Black Girl (1966) – film review

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Abstract

This review of Ousmane Sembène's most famous film – *Black Girl (1966)* – utilises recent geographic scholarship on the nature of migration to explore how the protagonist, Diouana, conveys Sembène's highly critical views of global capitalism. In doing so, key moments from the film are analysed through the lenses of precarity and racialisation, whilst considering the external influences at the time of production (e.g., Senegal's emancipation from French rule). Drawing knowledge from feminist socialist geographies, particularly Rose's (1993) emphasis on embodiment, this critique aims to answer the question of whether modern concepts about gendered migration can be retrospectively applied. I draw from multiple sources from different sections of the media, including blogs, national newspapers, books, and journals.

1. Introduction

Black Girl (1966) is considered one of Ousmane Sembène's seminal works and is the first African-made film to garner critical acclaim in Europe and North America (Hoffman, 2016). The narrative is told through the eyes of Diouana, the only named character, a young Senegalese woman who is recruited as a nanny for a French family. Whilst she is initially joyous at the appointment, Diouana's relocation to Antibes for work uncovers a hidden side to her employers – *'Monsieur and Madame'* – as she slowly is forced into the role of a domestic slave.

The hour-long film was shot partially in post-independence Dakar, at a time when President Léopold Sédar Senghor's unique brand of Pan-African socialism (*négritude*) was sweeping the region (Alden, *et al.,* 1980). This encouraged Sembène's Marxist tendencies – which were nurtured as he recovered from a serious injury sustained whilst working at the Paris Citroen factory (Clark, 2017). The film is of vital importance to geographers, as labour and work is not only a major subdiscipline – one which is barely touched upon during most students' secondary education – but remains current at home and abroad. From the Conservative government's 'hostile environment' policies to the conditions of migrant workers in Qatar, it is pertinent that we look to the past, via creative mediums, to understand how geographical theory has and continues to advocate for migrants. *Black Girl's* dark and hopeful critique of life in post-colonial Africa, exposes Diouana's position within a world reliant on racial capitalism (the system through which capitalism's inherent inequalities are enshrined by racial pseudo-science, Card, 2020). This makes Diouana's body a vital scale through

which to analyse the film, as emphasised in its title. However, some of the ambiguity of the original title – *'La noire de...'* – is lost through translation, a theme that echoes through the prosaic English subtitles which proved secondary to Mbissine Thérèse Diop's highly expressive body language. In this review, I examine labour and gendered migration through the lens of Sembène's tragedy-strewn drama.

2. Diouana as the embodiment of rampant capitalism

Diouana's economised life can be understood within the context of modern flows of female domestic workers, who migrate from developing countries to developed countries, increasingly to work in the care sector (Eckenwiler, 2014). Fernandez (2010) describes how Ethiopian women migrating to the Gulf find themselves at the bottom of a racial hierarchy and bound to their Khafala (sponsor-employer). In parallel, Diouana was not explicitly ordered to stay at home, but the burdens of maintaining her masters' household on the French Riviera – where appearances, especially to *'liberal'* white peers, mattered deeply – severely restricted her mobility. Furthermore, Diouana's unfamiliarity with French culture and overt blackness amongst a majority- white *'jet set'* confines her to what Mbembe calls a *'deathworld'* (2019: 39). A term used to refer to the drawn-out, psychological torture inflicted upon slaves, Diouana's racialised commodification and forced displacement from home results in a prolonged depression and, ultimately, her suicide. This reinforces how borders engrave race onto bodies (Gahman and Hjalmarson, 2019) – it is only when Diouana enters France that she becomes aware of the implicit power dynamics between herself as the racial *'Other'* (Said, 1978) and her superior white employers. Indeed, Rollins' (1985) concept of the linguistic deference created when employers insist on being called formal terms (e.g., *'Madame'*) suggests that daily life for Diouana is a negotiation of her position in the household, contrasting her invisibility amidst capitalism's labour networks.

Figure 1. Diouana dead in the bath (Sembène, 1966)

Diouana's graphic death was undoubtedly shocking for a 1960s audience, as colonial psychologists dictated that Africans were too *'happy go lucky'* to experience mental illness (Vaughan, 2012). This may explain why Diouana's thoughts are conveyed via voiceover, adding a sense of intimacy to the film and marking it as a rare reflection on the lives of the colonised (Rosenbaum, 1997). Nonetheless, Diouana's death is her silencing – the symbolism of slitting one's throat cannot be denied – although it is also her final act of resistance. The image of her limp, black body in the stark white bathtub (a place usually associated with cleansing relaxation – Langford, 2001) is seared into the viewer's mind. Therefore, Diouana's death shows how migrants are fundamentally *'income generating units'* (Engle, 2004 : 23) which can be exploited and disposed of. Nonetheless, this is a distinctly Marxist perspective which risks diminishing the highly differentiated embodied experiences of female migrants. Indeed, Sembène's use of flashbacks to Diouana's life in Dakar rejects the traditional migration model of mutually exclusive *'push and pull factors'*: – she leaves behind a lover, family and a rich cultural identity.

Unlike Diouana, the female migrants trapped in *'contract slavery'* (Bales, 2004: 37) today may, at the very least, benefit from remittances and the legal protections of *'labor brokerage states'*, who train potential emigrants (Rodriguez, 2008). In Indonesia and the Philippines, this exodus of married women leaves children with their fathers, shifting the gendered practices of care, but not the gendered ideologies behind who is a suitable caregiver (e.g., fathers believing they lack the *'women's touch'* – Lam and Yeoh, 2018: 111). Therefore, women's

economic migration in the 2000s is contrasted with Diouana's refusal to accept her 20,000-franc salary – an act of protest against Western capitalism and its associated racial subjugation. Diouana will not be bought, but her masters assume that she is unwell or lazy, reinforcing the racialised and colonial dismissals of Black women's bodies as *'chaotic... static wombs'* (McKittrick, 2000: 227). Additionally, Diouana's assertion that *"I'm no cook! I'm no cleaning woman!"* (8:15) perhaps hints at her higher social standing in Dakar, with the repetitive background sound of the xalam (a West African stringed instrument) underscoring Diouana's robotic daze (Hoffman, 2016). The forced kiss from Madame's friend, who remarks: *"I've never kissed a black woman!"* (12:20), is an insensitive interruption to Diouana's unreadable façade, and her objectification a colonial residue (or legacy). So, whilst Diouana's migration occurred in an opposing spatiotemporal context to that of Southeast Asian women today, they both exercise resistance – from Diouana's dissent of French etiquette to Vietnamese female domestic workers posting Facebook videos detailing the worsening abuse they faced in Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 pandemic (Le and Yow, 2021).

3. Examining Diouana through the lenses of precarity and casualisation

Black Girl can be examined through the concept of labour precarity, defined by Standing as workers lacking an *'anchor of stability'* (2011: 1). This was triggered partially by the growth in temporary contracts during the unrestricted neoliberalism of the 1970s, as the worker lacked a defined labour community with which to share their stresses. However, precarity has multidimensional qualities, which can include part-time or temporary workers who lack pensions and the ability to unionise (Coe, 2013) and may have to adopt *'gig work'* (one-off commitments, e.g., Uber) to survive. In this way, Diouana is an early member of the *'Precariat'*, as her livelihood depended on being picked from a Dakar street-corner of potential maids by the Madame, who *"passed us in review"* (17:06). Bodily performativity is invoked again as a key motif, supporting McDowell's (2011) example of stewardesses of the 1980s requiring *'an idealized, typically white, clean, slim, young, and often sexualized body'* (342). Therefore, the indentured labour of black women was arguably the precursor to the *'deferential servility'* (343) required of women in the expanding service sector today. This feminist narrative also prevents an over-emphasis on the power of capital, rather than workers' individual agency, which labour geographers have long been guilty of (Coe, 2013). Diouana's body, especially her doey eyes, is also a threat to Madame, who recognises the forbidden attraction between her husband and his slave, responding with orders (e.g., sniping at Monsieur that *"all you do is drink! You're to stop when the kids come!"* – 25:40). The emphasis on Diouana's physicality – which is heightened by the film's lack of dialogue – reflects current geographic scholarship on female migrants' rights. For example, Engle (2004) notes that female domestic workers in Singapore and Malaysia are subject to

pregnancy tests every six months, with pregnant women deported within 24 hours. Thus, governments' imposition of biopolitical controls emphasises how women's bodies function as mechanisms of reproductive work and for reproduction itself (Gupta, 2006). By killing herself, Diouana is contesting this capitalistic expectation – her possessions are very limited upon her death, suggesting that Diouana's dreams of shopping along the French coast have shattered.

Figure 2. Diouana clearing the table (Sembène, 1966)

However, a key component of precarity is casualisation – a shift towards short-term employment arrangements (Standing, 2008). Diouana's more permanent recruitment, therefore, cannot be captured fully within the parameters of modern economic theory, due to the looming presence of colonial enslavement in the film. So, whilst Diouana's existence was certainly unpredictable and unbearable, her livelihood is distinguished from the economic insecurity of those working in menial, low-paid *'McJobs'* (Ritzer, 2002) today. Furthermore, Sembène's Marxian mindset might resist the homogenisation of informal workers under the umbrella *'Precariat'*, perhaps viewing Diouana more as a disenfranchised member of the proletariat, who effectively seizes Monsieur and Madames' *'means of production'* by taking her own life.

4. What about the mask?

Figure 3. Diouana and the mask (Sembène, 1966)

Sembène utilises the mask throughout the film to symbolise how Africans' financial needs force them to adopt a *'mask'* to become socially mobile and acceptable. The mask appears at the beginning of *Black Girl,* as Diouana gifts it to her employers and they place it amongst a collection of similar objects. As Langford (2001) notes, Diouana's spirit of unity and generosity is ignored by Monsieur and Madame. The mask could, therefore, be said to represent Diouana herself – she fits in in Dakar, but quickly becomes an exotic spectacle in Antibes, when the mask is symbolically placed alone on a white wall. Ponzanesi and Berger (2016) propose the mask as a representation of Africans' forced migration to Europe to make a reasonable wage – presently a major fear for policy makers (Beauchemin, 2018). Furthermore, Diouana's attempt to assimilate into French culture and reshape her identity – namely through the hand-me-down polka dot dress – is cruelly truncated by Madame (*"you're not going to a party!"* – 8:48). Fanon's *'Black Skin, White Masks'* (2008 : 117) is invoked – Diouana will always be a *'phobogenic object',* or an irrationally anxiety-inducing individual, to her white counterparts. This might hint at why, breaking from the pedestrian pace of the film, Diouana fights Madame for the mask, as she understands that she must hold onto her cultural roots to prevent her physical displacement from becoming a psychological one. Diouana therefore resists the

'bi-placement' of her identity, which is nowadays expressed by female care workers who must leave their families (Eckenwiler, 2014 : 216).

5. Conclusions

Diouna's realisation that *"I'm a prisoner here"* (39:56) alludes to how increasing disposable income in the Global North can oppress the most vulnerable in the Global South. This is achieved through capitalist mechanisms, which encourage the exploitation of lower class, often female, labour. Although some have criticised *Black Girl* for its slow naturalism (Ebert, 1969, referring to the banal realities conveyed by Sembène), I believe that the viewer is encouraged to reflect on Diouana's intersecting identities as a young Senegalese woman, groomed by Madame playing the allegorical role of the French metropole, as the film progresses. Thus, Sembène's masterpiece stands as a chilling indictment of the rampant free market in West Africa and the apathetic *'monsieurs'* sustaining it.

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