
Marie NDiaye

Three Strong Women

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BIOGRAPHY Marie NDiaye was born on June 4, 1967 in Pithiviers, France, the daughter of a French mother and a Senegalese father. She is the sister of Pap Ndiaye, historian and lecturer at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences and wife of the author Jean-Yves Cendrey, with whom she wrote a series of three plays entitled *Puzzle*, in 2007.

Marie NDiaye studied linguistics at the Sorbonne and won a French Academy scholarship for a residence at the Villa Medici in Rome. She began writing at 12 years old and published her first work, *Quant au riche avenir* [As for the Promising Future] at the age of 17. She received literary acclaim with *En famille* [A Family Affair]. She also writes novels for children and is a playwright. Her play *Providence* was staged at the International French-Language Theater in Paris and her play *Papa doit manger* [Daddy has to Eat] is only the second play by a female writer to be taken into the repertoire of the Comédie-Française.

PUBLICATIONS Among her most recent novels and short stories: *Mon cœur à l'étroit* [My Cramped Heart], Gallimard, 2007 (re-ed. coll. "Folio", 2008); *Autoportrait en vert* [Self-portrait in Green], Mercure de France, 2005 (re-ed. Gallimard, coll. "Folio", 2006); *Tous mes amis* [All my Friends], Les Éditions de Minuit, 2004; *Rosie Carpe*, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2001 (prix Femina) (re-ed. coll. "Double", 2009).



Three narratives, tenuously held together. At the center of each story, a woman who says no. Their names are Norah, Fanta, Khady Demba.

Norah, in her forties, arrives at her father's home in Africa. The former egocentric tyrant has become silent, bulimic, and spends his nights perched in the courtyard's flamboyant tree. Why did he ask her to come? What Norah will discover is even worse than she could have imagined.

Fanta used to teach French in Dakar, but she had to follow her partner, Rudy, to France. Rudy proves to be incapable of providing Fanta with the rich and joyful life she deserves. He remains

under the morbid influence of his mother, who dedicates her life to convincing her entourage of the existence of angels. Destabilized, he wanders through a viscous reality that fills him with anger and spitefulness. By his side, Fanta is a rock.

Khady Demba is a young African widow. Penniless, she tries to find a distant cousin, Fanta, who lives in France. The long journey of emigration will be punctuated by unspeakable suffering.

Each of these three women fight to maintain their dignity in the face of the humiliation that life inflicts upon them with a methodical and incomprehensible persistence.

And he who greeted her or, who seemed to appear fortuitously on the doorstep of his large cement house, in an intensity of sudden light which his body, dressed in bright colors, seemed to produce and radiate, this man so small, heavy and emitting a white ray like a neon bulb, this man emerging from the entrance of his oversized house had nothing left, Norah immediately thought to herself, nothing of his arrogance, his stature, his youth, which before had been so strangely constant that they had seemed eternal.

He kept his hands crossed over his stomach and his head cocked to the side, and his head was grey and his stomach protruding and soft under his white shirt, above the belt of his cream-colored pants.

There he was, surrounded by a cold brilliance, having fallen, no doubt, onto the doorstep of his pretentious house from the branch of one of the flamboyant trees in the garden, Norah said to herself. She had approached the house staring at the front door through the fence grating and had not seen it open to let her father come through—yet there he was, appearing at the end of the day, this radiating and dethroned man with a bump on his skull which transformed the harmonious proportions that Norah remembered to those of a fat man with no neck and short, thick legs.

Immobile, he watched her approach and nothing in his hesitant rather lost look showed that he was waiting for her arrival, nor that he had asked her to

come, and had urgently begged her to visit him (in as much, she thought, as such a man was capable of imploring any aid at all).

He was simply there, having perhaps flapped down from the huge branch of the flamboyant that shaded the house in yellow, to land heavily on the cracked cement of the front steps, and at that moment it was as if only coincidence had brought Norah's steps towards the fence.

And this man, who could transform any entreaty into a solicitation for his own sake, watched, with the air of a host who, slightly put out, forces himself to hide the fact, as she pushed the gate open and came into the garden, his hand held as a visor above his eyes, even though the evening had already drowned in shadow the doorstep which still somehow illuminated his strangely radiant and electric presence.

— Well, it's you, he murmured in French. Despite his mastery of the language, it was as if the proud apprehension that he had always had about certain difficulties of the language had, in the end, made his voice tremble.

Norah did not respond.

She briefly hugged him, without pressing him against her, recalling how he hated physical contact and the almost imperceptible way his flabby arms would shrink away from the touch of her fingers.

She seemed to detect the smell of mould.

It was an odor coming from the abundant blossoms, thought Norah with embarrassment, squeezed from the large yellow flamboyant whose branches grew above the flat roof of the house, and among whose leaves this secret and presumptuous man nested perhaps listening for the slightest noise of steps approaching the fence, ready to take flight and clumsily take his position on the front steps of this vast residence with its crude cement walls. Or perhaps it came from her father's clothes or his body itself, from his old pleated skin, the color of ashes. She didn't know, she couldn't say.

Furthermore, it was clear that he wore that day, and no doubt wore every day now, she thought, a wrinkled shirt stained with rings of sweat and that his pants were worn, shiny and extremely baggy around his knees. He must now be too heavy to be a bird and must stumble each time he hit the ground, or, she thought, with a slightly weary feeling of pity, he had become an old neglected man, indifferent or blind to his lack of cleanliness, preserving his habits of conventional elegance, dressing himself as he had always done, in white and fresh light yellow and never appearing even on the front steps of his unfinished house without having pushed his tie knot back up, no matter from which dusty living room he had come or from which flowering-weary flamboyant he had flown.

Norah, had taken a taxi from the airport then walked a long time in the heat, because she had forgotten her father's exact address and had to walk until she

saw the house she recognized, so that she now felt sticky, and diminished.

She was wearing a sleeveless lime-green dress, dotted with little yellow flowers just like those which had fallen from the flamboyant across the front steps. Her flat sandals were of the same pale green.

She was shocked to notice that her father was wearing plastic flip-flops, given that he had always made it a point of honor, she remembered, never to be seen in anything but polished beige or off-white shoes.

Was it because this unkempt man had lost the legitimacy to look at her critically or disappointedly or severely, or because, now stronger for her 38 years, she no longer worried above all how people would judge her appearance? What was certain was that 15 years before she would have felt embarrassed—mortified—to be seen sweating and tired before her father, whose physique and allure never used to be affected by the slightest sign of weakness or sensitivity to the heat. But today, that made no difference to her and she even shamelessly presented her father with a bare and shiny face which she had not taken the time to powder in the taxi. She thought how surprising it was that she had given such importance to all that. Then she said to herself with a rather acerbic, slightly spiteful gaiety: he can think whatever he likes of me. She could remember the cruel and offensive remarks, casually uttered by this superior man when she and her sister would come to see him as adolescents and all that concerned him was their lack of elegance or lipstick.

She would like to say to him now: can't you see, you spoke to us as if you were talking to women, as if it were our duty to be seductive, when we were only kids and we were your girls.

She would like to say this to him gently, with just a hint of a scolding in her voice, as if it had only been a kind of rough joke on her father's part and they could now laugh about it he, a bit contrite.

But seeing him there in his plastic flip-flops, on the concrete doorstep dotted with rotting flowers that he perhaps had made fall when, on heavy and weary wings he had left the flamboyant, she realized that he was no more concerned about examining and judging her appearance than he was about the most insistent allusions to the mean-spirited assessments he used to make.

His eyes were deep holes, with a faraway, slightly vacant look.

She wondered whether he actually remembered having written her, asking her to come.

—Can we go in? She said switching her bag from one shoulder to the other.

—Masseck! He clapped his hands.

The icy, almost blue gleam of his shapeless body seemed to intensify.

A barefooted old man in Bermudas and a torn polo, came out of the house with a lively step.

—Take the bag, ordered Norah's father.

Then, addressing her:

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— It's Masseck, don't you recognize him?

— I can carry my bag, she said a moment later regretting saying something that could do nothing but offend a servant who was used to—despite his age—picking up and carrying the most awkward of loads. She then held her bag out to him so impetuously that, unprepared, he faltered, before righting himself and throwing it onto his back; and, bent over, going back into the house. The last time I came it was Mansour, she said. I don't know Masseck.

— Which Mansour? her father asked, suddenly with a lost, almost appalled air which she had never seen before.

— I don't know his last name, but the Mansour in question lived here for years and years, Norah said, little by little feeling a sticky and suffocating discomfort take hold of her.

— Maybe he was Masseck's father then.

— Oh no, she murmured, Masseck is much too old to be Mansour's son.

And since her father seemed more and more disoriented and even about to start wondering if she was duping him, she quickly added: But it's not really important.

— I never had a Mansour working for me, you're wrong, he said with a slightly arrogant, condescending smile. It was the first sign of her father's former personality and as irritating as this scornful grin always was, it warmed Norah's heart as if it mattered that this smug man should continue to insist stubbornly on having the last word, even more than on being right.

But she was sure that Mansour had been a diligent, patient, efficient presence at her father's side for years and if, since childhood, she and her sister, had come but three or four times to this house, it was Mansour they had seen and never this Masseck, whom she didn't recognize.

Barely inside, Norah felt how empty the house was.

It was dark now. The large living room was dark, silent.

Her father turned on a lamp and its dim light, produced by a 40-watt bulb, lit up the middle of the room and its long glass table.

On the coarse stucco walls, Norah recognized the framed photos of the vacation village that her father had owned and managed, and which had made him his fortune.

A large number of people had always lived in this house, owned by this man who was proud of his success. He was not that generous, Norah had always thought, but, rather, satisfied at being able to show that he could house and support his brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces and various other relatives, so that Norah had never seen the living room empty, whatever time of the day she happened to be there.

Children forever sprawled on the couches, stomachs in the air like satisfied cats, men drinking tea while watching television, as women came and went from the kitchen or bedrooms.

That evening, the deserted room cruelly revealed the harshness of its materials: shiny tiling, cement walls, narrow strip of windows.

—Your wife isn't here? Norah asked.

He moved two chairs from the large table, put them close to one another, then changed his mind and put them back in their places.

He turned on the television and turned it off before even the faintest image had the time to appear.

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