance to become a writer. In the following passage, the narrator observes that it was her childhood initiation into French that saved her from the veil and from sequestration, and afforded her entry into the street--the "public" sphere reserved for men in traditional, Muslim society.

Moi qui, devant le voile suaire n'avait nul besoin de trépigner ou de baisser l'échine comme telle ou telle cousine, moi qui, suprême coquetterie, en me voilant lors d'une noce d'été, m'imaginais me déguiser, puisque, définitivement, j'avais échappé à l'enfermement--je marche, fillette, au dehors, main dans la main du père. (239)

As such, she recognizes the benefits of this "don d'amour" from her father. But it is also as a result of her acquisition of the language of the métropole that the young girl is severed from her native Arabic--the oral language which the narrator repeatedly associates with her mother and her female ancestors. Although Algerian men also spoke Arabic, Djébar regards French as a paternal language, that is as "a source of power and dominance to which certain men (such as her father) had access during the colonial period and to which most women did not" (Mortimer; Journeys 156) The narrator's attempt to navigate a course between the conflicting demands of two cultures, and two languages, leads her to characterize her own position as the site upon which the battle is fought between the French invader and the rebellious Algerian people, the written language of the métropole imposed upon the colonized population, and the devalorized and repressed oral traditions of the Arabic language.

Après plus d'un siècle d'occupation française...un territoire de langue subsiste entre deux peuples, entre deux mémoires; la langue française, corps et voix, s'installe en moi comme un orgueilleux préside, tandis que la langue maternelle, toute en oralité, en hardes dépenaillées, résiste et attaque, entre deux essoufflements...je suis à la fois l'assiégé étranger et l'autochtone partant à la mort par bravade, illusoire effervescence du dire et de l'écrit.(241)

By designating her own position as the site of this battle, the narrator conveys, on the one hand, the tensions inherent in the situation of the post-colonial

Francophone writer, namely: the problem of writing in the language of the colonizer; the difficulty of addressing the question of women's emancipation without identifying oneself with the values of the métropole; and the transgressive nature of autobiography for an Islamic woman. On the other hand, the image of the post-colonial woman writer as the site of a battle also suggests the ability of the writer to resist the hegemonic language and culture of the colonizer. As we shall see, this tension pervades the text of L'Amour and is closely related to the different forms of Djébar's contestation of the discourses of colonialism and patriarchy. As suggested by the figural language of this passage with its metaphor of phallic penetration, the narrator regards the French language as masculine and powerful--the tongue of the colonizer and of the father--and Arabic as the maternal, feminine language resisting this sexual/linguistic aggression.

As the recurring image of the young girl led to school by her father suggests, the hybrid cultural identity of the narrator is a result not only of French colonial domination but also of paternal authority. It is "hand in hand" that the father brings his daughter to school in order to initiate his daughter into French language and culture, thereby cutting her off from the oral tradition of her mother's Arabic tongue. At the same time, he provides her with the opportunity, a formal

education, which will ultimately enable her to escape sequestration in the family harem--the typical destiny of young Muslim women in Algeria at that time.⁷ But the young girl is not content to accept obediently the language given to her by her father. Some years later, she deliberately avails herself of the colonizer's tongue in order to transgress the authority of her father. Piecing together a love-letter written to her by a young French student and torn up by her outraged father, the seventeen-year old protagonist embarks on a secret correspondence with this mysterious young admirer: "ainsi, cette langue que m'a donnée le père me devient entremetteuse et mon initiation, dès lors, se place sous un signe double, contradictoire..."(12). Here, gender roles are confused as the language associated with the father is placed in the traditionally feminine position of the go-between in order to serve the young girl's active desire. Although she first acquires the French language as a result of her father being a teacher in the French colonial school system and his decision to have her educated in the ecole where he teaches, this language is subsequently related to her transgression of paternal authority as she makes it the medium for the expression of her illicit desire. Just as the young girl takes the language "given" her by her father only to use it to disobey his strictures, so too will Djébar employ the language of the invader in order to

contest and undermine French colonial authority. In L'Amour, this contestation takes the form of a reaccentuation of the official discourse concerning the French conquest of Algiers. The importance of language and discourse as weapons essential to the project of colonialism is commented upon by the narrator.

Le mot lui-même, ornement pour les officiers qui le brandissent comme ils porteraient un oeillet à la boutonnière, **le mot deviendra l'arme par excellence**. Des cohortes d'interprètes, géographes, ethnographes, linguistes, botanistes, docteurs divers et écrivains de profession s'abattront sur la nouvelle proie. Toute une pyramide d'écrits amoncelés en apophyse superfétatoire occultera la violence initiale. (56; emphasis mine)

This knowledge elaborated and amassed by French scholars belongs to what Said calls the discourse of "Orientalism" and was vital to the whole project of French colonialism in both Africa and the East.⁸ Rather than allow the French reports of events between 1830 and 1848 to submerge the brutality and violence of the conquest beneath their detached and "objective" style, Djébar "steals" the language of the colonizer as though it were one of the spoils of war in order to expose what is veiled by the official rhetoric: "Langue installée dans l'opacité d'hier, dépouille prise à celui avec lequel ne s'échangeait aucune parole d'amour..." (241).

In the first section of the text, "La Prise de la ville ou L'Amour s'écrit" the narrator rescues this chapter of Algerian history from the oblivion of the

official archives by transforming the "flat sobriety" of the reports into a spectacle of vivid and concrete events deploying themselves before the eye of the reader. At the same time, the narrator gives voice to an account of the suffering of the North African population in order to offset the omissions of the authorized reports: "Et l'inscription du texte étranger se renverse dans le miroir de la souffrance, me proposant son double évanescent en lettres arabes, de droite à gauche rédevidées..." (58).

Furthermore, in the letters written by two French officers to their families in France, the narrator reveals the obsessions, fears and fascination which lay at the heart of their alleged concerns in Algeria.

Les lettres de ces capitaines oubliés qui prétendent s'inquiéter de leurs problèmes d'intendance et de carrière, qui exposent parfois leur philosophie personnelle, ces lettres parlent, dans le fond, d'une Algérie-femme impossible à apprivoiser. Fantasma d'une Algérie domptée... (69)

The sexual component of the military conquest, and the attempts to relive this libidinal excitement through writing, are exposed as the real motivating forces behind the exploits of war, and the epistolary act.

Notre capitaine s'adonne à l'illusion de ce divertissement viril: faire corps avec l'Afrique rebelle, et comment, sinon dans le vertige du viol et de la surprise meurtrière?... Bosquet, comme Montagnac, restera célibataire: nul besoin d'épouse, nulle aspiration à une vie rangée quand le plaisir guerrier se ravive, taraudé par les mots. Revivre par reminiscence, le halètement du danger; les phrases harmonieuses des épîtres conservent cette acroté que ne soupçonnent pas les femmes de la famille rêvant dans l'attente. (68)

By drawing attention to the gendered nature of the military metaphors, Djébar reveals how the French construct the North African people as weak and inferior by feminizing them.⁹ Through this juxtaposition of the official comptes rendus and the officers' correspondance with Djébar's competing interpretation of the conquest and the authorized accounts of it, the French language becomes a weapon in the arsenal of the post-colonial writer. By analysing the rhetoric of the French reports, Djébar strips away their authority, and refuses to allow the last word to go to the colonizer.

On the other hand, Djébar's use of the French language does not always allow her to transform a marginalized position into one of discursive strength. The danger inherent in writing in the language of the colonizer also threatens this post-colonial writer. This danger, in fact, is closely related to another oppositional strategy in L'Amour--the subversion of the traditional autobiographical "I". In her essay "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," Susan Stanford Friedman argues that the "individualistic concept of the autobiographical self" is the bedrock of traditional autobiography.¹⁰ As part of her critique of Georges Gusdorf's seminal essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (1956), Friedman argues against such a constricted definition of autobiography claiming that this

individualistic concept "raises serious theoretical problems for critics who recognize that the self, self-creation, and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities, and many non-Western peoples" (34). Friedman claims, furthermore, that Gusdorf's emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of "a culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities" and ignores "the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process" of such disenfranchised groups (Friedman, 34-35).

Djebar's L'Amour exemplifies this shift from an individualistic paradigm to the construction of a collective identity defined by gender and ethnicity. The formal organization of the text is the most overt indication of this shift: arranged like an Algerian cavalcade, la fantasia, the successive charges of the cavalry are represented by the female voices in "Les voix ensevelies," the third section of the text. From Cherifa's account of her activities as a female militant, to the ritual chanting and strident "cries" of the aieules as they exorcise their suffering, and the "murmurs" of those entrusted with the transmission of their national heritage, these diverse voices emerge from the silence of the past and speak in turn, each giving way to the testimony of the next woman. In an interview with Mildred Mortimer, Djebar explains the organization of her

autobiography: "Cette structure 'en fantasia' permettait d'entrelacer ma propre voix avec les voix des autres femmes" (203). In contrast to the unitary subject of traditional autobiography, split only between the narrated "I" of the past and the narrating "I" of the present of discourse, the subject of L'Amour is made up of multiple voices with the narrator conceiving of herself as part of a larger community, her voice only one among the many which have preceded her, and will follow her: "Dire à mon tour. Transmettre ce qui a été dit, puis écrit" (187). At the same time, Djébar's construction of a collective identity explodes the conventional notion of the autobiographical self revealing itself in language. Despite the narrator's attempt to convey the "truth" of her own identity, to "unveil" herself in autobiography, she comes to realize that her individual identity is inseparable from the identity of the collective group of female ancestors: "Croyant 'me parcourir', je ne fais que choisir un autre voile. Voulant, à chaque pas, parvenir à la transparence, je m'engloutis davantage dans l'anonymat des aieules!" (243). This desired transparency, however, is thwarted by the fact that the identity of the female subject, and in particular that of an Arab woman, straddles the individual and the collective realms. Friedman explains it in the following way:

In taking the power of words, of representation, into their own hands, women project onto history an

identity that is not purely individualistic. Nor is it purely collective. Instead this new identity merges the shared and the unique. In autobiography, specifically, the self created in a woman's text is often not a "teleological unity," an "isolate being" utterly separate from all others, as Gusdorf and Olney define the autobiographical self.... Instead, the self created in women's autobiographical writing is often based in, but not limited to, a group consciousness--an awareness of the meaning of the cultural category WOMAN for the patterns of women's individual destiny. (40-41)

But despite the narrator's strong sense of participating in a collective identity based on the negative experience of subjugation on the one hand, and the positive experience of female solidarity on the other, the differences in her individual destiny prove an obstacle to the relationship she desires. The narrator ultimately perceives her attempt to rescue from oblivion the testimony of these women as a failure. Despite her faith in the potential of writing to give life to these silenced voices of the past--"écrire ne tue pas la voix, mais la réveille, surtout pour ressusciter tant de soeurs disparues"(229)--the narrator believes that her translation of their stories from oral arabic to French does not resuscitate these "buried voices" but obscures them even further. Lamenting her failure to capture the spirit of Chérifa's story in French, the narrator comments on the deformation wrought by translation: "Chérifa! Je désirais recréer ta course.... Ta voix s'est prise au piège; mon parler français la déguise sans l'habiller. A peine si je frôle l'ombre de ton pas!"(161). Amputated

from its oral, arabic source, Cherifa's story is now as lifeless as the official French reports of the war.

Les mots que j'ai cru te donner s'enveloppent de la même serge de deuil que ceux de Bosquet ou de Saint-Arnaud. En vérité, ils s'écrivent à travers ma main, puisque je consens à cette bâtardise, au seul métissage que la foi ancestrale ne condamne pas: celui de la langue et non celui du sang. (160)

The narrator pays an even greater price for her linguistic bâtardise as her desire for solidarity with her Arabic "sisters" is thwarted by the métissage she practices. Ironically, the recovery and transmission of these female voices previously consigned to oblivion--the very act by which Djébar seeks to express her solidarity--ultimately serves to alienate her from her compatriots. Indeed, the cost of her deployment of the French language is so high that she is condemned to exile from this community of women: "Mots torches qui éclairent mes compagnes, mes complices; d'elles définitivement, ils me séparent. Et sous leur poids, je m'expatrie"(160). This feeling of alienation in relation to her female compatriots is not a new one for the author of L'Amour. Indeed, between 1969 and 1980, Djébar had stopped writing because, writing as she was in French, she felt she was unable to communicate with her Arabic sisters.(Monego, 139). In 1977, Djébar turned to Arabic in order to give voice to the repressed history of her compatriots, basing the film La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua on the original testimonies in Arabic of these Algerian peasant women who had

participated in the War of Independence. It was not until Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement (1980) that Djébar returned to writing in French. But as the pervasive theme of the problematic nature of writing in the language of the colonizer in L'Amour makes clear, Djébar continues to confront this linguistic dilemma.

However, it must be noted that although the narrator regards the translation of her compatriots' testimonies as a betrayal, she does, nonetheless, achieve a partial success by telling what had previously been repressed in the official reports of the Algerian war: the colonized population's version of events and the testimonies of those women who participated in the war. Indeed, it is the presence of these voices which give to the text what Bakhtin would regard as its distinctively "dialogic" character. In The Dialogic Imagination, Bakhtin notes that "a word, discourse, language, or culture undergoes 'dialogization' when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things. Undialogized language is authoritative and absolute" (427). Moreover, by reproducing in French what Dorothy Blair describes as the "sobriety of tone, staccato, laconic expression and popular turns of phrase" of the women's stories in Arabic, Djébar introduces another linguistic register very different from that of the narrator. As the dialogue between the narrator and the

testimonies of these peasant women makes clear, Djébar refuses to privilege the educated voice of the narrator over that of her peasant compatriots. In the "Introduction" to her translation of L'Amour, Blair describes this feature of the text as follows:

The transcription into French of these unedited accounts explains the distinct and deliberate difference in linguistic style of the chapters devoted to the women's stories from the author's own virtuoso use of the French language, and is an important element in the antiphonal structure of the work: dialogue between recent and more distant past; between personal and national experience; between writing and orality; between the conflicting claims of the author's 'father and mother tongues'. ("Introduction")

Although it is as a result of their transcription into French that the testimonies of these women can be included in L'Amour, and thereby contribute to its dialogic character, the narrator nevertheless foregrounds the risks attendant upon the act of translation, both literal and figurative. In her reenactment of the initial French conquest of Algiers, there are several incidents concerning the fate met by those involved in the transfer of information from one language, or culture, to another. For instance, the old Arab charged with conveying a message in Arabic from the French to the besieged Algerian camp meets with an untimely death.

Sitôt éloigné du camp français. le promeneur sera tué par les siens, précisément à cause de ces feuillets qui l'ont fait prendre pour un espion de l'envahisseur. Ainsi, les premiers mots écrits, même s'ils promettent une fallacieuse paix, font, de leur porteur, un condamné à mort. Toute écriture de

l'Autre, transportée, devient fatale, puisque signe de compromission.(44)

Similarly, Brasewitz, the messenger/interpreter who translates the terms of surrender dictated by the French to his own people must also pay the price for his linguistic transgression: "En assurant au mot le passage dans la langue adverse (langue turque du pouvoir vacillant ou langue arabe de la ville maure, je ne sais...), Brasewitz semblait devoir payer cela de sa vie."(53)

The "fatal" stakes involved in translation for the post-colonial writer are clear as Djébar employs the metaphor of an autopsy to designate her own autobiographical project.

Tenter l'autobiographie par les seuls mots français, c'est, sous le lent scalpel de l'autopsie à vif, montrer plus que sa peau. Sa chair se desquame, semble-t-il, en lambeaux du parler d'enfance qui ne s'écrit plus. Les blessures s'ouvrent, les veines pleurent, coule le sang de soi et des autres, qui n'a jamais séché. (178)

Writing in French is a kind of living death since it entails using the language of the colonizer to expose the wounds inflicted upon her and the Arabic community by French colonialism, including the repression of what Djébar regards as her mother tongue--the oral language of her childhood. Because of the linguistic conflicts produced by her situation, autobiography, the writing of one's life, also involves the symbolic death of the post-colonial writer.

While one might argue that alienation is inherent in the nature of writing itself, and particularly so in autobiography, the form of alienation that occurs in Djebbar's text is qualitatively different. What is commonly regarded as the alienation or displacement of the subject in writing is related to three principal factors: first, Freud's discovery of the unconscious and the consequent decentering of the "I" of discourse; second, Lacan's "mirror stage" and his claim that the perception of a unified self is based on a misperception; and third, the notion of language elaborated by post-structuralist theorists such as Derrida, Barthes and Foucault, according to which language is not a mere tool of expression but "the very symbolic system which both constructs and is constructed by a writing subject" (Benstock, 11). As a result of these determining factors, the self can never coincide with the "I"--the representation of the self--in language, including autobiographical forms of writing. What the narrator of L'Amour perceives as the fatal effects of autobiography is not the result of the inevitable displacement of the writing subject in language, but is directly related to her specific political situation and the dilemma of using the language of the former oppressor. Whereas writers of all ethnic, cultural and religious groups are inevitably subjected to the displacement of the self in language, the dilemma

which confronts Djébar is not a universal one but is particular to post-colonial writers. Because the French colonial administration was disturbingly effective in its repression of Arabic in Algeria, and its imposition of the French language upon the colonized population, the problem of writing in French is articulated with particular force in the works of writers from the Maghreb, particularly in works such as Djébar's L'Amour and Khatibi's Amour bilingue.

The tensions in post-colonial autobiography from the Maghreb are not limited to the linguistic realm. For a writer concerned with the status of women in Islamic society, the politics of writing in this genre are even more problematic. Upon reading the first two volets of Djébar's quatuor, one is struck by the difference in the concerns explored. Whereas L'Amour is largely concerned with challenging the discourse of French colonialism, and recovering women's participation in the Algerian resistance to colonial rule, Ombre Sultane exposes the repressive patriarchal order of post-independence Algeria. This division is, I argue, intimately related to the politics of women's emancipation in a colonial situation, and to the autobiographical character of L'Amour. An understanding of Djébar's previous publications and their reception in France and North Africa puts this relationship into perspective.

In the past, Djebbar's work has been criticized on two fronts.¹¹ Her first novel La Soif (1957) examines many issues germane to women's subordinate status in Muslim, North African society: marital relations, infidelity, women's fear of sterility and subsequent repudiation, rivalry among women. La soif was loudly condemned by North African critics who regarded it as selfish indulgence in personal concerns at a time when Algeria was involved in its struggle for national independence. After the criticism of her first publication, Djebbar seems to have been considerably more guarded in her approach to the subject of women's subjugation, concentrating instead on the celebration of the resistance to the French conquest and the Algerian war, and the role of women in the transmission of Arabic, Muslim culture.¹² This shift in the focus of her work also came under attack, this time from the French critic Mare-Blanche Tahon.¹³ Tahon criticizes Djebbar for contributing to "official Algerian ideology" in her glorification of the war, and for upholding Islamic tradition which regards women as the guardians of a nation's heritage. She also finds fault with Djebbar's timidity in confronting the systemic nature of women's oppression in Algerian society, and suggests that Djebbar "circumvents" the issue for fear of being suspected of promoting "the western values of the occupier."

Ombre Sultane, however, marks a radical departure in this area through its emphasis on women's continuing subjugation in contemporary, post-colonial Algeria. This second volet of her "fresque maghrébine" vividly exposes the oppressive conditions of life for Algerian women, conditions which result from institutions and mores which are legally and/or culturally sanctioned in male-dominated Muslim society. Taking one of the tales from Mille et une nuits as a leitmotif, Djébar dispels the exotic/erotic aura conjured up by the oriental harem in order to expose the repression and suffering which characterize the contemporary version of the harem--the polygamous household--and a society in which many women continue to be veiled and sequestered, their voices silenced, and their bodies subjected to marital rape. In Ombre sultane, Djébar is particularly concerned with polygamy as an institution which instigates rivalry and competition among women. Djébar, however, rewrites the dynamics of the polygamous marriage by having the two wives, Hajila and Isma, unite against their common husband, and thereby undermine his power.¹⁴

The strength of female solidarity is mirrored in Djébar's interpretation of the tale of the Sultana Scherazade. Rereading this orientalist tale from a feminist perspective, Djébar reveals the essential role played by the solidarity between Scherazade and her

sister. In this way, Djébar revises the myth of female rivalry and competition in the harem. Just as Scherazade's sister wakes her at dawn so she can tell stories to the sultan in order to ward off her otherwise inevitable death, so too does Isma, the emancipated protagonist and female narrator of Ombre sultane, ultimately help her traditional muslim "sister", Hajila, in her revolt against sequestration and abuse by her violent, polygamous husband. Similarly, Djébar, the author, demonstrates her solidarity with her female compatriots by making her fiction the site of opposition to the status quo of relations between the sexes in Islamic society. Unlike Les enfants du nouveau monde (1962) in which "Djébar makes it clear that society is no longer to be considered the culprit with respect to the condition of women" and that women "should seek solutions to their problems **within themselves**" (Accad, 46-47), Ombre sultane exposes the social and legal institutions in Islamic society which oppress women: sexual segregation and the sequestration of women in the domestic sphere; polygamy and repudiation; their legal subordination within the family as illustrated by the modern law which requires a wife's submission to her mother-in-law, and the law which accords custody of children to the father if the mother lives abroad.¹⁵ However, it is important to note that Ombre sultane also contains an implicit critique of individual, female

emancipation in the figure of Isma, the "westernized" protagonist. Although Isma ultimately assists Hajila in her revolt against her husband, it is she who was initially responsible for choosing Hajila as his spouse: "Deux femmes: Hajila et Isma.... L'une d'elles, Isma, a choisi l'autre pour la précipiter dans le lit conjugal. Elle s'est voulue marieuse de son propre mari: elle a cru, par naïveté, se libérer ainsi à la fois du passé d'amour et du présent arrêté" (9). By placing Hajila in the position from which she herself had escaped, Isma "naively" attempts to achieve individual liberation at another woman's expense. Although Isma's appropriation of the masculine role--the one who chooses a woman's spouse--is a way of liberating herself, she comes to realize that individual emancipation is not the answer. Similarly, by returning to claim the daughter she had left behind with her husband, and thereby incurring the risk of being obliged to return to a traditional female lifestyle in Islamic society, Isma comes to relinquish this individualistic mode of emancipation in order to liberate her daughter Meriem: "J'avais voulu m'exclure pour rompre avec le passé. Ce fardeau, pendant mes errances dans les villes où j'étais de passage, s'était allégé. Mériem m'avait écrit. J'accourais; je ne pouvais me libérer seule" (90).

In contrast to her overt condemnation of the repressive structure of Muslim society in Ombre sultane, L'Amour contains a relatively muted critique of this patriarchal order. Despite Djébar's gesture to rescue from oblivion the "cris sans voix" of the women who went before her, her own voice of protest against women's subjugation constitutes what Monego would call "mutual commiseration in unhappiness" rather than a genuine critique of their oppression. This reluctance to confront the sexual politics of Arab, Muslim society is inextricably connected to the subject position of the author, her use of the autobiographical "I" and French colonial support for female emancipation in the Maghreb. As Djébar makes clear, the very act of writing an autobiography already represents a major transgression in relation to Islamic culture: "Comment dire 'je', puisque ce serait dédaigner les formules-couvertures qui maintiennent le trajet individuel dans la résignation collective?" (177). For a woman to speak out before she has reached old age--when women in muslim society enjoy considerably more power--is an act which constitutes an even more serious transgression: "Comment une femme pourrait parler haut, même en langue arabe, autrement que dans l'attente du grand âge?" (177). For a woman to write an autobiography in French, then, is to defy the dictates of Islamic culture, patriarchal society, and Algerian nationalism.

Furthermore, as a woman writing in French in decolonized Algeria, Djebbar occupies a position afforded her in part by her access to secondary education in colonial Algeria, and her acquisition of the French language. Since it was mainly the middle classes who used the colonial schools, Djebbar's education--instrumental in her emancipation from the harem--was largely a result of class privilege. Consequently, her pride in her own good fortune is tainted by her guilt in relation to her less fortunate muslim peers.

Soudain, une réticence, un scrupule me taraude: mon "devoir" n'est-il pas de rester "en arrière", dans le gynécée, avec mes semblables? Adolescente ensuite, ivre quasiment de sentir la lumière sur ma peau, sur mon corps mobile, un doute se lève en moi: "Pourquoi moi? Pourquoi à moi seule, dans la tribu, cette chance?" (239)

In order to assuage the personal and political guilt occasioned by her own emancipation--the result of her linguistic alliance with the colonizer--Djebbar distances herself from French colonial support for women's emancipation by reserving her own critique of the subjugation of women in Algerian society for the novelistic Ombre sultane, and deploying her autobiographical voice(s) instead in a celebration of women's participation in national events. By recovering the testimony of women who took part in the resistance to the French conquest of Algiers, and in the war of

independence, Djebbar claims a place for her female ancestors in their national history.

It has been argued, however, that Djebbar includes women in the history of Algerian nationalism only to contribute to what Tahon calls "the great deeds of an essentially male epic." While it is possible that Djebbar does not share the view of Tahon and of many Western feminists that war is a masculinist, patriarchal activity, it is hard to deny that women's participation in the militant activities of the resistance and the FLN did little in the way of changing their subordinate status in Algerian society. While they may differ in their analyses of this issue, feminists from both the Arab world and France concur that independence failed to improve women's status. According to Fadéla M'Rabet, an Algerian journalist, women were cynically used during the revolution, and the achievement of national independence actually led to a deterioration in their legal status (97-142). Similarly, the Lebanese critic, Evelyne Accad, notes that after the War of Independence, traditional laws were reinstituted which deprived women of the rights they had enjoyed under colonial rule" (47) As Juliette Minces explains, "the majority of Algerian militants...had no goal other than independence and were extremely vague when it came to envisaging the transformation of society"(161). Indeed, "in the minds of many, [independence] meant

returning to the norms and ways of life that colonization had devalued if not destroyed. Algerian-ness could not renounce being Arabo-Islamic"(164). Similarly, as Gisèle Halimi, a prominent Tunisian lawyer who defended Algerian women condemned to death for their activities in the war, has observed, "Les femmes, en générale, se sont laissé piéger dans les luttes de libération. Leur prise de conscience a été uniquement politique, elles ne sont pas engagées aussi en tant que femmes, en posant leurs conditions de femmes."¹⁶ In Omre sultane, Djebbar exposes the fact that independence brought little change in the status of women. Djebbar's celebration of the Algerian resistance and women's participation in national events is absent from the fictional Ombre sultane, with one of the few references to the war of independence being a satirical one: in response to her mother's claims that her husband died a martyr of the war, Hajila reminds her mother that he was accidentally killed by a tractor after the conclusion of the war (53).

Given the historical relationship between women's emancipation and French colonialism, it is not surprising that Djebbar avoids a sustained critique of women's oppression in Arab-Muslim society in her first experiment with autobiography. In Sociologie d'une révolution: L'an V de la Révolution algérienne, Frantz Fanon explains why the question of women's liberation became such a complex and

vexed issue in French colonial Algeria.¹⁷ Because the domestic sphere was the one area outside French control, it became a bastion of traditional values and customs crucial to the preservation of an Algerian national identity. Intent on destroying the structure of Algerian society, the colonial administration realized that it was first necessary to win the allegiance of the women--the main inhabitants of the domestic sphere--in order to destabilize the infrastructure of Muslim society. Consequently the colonial government officially opposed the wearing of the veil, denounced the treatment of Algerian women by their spouses, and strategically espoused female emancipation in order to divide the colonized population and fracture what remained of its national identity. As a result, emancipation was regarded as a Western phenomenon encouraged by the French and inimical to Algerian nationalism and the struggle for independence.

In the light of the politics of women's emancipation and French colonialism, Djébar's situation as a writer, with the "liberated" status it implies, is a delicate one further complicated by the fact that she writes in French. To avoid too close an association with the colonizer, Djébar must negotiate the dangers inherent in her own position by reserving her virulent critique of women's oppression in Algeria for the novelistic Ombre sultane,

and concentrating on women's participation in the Algerian resistance to French colonialism in the autobiographical L'Amour. Djébar's negotiation of the tensions inherent in her situation indicates that autobiography does not reflect the "truth" of the author and her lived experience in any simple, direct way. Rather, it suggests that autobiography and the real exist in a complex relationship. That is to say, the autobiographical act-- "the **graphing** of the **autos**"--is itself mediated by the real and by the experience of history. Thus, it is precisely the absence of this virulent critique of women's oppression in L'Amour which, while problematizing the notion that autobiography offers direct access to "truth" and "reality", simultaneously asserts the relationship of autobiography to the real.

Another strategy which allows her to distance herself from the values and culture of the colonizing country, is her representation of her acquisition of the French language as an involuntary act forced upon her by her father. As we have already seen, the narrator compares her learning of the enemy tongue to the forced marriages of her female peers. The narrator also emphasizes the involuntary nature of her linguistic acquisition by drawing an analogy between her own situation and that of those royal princesses abandoned to the enemy side upon the conclusion of war: "Mais les princesses royales à

marier passent également de l'autre côté de la frontière, souvent **malgré elles**, à la suite des traités qui terminent les guerres" (240; emphasis mine)

Clearly the tensions inherent in Djébar's situation as a writer largely determine the strategies she employs in L'Amour as she attempts to contest the discourse of French colonialism, and simultaneously transform the marginalized position of her female Arabic compatriots into one of discursive strength: "Ma fiction est cette autobiographie qui s'esquisse, alourdie par l'héritage qui m'encombre" (244). The personal price she pays for writing her autobiography in French is vividly conveyed by the metaphor of Nessus' robe: "La langue encore coagulée des Autres m'a enveloppé, des l'enfance, en tunique de Nessus..." (242). Just as the autobiographical act in the language of the colonizer is compared to the pain of a living autopsy cutting away the Arabic of her roots, so too does this act resemble the robe stained with Nessus' blood, which burned Heracles with such intensity that he threw himself on a pyre in order to immolate himself. While Djébar's discursive challenge to the discourses of colonialism and patriarchy may be a Pyrrhic victory on a personal level, she does nonetheless make an important intervention in history. By revealing women's participation in the traditionally male public sphere, and by articulating the experience of the colonized, Djébar

tells what has been silenced and repressed, and thereby transforms the historical narrative of French colonialism. Furthermore, by deploying the "I" of autobiography, Djébar defies the taboo in Islamic society against a woman's assertion of her personal identity, and at the same time she creates a space for the voices of her Arab compatriots, women whose collective identity she also shares.

Notes

1. See Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's "Introduction" to De/Colonizing the Subject: Gender and the Politics of Women's Autobiography for an analysis of the ways in which post-colonial women writers contest the discourses which marginalize them.

2. All citations are from the following editions:

Assia Djebar, L'Amour, la fantasia, (Paris: J C Lattes, 1985). Hereafter, cited by the abbreviated title L'Amour.
Assia Djebar, Ombre sultane, (Paris: J C Lattès, 1987).

3. Djebar discusses her ambivalent relationship to the genre in an interview with Mildred Mortimer published in Research in African Literatures: "Visiblement, c'était plus d'ur pour moi de parler de souvenirs d'enfance qui n'ont rien à voir avec la guerre, simplement parce que pour la première fois, si vous voulez, contrairement à mes précédents romans, j'annonçais ouvertement que je vais écrire une autobiographie. Je résiste peut-être à cette poussée de l'autobiographie parce que mon éducation de femme arabe est de ne jamais parler de soi, en même temps aussi parce que je parlais en langue française" (203).

4. There is an enormous critical literature on autobiography. Some of the principal references are: Philippe Lejeune's Le pacte autobiographique; Georges Gusdorf's "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" in Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical Ed. James Olney; Paul Jay's Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes. Critical studies of women's autobiography in particular include the following: Estelle Jelinek ed. Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism; Estelle Jelinek, The Tradition of Women's Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present; Sidonie Smith, A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation; Shari Benstock, The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings; Katherine Goodman, Dis/Closures: Women's Autobiography in Germany Between 1790 and 1914; Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, De/Colonizing the Subject: Gender and the Politics of Women's Autobiography.

5. See Françoise Lionnet, Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture for an exploration of cultural and linguistic métissage in the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, Maryse Condé, Marie Cardinal and Marie-Thérèse Humbert. Lionnet draws on the work of

Edouard Glissant for whom "the métissage or braiding, of cultural forms through the simultaneous revalorization of oral traditions and reevaluation of Western concepts has led to the recovery of occulted histories"(4). Through an exploration of métissage in the works of women writers marginalized by race and gender, Lionnet expands Glissant's concept and uses it to understand how these women "rewrite the 'feminine' by showing the arbitrary nature of the images and values which Western culture constructs, distorts, and encodes as inferior by feminizing them"(5).

6. In her essay "Women in Algeria," Juliette Minces states that at the end of World War II, on the eve of the Algerian insurrection, Algerian Muslims were "forbidden by law to study their language, Arabic, in the public schools. The teaching dispensed in these schools was addressed only to the students of European origin (history of France, geography of France, and so on)" (160).

7. In Harem: The World Behind the Veil, Alev Lytle Croutier explains the various meanings of the word 'harem.' Derived from the Arabic haram meaning "unlawful," "protected," or "forbidden," the secular use of the word

"refers to the separate protected part of a household where women, children, and servants live in maximum seclusion and privacy. Harem also applies to the women themselves and can allude to a wife. Finally, harem is 'House of Happiness,' a less-than-religious acceptance of the master's exclusive rights of sexual foraging, a place where women are separated and cloistered, sacrosanct from all but the one man who rules their lives. It is a place in a noble and rich house, guarded by eunuch slaves, where the lord of the manor keeps his wives and concubines" (17).

8. In Orientalism, Said argues that the discourse of Orientalism is an "enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage--and even produce--the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post Enlightenment period" (3).

9. See Lionnet's "Introduction" for further elaboration of these hierarchical differences created by "discourses of power" (5).

10. Susan Stanford Friedman's essay "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice" appears in

The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings, ed. Shari Benstock.

11. I am indebted to Joan Phyllis Monego's Maghrebien Literature in French for an overview of how Assia Djebar's work was received in the French and Arabic world.

12. As Monego notes, the theme of "women's collective struggle to emancipate the nation through militant action" is explored in Djebar's third novel Les enfants du nouveau monde (1962); the play Rouge l'aube, co-authored by Djebar and her former husband Walid Carn, is a celebration of the revolution. Djebar's collection of poetry Poèmes pour une Algérie heureuse (1969) is in a similar vein. La Nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua (1977), a film made by Djebar for Algerian television, focuses on women's accounts of their activities in the resistance to colonial rule. Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement (1980) is a series of six narratives which emphasize women's solidarity in suffering but does not address the systemic nature of their oppression.

13. In her chapter on Djebar, Monego cites Tahon's review of another of Djebar's texts Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement.

14. In her interview with Mildred Mortimer, published in Research in African Literatures, Djébar explains:

"Evidemment le pouvoir de l'homme vient du fait que, puisqu'il a droit à plusieurs femmes, il instaure une rivalité entre elles. Donc, elles se blessent mutuellement. Mais qu'est-ce qui se passe si ces femmes s'unissent, si elles, à priori, suppriment la rivalité? On s'aperçoit que, à partir du moment où toutes les deux s'unissent, l'homme perd son pouvoir. C'est lui qui se blesse car, ayant perdu son pouvoir, il n'est plus rien" (205).

15. For an excellent analysis of the significance of the mother-in-law in Moroccan society, see Mernissi's Beyond the Veil, esp. Chapter 7 "The Mother-in-Law". Mernissi notes that "the triangle of mother, son, and wife is the trump card in the Muslim pack of legal, ideological, and physical barriers that subordinate the wife to the husband and condemn the heterosexual relation to mistrust, violence and deceit" (135).

16. Halimi's comment was made in a letter published in the Nouvel observateur, July 10, 1978. That the new "socialist" state implemented by the governing party was not going to address the question of women's emancipation

is illustrated by the response of Khider, Secretary General of the FLN, to those women imprisoned by the French as a result of their militant activities during the war: "Vous? Après la libération, eh bien, il faudra retourner au couscous." Indeed, after independence, women's emancipation became something of a taboo subject. Fadéla M'Rabet, a broadcast journalist on the state-controlled Algerian radio and author of La femme algérienne suivi de Les algériennes, was exiled as a result of her programs which raised controversial questions concerning woman's continuing oppression and suffering under the new socialist state.

17. For further elaboration of this argument, see especially "L'Algérie se dévoile": 16-48.

Chapter 5
Discourses of Power and Decolonization
in Tahar ben Jelloun's L'enfant de sable

In 1981, Abdelkebir Khatibi, the Moroccan novelist and sociologist, argued that decolonization had not been accompanied by the deconstruction of the imperialist and ethnocentric ideologies which provided the discursive support for colonial domination.¹ With Derrida's critique of the logocentrism and ethnocentrism of western philosophy serving as his theoretical foundation, Khatibi constructed the thesis that decolonization can only be fully realized by means of "a two-fold critique": on the one hand, by the development of ways of thinking which consist in the "affirmation of a difference", and not in a mere reversal of power; on the other hand, by "a critique of the knowledge and the discourses elaborated by the various societies in the Arab world about themselves" (48-9). According to Khatibi, the latter must begin by a contestation and subversion of the foundations of patriarchalism which he identifies as one of the structuring forces of Arab societies.

Published in 1985, L'enfant de sable is a work of fiction by the Moroccan Tahar ben Jelloun which offers a powerful contestation of the patriarchalism decried by Khatibi, Djébar, Chraïbi and other Maghrebian francophone writers. It does this by means of a complex critique of

the phallogocentric discourse of sexual difference which informs Islamic society. At the same time, Jelloun's novel indirectly subverts the narrative of French colonialism and cultural imperialism in the Maghreb. This subversion takes place through an exploration of the question of identity in North African, Muslim society. This question is addressed through an explicit interrogation of sexual identity and the exploitation of women, which I also read as a metaphor for the problem of cultural identity for the colonized and post-colonial subject in the Maghreb.²

Jelloun explores these issues through the figure of Ahmed, the central protagonist and "sandchild" of the title. After the birth of seven girls to an Arabic, Islamic couple during the period of French rule in Morocco, their father decides that regardless of its biological sex, the next child will be his son and male heir. Consequently, the eighth child, a girl, is triumphantly presented to the world as a boy, with only the mother and the midwife privy to the secret of Ahmed's true identity. Despising and ignoring his daughters, Hadj Ahmed raises his youngest child to enjoy the privileges and power accruing to the male sex in Muslim society. The story of Ahmed's life is told to us by a series of storytellers, the first of whom claims to be in possession of her journal, the rest of whom were members of the audience of the original conteur and provide different

endings to the unfinished story of the sandchild. L'enfant de sable is a complex narrative with stories embedded within stories, the levels of narration inextricably confused as storytellers become characters, and characters take over as conteurs.

As the narrative traces Ahmed's childhood, Jelloun depicts the more overt characteristics of this male-dominated world: the inferior status of the girl child; the automatic assumption that the wife is to blame for her failure to produce a son; a woman's duty to obey her husband at all times; and the legal code which all but disinherits female children. Still considered a young, prepubescent boy, Ahmed has access to both the world of women--the secluded domestic universe--and the public world inhabited by men.³ Accompanying her mother on her weekly visit to the hammam--the only escape from the house for a traditional Moroccan woman--Ahmed is privy to her conversations with her friends. As she witnesses the reality of their lives, she muses on her own good fortune in escaping such a fate.

Et pour toutes ces femmes, la vie était plutôt réduite. C'était peu de chose: la cuisine, le ménage, l'attente et une fois par semaine le repos dans le hammam. J'étais secrètement content de ne pas faire partie de cet univers si limité.(34)

Moreover, once Ahmed's father initiates her into the public sphere--the mosque, the workplace and the street--the child comes to revel in this world of men:" J'aimais

bien me retrouver dans cette immense maison où seuls les hommes étaient admis" (37-38). Not only does Ahmed consider herself fortunate to be a part of this brotherhood, but she also develops a loathing for the female body and contempt for characteristics regarded as feminine by her society. This incipient misogyny is evident in the young Ahmed's revulsion at the sight of female genitalia in the hammam.

Je m'accrochais à ces cuisses étalées et j'entrevois tous ces bas-ventres charnus et poilus. Ce n'était pas beau. C'était même dégoûtant.... je ne pouvais pas être comme elles...C'était pour moi une dégénérescence inadmissible (36).

Under the tutelage of his father, Ahmed is inculcated with the machismo deemed proper for a man and is taught to reject "feminine" modes of behaviour. Seeing his "son" crying upon being beaten by three young street ruffians, El Hadj rebukes him roundly: "Tu n'es pas une fille pour pleurer! Un homme ne pleure pas!" As she dries her eyes and heads off in pursuit of her attackers, Ahmed learns the "masculine" response to the situation: Il avait raison, les larmes c'est très féminin. Je séchai les miennes et sortis à la recherche des voyous pour me battre" (39).

Ahmed's rejection of things feminine is the seed of her own self-alienation and self-hatred. Raised in a culture which holds women in low esteem, Ahmed begins to identify with the dominant attitude.⁴ Because she has not

yet reached sexual maturity, Ahmed sees her own body as different from those of his mother and her friends: "Je me cachais le soir pour regarder dans un petit miroir de poche mon bas-ventre: il n'y avait rien de décadent; une peau blanche et limpide, douce au toucher, sans plis, sans rides"(36). At this point then, she can regard these women as other and inferior without being aware of her own self-alienation. As her mother binds her chest to stunt the growth of female breasts, Ahmed is pleased to cooperate with her parents' efforts to make of her a boy: "Je ne disais rien, je laissais faire. Ce destin-là avait l'avantage d'être original et plein de risques. Je l'aimais bien"(36).

Jelloun's representation of Ahmed's childhood may be read as an exploration of the relationship between gender and biological sex. By showing how the young child, biologically sexed female, absorbs and identifies with masculine attitudes and characteristics, Jelloun points to gender as a social construct and not an essence determined by biology. In disclosing how Muslim society naturalizes femininity and masculinity, Jelloun attempts to deprive this essentialist conception of its authority. For instance, when El Hadj tells his son that tears are for girls only, the narrative ironizes such essentialism when Ahmed, whose biological sex is female, adopts the behaviour and attitudes regarded as proper to a man. Given

that the alleged natural inferiority of women is the basis for their subordinate status in Muslim society, this strategy is an important one in the struggle for women's emancipation.

Ahmed's childhood enthusiasm to acquire a male persona, and to hide the traces of her biological identity, is very suggestive when read in the context of cultural identity. This narrative of a girl raised as a boy is also the story of French colonialism and its effects on the colonized Moroccan people. El Hadj, the father who denies the female sex of his child and imposes a masculine identity upon it, is also the symbol of French colonial authority and its imposition of the metropolitan culture and language upon the North African people. Just as Ahmed is taught to speak the language of men and to value it above that of women, so too is the colonized population imbued with the superiority of the language and culture of the métropole. Frantz Fanon makes the point in this way:

Every colonized people--in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality--finds itself face to face with the language of the colonizing nation: that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (18)

Like the colonized who adopt the culture of the colonizing country, Ahmed identifies with the physical and

psychological attributes of manhood to such an extent that she develops some of the traits of the male sex.

De temps à autre des signes extérieures venaient me confirmer dans cette voie. Ainsi le jour où la caissière du hammam me refusa l'entrée, parce qu'elle considérait que je n'étais plus un petit garçon innocent mais déjà un petit homme, capable de perturber par ma seule présence au bain la vertu tranquille et les désirs cachés de femmes honnêtes. Ma mère protesta pour la forme, mais elle était au fond heureuse. Elle en parla fièrement le soir à mon père qui décida de me prendre avec lui dorénavant au hammam. (37; emphasis mine)

Realizing that the "exterior signs" which testify to Ahmed's manhood constitute a language which will afford her entrance into the male world of power and privilege, the mother is happy to see her child escape the denigrated status of women. These exterior signs are to masculinity what French is to those who speak it in a colonial situation, namely a source of power. As Fanon argues, the acquisition of the colonizer's tongue is frequently the key to power in a colonial situation: "A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language.... Mastery of language affords remarkable power" (18).

Jelloun's narrative, however, exposes the language of masculinity as an illusion supported by the legal codes and cultural institutions of Muslim society: "Etre homme est une illusion et une violence que tout justifie and privilégie" (94). The illusory character of male superiority--the implicit basis of male privilege--is

exemplified by Ahmed who is a girl charading in the signs of masculinity. By extension, L'enfant de sable implies that French colonial power is also constructed upon the illusion of French superiority, and depends for its authority on the violence of cultural imperialism--the imposition of the culture and language of France--and ultimately, on the use of military force. Conversely, the narrative suggests that the colonized, like women, can be constructed as inferior because they have internalized this idea and do not question it: "Etre femme est une infirmité naturelle dont tout le monde s'accommode" (94). Like Fanon's example of the Antillean who rejects his autochthonous culture because colonialism has alienated him from his own identity, and who attempts to share in the privileges of the colonizer through the acquisition of French, Ahmed's mother wants to dislocate her child from her identity as a female, and encourages her to learn the language of masculinity so that she may enjoy the elevated status accorded to men.

With the onset of puberty, Ahmed's contentment with her strange destiny turns to loneliness and frustration. As her body matures sexually and menstruation commences, the project of masquerading as a man becomes more problematic.

C'était bien du sang; **résistance du corps au nom;**
 éclaboussure d'une circoncision tardive. C'est un
 rappel, une grimace d'un souvenir enfoui, le souvenir

d'une vie que je n'avais pas connue et qui aurait pu être la mienne. (46; emphasis mine)

With the flow of menstrual blood--the undeniable evidence of her biological sex--Ahmed realizes that she has a female body which cannot be totally eradicated through the acquisition of the language of masculinity. At this stage, Ahmed's "self" is split in two: her masculine identity on the one hand, her sexually mature female body on the other.

This stage of Ahmed's development also marks the beginning of her contestation of her father's authority. The masculine voice which she has developed provokes her to wonder whether she is in fact a mere creation and puppet of her father.

Je suis et ne suis pas cette voix qui s'accommode et prend le pli de mon corps, mon visage enroule dans le voile de cette voix, est-elle de moi ou est-ce celle du père qui l'aurait insufflée, ou simplement déposée pendant que je dormais en me faisant du bouche à bouche. (45)

This metaphor of El Hadj infusing his son with a masculine voice and identity echoes God's creation of the world in Genesis and reinforces the notion of the enormous power invested in the father, a point which Ben Jelloun makes clear in an earlier work in which he notes that in Maghrebian society "...le pouvoir économique, l'autorité morale et la responsabilité sociale y renvoient à la place fondamentale donnée au Père" (Solitudes, 52).⁵ But while the father may have used his authority to orchestrate his

son's masculinity, Ahmed remains without a penis, the ultimate marker of virility and power in North African society.

Je me suis souvent tenté d'organiser mon petit cimetière intérieur de sorte que les ombres couchées se relèvent pour faire une ronde autour d'un sexe érigé, une verge qui serait mienne mais que je ne pourrais jamais porter ni exhiber.(44)

Because Maghrebian society has so much invested in phallic sexual power, Ahmed's "castrated" state destroys her aspirations to true manhood.

La sexualité (le pouvoir sexuel) est du ressort de l'homme: elle est puissance et virilité. Le sexe est valorisé, il est la base même de l'exercice des autres pouvoirs.... Perdre ce pouvoir... c'est perdre son statut social et sa raison d'être dans une société où il n'y a pas de place ni de rôle pour un homme 'mutilé' sexuellement. (Solitudes 56)

Therefore, in order to protect her identity as a man, Ahmed must keep her sexual impotence a secret from the world. As a result, she is condemned to a life deprived of sexual or affective relations: "Il est une vérité qui ne peut être dite, pas même suggérée, mais vécue dans la solitude absolue"(43). Emphasizing this is Jelloun's ironic reaccentuation of the Rimbaudian "je est un autre"-the poet's celebration of the otherness within now replaced by the loneliness of the sandchild's double identity: "O mon Dieu, que cette vérité me pèse! dure exigence! dure la rigueur. Je suis l'architecte et la demeure; l'arbre et la sève; **moi et un autre; moi et une autre**" (46; emphasis mine).

This notion of the castrated son is significant in the context of cultural identity. Indeed, the metaphor of castration is a common one in Maghrebian Francophone literature and is used to convey the impact of colonialism on the identity of the North African people. In her overview of this literature, Joan Phyllis Monego states that "the indigène saw himself as a 'bastard' son, neither Maghrebian nor French, 'castrated', 'alienated', 'dispossessed', an 'outcast', an 'exile' in his own land" (29).⁶ Like the colonized who buries his cultural identity to make himself into the image of the Frenchman, Ahmed has buried her female sexual identity in order to make herself over as a man. But without the penis, the literal marker of manhood and the symbol of French colonial power, Ahmed remains an impostor, belonging neither to the world of men nor to that of the French colonizer. Alienated from her sexual and cultural identity as a female and as a Moroccan respectively, Ahmed is dispossessed of both her sexuality and her culture.

Ahmed's questioning of his father's authority soon turns to open rebellion. Instead of living her life according to her father's plan, Ahmed takes her destiny as a man into her own hands. As she makes the decision to get married, she brings it to its perverse yet logical conclusion: "Père, tu m'as fait homme, je dois le rester. Et comme dit notre Prophète bien-aimé, 'un musulman complet

est un homme marié'" (51). Meanwhile, Ahmed becomes increasingly authoritarian and despotic in her familial relations.

Ahmed était devenu autoritaire. A la maison il se faisait servir par ses soeurs, ses déjeuners et ses diners. Il se cloîtrait dans la chambre du haut. Il s'interdisait toute tendresse avec sa mère qui le voyait rarement. A l'atelier il avait déjà commencé à prendre les affaires en main. Son père était dépassé. Il laissait faire. Il n'avait pas d'amis. Secret et redoutable, il était craint. Il trônait dans sa chambre, se couchait tard et se levait tôt. (51)

In this way, Ahmed rejects her father but appropriates his authority and uses it for her own ends. By choosing to marry Fatima, her sickly, epileptic cousin, and to inflict a cruel destiny upon her, Ahmed dominates in her turn.

Reading the question of sexual identity as a metaphor for cultural identity in a colonial situation, Ahmed's rebellion against paternal authority represents the insurrection of the colonized against the forces of colonialism. Ahmed's initial suspicion that her voice--traditionally associated with self-presence and self-identity--belongs, in fact, to her father, has its parallel in the realization of the colonized population that its identity is no longer its own but is moulded by the métropole. The subsequent rebellion of the colonized against the forces of French cultural and military domination represents the son's rebellion against the law of the father, and his demand for self-determination. However, like so many decolonized African nations which

threw off the yoke of French or British colonial domination only to replace it with a dictatorship, Ahmed's rebels against her father only to install her own repressive regime. In this way, Jelloun's narrative vividly enacts the dangers inherent in a mere reversal whereby those who accede to power rely on the same, or similar, oppressive structures in order to maintain their authority. Like Khatibi, Jelloun shows how a mere reversal of power does not allow for an "affirmation of difference" but leads to new justifications for the denial of difference and the continued oppression of the other, either sexual or cultural. For instance, once El Hadj dies, Ahmed summons her sisters and provides a new rationalization for their inferior status:

A partir de ce jour, je ne suis plus votre frère; je ne suis pas votre père non plus, mais votre tuteur. J'ai le devoir et le droit de veiller sur vous. Vous me devez obéissance et respect. Enfin, inutile de vous rappeler que je suis un homme d'ordre et que, si la femme chez nous est inférieure à l'homme, ce n'est pas parce que Dieu l'a voulu où que le Prophète l'a décidé, mais parce qu'elle accepte ce sort. Alors subissez et vivez dans le silence. (66)

Whereas the discourse of colonialism justifies the domination of the colonized by constructing them as inferior--just as El Hadj naturalized his daughters' inferior status by attributing it to divine will--Ahmed now blames the victims for their own oppression.

After Fatima's death, Ahmed is tormented by desires which she cannot express:

Je marche pour me dépouiller, pour me laver, pour me débarrasser d'une question qui me hante et dont je ne parle jamais: le désir. Je suis las de porter en mon corps des insinuations sans pouvoir ni les repousser ni les faire miennes. Je resterai profondément inconsolé, avec un visage qui n'est pas le mien, et un désir que je ne peux nommer.(88)

Finally, worn out by this alienation, she decides that her masquerade as a man has lasted long enough and that she must begin the long trajectory back to her female "self": "Aujourd'hui, je cherche à me délivrer.... Il est temps de **naître à nouveau**. En fait je ne vais pas changer mais simplement **revenir à moi**"(111; emphasis mine).

Interestingly, Ahmed leaves her family once she has decided to recover the identity obscured by her male persona, suggesting that a return to her female "self" is impossible within the male-dominated family of Islamic society. Inveighing against its repressive structure, Ahmed repudiates the Islamic family as a social institution: "Sachez mon ami, que la famille, telle qu'elle existe dans nos pays, avec le père tout-puissant, et les femmes reléguées à la domesticité avec une parcelle d'autorité que leur laisse le mâle, la famille, je la répudie, je l'enveloppe de brume et ne la reconnais plus" (89).

While the metaphors of rebirth and the return to an original "moi" seem to indicate an essentialist conception of the self, biologically determined at birth, Ahmed also

describes this "retour à soi" in terms which deconstruct its apparent logocentrism.

J'ai perdu **la langue** de mon corps; d'ailleurs je ne l'ai jamais possédée. Je devrais l'apprendre et commencer d'abord par **parler comme une femme**.... Il va falloir faire un long chemin, retourner sur mes pas, patiemment, retrouver les premières sensations du corps que ni la tête ni la raison ne contrôlent.(96; emphasis mine)

Such a conception of sexuality suggests that desire is not totally determined by biology--the female body--but that it is also mediated by language. Equally important though is the converse implication that sexuality is not a purely discursive construction but is itself "propped on the body," in what Ahmed calls "les premières sensations du corps." This is important because it allows for a conception of sexual identity in which the materiality of the female body, and women's historical experience of their bodies, is retained.

As Ahmed sets out on the literal and figurative path of return, the debilitating effects of the ambiguity of her own identity are exemplified by her response to the old woman who refuses to let her pass until she answers her question "Qui es-tu?"

J'aurais pu répondre à toutes les questions, inventer, imaginer mille réponses, mais c'était là la seule, l'unique question qui me bouleversait et me rendait littéralement muette.(113)

Ahmed's inability to respond, to classify herself as "un homme ou une femme" is also the problematic position of the North African intellectual who belongs to two cultures

but cannot completely identify with either. Furthermore, having been raised to identify with misogynistic attitudes in a society which regards women's sexual pleasure as a sign of moral degeneracy, Ahmed feels shame as a result of her nascent female sexuality and the pleasure she experiences when the old woman caresses her breast.

La sensation physique que j'éprouvai aux caresses de cette bouche édentée sur mon sein fut, même si elle ne dura que quelques secondes, du plaisir. J'ai honte de l'avouer. La nuit je dormis dans une chambre d'hôtel luxueux pour essayer d'oublier. (115)

The masturbatory scenes which take place after the encounter with the old woman illustrate Ahmed's attempts to awaken her female sexuality and to turn her shame into acceptance of her female body: "Ces caresses devant le miroir devinrent une habitude, une espèce de pacte entre mon corps et une image, une image enfouie dans un temps lointain et qu'il fallait réveiller en laissant les doigts toucher à peine ma peau" (116). An integral part of Ahmed's masturbatory experiences is the writing of her journal and the creation of images with which to give voice to her desires: "J'écrivais avant ou après la séance. J'étais souvent à bout d'inspiration car je découvrais que les caresses accompagnées d'images étaient plus intenses" (116). However, as a result of the repression and censorship of the female body and female sexuality in Islamic society, she is often at a loss for the language of feminine desire: "Je ne savais pas où aller les

chercher. J'avais beau en inventer quelques-unes, il m'arrivait de rester en panne, comme il m'arrivait aussi de rester des heures devant la page blanche" (116) In the same way that the book she is writing must be nourished with words, so too must her sexuality be mediated by language, images and emotions: "Mon corps était cette page et ce livre. Pour le réveiller, il fallait le nourrir, l'envelopper d'images, le remplir de syllabes et d'émotions, l'entretenir dans la douceur des choses et lui donner du rêve" (116).

In this way, Ahmed's original revulsion at the sight of the female genitalia is gradually replaced by an acceptance of the female body and the pleasure it affords her. Female masturbation is represented as a liberating activity which both paves the way to self-acceptance, and subverts the denigration of a woman's body and the censorship of feminine desire in Islamic society. Just as the narrative points to the way in which women must reclaim language and elaborate their own images in order to give voice to their desire, so too must the colonized recover and value their own idiom, both cultural and linguistic, if they are to escape the alienation and self-hatred wrought by colonization and the denigration of their culture, language and traditions. In this way, the colonized can throw off what Albert Memmi calls the "mythical and degrading portrait willfully created and

spread by the colonizer" and which the oppressed population has hitherto internalized.⁷ To regain its cultural specificity then, the North African people must look toward its history, language and culture for the images with which it can reconstruct an identity obscured by French rule and the imposition of the language and history of the métropole.

However, Ahmed's attempt to recover "une image enfouie dans le passé" also suggests the potential dangers attendant upon the recovery of a past identity. If the colonized population blindly embraces every aspect of Arabic Islamic society, it runs the risk of becoming petrified in outmoded traditions and anachronistic social structures. Memmi makes the following observations regarding the tendency of the colonized to develop a "countermythology":

Du coup, exactement à l'inverse de l'accusation colonialiste, le colonisé, sa culture, son pays, tout ce qui lui appartient deviennent **parfaite positivité**. **En définitive, nous allons nous trouver en face d'une contre-mythologie**. Au mythe négatif imposé par le colonisateur succède un **mythe positif** de lui-même, proposé par le colonisé... A entendre le colonisé, et souvent ses amis, tout est bon, tout est à garder, dans ses moeurs et ses traditions, ses actes et ses projets; même l'anachronique ou le désordonné, l'immoral ou l'erreur. (166)

Thus, while the narrative stresses the importance of self-acceptance in the construction of sexual and cultural identity, it does not merely reverse the hierarchical binary oppositions of male/female and colonizer/colonized.

Rather than valorize the feminine over the masculine, or by extension the culture and language of Arabic, Islamic society over the French language and culture, Jelloun's novel locates a space in which masculinity and femininity co-exist in a non-hierarchical relationship. This space is the circus--a place of illusion peopled by hermaphroditic figures like the bearded Malika who performs in female drag, animals trained in the art of simulation, and lottery wheels which are rigged. As the ringmaster explains to Ahmed:

Tout est faux, et c'est ça notre truc, on ne le cache pas; les gens viennent pour ça, pour Malika qui n'est pas plus une danseuse des mille et une nuits que moi qui ne suis un marin balafre, ils viennent pour la loterie; la roue qui tourne est truquée, ils le soupçonnent mais acceptent le jeu; seul l'âne qui fume et fait la mort est vrai... (120)

It is here that Ahmed will perform alternately as both man and woman: "tu te déguiseras à la première partie du spectacle, tu disparaîtras cinq minutes pour réapparaître en femme fatale"(121). As Ahmed prepares herself for this life of disguise and illusion, she anticipates it with joy: "Je n'avais pas d'appréhension. Au contraire, je jubilais, heureuse, légère, rayonnante"(123). Whereas Ahmed had previously been obliged to keep her female identity a lonely secret, and to present herself as a male to the world, her performances in the circus are clearly an illusion "sans réelle ambiguïté (120)." It is here that Lalla-Zahra, as Ahmed comes to be called, is at liberty to

don the clothes/signs of both masculinity and femininity,
and at the same time to recover her identity as a woman.

Son corps trouvait une joie et un bonheur
d'adolescent amoureux. Elle se cachait pour
écrire.... Tantôt homme, tantôt femme, notre
personnage avançait dans la reconquête de son être.
Il ne dormait plus avec les acrobates mais dans la
roulotte des femmes; elle mangeait et sortait avec
elles. On l'appelait Lalla Zahra. Elle aimait bien ce
prénom. (127)

In this way, the narrative points to a conception of sexual identity in which masculinity and femininity would no longer be restrictive gender roles constructed on male and female bodies, but, instead, would be traits and characteristics found in each sex, allowing for a true affirmation of difference within each sexed subject. By extension, in juxtaposing Zahra's writing and her bisexual performances, the narrative suggests a concept of cultural identity according to which the Maghrebian, post-colonial writer, while identifying her or himself as a North African in the first instance, could share in the language and culture of both Arabic, Islamic society and of France, without either being valorized above the other. However, the narrative also demonstrates that such a conception of identity is far from existing in reality, and that men and women displaying the characteristics of the opposite sex are only tolerated within the world of the circus where there is no real ambiguity, only overt illusion and masquerade. As Abdelwahab Bouhdiba notes in La sexualité en Islam: "le grand tabou sexuel de l'Islam n'est pas tant

de ne pas respecter un rapport de parenté que de violer l'ordre du monde, la bipartition sexuelle et la distinction du féminin et du masculin"(45-6).

Thus, while Zahra's performances clearly belong to the carnival tradition with its transgression of hierarchies, in this case those based on gender, they take place within a theatrical space which circumscribes such transgressions. Indeed as her experiences "off-stage" make clear, the liberating possibilities suggested by the carnivalesque space of non-hierarchical gender difference is in stark contrast to the actual relations which obtain between the members of the circus once they leave the ring. When Zahra's story is taken up by Salem, one of the members of the original storyteller's audience, he tells how the ring-master brutally attempts to sodomize Zahra, saying to her: "Donne ton derrière--ça va être ta fête. Tu fais ça toute seule, je vais t'apprendre comment on le fait à deux" (142). Here, Abbas' words ironize the possibility of a sexual encounter between men and women based on anything other than violence and male domination. Furthermore, his reference to Zahra's previous masturbation as he is on the point of raping her, indicates that female, sexual self-sufficiency will be ruthlessly opposed by a society which sanctions the beating, and sometimes even the killing of women who oppose the status quo of sexual mores.

Salem's version of Zahra's death is equally pessimistic: suspecting that Abbas is returning to rape her again, Zahra places razor blades between her legs, a suicidal act of defiance which results in not only the death of the circus-master, but also her own. The fact that Salem recounts Zahra's act of resistance in 1957, the year after Morocco achieved political independence from France, suggests that political independence must also be accompanied by revolt against indigenous forms of repression, a revolt which is represented figuratively by Zahra's severing of the male genitalia of the ring-master, a police informer and an authoritarian tyrant within the world of the circus: "Les gamins acrobates sont tous des orphelins et moi je suis leur père et leur frère; quand ils m'énervent je les bats, c'est ainsi. Dans ce pays, tu réprimes ou tu es réprimé. Alors je frappe et domine" (121).

Given that the phallus is repeatedly related to repressive forms of authority in L'enfant de sable, it is possible to read Zahra's emasculation of her boss within the context of the oppressive legacy of Western cultural forms within the literary world. As John Erickson argues, the problem of sexuality is indissolubly linked to "the literary revolt of the post-colonial writer".

[Zahra's] story, while involving the making and unmaking of self, involves as well the making and unmaking of narrative, the relentless deconstruction of a coherent (male) subject/narrative. In an

extended sense, Zahra becomes for ben Jelloun a privileged metaphor for the post-colonialist author trying to reconstruct his own idiom out of the debris of a western tongue" (6).

Read within the context of the sexual violence experienced by Zahra, her earlier attempts to recover her female sexuality through masturbation indirectly suggest a valorization of narcissistic self-sufficiency within a society in which relations between the sexes are based on domination and repression. Thus, although the text points to a Derridean notion of difference--beyond the assignment of sexual or cultural identity on the basis of gender or national origin--it also problematizes such a notion of difference through the suggestion that self-acceptance and self-sufficiency must first be achieved by women, and by extension the post-colonial world, before such a relationship can exist between the Arab world and European society.

Just as the subjugation of women continues in Islamic society, so too does the cultural identity of the post-colonial writer remain a problematic one. While many Maghrebian writers have indeed adopted the language of the colonizer in order to critically engage issues related to the legacy of colonialism in North Africa since the independence of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, their situation is an ambiguous one.⁸ As a result of their controversial critique of the patriarchalism of Arabic, Islamic society, literary works like those of ben Jelloun,

Djebar and Chraïbi are often banned from the countries of the Maghreb. Even those that are not banned are read by a restricted, preponderantly French audience, and remain unread by the general population in North Africa due to the barriers of language and cost. Consequently, many of these Francophone writers end up living in France exploring the problem of cultural identity through their writings. However, the importance of a work like L'enfant de sable lies in the intervention it makes in the historical narrative of French colonialism, the discursive challenge it poses to the patriarchalism of Islamic society, and its refusal to mythologize the national identity of Morocco. In this way, not only does the L'Enfant de sable expose the phallogentric and imperialistic discourses which construct women and the colonized population as the sexual and cultural Other respectively in order to legitimize their oppression, but it also offers paradigms of sexual and cultural identity which, in their ultimate affirmation of difference, go beyond a mere reversal of power. In this way, Ben Jelloun's narrative reveals not only the necessity of political decolonization, but equally important, the necessity of deconstructing the ways of thinking and knowing which inform the discourses of power responsible for the oppression of whole groups of people on the basis of gender, race or national origin.

Notes

1. See Khatibi's Maghreb pluriel, especially the chapter entitled "Double Critique": 43-63.

2. For an interesting exploration of the sandchild as a figure for the "literary revolt" of the post-colonial author, see John Erickson's article "Veiled Woman and Veiled Narrative in Tahar Ben Jelloun's Sandchild."

3. In Beyond the Veil, Fatima Mernissi notes that "the symbolism of sexual patterns certainly seems to reflect society's hierarchy and power allocation in the Muslim order. Strict space boundaries divide Muslim society into two sub-universes: the universe of men (the umma, the world religion and power) and the universe of women, the domestic world of sexuality and the family" (138). See esp. Chapter 8 "The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries" for further discussion of this subject.

4. The following works deal with the subordinate status of women in Islamic society: Fadela M'Rabet's La femme algérienne suivi de Les Algériennes; Fatima Mernissi's Beyond the Veil: Male/Female Dynamics in the Muslim World. In Veil of Shame: The Role of Women in the Contemporary Fiction of North Africa and the Arab World, Evelyne Accad

explores the representation of woman in Maghrebian literature.

5. Ben Jelloun's La plus haute des solitudes: misère sexuelle d'émigrés nord-africains developed out of a social psychiatry dissertation defended at the Sorbonne in 1975. It explores the affective and sexual deprivation of North African immigrants in France.

6. See Monego's Maghrebian Literature in French, esp. Chapter 1.

7. For an excellent analysis of the dynamics of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, see Albert Memmi's Portrait du Colonisé précédé de Portrait du Colonisateur.

8. For a discussion of the future of post-colonial, Maghrebian writing in French, see Monego's Maghrebian Literature in French esp. Chapter nine.

Conclusion

Inveighing against the "reduction of a 'person'...to the position of 'other'" in La Jeune Née, Hélène Cixous writes:

Qu'est-ce que c'est l'"Autre"? S'il est vraiment "l'autre", alors on n'a rien à dire, ce n'est pas théorisable. **L'autre** m'échappe. Il est ailleurs, dehors: autre absolument. Il ne se pose pas. Mais bien sûr, dans l'Histoire, ce qu'on appelle "autre" c'est une altérité qui se pose, qui entre dans le cercle dialectique, qui est l'autre dans le rapport hiérarchisé où c'est le même qui règne, nomme, définit, attribue, "son" autre.... Le paradoxe de l'altérité, c'est bien sûr qu'à aucun moment dans l'Histoire elle n'est tolérée, possible, comme telle. L'autre n'est là que pour être réapproprié, repris, détruit en tant qu'autre. (130)

Such notions of otherness are central to the problematic explored in this dissertation: the relationship between marginalized subject-positions based on gender, colonialism and sexual orientation, and the textual strategies deployed to create a position of strength, even dominance, by, and for, those whom society constructs as its others.

While the valorization of traditionally disenfranchised positions is a central concern in the texts of Duras, Gide, Djebbar and ben Jelloun, the textual dynamic of domination and marginalization is more pronounced in Duras' L'Amant and Gide's L'Immoraliste than in the post-colonial narratives of Djebbar and ben Jelloun. Duras and Gide construct a dominant subject position for

the female protagonist of L'Amant, and the male homosexual narrator of L'Immoraliste respectively, through the marginalization of other positions--in L'Amant the racial Other is subordinated; in Gide's récit women are violently suppressed, and the cultural alterity of North Africa is denigrated. In both Duras and Gide, the textual "colonization" of the cultural Other is complicitous with orientalist/colonialist discourses. In their respective representations of cultural alterity, French colonial North Africa and Indochina figure, at least in part, as a set of topoi instrumental in the construction of a female subjectivity and a male homosexual identity. While Duras draws on the narrative strategies of Orientalism--namely, the eroticization of the exotic, the feminization of the racial Other, and an essentialist representation of the Orient--Gide's L'Immoraliste is colonialist in its hierarchical distribution of cultural difference, a hierarchy which at first valorizes North Africa for its vitality and spontaneity, characteristics which the text associates with masculinity, only to later denigrate it for its debilitating, feminine traits of listlessness, passivity and sensuality.

Just as Duras' L'Amant draws much of its authority from the discourse of Orientalism as it constructs a position of strength for the female Other, the lower-class white woman in the patriarchal society of French

Indochina, so too does the authority of Gide's L'Immoraliste derive from a misogynistic discourse of gender difference, ideologically inscribed within the literary texts of the nineteenth century, and within French society at the turn of the century.¹ While Duras' deployment of orientalist topoi tends to hypostasize the attributes embodied by the young girl's Chinese lover as characteristics related to the very essence of the East--his weakness, passivity, "exotic" sensuality and femininized body--the misogynistic ideology of L'Immoraliste essentializes masculinity and femininity, valorizing the former over the latter, and thereby naturalizes these gendered differences. In this way, Gide's valorization of male homosexuality, and his subversion of its social construction as Other, leads not to an acceptance of other forms of difference, but to the repression of the female Other.

But whereas Duras tends to essentialize **cultural** identity, her representation of **sexual** identity in L'Amant does not. Rather, the question of sexual identity is indissolubly linked to the question of writing--autobiographical writing in particular--and the position occupied by the narrator. The text clearly indicates that women have historically experienced oppression as a result of the social construction of gender, and the prostitution of the female body, but it also enacts a different

distribution of power as the female narrator appropriates a masculine position of strength, and the Chinese man is placed in the traditionally feminine, subordinate position. Such a distribution of gender/power relations suggests that this hybrid text does not so much reflect the real, as reshape it discursively, and, in so doing, it both underwrites, and resists, the narrative of female disempowerment in patriarchal society.

By contrast, the notion of sexual and cultural identity which informs Gide's L'Immoraliste is a distinctly logocentric one. For Michel, the discovery of his homosexuality leads him to posit an original homosexual identity inscribed within nature, and subsequently obscured by education, culture and the conventions of European society. Interestingly, the narrative legitimizes this "authentic self" by conflating it with the notion of an essential masculinity. As I have argued, Gide's text associates male homosexuality and masculinity with the valorized terms of the binary oppositions nature/culture, Africa/Europe, spontaneity/morality, and femininity with the denigrated terms. Towards the end of the text, however, these hierarchies are reversed, with Europe now the locus of masculine strength and power. But although these hierarchical oppositions contain the seeds of their own dissolution, Michel continues to nurture the hope of

attaining a masculine identity uncontaminated by the debilitating effects of the now feminized Africa, a hope with which the reader is encouraged to identify. Thus, Gide's reversal of the hierarchical oppositions which organize cultural and sexual difference in the text, are tied to the same structural model, and remain inscribed within the repressive discourses of colonialism and misogyny.

In Gide, then, there is a movement from the valorization of Africa to its subsequent denigration, with the superiority of European civilization ultimately asserted. Although the workings of Duras' Le Vice-consul are considerably more complex, it, too, maintains the West in a position of dominance. Through its deconstitution of the rational, cartesian subject, and its critique of knowledge as power, Le Vice-consul attempts to explore alternate ways of relating to the alterity represented by India. However, by privileging concepts central to post-structuralist theories from Europe--the decentered subject and the problematization of the historical referent--with their elision of India as an active subject and agent in history, Le Vice-consul produces the West as the subject of knowledge, and thereby maintains the West in its position of dominance vis-à-vis the decolonized nations of the developing world.

Just as L'Amant associates cultural alterity with sexual difference through the feminization of the man from Cholon, so too does Le Vice-consul feminize India through its deployment of Anne-Marie Stretter as a trope for the cultural alterity of the East. Although Duras' text suggests that the radical alterity of India as figured by the beggarwoman of Calcutta is unknowable, and therefore cannot be "captured" by traditional ways of knowing, Le Vice-consul displaces this cultural alterity onto the figure of Anne-Marie Stretter, and in so doing, domesticates the threatening alterity of India. For readers familiar with Duras' oeuvre, Anne-Marie Stretter recalls the figure of Lol V Stein and the deconstitution of subjectivity enacted in Le ravisement de Lol V. Stein. Like Lol, Stretter embodies the negation of the self-present subject and the notion of knowledge as mastery. But whereas Duras' novels valorize the relationship of the feminine to absence, passivity and non-mastery in the fictional characters of Lol V. Stein and Anne-Marie Stretter, in L'Amant--the text that explicitly identifies the narrator, the young girl in Indochina and the author--there is a clear attempt to construct a female subjectivity based on the masculine notions of activity, presence and control. That such a shift should occur in a text that deals with Duras' actual experience suggests that the deconstitution of subjectivity is a premature

move for women in a society in which they are not yet accorded full subject status.

Both Duras and Djébar avail themselves of the autobiographical genre, and, in so doing, they participate in "a tradition of colonial practice"--the writing of autobiography traditionally associated with the unitary male/colonial subject (Decolonizing the Subject, "Introduction"). By writing autobiography from the position of the Other, both women contest, and subvert their subjection within society. In different ways, they explode the notion of a unitary autobiographical self by revealing the ways in which patriarchal society, and/or French colonialism, have produced subjects alienated from their sexual or cultural identities. In both cases, this alienation determines the form of the text. In L'Amant, the vacillation between "I" and "she" suggests that, as an object of the male gaze and prostitution in patriarchal, French colonial society, the sense of identity of the lower-class, white girl is fragmented, with "the surveyor and the surveyed" constituting two distinct elements of her identity as a woman. As I argue in chapter one, Duras' use of the autobiographical "I" ultimately enables her to reconstitute her subjectivity. In this way, she discursively resists her objectification by society.

But whereas Duras is primarily concerned with individual identity, that of a specific young French girl

in the colonies, Djébar conceives of identity in collective terms. For the narrator, subjective identity is never only individual, but is intimately related to the collective experience of the larger community of women in Islamic society. Such a conception of identity gives rise to the unorthodox formal composition of the text in which history and personal story are inextricably connected: the narrator's recollections of her life in both the autobiographical and novelistic registers, the historical reports in the third person of the French invasion of Algeria, and the first-hand accounts of the Algerian women who fought in the War of Independence, are all interwoven throughout the text. In this way, Djébar's use of the autobiographical genre--a genre traditionally associated with the writing of the **self**--implies that individual identity is inseparable from the collective experience of the community. Like Duras' use of the genre in L'Amant, Djébar's use of autobiography problematizes the traditional status of autobiography as medium of "truth", "life" and "reality". As my analysis of the relations between Duras' Un barrage and L'Amant, and between Djébar's L'Amour, la fantasia and Ombre sultane reveals, narrative--both the novelistic **and** the autobiographical--entertains a highly mediated and complex relationship with the real.

Through his deconstruction of essentialist definitions of masculinity and femininity, ben Jelloun implies that both sexual and cultural identity are mediated by language and by history. Such a conception both liberates the concept of identity itself from logocentric definitions, and allows for an understanding of how sexual identity is propped on the body: not in the sense that the female body is biologically determining, but rather in the sense that women's historical experience of their bodies in Islamic society--an experience of repression and violence--is instrumental in the construction of sexual identity. In this way, ben Jelloun's L'enfant de sable suggests that female sexuality and desire is produced by a nexus of relations between the biologically-sexed female body, language and the social construction of femininity.

While the text does locate a space in which men and women, the masculine and the feminine, exist outside of dominatory relations and structures, and by extension suggests a new relationship between the Arab world and European civilization, it points even more insistently to the necessity of recognizing the violence of the real, namely the legacy of French colonialism and the patriarchalism of Islamic society. In this fashion, L'enfant de sable implies that it is premature, even utopian, to conceive of sexual and cultural identity in

terms of what Derrida would call "the multiplicity of sexually marked voices" within each individual.² Just as the young girl's experience of prostitution and objectification in Un barrage and L'Amant contrasts starkly with the discursive construction of a dominant female subject in L'Amant, so too is Zahra's experience of sexual violence--an experience indissolubly linked to her female body--in marked contrast to the liberating vision of sexual identity and the mobility of gender positions located within the theatrical space of the circus.

In this way, L'enfant de sable implies that a necessary step on the road to emancipation, both sexual and cultural, is the recognition of the effects of the real--of history--in the construction of identity. Just as the poor woman from Alexandria seeks for deliverance through the recounting of the story of her uncle/aunt, Ahmed-Zahra, so too must the oppressive realities of French cultural domination and the patriarchalism of Islamic society be articulated, and opposed, if women--in both France and the Muslim world--and the peoples of the Maghreb, are to be liberated from their political, social and discursive construction as Other.

Notes

1. In "Irony and Misogyny: Authority and the Homosocial in Baudelaire and Flaubert," Ross Chambers explores the relationship between misogyny and the production of discursive authority in Flaubert's Un coeur simple and Baudelaire's La Fanfarlo.

2. In "Choreographies", an interview with Christie V. McDonald, Derrida valorizes such a notion of sexual identity: "The relationship [to the other] would not be a-sexual, far from it, but would be sexual otherwise: beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the opposition feminine/masculine, beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality which come to the same thing. As I dream of saving the chance that this question offers, I would like to believe in the multiplicity of sexually marked voices. I would like to believe in the masses, this indeterminable number of blended voices, this mobile of non-identified sexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each 'individual', whether he be classified as 'man' or 'woman' according to the criteria of usage" (76).

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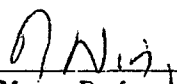
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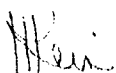
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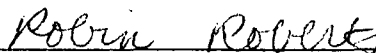
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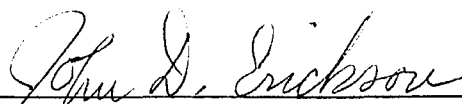
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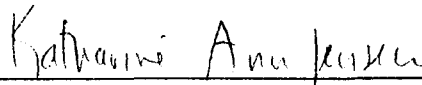

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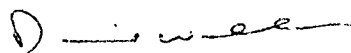

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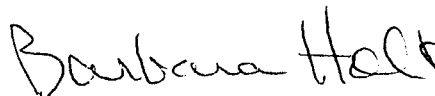
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