

Andrew Asibong. *Marie NDiaye: Blankness and Recognition*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2013. 245pp.

Andrew Asibong undertakes the difficult task of analyzing Marie NDiaye's work as a whole, and it's not a modest endeavour since this rather prolific author has published many novels, short stories, theater plays, and texts for children. Asibong's monograph, which is organized into four chapters, includes thirty plot synopses of NDiaye's texts as well as a rich introduction and conclusion.

Recipient of the most important French literary award in 2009, the Prix Goncourt, for her *Trois femmes puissantes* (*Three Strong Women*), Marie NDiaye is among the most intriguing contemporary French writers. Due to her difficult subject matter and unique storytelling technique that often oscillates between reality and fantasy, NDiaye's narratives are a challenge for readers as well as for critics. It's the recurrent idea of lack, absence, and deficiency that lies at the heart of NDiaye's texts "about family, identity and alienation" (70). For Asibong "blankness" is the fundamental concept through which he accesses NDiaye's writing and which he discusses at length in his introduction, thus laying the foundation for his further analysis. "Blankness" refers to the emotional emptiness of the protagonists and to the indifference of communities that accept and promote the abusive behaviors that result in the "'deadening' of other" (3). However, Asibong goes even further and forges the compelling neologism "blancness" that comes from French *blanc* 'white' and which allows him to consider NDiaye's writing in a racial and/or post-racial context (19). However, as he notes, this might seem unexpected when it comes to her early works, especially in regard to the text *En famille* (*Among Family*) where NDiaye does not openly introduce the question of race. This is all particularly interesting since, as he asserts, in spite of being born to a Senegalese father, NDiaye managed to preserve "her right to full Frenchness" and therefore was never considered a "'postcolonial' French writer" (73). Thanks to the commercial success of her work, NDiaye was then able to reinvigorate the French literary landscape.

In the first chapter, analyzing early NDiaye's texts, Asibong explores the idea of "(dis)integration" that has many different manifestations, beginning with disintegration of the text itself through the disintegration of attachment, relationship, and emotional ability to react to the world and ending with the metaphorical or even literal disintegration of the self. As Asibong points out, the protagonists' quests for integration (even if it's theoretically possible) into a society, community, or a family are always condemned to failure. Regardless of their efforts and sacrifices, those who long for acceptance, a certain sense of belonging, or at least a sign of affection end up rejected, alienated, or destroyed by their emotionally void loved ones.

In the second chapter of his book, the idea of “blankness” is confronted with the concept of “(re)generation,” which might be understood, among other possibilities, as a proliferation of dysfunctional, distressing, and destructive relations between family members and across generations. As Asibong successfully demonstrates, “blank” parents and their children are connected through psychological dependency, incest, and emotional and sexual abuse that have catastrophic consequences for their affective development. Occasionally this cycle is interrupted by more positive accents that, according to Asibong, may have been provoked by NDiaye’s rising popularity and perhaps the wish to fit the taste of a wider audience. In the third chapter, Asibong focuses his study on NDiaye’s theater plays that portray children and adults victimized by the very people they trust and who feed on the suffering they instill. They seek to fill their own lack of happiness by spreading horror, but they never manage to get satiated. The “ghouls” (as they are called by Asibong) leave their victims emotionally drained, “zombified” (127), or even literally killed. These same themes of rejection, emotional coldness, and trauma also appear in the NDiayan children’s stories analyzed by Asibong in his fourth chapter. As he notes, in those stories the subject matter is presented in a softened version and with happy endings which makes it more suitable for younger readers. However, the positive conclusion is often abrupt and unexplained.

The complicated nature of NDiaye’s writing requires a well-structured and methodical approach that Asibong gracefully offers in his book. He does not hesitate to analyze Marie NDiaye’s work in light of her life and personal experience, thus providing an insightful reflection and observation on her identity as well as on the general perception of her as an author and a public figure. In a very detailed manner, he explores the connection between NDiaye’s subsequent texts, traces similarities in themes, plots, and protagonists, and reveals a certain evolution in NDiayan writing. In his study, Asibong draws upon psychoanalytic theory (Freud, Bion, Jung) while exploring the subject of trauma and stigma and brings NDiayan work into connection with numerous cinematographic productions (Hitchcock and Lynch among others), thus placing her work in a rich interdisciplinary context. For a book of this length (175 pages and 34 pages of synopses), the bibliography is also quite impressive. In short, *Marie NDiaye: Blankness and Recognition* is an essential read for anyone who studies or intends to work on NDiaye’s dark, disturbing, but also appealing literary production.

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