

The Most Secret Memory of Men

La plus secrète mémoire des hommes

Presented by: Sandra Folie

La plus secrète mémoire des hommes is the fourth novel by Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, first published in 2021. It is set on three continents (Africa, Europe, South America) and spans a period from the late 19th century to the present day: from French colonialism and the Senegalese Tirailleurs to the recent political protests in Dakar and the current generation of African writers living in Paris. These different eras and geographical locations are mostly described from the perspective of the colonised and their descendants, who have been marginalised in official historiography. As Sarr is very interested in post- and decolonial thinking, his works mostly focus on a political and social approach. While his first three novels revolve around jihadism, migration to Europe and homosexuality in Senegal, *La plus secrète mémoire* reflects the politics of a Eurocentric literary market and the expectations placed on African (diaspora) literature.

The novel is divided into three books with sub-chapters (“parties”) and so-called “biographèmes”. The “parties” are narrated by Diégane Latyr Faye, an aspiring Paris-based Senegalese author in Paris who becomes obsessed with the fictional novel *Le labyrinthe de l'inhumain* by his compatriot TC Elimane from 1938. The frame narrative begins with one of Diégane’s diary entries from August 2018 and then jumps to an earlier point in the story, where he explains how he came across Elimane’s “phantom book”, which he initially thought was lost. Instrumental in this discovery is “the spider mother”, as he calls Siga D., a more experienced Senegalese author whom he meets by chance one evening in a Parisian bar. After a brief and awkward erotic encounter, she lends him her copy of *Le labyrinthe* – the legacy of her cousin (or half-brother) Elimane – and invites him to visit her in Amsterdam as soon as he has finished reading it. Siga D. regularly (re)tells stories within Diégane’s account, constantly mediating between the frame narrative and internal narratives, between generations, genders, times and geographical spaces.

In addition to Siga D.’s stories about Elimane, various interspersed documents play an important narrative role in the novel, in particular the reviews of *Le labyrinthe* that Diégane reads in the Paris press archives. While some celebrate Elimane as a “Black Rimbaud”, others suspect a *white* author behind his enigmatic name or accuse him of plagiarism. A renowned French ethnologist claims that Elimane plagiarised a Senegalese founding myth (which, as it later turns out, he invented himself), and a literary scholar discovers unattributed text passages from European, American and ‘Oriental’ classics in *Le labyrinthe*. The resulting plagiarism scandal, which was partly based on a lie and a lack of appreciation of Elimane’s collage technique, marked the end of his career as an author. He never spoke out about the accusations and eventually returned to his home village in Senegal after travelling to various European and South American countries.

In a way, the story of Diégane is also a return narrative. His search for Elimane leads him, at least temporarily, back to Senegal: first to the politically troubled capital Dakar, where a young woman

has set herself on fire in protest against the government, and then to Elimane's home village, not far from where he himself grew up. When Diégane arrives there towards the end of the novel, Elimane is already dead, but has left behind a manuscript. However, as it does not fulfil Diégane's high expectations, he sinks it in the river. Although the return of the male protagonists to Senegal can be read as part of the novel's strategy of decentring Europe, it does not go hand in hand with an idealisation of Africa or African authors and their writing: neither Elimane nor Diégane are clearly positive figures of identification.

While in the sub-chapters called "parties" it is clear where the narrated information comes from (e.g. from Diégane, Siga D. or the archive documents) and who passes it on to whom, the situation in the four "biographèmes" is more complicated. This term goes back to Roland Barthes, who wrote in *Sade Fourier Loyola*: "Were I a writer, and dead, how I would love it if my life, through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections, let us say: to 'biographèmes' whose distinction and mobility might go beyond any fate and come to touch [...] some future body, destined to the same dispersion" (9). Sarr's biographèmes, which differ in terms of narrative perspective, time, space, length and style, consist of a diary entry and a letter by Elimane, a stream of consciousness from his mother's perspective and an account by his Jewish publisher documenting his return to Nazi-occupied Paris in July 1942 in search of Elimane. They all ultimately revolve around Elimane and provide further pieces of the puzzle of his biography. Interestingly, it remains unclear who "finds" or "retells" them. Readers thus become investigators themselves, competing with the diegetic narrative authorities and having to judge which stories they find credible. The struggle for knowledge and epistemic power, which plays a central role on the thematic level of Sarr's novel, is thus also reflected in formal and aesthetic terms.

In addition to the complex structure of the novel, its intertextuality is also striking. This is already evident in the paratexts: Sarr borrowed the title from Roberto Bolaño's *Los detectives salvajes* (1998 [*The Savage Detectives*, 2007]) and dedicated his novel to Yambo Ouologuem, a Malian author who won the Prix Renaudot for his debut *Le Devoir de violence* (1968 [*Bound to Violence*, 1971]). However, his career was overshadowed by accusations of plagiarism and eventually ended. Apart from this obvious parallel between the real-life case of Ouologuem and the fictional case of Elimane, Sarr reflects more generally on the expectations placed on African authors and their literature. His novel deals with the question of who is allowed to 'plunder' literature, when and under what conditions. He asks where the boundary between intertextuality and literary appropriation lies and to what extent this boundary is defined differently depending on the origin of the author and the appropriated work.

The "longue durée" perspective that Sarr brings to his novel by setting Elimane's debut in the 1930s allows him to address not only the history of colonialism in Senegal (e.g. the colonial education system and the Senegalese Tirailleurs in the First World War), but also the long history of racism in European literary criticism. In her article on Black authors and literary prizes, Elara Bertho shows that the reviews of Elimane's *Le labyrinthe* are reminiscent of the way literary critics treated Ouologuem as well as francophone African (diaspora) authors of earlier generations such as Camara Laye, Bakary Diallo and René Maran, the first Black author to be awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1921. Their authorship was either doubted or they were accused of plagiarism because their texts lacked the African 'authenticity', simplicity and/or orality expected by Western critics.

After *La plus secrète mémoire* was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 2021 and translated into numerous languages, it was not spared controversy, such as that triggered by an article published

in the German newspaper *Die Zeit* by the authors Juliane Liebert and Ronya Othmann. They were members of the jury for the International Literature Prize 2023, which was awarded by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) to Sarr and his German translators Holger Fock and Sabine Müller. Liebert and Othmann accused the HKW and the other jury members of basing their decisions on identity politics rather than literary quality. While the rest of the jury and the HKW unanimously rejected the accusations, literary critic Insa Wilke pointed out that the debate about whether aesthetics is an untouchable, demarcated space or whether ethical and political categories also play a role, is not new. In the current climate, it is only being updated, partly because there is a generational shift and partly because new groups are demanding a say. In essence, it seems to be about the same question that Sarr's novel revolves around: Who is seen when it comes to literary quality and who is not?

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This article was written as part of a project funded by the European Union (ERC-STG, AFROPEA, Grant agreement no. 101075842). However, the views and opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the ERCEA. Neither the European Union nor the ERCEA can be held responsible for them.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

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