

# Thinking Erasure in African Literature

Salawu Olajide

April 4, 2025



There is a peculiar fate in literature: some books die and some books are killed, not because they weren't read or weren't loved, but because they were regarded as unbearable. And some simply refuse to vanish. They exist as whispers, as rumors in footnotes, as echoes in the margins of other people's stories. Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's *The Most Secret Memory of Men* is a novel about such fate. It is a book about what happens when a writer is erased—how literature, like history, is structured not only by what is remembered, but also by what is deliberately forgotten.

Sarr himself burst onto the literary scene with a rare combination of critical acclaim and defiance of conventional literary expectations. Winning the Prix Goncourt in 2021, he became the first writer from sub-Saharan Africa to achieve this honor. His success did not come without its own tensions. In a literary world that often seeks to define African writers within narrow categories, Sarr resists containment. His work is deeply concerned with the politics of memory, authorship, and refusal—the refusal to be categorized, to be reduced, to be silenced. Sarr's first book, *Terre Ceinte*, established him as a writer unafraid to confront political violence and historical amnesia. The novel, set in a dystopian Sahelian state governed by jihadists, depicts the brutal reality of oppression and the struggle for resistance. It explores the ways in which narratives of power seek to erase the past, suppressing any form of dissenting memory. While that novel directly tackles themes of extremism and collective trauma, *The Most Secret Memory of Men* takes a more nuanced, metafictional approach, interrogating the structures that govern literary history itself by situating the protagonist as an investigator researching what he considers as his literary heritage. Through this shift, Sarr expands his exploration of how memory operates—not just as recollection, but as a form of resistance against erasure. If *Terre Ceinte* examines the disappearance of political agency under authoritarian rule, *The Most Secret Memory of Men* extends that inquiry to the literary world, revealing how exclusion, scandal, and marginalization operate as tools of erasure within the global literary marketplace. Both impel attention on the politics of erasure that looms on some African texts yet with shadow presence in the middle.

In the world of *The Most Secret Memory of Men*, African literature is perpetually subjected to cycles of recognition and exclusion—a space Jacques Derrida might call a hauntological space. At the center of this kind of haunting is T.C. Elimane, a Senegalese writer whose novel, *The Labyrinth of Inhumanity*, dazzles Paris—until it doesn't. Until whispers of plagiarism swell into scandal, and scandal collapses into silence. Elimane disappears, not just in body but in text. He becomes a literary ghost, an absence more powerful than any presence. He joins the ranks of writers who were, at different times, too much and not enough—Yambo Ouologuem, Camara Laye, Amos Tutuola—figures who unsettle the fragile rules of the world literary canon.

But what is this canon, and who decides who belongs to it? Pascale Casanova, in *The World Republic of Letters*, describes world literature as an uneven landscape: at its center, Paris, London, New York—capitals where books are consecrated; at its periphery, the so-called margins, where books are translated, anthologized, and labeled as “postcolonial,” “world,” or “ethnographic.” African writers, Casanova argues, must first be discovered by these literary centers before they can be seen at all. But discovery is treacherous—it is always a form of possession. A writer is celebrated for his “universal” vision until he is accused of inauthenticity. Until his work is deemed too borrowed, too impure.

Elimane's fate echoes the real-life story of Yambo Ouologuem, whose 1968 novel *Bound to Violence* won the Prix Renaudot in 1968 before he was accused of plagiarism and cast out of the literary world. His novel did not fit into the mold of what African literature was supposed to be: singular, legible, contained. Elimane's book meets the same fate—it is first exalted, then discarded, then erased. Not merely forgotten but made to disappear. Yet erasure is never complete. As Jacques Derrida reminds us in *Specters of Marx*, ghosts do not vanish; they return. They reappear in unexpected places, in the margins of other texts, in the journeys of those who go looking for them. Sarr's protagonist, Diégane, is not just searching for a lost writer; he is searching for the conditions that make literary disappearance possible. What does it mean to write from a place where one's existence in literature is always precarious? Where authorship itself is under suspicion?

For Sarr, writing itself is an act of refusal. The refusal to be erased. The refusal to abide by the dictates of the literary marketplace that seeks to determine who is worthy of remembrance. His engagement with memory is not passive nostalgia, but an active reckoning with the structures that produce literary ghosts. His approach mirrors his earlier work in *Terre Ceinte*, where he refused to offer easy solutions to political violence, instead forcing readers to confront uncomfortable histories. Here, too, he refuses resolution, forcing readers to reckon with the ways literature itself can function as a tool of exclusion.

Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* provides another way to understand this ghostly condition. He describes postcolonial African societies as haunted by the unfinished business of colonial rule, where time does not move forward so much as spiral in endless repetition. The past is not the past. Empire persists in new forms, dictating the terms of visibility, of legitimacy. In literature, this haunting manifests in the expectation that African writers must always explain themselves, must always prove their authenticity, must always bear the weight of representation. Elimane's disappearance, then, is not just about plagiarism or scandal—it is about the fragile space that African literature occupies within the global imagination.

Many other writers have suffered a similar fate. Ouologuem is one, but so too are figures like René Maran, whose *Batouala*, the first African novel to win the Prix Goncourt in 1921, was quickly dismissed for its critical stance on colonialism. Or Delphine Zanga Tsogo, the Cameroonian writer whose works on gender and power have remained largely inaccessible outside of specialized archives. These authors are not simply overlooked; they are deliberately excised from dominant literary narratives, their works rendered invisible unless actively sought out by readers and scholars



willing to challenge the canon. Hence, these writers refuse to disappear from literary debates despite the controversies that surround their work?

In *The Most Secret Memory of Men*, Sarr does not offer resolution. He does not resurrect Elimane, does not restore him triumphantly to the literary world. Instead, he lets the absence remain. The novel's protagonist does not find Elimane so much as he finds the mechanisms that made his disappearance inevitable. And this, ultimately, is *The Most Secret Memory of Men's* greatest provocation: not simply to retrieve what has been erased, but to confront the structures that enable literary erasure in the first place. The novel also considers the experience of exile, which is not only a physical condition but a psychological and literary one. Musimbwa, one of Diégane's closest literary confidants, embodies this experience. Having fled the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Musimbwa speaks of his homeland with both nostalgia and pain:

"Because I only have unhappy memories of Zaire. I spent the happiest moments of my life there. But thinking about it always makes me unhappy. Remembering those moments confirms that not only are they gone, they're destroyed forever, and an entire world with them" (*The Most Secret Memory of Men*, Sarr). His words encapsulate the paradox of exile: the past is both cherished and unbearable, a source of identity and of sorrow. Edward Said, in *Reflections on Exile*, describes this condition as a state of permanent unsettlement, where home is simultaneously longed for and impossible to return to. The African writer in the global literary space exists in a similar condition, forever straddling cultural and linguistic worlds, yet never entirely belonging to any of them.

Sarr's work is a political insistence on recognition. It is about resisting fixity or categorization. At the end of his novel, he leaves us with a world where ghosts are real, where the disappeared do not stay disappeared, and where literature remains a battleground for who gets to be remembered and who is consigned to oblivion. *The Most Secret Memory of Men* is not just about one missing writer; it is about all the missing writers. The ones whose books exist only in obscure archives, in untranslated manuscripts, in the memories of a few devoted readers. It is about literature's ghosts—and the uneasy realization that to be an African writer is to always be on the verge of haunting, to always risk becoming a specter in the margins of the canon.

---

**Tolu Daniel** is a Nigerian writer. He is an MFA Creative Writing graduate from Washington University in St Louis. He received an MA in English from Kansas State University where he was awarded the Seaton Fellowship, Peggy & Gary Edwards Scholarship and the Popkins Scholarship for Creative Writing. His essays and short stories have appeared on *Catapult.co*, *Olongo Africa*, *The Nasiona Magazine*, *Lolwe*, *Prachya Review*, *Elsewhere Literary Journal*, and a few other places. He is a PhD Student in Comparative Literature at Washington University in St Louis.