

## Marguerite Duras 'L'Amour: Understanding Madness through Foucault's Concepts of 'Biopower' and 'Biopolitics'

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### **Abstract**

Marguerite Duras (1914-1996), one of the most distinguished French intellectuals, excelled not only as writer but also as a filmmaker, dramatist, and journalist. Her well acclaimed novella, *L'Amour*, presents madness as a result of repressive thought process existent in the society. This paper takes up to understand madness through the lens of Foucault's notions of 'Bio-politics' and 'Bio-power'. Foucault's discourse on madness is a valuable insight into the power politics behind the dichotomies such as- sanity and insanity, reason and unreason, normality and abnormality. According to the philosopher, it is power which differentiates between healthy and sick people. The sick is regarded as deviant therefore excluded from the society. Madness is considered a condition that denotes absence of reason. The reasonable persons are given right to exercise power over the unreasonable. Madman is controlled through discipline and cure that apparently have a rational and positive orientation but Foucault considers them as the subtle power mechanisms referred to as 'Bio-power'. The mad people can include all those who do not adjust with the norms of the society such as eccentrics, rebels, and transgressors. They are seen as anomalies from the rational order of the world. Madness in *L'Amour* is first presented as a deviant characteristic and then as a tool of liberation. The mad characters here are not seen taking any effort to integrate with the society and with its norms; they rather seem to have transgressed the very myth of normality.

**Keywords:** Madness, Bio-power, Bio-politics, Norms, Liberation.

Marguerite Duras, one of the distinguished French intellectuals, excelled not only as a writer but also as a filmmaker, dramatist, and journalist. In the world of fiction, Duras brings forth the

emotional imbalance in the lives of women caused by different factors. She deals with love, desire suffering as these emotions affect women adversely and push them towards insanity (Mambrol). It is believed that the insane suffer from a brain ailment. This viewpoint is commonly held by specialists in the area and has been popularised in literature, films, and other forms of media. Contrary to this popular viewpoint, Duras in her well-acclaimed novella *L'Amour*, presents madness as a means of power-politics prevalent in the society. Madness can be understood through the lens of Foucault's notions of 'Bio-politics' and 'Bio-power.' Foucault's discourse on madness is a valuable insight into the power politics that work behind the dichotomies such as sanity and insanity, reason and unreason, normality and abnormality. Madness is considered a condition that denotes the absence of reason. The reasonable persons are given the right to exercise power over the unreasonable. In a society where reason is the norm, mad people are considered as the 'other' therefore excluded from the normal mode of existence. Madman is controlled through discipline and cure that apparently have a rational and positive orientation but Foucault considers them as the subtle power mechanisms hence 'Bio-power.' Foucault examines different ways in which bio-power works towards making the human body a subject to the dominant forces. An individual's body is manipulated and trained by the incessant exercise of disciplinary power. He/she is made to internalise certain norms of behaviour knowing them as essentially good for their life. Thus, the disciplinary mechanisms in today's modern society have got rid of "direct forms of repression and constraint because social control is achieved by means of subtler strategies of normalisation, strategies which produce self-regulating, 'normalised' individuals" (13). This life-affirming and productive bio-power, as viewed by Foucault, mainly works through power/knowledge dynamics:

Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true.' Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining

of practice. Thus, ‘there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations (1977, 27).

Michel Foucault talks about that how various institutional, physical, social mechanisms and knowledge structures enhance and maintain the exercise of power within the social body. Knowledge itself is a medium to impose a monopoly over the world. One group is othered on the basis of the knowledge which has been provided for that particular group that it is weak, insignificant, peripheral. Now, where does this knowledge come from? This comes from the group or the community which is in power. The powerful group highlights others’ perceived weaknesses to make itself look stronger or better. So, this is done for maintaining and furthering the power of one section minimising the power of the other. So, knowledge serves to keep power where it already lies. Any knowledge or truth which is made available to the world is fabricated in favour of one group and against the other. So, it is important to understand this power/knowledge relationship if we want to understand the underlying politics. The perceived knowledge about any particular group is made so pervasive and it has penetrated so deeply into the belief system that we have believed it has a truth. The knowledge provided about certain people as mad since they are mentally sick and therefore not for to live a normal life with others in the society. They have been presented in such a negative way that they have become secluded in society. People start maintaining distance from them considering them negative and threatening as their behaviour is not normal and reasonable.

The people are ignorant of the more intense patriarchal domination that comes in the form of ‘bio-power – ’which is implicit but all-pervasive. For Foucault, “power exists everywhere; it was a key concept because it acts as a type of relations between people, a complex form of strategy, with the ability to secretly shape another’s behaviours” (Mason). Michel Foucault is of the view that various institutional, physical, social systems work towards strengthening the forces

of power on the one hand and transforming human bodies into docile bodies on the other. Medicine is one such field that makes a certain group of people misfit in society therefore repressed. It is literature that has given the voice to the silenced people. The mad people are mostly portrayed suffering from the loss of language. Foucault defined madness as a “lack of language” that is “the silence of a stifled, repressed language” (Felman 14). Language and rationality go hand in hand. Since madness means the absence of rationality, it also entails the absence of language. Loss of connection with language means losing connection with meaning. In her work *Writing and Madness*, Shoshana Felman rejects the “false concept” of madness as a “loss of the relation to the mastery of meaning” (54). Using this definition, Felman takes a critical stand against the domination of psychiatric discourse over philosophical and literary ones. In so doing, she celebrates the potential of literature in challenging the clinician’s power by giving routes of expression to what culture excludes under the label of madness, that is, “nonsense, alienating, strangeness, transgressive excess, an illusion, a delusion, a disease” (Knuuttila 133). An individual’s body is thus controlled through medical knowledge. Jen Pylypa throws light on this:

According to Foucault, the medical profession historically gained considerable power to define reality through the control of privileged and respected scientific knowledge. Medical knowledge came to define the boundaries of normality and deviance. Medicine has also objectified our bodies, bringing them under the surveillance of the medical system as objects to be manipulated and controlled. Thus, at the level of ideology, medicine creates the discourse that defines which bodies, activities, and behaviors are normal; at the level of practice, medical procedures are a principal source of the institutional regulation and disciplining of bodies (30).

The mad people can include all those who do not adjust to the norms of the society such as eccentrics, rebels, and transgressors. They are seen as anomalies from the rational order of the

world. The mad characters in *L'Amour* are the ones who never tried to get inclusion in the community rather they considered themselves as different people who have been liberated from societal constraints. Duras informs about this liberated and illuminated state of the mad people: “As she notes, the absent state of these madwomen does not refer to a mental illness but to a state illuminated by the ‘ignorance’ of their ‘inner shadow’, which places the women radically – but not unambiguously – beyond all moral evaluations” (Armel 123). In this novel, *L'Amour*, there is an unnamed madwoman who lives in a seaside resort S. Thala. This nameless madwoman is constantly pregnant. She is in contact with two men, one is a madman and the other is a traveler. The story is allegorical that has a literal meaning as well as a symbolic meaning. On the surface, it's a love story. The story portrays a woman and a man spending their days on a beach in the village of S. Thala. The first man, who happened to be the woman's lover, returned to the village after a long gap of 17 years. During this period the woman had gone mad. The novella tells the story of the trauma and suffering of women resulting in her madness on the pretext of failure of love on the one hand and other implications of the very concept of madness. The place, Thala, is considered an asylum in the story. Knuuttila writes, “Since an allegorical reading conveys another, secondary world alongside the literal one, my question is: how does *L'amour*, being a continuation of *Lol's* story, point to emblematic meanings in terms of trauma and madness, for example, to the socio-political discrimination of women, and/or the failure of romantic love?” (166).

In a desolate location where only the rhythm of natural elements signals the flow of time, the protagonists are reduced to mere pronouns, and their interaction is limited to minimum gestures and actions. They fall outside the language system. Therefore, they do not conform to the rationally ordered patriarchal world. In the state of madness, they belong to the other world which is not governed by language. This world, governed by reason and logic, is given meaning through language. According to Lacanian views, the hierarchical structures of Western society are constructed by the medium of language and form a “symbolic order.” It is by the symbolic system

that the laws are set to define the truth of all things. Within this Symbolic order, “subjectivity, identity and sexuality are constructed by language...” (Cameron 163). The mad people lose language thereby lying outside the symbolic order. They do not conform to the normative system of the given society as all the norms are laid down through the medium of language. Since the mad people appear to have lost the connection with language, they are free from socio-cultural imperatives. Mad people have access to unconscious non-verbal language. Before joining the "symbolic order" or the rules of language, a newborn life in the "semiotic order," as proposed by Julia Kristeva, where he or she is guided by instincts and impulses rather than words (Cameron 173). When one is in the semiotic order, one does not conform to the logical order. Being a part of the linguistic system involves submitting to prevailing discourses. “L’amour’s tropology appears to be an emancipatory counter-discourse which, substituting metonymically a sentence by one sole word or a broken line, does not submit itself to any dominant discourse. Rather, this rhetoric subverts the ‘rational ’order, such as the hierarchy of human beings as opposed to natural elements”. Thus, their madness and the fragmented language they use are the deconstructive modes to subvert the logical meanings subsumed to be inherent in the language system. So, breaking down the utterances into apparently meaningless utterances can be taken as a deconstructive tool. Language is the cornerstone of the male-oriented Western Metaphysical system that controls human life. The entire Western civilisation, with its rational orientation, arose and is comprehended only via the medium of language. The people who do not fit in the western system devised by rationality or reason and defined by language, are declared anomalies or deviants. Such people are kept in an asylum. They are kept on medication so that they can become normal to be fit in the rationally ordered society. Apparently, no harm is being done to them. They are kept on medication and subjected to regular monitoring. On the surface, they appear to be life-affirming mechanisms. If seen from the Foucauldian perspective, such a system itself is bio-power which gives rights to the sane people to exercise control over the insane. What is the basis of the divisions between sanity and insanity, reason or unreason, rational or irrational? Who decides that who has

power over whom? The power is maintained through the medium of language. Hierarchical dichotomies are created through the language itself. So, many thinkers and linguists came forward to deconstruct the rational modes of perception. The relationship between language and meaning is arbitrary as emphasised by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure: “there is no inherent connection between a word and what it designates” (Barry 41). Thus, mad people in this novel liberate themselves from the assumed hierarchical truths of the western metaphysical system. Madness for these people has become a liberating mechanism. They no more seem to rely on language to seek the truth of existence. Instead, they look to the elemental forces of Nature to experience life in its pure and authentic form. The world of Nature is considered irrational and instinctive as opposed to the Western world of rationality and reason. So, Nature itself is rejected by the rationally ordered human world. The power is sustained through the formula of Othering applied to certain groups by highlighting their imaginary weaknesses. This formula of Othering has not been applied to human beings only but also to the world of Nature hence the emergence of culture/ nature binary opposition. Culture includes everything which is man-made: civilisation, intelligence, value system, rational and moral laws etc. Nature is represented as insignificant, and peripheral. Again, some knowledge becomes the ground for Othering of Nature. Nature has not only been rejected considering as insignificant but it has also been controlled and exploited by mankind. It is through technology that man attempts to assert control over nature. The mad people here in this story appear to reject the rational world and reconnect their bond with Nature.

Madness in *L'Amour* is first presented as a deviant characteristic and then as a tool of liberation. They get to know the greater truths that lie in the unconscious world which cannot be accessed through reason or logic. Since madness means the absence of reason, it enters the realm of the unconscious instinctive world. Since Nature stands opposite to the reason and rationality of mankind, Mad people, as portrayed in Duras 'L'Amour, appear to have a kinship with the elemental forces of Nature. Thus, Duras as a writer endeavour to decode the notion of madness

through philosophy and psychoanalysis. The mad characters here are not seen taking any effort to integrate with the society and with its norms; they rather seem to have transgressed the very myth of normality.

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