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The Exploration of Center and Periphery in Two Novels by Michel Houellebecq and Marie NDiaye

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Abstract

This chapter analyzes the textual representation of tensions between center and periphery in two Goncourt Prize-winning novels by French writers, Michel Houellebecq and Marie NDiaye. In *La Carte et le territoire* (2010), Michel Houellebecq invents a fictional alter ego living outside the periphery of the Francophone world, in Ireland, from where he explores social and cultural developments in contemporary France that he finds disturbing. Embracing his otherness and alienation, he utilizes his marginalization to investigate disturbing and unacceptable aspects of contemporary France in an original auto-fictional narrative. In *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009), Marie NDiaye explores reality from the perspective of female characters living in Africa who reject their marginalization and forcefully assert their rights to a life in which they will be freed from the powerlessness, exclusion and humiliation that they experience daily. NDiaye invents new narrative strategies through which to express these women’s will for empowerment. These two thought-provoking novels present original insights into the experience of northern and southern peripheries, in relation to a problematic center—Paris and France.

**Keywords:** NDiaye, Refugee narrative, Attraction of center, Houellebecq, Disappearing center, Disillusionment.

The themes of center and periphery are major preoccupations in two recently published French novels, both of which were awarded the most prestigious literary prize in France in successive years, the Prix Goncourt.
Marie NDiaye won the Prix Goncourt in 2009 for her novel, *Trois femmes puissantes* (*Three Strong Women*) and Michel Houellebecq won it in the following year, 2010, for *La Carte et le territoire* (*The Map and the Territory*). In *Trois femmes puissantes*, Marie NDiaye explores contemporary life and reality from the perspective of three different women, each of whom rejects her marginalization in Senegalese society and forcefully asserts her right to a life of dignity and independence. NDiaye writes about the southern periphery of France and of Europe, highlighting movement and migration, or attempted migration, from Africa to Europe. She invents interesting and original narrative strategies to express these three women’s will for empowerment.

In *La Carte et le territoire*, Michel Houellebecq invents a fictional alter ego of himself, living, in the first half of the novel, outside the northern periphery of the French-speaking world, in Shannon, in the Republic of Ireland, from where he investigates, writes about and comments on, social and cultural developments in contemporary France. Positively embracing his feelings of alienation and otherness, and his desire for solitude, his fictionalized self, “Michel Houellebecq,” uses the liberating possibilities of voluntary physical and spatial isolation, marginalization and self-exclusion, to explore aspects of reality that he finds disturbing and even unbearable. Isolation allows for a possible investigation of the frontiers between fiction and reality, in a fascinating and original auto-fictional narrative.

This chapter will discuss parts I and III of NDiaye’s *Trois femmes puissantes*, the first and last sections of the three parts of the novel, each of which presents the story of a different female protagonist. The middle narrative, focusing on Fanta, the cousin of the other two women, highlights her experience of exclusion and discrimination within provincial French society, and is thus much less concerned with the questions of center and periphery than the two stories that frame it. Norah’s visit to her father, in Senegal, in Part I, places her in a dilemma or a situation of contrast and conflict between two worlds: France and French society, where she was born and where she still works as a successful lawyer, in Paris, where she lives with her husband and children, and Africa, where her father had decided to move back to, many years before, taking his son, Sony, with him, abandoning his wife and two daughters, and starting a new family, with a new wife, in Senegal. He has managed to make enough money to buy and to run a holiday and vacation village or resort there.
The narrator repeatedly emphasizes the traumatic consequences of Norah’s father’s abandonment of her mother, her sister and herself, and the inconsolable loss that she felt in her own life when he moved back to Senegal, taking her five-year-old brother, Sony, with him. There are clear, autobiographical echoes and tensions here, as Marie NDiayé’s own father had returned to live in his native Senegal, in a similar way, leaving a very young Marie and her French mother to fend for themselves in France.

As an experienced lawyer, who is used, particularly, to defending women against criminal charges in Paris, and to helping them to preserve and assert their legal rights, there is an ironic reversal at work here. Norah has been asked, by her father, to represent and to defend Sony, who is now grown up and who is facing the charge of having strangled and murdered his step-mother, his father’s second, African, wife. Sony had fallen in love with his step-mother and had wanted to elope with her. As he says to Norah: “C’est lui”; “It was him” (NDiaye 2009, 83; NDiaye, 2013, 70). He tells her that it was his father who had, himself, killed his own wife, in revenge for the fact that his two young children with the second wife had, in reality, been fathered by his son, Sony. This is a complex story, playing itself out in a patriarchal, rigidly hierarchical and very traditional society, in which the father takes revenge on his unfaithful wife by blaming his own son for a crime that he had himself committed and then asks his daughter, the lawyer, no doubt for reasons of saving his family’s honor, to defend that son against the charge.

There is a great deal of ambiguity in this story, and no clear sense of whether Norah’s defense of her brother will be successful, but there is, at the end, a direct and forceful statement of her strong wish to win the case and to free her brother, a wish that is powered by the love that she has always felt for him and which only grew stronger after he disappeared from her life as a boy of five.

Part III of *Trois femmes puissantes* is one of the most harrowing, intense and disturbing narratives of an attempted escape from the African continent and struggle to reach European shores to be found in contemporary Francophone fiction. Khady Demba’s husband died suddenly. She has been taken in by his family but is told by them that she must now leave and go somewhere else. Despite her yearning to have a baby and their attempting to conceive, the couple had no children. Khady was married for three years to a devoted and gentle man, but is now despised by her in-laws because she is poor and childless.
Marie NDiaye is clearly making an implicit criticism of the traditional and patriarchal rules that govern life within the society in which Khady is trapped, as her parents-in-law order her to leave their house. NDiaye writes: “Khady savait qu’elle n’existait pas pour eux”; “Khady knew that for them she simply did not exist” (NDiaye 2009, 256; NDiaye 2013, 237).

Although her mother-in-law does slip a few banknotes into the elastic of her underwear and gives her a scrap of paper with the address of her cousin, Fanta, in France, scribbled on it, she also tells her:

—Tu ne dois pas revenir ici, marmonna-t-elle près de l’oreille de Khady. Tu dois nous envoyer de l’argent dès que tu seras là-bas. Si tu n’y arrives pas, tu ne dois pas revenir.

Khady esquissa le geste de s’accrocher au bras de la vieille femme mais celle-ci fila prestement à l’intérieur de la maison et referma la porte derrière elle (NDiaye 2009, 261).

“You mustn’t come back here,” she murmured in Khady’s ear. “You must send us some money as soon as you get over there. But if you don’t make it, you mustn’t come back here.”

Khady made as if to clutch the old woman’s arm, but she slipped quickly inside the house and shut the door behind her (NDiaye 2013, 242).

The author gives the reader glimpses of the early life and thoughts of this poor young woman, who has only confused memories of having been brought up by her grandparents after her mother had given her up to them to raise, of her brief time at school, of years of work as a servant in different households, and of the kindness and love of her deceased husband, with whom she had run a small café or soft drinks stand.

The final fifty pages of the story present the distressing account of Khady’s chaotic journey, firstly to an unnamed port, of her being pushed into the back of a van by the man her mother-in-law has paid to take her away; then of her impressions of finding herself surrounded by a crowd of desperate refugees, pushing and shoving in attempts to get into a boat on the beach, her terror of being crushed, jumping back down into the shallow water, and injuring her leg as she does so. She meets a young man, Lamine, on that beach, who feels impelled to help her. He tends to her injured and bleeding leg and tells her:
But it is an elusive and ill-defined goal, one that might take many months or even years to achieve:

Lamine and Khady continue the long journey together. She agrees to work in dreadful conditions, as a prostitute, to earn money for the trip, and soon falls sick. They climb up onto the back of a truck with many other refugees. Deserts and borders are crossed, payments have to be made to guards encountered along the way. Lamine, the companion who had helped and protected her, and who had seemed to be falling in love with her, disappears with the rest of her money and she finds herself in a tent city with nothing: “Khady s’était aperçue qu’elle n’avait plus rien, ni ballot, ni passeport, ni argent”; “Khady’d noticed she had nothing anymore: no bundle, passport, or money” (NDiaye 2009, 313; NDiaye 2013, 289).

She finds herself, with many other desperate and helpless people, assembling a makeshift, improvised ladder and, scaling a fence that is topped with barbed wire and is defended by armed border guards and searchlights. Marie NDiaye does not name the location but suggests that this is one of the European, specifically Spanish, autonomous cities or enclaves on the coast of northwest Africa, Ceuta or Melilla, bordering on Morocco, both of which are still attracting desperate would-be migrants even today. Khady’s story does not have a happy ending. While Lamine, now safely in France and earning euros through casual work in restaurant kitchens and warehouses, thinks guiltily about how he left Khady behind,
abandoning her to an uncertain fate, somewhere in North Africa, she falls backward off her ladder, hits her head and most probably dies in her unsuccessful attempt to reach her Promised Land, the little piece of Europe on the continent of Africa:

It is I, Khady Demba, she thought, at the moment when her skull hit the ground and when, her eyes wide open, she saw soaring over the fence, a bird with long, grey wings—it is I, Khady Demba, she thought, dazzled by this revelation, knowing that she was that bird and that the bird knew it. (Passage not translated in NDiaye, 2013. Translation by the present author.)

Marie NDiaye presents the heartbreaking story of Khady Demba with great sympathy for the bravery and perseverance of this “femme puissante,” as she calls all three protagonists of the novel. It is a title that is full of irony. The attraction and pull of the center, here Paris and France as a whole, involves harsh and intense struggles that bring suffering, injustice, disillusionment, humiliation, failure and unexpected death—for Khady and for countless other human beings in the real world of today—both male and female.

In his Goncourt Prize-winning novel, La Carte et le territoire, Michel Houellebecq presents an ironic and extremely critical and even cynical view of the state of France in 2010. For Houellebecq, France has entered a period of decadence. French society, its traditional values and historical and intellectual importance, cultural legacy or patrimoine have all entered a downward spiral of decline, a decline that was to lead him, next, to publish the novel Soumission (Submission), which appeared in the same week as the Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher Islamist terrorist massacres in Paris, in January 2015. That later novel presents a dystopian, nightmarish vision of France in the near future, led by an extremist Islamist government that is ruthlessly enforcing strict Islamic values and Sharia law.

In La Carte et le territoire, Houellebecq’s fictional alter ego, “Michel Houellebecq” has fled from a Paris he no longer likes or understands and has gone to live in a bungalow in the rural west of Ireland, near Shannon Airport. Meanwhile, the novel’s main character, the photographer, painter
and conceptual artist, Jed Martin, continues to live in central Paris and to visit his elderly father in what was supposed to be his quiet retreat in the suburb or banlieue of Le Raincy, which is now surrounded by sinister, impoverished and dangerous gang-infested suburban zones. By page twenty of the novel, Jed’s father has moved into a retirement home in another suburb of Paris and, well before the novel’s end, he takes a flight to Zurich and ends his life in a pre-planned and expensively pre-paid stay in an assisted suicide facility in that prosperous Swiss city.

One of the aspects of contemporary French society that Jed finds most offensive is what he refers to as the “Relais et châteaux” and “French Touch” groups of hotels, which market an attractive but grotesquely distorted image of France to wealthy foreign tourists:

La firme avait vite pris conscience que les Français n’avaient, dans l’ensemble, plus tellement les moyens de se payer des vacances en France, et en tout cas certainement pas dans les hôtels proposés par ces chaînes. Un questionnaire distribué dans les French Touch l’année passée avait montré que 75% de la clientèle pouvait se répartir entre trois pays: Chine, Inde et Russie—le pourcentage montant à 90% pour les établissements “Demeures d’exception”, les plus prestigieux de la gamme (Houellebecq, 2010, 68).

Michelin had soon become aware that the French, on the whole, could no longer afford holidays in France, and in any case certainly not in the hotels proposed by the chains. A questionnaire distributed in the French Touch hotels the year before had shown that seventy-five percent of the clientele came from China, India, and Russia—the percentage rising to ninety for the résidences d’exception, the most prestigious establishments (Houellebecq 2012, 37).

Jed leafs through the French Touch brochure of luxury boutique hotels: “A travers l’ouvrage la France apparaissait comme un pays enchanté, une mosaïque de terroirs superbes, constellés de châteaux et de manoirs, d’une stupéfiante diversité mais où, partout, il faisait bon vivre”; “Throughout the guide, France appeared as an enchanted land, a mosaic of superb terroirs spangled with châteaux and manors, of an astonishing variety but in which, everywhere, life was good” (Houellebecq, 2010, 94; Houellebecq, 2012, 55). The narrator also criticizes pretentious and overpriced restaurants, presenting supposedly authentic “traditional” and “ancient” or historic dishes at outrageously high prices.

Another critique of France, and more generally of the societies of modern Europe, is presented when Jed thinks of including a painting of a Catholic priest in his series of portraits representing the various
professions practised in France today. He quickly gives up this idea, depressed by the overwhelming irrelevance of the traditionally respected and honored figure of the village or local priest in French society today:

Héritiers d’une tradition spirituelle millénaire que plus personne ne comprenait vraiment, autrefois placés au premier rang de la société, les prêtres étaient aujourd’hui réduits, à l’issue d’études efroyablement longues et difficiles qui impliquaient la maîtrise du latin, du droit canon, de la théologie rationnelle et d’autres matières presque incompréhensibles, à subsister dans des conditions matérielles misérables, ils prenaient le métro au milieu des autres hommes, allant d’un groupe de partage de l’Evangile à un atelier d’alphabétisation, disant la messe chaque matin pour une assistance clairsemée et vieillissante, toute joie sensuelle leur était interdite, et jusqu’aux plaisirs élémentaires de la vie de famille, obligés cependant par leur fonction de manifester jour après jour un optimisme indéfectible (Houellebecq, 2010, 99).

Inheritors of a millennia—old spiritual tradition that nobody really understood anymore, once placed in the front rank of society, priests were today reduced, at the end of terrifyingly long and difficult studies that involved mastering Latin, canon law, rational theology, and other almost incomprehensible subjects, to surviving in miserable material conditions. They took the Métro alongside other men, going from a Gospels—reading group to a literacy workshop, saying mass every morning for a thin and aging audience, being forbidden all sensual joy or even the elementary pleasures of family life, yet obliged by their function to display day after day an unwavering optimism (Houellebecq 2012, 59).

The narrator of the novel suggests that another sign of France’s decline on the world scale, or her relegation to the periphery of the worlds of both art and business, are the titles and subjects of Jed Martin’s paintings: Bill Gates et Steve Jobs s’entretiennent du futur de l’informatique (Bill Gates and Steve Jobs Discussing the Future of Information Technology), whose subtitle is The Conversation at Palo Alto, and Jed’s as yet unfinished painting, Damien Hirst et Jeff Koons se partagent le marché de l’art (Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons Dividing Up the Art Market). Important names and places in the domains both of art and of business are British or American, and definitely not French, or most of them are certainly no longer French. Houellebecq is clearly seriously concerned about the diminishing role that France is now playing, at least from his own point of view, in the two global spheres of art and business, in which she was, until relatively recently, a major player.
La Carte et le territoire is a novel that, in many ways, acts as Houellebecq’s vehicle through which he expresses his frustration and disillusionment with the increasing marginalization and decline of his homeland. The second half of the book is, in fact, a fast-paced murder mystery, as police and detectives attempt to discover the identity of the perpetrator of, and the motivation for, the grisly and quite horrific murder of the “Michel Houellebecq” character, when the writer’s grotesquely mutilated body, or body parts, are discovered in the home he just recently bought and moved into, in rural France.

The investigation allows for more expressions of disillusionment and dismay at the state of affairs in France, as a whole, in 2010. Detective Inspector Jasselin’s wife, Hélène, teaches economics at one of the universities in Paris. Contemplating an early retirement, she no longer believes in the validity of the discipline that she is teaching, and finds herself looking forward more and more to every vacation and holiday, when she does not have to teach or even set foot in her department:

L’intérêt d’Hélène pour l’économie avait beaucoup décru au fil des ans. De plus en plus, les théories qui tentaient d’expliquer les phénomènes économiques, de prévoir leurs évolutions, lui paraissaient à peu près également inconsistentes, hasardeuses, elle était de plus en plus tentée de les assimiler à du charlatanisme pur et simple. (Houellebecq 2010, 327).

Hélène’s interest in economics had waned considerably over the years. More and more, the theories that tried to explain economic phenomena, to predict their developments, appeared almost equally inconsistent and random. She was more and more tempted to liken them to pure and simple charlatanism (Houellebecq 2012, 209).

She is similarly disillusioned by the goals and achievements of the teaching profession itself, and by the motivation and seriousness, or lack thereof, that is evident among the vast majority of her students:

Son intérêt pour l’enseignement, lui aussi, avait beaucoup décru. Dans l’ensemble les jeunes ne l’intéressaient plus tellement, ses étudiants étaient d’un niveau intellectuel effroyablement bas, on pouvait même se demander, parfois, ce qui les avait poussés à entreprendre des études. La seule réponse, au fond d’elle-même elle le savait, c’était qu’ils voulaient gagner de l’argent, le plus d’argent possible; malgré quelques engouements humanitaires de courte durée, c’était la seule chose qui les animait réellement. Sa vie professionnelle pouvait en somme se résumer au fait d’enseigner des absurdités contradictoires à des crétins arrivistes, même si elle évitait de se le formuler en termes aussi nets (Houellebecq 2010, 327–328).
And her interest in teaching had also waned considerably. On the whole, young people no longer interested her much. Her students were at such a terrifyingly low intellectual level that, sometimes, you had to wonder what had pushed them into studying in the first place. The only reply, she knew in her heart of hearts, was that they wanted to make money, as much money as possible; aside from a few short-term humanitarian fads, that was the only thing that really got them going. Her professional life could thus be summarized as teaching contradictory absurdities to social-climbing cretins, even if she avoided formulating it to herself in terms that stark (Houellebecq 2012, 208).

This is a melancholy, rather depressing, and truly devastating indictment of aspects of life and society in France with which Houellebecq is expressing his dissatisfaction, frustration and extreme disillusionment. Moreover, passages such as these that appear in the novel are not placed within a context that would suggest that the narrator’s or author’s critiques are in any way ironic or not meant to be taken seriously, however extreme or exaggerated they may seem to be.

Michel Houellebecq’s narrative, in La Carte et le territoire, expresses an intense and rather alarming disillusionment with the late capitalist society of Western Europe and with the idea of his own country, France, being any longer the center of anything. Behind the cynical gaze at a depressing post-humanist reality, there is a questioning, an uncertainty and a profound doubt about the possible existence of any stable or credible values in the world in which we now live.

Preoccupations with, or anxieties about, the concepts of center and periphery thus inhabit the novelistic worlds and authorial concerns of both Marie NDiaye and Michel Houellebecq. Both authors, writing in French, examine and explore these notions and the issues associated with them in a rather obsessive manner, while each doing so in quite different ways. NDiaye’s characters are portrayed attempting to find liberation and self-fulfillment by leaving the southern periphery of Europe and the complexities and still insoluble problems facing them in modern Africa, by pursuing the elusive goal of achieving a greater degree of happiness and stability closer to a perceived center of world order. This turns out, however, to be an elusive or even an illusory goal. For Houellebecq, the concept of a center is itself revealed to be consistently problematic, hollow, nonexistent and, very often, risible or ridiculous. His novel, La Carte et le territoire, presents even the perception of any center, of society, culture, civilization and human behavior, as a disturbing and anxiety-provoking illusion. He presents characters who consistently flee to
the periphery, seeking refuge from a world that is lacking in stable values and any sense of central order. Both of these authorial visions, outlooks, and imagined fictional worlds, point to serious and, as yet, entirely unresolved problems facing humankind in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

**Works Cited**
