

**Fools, thieves and other dreamers and the de(con)struction of disillusionment in contemporary Africa.**

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**ABSTRACT:**

This article examines the theme of disillusionment in the anthology of translated Francophone short-stories *Fools, thieves and other dreamers*. The three short-stories in the anthology treat this theme in different ways. What they all seek to achieve though is not only to deconstruct disillusionment but also to put to question the ontological regime upon which this disillusionment is based. Instead of openly attacking the causes of the disillusionment, the short-stories adopt diverse strategies that depart from the conventional methods of criticism. Through a negation of literary norms, the texts are able to soar above the predominant disenchantment gripping the African continent. This attack of literary norms is at the same time a refusal to submit to an all embracing way of envisioning the world. This presents a new form of literary militancy of contemporary African Francophone literature which is entirely different from the way militant writers in the mould of Mongo Beti and Aimé Césaire had vehemently stood against the colonial regime. It is against this background that the three short-stories attempt to bring about new critical insights on the current state of affairs on the black continent, and ultimately increasing the consciousness on how best to deal with the dark force of disillusionment which has gripped the lives of people on the African continent.

**Key words:** Disillusionment, contemporary Francophone African Literature, literary militancy.

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## **Tontos, ladrones y otros soñadores y la de(construcción) de la desilusión en África contemporánea.**

### **Resumen**

Este artículo examina el tema de la desilusión en la antología de tontos, ladrones y otros soñadores, historias cortas traducidas a francés. Las tres historias en la antología tratan este tema de formas diferentes. Lo que ellas procuran es analizar no sólo la desilusión sino también hacer preguntas del régimen ontológico en la que esta desilusión está basada. En vez de atacar abiertamente las causas de la desilusión, las historias adoptan diversas estrategias que se salen de los métodos convencionales de crítica. Mediante una negación a las normas literarias, los textos son capaces de elevarse por sobre del desencanto predominante que agarra el continente africano. Este ataque a las normas literarias es al mismo tiempo un rechazo de someter de todo un abrazo el modo de prever el mundo. Esto presenta una nueva forma de militancia literaria de literatura contemporánea africana Francoparlante que es completamente diferente del modo que los escritores militantes de Mongo Beti y Aimé Césaire vehementemente habían estado en contra el régimen colonial. Es en este contexto que las tres historias intentan lograr nuevas críticas sobre la situación actual del continente negro, y en última instancia aumentar la conciencia sobre la mejor forma de ocuparse de la fuerza oscura de la desilusión que asola la vida de las personas en el continente africano.

**Palabras claves:** Desilusión, militancia contemporánea Francófona africana De la literatura, literaria.

“It is only a step from boredom to disillusionment, which leads naturally to self-pity, which in turn ends in chaos” ~ Manly Hall

## Introduction

Great expectation hailed the African continent as different countries achieved independence from colonial rule. These ambers of elation however smothered away as it became more and more apparent that indigenous post-colonial political leadership was unable to change, in any significant manner, the colonial *status quo*. Coup d'états, civil unrest, dictatorships, human rights abuses and gross economic mismanagement have become synonymous with contemporary postcolonial African governments. Moreover, a radically mutating socio-political and economic climate has served only to fan the flames of an already volatile and untenable situation. If, in this light, a single word can be sought that encapsulates the predicament faced by contemporary Africa, then the word would be disillusionment. This disillusionment, not just in political leadership but equally in existence itself, has found artistic representation in various post-colonial works of literature.

*Fools, thieves and other dreamers*, an anthology of three English translations of Francophone African short-stories; depicts, in a satiric and poignant manner the disillusionment experienced by present-day Africans and the African continent as a whole in the face of political and socio-economic uncertainty and instability. The short-stories go beyond a simple representation of this disillusionment in that they also examine at depth the very construction of this phenomenon. Furthermore, the three narratives, through an intricate interplay of language, metaphors and satire, embody the very disillusionment faced by and facing the continent.

We therefore set out in the present paper to analyse the construction and portrayal of textual disillusionment in the short stories. It is worth pointing out at this juncture that the literary cosmos of the three short-stories is complete in itself and our analysis will be based purely on this literary universe without seeking in any way to compare the real disenchantment with the literary depiction. To begin with, the locations described in the short-stories are not explicitly mentioned as being specific areas in Africa. Secondly, the force of the short-stories resides in

this very reality that the depicted literary universe is autonomous and independent of particular real geographical locations in the continent. What this means is that any of the three stories can be the tale of any African country. This autonomy allows the texts to “destruct” and bring new hope to a disenchanting continent. Our attempt to deconstruct and define disillusionment becomes a hermeneutical undertaking aimed at comprehending the struggle for change: social, political and cultural on the African continent.

### **The search for a new form of literary militancy**

The short-stories in the anthology *Fools, Thieves and other Dreamers*; project themselves as versatile constructs seeking, through the use of subterfuge, to depict the present realities of disillusionment by offering a gloomy and cynical picture of a tumultuous and harsh society where trust and principles have been corrupted and besmirched. Lawlessness, selfishness and personal survival are the order of the day. The narratives draw material from the instability of modern day life and strive to maintain a precarious balance of a world on the threshold of a violent implosion and explosion. The veiled tendentiousness of these texts and their internal functioning inescapably question the socio-political and economic milieu in which they are composed.

This crisis of disillusionment is not revealed purely in thematic terms but more importantly in linguistic and stylistic manners. The short-stories go beyond a condemnation and criticism of the contemporary leadership in Africa and offer, despite their negative representation of contemporary issues, a gleam of hope for a better future. There exists an inert power and vitality in the “aesthetically cocooned disengagement” (Pickering, 1990:10) of the texts. Although the short-stories do not directly expose and denounce causes of contemporary disenchantment, their masked use of embedded metaphors and symbols render the disillusionment in universe of

the texts all the more palpable. Obiang (2002:39) rightly points out in respect to the manner in which literary commitment has transformed over the years:

*L'engagement n'a jamais véritablement déserté l'écriture, il s'est simplement fait plus diffus, plus complexe aussi, en fonction des incertitudes même de l'écrivain.*

*Commitment has never actually deserted writing; it has simply diffused itself and become more complex, in function with the uncertainties of the author.*

The contemporary African Francophone text is not explicitly militant as was the case with belligerent texts by authors like Mongo Beti that openly attacked colonialism. Blair (1976: 269) points out that:

*Finally liberated from their inferiority complexes [contemporary writers] indict their own societies, attack their own leaders and governments, exposing weaknesses, corruption, tyranny or injustices, in a new type of political novel.*

Certainly, the contemporary African Francophone literary text makes a “*récusation oblique du réalisme omniprésent sur le continent, il opère un distinguo précieux entre l'art et le militantisme*” (an oblique challenge of the omnipresent reality on the continent by making an important distinction between art and militancy). These texts do not forfeit the literary art for the sake of militancy but are able to maintain militancy through the use of a literary language that transcends spatiotemporal constraints and barriers, both in the real and fictive worlds. Instead of overtly attacking leadership, the text itself becomes the scene and dramatisation of the crisis of disillusionment. The text rebels not only against the norms that govern the composition of literary texts, but also against the very force of disillusionment which saps away at the vitality of literary creativity and the literary creations as well. Chevrier (2000: 34)

*Cette évolution s'est bien entendu opérée en plusieurs temps; après la mise à mort des modèles classiques, il semble que l'on ait abordé une nouvelle phase de la radicalisation du discours romanesque marqué par un dérèglement délibéré des procédures narratives.*

*[This change which was spread over some time; after we had done away with classical models, it seems that we henceforth embarked upon a new phase of radicalisation of discourse in works of fiction marked by an intentional disregard of narrative practices.]*

The narratives that we are analysing do not react blatantly against the prevailing disillusionment. The reaction of the texts is expressed by a conscious and vehement disregard of norms that preside over literature and its composition. Considering that established literary forms represent, and are directly related to a force as powerful as disillusionment itself, the short-stories attempt to fight against this force by refusing to assume and subsume themselves to dictated forms. The short-stories rise above the conventions, which themselves are an embodiment of disillusionment in that they represent a status quo that adamantly refuses to be changed in any way. An example of this defiance is the manner in which indigenous languages are incorporated into the main language of expression (the French language in the original texts). This dilution, or “mutations génétique” (genetic mutation) as Chomsky (1980: 81) prefers to call it, of the aesthetic purity of the European language poses unswerving insolence of the status quo as it seeks a renewal of the ontological vision of present day reality.

### **Egocentrism, complacency and corruption: disillusionment in leadership**

The first of the three short stories, From the depths of a well, written by a Senegalese author, Seydi Sow, is an incongruous and uncompromising modern parable. This psychologically charged story which starts *in media res*, retells the misfortunes of five men; a judge, a Member of Parliament, a minister, a journalist and a simple citizen, who find themselves mysteriously trapped at the bottom of an unused well. A challenge in ambiguity is presented in that it is unknown how the men have found themselves in this desolate well. It is however certain that “by climbing on each others’ shoulders, one of them could escape and seek help” (4) for the

remaining four men. The fate of these remaining men would irretrievably be linked to this one person, as none of them would be able to reach the top of the well using the same method. What ensues are charged speeches by each of the five men, as they each seek to get the approval to be the “saviour” of the group. Sow, using the simplest of vocabulary and grammatical constructions sets up a suspense-filled mood, which inevitably leads to an exposition of a serious crisis of leadership and more importantly disenchantment in this leadership.

The Member of Parliament who takes to the floor first, gives an ardent speech is quickly brushed aside because he has “mastered the art of deceiving the she-goat with an empty calabash”. This proverbial expletive, which resonates of a direct translation from an indigenous language, does not only serve to render the narrative pertinent to local readers but also seeks to convey, as Blair (1976: 301) puts it, “contumely and irascible indignation at the current state of affairs”. The group has no confidence in the MP and does not entrust him with its fate. His trustworthiness is put to question because all he knows is “selling illusions about a hypothetical tomorrow”(6) without ever delivering much. The simple citizen laments at the end of his speech that:

*I will henceforth refuse to be the nation's grave-digger. I will no longer praise the despots, acclaim the demagogues or congratulate incapable rulers (6).*

This is by far the most overt attack on leadership in this short story. However, the citizen's lament should not be taken only as an attack on the leadership of the literary universe but also of the real world, the world outside the texts. The literary leaders, as are the leaders of contemporary Africa, are responsible, one way or the other, for the crisis that the continent finds itself in. Like the MP, neither the minister, the journalist, the judge nor the simple citizen is able to sufficiently convince the others that he is capable to take charge of the precarious situation in which they find themselves in. Sow concludes the short story by showing how the crisis would

continue unabated given that there is no one to assume the role of “saviour” and change the fortunes of the continent:

*They all understood that because they could not make a choice, they were now condemned to die. There was no one to represent the hope of the group or act in the name of the general interest. Foolishly, they again started to hope for possible help from outside. And yet their Saviour certainly stood amongst them (9).*

Everything remains in a state of limbo as Seydi Sow offers no resolution to the crisis befalling his characters. He neither attempts to make a value judgement on the literary universe that he creates as all he simply does is present a hard-hitting and unpretentious portrait of contemporary Africa, without trying to offer a moralising voice on the state of affairs. Faced with the instability of contemporary realities, Sow's short-story does not attack the status quo through militant means. The power of his short story resides in its simplicity and seemingly distanced and detached stance vis-à-vis the socio-political militancy and engagement.

### **Trapped between an intolerable today and an unfathomable tomorrow**

Florent Couao-Zotti's Small hells on street corners gazes upon a tumultuous market place, which is a microcosmic representation of the African continent. The protagonist of this short-story is a boy of whom we know nothing of save that he is a pickpocket. Like Seydi Sow, Couao-Zotti employs the technique of starting the story in the middle of a crisis and at the very climax of the plot. No anterior details are furnished on this boy, how he has come to be a pickpocket. We are neither given the slightest of indications as to the setting of the action of the story. In the same manner as in the short-story In the depths of the well, Couao-Zotti does not use the flashback technique to situate the action of the story and to give supplementary information on the state of affairs as depicted in the short-story. What this does is to exclusively focus the attention and place emphasis on what is happening only in the limited space and time of the short-story. The short-story, though short, is itself a complete unit which can be analysed

and understood without any extra elements, pertaining either to events prior or subsequent to the action of the story. This exclusive spatiotemporal focalisation on the short-story allows for better analysis of the story and how the minute world of the short-story can be adapted to the macrocosm of the African continent and the whole world in general.

The market place that Zotti adopts as the setting for his short story is a microcosmic representation of contemporary Africa. The little pickpocket is an image of the simple African man, disillusioned, uncertain of the future and whose very existence is threatened by violent forces far greater than him. The juvenile pickpocket, like the ordinary contemporary African is but “a tiny shape, small fry condemned to forget himself within himself... a fleeting memory”(24).

The boy’s act of stealing a gold pendant is not just a criminal act. The gold pendant is a symbolic representation of the hope and aspirations for a better future. The interwoven voices of the narrator and the young pickpocket describe this idea in such a manner:

*They are children, just children. Born with a flower in their mouths and hope in their eyes. I came into the world with nothing. I have to make my own flowers and invent my own hope (25).*

The boy cannot obtain this better tomorrow on a silver platter, he is forced to take it through violent means. Even after having stolen the pendant, this symbol of a better tomorrow, the boy is still unable to guard and keep it to himself. The entire market place fiercely stands to make sure that the pendant is taken away from the child’s possession. When the child thinks that he has escaped from the marauding crowd at the market place, he is unexpectedly captured by older pickpockets who demand that he hands over to them the gold pendant.

This literary society is depicted as a place in which the individual is forced to fight to survive and to fight to ensure a brighter future for himself. What is however distressing about this representation of contemporary society is the manner in which the individual is bestialised and reduced to fighting for his survival, at whatever cost and through whatever means. More

disquieting though is that after fighting gruesomely, the individual still finds himself unable to overcome the numerous challenges befalling him. The boy in the short-story Small hells on street corners is left disenchanting because he cannot think or dream of the future when he is unable to live through the present. This cynicism caused by the uncertainty of the future ultimately translates itself into an existential crisis in which the individual questions the meaning and utility of his existence. The pick pocketing boy expresses this existential crisis in these words:

*I have wanted to regain the time I lost as I was growing up, I have wanted to tear from the world my confiscated treasures and become part of mankind's logic. But all I am is a child of the gutter, a creature lost within the debris of the world. My birth, apparently, was nothing but a mistake. My mother was expecting a fart. But instead from between her legs emerged a baby. What can I do about that? Now, let me alone in my cage. Let me laugh at my life riddled with holes (30).*

Behind the comic façade of the above passage, bitterness and despair filter into the text. The comic effect is employed by Sow to veil the disillusionment of his literary characters.

The concluding phrase of the short-story Small hells on street corners serves to fortify the sense of despair that has been describing in the rest of the story: "So young and yet so old. Scarcely born and yet already sacrificed" (30).

These statements, simple and short, have cocooned in them a force that penetrates the very core of the cause of the disillusionment faced by and facing the African continent. Garnier (2002: 54) terms such phrases and texts "*des textes-chocs*" and he explains that the main goal of such texts is to force the reader to rethink and reconsider the African condition. Tansi (1981:5) elucidates as well in the same respect that:

*Le roman est, paraît-il, une œuvre d'imagination. Il faut pourtant que cette imagination trouve sa place quelque part dans quelque réalité. J'écris, ou je crie, un peu pour forcer le monde à venir au monde.*

*The novel, it seems, is a work of fiction. This fiction should however be rooted somewhere in reality. I write, or I scream, a little more to force people to come to people*

These “textes-chocs” seek not only to shock readers, but equally to awaken people in the African continent to the gloomy reality of their miserable condition.

Having analysed the thematic disillusionment, it is interesting for us to turn our attention, presently, to the way in which the short-story Small hells on street corners is able to signify the disenchantment through the use of literary techniques. The story itself embodies discontent through the adoption of a collage and patchwork-like technique used by cubist artists. Instead of telling the story in a logical and linear manner, Sow constantly halts the plot of the story. In these pauses of the action, he introduces a myriad of voices which all describe in one way or the other some sort of disillusionment. What is interesting about these polymorphous voices is that Sow gives different inanimate objects a voice to express their anguish. For instance, a sewer complains about the manner it is not respected even though it plays a very important role:

*I have nothing to give; nothing to take. I have already given everything; that's how life and misfortune have made me (17).*

The voices of these normally taciturn inanimate objects like sewers, roads and market places even, affords the author a means through which he can attack different people and institutions responsible for the disillusionment gripping the African continent.

### **Perpetual reverie or madness: avenues of escaping disillusionment**

The last short-story in this anthology, *The Fools gallery*, offers the most radical and pessimistic representation of disillusionment. This story which is set in Djibouti describes how people in this place are left without any hope in the present and the future. These people are

forced to take a drug called *khat*. The external world ceases to exist as people are lost in a dream like world induced by the intoxicating effects of *khat*.

*In a world adrift, men cling to the most fragile thing that exists: the twigs of an Ethiopian shrub. In return this plant toughens them. Khat is the poison and its antidote, in other words the perpetual imprisonment (32).*

The drug, as revealed above, plays a paradoxical role. It is on one hand addictive but on the other, it is the only available option left for people who have been forced, wittingly or unwittingly, into a hopeless and hapless existence:

*At independence and after it, we got nothing, not even a visionary demagogue who could transport us on river-like speeches, who could speak to us of national uprisings, or, to cut a long story short, someone to cradle our illusions for us (35).*

The reverie that envelopes the characters in this short story is one way in which they can escape the disillusionment staring them in the face. However, this reaction to the situation is rather defeatist in manner in that the characters completely abandon the “real” world and lose themselves in the artificial world due to *khat*'s intoxicating. This is defeatist in that instead of actively reacting against the disenchanting status quo, the characters simply resign themselves to chewing *khat* and doing nothing there after than wait for the intoxication to wane. As the narrator notes, “*khat* punctuates people's lives in this ruined country. Without *khat* no life!” (32).

However, not all people in the literary universe of the short story are locked away in passive daydream in the face of a gloomy and uncertain future. There exists in this short story people who are fools. The fools quite unlike the dreamers refuse to take disillusionment for granted. Neither do they take their difference for granted, but the total impact of their literary presence has more in it of salvation than of despair. These fools do not sit back and do nothing to change the status quo. The fools voice out their concerns about the situation in which they and their fellow countrymen find themselves in:

*But the fool, teller of many truths, continues to hunt down bigots by publicly revealing their failings (39).*

*The fool, teller of certain truths from the moment he opens his mouth. He enjoys shocking phrases and possesses a loquacious mastery of words and a shrewd perceptiveness, justly appreciated and acknowledged by all. Others see in him the moral conscious of the suburb (39).*

The ability to talk, freely and without shame, about different ills bedeviling the society marks a step towards some sort of coming to terms with the situation in the hope of a resolution of these different problems. The unashamed voice of the madmen becomes the “moral conscious” of the community in that it forces people not only to contemplate their faults but more importantly this moral conscious brings forth a voice of revolution and change. If we consider that the majority of people in the literary universe of The Fools Gallery are hopeless, passive and disillusioned in the face of their very existence and future, the attitude of the fool marks a paradigm shift in that the mere act of defiantly speaking defiantly against the status quo is the first sign of activity in a world marked by passivity. The madman excels in unearthing, from the brutal disillusionment of the literary world, the need to take some sort of action against this disenchantment.

## **Conclusion**

The three short stories that form the anthology *Fools, thieves and other dreamers* all depict in different ways the contemporary situation in a continent whose future, yet alone present, is veiled by a dark cloud of uncertainty. The stories not only reflect the harshness of a world in which individual devise different methods to ensure personal survival but equally go beyond allegorising the gloomy picture of contemporary Africa in that they all, through different literary strategies through a questioning of the epistemic and ontological regime upon which relies the disillusionment gripping the black continent. The authors emerging from different

geographical locations represent in diverse ways the contemporary reality on the African continent. Their short-stories not only depict the current disillusionment on the continent but attempt, as we have shown, to stand up and criticise this state affairs, in the hope of bringing about a change, or at least an appreciation of the challenges that the continent has to deal with.

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