

## **Between Ethnography and Literature: Case of Michel Leiris**

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### **Extended Abstract**

#### **1. Introduction**

The twentieth century has been dramatically influenced by massive political and social changes. Literature, art, and science were also transformed heavily by the changes predominant in the society. In Europe, especially in France, many writers - with their works and their positions in various fields - have recorded their names in history. Julien Michel Leiris (1901-1990) is one of those writers who has left an enormous footprint throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Critics usually have difficulty determining his position as a writer. Some consider him to be an autobiographer and label him as an eloquent poet who has succeeded in revolutionizing the concept of self. Others consider him as an ethnographer because of his numerous trips to Africa and his voluminous research on African tribes. His major book "Phantom Africa" impersonates his love for Africa and makes him a not so ordinary ethnographer. Given Michel Leiris's diverse writings and special use of language, positioning him in a precise field or movement becomes utterly difficult. This is where French school's discourse analysis concepts such as paratopie may help us better understand Michel Leiris as an author. Paratopie or paratopic to which we refer, is a theory developed by the French school of discourse analysis. Paratopie can be described as the condition through which the author constructs his identity (Maingueneau, 1993). A paratopic situation designates a paradoxical place, somewhere between the place and the non-place and the necessity to play in-between the two (Maingueneau, 2016).

#### **2. Methodology**

In this study, we tried to analyze the author's position and some of the works he has produced. Based on the French theory of paratopie produced by the French linguist and discourse analyst, Dominique Maingueneau (1993), we investigated the paratopic situation of the author and his writings. According to Dominique Maingueneau's (1993) theory, paratopie is a contradictory point or place, somewhere

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situated between the place and the non-place (Maingueneau, 2004) known as *non-lieu* in French. Dominique Maingueneau (1993) used the term *parasite* to characterize the concept of *paratopie*. By writing different books belonging each to a different genre, Michel Leiris is one of those rare authors who cannot be confined to one movement or genre. In his famous novels such as “Manhood” (1939) or “Rules of the game” (1948), he appears to be an autobiographer while in works like “Phantom Africa” (1934), he turns into an ethnographer; this is how he transformed himself into a *paratopic* author. The social and political period in which the author lived and his writings made him a *paratopic* writer. Leiris’s presence in the society, in different literary circles and his trips influenced his writings greatly and became an integral part of his creating process. This is precisely what we can label a *paratopic* motor.

### **3. Discussion**

Leiris’s life as a child, his numerous trips with his family and his taste for culture have had an impact on his thinking patterns later. His interactions with the surrealists in the 1920s marked his career. His early works (1925) were hugely influenced by the revolutionary artistic movement until he met Marcel Griaule (1930), famous French ethnologist who would change his career forever. Michel Leiris accompanied Griaule in the Dakar-Djibouti mission which lasted two years (1931-1933). The mission in Africa and his exploration of African tribes led to one of his greatest books called “Phantom Africa” (1934). Leiris’s presence and activities in different fields of human sciences made it difficult to place him in one movement or genre. Novels such as “Manhood” or “Rules of the game” are considered as autobiographical acts and labeled as literary works whose language is heavily influenced by surrealist’s linguistic innovations. On the other hand, some critics consider him an ethnographer because of his deep involvement in ethnography. His long stay in Africa and his study of African tribes gave birth to what many consider to be his masterpiece “Phantom Africa” (1934). By studying this work closely, we can clearly notice that it is not merely an ethnographic book on the African tribes. The poetic and literary language seems to haunt the text from the very beginning where he quotes from the eighteenth-century French author Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). However, his look towards the otherness and the relation established between the self and the otherness transform his work into a philosophical ethno-autobiography.

### **4. Conclusion**

Today Leiris’s name is linked to different movements and genres. Critics who have studied his writings closely have established a link between ethnography and poetry in his language and some like Michel Beaujour (1987) have even gone as far as calling him a poet-ethnographer. This situation puts the author in a *paratopic* position, in an impossible place and, at the same time, shows how the borders between different genres and movements could be destabilized. Could we conclude

that Leiris's whole project can be resumed into the autobiographical act? An autobiography which leads itself towards the ethnography of the self and the other?

**Keywords:** Ethnography, Michel Leiris, Literature

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