
H-France Review Vol. 23 (January 2023), No. 13

Pauline Eaton, *Mothers Voicing Mothering? The Representation of Motherhood in the Novels and Short Stories of Marie NDiaye*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021. 255 pp. Bibliography, index, and series index. \$65.85 U.S. (pb) ISBN 9781800792227; \$64.90 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781800792241.

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While reception of many writers can err on the lopsided, strong critics with their own blindness enabling their particular insight as Paul de Man suggests,^[1] Marie NDiaye seems to be peculiarly susceptible to partial readings. Pauline Eaton is appropriately aware of the dangers of reducing the ambiguity of NDiaye's voices to one particular message or of limiting the plurality of interpretations—and yet of course it is hard to resist simplification when driven by a particular research question. This monograph, based on a doctoral thesis, addresses the important topic of mothers and mothering which has proved fertile soil for much recent work on women's writing. Eaton focuses in particular on *Rosie Carpe*, *La Sorcière*, *La Femme changée en bûche*, *En famille*, *La Cheffe*, *Mon Coeur à l'étroit* and three of the stories collected in *Tous mes amis*. The book covers a significant amount of ground with detailed examples and would be essential reading for any NDiaye scholar interested in this area.

Chapter one, "Mythologies and Models of Motherhood: Medea, Madonna and More" uses the "archetypes" of the Virgin Mary and Medea to seek intertextual relations between a couple of NDiaye works *Rosie Carpe* and *La Femme changée en bûche*, and three other examples of relatively contemporary female-authored prose fiction which feature mothers whose children die.^[2] Chapter two "The Good Mother, the Bad Mother and the Ordinary Devoted Mother" introduces Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott; selective summaries of the two child psychoanalysts provide an interpretive frame for most of the monograph. Chapter three "Mothers and Daughters: Suppression and Subjectivity" focuses on the relationship between mothers and adult daughters in NDiaye while chapter four "Counterpoint: Joy, Ambivalence and Success" suggests that later work by NDiaye is more open than earlier examples to the representation of maternal love and joy at least to some extent.

It seems to me a shame that many contemporary works on motherhood in some ways replicate a long-standing (particularly acute since the eighteenth century) patriarchal insistence on the essential mother-child (in particular the daughter here) dyad—and treat the larger social context and indeed fathers, present or absent, as relatively incidental. Fathers are allowed only brief excursions, almost an afterthought, in this monograph (notably pp. 221, 235-8). One alternative take on normative motherhood (in counterpoint to the would-be universalism of some psychoanalytic work), which I summarise with indecent brevity, is that the rise of the bourgeoisie,

needing to be differentiated from both the decadent aristocracy and the lower orders, led to a particular historically located model of a virtuous family in which fathers provided economic support and could take up a socio-political role outside the home while mothers tended their offspring, reproducing the labour force and values of capitalism, and managed the household. This division of labour has been challenged at certain points such as during wars, that saw women living without men, who were often drawn into the workforce, and thus in need of childcare. And it has been reinforced at others, notably after the world wars when women were pushed out of work and encouraged to focus on reproduction both physically and socially. The danger of introducing psychoanalysis, as Eaton does from chapter two onwards, in relation to literary texts is that the authoritative analyst may become the voice of universal truth which the critic seeks to channel in order to analyse the characters as if real individuals (if not patients). Shoshana Felman alerts readers to the loss of subtlety, and indeed literariness, by invoking and critiquing Freudian readings of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*—an ambiguous tale of absent father figures, disturbed women in loco parentis and endangered or dangerous and corrupt children which treads on a fantastical borderline.[3] This novella and the history of its interpretation might indeed be suggested as another intertext for NDiaye's stories of adult-child interaction. Winnicott's seminal work (and Klein's) is cited in Eaton in modern editions which obscures the fact that he was publishing and lecturing to housewives on the radio in the 1950s, the heyday of compulsory (heterosexuality and) domesticity for the great middle classes. The focus here is very much on "the mother" and "the daughter." While the terms are sometimes in the plural, it is the singular which predominates. This encourages a decontextualized account of examples of biological mothers in NDiaye—economic issues, class and even race (a focus of much critical work on NDiaye) are largely in the background. Fathers, father-figures and mother-figures only enter the picture tangentially.

Personally, I find the issue of class impossible to avoid when delving into the trajectories and mental life of NDiaye's characters. Eaton makes a rare concession to the social in investigating the intersection of race and motherhood in *Ladivine*, but although she mentions that (Malinka's or) Clarisse's mother is a cleaner, she insists that the issue of race is the only one at stake: "the real reason for Clarisse's repression of her mother is that her mother is black, and she blames her for this hated mixed-race heritage" (p. 185); "Clarisse's explicit rejection of her mother because of the colour of her skin" (p. 185); "Ladivine's daughter excises her mother from her social and family life because she is black and for no other reason" (p. 239). This might be considered a significant over-simplification of a complex and subtle long novel in which there is only one word, uttered by Clarisse's racist boss when she is working as a waitress, referring to Ladivine senior as black—and thus utterly undesirable as a customer in the café. Achieving whiteness in the novel, as Malinka becomes Clarisse, is inextricably tied up with social advancement and what initially seems like liberation from confinement. It is only after the departure of her adored, unfaithful middle-class husband that Clarisse adopts a lover with whom she has a sense of fraternity—whose skin is white but who is abjectly proletarian. He is the first person whom she feels she can introduce to her working-class (as well as black) mother, and that hospitable encounter allows both mother and lover to shine as human beings. Clarisse's daughter (whose loyalty lies with her father) rejects her mother's lover—clearly on grounds of extreme class unsuitability—and thus indirectly brings about her mother's death (or so she fears on an unconscious level at least). The important issue of race, moreover, cannot simply be reduced to a personal response (easy to condemn) on the part of a mixed-race child—that child is movingly located in the novel in a society where the fall into racial hostility is only ever a moment away.[4]

Marie NDiaye is generally recognised as a complex writer; but one of the least analysed facets of this complexity is her wit and humour. Eaton sets up the model reader of NDiaye as a judge—to approve or disapprove of the behaviour or demeanour of mothers and to adjudicate between the imagined perspectives of mothers and daughters. For example, when Clarisse is overwhelmed by love for her baby and proceeds to devote herself to humdrum maternal tasks such as preparing food, Eaton comments, “This displacement activity absolves her from accepting the implications of her love. In denying the truth of the event that has occurred, and in refusing to recognise fully the reality of the love that she experiences, Clarisse fails to enter completely into her new maternal subjectivity” (pp. 220-1). This is a harsh judgement on the character—arguably made by a critic using a Winnicottian model of an “ordinary devoted mother” (instead of the more familiar “good enough mother”) rather than the author. Eaton sometimes expands “approval” to include empathy—perhaps more valuable than approval—even without empathy it could be argued (as it is by Eaton) that one of the strengths of NDiaye’s writing is its representation of characters and situations rarely treated in literary fiction. Equally, there are other potential reading modes, especially when readers encounter figures seen as grotesque such as Mme Carpe in *Rosie Carpe* including that of the Flaubertian who is at least entertained if not amused by the descriptions whether in the small details or the more extreme flights of fancy. And Mme Carpe, seen here as the most demonized of mothers, could also be read as a satirical representation of the way in which our capitalist society demands that women stay eternally young even as they age. Women are not only mothers.

I was particularly struck by the analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1988) as a key intertext in chapter one. Eaton’s interpretation revolves around the point that, even if a mother is convinced that by killing her child(ren) she is saving them from a terrible life, infanticide robs the child of its autonomy, of its opportunity to decide for itself... This might well be a reasoned point made in court, even in the court of public opinion, but nevertheless, even if one were analysing real life examples rather than works of literature, there may be approaches other than the one of strictly individual rationality—the madness of the context and of the subject in that context. Morrison’s multi-layered novel steeps its reader in a toxic environment in which a mother believes she must kill her beloved children. The shackles of racial chattel slavery lie heavy in the novel even on those who are not or no longer slaves but remain enslaved to racial hierarchy. The reduction of human beings to beasts, whether masters are exceptionally cruel or apparently relatively benign, has a psychic as well as a physical impact—and when Sethe discovers she has been studied to determine which of her characteristics are animal and which human, the aftermath is long.

Eaton takes up the argument attributed to Lydie Moudileno that there is a gulf between the literariness of NDiaye’s prose style and the quotidian mediocrity of some of her characters, to argue repeatedly that there is a “superior” narrative voice which seems to despise the less-cultured protagonists of the novels. It seems to me that it is rather (some) critics who despise these protagonists—but that this “snobbishness” (p.48) is far from an inevitable reading effect or reader’s position. Eaton’s overall mission is described as a rejection of the critical view of “NDiaye’s mothers as exceptionally awful rather than on a continuum of normal motherhood, whose difficulties are foregrounded by NDiaye’s expressed preference to pushing her own characters to extremes” (p. 100), yet she often lapses into disapproval—at one point referring to “NDiaye’s usual obfuscating ambivalence” (p. 228) about motherhood and even more damningly to NDiaye’s “demonizing of the mother” (p. 209).

The perspective of assuming that analysis of “the mother” is a consistent concern in NDiaye, leads to a reading that is strong in its collection and investigation of examples of mothers in her oeuvre. However, it can lead to a blindness about the specificity of any one character, and more importantly the context which is painted around her. Another critic might take the view that it is the portrayal of hostile societies and groups which is at least as interesting and significant as the aberrant behaviour or thoughts of those in subaltern positions. In my analysis of NDiaye’s “La Gourmandise,” a short story which could have featured in this study, I argue that the female protagonist, however irresponsible, is set in a fascinating—and, importantly, humorous—portrait of a narrow and repressive society.[5] Antoinette’s desire to escape for moments, to have her own space and to indulge herself, away from husband and children, is one that many readers could surely recognise. The fact that the mother in this story is not an attractive figure, makes this identification, if the reader does empathise, a more important leap of the imagination of the kind fiction can sometimes enable, seeing something of “us” even in someone who is not a “person like us.” (I say this on the assumption that the typical NDiayean reader is a lover of reading with cultural resources not available to all of her characters.)

Eaton honestly reveals from the very beginning how tempting she has found it to relate NDiaye’s descriptions to her own maternal experiences. She cites an episode from *Rosie Carpe* and comments, “This particular movement, made by a small baby, but showing such conscious determination and such force that it is shocking, is one I recognized from my own early days as a mother [...] This tiny detail awoke the memory of a uniquely stressful and difficult time in my life, when I was discovering what being a mother might mean to me. At this point in my initial reading I identified completely with Rosie. I probably also leapt to the conclusion that NDiaye must have shared my experience and that she wrote as a mother” (p. 1). Readers of this monograph (including those who are also mothers) may well empathise with Eaton’s subjective and impassioned working through of NDiaye’s particularly challenging while always elegant representations (and the elegant style clearly grates on some who might forgive it in Flaubert) of mothers and motherhood. NDiaye’s subtle use of indirect free speech and her deployment of polysemic language, including numerous free-floating signifiers, in relation to subjects often historically under-represented *as subjects* are well worth infinite analysis.

NOTES

[1] Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Methuen and Co., second edition, 1983).

[2] Eaton uses *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990) to elaborate theories of intertextuality; I shall note only a small error that the Introduction, which she cites frequently, should in fact be attributed to Still and Worton rather than Worton and Still. The choice to switch the usual alphabetical order on the cover is open to misunderstanding.

[3] Shoshana Felman, “Turning the screw of interpretation,” in *Yale French Studies 55-6 Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed., Shoshana Felman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977): 94-207.

[4] For my rather different take on *Ladivine*, see for example my *Derrida and Other Animals: the Boundaries of the Human* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), chapter six or “Being a

Guest: From Uneasy Tourism to Welcoming Dogs in Marie NDiaye's *Ladivine*" in *Hospitalities: Transitions and Transgressions, North and South* ed. Merle A. Williams (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2020), chapter nine. For other critics' readings of this and other works by NDiaye, see Eaton's excellent bibliography.

[5] Marie NDiaye, 'La Gourmandise', in J. P. Gén  and Marie NDiaye, *La Gourmandise (3 Les P ch s capitaux)* (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1996) : 46-63; "The Solitary Pleasure of a *M re de famille* OR Disorderly Eating in Marie NDiaye's 'La Gourmandise,'" in *Disorderly Eating in Contemporary Women's Writing*, ed., Shirley Jordan and Judith Still, *Journal of Romance Studies*, 20:2 (2020): 365-89.

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ISSN 1553-9172