

India Song Study Guide

India Song by Marguerite Duras

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Introduction

In 1972, Duras was commissioned by Britain's National Theatre to write *India Song* as a play, although it was not staged at that time. *India Song* was first published in book form as a play/screenplay/novel in 1973. It was adapted to film as a motion picture released in 1975 and first performed on stage in 1993.

India Song is narrated by four voices, two female and two male, who recall the events of one night at a party held at the French embassy in Calcutta in 1937 and the following day at the French residence on an island in the Indian Ocean. Anne-Marie Stretter is an object of fascination for everyone. Although married to Ambassador Stretter, she has taken Michael Richardson as her lover. Two other men, a French vice-consul and a young French attaché, are also in love with her. One night, Anne-Marie commits suicide by walking into the Indian Ocean to drown herself. Her story is set within the luxurious confines of European colonial life, where the privileged white colonists take refuge from the poverty, disease, starvation, and suffering of the Indian people.

India Song covers many themes, including love, desire, passion, and the social inequalities of colonial domination.

Author Biography

Duras was born Marguerite Donnadiou on April 14, 1914, in French Indochina, a region that is now part of South Vietnam. Her parents were schoolteachers in the French colonial service. When she was four years old, her father died, leaving the family in financial distress. Duras graduated from a high school in Saigon and, at the age of eighteen, moved to Paris, France, to attend college. She earned a degree in law from the Sorbonne. From 1935 to 1941, Duras worked as a secretary in the French Ministry of Colonies. With the advent of World War II, France was occupied by Nazi Germany, and Duras joined the French Resistance movement. Her husband, writer Robert Antelme, was arrested and sent to a concentration camp in Dachau. Antelme returned home in 1945, but Duras had developed a relationship with Dionys Mascolo in his absence. She soon divorced Antelme and eventually married Mascolo, with whom she had a son. Over the course of her life, Duras developed a reputation for her many passionate love affairs, her struggles with alcoholism, and her difficult personality.

In the post—World War II era, Duras established herself as a popular novelist. As her writing style developed, she became identified with the French *nouveau roman* (new novel), that emerged in the post-war period. In the 1950s, Duras became involved in the film industry as a screenwriter and director. Her most successful screenplay, *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), was based on a novel by Alain Resnais, who directed the film. Duras also began to write plays; her theatrical style became increasingly experimental over the years, establishing her as one of France's most important feminist playwrights.

Many of Duras's works are based on autobiographical experiences. A series referred to as the India cycle is based on her childhood in French colonial Indochina. The India cycle includes the novels *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964; *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*), *Le Vice-consul* (1965; *The Vice-Consul*), and *L'Amour* (1972; *Love*), as well as the play and screenplay *India Song* (1973). *L'Amant* (1984; *The Lover*), published when Duras was seventy years old, is her most popular novel and was adapted to film in 1992. Duras was awarded the Prix Goncourt, France's most prestigious literary award, for *The Lover*. Late in life, Duras, long separated from her second husband, lived in domestic partnership with Yann Andrea Steiner, a young writer. Duras died in Paris on March 3, 1996.



Plot Summary

Act 1

"India Song," a blues tune is heard being played on a piano. Two disembodied female voices, voice 1 and voice 2, are heard talking to each other. The two voices indicate that Michael Richardson had been engaged to a local woman in the town of S. Thala but that he met Anne-Maria Stretter at a dance one night and fell in love with her. After meeting Anne-Marie, he abandoned his fiancée and followed Anne-Marie to Calcutta. Anne-Marie, dressed in black, lounges on a couch. Michael Richardson sits next to her, while a third man stands nearby. The voices explain that Anne-Marie died one night while in India and that Michael Richardson left the country after her death.

Anne-Marie and Michael get up from the couch and begin dancing. The two voices speak as if partially remembering a story they had heard long ago. They remember that the setting of the dancing couple is the French embassy in Calcutta, India. The street sounds of Calcutta can be heard in the distance. A beggar woman is heard, shouting and laughing. The two voices recall that the beggar woman, who is crazy, is from Burma. The voices state that the beggar woman got pregnant at the age of seventeen and was kicked out of the house by her mother. They say that she spent ten years walking across Asia, before arriving in Calcutta.

Anne-Marie enters the French embassy. She stands in the middle of the room and weeps silently. Michael Richardson enters, takes Anne-Marie in his arms, and gently lays her down on the floor. He sits down beside her and watches her sleep. The voices state that Michael's former fiancée died after he abandoned her for Anne-Marie. A second man, the Stretters' guest, enters and sits beside Anne-Marie. Both men lie down next to her.

The two voices begin to recount the "ballad of Anne-Marie Stretter." They say that Anne-Marie was originally from Venice and that she married a French colonial official at the age of 18. She later met Ambassador Stretter and left her first husband to marry him. For the next seventeen years, she moved with Ambassador Stretter to various cities throughout Asia.

As the two voices talk about Anne-Marie, the vice-consul can be heard in the distance, crying in despair. The voices explain that, in the city of Lahore, the vice-consul shot a gun from his balcony at the lepers and beggars below him. The voices recall that Anne-Marie first attempted to commit suicide while in Chandernagor. In the distance, a glow emanates from the horizon, which the voices identify as fires burning the people who have starved to death.



Act 2

The setting is a reception or party at the French embassy in Calcutta. Though fragments of conversation are overheard, none of the characters onstage throughout the play are ever seen speaking. Thus, not a single word is uttered on stage by any of the characters. The snippets of overheard conversation from the guests at the reception reveal bits and pieces of information about the main characters.

Michael Richardson, Anne-Marie's lover, is at the reception. The French vice-consul from Lahore is there, and the guests gossip about his behavior in Lahore and of his attempted suicide. A young French attaché, newly arrived in India, is also at the party. Some guests are heard saying that they find Anne-Marie intriguing and wonder what she does with her time. Others inform one another that she frequently plays tennis with her two daughters and rides her bicycle early in the morning. Some guests note that Anne-Marie is dancing with her husband though they are not seen onstage.

The vice-consul stands in the garden, and the other guests avoid him. The ambassador is heard asking the young attaché to talk to the vice-consul. The young attaché goes out into the garden and approaches the vice-consul in a friendly way. He tells the vice-consul that no one can understand why he shot his gun off the balcony in Lahore. The voice of George Crawn is heard, introducing himself to the other guests as an old friend of Anne-Marie's. In a private room away from the reception, Anne-Marie dances with Michael Richardson.

The beggar woman can be seen in the garden, hiding in the bushes. Anne-Marie comes out to the garden, sees the beggar woman, then goes back in. Some of the guests are heard saying that Anne-Marie takes vacations on an island in the Indian Ocean with Michael Richardson and other friends, while her husband goes hunting in Nepal. They claim that her husband knows she has lovers but does not mind because he is older than his wife, and their marriage has become a friendship. Other guests are heard stating that Anne-Marie was once a celebrated pianist in Venice, before she got married.

Anne-Marie dances with the young attaché. The vice-consul asks a woman to dance and, to everyone's surprise, she accepts. While they are dancing, they are heard discussing leprosy and the fear of contracting leprosy while in India. The vice-consul then tells the woman that he in fact wants to get leprosy. She stops dancing and abruptly walks away.

Later, Anne-Marie dances with the vice-consul. He tells her that he loves her, but she responds that she loves only Michael Richardson. The vice-consul begs her to let him spend the night at the embassy, but she refuses. He begins shouting that he loves her and wants to stay at the embassy with her. The other guests are horrified by the shame of his display, and he is told to leave. When he refuses to leave, he is escorted off the premises. Throughout the night, he can be heard in the distance, crying in agony and calling out Anne-Marie's name as he wanders aimlessly through the city.



Act 3

Everyone has left the party except Anne-Marie, Michael Richardson, the young attaché, the Stretters' guest, and George Crown, who are sitting around in the reception room. The vice-consul can still be heard crying and yelling in the distance. Voice 3 and voice 4 are heard for the first time. They say that Michael Richardson left India right after Anne-Marie died and that the vice-consul resigned his post in 1938 and was never heard from again. Voices 1 and 2 can be heard, also discussing the fate of the vice-consul. The five people in the embassy doze in their chairs, as the night turns to day. While they are sleeping, voice 3 and voice 4 describe their journey by car the next day to vacation on the islands. The voices indicate that they are staying at the Prince of Wales Hotel on an island in the Indian Ocean.

Act 4

Anne Marie, Michael Richardson, the young attaché, the Stretters's guest, and George Crown enter the lounge of the Prince of Wales Hotel, then go into the dining room for dinner. The vice-consul appears in the garden and enters the hotel, though the others do not see him. The voices indicate that the beggar woman has also come to the island. They explain that after dinner Anne-Marie said she wanted to walk along the beach by herself. Though she does not see him, the vice-consul follows behind her.

Act 5

Anne-Marie, Michael Richardson, and the young attaché arrive at the French residence on the island at the same time, though they have taken different routes. The vice-consul arrives soon after, unnoticed by the others. Inside, Michael sits playing the piano. The young attaché takes Anne-Marie in his arms and gives her a passionate kiss, right in front of Michael Richardson. The vice-consul watches from the window. Michael and the young attaché both walk away from the residence, leaving Anne-Marie alone with the vice-consul. Voice 4 explains that in the morning Anne-Marie walked into the Indian Ocean, committing suicide.



Characters

Beggar Woman

The beggar woman is a mysterious figure who hides in the bushes of the French embassy garden and occasionally peeks her head out to watch the goings-on at the reception. The voices explain that she is from Burma and that she got pregnant at the age of seventeen and left home. They state that the beggar woman walked across Asia for ten years and finally ended up in Calcutta. She has lost all her hair from malnutrition and is bald. The beggar woman can be heard singing at various points throughout the play. At the end of *India Song*, the voices indicate that the beggar woman has followed Anne-Marie and her friends to the island. While Anne-Marie represents the status of white European women in colonial Asia, the beggar woman represents the conditions of life for Asian women.

George Crawn

George Crawn is an Englishman and an old friend of Anne-Marie's. He arrives at the embassy reception and encourages the other guests to help themselves to drinks from the bar. Toward the end of the play, he travels with Anne-Marie and several of her other friends to the islands.

The French Ambassador

See Ambassador Stretter

The Guest

The guest of the Stretters' is one of the men who attends the reception at the embassy. The next day, he travels with Anne-Marie and several other friends to the islands. There is some indication that the guest may have been one of Anne-Marie's lovers.

Michael Richardson

Michael Richardson is Anne-Marie's lover. He first met her in S. Thala, where he had been engaged to a local girl. After he met Anne-Marie at a party and danced with her, he fell in love with her and broke off his engagement. When Anne-Marie moved with her husband to Calcutta, Michael Richardson dropped everything to follow her. He started his own shipping company in Calcutta so that he could live there and be near Anne-Marie. He frequently travels with her to the island, where they vacation together at the French residence. Toward the end of the play, he plays the piano and watches as Anne-



Marie shares a passionate kiss with the young attaché. The voices explain that after Anne-Marie's suicide, Michael Richardson left India and never returned.

Ambassador Stretter

Ambassador Stretter is the husband of Anne-Marie Stretter and is the French ambassador to India. They have been married for seventeen years, during which time they have lived in various capital cities throughout Asia. Ambassador Stretter never appears as a character on stage; however, his voice may be heard offstage at various points during the reception that is held at the French embassy in Calcutta. The voices and various gossiping guests at the party indicate that the ambassador is well aware of the fact that his wife takes lovers. The Stretters' marriage has become more of a platonic friendship than a romantic relationship, so he does not mind her infidelities. Thus, when Anne-Marie vacations on the island with Michael Richardson, her husband goes on hunting trips in Nepal. During the course of the reception, Ambassador Stretter can be heard offstage talking with the young attaché, inviting him to travel with Anne-Marie to the islands and asking him to speak with the vice-consul since no one else at the party is willing to go near him.

Anne-Marie Stretter

Anne-Marie Stretter is the central character of *India Song*. She is originally from Venice, born of a French father and a mother of unknown origin. When she was seventeen, she got pregnant and married a French bureaucrat, with whom she traveled throughout Asia. She then met Ambassador Stretter and left her first husband to marry him. At the point when the events of the play take place, she has been married to Ambassador Stretter for seventeen years and has lived with him in various capital cities throughout Asia. She has two daughters.

It is well-known that Anne-Marie takes lovers outside of her marriage. At this point, she is in love with Michael Richardson. During the reception at the French embassy, Anne-Marie dances with her husband, with the young attaché, with Michael Richardson, and with the vice-consul. The various guests at the party find her intriguing and mysterious and gossip about her extensively. The day after the party, she and four guests drive to the island to stay at the French residence there. That night, Anne-Marie shares a passionate kiss with the young attaché, right in front of Michael Richardson. Later, she commits suicide by walking into the Indian Ocean.

The Vice-Consul

The man referred to as the vice-consul is the former French vice-consul in Lahore, India. While in Lahore, he suffered a mental breakdown and one night fired a gun from his balcony down onto the beggars and lepers crowded below. He tried to shoot himself in the head but failed to commit suicide. After these events, the vice-consul was dismissed from his post in Lahore. He then went to Calcutta to await reassignment.



Anne-Marie invites the vice-consul to the reception at the embassy. Because of his outrageous behavior in Lahore, the other guests avoid him and gossip about him. The vice-consul finally asks one woman to dance with him, but when he tells her that he wants to contract the disease of leprosy (presumably because he is suicidal), the woman stops dancing and walks away from him.

Toward the end of the party, the vice-consul and Anne-Marie dance together. He tells her that he is in love with her, but she responds that she is in love with Michael Richardson. The vice-consul then begs her to let him spend the night at the embassy, but she refuses to allow this. He begins shouting that he loves her and wants to spend the night so that all the guests can hear him. The vice-consul is then told to leave the embassy and is escorted off the premises. Throughout the rest of the night, he can be heard in the distance, crying and shouting Anne-Marie's name.

The day after the party, when Anne-Marie and her friends travel to the islands, the vice-consul secretly follows them. After supper, Anne-Marie walks back to the French residence on the island and sees the vice-consul in the garden but does not say anything. The voices state that he was the only one who saw her walk into the ocean to commit suicide but that he did not do anything to stop her. They explain that soon after her death, the vice-consul resigned from his job, and no one ever heard from him again, though he may have been seen walking among the lepers along the Ganges River in Calcutta.

Voice 1

Voice 1 is a disembodied voice that serves as one of the four narrators of *India Song*. Voice 1 is that of a young woman and is sweet but tinged with madness. Voice 1's memory of the love story of Anne-Marie Stretter is incomplete and illogical. Yet, she is so fascinated and consumed by Anne-Marie's story that she loses herself in it.

Voice 2

Voice 2 is one of the four disembodied voices that serve as narrators of *India Song*. Like voice 1, voice 2 is that of a young woman, tinged with madness and sweetness. Voice 2 is consumed with love and desire for voice 1 and continually tries to connect the love story of Anne-Marie back to their own love story.

Voice 3

Voice 3 is a disembodied male voice that is one of the narrators of *India Song*. Like the other voices, voice 3 is fascinated by the love story of Anne-Marie Stretter. However, voice 3 can remember almost nothing of the story and continually asks voice 4 to remind him of the events surrounding Anne-Marie's suicide.

Voice 4

Voice 4 is one of the disembodied voices that narrates the story of Anne-Marie Stretter in *India Song*. Unlike the other voices, voice 4, a male voice, can remember every detail of Anne-Marie's love story.

The Young Attaché

The young French attaché, newly arrived in India, is invited to the reception at the French embassy in Calcutta. Anne-Marie dances with him, and he immediately falls in love with her. She invites him to join her and her friends on their trip to the islands the next day, and he accepts. The first night on the island, while they are at the French residence, the young attaché takes Anne-Marie in his arms and kisses her passionately, right in front of Michael Richardson, who does nothing to stop them.



Themes

Obsessive Love

Duras portrays the experience of love in *India Song* as characterized by obsession. Anne-Marie Stretter is a lightning rod for the obsessive love of the men who surround her. Although she is married, she has taken many lovers, and men easily fall in love with her. Thus, Michael Richardson, the vice-consul, and the young attaché are all in love with her, while Anne-Marie loves only Michael Richardson. These characters seem to have no power or control over their obsessive feelings of love. As Anne-Marie tells the vice-consul, "I love Michael Richardson. I am not free of that love." The vice-consul responds that he loves her in the same way that she loves Michael Richardson. The vice-consul thus obsessively pursues Anne-Marie, despite her clearly stated rejection of him. After she sends him away from the embassy, he wanders the streets of Calcutta all night long, pathetically crying out her name and proclaiming his love for her. The next day, he secretly follows her to the island, obsessively continuing to pursue her. Duras thus explores the experience of love as one of compulsion and obsession, a human emotion that operates outside the bounds of reason and often leads to self-destruction.

Colonialism

The events narrated in *India Song* take place in a context of colonialism. The main characters of the play are European, mostly French and English, colonial diplomats living as the most privileged members of society in a nation where the majority of the population suffers from poverty, disease, and starvation. The death and suffering of the native Indian people under the yoke of colonial domination serves as a backdrop to the central story. Their plight is evoked through frequent mention of the suffering masses of the Indian population outside the embassy. The streets of Calcutta are filled with beggars, lepers, and starving people. The countless numbers who starve to death each day are burned in large fires along the Ganges River, and the glow from these fires may be seen from the embassy.

The central events of the play, however, take place in "white India," the luxurious settings of the French embassy in Calcutta, the Prince of Wales Hotel on the island, and the French residence on the island. While the white people dance and gossip, servants may be seen on stage, silently catering to their pleasures, pouring champagne and cleaning the rooms. The beggar woman, who hides in the bushes and occasionally pokes her head into the embassy garden, serves as a reminder of the suffering masses who live just outside the confines of these privileged "white" spaces and whom the white colonialists generally choose to ignore. One of the guests at the reception comments that the white people in India talk only about themselves, ignoring the Indian population amongst whom they live. Anne-Marie, on the other hand, is at least somewhat sympathetic to the plight of the Indians, as she sets out jars of clean drinking water for them and donates all of the leftovers from her parties to the starving people. *India Song*



thus offers a critique of the colonial system which creates such extreme contrasts of wealth and poverty.

Despair and Suicide

Anne-Marie serves as a symbol for the despair that surrounds her. She has attempted to commit suicide in the past, without success. On the night after the party, she succeeds in killing herself by walking into the ocean and drowning. The play does not provide any clear-cut explanation of why Anne-Marie commits suicide. However, it seems that she is particularly sensitive to the suffering and despair of everyone around her, both the Indians and the Europeans. By the end, she seems to be overwhelmed with despair about the suffering of the Indians as well as the suffering of the men who love her.

The vice-consul expresses his sense of despair more blatantly than Anne-Marie. He is known to have suffered a mental breakdown and shot his gun off his balcony in Lahore and then tried to shoot himself. His suffering is so great that he even expresses a wish that he might contract leprosy and die. The vice-consul's mental and emotional instability seem to be an expression of the despair he witnesses all around him in India. While most of the Europeans are capable of ignoring this death and suffering, the vice-consul, like Anne-Marie, is particularly sensitive to it, and is driven to despair and attempted suicide as a result.

The Status of Women

Duras uses the central character of Anne-Marie Stretter in *India Song* as a symbol for exploring the status of women in society. Anne-Marie serves as an object of fantasy for the other characters in the play and for the four voices who narrate her story. Duras specifically constructed *India Song* such that Anne-Marie is never heard to utter a single word throughout the play. She appears as a passive figure, a physical body and an object of obsession for others that has no opportunity to speak for herself. Duras seems to be suggesting that women's status in society is similar to that of Anne-Marie, in that women's voices are often stifled by the dominant forces of a society, and women are often subjected to the fantasies projected on them by others, particularly men. Anne-Marie's decision to commit suicide is the only way she succeeds in taking action or escaping her position in life. Anne-Marie thus sees self-destruction as her only option for protesting her status within her society. Duras suggests that women's status in society renders them almost totally powerless to take positive action toward self-empowerment or to alter the conditions of their lives.

Style

Experimental theater refers to dramatic works, usually written for the stage, that question and expand the definition of the play as a literary form. *India Song* is a work of experimental theatre in which Duras experiments with generally accepted categories of genre, traditional expectations of action and dialogue, and an unusual use of disembodied voices to narrate her play.

India Song was originally published in book form in 1973. Though it bore the English-language title *India Song*, it was written by Duras in French. In the original French text, *India Song* is subtitled "theatre/film/texte," which indicates that the story may be interpreted as simultaneously a stage play, screenplay, and work of prose fiction. Duras thus questions and expands upon generally accepted definitions of, and distinctions between, plays, screenplays, and novels.

One of the most striking experimental elements of *India Song* is the fact that none of the characters who appear on stage are ever seen actually speaking their lines before the audience. Much of the dialogue that is heard during the play is made up of bits and pieces of fragmentary conversation of the guests at the reception, who gossip among themselves about Anne-Marie, her husband, and the various men who are in love with her. When they do appear on stage, the characters mime their actions without ever speaking. Rather, all dialogue and voices that are heard throughout the play come from offstage. In one live performance of *India Song*, for example, all of the dialogue was prerecorded, and then broadcast over a loudspeaker, while the live actors performed their silent roles.

Yet another experimental element of *India Song* is Duras's use of four separate disembodied voices to narrate the story of Anne-Marie Stretter. While these voices are never identified specifically, Duras describes some qualities of the voices and the different manner in which each voice tells the story. These voices recall the story in bits and fragments, as they slowly come to remember various details and facts about it. While stage plays often have a character who serves as narrator to the central events of the play, it is unusual to have narrators who are never actually seen onstage, embodied by an actor.



Historical Context

British Colonial Rule in India

From 1858 to 1948, India was a colony under the rule of the British crown. When it first came under the domain of the United Kingdom, Queen Victoria was in power. The highest government position in India was the viceroy, a post appointed by the British government and always held by white British politicians. Originally, the British capital of India was located in Calcutta. In 1912, the capital was relocated to Delhi.

From the beginning of colonization, many Indian citizens protested against British domination. During the twentieth century, two major political organizations devoted to the struggle for Indian national independence emerged: the Indian National Congress, primarily made up of Indians of Hindu faith, and the All-India Muslim League, primarily made up of Indians of Muslim faith. Though these organizations sometimes formed a coalition, they were often divided because of ongoing tensions between the Hindu and Muslim populations of India. Two of the major Hindu leaders of the Indian nationalist movement were Mahatma Gandhi and Motilal Nehru. Mohammed Ali Jinnah was a major leader of the Muslim League.

National Independence

In the wake of World War II, Great Britain was forced to cede its colonial rule over India. In the Indian Independence Act, passed by the British parliament in 1947, India was partitioned into two sovereign nations. The largest was India, in which the majority of the population was Hindu; and the smaller was Pakistan, in which the majority was Muslim.

The newly formed government of India was established on the British model of parliamentary democracy. The national languages of independent India were designated as Hindi and English, while 14 additional regional languages were also recognized. The first Prime Minister of India was Nehru, who presided from 1947 to 1964. Mahatma Gandhi, though he never served in political office, continued to be a revered and influential advocate of nonviolence, until he was assassinated in 1948.

The new nation of Pakistan included two distinct regions: East Pakistan and West Pakistan. Independent Pakistan established a parliamentary democracy based on the British system, and Jinnah served as the nation's first governor-general. Military coups, the suspension of government, and the imposition of martial law have characterized the history of Pakistan since gaining independence. The Pakistani legal system has increasingly been determined by the tenets of Islamic law.

In 1947, with the establishment of independent India and Pakistan, the region of Bengal was divided. Part went to Pakistan and became East Pakistan, while the part that went to India became the province of West Bengal. In 1971, after a civil war in which India intervened, East Pakistan was granted national independence as the new nation of



Bangladesh ("Bengal land"). The majority of the Bangladesh population was Muslim, and the national language was designated as Bengali. Bangladesh was established as a parliamentary democracy, after the British model. But many military coups and institutions of martial law since independence have hampered the democratic process. In 1988, a national referendum determined that Islam would be the official state religion of Bangladesh.

When the independent nations of Pakistan and India were created in 1947, the northern region of Kashmir, like the Bengal region, was divided between the two countries. The southern and southeastern portion was incorporated into India, becoming the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The northern and western portions of Kashmir became a part of Pakistan. Ever since this time, Kashmir has been a subject of hostile border disputes between India and Pakistan. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, international concern over the escalation of tensions between the two nations increased due to the fact that both India and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons.

Critical Overview

India Song is hailed as an experimental feminist text that simultaneously critiques colonial culture, women's status in society, and representations of the female body. Feminist critics make much of the fact that all of the voices in the play/film are disembodied and that the characters are seen as physical bodies devoid of direct dialogue. This experimental technique is regarded as a critique of traditional representations of women. As Gabrielle H. Cody, in *Impossible Performances* remarks:

Duras's drama consistently features female protagonists who exist in a relationship of struggle with the representational frame and who "speak back" to the viewing authorities of a masculine symbolic.

Critics are also impressed with Duras's complex use of "offstage" sounds in *India Song*. Lib Taylor in "Sound Tracks" observes that

The verbal text is woven into a complex, orchestrated soundscape of instrumental music, songs, non-verbal cries and utterances, screams of pain and wretchedness, sounds of street shouting, and screeches of exotic birds and animals. These elements together become a score functioning alongside the visual text.

India Song is further praised as a critique of British colonial rule in India and of the subjugation of the Indian people by western imperial powers. Taylor notes that Duras intentionally focuses the action of her play on the luxurious settings of colonial white culture, while portraying the world of the Indian people through offstage sounds. Thus, Taylor argues, this dissonance between sound and image "rents the curtain of the visual spectacle of imperial power and disrupts the refined mask of western civilization."

Marie-Paule Ha, in "Duras on the Margins," similarly argues that *India Song* puts forth a critique of colonial society by demonstrating the ways in which the white colonizers try to insulate themselves within the confines of their privileged enclave, while striving to keep the Indian population on the margins of "white India." However, Ha maintains, Duras demonstrates that the disease and suffering of the Indians symbolically infects the Europeans as well. Thus, she asserts:

One of the external signs of the fissuring of the seemingly watertight compartmentalized colonial society is the deep sense of malaise and maladjustment which is wearing out its white inhabitants. In spite of the vast paraphernalia of protective artifices . . . the Europeans find their presence in the colony quite intolerable.

Thirty years after its initial publication, *India Song* continues to be the subject of extensive analysis by critics concerned with issues of postcolonial literature and the representation of women on the dramatic stage. As Cody notes, "Duras is one of the most important figures in the landscape of twentieth century theatre."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1



Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture from the University of Michigan. She works as a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, Brent discusses the relationships between the disembodied narrative voices in Duras's play.

Voice 1 and voice 2 serve as the principal narrators in act 1 of *India Song* and return again briefly in acts 3 and 5. Although neither is identified directly and neither appears bodily on stage, their verbal interactions subtly convey the complex and emotionally charged relationship between them. Voices 1 and 2 are both described as young and female. Both voices, though sweet, are tinged with madness, delirium, and desire. As Duras explains in her notes that precede the play, these voices "are linked together by a love story":

Sometimes they speak of this love, their own. Most of the time they speak of another love, another story. But this other story leads us back to theirs. And vice versa.

Voice 1 and voice 2 each express somewhat different feelings about the story they are telling. Voice 1 is utterly absorbed in the love story of Anne-Marie Stretter while voice 2 is passionately concerned with love for voice 1. Voice 2 expresses fear that voice 1 is so wrapped up in Anne-Marie's story that she is in danger of losing herself in it. Voice 2 is thus afraid of losing the love of voice 1.

In recalling the story of Anne-Marie Stretter, voice 2 remembers the facts more clearly than voice 1. Voice 1 often asks about the details, and when voice 2 fills her in on this information, voice 1's memory is sparked. Thus, voice 1 seems to be responding to Anne-Marie's story more emotionally, while voice 2 expresses a greater degree of emotional distance from the story she tells. On the other hand, voice 2 is very emotionally caught up in her relationship with voice 1, while voice 1 seems emotionally removed from voice 2 and unconcerned with their relationship.

As the play opens, voices 1 and 2 begin to tell the story of Anne-Marie's love affair with Michael Richardson and her act of suicide by walking into the Indian Ocean. When Anne-Marie and Michael appear on stage, voice 1 becomes fascinated with the sight of Anne-Marie. Voice 2 is so concerned with the effect of Anne-Marie's presence on voice 1 that she herself pays no attention to Anne-Marie's figure on the stage. Voice 2 comments, "How pale you are . . . what are you frightened of?" But voice 1 does not respond, as if so absorbed by the sight of Anne-Marie that she does not hear the words of her own lover.

As voice 1 and voice 2 watch Anne-Marie dance with Michael, voice 2 asks voice 1, "Why are you crying?" voice 1 does not answer. Voice 1 is so emotionally involved with Anne-Marie's love story that the sight of her dancing with Michael brings her to tears; yet, voice 1 is so emotionally removed from her own relationship with voice 2 that she does not even respond to the impassioned words of her lover. Voice 2, meanwhile, is



extremely concerned with voice 1's emotional response to the unfolding of Anne-Marie's story.

As the story continues, voice 2 repeatedly expresses her love for voice 1, but voice 1 is unresponsive. Voice 2 declares the depths of her love for voice 1, telling her, "I love you so much I can't see any more, can't hear . . . can't live." But voice 1 does not respond to this declaration. When Anne-Marie appears on the stage dressed in black, voice 2 is moved to express her desire for voice 1 and bursts out, "How lovely you look dressed in white," but voice 1 does not respond to this passionate outburst. Later, voice 2 tells voice 1, "I love you with a desire that is absolute," but voice 1 again does not answer.

In act 3, voices 3 and 4 pick up the threads of the story, while voices 1 and 2 are again heard to continue their discussion of the story. However, voices 1 and 2 never interact in any way with voices 3 and 4. Each pair is having completely separate conversations about the same subject.

Voices 1 and 2 describe the voice-consul aimlessly wandering the streets of Calcutta, suffering over his rejection by Anne-Marie. Voice 2 draws a parallel between the situation of the voice-consul, who has lost Anne-Marie's love, and the situation of voice 2 feeling that she has lost the love of voice 1. "How far away you are . . . from me," voice 2 laments. Later, voice 2 mournfully comments to voice 1, "How far away you are. Quite absent."

As voice 1 is increasingly caught up in Anne-Marie's story and ignores voice 2's attempts to bring the conversation around to their own love, voice 2 becomes increasingly frightened that she is losing voice 1. Toward the end of act 3, voice 2 says to voice 1, "The sound of your heart frightens me. . . . Your heart, so young, a child's." When voice 1 does not answer, voice 2 calls out, "Where are you?" but again receives no response.

The relationship between voice 1 and voice 2 is a tragic love story, in which voice 2 loses voice 1 to the madness of Anne-Marie's story. In act 5, shortly before Anne-Marie's suicide, their story is heard for the last time. Voice 2, terrified, calls out to voice 1, "Where are you? . . . You're so far away . . . I'm frightened." But voice 1 is never heard again.

Voice 3 and voice 4, first heard in act 3, are both male. In contrast to the emotionally intense love relationship between voices 1 and 2, voices 3 and 4 have no emotional connection to one another, except that they share a fascination with Anne-Marie's story. While voice 3 remembers almost nothing of Anne-Marie's tragic love story, voice 4 remembers almost everything in detail.

Voices 3 and 4 express themes of memory and suffering in relation to the story of Anne-Marie Stretter. Voice 3 used to know the story very well but has chosen to forget it, while voice 4 has chosen to remember it. Voice 3 finds Anne-Marie's story to be one of such great suffering that it is intolerable to remember, and thus has rejected the fascination the story holds. Voice 4, on the other hand, tolerates the fascination of the story, and

manages to tolerate the suffering it evokes. Thus, while voice 3 is keenly sensitive to this suffering, voice 4 remains emotionally distant from it in order to avoid the experience of suffering. Through the characters of voices 3 and 4, Duras explores the relationship between how we remember the past and how we tolerate the suffering of others.

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on *India Song*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

India Song was adapted to film and directed by Duras. It premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 1975. Voice 4 in the film, which is indicated in the script as male, is narrated by Duras.

Topics for Further Study

India Song presents the experiences of women in colonial India. Research and write about the status of women in India today. What laws and customs exist with regard to marriage, education, work, and political participation of women in modern Indian culture? How have these practices changed in India since the 1930s? How have these changes improved the life of women in India, if at all?

Among Duras's fellow contemporary French feminist playwrights are Helen Cixous, Monique Wittig, and Nathalie Sarraute. Research and write about one of these writers. What are some of the major works of this author? What elements of this author's work make her a feminist writer? What attitudes, opinions, or critiques does this author's work present, regarding the status of women in society and the representation of women on the theatrical stage? If possible, try to see a performance of one of the author's plays or read reviews of a past performance. Write a review that critiques how well the performance expressed feminist views.

The characters in *India Song* frequently mention their fear of contracting leprosy. Research and write about leprosy as it persists today in modern society. What causes leprosy and what are its major symptoms? What cures are available for the disease? How prevalent is it, and in what parts of the world is it most prevalent? What efforts are being made to prevent and treat this disease? If possible, interview a doctor, nurse, or medical professional to explain the history and nature of this disease.

If it is available to you, watch the 1975 motion picture adaptation of *India Song*, directed by Duras. In what ways does the visual medium of cinema enhance your understanding and appreciation of the story and characters? What changes were made to adapt the play to the screen? What parts of the story do you feel suffered or were enhanced in the film version?



Compare and Contrast

1930s: India is a colonial holding of the British Empire. Indian nationalist movements for independence have been gaining momentum since the nineteenth century.

1970s: The former British colony of India now comprises the sovereign nations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, which are set up as parliamentary democracies after the British model.

Today: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh remain independent nations.

1930s: Tensions between the Indian National Assembly, a primarily Hindu organization, and the All-Indian Muslim League, an Islamic organization, divide the movement for Indian national liberation. Kashmir is a region within British-controlled India.

1970s: Independent India and Pakistan engage in an ongoing dispute over the border region of Kashmir. After the India-Pakistan war of 1971, Pakistan and India sign a peace accord resolving to settle the dispute peacefully. However, beginning in 1979, Kashmir again becomes a major source of tension between the two nations.

Today: Escalating tensions between India and Pakistan over the disputed territory of Kashmir raise international fears of nuclear war between the two nations, both of which now possess nuclear weapons.

1930s: The French government is in the era of the Third Republic, under the Constitution of 1876. France is a parliamentary democracy with voting rights extended to all adult males. Women in France do not have the right to vote.

1970s: The French government is in the era of the Fifth Republic, a parliamentary democracy under the Constitution of 1956. Voting rights are extended to all adult men and women.

Today: The French government remains in the era of the Fifth Republic, a constitutional democracy with universal suffrage.



What Do I Read Next?

Duras' screenplay *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959) was based on the novel by Alain Resnais and made into a film directed by Resnais. The story is set in Tokyo during World War II and concerns the love affair between a French actress and a Japanese architect.

India Song is loosely based on Duras's novel *Le Vice-consul* (*The vice-consul*), published in 1966. The novel is focused on the stories of two central characters: a French vice-consul stationed in Calcutta and a teenaged Asian girl who is abandoned by her mother after she becomes pregnant.

Duras's most popular novel, *L'Amant* (*The Lover*), published in 1984, is the autobiographical story of a relationship between an impoverished fifteen-year-old French girl and her wealthy middle-aged Chinese lover.

Collected Plays (1980), by Nathalie Sarraute (a Russian-born, French feminist playwright contemporary of Duras), includes *It Is There*, *It's Beautiful*, *Issum*, *The Lie*, and *Silence*. Sarraute was also a popular novelist who introduced new ways of writing about social behavior in her work.

A play by Monique Wittig (another French feminist playwright contemporary of Duras), entitled *Le Voyage sans fin* (*The Constant Voyage*), published in 1985, is a feminist satire based on the Don Quixote stories of Miguel de Cervantes.

Selected Plays by Hélène Cixous (2004), edited by Eric Prenowitz, is a collection of dramatic writings by another French feminist playwright contemporary of Duras. This volume includes the plays *Portrait of Dora*, *Black Sail White Sail*, *The Perjured City*, and *Drums on the Dam*, as well as an interview with Cixous.

Marguerite Duras: A Life (2000), by Laure Adler, is a critical biography of Duras.

Further Study

Bhatia, Nandi, *Acts of Authority, Acts of Resistance: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, University of Michigan Press, 2004.

Bhatia provides a critical analysis of theater and drama in nineteenth- and twentieth-century India, examined in cultural, political, and historical context.

Cody, Gabrielle H., *Impossible Performances: Duras as Dramatist*, Peter Lang, 2000.

Cody offers a critical analysis of Duras's major dramatic works.

Dwyer, Rachel, *All You Want Is Money, All You Need Is Love: Sexuality and Romance in Modern India*, Cassell, 2000.

Dwyer provides a critical analysis of the representation of love, sex, and romance in twentieth-century Indian fiction.

Kerkhoff, Kathinka Renata, *Save Ourselves and the Girls!: Girlhood in Calcutta under the Raj*, Extravert, 1995.

Kerkhoff offers a critical historical account of the social conditions of girls in Calcutta, India, during the period of British colonial occupation.

Markovitz, Claude, ed., *A History of Modern India, 1480—1950*, Anthem, 2002.

Markovitz provides an overview of the history of India from the beginning of European conquest in the fifteenth century to the achievement of national independence in the post—World War II era.

Metcalf, Thomas R., ed., *Modern India: An Interpretive Anthology*, Sterling, 1990.

Metcalf provides a collection of essays by various authors on the history of India during the era of British occupation.

Nevile, Pran, ed., *Love Stories from the Raj*, Penguin, 1995.

Nevile offers a collection of romantic short fiction published and set during the period of British colonial rule in India.

Pati, Bisamoy, and Mark Harrison, eds., *Health, Medicine, and Empire: Perspectives on Colonial India*, Orient Longman, 2001.

Pati and Harrison offer a collection of essays by various authors providing critical historical analysis of health and medical care in India during the era of British colonial rule.

Read, Anthony, and David Fisher, *The Proudest Day: India's Long Road to Independence*, W. W. Norton, 1998.

Read and Fisher provide a historical account of the Indian nationalist movement and struggle for national independence during the period of British colonial rule.



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Taylor, Lib, "Sound Tracks: The Soundscapes of *India Song*," in *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Autumn 1998, p. 205.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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