



COGNITIVE CONFORMITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN THE AGE OF AI: A POST-TRUTH AND PTSD ANALYSIS OF MENTAL PARITY IN LIONEL SHRIVER'S MANIA

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Abstract

This paper deals with the impact of machine intelligence in creating a climate of intellectual uniformity in Lionel Shriver's bleak novel *Mania*, where the tenets of Mental Parity call for compulsory equality of mental faculties across the entire population. The text reveals the scenario wherein enforced conformity leads to psychological effects akin to PTSD: confusion, social isolation, emotional distress, etc. The paper addresses how AI dictates and monitor systems work as a façade for mental oppression beneath the cover of fairness, thus obliterating uniqueness. It scrutinizes how post-truth concepts condition our culture while mocking discomfort concerning mental diversity, linguistic control, and the pressure to think alike. This brings together Michel Foucault's theories on communication-power, Freud's theory of mental repression, and Shoshana Zuboff's theory on surveillance capitalism to discuss how institutions and emotions are influenced when uniformity of thinking is enforced. The very concept of negotiating a culture that values emotional correctness and ideological purity-as Pearson and Darwin show-presents its own psychological burden.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Cognitive Conformity, Mental Parity, Lionel Shriver, Mania, Surveillance Capitalism, Post-Truth, Power, Discourse*

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1. Introduction

This evolves into a sharp, satirical critique as it delves into the psychological and cultural fallout of forced intellectual sameness. Set in a near-future world, the narrative explores a society ruled by a doctrine called 'Mental Parity,' which claims to value all minds equally in terms of thinking ability. In this society, even the smallest IQ differences are seen as unfair inequalities. What starts off as a seemingly quirky belief slowly morphs into a tool of oppression, enforcing sameness in intelligence and behavior, while suppressing cognitive uniqueness through AI and automated data systems. This controlled setting reflects for closed approach to many different aspects of psychological trauma-related phenomena such as PTSD; coping within the intense stress environment so experienced carries with it the added burden of losing some sense of control. Research originating from the Montreal Neurological Institute indicates that parts of the brain corresponding to memory definition, emotional management, and flexible thinking were affected by PTSD, manifesting as confusion, social withdrawal, and difficulty in determining complex ways of feeling. In Mania, they experience a kind of socially inflicted PTSD; the mental dullness and isolation induced by prescribed conformity echo the emotional struggles of one suffering from trauma. By repressing dissonance and complexity, the story imparts the heavy damage on the individual mind that strict ideological order inevitably incurs when it is revealed in the narrative of mind control, words imposed into rules, and emotions staged. At this juncture, most aspects of life are embedded in these artificial intelligence words, in predicting job prospects or the behavior of an individual. All these expand the content of automatic filtering, thus involving freedom, identity, and what might be left to individuality when truth itself becomes quite questionable. These anxieties, of course, are hyperbolically captured in fiction by Shriver's Mania. For it's not hard to guess from the experience of characters like Pearson Converse and her over intelligent child Darwin that compliance to institutionalism, language policing, and emotional regulations make for an environment.

The raised questions, however, are about what can be left of individuality when truth itself feels so questionable. All these anxieties, of course, are hyperbolically captured in fiction by Shriver's Mania. It is not hard to guess from the experience of characters like

Pearson Converse and her over intelligent child Darwin that language policing, institutional compliance, and emotional regulation make for an environment rather compulsively riddled with malady in their lives where independent thought becomes dangerous. The disorientation psychologically coupled with social alienation they experience gives an idea of what it costs when dissent and nuance are pushed under the rug for ideological stability.

This research delves into the mutual influences of artificial intelligence, psychological conformity, and political lies in *Mania*. It aims to answer:

- How does *Mania* portray AI as a vehicle for intellectual homogenization?
- What are the psychological effects of mental equality on self-identity and well-being?
- How does the novel articulate current fears about freedom of expression and thought?

In responding to these questions, the article uses an interdisciplinary approach. The discourse and theory of normalization Michel Foucault serves as a critical podium for understanding the institutional powers and ideologies at work in submission. Also, repression by (Freud, 1927) is applied to explain the internal affective toll from actions taken by these characters in responding to a repressive cognitive regime. In addition, the Zuboff theory of surveillance capitalisms situates the AI's role in shaping behavior and values. This paper argues that Shriver's *Mania* is, therefore, a critique of not only technophobia but also of a cultural appetite for simple equalities that flatten meaningful distinctions that people have. The novel thus warns against a future that limits intellectual expression in the name of fairness, and where at least some conformity is enforced not only by law but by algorithms and social pressure. In this respect, *Mania* substantially adds to establishing debate in contemporary literature and culture involving AI, censorship, and the psychological autonomy of the digital age.

2. Literature Review

The intersections of artificial intelligence with ideological control and psychological conformity are ever-deepening questions within literature, social theory, and cultural studies. Recently released in the troupe of dystopian fiction, it is politically concerned with matters of the post-truth, AI governance, and with the loss of individuality common in the works of Lionel Shriver *Mania*. This literature review inventories the relevant theoretical and scholarly lenses into this world as the background for subsequently elaborated and scrutinized arguments regarding *Mania* as both an exercise in literary satire and a work of socio-political critique.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Increases in value of PTSD as an analytical lens in literary studies can be mostly perceived in analyzing narratives of control, repression, and trauma. PTSD, a kind of mental disorder deeply ingrained in the frame of reference of being exposed to intense, grievous kinds of stress or life-threatening situations, tends to express itself through flashbacks, numbness of emotions, disorientation, and alienation from society. (Caruth, 1996) explores how maintains that trauma is not something that can be represented directly; it erupts in the form of fragmented memory and disjointed narrative structures—features these dystopian texts project. Neuroscientific experiments from the Montreal Neurological Institute (MNI) lend credence to this view, indicating that PTSD disrupts various brain sectors concerning emotional regulation and memory and the development of identity. In *Mania* (Shriver, 2024) dystopic texts, is one; the characters are placed under ideological surveillance and enforced conformity, which makes them nigh symptomatic of PTSD, thereby stressing systems psychologically damaging to dissenters and individuality. Therefore, PTSD serves as one powerful lens to reconstruct the emotional and cognitive costs of authoritarian environments. Any study situating pretenses of normalcy into systemic conformity and ideological enforcement must entice deep insights from discourse by Michel Foucault. In *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977) " he argues that "Modern power" less operates by direct coercion but rather "by institutions shaping norms and regulating behaviors." The Manifold manifests itself beyond the visible as soft control in schools and hospitals, bespeaks the education system, by the language codes of the media, and within the socially enforced Mental Parity doctrine. Surveillance and internalized discipline, according to Foucault, are applicable to the internal analogy that moderates speech and thought of characters in Shriver to avoid ideological censure.

Under the influence of Foucault, Freud's theory of repression may be said to find a particular home in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), which provides yet another perspective into the inner psychological conflict of an individual living in an authoritarian milieu. They repress instinctual impulses for the sake of social harmony, thereby allowing these impulses to assume neurosis and identity splitting. The latent rage, disorientation, and frustration of Pearson and Darwin in *Mania* that result from their attempts to comply with the imposed demand of conformity to reason rather than opposing their intellectual integrity indicate the psychological toll that, according to Freud, civilization exacts for itself. Repression against such evils is more likely to propel individuals into internal conflict and - perhaps - environmental acts of frustration or even repression-induced neuroses.

The hyperreality theory of (Baudrillard, 1981) argues that in *Simulacra and Simulation* is a second major tool in grasping how meaning itself is empty in *Mania*. In a hyperreal world where the power-relationships to represent worlds become stronger than

the really existing world, the making real itself becomes unreal. The euphemistic or sanitized substitutions of terms like smart versus stupid fit neatly into this phenomenon. These kinds of language reform police what can be said and literally skew perception to almost entirely taboo any real intellectual evaluation, demanding tawdry affirmations for sameness instead.

The AI underpinnings of surveillance capitalism become the subject of (Zuboff, 2019) study *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, exploring how algorithmic systems anticipate and shape human behavior for the purposes of the institution. The texts located above become relevant to the post-truth culture (Lyotard, 1984) suggest that a cultural shift is taking place whereby facts are becoming secondary to emotions, with intense vilification of dissenting views. Most definitely, these concerns find echoes in *Mania*, where questioning truth equates to redefining it on a systematic basis to accomplish a social agenda with the backing of emotional correctness and ideological safety. Lionel Shriver's earlier novels, especially *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, have undergone a reasonable number of critical studies concerning motherhood, media, and moral ambiguity, while critics paid little attention to *Mania*. And its satire-on-AI, post-truth discourse, and mental regulation-is timely, making it a worthy candidate for literary-theoretical discussions. Thus, this piece hopes to make a significant contribution by placing *Mania* in the discourse of mental-health politics and the obliteration of any notion of truth.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research utilizes an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines Foucault's concept of discourse and normalization, Freud's psychoanalytic theory of repression, Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality, and Zuboff's so-called surveillance capitalism this will demystify the workings of the psychological and ideological machinery that is at play within *Mania*. They show how assimilative cognition is actually constructed, internalized, and secured within a society of artificial intelligence and ideological orthodoxy.

3.1. Foucault: Discourse, Power, and Surveillance

The basis on which that individual's articulation is to be understood in *mania* as a disciplinary apparatus is through the discourse and power principles of Foucault. The argument that in addition to repression, power generates "truth" through institutional discourse was made in *The History of Sexuality* about 1978. Here, language substitutes for age-old measures of intelligence and merit by 'Mental Parity'. Terms like 'intelligent', 'smart', or 'stupid' have been supplanted by a euphemism-'alternative processing'- that is used in education, law, or the home. Such a practice places us under a cultural umbrella

where any question of cognitive equality will instantly be construed as hate speech. The very words "smart," "intelligent," or "stupid" are forbidding, while obvious euphemisms like "alternative processing" are packed in education, law, and home.

The panopticons of Foucault were adjusted to the design of societal surveillance in the concert. One steps into a school, into an office, and into a home merely to understand how one looks to all the activities for any indication of "smartest" behavior or discriminatory speech. Such self-surveillance is internalized; Pearson, for instance, self-censors his speech and thought to avoid professional or social consequences. This internal discipline is precisely what constitutes Foucauldian Power.

3.2. Freud: Repression and the Psychological Toll of Conformity

The psychic costs of enforced conformity are analyzed through Freud's theory of repression, particularly in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). According to Freud, social standards necessitate the constraint of instinctual drives, which brings about a neuropsychological conflict, anxiety, and even neuroses. Darwin and Pearson are found within emotional turmoil and conflicts over morals in a world where absolute intelligence has to be denied or hidden. Existential angst in Darwin comes into play in terms of deep frustrations at school, where even facts are manipulated for applicable purposes of inclusivity because of a very high psychic repression of individuality.

Pearson embodies a resistance-cooperation syndrome. This means that while her mind fights against significant ideology, she outwardly complies to promote the interests of her children and herself. Here, Freud elaborates on the division of conscious self and social superego, which creates compulsion by means of fear and guilt.

Baudrillard: Hyperreality and Language Distortion

In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), a full-fledged account is provided by Jean Baudrillard on the theory of hyperreality, which almost fully justifies the fevered study of the modes of manipulation of language and meaning in Mania. It is in hyperreality that representations become "realer" than reality itself, thus obliterating all objective ground of truth. The novel elaborates this carrying absurd linguistic reforms, such as forbidding "smart" and changing intelligence tests to "self-reflection inventories." Such semantic changes sever words from their reference, thus creating a world in which communication becomes performative rather than expressive.

Thus, Baudrillard's notion is pores also into the process where the society in Mania seems morally superior by collapsing distinctions. A person may be said to be as cognitively equal as he is because he really is this way or in any possible way, but because

such an appearance becomes socially and politically necessary. That is how reality is sacrificed to an hyperreal requirement of equity.

3.3. Zuboff: Surveillance Capitalism and Predictive Control

Last, Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) sets the context for artificial intelligence as a technology for the shaping of behaviors. AI systems, argues Zuboff, are not neutral tools; they are active agents in predicting and modifying behavior. AI, in *Mania*, is a silent enforcement of ideological purity. Though rarely referenced in the active voice, it is the source of pedagogical standards, of language guidelines, and of social policies that eradicate intellectual diversity.

But predictive governance is not simply an observer of action: it also works to anticipate and direct behavior through a restriction of acceptable thought. This creates a situation where conformity is instilled in a populace through fear and through an omnipresent reprogramming of social instincts.

4. Analysis

4.1. Psychological Trauma and PTSD in Mania

In *Mania* illustrate the psychological toll of ideological repression through symptoms highly reminiscent of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Pearson Converse and her gifted son, Darwin, are subjected to three-dimensional tortures in a world of appropriative language, enforced conformity, and wretched thoughts. This continued onslaught of psychological control leads to behaviors akin to emotional numbness, hypervigilance, and social withdrawal associated with PTSD. According to the research conducted by the Montreal Neurological Institute (MNI), areas of the brain concerned with memory, control of affect, and identity are affected in PTSD, which fits well with characters growing disorientation and alienation. Through these subjective experiences, the novel critiques a broader phenomenon in which cognitive suppression and enforced uniformity create collective psychological trauma. *Mania* therefore criticizes authoritarianism but also uncovers its deep emotional consequences on the human psyche.

4.2. AI, Conformity, and Identity in Mania

In *Mania*, AI works more as a tool of conformity than a rational malevolent killer. It is already involved in class, legal, and public discourses to perform a regulatory role that delineates modes of behavior, thought, and speech considered unacceptable. Whereas classic dystopian literature depicts the direct physical imposition of will by despots (as in

Orwell's 1984), Shriver's dystopia represents a much stealthier mode of control, working through AI-sanctioned policies and predictive surveillance.

This is best discussed with examples from the field of education, where Darwin's school has apparently outlawed not just the right answer but also the pursuit of its achievement." Such a curriculum may be directly or algorithmically regulated to eliminate any metric of comparison. Standardized tests are outlawed; IQ is dismissed as a harmful myth; teachers are instructed to treat all students as intellectually indistinguishable, despite obvious differences. Automation provides data systems the tools necessary to erase social differentiation.

4.3. Language Policing and Emotional Repression

The mania represents a space where the communication is not only happening in the ideal regulation. Through extreme linguistic reforms like those depicted by Lionel Shriver, words themselves become sites for power, surveillance, and self-policing. Terms once describing intelligence, distinction, or difference-such as "gifted," "bright," and "defective"-are replaced with alternatives like "alternative processing styles," stripping the lexicon of emotional significance, making it sterile.

Language policing serves two critical functions. First, it removes the words that can be used to recognize differences in intellect and, thereby, reinforces the principle of Mental Parity. It is the conditioning which implicitly affects public discourse and individual thought. From the Foucauldian viewpoint, it restrains what can be thought before it can be verbally expressed. Pearson and Darwin illustrated this restriction in how it generates guilt and confusion because the society denounces the difference in the minds of members, resulting in a conflict within.

This repression may explain the emotional toll exacted by such a regime. Characters suppress their inner thoughts and instincts because any admission of superiority or inferiority is perceived as discriminatory. Darwin, for example, is compelled to dull his own thoughts and conceal his insights due to his clear cognitive superiority relative to peers; his frustration manifests through emotional outbursts.

4.4. Identity Loss and Psychological Conformity

One of the most chilling consequences of the ideology of parity in mania is a systematic dismantling of one's personal identity. When society deems all minds to be supposed to be equal and forbids deviations from this norm, individuality loses all relevance-and almost acquires a subversive character. Shriver creates a world that does not employ any overt physical violence in order to erode identity, but rather through a rather

insidious process of psychological conditioning about socialization and emotional disaffection.

It is natural-born Darwin Converse, the most explicit example of forced psychological manipulation to be found. A very bright child, Darwin is expected to eventually dumb himself down; to put curbs on any natural curiosity. He learns that his gifts make others uncomfortable, that standing out is rude. Over the years, through this social feedback, it has become an unconscious mix-up for Darwin to identify who he is and who he needs to pretend to be. Where once his identity was marked out by mental acuity and inventiveness, constant self-censorship began to fracture it.

Pearson, too, faces an identity crisis-the internal process is slower. A mother and career woman and theorist, she acknowledges the absurdity of the doctrine of Mental Parity but is too compromised by societal expectations to resist overtly. While formerly endorsed by sound rationale and independence, her self-identity now erodes freely to compromise her language, actions, and emotional expressions into socially acceptable forms. Her inner voice becomes a battlefield between authentic and socially acceptable emotional expression.

4.5. Resistance, Satire, and the Role of the Outsider

In Lionel Shriver's *Mania*, among other things, the author uses satire as a form of resistance to deride something socially relevant, specifically the ethics of artificial intelligence (AI) and cognitive leveling. With humor, irony, and exaggeration, Shriver seems to suggest that AI brings about an erosion of human individuality and projects a foreboding future where technology dilutes the psyche and the essence of what it means to be human. The manner of satirical expression in this novel really is both a social critique and an attempt to question the reader's perspective on progress and dehumanization that can come with the weight of technological advancement.

Satire is Shriver's means to counter the emergent implications of AI seen by her as an inevitability and a threat. The cognitive leveling as found in *Mania* is a kind of social leveling the AI propels, where idiosyncratic human traits emotions, passions, personal identity are all reduced to one and the same level of value. Shriver uses satire to extend the pertinent critique increasingly with ridiculous caricatures of social life in which AI, under the claim of technological advancement, encroaches so much that autonomy seems stripped away from the actors. The best examples may be present in an obsessive performance by the impetuous protagonist in dealing with AI systems that reduce personal identity to obsolescence for the sake of convenience and security against rampant

technology. It is this kind of satire that hyperbolizes the irony of pursuing perfection at the expense of individuality.

5. Conclusion

One such novel is *Mania*, in which Lionel Shriver criticizes and discusses the impact of artificial intelligence on the modern world. She gives a great picture of the effects that cognitive leveling, bias from AI, and the loss of individualism hold. This has satirized the deep hollowness carried though by adopting AI-driven systems of hiring, education, and content sourcing, which adds to societal differences, but it also carries within itself an intimate emotional cost of coercive conformity. Shriver shows AI ethics suffocated by cancel culture and ideological policing right through the ways in which free expression and diverse thought have been limited by such forces in the name of the progressive compromise of morals in how AI ethics are confined. The novel critiques the framing of public opinion through algorithms' control, as the hazards of being a world citizen who is gradually losing much of his or her agency to technological systems.

However, *Mania* is critical but not against technology, for it is a critique of the unquestioned ideological programming and the automatic acceptance of AI without regard to social and ethical implications. Shriver thinks that people should question the systems in place to defy conformity whenever it undermines personal autonomy and human richness. Further research could advance the debate by focusing on the placing of AI in literary works-depicting and critiquing the technological advances "through the page." The theme of resistance through satire in literature also deserves full-length exploration, for it gives a powerful lens through.

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