Middlebrow Matters

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Marie NDiaye’s femme puissante
– a Double Reading

*Trois femmes puissantes* (translated as *Three Strong Women*)¹ won the Prix Goncourt in 2009, with the result that it shot to the top of the French bestseller chart for that year alongside novels by Dan Brown, Anna Gavalda and Marc Levy.² Its author, Marie NDiaye, was already a well-known novelist and playwright whose work had received much scholarly attention and acclaim, but the media coverage and extensive marketing that accompany the prize offered her latest work for wider consumption. The book is not exactly a novel: it is composed of three stories, loosely linked by some minimal recurrence of characters from one to the other, and by the volume’s striking if somewhat misleading title. Each story does indeed contain a woman, but the relevance of the adjective ‘powerful’ is not immediately apparent, and in the second story a male protagonist takes centre stage. The story that most clearly fits the title, and which has received the most attention from press and readers, is the third, the story of Khady Demba. Its heroine is a young widow in an unnamed African country who is sent by her family-in-law on the illegal migrant trail to Europe. Dramatic, moving and already topical (though its topicality would intensify a few years later, with the refugee crisis), this is the most accessible of the three stories, and the one that has divided critical opinion precisely because of its departure from the author’s characteristically enigmatic, non-realist writing style towards

¹ Translated by John Fletcher and published in 2012 by the MacLehose Press. All English translations are taken from this edition.
² For overall book sales figures in 2009, see Ipsos (2010).
narrative that is more straightforwardly mimetic. It is on this story that I want to base my two readings.

First I propose to read the story as a ‘middlebrow reader’, that is, as myself in non-academic mode, reading for pleasure, interest and curiosity. Then I will read the same story as a literary critic, analysing technique and taking account of existing critical studies. There will inevitably be overlap, for our various ‘selves’ intermingle and are far from watertight. But my aim here is to try to understand what academic study often misses or omits, to ‘provide an account of the pleasures of a characteristically middle-brow way of reading’ (Radway, 1997, 12). Literary criticism expands knowledge: it is part of the great enterprise of understanding how we function as human beings, and how language shapes and opens up experience. Its grasp of the reading process, however, is inevitably coloured by ‘the interests and concerns of a highly specialised, quite heavily trained, and quite small professional audience’ (Radway, 1997, 230), whereas the reading of fiction is the province of a much wider public. ‘Literature’, as Rita Felski once put it, ‘may speak to readers in ways that literary critics are […] ill-equipped to deal with’ (2003, 162).

The story of Khady Demba (i) a middlebrow reading

The cover of the Livre de poche edition of Trois femmes puissantes features a beautiful strong-faced black woman with braided hair dressed in a loose robe with a bright floral design. The first story is set in an unnamed, non-Western tropical country, the second in France but with an important ‘back story’ set in postcolonial francophone Africa, so that I begin this, the volume’s third story, with some expectation of an African setting. Though never explicitly stated, this is soon confirmed by the heroine’s name, by the ‘pagne’ she wears – translated as ‘batik’ – and by the words ‘Year of the African Woman’ woven into the print of her sisters-in-law’s skirts. In my imagination I am soon in a hot land with a rainy season (2009, 262); Khady and her husband kept a little café (‘buvette’) in a lane in the ‘médina’ (2009, 262), a word evocative of Islamic culture and white-walled towns with narrow, maze-like streets and inner courtyards. The story is written in the third person but I am immediately situated with Khady, a young woman recently widowed who knows that her childless, dowry-less state makes her a drain on the meagre resources of her dead husband’s family, so that they seek only to be rid of her. Even her memories of three years of married life with
a man ‘si bon, si pacifique’ (NDiaye, 2009, 261) (‘a peaceable, kindly man’; NDiaye, 2012, 219) carry an undertow of remorse and sadness, for Khady recognises that in her anxiety to conceive at all costs she reduced him to a means to an end, their lovemaking to a purposeful, frequent but loveless exercise. She remembers with shame that when he collapsed and died at a fertile moment of her cycle, a sense of wasted opportunity competed with her grief: ‘N’aurait-il pas pu mourir après-demain, dans trois jours?’ (2009, 263; ‘Could he not have waited for two or three days?’ [2012, 220]). Neither wife nor mother, ‘écartée de la communauté humaine’ (‘excluded from the human community’ [2009, 269; 2012, 225]), Khady retreats into a self-protective state of mute torpor until she is literally banished by her family-in-law, sent off with a people smuggler to make her way to Europe and, her mother-in-law commands her, to send back money. The plot follows her journey, from the point of view of a Khady whose limited knowledge of the world provides no reference points, no clear expectations, no totalising view of world geography. First travelling on foot, then in a crowded car on dusty roads, then embarked on a rotting, leaking ship from which she flees before it sails, only to find herself marooned and penniless in a hostile port, Khady crosses deserts where border police demand bribes and brutalise those who cannot pay; she accepts prostitution in order to survive and continue her journey and finally, sick and prematurely aged, finds herself camped with other desperate refugees before the high fences that mark the European frontier in a Spanish enclave of North Africa. A desperate collective attempting to scale the fence is met with a barrage of bullets, and Khady falls to her death.

This is a quest story, one of the most basic forms of narrative. Khady’s search for safety and for some sort of future carries me along: with a mixture of hope and dread, I want to know what happens to Khady Demba. My sense of entrancement or of being inside the fictional world is supported by the forward movement of the plot that drives Khady on from one peril to another interspersed with brief sequences of relative calm, and also by the plot’s location within a recognisably real setting, both spatial and political. Though the story’s unnamed locations scarcely relate to my own first-hand experience, they map onto a geography recognisable from general knowledge and from other fictional sources: the decaying colonial city port where the migrants are

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3 Thus I experience the geography of the story as what de Certeau terms ‘space’ rather than as mapped, clearly located ‘place’. See Chapter 1, p. 21.
to embark, the balcony columns of its crumbling mansions like ‘de très vieux os soutenant quelque grand corps d’animal ravagé’ (2009, 288; ‘very old bones propping up the ravaged body of some large animal’ [2012, 240]); the rusty, putrid-smelling boat rocking on a dark sea; the hostile borders in arid, desert lands; and finally the encampment near a frontier that must be Melilla or Ceuta, Spanish cities on the Moroccan coast and thus heavily guarded gateways to Europe. Europe figures only as a vague mirage of hope and as a fortress armed against the poor and the desperate. My engagement with the story is fostered too by another form of referentiality: I know that Khady’s plight is representative of that of vast numbers of real refugees fleeing persecution and poverty to reach the affluent West. This knowledge provides the ballast of reality to my foray into fiction, but the knowledge itself is also changed: sympathetic as I may have already been to the situation of desperate migrants, to travel the harsh migrant trail vicariously with Khady Demba makes this knowledge felt, on the senses and through the emotions. The sense of learning something, or of deepening knowledge, also plays a part in the pleasure of reading fiction.

Compellingly plotted and mimetically grounded, the story’s appeal depends too on my caring about the fate of its central protagonist. And I do: despite the huge gap between her ordeals and my own comfortable experience as a privileged white woman living in an affluent society, for the duration of the narrative I experience the world through Khady’s eyes and Khady’s emotions. NDiaye’s writing very effectively draws me into a subjectivity that is not my own, rendering Khady’s experience graphically through the rhythm and shape of sentences as well as through telling sensory detail. The long, fluid sentences that describe Khady’s monthly cycle, as she tries with increasing desperation to conceive, capture the mounting exuberance of ovulation – ‘une ascension éperdue vers une possible bénédiction’ (2009, 259; ‘a frantic climb towards a possible benediction’ [2012, 217]) – before falling to the dull ‘effondrement’ (collapse) of renewed bleeding, and a state of ‘morne découragement’ (2009, 259; ‘gloomy despondency’ [2012, 217]) that precedes the cycle’s next upward turn. The physical horror of prostitution in the most sordid conditions is graphically rendered in sensory terms, as the hot bodies of strangers crush Khady into the dirty mattress (2009, 319; 2012, 265), and she suffers the pain of further friction on a vagina already swollen and inflamed. Though the vicarious experience of bitter disappointment, of pain and degradation are not exactly pleasurable, they situate me with Khady against a cruel world and intensify my imaginative involvement
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in the fiction. Moreover, Khady opposes to the horror of her situation a determined attention to an external reality beyond her pain, telling herself even as she undergoes the violence of unwanted sex, that ‘Il y a un moment où ça s’arrête’ (2009, 319; ‘There’s a time when it stops’ [2012, 265]), detailing ‘les fissures des murs rosâtres, le plafond de tôle’ (2009, 320; ‘the cracks in the pinkish walls, the corrugated-iron ceiling’ [2012, 265]) of the sordid hut to which she is confined, or just listening to the sound of her own heart beating. She recognises too the fear, the sense of entrapment and shame of her clients, fellow victims of poverty and exploitation. There is horror, but there is also resistance through resolute awareness of the world beyond the self, which also means generosity to others. My imagination is coaxed into simulating Khady’s sensory and emotional perception of the world, to adapt Marie-Laure Ryan’s formulation (2001, 122), and I am also ‘rooting for her’.

Reading for pleasure, I don’t pay conscious attention to the brilliance of NDiaye’s technique (though I might pause to reread a particularly nice sentence), but simply feel its effects. One central technical choice is that of an external, third-person narrative voice, where Khady’s subjectivity could have been expressed, for example, through a first-person stream of consciousness. NDiaye uses a form of free indirect style that remains rigorously close to Khady’s point of view, whilst rendering this with an eloquence and breadth of reference that are clearly in excess of the protagonist’s own. To take just one example, as she sets off on her enforced journey away from all she has ever known, Khady realises that she is noticing the sights around her, emerging from the cocoon of dreamy vagueness that has protected her since her husband’s death. A rhetorical question conveys Khady’s thoughts: ‘S’agissait-il qu’elle fût malgré elle protégée, arrachée à la somnolence dangereuse maintenant qu’elle se trouvait livrée à l’inconnu?’ (2009, 274; ‘Now that she found herself cast into the unknown, could it be that she had been wrenched from her dangerous torpor and was willy-nilly being protected?’ [2012, 229]). The language (imperfect subjunctives, erudite vocabulary) cannot be Khady’s, but its effect is to attribute to the semi-literate woman a subtle and complex psychology that does not depend (the text implies) solely on the possession of rich linguistic resources. Narrator (and hence reader) remain at one remove from Khady’s subjectivity, yet she is lent a voice that renders the shape and substance of a rich inner life. This seems to me to have the unconscious effect of registering the real distance between Khady’s situation and mine, whilst at the same time affirming the possibility of imaginative empathy.
And Khady’s inner life is also a vital element of that optimism that characterises middlebrow fiction and is abundantly present here, transcending the grimness of her experience and the story’s sad dénouement. For to the socially perceived ‘nullité et absurdité de son existence’ (2009, 265; ‘worthlessness and absurdity of her existence’ [2012, 222]), to the violence and suffering she undergoes, Khady opposes a stalwart, indeed an exultant sense of her own unique identity. The story returns insistently to Khady’s awareness of being ‘unique en tant que personne […] satisfaite d’être Khady’ (2009, 266; ‘unique as a person […] proud to be Khady ’ [2012, 223]). Even at her journey’s lowest point, when the money she has painfully saved to escape prostitution is stolen by the man who seemed to be her ally, Khady experiences the joy of simply being herself:

Et cependant son esprit était clair et vigilant et elle se sentait encore parfois inondée d’une joie chaude quand, seule dans la nuit, elle murmurait son nom et une fois de plus le trouvait en convenance exacte avec elle-même. (2009, 325)

(Still, her mind was clear and alert, and she was sometimes overwhelmed with joy when, alone at night, she murmured her own name and once again savoured its perfect affinity with herself [2012, 270])

This powerful conviction of her own selfhood seems remarkable, given Khady’s lifelong experience of dependence on the will of others, but NDiaye links it plausibly to Khady’s upbringing by a grandmother who, though undemonstrative and demanding, recognised in her granddaughter ‘une petite fille particulière nantie de ses propres attributs et non pas une enfant parmi d’autres’ (2009, 266; ‘a special little girl with her own attributes, not just any child’ [2012, 222]). To use Winnicott’s terminology, Khady has experienced sufficient ‘holding’ to enable her to create an integrated sense of self, and hence to relate to the world beyond (1986, 107) – and the story suggests too that this ‘holding’ was echoed in her gentle husband’s loving, affirmative view of her. Against the harsh inhumanity of the world depicted, Khady’s valiant sense of self repeatedly asserts a core of inner freedom, and the possibility of maintaining faith in the value of life. At the same time, her indestructible joy in simply being ‘moi, Khady Demba’ (2009, 312) bracingly asserts the individual selfhood of each refugee among the largely unnamed thousands that we glimpse on the news. As Khady falls from the high fence that finally blocks her road to Europe, a bird soars overhead: ‘C’est moi, Khady Demba’, she thinks for one last time ‘dans l’éblouissement
de cette révélation, sachant qu’elle était cet oiseau et que l’oiseau le savait’ (2009, 333; “It’s me, Khady Demba”, she thought, dazed by the revelation, knowing that she was the bird and that the bird knew it too’ [2012, 276]).

A short ‘counterpoint’ confirms the ultimate optimism of a story whose central focus is on human cruelty and suffering. Lamine is the boyish refugee who shared Khady’s journey from the port, across the desert and on to the grim little tavern where Khady sells her body to pay for their food and keep. Though they have been allies, even lovers, and she has treated him with kindness, Lamine steals the money Khady has saved and condemns her to further months or years of this wretched life before she can resume her journey. At the end, Lamine has reached France and is living the insecure, hand-to-mouth life of an illegal immigrant. He has at least reached his goal, and often thinks or dreams of Khady, incorporating her into his inner life as a confidante and a protector. Sometimes, when the sun warms his face, ‘alors il parlait à la fille et doucement lui racontait ce qu’il advenait de lui, il lui rendait grâce, un oiseau disparaissait au loin’ (2009, 333; ‘and then he would talk to the girl and tell her softly what had become of him. He would then give thanks to her. A bird flew away: far, far away’ [2012, 277]). Khady leaves a legacy, and the avian imagery attributes to this at least some small transcendence of death.

Optimism, a compelling plot, a powerful sense of place, an ‘identification with [an]other who is not like ourself’ (Huston, 2008, 182–83) – Khady Demba’s story works as an ‘entrancing’ fiction. Because I vicariously live through Khady’s journey, it has what Schaeffer calls a ‘modelling function’ (2010, 27), enabling me to ‘interiorise by immersion’ ‘scenarios of action’ and ‘ethical constellations’ far beyond my own lived experience.4 My passage through this imagined world – at once mimetically grounded in reality and shaped into vivid narrative – is pleasurable as stories are, because they satisfy curiosity and a desire for Kermode’s kairos (time ordered into significance) rather than mere chronos (time merely passing, ‘one damn thing after another’ [Kermode, 1967, 47]). But I also emerge from it just slightly changed: the metaphor of travel captures the experience of immersive reading, and as psychologist Richard Gerrig puts it in Experiencing Narrative Worlds, ‘the traveller [always] returns to the land of origin somewhat changed by the journey’ (1993, 10–11; cited in Ryan, 2001, 94).

4 See Chapter 1, p. 17.
(ii) Reading as a critic

To approach this story as an academic means to enter the collective, dialogical enterprise of literary studies. Context is required: where does this story belong in the work of a prolific and highly esteemed writer? How have other critics analysed this story, and what can I bring to this? What are the narrative techniques that produce the particular vision of the world articulated in the story of Khady Demba?

Marie NDiaye has had a dazzling career since her first novel, *Quant au riche avenir*, was published by the prestigious Éditions de Minuit in 1985, when she was a 17-year-old schoolgirl. Both a novelist and playwright, she has won many prizes including the Femina in 2001 for *Rosie Carpe*, the Goncourt for *Trois femmes puissantes* and two nominations (2013 and 2016) for the Man Booker international prize; her critical reception has been equally warm and included, to date, four international conferences devoted to her work, three edited volumes, numerous articles, doctoral theses and a monograph. She is not regarded as a realist or popular novelist, but as a fine, original stylist and interpreter of her age, writing at the avant-garde edge of the novel form.

NDiaye is often considered too as a postcolonial writer, though she was born and entirely educated in France, her Senegalese father left the family when she was a small child and she first visited Africa as an adult. NDiaye rarely writes explicitly about race or ethnicity, but her fictional protagonists are often marked by some unnamed and disavowed difference that sees them marginalised, humiliated or rejected by their surrounding community, as for example in *Mon Cœur à l'étroit* (2007), in which Nadia, an apparently respected and successful secondary teacher living in Bordeaux, suddenly and inexplicably finds herself and her husband the targets of abuse, harassment and violence. Nadia travels to an unnamed island which, despite her own conviction that she has never been there before, shows multiple signs of being her place of origin. There, among other strange happenings, Nadia’s stomach swells, and she gives birth to a dark, non-human creature that then simply disappears. The mysterious, disquieting nature of such events is typical of NDiaye’s non-realist narrative style: her colourful, often violent plots, though largely set in mimetically real places and dealing with recognisable types of social interaction and emotion, border on the fantastical. Characters are often oddly mute, or what they say hints only obliquely at their situation or their feelings. Narratives feature the Devil (*La Femme changée en bûche*, 1989), protagonists resurrected from the
dead (*En famille*, 1990), witchcraft (*La Sorcière*, 1996), zombies (*Rosie Carpe*, 2001), metamorphosis from woman to dog (*Ladivine*, 2013). The strangeness of NDiaye’s world, its figurative resonance and irreducibility to realist interpretation, is highly valued by analysts of her work: Andrew Asibong, author of the first monograph on NDiaye, finds for example that she gives ‘her readers and spectators new signs and symbols with which to conceive of unmourned emptiness or loss […], fresh and disturbing images with which [they] may be sufficiently stimulated to move forward towards new forms of life, colour and presence’ (2013b, 4).

It is not surprising then that the critical reaction to *Trois femmes puissantes* was mixed, and included some disappointment at the more mimetic, realist style of, in particular, the story of Khady Demba. Some of this disapproval was directed at the marketing of the volume as a whole: in their desire to signal to readers that this was an accessible book on an identifiable and coherent theme, the publishers of the paperback edition (Gallimard) packaged the three, only loosely linked stories in a cover bearing the image of what Asibong sardonically describes as a ‘generic “Mother Africa”, an exotic strong, “authentic” seeming repository for a collective fantasy about the sort of woman “we” think a novel such as this should ultimately be “about”’ (2013a, 397). NDiaye’s reticence and subtle, indirect approach to the issue of race had been replaced by a cruder characterisation of her as an authentically black writer, a ‘brown-skinned poster girl for difference and diversity’ (Asibong, 2013b, 100), and three quite different texts reduced, somewhat artificially, to a single, unified narrative. Lydie Moudileno, another perceptive and largely approving analyst of NDiaye’s work, found that the book’s presentation subscribed to a cliché of the “femme africaine” misérable et sublime, ‘son corps servant à la fois de métonymie d’un continent à l’agonie et de symbole de survie’ (2013, 72; “African woman”, at once wretched and sublime, her body serving both as a metonymy for a dying continent and a symbol of survival).

The title and cover of NDiaye’s Goncourt-winner are to some extent misleading, implying a simple, unifying theme to the whole that is not apparent in the stories themselves. However, critical scorn for ‘the text’s conversion into something coherent, readable and uplifting’ (Asibong, 2013a, 393) extends beyond its marketing to the presence of those qualities (coherence, readability, optimism) in the narrative itself, and above all in the character of Khady Demba. Asibong finds the whole book ‘relatively unconvincing’ in comparison to NDiaye’s other ‘breath-taking, if less conventionally successful work’ (2013a, 387), and judges
the portrayal of Khady’s indestructible sense of self (her ‘puissance’) to be ‘twee’ and ‘disingenuous’ (2013b, 102–03). Moudileno, in a more nuanced and ambivalent assessment, still finds Khady’s ‘stabilité narrative’ problematic in relation to the rest of NDiaye’s œuvre: a fully named, unified and consistent character, she finds, stands out among the enigmatic, shape-shifting protagonists of NDiaye’s usual world like ‘a statue among human beings’ (2013, 74).

These negative criticisms from discerning scholars of NDiaye’s work deserve proper attention and make me question my initial reading of Khady Demba’s story. What is at stake is this: can the techniques of realism (as we have seen, the dominant mode of the middlebrow) render adequately the traumatic, inchoate and – for the privileged Western reader – profoundly foreign experience of a poor African migrant, of what postcolonial studies terms ‘the subaltern’? Is it ethically or politically acceptable to imagine her inner life in a way that grants Western readers the pleasure of empathy – is this a form of neocolonial appropriation of her experience? And is it patronising and clichéd (the ‘femme africaine, misérable et sublime’) to attribute to Khady an invincible conviction of her own selfhood that survives trauma and even, symbolically, death? Do I have the right to be ‘uplifted’ by the imagined valour and resilience of a victim of the global inequality of which I myself am a beneficiary?

Some critical work on the story of Khady Demba is more sympathetic to the text’s realist register and the characterisation of its heroine, suggesting that close analysis can also endorse my first, positive response to the text. Both Deborah Gaensbauer and Shirley Jordan recognise this story as the most overtly political of NDiaye’s work: its mimetic referentiality (as opposed to NDiaye’s habitually oblique, fantastical narrative mode) clearly show Khady’s suffering as gendered (she is an outcast because women only have social value as wives and mothers, and power at the border camp is exercised in part through rape) and as determined by global inequality (postcolonial Europe is shown to jealously guard its affluence against those whose land and labour it exploits). For Gaensbauer, the fact that Trois femmes puissantes is overtly ‘about’ the migratory experience of contemporary women is positive, and laudably based on NDiaye’s ‘careful attention to testimonial documents collected by human rights organizations’ (2014, 12). Jordan too comments favourably on Khady’s status as ‘à la fois une distillation et une évolution plus ouvertement politisée de la figure principale ndiyienne de la femme errante’ (2012, 263; ‘both a distillation and a more clearly politicised development of NDiaye’s figure of the wandering woman’).
Both these critics perceive NDiaye’s choice of third-person narration focalised through Khady as an ethically aware, carefully modulated technique rather than an appropriation of another’s voice. Gaensbauer’s analysis of narrative voice echoes my subconscious response to this as a ‘middlebrow reader’, for she finds that the recognisable gap between the narrator’s erudite language and syntax and the protagonist’s limited linguistic resources constitutes a way of ‘putting oneself in the other’s position’ without ‘taking her place’ (2014, 12). The palpable disparity between eloquent narrator and semi-wordless character, she argues, ‘raises in pointed form [...] the problem of [...] composing narratives that [do not] confuse one’s own voice or position with the victim’s’ (Gaensbauer, 2014, 15). Jordan reads NDiaye’s use of bird imagery not only as an aesthetic device that introduces into the story (and indeed into all three stories of Trois Femmes Puissantes) that disquieting hybridity of animal and human that characterises NDiaye’s fictional universe, but also as a further element in the careful rendering of Khady’s subjectivity. Khady’s perception of her first trafficker as a crow – ‘Cachait-il derrière ses verres miroirs les petits yeux ronds, durs et fixes des corbeaux [...]?’ (2009, 283; ‘Was he hiding behind his gleaming lenses the small, hard, round, staring eyes of the crows?’ [2012, 236]) – vividly conveys his sinister, predatory role and evokes the association of crows in many cultures with cunning and with death. When she sees her fellow migrants as harbouring feathery wings beneath their clothes, the fantastical image (conjured up by a Khady whose exhaustion and hunger might well be producing hallucinations) suggests an ironic comparison between the legendary freedom of birds, and the utter subjection of the migrating hordes of refugees. At the same time – as Jordan points out – Khady’s bird imagery is consonant with the narrative’s psychological realism, for the text establishes (through allusion to her grandmother’s storytelling) that she inhabits a culture where animal imagery is commonly used to express human emotion, and where the borderline between human and animal is far from absolute. No wonder then that Khady pictures the victory of her own spirit over adversity as a long-winged bird hovering in the sky (2009, 333; 2012, 276). Free indirect style, both inside and outside the subjectivity of the protagonist, eloquently renders a less verbal, more pictorial mode of thought.

5 Gaensbauer draws here on the work of historian Dominick LaCapra on the writing of trauma.
Critical assessment of this story is divided, then, and this carries through to the narrative’s marked insistence on Khady Demba’s indestructible sense of selfhood. Some critics have seen this not as sentimental or disingenuous but as central to the protagonist’s ‘power’ as a memorable and resonant fictional figure. For Shirley Jordan, the proud repetition of Khady Demba’s full name echoing through the text, asserts the ‘plénitude existentielle’ (2012, 273; ‘existential plenitude’) of a woman whose bodily integrity, by contrast, is constantly under assault. If Khady starts the story self-protectively cocooned in aphasic numbness, shrunken to avoid notice into a ‘bloc de silence et de désaffection’ (2009, 265; ‘a silent, uninteresting heap’ [2012, 222]), her travels soon see her body opened to a brutal world through exposure to the elements, through the wound on her leg that refuses to heal and through unwanted sexual penetration. The sensorial nature of NDiaye’s narrative brings her sufferings vividly to life. Yet, like a mantra, the words ‘je suis Khady Demba’ affirm her uniqueness, her ‘pleine valeur sociale et humaine’ (Jordan, 2012, 273; ‘full social and human value’) and thus (as my first reading subliminally grasped) that of all the hundreds of thousands of anonymous refugees in similar situations. As Jordan concludes, Khady’s urgently affirmed selfhood interpolates the reader: we see the world in part through her eyes, yet are also objectively on the side of that ‘fortress Europe’ and its allies who deny her full humanity. This heroine, whose ‘narrative stability’ (Moudileno, 2013, 74) both conforms to and exceeds the conventions of realism, is a powerful figure because she poses a haunting, difficult question: ‘aux dépens de qui atteignons-nous notre confort?’ (Jordan, 2012, 280; ‘At whose expense do we procure our own comfort?’).

If I pursue my own critical analysis, I will take account of readings that go against my initial reaction to the text but will be drawn inevitably to those that explain and endorse my first, emotional response. Following Gainsbauer’s and Jordan’s sympathetic treatment of NDiaye’s narrative voice, for example, I might return to the way the structure and rhythm of her sentences mirror Khady’s perceptions, a technique that certainly had an effect on my initial reading, for example in the passage concerning Khady’s cycle from exhilarated ovulation through the hope of conception and back down to flat despair. This reflection of the shape of Khady’s thought in the syntax of the narrative is a recurring stylistic feature, and one that contributes to the story’s inside/outside narrative voice. One such instance is the moment when Khady’s mother-in-law announces to her, in the presence of the whole family, that Khady is to be sent off
to Europe. The narration takes the form of paragraph-long digressive sentences that simulate Khady’s own self-protective inattention to the frightening message, veering off to observe the skirts of her sisters-in-law and their hands which recall those of her dead husband, the syntax so complex that the stark message of Khady’s banishment gets lost in the reading. When, a few days later, Khady’s mother-in-law prods her in the back and orders, ‘Prépare tes affaires’ (2009, 271; ‘Get your things’ [2012, 227]), the reader shares Khady’s sense of shock, heightened by the sudden switch from intricate, multiclause sentences to the sharp brevity of direct speech. Khady’s strategic retreat from clear comprehension of her fate is both externally observed – ‘Elle ouvrait de nouveau son esprit qui lui tenait lieu de pensées depuis qu’elle habitait chez ces gens’ (2009, 271; ‘She opened her mind once again to the insipid pipe dreams that had stood in for thoughts ever since she came to live with these people’ [2012, 226]) – and shared from within, through the mimetic effect of style.

Close analysis supports a positive reading of NDiaye’s narrative voice as empathetic but non-appropriative. But a critical reading needs to pursue further the contested question of the story’s ethical stance, seen by some critics as shallow and sentimental, and by others as compelling and effectual. I will return in this light to just two aspects of the story: the depiction of Khady’s attitude to others and the text’s transcendent optimism.

If, as my ‘middlebrow’ reading suggested, this story invites the reader’s empathy with its heroine, empathy is also one of the themes that threads through the narrative. Its opposite, an instrumentalist view of others that denies their full humanity, is abundantly present: Khady accuses herself of just this in her reduction of a loving husband to a mere progenitor; her family-in-law fail to distinguish between ‘cette forme nommée Khady et celles, innombrables, des bêtes et des choses qui se trouvent aussi habiter le monde’ (2009, 269; ‘the shape called Khady and the innumerable forms of animals and things which also inhabit the world’ [2012, 225]); the traffickers, depicted figuratively as birds of prey, refuse all communication with their victims; the border guards exert their power over the excluded migrants through rape, beatings and finally by killing them. But to this denial of the other’s reality (in which, as Shirley Jordan argues, the reader is implicated), the figure of Khady Demba opposes a generous recognition of the other, expressed unemphatically but persistently, simply through the text’s attentive focalisation, through Khady’s eyes, of all those she encounters. Enabled by her stable belief in her own place in the world, Khady observes others with the same empathy that
her character invites from the reader. This is exemplified in her first meeting with Lamine on the beach, where she has jumped ship from the trafficker’s leaky craft, badly wounding her leg. Though in extreme pain, as well as lost and desperately hungry, Khady clearly perceives Lamine’s boyishness, his nervous tension, the evidence of a past suffering greater than her own – ‘trempé dans le bain glacial des sacrifices obligés’ (2009, 300; ‘tempered in the icy water of unavoidable deprivation’ [2012, 250]) – and makes a considered decision that it is in both their interests to form an alliance, and that she will care for him, even if she can’t entirely trust him. Understanding his humiliation when his confident plans for their onward journey fail, and when he is brutalised by a border guard, Khady is ‘navrée de ne pouvoir à sa place endosser l’humiliation, elle qui savait supporter cela’ (2009, 316; ‘upset at not being able to take on the humiliation in his stead, she who could bear it’ [2012, 263]) and ‘ne lui en tenait pas rigueur’ (2009, 317; ‘did not hold it [their failure to cross the frontier] against him’ [2012, 263]). Her non-judgemental attentiveness to others extends to the woman who pimps her to endless clients (whose face she perceives as ‘ronde et bienveillante’ (2009, 321; ‘round, kindly’ [2012, 266]), and to the clients themselves whose own desolate loneliness she recognises: it is through these brief interludes where attention shifts from her own suffering to the reality of other lives that Khady’s own life, and indeed the narrative, remain bearable. If this story exemplifies what Nancy Huston calls fiction’s ‘ethical role’ by ‘encouraging identification with others who are not like ourselves’ (2008, 182–83), it also displays that empathetic relation to the other in the figure of its heroine.

Khady’s goodness is part of the story’s optimism, of that ‘uplifting’ quality that some critics have found facile and sentimental. Middlebrow fiction, as this book has shown, tends to offer hope, at the very least by shaping the ‘chaotic, viscously contingent reality’ of life (Kermode, 1967, 145) into the relative coherence of plot, and often too by the depiction of human virtues (generosity, integrity, bravery) triumphing, morally if not practically, over evil. Sentimentality enters where fiction ignores or disguises Kermode’s ‘lingua franca of reality’ (1967, 107), merely ‘sealing up the cracks’ in Baroni’s image (2007, 409), and thus offering ‘mere fantasy […] unrelated to the basic human task of imaginative self-invention’ (Kermode, 1967, 146). The middlebrow fiction that has most appealed to readers over the past century does not do this, but acknowledges the discordant, painful, un congenial dimensions of existence even as it provides a safe and ultimately hopeful space to explore them. Khady Demba’s story is in this vein, balancing the
buoyancy of her powerful self-belief with a forceful emphasis on the horror of her situation. From Khady’s callous banishment from her home, through the eloquently rendered cruelty and indifference she encounters en route, to her last mortal fall with hands and feet ripped by the barbed wire fence, the story is unstintingly grim in its portrayal of poverty and exclusion. It ends with Lamine’s sense of the internalised legacy of Khady’s kindness, but also with the recognition that the long, painful itinerary that finally brought him to France has ended in insecure poverty, which means selling his labour wherever he can earn a few euros. The avian imagery that soared, in the previous paragraph, to express Khady’s final transcendence, now finds a grim echo in the ironic name of the restaurant where Lamine washes dishes: Au Bec fin.  

(iii) The power of fiction

Critical controversy around the story of Khady Demba arises from its middlebrow qualities of coherence, accessibility and optimism, particularly as none of these are the attributes admired in its author’s previous work. They are literary features that have been as little prized by critics, over the past century, as they have been enjoyed by readers. Studying this text purely as a critic, notebook by my side and paying due attention to NDiaye’s previous work and to critical commentary, I might also be uneasy about the author’s unexpected shift into a more mimetic, referential, hence potentially less resonant mode of narrative; about the story’s confident rendering of the inner life of a semi-illiterate woman from so distant a culture; and about the plausibility of its heroine’s resilient conviction of her own invincible identity. Yet, as a ‘reader for pleasure’, I was entranced by Khady’s fictional journey, moved by her suffering and her stoical openness to the reality of others, and at least subliminally aware of the delicacy with which an empathetic depiction of Khady’s subjectivity maintained awareness of her difference and her singularity. Rather than facile or sentimental, I experienced the story’s ‘uplifting’ quality as the result of satisfying narrative form, a compassionate, enlightening perspective on a real contemporary phenomenon and the affirmation, through the story’s heroine, of faith in life’s value, even in the cruellest of situations.

6 Literally the slender beak of a bird, but connoting a fine palate, gastronomic excellence.
What academic criticism can easily ignore is the sheer joy of fiction’s power to send us travelling through time and space, beyond the frontiers of our own individual consciousness and into the mind and heart of another. The narrative devices that most easily achieve this effect include Radway’s ‘rush of a good plot and [...] inspiration offered by an unforgettable character’ (1997, 7), to which might be added the mimetic anchoring of fictional story in the recognisably real – both of which have been the object of critical deprecation or indifference across most of the past century. Yet what is variously termed ‘immersive reading’ or ‘entrancement’ – and what I refer to here as ‘middlebrow reading’ – is particularly close to that experience of ‘transitional space’ that Winnicott holds to be crucial to mental and emotional health. For Winnicott, as we saw in Chapter 1, healthy development of the self requires both the acknowledgement of external reality – and thus of limits on the child’s early sense of omnipotence – and a maintained sense of subjective agency: if play effects this difficult balance in childhood, it is culture that takes its place in adult life. Reading fiction – arguably even more than watching fiction on film or television – plays out this negotiation between compliance and creativity, accepting the existence of a fictional world rooted in the real, and drawing on one’s own stock of experience and perceptions to imagine this world into existence. The entranced reader accepts and seeks to learn about an external reality, but also takes pleasure in her or his own sense of agency.

Middlebrow reading, in other words, has a salutary effect. At once serious and pleasure-oriented, throughout the twentieth century and up to the present it has engaged a huge (and increasingly female) sector of the population in the regular practice of imagination, exploration and empathy. ‘French literature’ generally refers to a French canon, heavily male-gendered, selected and endorsed by a ‘specialised, trained, quite small professional audience’ (Radway, 1997, 230, adapted). If we use the term instead to mean ‘literature that has pleased and affected a majority of French-speaking readers’, then literary history and contemporary criticism change both in content – for one thing, far more women writers appear – and in emphasis, since disregarded criteria such as the well-crafted plot, the capacity to ‘entrance’, a rich ‘modelling function’ (Schaeffer, 2010, 27) return to prominence. The middlebrow was long defined as Virginia Woolf’s ‘betwixt and between’, the ‘neither one thing nor the other’, the blandly mediocre. Instead, it may be seen as a creative space of imagination tempered by a desire to understand and get to grips with the real: as the vital ‘transitional space’ of culture.