

LITERATURE AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES : AN AFRICANIST VIEW

*Ataféï PEWISSI,
Université de Lomé
Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines
Département d'Anglais
Lomé -Togo*

RÉSUMÉ

Les théories littéraires constituent des formes de préoccupations qui déterminent les perceptions politiques ou idéologiques dans l'approche critique d'une oeuvre littéraire. Ces perceptions émanent de groupes d'intérêts opérant dans un système de relations conflictuelles.

L'objectif de la présente étude est de mettre en relief certains des dangers qu'entraînent les luttes théoriques et idéologiques et de proposer une relation inter- théorique capable de combattre la paranoïa.

Mots clés : Littérature, théories, conspiration, éthique, politique.

ABSTRACT

Literary theories are new forms of concern that sustain the study of a literary work. These forms back up the ideological and political assumptions, and their interpretations in a relation that appears to be a battle for interests.

The purpose of this study is to highlight the dangers of the on-going theoretical and ideological battles in literature and suggest a new theoretical interaction that questions the paranoiac culture.

Key words : Literature, theories, conspiracy, ethics, politics.

INTRODUCTION

Literary conspiracy is about the nature and the functions of the ideological constructs in a text. My reading of the current literary theories makes me believe that critical stands originate from theories that affect the readers that we are. In their varieties, literary theories appear as sources of division among the intellectuals who always trace their intellectual stands to identifiable theories. Every constructed meaning can be traced to a theoretical assumption as propaganda or a negation of the theory against which the present criticism is

formulated. John Lye elaborates more on the conflicting interplay between theories when he says:

...each theoretical perspective tends to find fault with the one before — apparently a normal evolutionary pattern, an orderly changing of the paradigm guard, the child rebelling against the parent as a way ... of proclaiming its identity.¹

In the light of the foregoing observation, conspiracy is less concerned with the way meaning is created than it is with a socialization of the readers. This preoccupation

explains why theories are labelled political agendas because whether literary meaning results from the author's intention, is contained in the text or is created by the reader², it is obvious to me that it is grounded within a theory that always associates an ideological bond with a cultural community. Seen from this perspective, literary interpretation is always held within both theoretical and ideological frames with the knowledge that each culture has its pre-structured logic. This awareness is the key reason why one cannot pretend to read literature without an accepted theory that underlies his/her every created assumption into proposing a social order from the writer's creative world.

As one reads literature and relates it to the world happenings, one becomes aware of the fact that political options (whether conservative, or democratic or even liberal) are held in abstraction in the writers' works. To a further extent, this not only implies that writers implements are associated with theories that identify themselves with political, religious and social plans but also points to the fact that theories that underlie the writings and the art of reading do not have to always agree. In this connection, and according to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, to conspire derives from the Latin *conspirare*, which means «to plot», «to act in harmony toward a common end»³ be it good or ill-intentioned. In other words, there are coalitions for reading and writing that aim to preserve their group identities and make other identities and coalitions invisible.

The purpose of this study is to show how theories conspire against one another and how these theories shape political as well as ideological powers that impinge on the society. The scope of the work is the conditions and time of the conspiracy, the pathology of the conspiracy and a new ethics that could aim to improve the quality of the theoretical interactions and enhance a useful interpretation of both the theoretical and the cultural differences notable in the African context.

(Footnotes)

¹ John Lye, «Contemporary Literary Theory» in http://www.broeku.ca/english/courses/2P70/contemporary_literary_theory.html.

² These approaches to the creation of the literary meaning are a sum total of how critics believe criticism is conducted in literature.

³ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspire>

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1. Literary Conspiracy: Time and Conditions

According to Encyclopaedia *Britannica*, «Conspiracy, in Anglo-American law, is usually described as an agreement between two or more persons to commit an unlawful act or to accomplish a lawful end by unlawful means »¹. This approach to the concept looks at conspiracy theories as forces of social, ethical, political or cultural discourses that characterize groups of people or institutions. These people or institutions join forces in order to generate power and exercise control over other theories by using secret methods. Universities, as the cradle for knowledge, become places of conflict as they set up conditions whereby conspiracy is made visible through the recommendation of particular books, and the identified ideologies that need promoting. The decision may aim to be in line with the policy of the ruling or the potential ruling authorities. Conspiracy may appear punctually as a need to solve a problem that arises. When the Ghanaian writer Annor Nimako wrote his novel *Mutilated* which, in the local context, met a certain acclaimed social need, an accepted political programme, the author got the 2003 Award from the Ghana Library Board, because it fitted into the globally sustained campaign against sexual mutilation in Ghana. The book centers on Barbara Aseke, a school girl who, as a result of a brutal circumcision, dies from hemorrhage. This educational approach to the contemporary Ghanaian society meets the Government's preoccupations to put an end to female circumcision in contemporary northern Ghana.

To me, the award is meant to celebrate an insight into a political agenda, a social manifesto. With this coincidence in concerns between the writer and the government, one is tempted to believe that political authorities occasionally confide to both writers and readers, who are not innocent of theoretical influence, for the achievement of political and organizational programmes by having curricula modified to meet the expressed needs. Terry Eagleton substantiates this view, in his attempt to relate theories to politics, when he observes: «certain theoretical concepts are ...from time to time put to the uses of political power...»²

Given the fact that theories influence both readers and writers, it is obvious that literary studies force political issues and affect the decision making processes. A literary critic, in his/her capacity as a creator of literary meaning, acts as a propagandist or a censor in relation to a literary work, and in the process, provides us with, I think, two different approaches to conspiracy. With the first approach, the conspiracy theories press

themselves on the theories or literary approaches they are meant to fight, equipping their sympathetic readers/critics with tools to be used to create meanings in their approving fashion. The second approach seeks to point to every weakness of the already existing codes of reading. As a matter of fact, no theory accepts to be referred to as a conspiring theory because most of the existing theories pretend to be on the defensive guards. Yet, it is obvious to me that they are the matrix of literary thoughts and provocative tools because of their way of questioning what is already accepted. It is in this vein that Robert J. C. Young sees literary theories as the «competing theoretico-political positions»³. Young identifies each theory with a political position, with the term *political* associated with a way of planning the functioning of the society. With the assumption that culture and tradition are the axes around which development operates, there is every indication that the relations between the conspirators and their opponents are sustained by forces, in the traditions, that shape their different minds. Out here in society, and as a result of the reading impact on them, parents and teachers are ideologically conditioned and therefore determine the ideological frames and the political orientations of the people under their control.

Literature in this vision is politics. ... Culturally, it enhances culture in the way it takes into account the prevailing social relations. Socially, it reviews people's behavior. Politically, it denounces the excesses and points to the actual needs in the ruling of a people.⁴

Theories shape preferences that are the foundations for the political and ideological effects accountable to them. This cultural and social conditioning gives insight into how theories contribute to the socialization of the human being. In connection with social happenings, theories are angles of visions for any society faced with constant crises. In this respect, it appears that theories do not conspire in a vacuum. Considering the different waves such as cultural, spiritual, economic, political and social crises that force the literary imagination, theories associate with political principles from which readers as well as writers tend to bring their reading to highlight the needed social changes.

Within the context of change, theories are marked politics. Literary theories anchor imperious values, gender perspectives, class distinctions, and other crises sustained by rhetorical devices through which the representational power is released. Again, there are

always hidden and identifiable reasons why a theory may conspire against another. Conspiracy appears to increase the chance of survival to the conspirators and the latter's influence on people. It breeds sympathizers among the readers who always enhance the emergence of new ideas and precepts.

In the African literary context, colonialism, post-colonialism, dictatorships and the consequences of these phenomena have given rise to the use of such theories as Marxism, Socio-Criticism, and many more whose aim is to offer ethical as well as organizational alternatives in terms of ideological reforms. Just like political and social theories, literary theories flourish at the times of crises since it is the right moment to record and experiment better strategies to tackle the rising problems. Poverty, tribalism, ethnic bond, and spirituality, are among other things, the sources of inspiration, and the cause of the many conspiracy writings.

Literary theories emerge as a result of their founders' failure to find other theories capable of taking into account their concerns. Promoters of these theories sometimes feel obligated, in one way or the other, to engage in this rational battle, the aim of which is to correct misunderstandings and reshape both the minds and the actions of the readers to see the world move in their desired direction. The ideology in this perspective is educational even though it sometimes turns to be oppressive with the ideological dictatorship implemented by theorists who tailor their imagination to fit their ideological dictates.

What makes conspiracy an object of study worth undertaking is the identification of the oppressive forces that stem from the claims inherent in the literary theories. Conspiracy stems from culture, race, tradition and stylistic devices. Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* illustrates what I posit here. In that novel, Cary uses Christian religion as a conspiring force against the African setting when he writes: «You don't know how happy it is for women to stop being girls and to be civilized wives with loving Christian husbands who never beat them and are their kind friends – just as good as brothers»⁵. Through the depicted Christian Religion, Cary substantiates the belief that religion is an ideological force. To Cary's mind, only Christian husbands «never beat their wives». So, Mr. Johnson is the worthy suitor for Bamu, regarding his Christian status. It seems obvious to Cary that an African woman in this context expects nothing greater than to have a Christian husband as her partner.

Ideological writing is suggested in Cary's attempt to prove to his readers that in reading his *African* novels, things need to be seen through Christian and British eyes.

As a critic, Philip M. Allen is also known for his conspiracy reading of African literature to suggest its worthlessness. One key example is found with him when in *Pan-African Journal* (Fall 1971), he discussed Yambo Ouologuem: «The achievement of Ouologuem's ... over-praised novel has more to do with whose ideological team he's playing on than with the *forcing of moral universality on African civilization*»⁶. The issue at stake here is the denial of the morality to Africans whom he sees forcing moral universality on their civilization.

Whenever one is taken into this imaginary world, one can never put a clear cut distinction between an ideology and a theory on which Cary and Allen's writings stand. The two concepts are interwoven. Chinua Achebe refers to this kind of writing and interpretation in a larger context as «colonial criticism». Literature, as a whole, seems to be associated with an ideology when seen against the background of how the European myth of superiority forces classification of races and cultures even in the creative world. In this connection, Atafēi Pèwissi observes: «In the fictional country of Fada, situated in a fictional Nigeria, the basic ideology developed is that of the inferiority of the Blacks and the superiority of the Whites.»⁷

In this context created by both Joyce Cary and Philip M. Allen, the new moral impinges on the reader as a ghost that persuades him/her to accept the moral order of the narrative and, in the process, to associate every action in the creative world with an eternal decree of God. Their literary theory is shaped by a culture of extermination in anonymity, manipulating every reader to accept their philosophical approaches to the African and, through this articulation, to bring to maturity and to justification the beast that lies in the racist. This kind of discrimination is doubtlessly a way of conspiring, a social pathology.

2. Pathology of Conspiracy Theories

In their varieties, literary theories overlap, contrast and sometimes cohere in the various ways they want to sustain their ideologies. Whether they are desired or incidental, these motivations need identification and location as to how they take control of people's minds and determine their social actions. In the case of African literature, pathological reading is about a «certain specious criticism which flourishes in African literature today and which derives from the same basic attitude and assumption as colonialism itself and so merits the name *colonialism*.»¹ Conspiracy is a disdain, an expression of hostility to some ideas or organized systems on the basis of prejudice. In this regard, colonialist criticism is pathological to the African ideologies and cultural values because no nobility is given to whatever is representative of the black continent.

Conspiracy is based on the societal values that sometimes appear as packaged ideologies within the frames of the society's educational system. Conspiracy is, to some extent, developed and sustained by institutions that can impose their views of the society on the communities of readers and writers. It is pathological, when seen against the fact that culture, politics, and traditions inspire conspiracy in the process of protecting peculiarities, i.e., class, race, culture, and identity with the paranoiac culture.

The identification of conspiracy policy and its pathological policy in the society are not easy. Yet, one is brought to wonder what specific traditions and conditions help generate the conspiracy theory and allow

(Footnotes)

¹ Chinua Achebe. « Colonial Criticism » (pp. 3-18) Chinua Achebe. *Morning Yet on Creation Day* Ibadan : Heinemann, 1975. p.3.

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¹ William Benton ed., *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. 6 (London: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Ltd., 1964), p. 378.

² Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.5.

³ Robert J. C. Young, *Torn Halves Political and Cultural Theory* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 88

⁴ Atafēi Pèwissi, «The Problematics of the Hero and the Notion of Space and Time in Chinua Achebe's Novels».

Thèse pour le Doctorat Unique (N/R). Option : Littérature de l'Afrique Anglophone. Soutenue à Lomé en décembre 2003 sous la direction du Professeur Komla MessanNubukpo, p.362.

⁵ Cary, *Mister Johnson* (London: Longmans, Greens and Co Ltd 1968), p. 43. "Quoted by Chinua Achebe in « Colonial Criticism » (pp.3-18) Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* Ibadan : Heinemann, 1975.

⁷ Atafēi Pèwissi, *The Problematics of the Hero and the Notion of Space and Time in Chinua Achebe's Novels* thèse pour le Doctorat Unique (N/R). Option : Littérature de l'Afrique Anglophone. Soutenue à Lomé en décembre 2003 sous la Direction du Professeur Komla Messan Nubukpo, p. 319.

it to spread into becoming a factor in political and cultural life. It is obvious that a mythical interpretation of the narratives, the projection of the crude myths without any adaptation to the present needs and the culture of selfness are the leading forces to this social pathology. The conspiracy theory functions and develops meanings in the cause-effect mode of reading with a logic that aims to demolish other people's entities and values.

Here again, there is a reason for conspiring theories in literature, some of them put in a crude manner, other in a skilfully-articulated aesthetic and value position. «The aesthetic in this sense is», as Terry Eagleton puts it, «the relay or transmission mechanism by which theory is converted to practice, the detour taken by ethical ideology through the feelings and senses so as to reappear as spontaneous social practice»¹. In this respect, there is every reason to believe that literary awards and literary prizes develop a conspiracy culture. Prizes idealize private political and ideological constructs to serve the ideologies and the political programmes of the funding/founding institution. Literary prizes and awards are the illustrations of the satisfaction of the rewarding or funding institutions with the book earning rewards. A book is worth earning a prize only when communities of readers with identified tastes give their assent, which is the root cause of the ideological manipulation. Literary tastes or aesthetics are conventional and determine the reading conspiracy. As conditions for literary awards and prizes are set based on tastes and identifiable aesthetics, they give rise to individual ideological interpretations especially when conditions offer occasions for personal and biased imprint on the issue. This, again, is pathological because it suppresses other options out of prejudice. As a matter of fact, Alfred Nobel, the Swedish industrialist and founder of the prize that carries his name failed to give clear instructions as to how he wanted the **Nobel Prize** awarded. What he said about the prize is that it should go to those who «shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind» and «who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction»². A problem arises here as to how individuals can avoid building up their own ideologies along with the prize giving. The reading committees with their personal tastes have to determine what is of «the greatest benefit on mankind» in literature and what social direction is «ideal» from the work. This vague statement gives rise to hungry tastes and coalitions in close connection with the prize. As a result, the ideologists prove their various tastes «outstanding» and «ideal» for

a good social orientation, and in the process, see the prize as an evidence for their worldwide support. The point needs raising, here, because the prize unfortunately sharpens in readers the belief that a literary book that is prized by an institution deserves every person's respect and the overwhelming acceptance of the ideologies highlighted in the book. This seems to me pathological as it may act as a source of conspiracy to a community, a culture, a race, and even a people. I agree with Marie-Noëlle Gary-Prieur that one needs to learn something about theories that a critic and a researcher use to give authority to their messages but one should not feel bound to become pushed by them into accepting whatsoever³. The danger, with loyalty to theories without a reasoned argument cemented by a collective concern, results from the fact that literature appears as an ideal medium through which world institutions seek to implement their cultural, racial and political dictatorships, most often against the real needs of the people. They stimulate writers in their policy lines with the prizes and other incentive measures. Theories associated with this battle conspire against other theories for the fulfillment of their objectives.

At the metaphorical level, conspiracy theories function on the basis of the negation of the other, thereby developing the disease *models* of social injustice. This context, if maintained, develops and sustains hard conspiracy culture in literature reaching out to the political battles that are unfortunately associated with violence in real life situations. Plots and plotting are no more a mere theory of sequencing the events but political acts as these indicate social options, organisations and structures on which individual approaches to true life are constructed.

It is my contention that plots and plotting are, among other things, the seductive literary tactics that aim to persuade the reader of the ideologies sustaining the theoretical corruption within the structures of the conspiracy culture. Readers are manipulated through plots and plotting into forgetting the ideological commitment of the writing. However, in close connection with African literature, the emphasis on the themes of identities is not meant to destroy the relations to otherness. Cultures are known from how they objectively differ. In our case, with the awareness of the imperialist policy of Africa's cultural extermination, our culture survives because of the mention some African writers make of it in their works. Tragedy results from the awareness that some western conspiracy theories proscribed ways of reading African literature, and the values worth rewarding in it. As can be seen, African

literature is taken as a good field for the development of western designed projects on Africa's destiny. Here, conspiracy appears as a policy that seeks to put literariness in the service of the conspirators' religious, political, historical, ethnic and ethical interests. Conspiracy builds up conflicting ideological bonds in various spheres in the way a writer articulates the cultural, social and the political issues in fiction. It is the duty of ethical criticism to point out what is amiss in the depicted human relations.

3. Ethics: A Literary Approach to Conspiracy Theories

In the world of conspiracy, ethics appears as an ideal approach to the increasing coalitions that aim at the destruction of the other. Inner orders need to be restored by adapting one's tastes to the wishes of the community created and sustained by collective interest. As theories are often associated with political claims, it is essential to fight the perpetual paranoia that characterizes literary theories today. «Paranoia» is according to *Longman Dictionary of English Language* «a tendency towards excessive or irrational suspiciousness and distrustfulness of others.»⁴

If a literary theory should be a source of power to go by, even the claim of the theories that pretend to fight on behalf of the minority should do it with the knowledge that to be a victim does not always mean to be a saint. Style and true commitment to social welfare should transcend the culture of revenge that seems to permeate many critics' works. I strongly believe, like this critic quoted by Eagleton, that «Manners are what vex and soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarise or refine us They add morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them».⁵ If this approach to literature is internalized, the struggle on behalf of the minority will happily take reconciliatory options that heal both the victim and the culprit, at least, on the moral ground. I think it erroneous to minimize the importance of the ethical approach to literature at this juncture of the increased social, political and cultural crises. It is reasonable to venture into ethical criticism because ethics is about a person's relationships to others; it stands in opposition to paranoiac undertaking of which theories and the culture of particularism stand as illustrations. It is worth noting that the ethical criticism that I undertake to discuss here is not a course of moral prescriptions because I believe that literature is not about pure description. This study is an approach that weighs chances that individuals have to rebuild their society from the potentialities within. It seems impossible to

me to achieve any ethical or sociological change whatsoever without acting on the society and I think ethical criticism is a way to this literary project. Literature stands as a better medium that acts on the society through its readers. The study of conspiracy appears here as a way of plotting against ideological forces that develop division and other discriminatory policies for the satisfaction of the conspirators who constitute the minority against the overwhelming majority of the people. So, ethics is here a way of suggesting a new order on the basis of what can set individuals free from prejudice and ideological classifications of values regardless of their true contribution to the society. In this regard, morality should not simply be seen through the behaviour of the characters but also through the way the writer handles the language and manipulates incidents, characters and language to control the readers' feelings. My opinion is that the violence that a reader decodes through a text possibly results from the writer's violence on the words and the word-order. It is generally agreed that words are innocent until they are given a context, a role, an order and an orientation. The way the language is handled shapes the mood, clarifies the assumptions and the preoccupations of the characters that are empowered by the writer to play their different roles. If the belief is that the mood is communicated through words and their interplay in contexts, then the role of theories is to provide readers with tools that can condition their understanding and interpretations of texts with our identification of what our society needs to solve its various crises. Theories are created within a mythical canon, time and space to generate «humour, interest, and pleasure»⁶ in the reader. It is from this background information that, I think, a writer chooses to highlight the aspect that appeals to his/her imagination in order to make the reader an activist and a creator of the social antidotes. From the very lot of symbols and imageries that a reader encounters in the act of reading, he or she orients his/her potential readers to what seems worth taking from the book. In this vein, literature remains an ideal space for the ethical encounters so far as it makes it possible for the individual readers to exchange their world perceptions with the characters' and their identifiable personalities. Ethics is an attempt to develop peace culture in individuals in order to create values that perpetuate freedom, justice and peace through reading, writing and personal commitment. I agree with Diéncba Doumbi for whom peace culture presupposes the development of values that are in close connection with freedom, justice, democracy, diversity, understanding,

dialogue, respect of Human Rights, non-violence, Right to life, environmental protection, and sustained development⁷ because these values enhance the quality of life even in fiction.

With the identification of these values the task should be to venture into how the different literary theories and institutions contribute to peace and its cultivation as the foundation of political and social welfare. This is attainable if theories in their varieties could give up their paranoiac culture that continues laying new obstacles to the process that might make a person a moral being, but not a being that sporadically performs isolated acts of morals. It is essential, even in the imaginative world, « to cease legislating for all lives what is liveable only for some, and simply, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unliveable for some»⁸. To me, this approach is essential, if life is to make sense to each and every person, and not to the isolated selves. With this ethical culture one may see the emergence of the trans-cultural theories the aim of which should be to elaborate on values that bring people together with a more humanizing philosophy. The attempt brings to light every discriminatory use of the imagination, some ideologically-blind approaches to life regardless of its impact on the society as a whole. Theorists' role should rather be to enable readers/critics, outside conspiracy, to confront «all of what we are and might become, understanding what is required if we wish to live fully human»⁹ despite all that holds our imagination captive and makes our lives miserable.

CONCLUSION

This study on conspiracy theories has tried to trace the conditions, and time of the manipulations in the art of writing and reading literature. Conspiracy culture results from the reading committees and the funding institutions that shape tastes and interests in the writers who thirst for fame and financial support. Besides, poverty appears as a conspiring force in the poor in so far as it allows neither the reader nor the writer to be him/herself. If we should take the case of the Third World Literatures, in general, and African literature, in particular, the tastes and aspirations of both the writers and the readers change to accord with the funding institutions. In this work, attempt is also made to show how theorists develop and implement their hidden ideologies by making readers aware of the situations in which writers and readers must construct identity. And they establish a connection with community, gender, race, sex-based education, and social

organization as theorists themselves would like them to be. Theoretical manipulations are the strategies used to develop conspiracy in literature.

There is every indication that theorists need to revisit both their political and private agendas, even at the theoretical levels, for the betterment of individuals' relations to each other.

(Footnotes)

¹ Terry Eagleton. *The Ideology of the Aesthetics*, p. 40.

² <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/10/02/print/main576176.shtml>

³ Marie-Noëlle GARY-PRÉEUR. *De la grammaire à la linguistique : l'étude de la phrase* (Paris 5^{ème} : Armand Colin, 1985) p.6 (a paraphrase).

⁴ *Longman Dictionary of English Language*. Longman, 1984, p.1065.

⁵ Quoted in Terry Eagleton. *The Ideology of the Aesthetics*, op. cit. p. 42.

⁶ James M. Banner, Jr., and Harold C. Cannon. *The Elements of Learning*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999.

⁷ Diènéba Doumbia. « Education scolaire à la culture de la paix : valeurs et types d'éducation » in *Revue du CAMES, Nouvelle Série B*, vol. 007 n°1-2006 (1^{er} semestre) (pp.221-231).

⁸ Judith Buthler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London, 2004), p.8.

⁹ Introduction (pp.xi-xvi) by Bernestine Singley. *When Race Becomes Real, Black and White Writers Confront Their Personal Histories*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2002), p. xvi.

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