

AATF BOOK CLUB 2010

The second text chosen for the AATF 2010 Book Club, *Neuf Nouvelles: Hommage aux Sénégalaises*, is a *recueil* of ten short stories, each preceded by deftly orchestrated interviews between the editor, Dr. Kathleen Madigan, and the ten Senegalese authors. The *grand finale* offers three additional interviews that elucidate yet more of the Senegalese context. After each story, Dr. Madigan provides a series of questions and activities to further engage readers in the texts. Given the high quality of this portion of the volume, I see no need in this review to offer additional pedagogical strategies. This lively volume serves equally well as a general reader or as a textbook for those interested in the lives of Senegalese women. The careful choice of text and the varied directions taken in the interviews allow the import of this thin volume to expand far beyond any national border and women's issues to touch upon the big questions of culture, religion, family, education, politics that underlie every facet of the human endeavor.

Dr. Madigan's introduction sets the scene by offering a short but sufficient accounting of both the literary and social scene soon to unfold. "Homage to Mariama Bâ," Madigan begins her own story with Senegal by referencing *Une si longue lettre*. From there, she describes her Fulbright sabbatical year from which arose this volume with its interviews and discussions crossing a wide range of fields—journalism, sociology, history, science, politics, business, and beyond. From there, she offers readers a literary history of Senegalese women writers followed by social, cultural, economic, political, religious, and ethnic contextualizations. In the end, she invokes the veritable *mater familias*: "À nos mères, alors, au Sénégal, aux femmes sénégalaises!" (p. 18).

Aïssatou Cissé, director of a publishing house in Senegal, also works with NGOs like the African Women Millennium Initiative on Poverty and Human Rights (AWOMI). Her story, "Linguère Fatim" tells of Fatim Djeumbet Dieng, daughter of kings, reduced to fishmongering, who never abandons the dignity of her royal blood. Several lessons—equally valid for young and old, man and woman, wealthy and poor—make their points along the way: the scandal of gossip-mongering gives way to that of assuming a person's 'worth' by the status of their daily labor; the value of honorifics ceding to that of one's mate's sense of self-worth and one's children's education. The subsequent questions and activities, as will be the case throughout the subsequent nine stories presented, allow readers unfamiliar with Senegalese names

and places to get a better grasp and to quickly spot check comprehension before moving to discussion questions and activities. The first is particularly apropos for Western readers who may, at first blush, refuse the moral of Fatim's sacrifice for her husband and children. By comparing the family-career choice that academic and professional women are called upon to make in so-called 'liberal' societies with those made by Fatim, it is soon evident that we share much common ground, however western feminists may couch it. As with most of these stories, I found that re-reading the interview brought even deeper appreciation of the text and context.

The second tale, "Le Rêve d'Amina," by Nafissatou Dia Diouf is another first-person narrative. This time, the narrator is a ten year old girl, Amina, who despite the taunts of her brothers and the dismissive attitude of her mother, follows her dream of becoming a lawyer. The epilogue stages a now 25 year old Amina, for whom the duress of girl-only responsibilities, perhaps even more so the derision of her siblings, has better prepared her for courtroom antics. Besides the transcultural question of how women, mothers in particular, affect the educational and professional aspirations of younger women, Dr. Madigan in Discussion # 6 (p. 55) asks the haunting question of the invisible father figure. If so-called patriarchies hamper girls from reaching their potential as women, how do the fathers and father figures do so *in absentia*? It would be instructive to compare Cissé's Fatim to Diouf's Aminata to further one's thinking about early and/or arranged marriages, social class and caste, and types of mothers, all in the full context of women's education. Going back to the interview with Ms. Diouf would underscore several points. Important to the whole discussion would be an exploration of the several questions in the interview where the style, beauty, and physical features of Senegalese woman are highlighted. How does this operate to the benefit and to the detriment of women in Senegal, elsewhere in Africa, in various Muslim countries, in the West?

Dr. Khadi Fall, author of the third short story, "Les Noces de Nafi," brings a wealth of global experience to her work, as do most of the authors. As a specialist in German literature, sub-specializing in the image of women, she brings to light the effects of globalization on the hearts and hearths of Senegal. In this instance, a *vieille fille*, 32 year old Nafi, finds her love match online. Jibi comes home to Senegal to meet her, falls in love, and soon after wedding preparations begin. Women, we learn both

in the pre-reading interview and in the text itself, maintain the important interpersonal relations in Senegalese society. So, as Nafi learns about the marital negotiations between Jibi's parents, she realizes that she has not asked him the most important question, one that leads right back to her having been raised by an adoptive mother. This story brings up a host of questions of interest to university age students: the global angle in the age of the Internet puts novel spice into the mix.

Mariama Sy Ndiaye in her work, "Justice," shows the flip side of marital unions. Her heroine is a first wife, Saffi, long ignored by a husband with two younger wives. Through a cosmic righting of wrongs, Saffi regains the love and respect of her husband. Divine intervention and strong religious beliefs explored in this story open readers' minds to alternative narrative realities and important cross cultural ways of thinking about life, love and justice.

Miriama Ndoye, too, brings an African flavored magic realism to her readership in "Si le Ndeup m'était conté." Her protagonist suffers from what western psychiatry would label post-partum depression. Yet, to the women in this new mother's *milieux*, her affliction comes from a spirit who is 'riding' her for her failure to show sufficient thankfulness. The *ndeup* ceremony provides an acceptable offering and she is liberated. Part of the incantation by the priestess refers to historically conflicting rapports with whites. Although mentioned in the interview along with the fact that Ms. Ndoye carefully chooses her titles to encourage readership, there is an intriguing story here that might well be ferreted out in frank class discussions (although not Senegalese, Claire Denis' *Chocolat* might well serve to elucidate black-white tensions in West Africa).

Three of the stories are written by men. "La Femme parfum" by Abdoulaye Elimane Kane focuses on the intersection of art and politics. His heroine, Kaltoum, uses her *couture* art to reflect on social mores. When the government falsely accuses her of espionage and collusion with the enemy, it is her artistic discourse that helps to bring about *détente*. The second male author is Charles Cheikh Sow whose main character mirrors an interviewer's interrogatories back at him in what becomes an eye-opening reversal for this government representative who usually runs the show and does who knows what with his collections. In a sophisticated play on the tale, the preparatory interview between Dr. Madigan and Mr. Sow creates a delightful *jeu de miroirs*. The third male author is

Pape Tall. His is the only story with a male protagonist; yet, it still stays true to the theme of an homage to Senegalese women. In it, a young soldier maintains his sanity and his courage through his love for Adélia. The opposition of love and war resonates in the interview with Mr. Tall, offering fecund ground for class discussions in these bellicose times. It might prove enlightening, after reading all ten stories, to discuss whether the three male authors bring a gender-specific perspective, thematic, style, voice to their tales.

The final story that I cover here is by a “transplant,” Anne Piette. Her tale, “Commandos insolites,” hums with traditional, animistic magic. Delving—as so many of the authors have—into the complex interpersonal relations to which the womenfolk must attend daily, the *real politik* behind the men’s official posturings, Ms. Piette weaves an engrossing scene behind the scene. In life, whatever one’s status, there are limitations, some appear perhaps less fair than others. In this tale, if not almost all of them, a workaround by those systemically less endowed with the power to bring about positive, immediate change still manage to do so. All the while, the delicate balance of a mass of intricate social dynamics are maintained. Peaceful co-evolution takes time.

The volume concludes with three more interviews: the scientist, Arame Boye Faye; the historian, Penda MBow; the sociologist, Fatou Sow. I cannot express my absolute delight upon discovering Dr. Sow’s interview. I realized quickly that she was the Senegalese sociologist whose lecture I had attended at the University of Minnesota in the mid 1980’s. Her thorough and well-documented sociological and historical research back then opened my eyes to the devastation that European trading brought to the female-dominated economies in much of what is now called Senegal. Her lengthy interview wraps up many of the threads woven through this volume that celebrates the lives, the hard work, the creativity and the love of our Senegalese sisters, mothers, friends and colleagues. This choice for the Book Club most certainly responds to the 2010 theme: “La Diversité francophone: passé, présent, futur.”

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