

## **Archetypal Memory And The Dislocated Subject In Marie Ndiaye's *Three Strong Women***

***Maria Luisa Ruiz, PhD***

Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York – CUNY, USA

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### **Abstract**

At the crossroads of various disciplines, the concept of the archetype has proven itself to be a rich and complex tool of literary analysis. Indeed, it is used in both anthropological and psychoanalytical approaches, drawing notably on the writings of Mircea Eliade and Carl G. Jung. Both thinkers came to the conclusion that the archetype belongs to the time of myth, before the historical time heralded by the arrival of monotheist religions, and that it operates in the collective unconscious. Prior to the individual and particularly charged with energy, the archetype escapes representation. Nonetheless, it manifests itself through images and particular correspondences with affective tonalities.

In a novel, an archetype can generate characters as much as it can, in a more subtle and concealed manner, influence the entire structure of a narrative. Whatever the mode of its manifestation, the archetype betrays its presence by a tension between the conscious and the unconscious, the individual and the collective, and the profane and the sacred. Each of these tensions can be more or less accentuated or noticeable and conveyed in the writing through a range of methods, both obvious and subtle.

This article explores how in *Three Strong Women*, the presence of archetypal symbols and motifs contributes to the dislocation of subjects attempting to become characters and disrupts the narrative thread in order to unveil mysterious and complex psychic processes. One can then ask, who are these three women, from where are they coming and what is the nature of their power?

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### **Introduction**

At the crossroads of various disciplines, the concept of the archetype has proven itself to be a rich and complex tool of literary analysis. Indeed, it is used in both anthropological and psychoanalytical approaches, drawing notably on the writings of Mircea Eliade and Carl G. Jung. These two

thinkers, each in their own domain, came to the conclusion that the archetype belongs to the time of myth, before the historical time heralded by the arrival of monotheist religions, and that it operates in the collective unconscious. Prior to the individual and particularly charged with energy, the archetype itself escapes representation. Nonetheless, it manifests itself through images and particular correspondences with affective tonalities.

In a work of literature, an archetype can generate characters as much as it can, in a more subtle and concealed manner, influence the entire structure of a narrative. Whatever the mode of its manifestation, the archetype betrays its presence by a tension between the conscious and the unconscious, the individual and the collective, and the profane and the sacred. Each of these tensions can be more or less accentuated or noticeable and conveyed in the writing through a range of methods, both obvious and subtle.

In reviewing the novels of Marie Ndiaye, literary critics have praised not only the virtuosity of her style, but also the very distinctive manner in which she succeeds in disrupting the dull monotony of everyday life by introducing fantastic and supernatural elements into the narrative. This particular aspect of her writing has been approached by several scholars in the past ten years and creatively developed according to different axes of research.

In her essay dedicated to the novel *Rosie Carpe*, entitled “Marie Ndiaye’s Discombobulated Subject,” Lydie Moudelino considers Ndiaye’s representation of what Dominique Viart calls “the subject in disarray”— the condition of a contemporary subject ill-equipped to interpret a reality whose logic always seems to escape her, and approaches it via a brilliant analysis of conjunctions in the narration (Moudelino, 2006).

In “Migration and Metamorphosis in Marie Ndiaye’s *Trois Femmes Puissantes*”, Deborah B. Gaensbaeur examines “the innovative embedding of the shape-shifts in *Trois femmes puissantes* in both harrowing socio-political realities and the ambiguities of the fantastic and superstition to convey the dehumanizing, unequal power relations governing contemporary women’s migration struggles.”(Gaensbaeur, 2014).

Finally, at the last Pacific Ancient and Modern Literature Association – PAMLA – Annual Conference, held in Portland, Oregon, in November 2015, Elizabeth Linley from the University of Cambridge in UK presented a paper entitled “Identity and the Fantastic: Reassessing Female Figures in Marie Ndiaye’s Theater”. She analyzes how the writer adapts fantastic elements to evoke the challenging but creative journey of her theatrical female characters toward identity.

In *Trois Femmes Puissantes* the strange and fantastic motifs appear indeed to haunt the stories through a manipulation of the characters’ identity

and, more specifically, their capacity to remember. All at once, some of the characters start to act without knowing any longer who they are and find themselves unable to trace back the thread of their own story.

Building upon the work already done on identity, fantastic and migration in Ndiaye's novels and plays, and insisting on the fact that the "subject in disarray is also a "dislocated subject," I would like to explore how in *Trois Femmes Puissantes (Three Strong Women)*, the presence of archetypal symbols and motifs contributes to the dislocation of subjects attempting to become characters and disrupts the narrative thread in order to unveil mysterious and complex psychic processes. One can then ask, who are these three women, from where are they coming and what is the nature of their power? This novel, which won the Prix Goncourt in 2009, takes the form of a triptych. Marie Ndiaye, like an embroiderer, weaves a veil, which hold together the three separate parts of the text through the three women. Then she adds strange pearls to this veil, whose reflections sometimes mirror biblical themes, (names of characters like Jacob or Abel, transgression of family ties, presence of angels), sometimes African beliefs (importance of the flamboyant tree in the first story) and seemingly, a fairy tale which fails. Stuck between the conscious and the unconscious, the collective and the individual, the past and the present, the protagonists of these three stories, whether men or women, ultimately struggle with the power of memory. Emerging from the depths of the past this memory most powerfully points to the presence of archetypes.

## I.

Let's start with the repetitive power of memory and its capacity to be transmitted from generation to generation. In the first two stories of the triptych, the protagonists are not aware of being the carriers of the traces of familial memory. This trace manifests itself in the form of an ancient archetypal couple: the couple executioner/victim. Both Norah in the first story and Rudy in the second, have murderous fathers and, in one way or another, have internalized the energy of the archetypal couple. Their identity has been unconsciously formed in the oscillation between these two poles: at times victim, at times executioner and most of all, victim and executioner of themselves.

The concept of individuation has been used in psychology and psychoanalysis to define a process of transformation whereby the personal and collective unconscious are brought into consciousness to be assimilated into the whole personality. Marie Louise von Franz, Jung's foremost student and collaborator studied the process of individuation in fairy tales from different parts of the world in her book entitled "Individuation in Fairy Tales". She stresses the importance of dreams and active imagination in the

constitution of individual and collective memory of the heroes and heroines in the analyzed stories. Their quest toward individuation is often-arduous and entails a series of battles which are quest toward individuation, Marie Ndiaye's protagonists struggle with and within this trans-generational memory, which inhabits them and possesses them via archetypes whose behavioral manifestations they cannot control. Thus Norah, rejected by an obsessive and rigid father who murders his young wife because she had a relationship with her stepson, cannot realize that she too is as rigid, obsessive and capable of violence as her father. As for Rudy, a character in the second story, he is rejected by a mother enamored of blond children in the image of the Infant Jesus. He lives entangled in an outrageous lie, that of being the victim of an assault which supposedly took place at the French Lycée of Dakar where he teaches among other things Middle Age Literature, more specifically one of Rutebeuf's text that is quoted in the narration without any reference and appears as a palimpsest.

In each of these two cases, the narrative tells not only the story of the characters' sudden awareness of the memories transmitted by their parents but also how they got there. By this I mean that the writing itself becomes like a reflection, a mirror of the memory work that needs to be done to unveil this trace, transmitted over time like a hereditary defect. The narration digs into the memory of the characters but does so within the confines of their lack of consciousness, their ignorance and their inability to see. A sort of pact is created between the main character and the narration, and it is, in my view, this narrative pact and the way it enriches the writing of these two tales that has brought me to examine more closely the status of these characters. Are they simple containers, empty membranes ready to receive the energy of the archetypes? Are they possessed and thus "dislocated?" Or, in the final analysis, are they not part of the great canvas that the writer weaves from tales to tales, from books to books? It is easy for anyone who reads her with assiduously, to find connections between the characters of *Trois Femmes Puissantes*, those notably of the novel *Rosie Carpe* and the play *Papa Doit Manger*.

Moreover, there are more or less apparent links between the various characters of the three tales. If we observe how those connections are subtly broached and scarcely underlined, it would seem that Marie Ndiaye would like to suggest the existence of a network of connections belonging to another dimension more complex and less visible, yet as essential to the coherence and understanding of our universe. The collective unconscious is made of these subtle links and, in the three tales, they come to knock at the door of the imaginary without fanfare, unheralded, without arrogance, but with discretion and sometimes with humor.

Thus Jacob in the first tale and Abel in the second discreetly refer to biblical characters so embedded in the collective unconscious that the echo of their meaning can at first glance go undetected and seem to be without direct semantic connection to the stories in which they appear. However, upon a closer look, we realize that in the Bible Jacob is both a son who betrays his father (he passes himself off as his brother Esau in order to rob him of his birthright) but also a father betrayed by his sons, jealous of his preference for his last-born, Joseph. As for Abel, he is the victim of the jealousy of his brother Cain and becomes the first human to die in the Genesis. He is also a character in the Koran and thus straddles several cultures much like several of the characters in *Trois Femmes Puissantes*.

Now, let's have a closer look at the way Marie Ndiaye appropriates these biblical motifs and makes use of them in the first two stories of the triptych.

First of all, the characters who bear these names are very different from the biblical ones. In the first story, Jacob is the companion of Norah: he is tender, gentle and the complete opposite of the patriarch personified by Jacob in the Genesis. By contrast, the father of Norah, whose name remains unknown throughout the story, is the perfect incarnation of the authoritarian father. Above all, he is a father much loved by his only son, Sony, who, even if he betrays his father by engaging in a passionate affair with his young step-mother, is willing to go to jail in his place, for a crime which he did not commit. From this liaison between Sony, the adored son and the father's young wife come twins, two pretty little girls, referring back to the twins Jacob and Esau. This theme is taken up again in the story with another pair, the daughter of Norah and the daughter of her companion Jacob, who are the same age and therefore compared to twins. One can thus observe that another semantic web is woven around the presence of the biblical proper noun and forms a connection with the history of the biblical character while masking it or distorting it. It seems to me that the literary method adopted by Marie Ndiaye, - in which the name of a secondary character provides while also concealing information on the real identity of another, much more important character, could be seen as paralleling psychic processes now increasingly studied in the domain of psychogenealogy: the trans-generational inheritance of an archetype whose history has been all but forgotten by family members. However, this history plays itself out again with some modifications, through life paths following different trajectories in new places and cultural contexts.

One could say that the writer chose the names for her characters by whim or by coincidence. We would then be at the same level of consciousness as the protagonists, who feel and bear the weight of this archetypal inheritance without much understanding it. At least this is the case in the beginning since, little by little, the narration allows them to become

aware of their history and to excavate a past that is not solely individual but above all familial. Thanks to the narrative pact that respects the timing of each character's awakening, the story provides a therapeutic space similar to the one existing between a patient and a therapist specialized in psychogenealogy. This field, today well known in psychotherapy consists of revisiting and reconstituting the family tree based on what one knows or what one has been told. This memory work, this anamnesis, calls on various types of memory and illuminates zones of light and darkness.

In *Tout sur la mémoire* Bernard Croisile provides a rigorous and scientific study of the role of memory among human beings that complements well the work done by Boris Cyrulnik on the complexity of the psyche in terms of memory and identity construction. Cyrulnik is a neuropsychiatrist, ethnologist and psychoanalyst, above all known for his concept of resiliency. In particular, in his book entitled *Parler d'amour au bord du gouffre*, he develops the concepts of Affective Style and narrative identity and analyzes in a clinical context the processes of diverse memories: biological memory, episodic and semantic memory, declarative memory, procedural memory. All of this is complex but to illustrate my point, I will simplify by stating that one can distinguish two categories of memory: explicit and conscious memory and implicit and unconscious memory. In each of these categories, there are scripts of representations with which we identify ourselves consciously or unconsciously.

These scripts function as narrative that we keep repeating to ourselves and become patterns of behaviors and judgements.

As readers of Marie Ddiaye's stories, we become, thanks to the narrative pact, witnesses of a moment of life in which the character is in the midst of transforming a specific representational script: he or she is then not only able to reposition himself or herself in his or her universe, but he or she is also able to establish a new type of relations with others. The character then becomes the subject by dislocating itself in ways that refer to the etymological meaning of the verb displace. Indeed, in these three stories, the characters have to move not out of their own volition but as a result of a violent incident: Norah is summoned to Senegal by her father in order to plead the case of her brother in court; Rudy is obliged suddenly to leave Senegal after his fight with three students of the French Lycée of Dakar. An act of aggression connected to the murder previously committed by his father and masked as an accident. Meanwhile, Khady, the heroine of the third tale, is forced to secretly emigrate by her in-laws after the death of her husband. The narrative of her displacement is, in my view, the real challenge of *Trois Femmes Puissantes* since she is well aware, from the outset of the story, of the grim fate that awaits her. She knows that since she was unable to give a child to her deceased husband, she will be chased away by her in laws. In the

face of this certainty, Khady has no other choice than to step into the unknown, the extreme dislocation that her violent and painful displacement through several African countries will turn out to be, in the hope of one day reaching France and rejoining Fanta, the wife of Rudy in the second tale. Paradoxically, this displacement allows her to become a full-fledged subject in the most cruel of circumstances. She has nothing left but her awareness of being a human being, alive and certain of her integrity and form.

To speak of love on the edge of the precipice, is certainly what the story lets Kadhy do as she evokes the memory of those who have loved her during her tragic journey: the husband and the grand mother who “who had been able to see, even while treating her harshly that she was a very special little girl with her own attributes and not any old child.” This self-consciousness linked intrinsically to the necessity to be loved and recognized during childhood, is the basis for the concept of resiliency developed by Cyrulnik in his first two books, *Les Vilains Petits Canards* and *Un Merveilleux Malheur* on the basis of his observation of concentration camp survivors and diverse groups of children, especially children from Romanian orphanages and street children from Latin America.

Resiliency is what allows human beings to rebound after traumatic experiences and to rebuild themselves by overcoming the trauma. Unhappily for Khady, it is death that awaits her at the end of the ladder that she, following the example of her companions in misfortune, had built for herself in order to jump over the barbed wire and come nearer to her final destination. She is the sole character, who does not manage to survive, but she carries deep within her the essence of this female power multiplied by three alluded to in the title of the book.

## **Conclusion**

In the first two stories, dislocation brings about a psychic readjustment the final result of which is to integrate the elements of lived experience both personal and collective that until then had been disruptive and seemingly abnormal. Thus, these elements appear in the form of supernatural motifs: the father of Norah sleeps in a flamboyant tree and Rudy is chased and attacked repeatedly by a hawk. But as soon as the transformation of the representational script takes place, these elements are integrated or discarded. Norah joins her father in the flamboyant and stops asking herself questions about what she is supposed to do. Rudy kills the hawk and regains the love of his son and his wife. In the case of Kadhy, something else is at stake: In that story, Marie Ndiaye totally upsets the usual structure of the fairy tale. There is no happy ending for Khady: not only will she never reach her final destination but Lamine, the charming prince she met on the road who first appears as her potential savior, will exploit her to

achieve his own aims. In this final story of the triptych, the archetypal couple, executioner and victim, is transcended and takes on a different valence: As Khady climbs over the barbed wire, marching bravely and willfully towards her own death, she does not see herself as a victim. Even as she suffers and her body pierced by the barbed wire bleeds, she finds the strength within herself to be entirely present in the moment as if she were becoming one with all her surroundings. It is a sort of state of grace, a plenitude that abolishes all boundaries between inner and outer world, between the self and others. It is akin to a state known as *perceptude*, a concept coined by the psychoanalyst Jean- Louis Lamande and developed by François Roustang, a psychoanalyst specialized in hypnosis. Perceptude is defined as “ a singular form of communication; an ability to cultivate a state of receptiveness that allows us to perceive the signs of the world, a state of openness to the most subtle and ineffable dimensions of the world, a receptive stance necessary to reveal the unacknowledged dimensions of our individual and cultural identity.” (Roustang 2003)

I would like to quote a short passage that relates the death of Kathy Demba: "This is me, Khady Demba, she kept thinking as her forehead hit the ground, her eyes wide opened, as she saw a bird with long grey feathers hovering over the fence. This is me Khady Demba - she kept marveling at this revelation, knowing that she was that bird and that this bird knew it." (Ndiaye, 2009)

In the final analysis, Khady's ladder seems to rise up in the sky higher than the branches of the flamboyant on which Norah comes to join her father. Furthermore, the waking dream of Khady is very different from the biblical dream of Jacob in which he sees a ladder that rises towards the sky with the angels. The ladder in the last tale is another instance of the transformation of a biblical theme. Moreover, angels appear in the second tale. But in the same way that the Genesis character has no doubt as to the meaning of his dream, Khady also knows and she knows that all her worth and power as a human being resides in her capacity to be in that state of *perceptude*: a state embodied in the writing, as it were, as it performs this narrative pact, revealing another way to be in the world and to know oneself.

On a final note, I would like to say that from the tree to the ladder to the angels, the writing of Marie Ndiaye leads us readers, whether we are or not familiar with her fiction, from the most known to the most unknown, opening a bit further at every step the space where perception becomes *perceptude*. There is no English word that translates this French neologism. The closest concept would be that of totally sentient or extremely sentient. In *Trois Femmes Puissantes*, we become part of a process in which the narrative voice is submissive to the power of perceiving and fights to gain

access into consciousness despite all the obstacles set by a long tradition of story-telling in which the narrator pretended to be omnipotent.

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