Theories and Methodologies

"This Intimate Burden": An Interview with Mame Coumba Ndiaye

MAME COUMBA NDIAYE AND TOBIAS WARNER

MAME COUMBA HANE (NÉE NDIAYE) is the author of *Mariama Bâ; ou, Les allées d'un destin* (Nouvelles Éditions Africaines du Sénégal, 2007). After studying at the École Normale des Jeunes Filles de Thiès and the Sorbonne-Nouvelle, she has worked in accounting, as a stylist, and as an interior designer for event production.

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The rediscovery of Mariama Bâ's "Memories of Lagos" began with a clue in a biography of Bâ written by her daughter, Mame Coumba Ndiaye. *Mariama Bâ; ou, Les allées d'un destin* (*Mariama Bâ; or, the Alleys of a Destiny*) is the kind of book that sparks such unexpected connections. An unclassifiable hybrid of biography, memoir, and filial ventriloquism, it is the only book-length study of Bâ's life. In its pages, Ndiaye offers a meditation on decolonization and gender and traces an intellectual portrait of her mother. Drawing on many of Bâ's private writings and unpublished speeches as well as on a host of questionnaires that circulated among Bâ's friends and family, the book is itself an archive. Throughout, Ndiaye hovers movingly between speaking as a biographer and as a daughter. "I am not outside [this] narration," as she puts it in this interview, which was conducted, translated, and edited by Tobias Warner. This conversation took place between December 2023 and June 2024 over email and *WhatsApp*. For the first time in English, Ndiaye reflects on her extensive research into her mother's life, their mother-daughter epistolary relationship, the role of print culture in their family, and the relevance of Bâ's work today.[1]

Tobias Warner: Can you tell us about your own trajectory and what led you to write *Mariama Bâ; ou, Les allées d'un destin*?

Mame Coumba Ndiaye: After the A-level baccalaureate and two years studying literature at the Sorbonne-Nouvelle (Paris 3), I switched to accounting. I then worked for years as a payroll manager for different companies before retiring. Today I am a stylist and interior designer. Why write a biography of Mariama Bâ? There was none, leading to misinformation and gray areas about an author

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PMLA 139.5 (2024), doi:10.1632/S0030812924000890

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812924000890 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who is foundational to the history of feminism in Africa and whose writings touch on themes that still apply to life today.

TW: In her preface, Aminata Maïga Ka calls your book a "biographical novel." I wondered what you thought of this description.

MCN: Fictional biography, novelistic biography, biographical novel: we hear such expressions often in literature. The boundaries are quite blurry, and everyone has their own interpretation. As a writer herself and a friend of Mariama Bâ, Aminata Maïga knows well that I worked firsthand with objective information in this book, but she would also not deny this intimate burden [*charge intime*] that links me to my subject [*la biographiée*]. Indeed, I am not outside the narration.

TW: Could you speak more about that? One of the most striking aspects of your work is that mixture of a biographer's stance with familial intimacy. You draw on family archives, while also writing about Mariama Bâ in the third person.

MCN: Being the daughter of Mariama Bâ, I did not feel authorized to write an objective biography. So, I decided to write a biographical essay, a genre that remains subject to the principle of subjectivity without losing its claim on the truth. Hence that mixture of family intimacy and distancing that you note.

TW: At times, your voice seems almost to harmonize with your mother's, as if you are allowing yourself to imagine what she might have thought or felt in certain moments. How did you envisage the relationship between your voice as a biographer and that of Mariama Bâ as the subject of your biography?

MCN: Of course, one is tempted to confuse these voices—the voice of the subject [*la biographiée*] with the "I" of the essayist who seeks to discover her subject's ideas and opinions, which can in turn only be translated by the "I" who is doing the writing. But she is also a critical "I" who is not confined to the author's version of the story and can therefore help her readers think for themselves or open up new avenues for their research. Fortunately, we have quotation marks to announce citations or indicate sources in appendixes.

TW: The story you tell of Bâ's life follows the conventions of a linear timeline in some respects, but the narration also seems guided by the demands of memory, with all its suggestive digressions and surprising connections. Can you comment on the way you chose to structure your book?

MCN: In my introduction, I begin with the Noma Prize at the Frankfurt Book Fair, a moment of recognition that led Mariama Bâ to become a global literary phenomenon. I then go on to explore the trajectory of her life as a writer, which of course means a history of her ideas. It was from this outline that the structure of the book took shape, with a linear succession of chapters, from childhood to death. But the book is also the expression of lived experience, which places me at the creative heart of the story in a free, frank, and personal discourse. Thus the evocative flow of the whole in which I allow symbols and memories to resonate in me. A flow that is complemented, however, by questions, proven facts, and testimonies.

TW: An abundance of published and unpublished sources informed your work, many of which you reproduce in your book's appendixes. These include interviews, correspondence, speeches, and photos. How did you assemble the archive for this project?

MCN: I had an outline and had already roughly worked out my ideas for the book. But I was very concerned with getting back all the sheets of paper that I had sent out. I had written on them numerous questions about the author and sent these to many of her relatives (children, family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances). I also knew she kept documents in the drawers of her bedside table, but not in such large quantities. Apart from the documents you have mentioned, there was also the manuscript of *Scarlet Song* and that of her third novel (the sequel to *So Long a Letter*). This was how these documents made their way into the book, alongside others that I searched for in archives or were shared with me by her older sister.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812924000890 Published online by Cambridge University Press

TW: I'm struck by your description of the paper questionnaires that you sent out to close friends, colleagues, and family. What was that aspect of your research like?

MCN: I always tried to ask the same questions. For example: "What is the dominant quality or defect in Mariama Bâ?" Generosity and stubbornness came up most often as answers. Other questions included "Why did she not start writing very early?" "Do you think that Mariama Bâ is a romantic [*une fleur bleue*]?" "Could we say that she is a rebel?" "What did Mariama Bâ bring to your life as a friend, colleague, relative, etc.?" "What struck you the most about *So a Long Letter*?" "Is Mariama Bâ really what she seems to advocate for in her book?" Once the sheets of paper were all returned, I incorporated the most common answers into the book.

TW: Why did you decide to use paper questionnaires rather than conduct interviews and take notes?

MCN: I preferred the sheets of paper because they gave more freedom to my recipients. I was the daughter of the writer, so any interview would have necessarily included my physical presence, which could have influenced the answers to sensitive questions. I wanted to go beyond my own experience with the subject [*la biographiée*], as well as my subject's own version of her life story. So I collected information about Mariama Bâ from sources who knew her well, while positioning myself outside the judgments I was gathering. Using these cards to assemble many opinions on my subject from those close to her was the most interesting angle of this project. Her colleagues and certain acquaintances whom I did not know very well were among the most reliable sources.

TW: In several chapters you also draw on your correspondence with your mother. What was your own epistolary relationship with Mariama Bâ like?

MCN: I spent seven years in boarding school at the École Normale des Jeunes Filles de Thiès, located seventy kilometers from Dakar. I left just once a month and cell phones didn't yet exist. Wanting to compensate for this distance from my family that had been established by my father, she had promised me that we would establish an epistolary relationship. This continued uninterrupted except for school holidays and went on to enrich my university studies in Paris. I asked her questions without taboo and was grateful for her candid replies.

TW: A recurring tension in your biography is the border between fiction and reality. You mention that many readers tended to confuse Mariama Bâ's fiction with her own life: "one might believe that her biography is summed up in *So a Long Letter*" ["c'est à croire que sa biographie se résume dans *Une si longue lettre*"; Ndiaye 12]. As you explain in the introduction, this confusion was one of the reasons that led you to write this book. But you also observe that Mariama Bâ herself "could never establish boundaries between reality and what she wrote, such was her nature as a writer" ["ne saurait jamais établir—telle était sa nature d'écrivain—de frontières entre la réalité et ce qu'elle écrivait"; Ndiaye 127]. How do you see this tension between fiction and life with regard to the life and writings of Mariama Bâ, but also in your own book?

MCN: This association of Mariama Bâ with her heroine Ramatoulaye was initially the result of the press that spread the misinformation that this was an autobiographical work. As one author put it, a rumor is "a truth which travels like a lie by word of mouth, and which does not make people think."[2] Even before I wrote my book, Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines [Bâ's publisher] sent students to my address if they were looking for more information on Mariama Bâ. And most of them literally confused Mariama Bâ with the narrator of *So Long a Letter*. For them, they were the one and the same person! This assumption was also common among high school students who had her book on their reading lists.

This was partly what pushed me to write my book in the first place, in order to reestablish the truth. I did well to put an end to all the confusions and controversies surrounding a subject as sensitive as that of someone's personal life. Not only that, I

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812924000890 Published online by Cambridge University Press

also had to free the reader of this assumption to let them go further in their own research.

Of course, her writings also speak of things she experienced, things she loved and things she criticized. And so acute in her was the fight for the emancipation of her African sisters that her heroine's unique voice and harmony of tone merge with those of the writer. In such passages, we undoubtedly discover Mariama Bâ behind her narrator. And indeed, what committed author could avoid putting into their writing that which they yearn for and that which they cannot give up?

If we cannot have the best of all worlds, it is still possible for us to strive for a better one. As far as I am concerned, if it is true that there is a certain tension as you say between fiction and reality, I have not felt any such friction in my work, because I owe the truth to the one who is absent [*à l'absente*], and I have been guided throughout the work by this desire for authenticity. If one can talk about tension, it was toward the end of the writing that it arose, when I started to cry hot tears as if the day of her death were only yesterday.

TW: An attachment to writing links generations of your family: you note that Amadou Bâ [Mariama's father] was the founder of a newspaper, *L'informateur-Dakarois* [*The Dakar Informant*], while her husband Obèye published *L'Ouest Africain* [*The West African*], where Bâ seems to have begun publishing her work. Your description of the way in which Bâ continued to write right up until the end of her life is also very moving. What was the importance of print culture and the written word in your family, and of writing itself for Mariama Bâ?

MCN: They were people of the written word. Mariama owes the importance of writing to her father who "flooded her with books" from childhood, she writes. Later, this appetite for letters would be strengthened at the École Normale, where amid all her bookish experiences she would also encounter a hierarchical, assimilated, and dominated world, hence the cry of racial revolt in "Ma Petite Patrie" ["My Little Homeland"], written in 1947 when she was only eighteen years old. This text did not go unnoticed by Emmanuel Mounier, a major political intellectual, inventor of the concept of commitment, who took up the text in the journal *Esprit*.[3] With her husband, Obèye Diop, it was a private and intimate sharing of ideas, an intellectual fusion that became for her a safety valve to confront a world based on male privilege and rife with centuries-old patriarchy. Thus, she did not hesitate to invite women (who remain a minority in this area) to take up the pen and upset this established order and take their destiny in hand. As the impact of her first book became clear, she was more and more aware of her role in promoting women's rights. She was no longer a part-time writer and became dedicated to her literary practice. Mariama Bâ would never stop writing. Toward the end of her life, writing was a kind of therapy for her, writing as if to overcome death. Few women are cited among the great names of African literature even though they have many more things to say about their true condition. Mariama has a pioneering role to play in this respect.

TW: A brief mention of Bâ's trip to Lagos in your book helped lead to the recovery of "Memories of Lagos." Can you tell us any more about Bâ's experiences at FESTAC or her writings for *L'Ouest Africain*?

MCN: The '70s found me in France. I learned about her 1977 trip to FESTAC in Nigeria through a letter from my stepfather, Obèye Diop. I didn't know that *L'Ouest Africain* published writings by Mariama Bâ. It is clear that publishing in newspapers must have unlocked something for Mariama Bâ, sparking a vivid return to herself and an awakening of her artistic abilities. Something clicked for her that would later be nurtured by Annette Mbaye d'Erneville. I wish I could tell you more, but it was through you that I was able to discover Mariama Bâ's writings in *L'Ouest Africain*, which in many ways, as you point out, served as a first workshop for *So Long a Letter*.

TW: You maintain that Mariama Bâ's writings still retain their topical power [*force d'actualité*]. How do you see the contemporary relevance of her work today? In Senegal, across Africa, or in the world more broadly?

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MCN: More than forty years after her passing, Mariama Bâ remains essential in the major feminist debates in Africa, particularly in Senegal. Her intellectual heritage continues to fuel academic work, spaces for reflection, and the activism of many women. She leaves behind an intergenerational production that continues to inspire intellectuals and generate disciples who find their own contemporary echoes in her work. Compared with the struggles undertaken in the African diaspora, in Western countries, modernism for Mariama Bâ does not mean a denial of her culture, traditional and family values, or her religion. Furthermore, feminism for many authors in the West must rhyme with sexual freedom, a liberation of the body. As a Muslim, she had a sacred conception of the female body. "Every woman does with her life what she wants. A dissolute woman's life is incompatible with morality" ["Chaque femme fait de sa vie ce qu'elle souhaite. Une vie de femme dissolue est incompatible avec la morale"; Bâ 128]. Indeed, in this conflict between modernity and tradition, Mariama Bâ reaffirms her attachment to the values on which a peaceful feminism is based while fighting all forms of cultural domination. No one has a lesson in humanity to learn from anyone.

Notes

1. The original French text of this interview is available online as a supplement to my English translation; see the DOI below.

2. This quotation is from Charles Soucy.

3. This was a school composition written by Bâ at the École Normale in Rufisque. It was read and reproduced by Mounier as part of a travelogue of his experiences in French West Africa that appeared in *Esprit* in 1947. The text is also available in Ndiaye 187.

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Supplementary material: The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812924000890.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812924000890 Published online by Cambridge University Press