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**The Role of Literary Theory in Teaching and Learning of  
French Literature in Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

Literary theory is the apex of literary studies. We have various theoretical subdivisions of the literary theory that facilitate the teaching and learning of literature. For example, the university theory, socialism, modernism, feminism, existentialism, naturalism, romanticism, feminism, absurdity, etc. It is a truism that we have different types of literature in the world. For example, African literature, French literature, Caribbean literature, Igala literature, Tiv literature and Yoruba literature, etc. These are products of the society. It is pertinent to note that the primordial role and the specific value of literary pedagogy is to project the society. It is indeed, by this specific value that we look at literature as the mirror of the society. French literature is also a perfect illustration of this reality. Unfortunately, the pedagogy of French literature, be it in colleges of education, be it in universities doesn't captivate the interest of most students. This has provoked the researcher to re-examine the place and efficiency of literary theory in the in-depth study of French literature. This will give us another intellectual opportunity to look at some of the academic problems associated with the domain. For example, the methodological problems, the problem of materials and that of the socio-milieu. It is in view of this that the paper calls for possible solutions that will render the literary pedagogy in this domain more motivating and efficient.

### Introduction

Literature as an indispensable instrument of the society can only be fully understood within the intellectual framework of the literary theory. The preoccupation of literary theory encompasses literary techniques, rules, philosophical theories and approaches to the study of literary works. The study of French literature as a crucial aspect of language, sociology and philosophy in the society can be built on the existing knowledge of French literary theories. These are principally literary approaches that make learning very interesting and the works very comprehensive. It is in view of this that the paper centres on the challenges of studying French literature in an Anglophone country like Nigeria, the best literary approaches to the effective teaching and learning of French literature in Nigeria.

#### Contextual Clarification of Some Basic Terminologies

**Theory:** A theory is a set of well organised and stipulated philosophical approaches, principles and rules which are universally accepted for the purpose of knowledge acquisition and application. It is a stepping and shaping force. According to Keith Booker, a theory is a perception for knowledge.

A theory is no passing fad –at least no more no so than that the new criticism that preceded it or the traditional methods that preceded the new criticism. Indeed, the traditional methods and the new criticism were themselves theories and it is not inaccurate to suggest that, a theory is really a synonym for any perceptive, educated approach to literature (5).

It is imperative to say that a theory is not just significant in the study of literature. It goes beyond the boundaries of just literary appreciation and understanding but using literature to understand global issues.

**Literary theory:** Literary theory is the embodiment of literary approaches, criticisms, principles and rules that lead to accurate study and better understanding of literature. The in-depth understanding of literary works is efficient and significant in building self-consciousness. It is indeed by this resounding factor that literary writers and philosophers are confident to project the society. They x-ray the societal values and appreciate the intended socio-political and economic values. Literary writers on the other hand renounce and criticise the increase of social vices on daily basis. In the view of M. Keith, literary theories are expository instruments of ethical values of the society, “we might compare the use of external information to aid in the interpretation of a literary text to the activities of a scientist who interprets a particular natural phenomenon by putting to use her overall knowledge of the workings of nature” (4). The application of the overall knowledge implies the use of approaches, techniques,

principles and rules to understand man and his society. Tartule Tijah has a comprehensive view of literary theory:

Il s'agit là d'un outil appliqué à l'étude d'une œuvre littéraire. Dans leur ensemble, ces méthodes ou ces approches littéraires sont influencées par d'autres domaines de la connaissance telles que la philosophie, la religion, ces sciences (naturelles et sociale) la médecine, la sociologie la psychanalyse (Adebayo, 47) (80).

This implies that,

It is therefore an applied instrument to the study of literary works. These methods or literary approaches are entirely influenced by other fields of study such as: philosophy religion, sciences (natural and social), medicine, sociology, psychoanalysis (Adebayo, 47) (80).

We can finally say that literary theory encompasses the integration of theories, approaches and techniques that are applied in the exploration of literary works.

### **Overview of the Study of French Literature**

The study of French literature and its in-depth understanding can be traced from the literary epochs in France. The principal epochs of the French literary movements are the classic, modern and contemporary epochs. The epochs encompass centuries. The centuries are characterised by strong socio-political events which metamorphose into literary movements like: classicism, romanticism, realism, naturalism, existentialism and absurd, etc. The socio-historical and political events of each period influence the ideas of French philosophers and literary writers. It is pertinent to know that these socio-historical and political events of war, love, storms, revolution, religion, power etc. greatly influence the thematic preoccupations of the French literary works. The in-depth knowledge of the classic, modern and contemporary French literature will be instrumental to the quick understanding of the French literature.

### **Classic French Literature**

The classic French literature is the 17<sup>th</sup> century French literature. It expands from the antiquity and medieval periods. The literature of this era reached its apogee during the reign of Louis XIV. The literary works of this period are associated with the aristocratic codes –values of nobility such as power, prestige and luxury. The literature is very rigid. The rigidity implies that the writer's fate in the volume of work, time and plot is being determined by strong external forces and dictates from the King-Louis XIV. It is evident therefore that the acceptability of the work is based on its reasonability and strong adherent to the three unities, 'vraisemblance' and 'bienseance',

The literature of this period is often equated with the classicism by Louis XIV's long reign, during which France led Europe in political and cultural development, its authors expounded the classical ideas of order, clarity proportion and good taste (<http://...>)

It is equally essential to know that literature of this period cuts across the three genres of literature: prose, theatre and poetry.

- a. **The classic novel:** The classic novel has a central problem. The intrigue is developed in line with the problem with a view of proffering a solution. In order to develop the intrigue fully the novelist avoids proliferation of action. The narrative fictions that are termed the sentimental novels formed the basis of classic novels. The novels are really short and are based on passion and love. Their messages are intellectually packaged in gallant letters, polite discourse, amorous dialogues, letters and poems as well as rhetorical figures. The sentimental novels were succeeded by baroque adventure novels. These novels contain stories of storm kidnapped maidens, etc. They have favourite passionate intellectual plots that were mostly carved out in Valois court.

In France, the period following the *Wars of Religion* saw the appearance of a new form of narrative fiction (which some critics have termed the "sentimental novel"), which quickly became a literary sensation. Thanks to the enthusiasm of a reading public searching for entertainment after so many years of conflict (<http://...>)

- b. **Theatre:** The preoccupation of theatrical production follows the three unities: unity of place; unity of time and unity of action. The unity of place entails that the place (stage) for production should not change. It should be used throughout the production or performance. Besides, the unity of time implies that the duration should not exceed 24hours. The unity of action centres on the intrigue or the story line. The actions should not be proliferated by other multiple actions. The works must be characterised by 'bienseance' and 'vraisemblance' (<http://...>). These two basic concept influence and add more value to the theatrical unities. "Les bienseance" reinforce the moral lessons of the theatre. "Literature should respect the moral codes and good taste, nothing should be presented that floats these codes even if they are historical events" (<http://...>). The vraisemblance ensures that the reasons for theatrical production and the actions must be believable.

Poets developed their works in the noble salons in form of epigrams and satirical verse. From the 1660s, three poets Jean de la Fontaine, Jean Racine and Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux became very popular due to their poetic writings.

### Modern Literature

Modern literature is the 19<sup>th</sup> century French literature. Literary works developed to a full capacity as the result of the death of Louis XIV and the end of monarchy and empires in France. French literature enjoyed enormous international prestige due to intellectual liberty of philosophers. The first part of the era was dominated by “romanticism”, until around the mid-century “realism” emerged at least partly as a reaction. In the last half of the century, “naturalism”, “Parnassian” poetry and “symbolism” among other styles and a programme or manifesto) (<http://...>)

Romanticism revolts against the classic rules. It renounces reason and set in imagination as a tool of literary works. French romanticism had ideas that diametrically opposed to French classicism and the classical unities, but it could also express a profound loss for aspects of the pre-revolutionary world in a society now dominated by money and fame, rather than honour (<http://...>).

The movement originated in Germany at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was extended to France under the influence of Mme de Staël and Chateau Briand. The emergence of the movement marks the end of classical ideologies of imitation, mythology and *vraisemblance*. The romantics developed a mindset and they believed in the primacy of feeling, love, pleasure and imagination over reason. The writers seek to restore the lost dignity of man, harmony between the individual and nature. At a point, people became tired of imagination as the result of science.

**Realism:** Realism is a movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that depicts the reality of issues in the contemporary life and the society. It became very powerful as the result of development of science and other social science for example, biology, history and sociology. These lead to the growth of industries and commerce. Consequently, the production of literary works was at its peak. Realism is an attempt to reflect on ideal life situations. Realism believes in fidelity and actuality. Balsac, Flaubert, Gustave and Victor Hugo are the famous writers of the era.

**Naturalism:** It is a literary movement that seeks to depict life as accurately as possible. The naturalists’ works are expository works that seek to depict the individual’s compulsive instincts towards sexuality, hunger, psychology without artificial distortions of human tendencies –emotions, idealism and hope. Zola is one of the prominent writers of the time.

### Contemporary French Literature

The contemporary French literature is the 20<sup>th</sup> century French literature. It started from 1900-1999. The works of the period depict the human existence and the absurdity of life. The literature gives the picture of the realities of life. For example, the wickedness of man, the Marxist tendencies, human liberty, abuse of power, and the tragic end of

human life. The social, cultural and technological developments of the century and the development of human consciousness really reinforced the growth of literary works and criticism. Writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus dominate the period.

### **Literary Approaches to the Study of French Literature**

The literary approaches to the study of French literature can be derived from the historical epochs or movements of French literature. These help us to associate events with approaches or literary theories that will be instrumental to the understanding of the realistic issues of the time. Some of the approaches are as follows:

The formalist

The socio-historicist

The Marxist

The feminist

Mythological approach

The psychoanalytic approach

The **formalist approach** deals with the structure of language as applied in the literary works. For example, the nature of pronouns –first person singular I or third person singular He/She. It is a systematic theoretical approach that helps us to interpret and understand the works in context. The method involves detail inquiry into plot structure, narrative perspective, symbolic imagery and other literary techniques. M. Keith opines that: “The new criticism is a formalist approach to literature that is, it pays close and careful attention to the language, form and structure of literary text” (14). The theory was developed by Victor Shiklovsky, Vladimir Propp and other Russian critics in 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**The Socio-Historical Approach:** This is an approach to literature that deals with the socio-historical event that surrounds a literary text. The approach attempts to describe the culture of a people, the issues of war and revolution. This approach helps us to reflect on the issues that prompt the writer to carry his generation along.

**The Marxist Approach:** The Marxist theory was developed by Karl Marx. The theory gives the reality of the competing economic interest that emanates from the division of labour. The approach is aimed at revealing and clarifying ideological issues of a class and correcting social injustice. It criticises corrupt practices and exploitative tendencies.

M. Keith says:

Marx begins his elaboration of a materialist philosophy with the very basic assumption of the existence of living human individuals who

must acquire certain necessities to life. Life involves before all else, eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historic act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs (156) (71).

**Feminist Approach:** feminist approach or feminism is the literary approach that seeks to readdress the deformative ideologies against women in a social, political and economic life in the society. It places literature in a social context. The feminist approach attempts to understand literary works in feminist perspective especially as they affect their social conditions. It seeks to correct with a feminist consciousness, marginalisation and domination by men in the field of politics, culture, sports, education and commerce. This approach is gender sensitive. Literary works on gender such as gay marriage, lesbianism, sexual harassment and divorce are issues that constitute the thematic preoccupation of feminist works.

**Psychoanalytic Literary Approach:** This is the literary theory developed by Sigmund Freud. The approach is based on human unconsciousness and existence. It is an attempt towards human understanding of the internal and unconscious feeling such as dreams, impulses, anxiety, desires and feelings. Literary writers and scholars use the psychoanalytic approach as an expository instrument of the internal feelings and emotions of characters. Through this approach, feelings, dreams and other unconscious effects are given symbolic meanings. M. Keith is of the view that:

Psychoanalytic literary criticism has its roots in the works of Sigmund Freud (1856-1936) and the various thinkers who have been influenced by his work... for one thing, in its emphasis on discovery of the source of symptoms; psychoanalysis is first and foremost a method of interpretation. Moreover, this interpretation is often of rather literary kinds (27).

**Mythological Approach:** The mythological approach is a parameter for cultural appreciation and human experiences in the literary works. This approach is also called archetypal approach. The approach weighs the recurrent patterns in literature that ascribe universal meaning and basic experiences of readers without minding their geonology and the period in which they live.

These critics attempt to explain how archetypes (the characters, images and themes that symbolically embody universal meanings and experiences) are embodied in literary works in order to make larger connections that explain a particular work's lasting appeal (<http://...>)

This approach is basically applied to areas of classical literature, philosophy, psychological, anthropology, and cultural history with principal emphasis on cultural vindication and appreciation.

### **Academic Values of Exploring French Literature in Nigeria**

1. The knowledge of French literature develops the linguistic competence of the learner. Students who have passion for French literature and study it effectively are in a better position to enrich their vocabulary with new language structures, words, expressions and meanings.
2. The French literature equally enables learners to appreciate the ethical values of life. As a result, students are refined in their logical thinking and as such embrace good attitudinal change.
3. Besides, they are in a better position to appreciate the French culture and also make a comparative analysis of their own culture and that of French in order to have a realistic view of human life.
4. It helps learners to develop sound conscience and critical thinking. This gives them a deeper reflection and engagement.
5. The exploration of French literary works enables learners to have sound ideological base and philosophy of life. These help them to develop sound socio-political ideas.

### **Problems of Teaching and Learning French Literature in Nigeria**

The teaching and learning of French language in general and French literature in particular has enormous problems. These challenges are arrayed from culture, economy, lack of professional hands, instructional materials, effective approaches and learners' attitude.

**Cultural problems:** This is a very serious problem that hinders quick and good understanding of French literary works. Students are faced with a foreign culture and a strange socio-milieu. Some of the ways of life of the French people in relation to social life are totally different and strange to our own culture. This leads to cultural intellectual conflict. The learner thinks about the French culture in his own African way. This makes it extremely difficult for him to understand the elements of French culture as they appear in the text. Bukoye Arowolo reaffirms that “the problem is aggravated by the impression created by most teachers that literature is independent of other components of language” (<http://...>).

**Economy:** The poor economic condition of the country due to mismanagement and misappropriate of funds make it difficult for most students to go into the study of French without passion. The in-depth study of French literature involves excursion to francophone countries, French village, French cultural centres and other universities for facts finding and material acquisition. In a situation whereby students don't have scholarship, it hinders the academic scope in the area. We have situations and cases whereby students lack sponsorship and they couldn't go for their one year abroad, and

as such, couldn't graduate. Poor economic status of the country affects staff remuneration thereby jeopardising productivity.

**Lack of Professional Hands:** Lecturers of French literature are not many. In some universities or colleges of education, the aspect is being taught by professionals in French francophone literature. This makes teaching and learning of French literature less interesting.

**Inadequate instructional materials:** The problem of instructional materials in the teaching and learning of French literature at tertiary level in Nigeria is one of the fundamental problems. Most colleges of education and university libraries are sparsely equipped. Some don't have the recommended French literary texts for the study of French literature. This makes teaching and learning ineffective. Most post graduate students especially in most of our new universities travel far and wide to carry out their substantial research work. It is important to know that in most of these colleges of education and universities, it is difficult to see a functional language laboratory and other audiovisual materials that could enhance the linguistic competence of students. This problem hinders student from understanding the basic literary text for French literature. Christie O. Anyogo reaffirms that: "closely related to the problem of teachers is the fact that there are no current standard textbooks for the teachers to use" (12).

**Lack of Effective Approaches:** The literary approaches employed by most lecturers are digressing and unmotivational. French literature is built on different epochs with different socio-historical and political issues that form the integral part of thematic preoccupation. Literary approaches towards this study must have bearing on the epochs and literary movement to avoid ambiguity.

**Learner's Attitude:** Most learners of French literature hardly develop self-consciousness and learning readiness. Some are influenced by their cultural and social milieu syndrome to be passive. Some look forward to acquiring just the certificate but not the knowledge that will be useful to them and the society. Anyogo says: "attitude influences language teaching and learning greatly. Although many Nigerian students have indicated interest in French, few have really embraced the study of French language" (13).

### **The Role of Literary Theory in Teaching French Language in Nigeria**

French literature is the literature that is based on the socio-historical, cultural, political and economic life of the French society. This literature is completely foreign to the Nigerian people. To effectively teach and learn French literature in Nigeria, both lecturers and students should employ good literary approaches that will motivate the students, enhance learning and proper understanding of the French literature in our social milieu.

Literary theory helps lecturers of French literature to keep themselves abreast with relevant literary approaches that enhance the teaching and learning of French literature of a particular era. For example, with the knowledge of literary theory, we can apply mythological approach to classical literature. To effectively teach and learn with this approach, lecturers and students alike should make strenuous efforts to understand and identify the socio historical and political events of the classical literature as appeared in the text, identify characters and thematic preoccupation. Structural or formalist approach will come in to help us understand deeply the language structure and tone of the work. The social historical approach also gives information about the title, the date and period of publication, the physical image of the writer, his biography and works. This entails that in teaching a literary text, the information about the author, the period of his publication, thematic preoccupation and the characters will be identified to ease teaching, learning and comprehension.

It is equally important to know that literary theory gives us a lot of literary approaches and techniques to be used for the teaching and learning of French literature in Nigeria. The teaching of modern French literature can be facilitated by some approaches like social historical, formalist, new criticism and realist approach. These approaches give a deeper understanding of the language structure, the social historical event that led to the emergence of other movements like romanticism, realism, naturalism and symbolism. Literary theory enables the understanding of the techniques used by the authors. For example, Honoré de Balsac used descriptive style of writing in his book, *Le père Gonot*. Balsac takes a long time describing the hostel – (la pension). Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* adopted the realist approach and descriptive writing. When these elements are taken care of and the literary works of the period are well planned and presented to the learner of modern French literature; his intellectual horizon can be expanded and deepened. By these coherent and logical approaches, the students will not be passive, but proactive to the issues of French literature.

The teaching of 20<sup>th</sup> century contemporary French literature in Nigeria can also be influenced by the psychoanalytic approach, the formalist, social historical approach, Marxist approach, etc. These approaches deal with the historical and contemporary issues that affect the society and human existence. For example, absurd, injustice, war, wickedness, courage, revolt, religion, exploitation and gender issues. The fact remains that these approaches will help us to understand the thematic preoccupations, the historical perspective of the works and the author's view. For example, Jean-Paul Sartre's work on human existence and the essence of life. Camus work on the meaninglessness of human existence. Camus accuses God for being silent to the injustice caused by death to man in the world of absurd. Literary theory enables us to view the preoccupation of both the historical and contemporary circumstance of the French society and the human conscience.

### Conclusion

It is pertinent to note that literary theory is instrumental to the effective teaching, learning and understanding of French literature in Nigeria. The literary approaches like psychoanalytic, formalist, Marxist, mythological approaches are to some extent interwoven. To effectively impart knowledge, lecturers can use the basic relevant approaches as applied to literary movements and centuries in France to help the Nigerian students understand French literature in the context of French society, rather than the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods of African literature in Nigeria.

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