

French Women's Literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Throughout the centuries, males have largely dominated French literature. While multiple countries across the globe experienced an influx of women's writing following the various suffrage movements and women's rights acts, France remained stagnant. While slow in rising, the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have seen an overwhelming increase in the quantities and qualities of women's writing in France. Many literary critics theorize this abundance of literary creation is due in part to the rising feminist movement spreading across Europe (Asibong 4). While originally focusing on disparages in civil liberties, feminism in France has extended to encompass a broader array of social issues. In this paper, I will examine how Marie NDiaye, Virginie Despentes, and Linda Lê, intertwine feminist tendencies throughout their novels in order to magnify racial discrimination, sexual injustices against women, and hostility towards migrants. With each author, I will first explore her background and preferred style of writing, then I will observe various feminist thoughts present in her works, and finally I will acknowledge an issue the author highlights through feminism in her pieces of literature.

Literary audiences acknowledge Marie NDiaye, an acclaimed novelist and playwright, as one of the most influential writers in France (Eberstadt). Born in Pithievers, France to a French mother and Senegalese father, NDiaye draws upon her experiences as a biracial woman in much of her writing (Flood). While NDiaye has never explicitly stated her pieces reflect racial issues in France, literary critics argue she has subtly incorporated this theme throughout multiple narratives (Eberstadt). Similarly, theorists find her writing to incorporate feminist tendencies, such as her frequency to incorporate strong, independent female protagonists (Jaggi). Thus, NDiaye's approach to

social issues is different than other feminist authors due to her capacity to subtly incorporate and weave her opinions on the topics throughout her novels. This approach is argued to affect the feminist movement just as much, if not more so, than blatantly stating her opinions due to the reader's ability to interpret the writing and form conclusions on their own.

The majority of NDiaye's works center around independent women, as seen with her 2009 novel *Trios femmes puissantes* (*Three Powerful Women*). The novel received the Prix Goncourt- France's highest literary honor- making NDiaye the first black woman to win the award (Flood). One of the main protagonists in the story is named Norah, which many believe to be an allusion to the female lead in Henrik Ibsen's famous 1879 play "A Doll's House" (Jaggi). Ibsen's play was remarkable for its time due to its incorporation of feminist ideas, and the belief that Nora could live on her own without a husband. NDiaye reflects this idea in *Three Powerful Women* when Norah leaves her child and husband in Paris to visit her family in Dakar (Jaggi). Throughout the novel, the reader discovers that Norah, along with the two other female leads, struggles with self identity, and society's pressure to intrinsically associate one's self worth with one's ability to care for their husbands and children (Eberstadt). NDiaye's delicate approach to the suppressed lives of these three women leaves readers with a boiling sense of frustration, a sentiment felt throughout the majority of supporters fighting for the feminist movement.

NDiaye further incorporates feminist themes throughout her short stories, which serve to magnify greater social issues, such as racial discrimination. She contributed the short story *Les Soeurs* (*The Sisters*) to her brother Pap NDiaye's study of French societal

reception of blackness (Abisong 73). The brief story highlights NDiaye's belief that successful mixed race integration in France is nearly impossible due to the false identity inflicted upon dark-skinned individuals by their own perception of societal standards (Abisong 74). *Les Soeurs* follows two sisters, Paula and Victoire, as they struggle with their biracial ethnicity. The story describes how the girls' mother is a white French woman while their father is black, a situation which mirrors NDiaye's own parentage. While Paula is extremely fair skinned and can "pass" as white, Victoire received her father's dark skin. As the girls mature and progress through school, Paula continues to see herself solely in "black terms" despite her fair complexion, consequently developing a defensive, self-protective persona. Contrarily, Victoire assumes an air of confidence, and seems almost oblivious to stares in the schoolyard (Abisong 76). Thus, NDiaye utilizes Victoire as a means in which to convey the unrealistic fantasy of painless integration in French society (Abisong 76). The two sisters' contrasting self-images emphasize the idea that the collective opinions of a population, not skin color, form the tensions and discrimination seen in France today.

While NDiaye's approach to literature is one of elusiveness and self-interpretation, renowned French author Virginie Despentes has a seemingly overbearing direct style. A novelist, writer, and filmmaker, Despentes finds inspiration for her works through her experience as a sex worker in France, and the demeaning attitudes towards women in French culture (Sehgal). Despentes is both widely praised and criticized for her pieces of film and literature which portray the harsh realities of sexual violence and harassment against women. Throughout her writing, which literary audiences widely refer to as "feminist pulp novels", Despentes incorporates profane language and graphic

content in order to capture the attention of the reader (Sehgal). As a result, Desportes' novels challenge its audience to critically examine the true nature of French society's discernment of women. Writing both nonfictional and fictional works, Desportes incorporates outright declarations of feminist theories and beliefs, leaving her regarded as one of the most influential leaders of the feminist movement in France today (Heathcote 225).

In 2006, Desportes published a nonfiction piece entitled *King Kong Theory*, a hard-hitting collection of essays examining French perceptions of female beauty, sex, and gender (Sehgal). The title is derived from Desportes' stance that women are powerful beings, not merely helpless girls in distress. Desportes created *King Kong Theory* as a means in which to respond to critics who rebuked her previous films for containing overly graphic content (Sehgal). As a whole, the work serves as a rallying call for unity within the feminist movement by uniting those who fall far below the popular definition of the "perfect woman." Throughout the novel, Desportes admonishes society's assumption that unattractive women are automatically lesser beings, and challenges the collective public to develop realistic attitudes towards physical beauty (Heathcote 227). As the essays progress, Desportes reveals increasingly controversial opinions, including her belief that marriage is no more than a social construct developed for men to possess sexual control over their wives (Sehgal). This opinion among with others created mass publicity for *King Kong Theory*, bringing it to the forefront of the feminist movement in France (Heathcote 226).

After *King Kong Theory* established Desportes as a leading figure in French feminism, she centered her subsequent novels on similar issues, namely sexual injustices

towards women. As previously touched upon, Desportes spent much of her young adult life working in prostitution and pornography, and in her early twenties, she and a friend were gang-raped by three men while they were traveling through Europe (Sehgal). These experiences of sexual abuse and extortion serve as a constant theme throughout Desportes' novel *Apocalypse Baby* (2010). The novel is certainly unique in that Desportes approaches issues such as rape with an air of anger and revenge (Johnstone). The novel follows a young woman, Valentine, as she flees home and travels across Europe, all the while a target of two spies her mother hired to bring her back to France. Throughout the story, Valentine faces the challenges of emotional and physical abuse, and the constant struggle of living alone as a single woman in Europe (Johnstone). Desportes further incorporates the idea that women have the right to protect themselves against male attackers, violently if necessary, which is a theme present throughout much of her work (Johnstone). *Apocalypse Baby* truly encompasses the reality of the sexual hazards haunting women, and blatantly declares society has an obligation to negate these fears of danger within women, a sentiment which has formed the basis for a major segment of the feminist movement in France.

Unlike NDiaye and Desportes, Linda Lê is an emerging author in French literary circles (Cheallaigh 61). Lê was born in Vietnam and as an adolescent she was brought to France by her mother (Cheallaigh 61). As an immigrant growing up in French society, Lê constantly struggled with establishing her identity, a theme which she incorporates throughout many of her novels. Despite her representations of Vietnam culture in her novels, Lê adamantly refuses to be referred to as a Vietnamese or Vietnamese-French author, stating she never identified with her Vietnamese heritage (Rodger 45). Lê's belief

that one can choose to adopt whichever nationality one pleases is exemplified throughout multiple pieces of her work. Lê is widely praised for her capacity to completely altar her voice and style in every novel, thus allowing her to explore a vast array of topics (Rodger 48). This tactic allows her to focus each piece of her writing on different issues revolving around feminist thought and migrant reception in France.

In 2011, Lê's short story *À l'enfant que je n'aurai pas* (*To the Child That I Will Not Have*) received the Prix Renaudot Poche- a highly prestigious literary award in France (Rodger 46). The story was published in a collection of essays entitled *Las affranchise*, which called for writers to draft a letter filled with emotional sentiment. In the letter, Lê addresses her unborn child, whom she will never bear. She describes how in a sense her frustration stems from society's belief that bringing children into the world is a woman's sole purpose in life (Rodger 46). Throughout the letter, Lê is adamant that her decision to remain childless in no way diminishes her status as woman, but rather elevates her through the freedom and empowerment of independence (Rodger 47). Lê further examines society's admonishment of the "non-mother", and French society's assumption that childless women are unhappy and/or selfish for pursuing a career rather than giving life to others (Rodger 47). Similar to Desportes' statement that unattractive women are seen as inferior due to society's unrealistic expectations of women, Lê argues that French society in a sense shuns "non-mothers" due to their refusal to succumb to their natural calling (Rodger 47). Lê's resolute argument for the acceptance of women who refuse motherhood into French society is mirrored by the feminist movement's calling for women to receive full rights to their body, without fear of persecution by those who believe otherwise.

Lê further explores the role of the mother in relation to the status of a migrant in her 2012 novel *Lame de fond (Groundswell)*. The novel is split into four sections, each with a different narrator whom the reader discovers is deceased (Cheallaigh 77). Throughout the stories, the characters reflect on their lives on earth, and anguish over their regrets and failures of the past. The first of the four stories is told by Van, a male immigrant originally from Vietnam. Van describes his horror when his mother sends him away from his war-torn country to live in Paris, and his struggle to assimilate into French culture, a narrative similar to Lê's own origins (Cheallaigh 78). Throughout the novel, Lê incorporates Van's strained relationship with his wife and mother, along with his relationship with a mistress, Ulma, who later receives her own chapter of the book which details her own perception of Van's affair (Cheallaigh 78). Lê's writing is different from NDiaye and Desportes in that her main protagonist is not a strong, female heroine, but rather a man. This unique insight to the inner workings of the male mind allows the reader to acknowledge the profound differences between the thought process of men and women. Thus, Lê exhibits how one of the main obstacles the feminist movement faces is the fact that men and women approach issues such as affairs and abuse with a completely different mindset.

Literature in France has evolved into an influential mechanism which can inform and shape opinions of the public. After evaluating my findings, I believe literature can establish thoughtful, critical opinions within readers, which cannot be ascertained through any other venue. For instance, in modern culture throughout the world, social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, and news channels are the population's primary source of information. While these sources can be informative, they take away one's ability to



form a conclusion of one's own about a topic due to the media's tendency to explicitly tell the audience what it should believe. Reading a book immerses the reader in a different world, which creates emotional investment in the lives and well being of the characters throughout the pages. Thus, literature bestows upon the audience the opportunity to experience unique circumstances, For instance, I believe few men can relate to the fear a young woman experiences while she walks along a dark, empty street at night. However, if men read Desportes' *King Kong Theory*, and immerse themselves within the terrifying first hand accounts of women brutally attacked and raped, they are more likely to develop progressive thinking in terms of the female perspective. Thus, people who read the works of NDiaye, Desportes, and Lê are more likely to understand feminist thinking, and join the movement themselves.

While literature can persuade readers to pursue a certain belief, the style in which the text idea is presented is just as important as the content itself. After examining the unique styles of the three women in this paper, I believe NDiaye's style will evoke the greatest response from readers. While I acknowledge Desportes' works have garnered significantly more attention, much of this publicity has created negative, inaccurate views of feminists. I believe that the definition of feminism varies from person to person, and I feel that Desportes' novels are so blaring in their opinions, they consequently prevent the reader from interpreting the meaning on his or her own. Therefore, NDiaye's subtle incorporation of feminist tendencies allow the reader to critically analyze the situation in the text, and formulate their own opinion on the topic. I believe if more female authors followed in NDiaye's footsteps and incorporated feminist thought to the perfect extent, the feminist movement would spread dramatically quicker. If a reader is truly moved by a

piece of text, they will feel a call to action within themselves, which is what I believe they will experience when reading NDiaye's novels.

The worldwide phenomenon of feminism has changed thousands of lives. Women who grew up believing they were inferior to their male counterparts now have a voice for equality. Young girls can now feel confident and empowered while pursuing traditionally male activities. A sense of unity permeates through generations of females, uniting their desire for a more cohesive, unified atmosphere for the next wave of young girls. Feminist marches have filled the streets in America, Britain, Spain, Japan, Brazil, and France, uniting women internationally in their search for equality (Almukktar). While this extraordinary movement is expressed in a variety of manners, I believe spreading feminist thoughts through literature is one of the most impactful and meaningful ways imaginable.

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