

# Religion and propaganda in French narrative literature in 20<sup>th</sup> century

## case study: “*Man’s Fate*” of André Malraux and “*Souvenirs and Reflections of an Aryan*” by Savitri Devi

### 1. Main objectives and summary of the project:

Accepted beliefs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were both political and polemical (Bazin, 2018). while *Thomas Merton*, a Trappist monk who had visited Eastern countries and studied Dalai Lama and Buddha, was trying to illustrate “interfaith” in his *Seven Storey Mountain* as a means of salvation (Editorials, 2019), *Savitri Devi*, a French-born Indian lecturer who was inspired by Nazi’s ideology, strongly opposed multiculturalism, recognizing Aryan race as superior to other origins and Jews as a threat to the entire humanity (Devi, 1976). This anti-Semitic view soon became the slogan of Neo-Nazi ideology and gave birth to the *Nouvelle-droite* (an extremist right/racist party) in France and later the *Alt-right* movement in the US (Lewis, 1996).

On the other side of the story lies *André Malraux*, who, in seek of Eastern Religions, visits Khmer Temple in Cambodia and makes important discoveries of Greco-Buddhist art in both Afghanistan and Iran (Curtis, 1997). He gets acquainted with the concepts of equality and independence<sup>1</sup> and later, runs campaigns against supremacists<sup>2</sup> and becomes a resistance author, opposing the Nazi anti-Jewish doctrine (ibid). His masterpiece, the *Man’s Fate*, is a narrative story of a new emerging doctrine (communism) in China and is a precious social asset since it demonstrates the characteristics of “*propaganda*” rising under the flag of despotic rulers (ibid).

*Communism* and *Nazism* in their fanatical sense are the two major disastrous ideological perversions that have left destructive effects on humanity during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ellul, 1990). Since literacy is a powerful means of propaganda (ibid), studying it in the framework of literature seems to be quite essential. In order to further illustrate the impact of Communism and Nazism as the two facets of the same phenomenon (propaganda) on French literature:

- In the first chapter of this thesis, we will have a chronological look at the modification of religion in Europe and how it moved towards secularization.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Mahayana, there is no fundamental difference between any human beings. Every individual is valued and should be treated fairly and therefore with justice since we all have the Buddha Nature and can be enlightened (Canon, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> He runs a newspaper called *Indo-China* in chains for opposing the French Colonial policies in South-Asia (Curtis, 1997).

- The second chapter is devoted to the controversial conception of “religion” and “propaganda”. To provide a definition, we adopt the theoretical framework of *Jacques Ellul*, illustrated in his famous book: *Propaganda*. We will then prove this ideology by using a collection of literary extractions of authors who have lived propaganda.
- In the next chapter, we elaborate the perverted characteristics of the communism as it is illustrated by André Malraux in his book: *The Man's Fate*.
- Finally, in the last chapter, we study the ideology of Savitri Devi in her *Souvenirs and Reflections of an Aryan*. To do so, we confront her book with the *Man's Fate* of André Malraux and once similarities and differences are characterized, we will conclude if her ideology was original or another example of a propaganda.

## **2. Importance of the subject:**

In order to make sure that fanatical historical calamities of the past century will be marked: “never again”, it is quite essential to provide an intuitive key that helps the intellectual to distinguish between righteous ideology and propaganda. Since literature has all that is needed to empower falsification, the urge to have another *treaty on the tolerance level* to guide and set limits to ideological perversions in literary circles is increasing consistently.

Furthermore, since Communism and Neo-Nazism are among very few ideologies that have survived the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is quite essential to observe them in-depth to predict their future impact on the world.

## **3. Background of the project:**

The first half of the twentieth century is considered the era of misogyny, hatred, racism and war. Many households lost their homes, children orphaned, mothers starved to death and on balance, humanity ceased to exist (Michel, 1975). Old systems and ideologies collapsed and brand-new viewpoints emerged (ibid). Catholic instructions were no longer able to satisfy people, and a sense of secularization enveloped the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Mayeur, 2005). It was in 1905, after a century of fierce battle between the State and the Church that Catholicism in its fanatical sense was overthrown and a law was adopted in France in which people had liberty of religion (Fourest, 2016). According to the new law, beliefs were personal, and in State-level, the government had to remain neutral and to take no position towards any religion (Secular State<sup>3</sup>) (ibid). the expansion of this secular trend was further progressed when a sense of indifference and absurdity dominated the world as a result of

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to distinguish between the American model secularism and the French Laïcité. Although the latter has no tendency in a nation-wide scale towards any religion (Liberté, égalité, fraternité), the former is monotheist: Americans, despite a separation between the State and the Church, swear in bible when in Court or begin their Congress with the Christian moto: “ In God We Trust...”, (Fourest, 2016).

the sufferings in the 2 upcoming World Wars. In other words, great figures of literary circles of that time, such as *Albert Camus* and *Jean-Paul Sartre*, contributed significantly to the growth of the term philosophy of absurd (Larousse, 2000).

Another key factor in the development of the secular point-of-view was the advancement of technologies<sup>4</sup> and sciences<sup>5</sup> specially during WW2, which faded the traces of classical traditions (closed world) and opened the boundaries towards a modern world (opened world) (Koyré, 1988)<sup>6</sup>. In this new era, new doctrines emerged, giving different shapes to the societies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Editorial, 2020). *Communism* rose in the East, believing that all people, regardless of their qualities, are equal and that the top priority should always rely on the *Common Wealth*, which is the foundation of the society (ibid). On the other side of the world was Capitalism, which based societies on capital and money-led motivations (ibid). Moreover, the propaganda of the *national-socialism* rose in Germany and Italy under the flags of Nazism and Fascism respectively (ibid). Since doctrines were contradictory with one another, soon conflicts captured the entire world, and Intellectuals, in turn, according to their religious-political thoughts were divided into diverse categories (ibid). the prime examples of such figures are Roger Garaudy (Communist), Savitri Devi (Nazi), Robert Brasillach (Nazi) and Louis-Ferdinand Celine (Fascist) (ibid).

The common factor shared in most ideological perversions of that time was a sense of “discrimination” based on people’s belonging group: either by ethnicity, nationality or religious identity (Ellul, 1990). The earliest occurrence of such discrimination was the *Dreyfus Affair*<sup>7</sup>. It motivated *Emile Zola* to publish *J'accuse* in order to exonerate the innocent Dreyfus from his criminal charges.

When World War II peaked in Europe, racism caused many great literary figures of that time to be tormented and executed in the Nazi Concentration Camps because of their Jewish origin (Nemirovsky, 2006). One perfect example of this would be Irène Nemirovsky<sup>8</sup>, who was refused the French nationality by Vichy government despite writing successful French novels (ibid).

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<sup>4</sup>The best example would be the defeat of Polish Knights in front of high-tech German armor.

<sup>5</sup> Particularly aviation and nuclear development on the tide of the Second World War

<sup>6</sup> In this regard, the 20th century could be compared with the Renaissance of the 16th century, when a deep revolution took place and humanity lost its prior values (world closed) and a reconstruction of fundamental concepts (a new open world), including religious thoughts were adopted to the new era (Koyré, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Alfred Dreyfus was a Jewish French artillery officer in the Army of France, who was accused of spying for Germany while he was innocent. By false evidence, the Court pleaded him guilty, dishonored and discharged him from all his ranks. This judiciary affair attracted the attention of Emile Zola, the influential writer of that time, and, in his defense, he published an article entitled *J'accuse* that denounced the anti-Semitic view of the Court. In this regard, Dreyfus Affair is comparable with Callas Affair.

<sup>8</sup> She has written great narrative novels depicting the atmosphere of the wartime (Nemirovsky, 2006).

Fighting against religious discriminations was not limited to the Jewish cult. While *Thomas Merton* initialized an intellectual campaign by writing about Zen Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism (Merton, 2012), *Bazin* narrated the story of *Le Chanoine Keir*, a monk who liberated thousands of prisoners from Nazi Concentration Camps during the war (Bazin, 2018).

The confrontation of propaganda and religion on literary circles is not limited to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Baty-Delalande, 2016). *John Meslier* may be the pioneer of fanatical religious opposition. He was also the first person to reveal tendency towards laïcité in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Meslier, 2007). His testament later moved Voltaire, among others, to the era of enlightenment (Voltaire, 2005).

#### **4. Theoretical framework:**

Confrontation of the communism in *Malraux's* work, with *Savitri Devi's* Nazi testament will be in the framework of the sociological views of Jacques Ellul according to his book: *propaganda* (Ellul, 1990).

#### **5. Research questions:**

In this thesis, there is an attempt to answer the following questions:

- How influential were religions and propagandas in the development of ideologies in literary circles of France during the 20<sup>th</sup> century?
- What is the difference between true ideology and propaganda in literature?
- How is the communism depicted in the storyline of *The Man's Fate* of André Malraux?
- How similar/different is the ideology behind the *Souvenirs and Reflections of an Aryan* of *Savitri Devi* to the *Man's Fate* of *Malraux*?

#### **6. Expected findings (hypothesis):**

in this thesis, we will conclude that:

- 20<sup>th</sup> century is filled with both religious ideologies and dogmatization: the beginning is marked by emergence of laïcité. During world wars, perversions rose in societies and an anti-Semitic view gained in popularity. Finally, by advancements of technologies, humanism put mankind back in the center of attention and religious currents faded in favor of a secular-existentialist view (Baty-Delalande, 2016).
- According to Ellul, religions have the vocation of saving humanity. Religious authors are those who promote an ideology in service of the Public, regardless of their political views or interests. However, propaganda focuses on the minority and imposes their views on the society. In propaganda, people are usually encouraged to undertake a difficulty. It is normally fueled by emotional talks while religious writings are more rational (Ellul, 1990).
- Communism in the *Man's Fate* is pictured with sorrow, treason, torture and fatalism. That is because protagonists have no right to choose their so called "fate" and only death can

liberate them from their curse of living. These are considered as symptoms of propaganda in the society.

- *Souvenirs and Reflections of an Aryan* is the story of racism: Aryan race is considered pure and original while the Jewish are unoriginal. Crossbreeding and cross-friendship is banned. Therefore, Devi's ideology is similar to the picture of communism in *Malraux's* book as it questions people's freedom and illustrates signs of perversion by projecting fatalism in life.

#### **7. Method:**

The thesis will adopt a descriptive approach to describe and explain the ideology of André Malraux and Savitri Devi, extracted from their books respectively: *The Man's Fate* and *Souvenirs and Reflections of an Aryan*.

#### **8. Proposed dissemination:**

As Sartre clearly states that elites have a vocation to employ their plume in service of the ground Public (Sartre, 1998), it appears quite essential for the intellectuals to study religious thoughts and propagandas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to better predict the up-coming trends. In this regard, a study of *the decline and rise of the alternative-rights* (Gauttified, 2008) is strongly recommended. This ideology is based on Savitri Devi and Neo-Nazi doctrines and has been quite popular by right extremists' publications during the past few years.

#### **9. Progress plan:**

Given the multi-dimensional aspect of this thesis, a sociological study of the 20th century and psychological analysis of its literary circles may be quite essential. Hence, a meticulous reading and analysis of *literal profile of the 20<sup>th</sup> century* (Berton, 2002) and *the disenchantment of the world, a political history of religion* (Gauchet, 2016) are considered a must.

Moreover, in order to soar our knowledge of the subject, reading about propaganda particularly in the framework of Communism and Nazism are among tasks to undertake during the first couple of semesters. To achieve this, we intend to read *propaganda* by *Edward Bernays* (Bernays, 2004) and *Jacques Ellul* (Ellul, 1990).

It is then followed by reading the corpus of our research: *The Man's Fate* by *André Malraux*, and *Souvenirs and Reflections of an Aryan* by *Savitri Devi* during mid-semesters.

In the final year, we will conclude the dissertation by extracting information from the corpus of our study and prepare for the thesis defense session.

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