

## THE SECRET MEMORY. HOW THE GONCOURT 2021, MOHAMED MBOUGAR SARR, REWRITES THE STORY OF THE “BLACK RIMBAUD”

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**ABSTRACT.** *The Secret Memory. How the Goncourt 2021, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, Rewrites the Story of the “Black Rimbaud”.* In a mixture of “savage detective story” à la Bolaño, of diary, journalism, interviews and discussions on “plagiarism,” the revolutionary book of Mohamed Mbougar Sarr rewrites the history of Western relations to Africa, to its cultures and its storytelling, but also to different forms of marginality, since its main character, Elimane Madag, is also travelling to South America, being part of its most interesting intellectual circles – through, for instance, Sabato, Gombrowicz, Silvina and Victoria Ocampo. Through voices of Senegalese, Haitian, Argentinian writers and poets, through an apocryphal rewriting of the literary history of the twentieth century, through subverting the theory of plagiarism (since African myths are reinterpreted and melted in the Western culture, similar to African artefacts after the expedition Dakar-Djibouti), as well as through detective journalism (since many characters are interrogating the relation facts-fiction), the marginal and the minor are presented as an alternative, disruptive literary history of the twentieth and of the beginning of the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** *marginality, minor, African myths, Western culture, plagiarism*

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**REZUMAT: Memoria secretă. Despre cum laureatul premiului Goncourt 2021, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, rescrie povestea unui „Rimbaud negru”.** Într-un amestec de „detectivism sălbatic” à la Bolaño, de jurnal, jurnalism, interviuri și discuții despre „plagiat”, romanul revoluționar al lui Mohamed Mbougar Sarr rescrie istoria relațiilor Occidentului cu Africa, cu culturile sale și cu modul ei de a povesti, dar și cu forme diferite de marginalitate, din moment ce personajul principal, Elimane Madag, călătorește în egală măsură în America de Sud, făcând parte din cercurile ei intelectuale cele mai interesante – prin intermediul, de exemplu, al lui Sábato, Gombrowicz, Silvina și Victoria Ocampo. Trecând prin voci de scriitori și poeți senegalezi, haitieni și argentinieni, printr-o rescriere apocrifă a istoriei literare a secolului XX, prin subversiunea teoriei plagiatului (din moment ce mituri africane sunt reinterpretate și preluate în cultura occidentală, la fel cu artefactele africane, după expediția Dakar-Djibouti), precum și prin jurnalism detectivist (întrucât multe dintre personaje interoghează relațiile dintre fapte și ficțiune), marginalul și minorul sunt prezentate ca o istorie literară alternativă, perturbatoare a secolului XX și a începutului de secol XXI.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** marginalitate, minor, mituri africane, cultură occidentală, plagiat

In the introduction of her keynote conference at the *American Comparative Literature Association* congress (ACLA)<sup>2</sup>, Gayatri Spivak defines translation as “critical intimacy” and places it at the core of an extensive exercise of undermining the I, understood as the subject of capitalist grid, based on a world vision characterized by homogeneity, and rigid borders, whose leading figure is the total war. Total war is the subject and the consequence of “continentality,” of identity politics and grid, understood as fundamental attitudes towards world, others, and territory.

In order to restore the “oceanic” (a world of water rather than a world of land) and to conceptualize the thought of it (languages should no longer be understood as a ground for nation-states), Spivak addresses the idea of scales, namely through rethinking the accident of birth. Working with comparative literature means discovering *ipseity* “in the situation,” precisely through “other” situations that do not necessarily lead to violence. These situations build the prerequisite for the possibility of imagining an extra space. Briefly put, of imagining the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Held at Palais des Congrès in Montreal between March 13-17, 2024. The text presented here (on Sarr’s *The Most Secret Memory of Men*) was originally part of the panel *The Minor in World Literature: Reconfigurations, Recognitions, and Resonances*, organized by Simla Dogangun, Warwick University, and H. Esra Almas, Bilkent Üniversitesi (Bilkent University), at the ACLA.

We tend though to forget that gendering, feminism, and postcolonialism can't be tied exclusively to social foundations, that they are rather related to an incalculable supplement, which cannot be contained in our theoretical approaches. This is the junction through which the role of the minor in literature comes to the fore because it teaches us that violence means desire and therefore gendering, feminism, and postcolonialism, all of them reside in an incalculable supplement.

This incalculable supplement is at the core of Spivak's take on the *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Apter, Cassin 2014), when she affirms that all methodology betrays the impossibility of action. Furthermore, the untranslatable would mean, in my view, the clash between two worldviews that cannot coincide with each other because of their excess in addressing sensitive issues such as conflict and violence, and especially the fact that, genuinely, desire means violence. In addressing this indiscernibility, Spivak mentions the novel of Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, *The Most Secret Memory of Men*, where the diasporic as well as the vindicative versions of postcolonialism cannot stand together. They collapse in a space of indiscernibility, hence the beauty of the book.

If the time of this collapse is the time of world-making, it also involves the question of the aspirational, of a world-to-come. Aspirational is different from possibility because it is completely undecided. It is sometimes a matter of initiating a change of paradigm, based on what Mohamed Mbougar Sarr calls *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*, making reference to a decisive book written by his Senegalese predecessor: a long exercise in a "sustained continuity" of a "dehumanized thought." Paradoxically, this exercise leads to an abnormous legacy, based less on *talking the talk* than on *walking the walk*. These are the final words of Spivak's keynote conference, which insists on the fact that at the bottom, literary in a planetary sense means teaching mathematics, geography, history, imagining the external space (the speaker also makes reference to the imperative of *Re-imagining the Silk Road*). Moreover, I would add, if there is a dimension that could be inserted within these interstices of indiscernibility, this is the minor key, which addresses different scales, different logics of causality and thus different experiments of thought.

In the book of Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, *The Most Secret Memory of Men*, the logic of center-peripherality or of minor-major is disrupted (sometimes reversed), by adding to a first periphery (Senegalese writers aspiring to be acknowledged by the Parisian literary milieu) a second one – the South-American intellectual and artistic circles, where a large part of the book action is placed. Literature in its entirety is seen as a series of robbed, apocryphal myths, circulating through the languages of the "murderers" as well as through those of the "murdered," of the guilty ones and of those on whom guilt is perpetrated.

In this “total translation” of the world, in the reversed logic proposed by Sarr (in a way, similar to the logic of *Critique of Black Reason* by Achille Mbembe<sup>3</sup>), travel always implies the necessity of a counterlife, where the point of arrival is all but a promised land. The peripheral and the anecdotal become the rule; the minor represents the universal wish to transcend cultures, not in the direction of the Major, but rather in the direction of indiscernibility.<sup>4</sup>

The shape of things is shifting towards a “literature of Disaster,” in the direction of minor moments not being anywhere at home, but building a different, aspirational space. To the necessity of impersonating a character, Sarr answers: Don’t exoticize me! We are all guilty of plagiarism. But nevertheless, the autofictional is a staged element of authenticity. What is then everything about?

In a mixture of “savage detective story” à la Bolaño, of journalism, diary, interviews and discussions on “plagiarism,” the revolutionary book of Mohamed Mbougar Sarr rewrites Western relations to Africa, to its cultures and its storytelling, but also to different forms of marginality, since its main character, Elimane Madag, is also travelling to South America, being part of its most interesting intellectual circles – through, for instance, Sábado, Gombrowicz, Silvina and Victoria Ocampo.

In an excessive form of novel, the author is subverting several genres, since the publication of the first and single novel of Elimane (a “Black Rimbaud,” as he is characterized by journalists, writers and editors), *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity* (1938), is from the beginning accepted as a form of plagiarism – firstly of a Western African myth, of a king killing his subjects and nourishing trees with their fat, in order to become more powerful, myth told to Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris during the famous ethnological expedition Dakar-Djibouti<sup>5</sup>; secondly of many other literary sources, acknowledged by the author. The final outcome is an intrusive form of poetry and thought, influencing careers, lives, destinies, and leading to murders. The editor is forced into trial by the defenders of plagiarism. The central issue of the book is the idea of writing and the way it subverts identity, belonging, and fame. At its core stands also the whole history of Europe, with its colonialism and Holocaust, recounted through characters that are searching for their identity throughout their entire

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<sup>3</sup> It involves the fact that all subaltern humanity has become *Black*.

<sup>4</sup> Similar to the shape shift expressed by G. Schwab in *Imaginary Ethnographies. Literature, Culture, and Subjectivity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> A reinterpretation of this expedition from the point of view of the subject of mobility in a colonial era is offered by S. Harel in « De l’Afrique spectrale à l’objet ventriloque. Parcours de la mobilité dans Dakar – Djibouti, 1931. Le butin du musée de l’Homme », in *Journal of Global Cultural Studies*, 17/2022. It also explores the forms of vehicular mobility through the principle of velocity and through the cartography of the territory covered.

lives. It is not random that three central characters of the book have almost similar names: Elimane, Engelmann and Ellenstein, the African writer published in Paris, the German officer during the Second World War and the Jew, arrested and tortured by him.

Sarr gives voice to the aspirations of an entire generation of writers coming from the francophone Africa, aiming at writing "the Book." Its minor key expresses itself in the forms of a disputable plagiarism, in a mixture of African voodoo and of high literary culture, on the traces of the haunted figure of the above mentioned "Black Rimbaud." And also in the form of a second, unfinished book, since Elimane will never be able to fulfill his task. He ends his life as a wiseman in his ancestors' village.

Through voices of Senegalese, Haitian, Argentinian writers and poets, through an apocryphal rewriting of the literary history of the twentieth century (since Sábato, Gombrowicz, Victoria and Silvina Ocampo become transitory characters in the book), through subverting the theory of plagiarism, since African myths are reinterpreted and melted in the Western culture, similar to African artefacts after the expedition Dakar-Djibouti, as well as through detective journalism (since many characters are interrogating the relation facts-fiction), the marginal and the minor are presented as an alternative, disruptive literary history of the twentieth and of the beginning of the twenty-first century. All characters of the book are in a continual movement between Europe, Africa and South America, being interconnected in a poetic, planetary memory.

The novel of Mbougar Sarr is, simply put, about how a "black Rimbaud" conquers France, asserting his own exclusion. However, if it were only about this, we probably would consider it one of the novels with a strong ideological, ironic, angry, often destroying imprint, about how an entire world was contaminated by the other and can no longer live without it. But also about the way the "soul captures" push certain members of the society of origin to blow their roots, to seek for a foreign soil, to reinvent their ancestors, to rewrite "wild" cartographies, to explore invented languages, to follow a journey in which works, readers and critics will disappear, until one day, when the Work will travel "unavoidably alone in the Vastness. And one day the Work dies, as all things die, as the Sun and the Earth, the Solar System and the Galaxy and the most secret memory of men will be extinguished." (R. Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives*, opening quote of Sarr's novel).

The novel is about writing a book, starting from another, which is entitled *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*, published in 1938 by an African author who instigated a huge scandal at the time, that eventually led to the bankruptcy of his publisher. It is also about two disappearances – the first one when he realized that his readers were not at all interested in the book, but in all the

adjacent things they could discover in it; the author first leaves to the north of France on the footsteps of his father, who disappeared one day because he was ready to die for the causes of the “white people”; after the second departure of the author, we can mysteriously find him in the South America, following the SS officer who had tortured and killed his publisher, during the German occupation of Paris, in World War II.

The novel focuses thus on a certain form of exclusion and marginality (most often excessive), as the central character, Elimane Madag, but also the narrator of the novel, Diégane Latyr Faye, as well as the fascinating author Marème Siga<sup>6</sup>, they are all in the search of a fundamental book, of a primordial language, which can create echoes wherever one uses or performs it. This language returns to the beginning, at that first book that was thrown into the unknown, which has defied the laws of literary “gravity” and has self-proclaimed the origin of some important founding myths reinvested in contemporaneity. This book defies a long genealogy of writers who will dare to continue a founding irreverent tradition.

In an excessive form of narrative, the novel is an assumed plagiarism of many other sources, accepted by the author, implying that any literature becomes a form of robbery. Just as the appropriations, intrusions, cultural mixtures represent imperfect exchanges, likewise this “genius of collage,” although extremely disturbing at first sight, implies a special virtuosity, a hardly perceptible nuance for those who consider it, without hesitation, a form of imposture:

He recognized the virtuosity of the writing, and he recognized that the story was one of a kind, but he couldn't shake off the idea that the whole thing was theft, a dishonest sham. It was a singular book, never before seen, deeply original, but at the same time it was also a compilation of existing books. ... Elimane responded that literature was nothing but a game of pillages, and that his book proved it. He said that one of his goals had been to be both original and not, since that was one possible definition of literature and even of art, and that his other goal had been to show that anything could be sacrificed in the name of creative perfection (Sarr 2023, 194).

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<sup>6</sup> This is modeled after the Senegalese writer Ken Bugul, raised in a polygamous environment and who, after studying in Dakar, returns to her native village where she becomes the 28th wife of a marabout, after whose death she returns to the metropolis and imposes herself as a writer, internationally acknowledged nowadays. The episode of her polygamous past recurrently comes back in the manner American feminists criticize her, every time she openly talks about women and their role in society.

The final result is thus an intrusive form of poetry and thought, which influences lives, destinies and leads to crime, as all journalists who wrote about the *Labyrinth of Inhumanity* committed suicide. But the irony subsists, as the final purification through the book that kills its adepts is immediately harshly sanctioned: "It's crypto-symbolist bullshit. Risible mystagogy. A tasteless parody of a prophet or Meister Eckhart or a Congolese evangelist charlatan planning to expulse the demons inside possessed women by sodomizing them live on Facebook, Bible in hand. T.C. Elimane would have never written this stuff with any seriousness" (Sarr 2023, 288).

As a result of this "robbery", the publisher of the *Labyrinth of Inhumanity* is facing plagiarism accusations. Writing dynamites identity, belonging, and the idea of fame. But at the same time it restores differently the whole history of Europe, on the traces of colonialism and the Holocaust, whose monstrous heads protuberate, since that what fascinates us can become all of a sudden deathly dangerous.

After deambulating through Europe and South America, the writer returns to Senegal, in his native village, taking the place of his adoptive father (or his biological father-enigma persists), as a keeper of memory, as the intermediary between two worlds – paying the price of losing his previous memory. There are no books in his house, and he becomes destructive when they intrude, reminding him that he will never be able to write a second one. After his death, Diégane, the young author in search for his voice, is tracing him back to his native village and will indeed find fragments of his attempt to "restore the initial cosmogony," but these debris cannot compare to the initial one: "One thing is clear: Madag didn't run out of time, as he says in the letter he sent to his future. He simply never got past the *Labrinth of Inhumanity*. He probably should never have tried. Maybe he only had a single book in him; a single, masterful book. It might be that every writer, in the end, only contains a single essential book, a work that demands to be written, between two voids" (Sarr 2023, 227).

I believe that this aspiration towards the cosmogonic force of writing the first, unrepeatable book, but also the consciousness that will slip into forgetfulness, in a black, reversed cosmogonia, give this novel the tone of a planetary exploration, of a planetary consciousness more precisely. It is capable on the one hand of encompassing experiences of decorporalization and travel of the soul beyond the edges of the material, as in the archaic world in which the narrator of the *Labyrinth of Inhumanity* originates, but also extremely contemporary experiences, such as asking oneself questions about the role of writing, especially in a world where direct intervention, activism, protest, resistance and revolution are urgent. What is to be done, what can a young

writer do by investing full energy in a quest, seemingly useless for all those surrounding him? How can he sustain the search for a nomadic, obsessive fiction in relation to the world, to its emergent causes?

This conflict becomes extremely violent because, unable to do anything in order to change the condition of those people who are immolated for justice, whose lives are endangered by the “necropolitics of fear,” any possible literary enterprise seems a form of escapism, of arrogant non-involvement. The internauts attack: “You know why you’ll never be a big deal here? Because you act like you’re better than us. The whites can celebrate you as much as they like, give you all the prizes they want, talk about you in their fancy papers, but here, you’re nothing. Nada. And when you’re nothing in your home country, you’re nothing everywhere. You’re a traitor, a castaway, a house Negro. You’ll never reach the caliber of... Then he listed the names of seven or eight intellectuals” (Sarr 2023, 305).

How to respond to such an accusation? What can memory do in order to become a planetary narrative, which could echo in dissonant spaces and times? The paths explored by Sarr are the following: first, the Basser myth of the king who burns his subjects in order to become stronger; it has a follow-up, as after this abominable beginning, a woman of excessive beauty leads the king to the forest, where each tree speaks as the soul of the subjects killed. The king will therefore have to face, one by one, the committed crimes, and will eventually return to life and proper judgment. This myth of burning makes reference to the self-metamorphosis – someone who must burn his past in order to become a completely different person. The Basser myth thus is the allegory of identity betrayal. Every wanderer becomes incomprehensible to all those he has left behind: “Who was he? A pure writer? An abashed plagiarist? A brilliant impostor? A mystical assassin? An eater of souls? An eternal nomad? A refined libertine? A child looking for his father? A simple, unhappy exile, who lost his bearings and himself? What does it matter, in the end. What I love in him is something else entirely.” (Sarr 2023, 271).

I think that the force, often defamatory, but of an intense poetry, of someone who can appear in the eyes of the others as carrying both the aura of the explorer, but also of a murderer of his own origins, is translatable through the fact that this voice becomes the echo of a wider, almost planetary experience.

There is a passionate odyssey, full of beauty and horror, as any odyssey, a double-edged tide, full of exaltation and dismay. There is a lot of anger – the anger of not being able to live otherwise than with the spine in the flesh; if it is removed, it will definitely kill the one who carries it. This is the spine of contamination with otherness, with a culture that perceives the other as exotic. Elimane is not only a talented writer, but also an exhibited wild object. Although



the descendant (or imprint) of a long genealogy of preservers of memory, "other poets, other wordsmiths, aoidos, magicians and mages, word-bearers, linguistic maieutologists, royal griots, creators of rhymes, speakers of gymnastic poems, other shepherds of silence" (Sarr 2023, 286), Elimane is also the most fulfilled and most tragic product of colonization, which instilled in him the desire to become like the others and equally his alienation.

What can the writer do? What can this broken Ulysses do, who remains, paradoxically, "intact" inside his tongue, by facing the threat: "I know you know that Wittgenstein quote, at the end of *Tractatus*: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.' But staying silent, not telling, doesn't mean you shouldn't show. We're not here to heal ourselves, or to mend, or console, or reassure or educate; we're meant to stand tall in the sacred wound, to see it and show it in silence. That there is the point of *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*. Everything else is a failure" (Sarr 2023, 347).

So, asking if the past is the one which haunts us or if, on the contrary we are the ones to haunt it, it seems that a conclusion is required: we haunt the past, leaving no rest to those who precede us. We haunt them with our questions because we do not want the past to remain inscrutable. We want it to continue to be transformed into future, a future that contains the possibility of the new. This is why we reopen the space of memory, the monuments of the past.

The author investigates the past in a minor, assumed key, through voices of Senegalese, Haitian poets, Argentine writers, by an apocryphal rewriting of the literary history of the twentieth century, through a subversive theory of plagiarism, through detective stories, in a "total translation" of the world. This is how the minor is interconnected in a planetary memory. Through its reversed logic (all subaltern humanity has become Black), the minor represents the possibility of transcending cultures, eluding the Major and replacing it through indiscernibility, which means extension of desire. Indiscernibility points also towards an incalculable supplement, engendered by the ambiguous nature of desire: violence and aspiration, renewed projection of an external space. This external space would have no actual meaning if it were not inhabited by a protheic language, as the one explored by Sarr.

As a conclusion, we could affirm that the fundamental book or rather the longing for the fundamental book – is a book of irony, of assumed plagiarism, of robbery, showing at the same time its force of vulnerability, of writing from the edge. Paradoxically, the Book is a minor one.

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