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FANTASTIC HESITATION,
PHENOMENA AND
THE MALE CHARACTER
IN MARIE NDIAYE'S
THREE STRONG WOMEN

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that the male protagonist of the second story of Marie NDiaye's *Three Strong Women* (*Trois femmes puissantes*) can be viewed as a fantastic character. The protagonist's hesitation in the face of unsettling phenomena – both the external world and the traumatic events from his past – constitutes the central pivot of his construction. The fantastic characteristics of Rudy Descas, whose voice is predominant in the text, reveal the multidimensionality of the supernatural in NDiaye's work, as the boundaries between the notion of the “character” and the “phenomenon” are not clearly defined. The analysis is based on literary theories concerning the nineteenth century fantastic, the new fantastic and the African fantastic.

KEYWORDS: NDiaye, fantastic, protagonist, phenomenon, hesitation.

As a literary genre, the fantastic – *le fantastique* – enjoyed its greatest popularity in France in the nineteenth century. Critics like Pierre-Georges Castex (1951: 13–24), Valérie Tritten (2001: 7) and Denis Mellier (2000: 48) emphasize that the development of the fantastic constituted a reaction to the Age of Enlightenment, the omnipresent rationalism and the disdain for any form of supernatural beliefs or superstitions. Indeed, the genre in question is based on the introduction of a malevolent phenomenon into a realistic framework. The presence of the phenomenon deeply and permanently unsettles the character (Malrieu 1992: 49). Faced with the disruptive element, the protagonist wavers between the rational and irrational explanation of the new reality. Hence, the notion of hesitation is crucial in defining the genre in question. According to Tzvetan Todorov: “The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (1973: 25).

Undoubtedly, the perception of the fantastic element by both the character and the reader has changed over the centuries. In regard to the classical, nineteenth-century fantastic, certain critics insisted on classifying the phenomena. For instance, Roger Caillouis enumerated their twelve types, including among others: phantom, vampire, lost soul,

pact with demon, inanimate objects coming to life (1966: 36–39). In contrast, Louis Vax (1965: 61) argued that anything can constitute a disruptive element, since the fantastic is subjective and its nature depends on the character's perspective. As far as the modern fantastic is concerned, the phenomenon had to evolve to meet the needs of the contemporary reader. In his preface to the anthology *L'oreille contre les murs*, the French writer and theorist Jean-Pierre Andrevon uses the term "new fantastic" – *le nouveau fantastique* – in order to establish the distance between modern creation and the canonical texts, in which the supernatural appears oversimplified and naïve (1980: 7–9). In his view, the supernatural should be situated in everyday life, which is banal and monotonous, in order to assure a greater credibility. Examples of such phenomena, frequent in Andrevon's texts, are the burning environmental issues of today's world, such as: global warming, overpopulation, pollution, extinction of species. To all that one must add the voices of theorists studying non-French, non-European fantastic. In analyzing Latin-American and Chinese texts, Roger Bozzetto observes the absence of incompatibility of the supernatural and the real worlds, which interpenetrate each other (2004: 114). Similarly, in regard to the African fantastic, Pierre Martial Abossolo evokes the omnipresence of magic in everyday life: for a protagonist brought up in a traditional, rural environment, supernatural occurrences are completely ordinary, whereas a character ignorant of African traditions will perceive them as fantastic (2015: 68). Thus, both the adaptation of the phenomenon to the contemporary reader's reality and adopting a non-European or cross-cultural perspective open new interpretative possibilities for the fantastic as a literary genre.

The notion of the fantastic is frequently evoked by critics speaking of Marie NDiaye's writing. According to Dominique Rabaté, who examines the uncanny – *l'étrangeté* – in the writer's work, it lies in "the constant discrepancy between what happens and what should have happened, between the wish and the reality, between the desire and the brutality of intersubjective aggression"¹ (2008: 15). Shirley Jordan argues that "The fantastic in her [Marie NDiaye's – A.S.] writing is pervasive and extraordinarily diverse, incorporating an extensive repertoire of familiar devices and tropes drawn from a range of conventions (...), unsettling too precisely because it refuses to settle into any model of the fantastic" (2010: 97). Jordan refers to Todorov's principle of hesitation as the most important element of NDiaye's "light fantastic" (2010: 100), specifying that the author herself classifies her novels in between two genres: realistic and fantastic (Jordan 2010: 98). Indeed, her protagonists – usually women – are outsiders, struggling to belong in a family or a community. As Jordan points out, NDiayien fantastic is the art of not saying, indirectness; it is also intellectualized and politicized, as it tackles social issues (Jordan 2010: 99).

Similarly, Michael Sheringham observes that the author "places together very different patterns of understanding—the real and the fabulous (or the fantastic), science and folklore (or superstition), the European and the non-European"² (2009: 175). The non-European elements of NDiaye's texts result from her unique, "both central and other" (Migraine-George 2013: 89) position in the literary field. Born in Pithiviers, the

¹ Fr. "ce décalage constant entre ce qui arrive et ce qui aurait dû se produire, entre le souhait et la réalité, entre le désir et la brutalité des agressions intersubjectives".

² Fr. "fait coexister des modes de compréhension très différents—le réel et le fabuleux (ou le fantastique), la science et le folklore (ou la superstition), l'europpéen et le non-europpéen".

writer is of Senegalese descent on the paternal side, yet her father and her French mother separated early on. Given her rootedness in France, the author identifies as a French writer (Cazenave 2003: 224). Rabaté considers including her among African Francophone writers unsubstantiated, due to her French upbringing and cultural background (2008: 25). However, one cannot ignore the importance of African-inspired motifs in her writing. Commenting on *Three Strong Women*, Lylian Kesteloot notes that: “Even the fantastic (others would say animism) is present everywhere, in the unsettling form of malevolent, aggressive birds, more or less totemic of certain characters. (...) I cannot see how a French writer would introduce such details in a novel about Africa”³ (2009: 9012). Therefore, it seems that Marie NDiaye's identity as a French author is enriched by her Senegalese origins, which inspire her to explore and incorporate African elements in her writing.

First published in France in 2009, *Three Strong Women (Trois femmes puissantes)*⁴ received the Prix Goncourt in the same year and was also a finalist for the 2013 Man Booker International Prize. It tells the stories of three Senegalese women – Norah, Fanta and Khady Demba – connected in different ways to both Africa and France, who struggle to maintain their dignity and sanity in impossible circumstances. As Deborah B. Gaensbauer observes: “Their experiences of dispossession, elucidated by means of an innovative use of the literary fantastic, are reflective of the traumatically dehumanizing, unequal power relations governing contemporary women's migration struggles” (2014: 1). Whereas in the first and the third story, the extradiegetic/heterodiegetic narrator adopts the point of view of the female characters – Norah and Khady Demba – in an internal focalization, the second story is told from the perspective of Fanta's husband: Rudy Descas. The Frenchman is a medieval literature teacher in Dakar, where he meets and eventually marries Fanta, who is also a teacher in the same school. He has many doubts about his family's past – as the reader finds out later on, Rudy's father, Abel Descas, killed an associate and then committed suicide in a Senegalese prison. After being fired for attacking one of his students, who calls him a “murderer's son”, Rudy moves back to France with his wife and son, Djibril. Thus, Fanta is forced to become a housewife, as she is not authorized to teach in France, whereas Rudy has to work as a kitchen salesman. The focalization in the text and the constant hesitation of the protagonist, who is not sure to remember his own life story, allows to demonstrate Rudy's fantastic characteristics and the distribution of the actantial roles of the “character” and the “phenomenon” in the text.

According to Joël Malrieu (1992: 53–63), the fantastic protagonist displays a set of typical characteristics. Similar traits can be observed in the neo-fantastic character (Gadomska 2012: 50–65). Firstly, the protagonist is virtually always a man and his name does not appear in the title of the text. This indicates the insignificance of the protagonist and the mightiness of the phenomenon. The second story of *Three Strong Women*

³ Fr. “Il n'y manque même pas le fantastique (d'aucuns diraient l'animisme) présent partout sous la forme inquiétante d'oiseaux maléfiques et agressifs plus ou moins totémiques de certains personnages (...) Je vois mal un écrivain français introduire de tels détails dans un roman sur l'Afrique”.

⁴ The English translations of the text used in this paper are taken from John Fletcher's translation (Ndiaye Marie, 2013, *Three Strong Women*, John Fletcher (trad.), London: MacleHose Press). Translations of other citations are mine.

does not have a separate title, but it is evident that the main title highlights the heroine's resilience: Rudy's name is of little importance. The fantastic male character is often anonymous, average and banal: he is both an "everyman" and a "nobody". After moving back to France, Rudy becomes a failure in his own eyes: his wife cheats on him and tries to leave him, while his meaningless job is a continual source of frustration. The protagonist does not seem to understand the reasons behind this sudden life change, "having long believed that his lack of shrewdness and cunning was amply compensated for by his singular sensibility, the spiritual, idealistic and romantic scale of his ambition, by its very imprecision" (NDiaye 2013: 94). The protagonist seems torn between feeling exceptional and worse than everyone else. Rudy makes one mistake after another in his job, which he hates: he believes to be destined for a more meaningful profession. At the same time, he keeps comparing himself to stronger and more successful men, who in his mind are always a threat. His hostility towards his boss Manille, who had sexual relations with Fanta, is easily understandable. However, Rudy's insistence that Gauquelan, the local sculptor, committed "a cruel act of mockery" (NDiaye 2013: 83) creating a statue with enormous genitalia and a face resembling Rudy's, indicates the level of the protagonist's delusion. Pathologically sensitive and over-interested in his feelings like a typical neo-fantastic character (Gadomska 2012: 53), Rudy has an incessant, chaotic internal monologue, above all obsessing about his relationship with Fanta:

(...) l'amour qu'il lui portait, à cette femme secrète, l'effrayait.

Car elle était étrange, trop étrange pour lui peut-être, et il s'épuisait à démontrer qu'il n'était pas réduit à ce qu'il avait l'air d'être, qu'il n'était pas simplement un ex-professeur de lycée revenu s'installer dans sa province natale mais un homme que le sort avait élu pour s'acquitter d'un destin original.

Il lui aurait suffi, à lui, Rudy Descas, il s'en serait contenté avec gratitude, de n'être chargé de nul autre devoir que celui d'aimer Fanta.

Mais il avait l'impression que c'était trop peu pour elle (...) (NDiaye 2009: 109–110).

(...) the love he felt for this unfathomable woman put the fear of God into him.

Because she was strange, too strange for him, perhaps, and he was wearing himself out trying to prove that he was a lot more than he seemed, that he was not just an ex-schoolteacher who had come back to live in the region of his birth, but a man chosen by fate to bring something truly original to fruition.

For Rudy Descas, to have no other duty than that of loving Fanta would have sufficed, indeed he would have welcomed such an obligation with open arms.

But he had the feeling that it was too little for her (...) (NDiaye 2013: 88).

The passage cited above draws attention to the second set of traits displayed by the fantastic and neo-fantastic character, namely his social, emotional and intellectual isolation. As Jordan points out, in NDiaye's novels, "the most recurring thematic to which the fantastic is applied is that of ostracism" (Jordan 2010: 99). Rudy's emotional isolation already begins in his childhood: his mother, strangely obsessed with angels, prefers a little blond neighbour over her own son. The boy with "golden legs" relieves *maman*

“of the boredom which Rudy’s simple presence failed to break and perhaps even accentuated and increased” (NDiaye 2013: 136). As an adult, Rudy realizes that that boy was in fact Manille, his boss, which only intensifies his hostility towards the latter. Rudy evokes the solitude and lack of friends in his “very isolated” life, stating that “their friends (who were they exactly, what were they called, where had they all gone?) had drifted away as Fanta started to turn her back on him” (NDiaye 2013: 85). The protagonist, however, does not seem to mind the isolation, as he only needs his wife and his son, whom he sees as “a mysterious and seductive extension” of Fanta (NDiaye 2013: 85). His attitude agrees with Malrieu’s statement that the fantastic protagonist is always more or less antisocial and that he leads a superficial, idle existence (1992: 56–57). As Rudy proves to adhere to the image of a typical fantastic character, further analysis will focus on his relationship with Fanta – the “phenomenon” – marked with doubt and hesitation.

On the surface, Rudy seems to have absolute power over his wife: she is the one who is truly ostracized, as Rudy lied to her about her job prospects in France and “on the pretext of loving her he had imprisoned Fanta in a fortress of dreary, cold love” (NDiaye 2013: 123). However, from Rudy’s perspective, Fanta appears mentally stronger. When they have a fight, Rudy torments himself, as he cannot be sure if he really insulted Fanta. Rabaté mentions that “a number of Marie NDiaye’s characters no longer know if they really are speaking or if they are just formulating in their heads the thoughts that thus acquire the disturbing ability to uncontrollably exit their inner selves (...)” (2008: 23)⁵. Rudy seems to be one of those characters, as he cannot separate illusion from reality:

Tu peux retourner d’où tu viens. (...)

Il était impossible qu’il lui eût dit cela.

Il le croyait, songea-t-il, parce qu’il avait cette propension à se sentir toujours plus blâmable qu’il ne l’était, à s’accuser du pire vis-à-vis d’elle (...)

La seule pensée qu’elle pût obéir à ces mots affreux lui causa un afflux de sueur à la face et dans le cou.

Puis, presque aussitôt, il fut parcouru de frissons.

Avec un désespoir d’enfant il souhaite alors s’arracher à ce rêve interminable, ce rêve monotone et froid dans lequel Fanta allait le quitter parce qu’il le lui aurait, sans pouvoir se le rappeler, en quelque sorte ordonné, et alors que rien de plus horrible ne pouvait lui tomber dessus (...) (NDiaye 2009: 114–115).

“You can go back where you came from” (...)

It was not possible that he had said that to her.

He thought he had – or so he believed – because of his tendency to feel more guilty than he really was, to accuse himself when she was concerned of the worst (...)

⁵ Fr. “Nombre de personnages féminins de Marie NDiaye ne savent plus s’ils parlent réellement ou s’ils se contentent de formuler dans leur tête les pensées qui acquièrent, alors, l’inquiétant pouvoir de sortir hors de leur for intérieur sans plus de contrôle (...)”.

The sweat poured down his face and neck at the very thought that she might indeed carry out what he had so horrendously told her to do.

Then, almost immediately, he began to shiver violently.

With a child-like feeling of despair he sought to extricate himself from that cold, interminable, monotonous dream in which Fanta was about to leave him because he had in a way – even if he could not remember the exact words – ordered her to, and because nothing more horrible could now befall him (NDiaye 2013: 92–93).

Long, chaotic sentences translate the character's troubled mind, emotional liability and compulsive analyses of his own psyche. Rudy constantly talks and dissects his past experiences, of which he is never sure. Fanta, on the other hand, punishes her husband by emotionally shutting down: she rebels in silence. In many ways, she can be viewed as a fantastic phenomenon. As Malrieu argues, a fantastic phenomenon is “merely a specific expression or a materialization of the protagonist's aspirations, fantasies or anxiety” (1992: 39)⁶. In the traditional fantastic of the second half of the nineteenth century, a woman usually represented a demonic phenomenon, leading the male protagonist to temptation and death. This negative, misogynist vision of a woman prevails in neo-fantastic texts written by men (Gadomska 2012: 70–71). However, in the analyzed text, Fanta is portrayed as a victim of Rudy's egoism, impulsiveness and poor life choices: therefore, her image is by no means negative.

Rudy's anxiety over their marriage is only reinforced by Fanta's behaviour. When the protagonist constantly telephones his wife instead of focusing on work, Fanta refuses to talk to him: she either does not answer the phone or only utters a few words with a “controlled, metallic perfection of her mastery of the French accent” (NDiaye 2013: 96). Her mutism brings to mind another Joël Malrieu's statement, that “the phenomenon gazes and does not speak” (1992: 96)⁷. This silence, resulting from Fanta's sense of vulnerability and injustice, as well as her concise manner of speaking, are unbearable for the male character, convinced that “even if he beat her up and pushed her face down hard on the rough floor she would still have said nothing” (NDiaye 2013: 100–101).

Moreover, Fanta appears to control Rudy's surroundings in a supernatural way. In her husband's eyes, Fanta is “not like other human beings” (NDiaye 2013: 88). When the couple is attacked by aggressive dogs, she remains perfectly calm, adamant in the face of danger. Her peculiarity is visible when Rudy compares her to a bird: in Dakar, she seems to have “winged” ankles that let her fly above the ground (NDiaye 2013: 101). The uncanny connection between a bird and a human character seems to be the leitmotif of *Three Strong Women*; it also appears in other Marie NDiaye's works, such as *Les Grandes Personnes* or *La Sorcière* (Zimmermann 2013: 293). In France, Fanta's “winged ankles” become “leaden” (NDiaye 2013: 102) as she becomes in a way imprisoned in the house. However, as Gaensbauer notes: “Although Fanta is trapped for the moment in a geo-social trough exacerbated by racial and gender chauvinism, NDiaye appears to suggest by means of the multicultural connotations of Fanta's perceived shape-shifts that

⁶ Fr. “qu'expression concrète, ou la matérialisation des aspirations, des fantasmes ou des angoisses du personnage”.

⁷ Fr. “Le phénomène regarde et ne parle pas”.

she may be better poised to recover her independence and resist the consequences of the enforced uprooting from Dakar than Rudy” (2014: 10).

Indeed, Fanta does not only resemble a bird: when she can no longer “fly” on her own, she sends a real bird to convey a message to her husband. After the fight, Rudy is followed and attacked by a vengeful buzzard:

Point n'était besoin, Fanta.

Elle ne fut d'abord qu'une tache noire parmi d'autres, loin au-dessus de lui dans le ciel laiteux, puis il entendit et reconnut son cri hargneux, véhément, et il comprit, à la voir piquer vers lui, qu'elle l'avait reconnu également. (...)

De profil elle l'observait, inflexible et droite, de son œil jaspé, mauvais.

Il fit demi-tour et s'éloigna sur le chemin aussi vite qu'il le pouvait.

L'angoisse, la chaleur l'éblouissaient.

Allait-il maintenant jamais, se demanda-t-il, allait-il pouvoir sortir de sa voiture sans que l'oiseau vindicatif s'acharnât à vouloir lui faire payer ses vieux torts ? (Ndiaye 2009: 236)

“There was no need, Fanta...”

It was at first only a black spot amongst others high above him in the milky sky. Then he heard and recognised its bitter, aggressive shriek and, when he saw it diving towards him, realised it had recognised him, too. (...)

Rigid and erect, it looked at him askance, its mottled eye full of menace.

He did a three-point turn and drove away along the track as fast as he could.

The heat was stifling. He was in anguish.

Was he ever now, he wondered, was he ever now going to be able to get out of his car without that vindictive bird pursuing him relentlessly over his old misdeeds? (Ndiaye 2013: 195)

Rudy is certain that the buzzard was sent by his wife in order to punish him. In the French text, the buzzard – *la buse* – is feminine, which may indicate that Fanta actually transforms into the bird, as Gaensbauer suggests in the citation above. The connection between Fanta and the bird seems totemic in its nature. According to James Frazer, totemism “is an intimate relation which is supposed to exist between a group of kindred people on the one side and a species of natural or artificial objects on the other side, which objects are called the totems of the human group” (1968: 3–4). The buzzard, a bird that lives both in Senegal and in France, also has a symbolic meaning in shamanism. In *Rencontre avec votre animal totem* (2015), Elke Kirchner and Phillip Kansa define the buzzard as an animal that allows one to develop a comprehensive view of one's life, understand one's past, clearly see and interpret the present and the future. This line of thought would be in accordance with Rudy's feelings, as he starts to remember events from his past while escaping from the bird. Another, rather obvious interpretation of the phenomenon in question would be that it represents Fanta's frustration, anger and desire to break free.

At first, the reader is not sure if the buzzard does not constitute a product of Rudy's imagination. However, Djibril, Rudy's six-year-old son, also sees the bird "in the kind of realistic intrusion into the fantastic in NDiaye's work that complicates the reader's assumption that apparently hallucinatory events and responses are the troubled workings of an individual psyche" (Gaensbauer 2014: 9). Therefore, the bird appears to be real, but its presence does not influence all characters in the same way. As stated by Abossolo on the African fantastic, "as far as supernatural African characters are concerned, the problem is not their existence or non-existence, but the capacity to identify them and to perceive their activity" (2015: 133)⁸. Djibril has a symbiotic relationship with his mother, as well as a distant and distrustful attitude towards his father. In a desperate attempt to keep Fanta from going away, Rudy collects Djibril from school, because he is sure that she would not leave the child behind. In this context, it is not surprising that the boy is not afraid or perturbed by the buzzard: his mother's totemic animal is protective of him and would never cause him any danger. As her son, because of his Senegalese origins, he might also understand things that are hidden from Rudy. In this regard, Abossolo argues: "As a living creature cannot consist only of what is evident, it must be recognized to have the capacity of moving and metamorphosing depending on the circumstances. (...) [I]n Africa, there are facts that cannot be rationally explained" (2015: 182)⁹. The child also seems to be the key to the surprisingly optimistic ending of the story. When Rudy wants to leave Djibril at his mother's house, he finds there a little blond boy, whom his mother uses as an angel model. At that time, the protagonist realizes that Djibril (whose name is an Arabic form of the name Gabriel, one of the archangels and the bearer of revelation to Islamic prophets), is being ostracized, just like Fanta and himself in his childhood. Whereas, typically, in the fantastic the protagonist is always weaker than the phenomenon, which eventually leads to the degradation or death of the former (Gadomska 2012: 55), the analyzed text culminates with Rudy running over the buzzard and Fanta being able to smile again (NDiaye 2013: 213). Paradoxically, the phenomenon does not destroy the character – on the contrary, it forces him to face his past and to understand his present.

Overall, the second story of Marie NDiaye's *Three Strong Women* can be interpreted using the fantastic and neo-fantastic theoretical framework. Rudy Descas seems to be an adequate example of the fantastic character: male, solitary, average and profoundly hesitant, almost on the verge of madness. Rudy represses painful memories from his past: the murder and suicide committed by his father, his mother's negligence, his own violent outbursts towards his students and his wife. The hesitation that he constantly feels stems from his traumatized self, but also from being tormented and pushed further into despair by the disturbing events. On the other hand, Fanta initially acts as a typical fantastic phenomenon. She remains silent, but omnipresent: she haunts Rudy's thoughts and she sends the vengeful buzzard to persecute him. However, although at first it is not clear for the character nor the reader, Fanta's actions are beneficial for Rudy: he finally reconnects with his son and finds peace of mind. In this way, NDiaye's fantastic is innovative, as it

⁸ Fr. "Au niveau des personnages surnaturels africains, le problème ne se pose pas en termes d'existence ou de non existence, mais en termes de capacité de les identifier et de percevoir leur action".

⁹ Fr. "L'être vivant ne pouvant se constituer uniquement de ce qui tombe sous les sens, il faut lui reconnaître la capacité de se mouvoir et de se métamorphoser selon les circonstances. (...) il y a en Afrique des faits qui échappent à l'explication rationaliste".

introduces a positive fantastic phenomenon. What is more, Fanta is undoubtedly meant to be the true heroine of the second story of *Three Strong Women*: through Rudy's eyes, the reader can see her isolation and despair after having emigrated to France. Therefore, Marie NDiaye's skilful use of fantastic conventions and her "art of not saying" enable a deeper understanding of both characters and their struggles.

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