

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 1 No. 3, December 2017

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-1-issue-3-december-2017/>

Film: *Black Girl*. Sembene Ousmane (Dir/Writer) and André Zwoboda (Producer). Languages: French & Wolof and reproduced with English subtitles. 1966. 80 minutes.

Reviewed by: Leah Rothfeld, Duke University

51 Years after *Black Girl* and 10 Years after Sembene Ousmane

Country and Historical Setting

The film *Black Girl* celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2016-17. Given the anniversary of this important piece, this year highlights an important time to revisit the film. *Black Girl* is often regarded as the first film about Sub-Saharan Africa and the first that was made by an African filmmaker to garner international attention. This is a significant feature of the film, as it indicates a unique opportunity of its time from an African's view point of the African-European relationship to be portrayed. France began its colonization of Senegal in the 1880s, a process which continued well into the 1890s. French colonization occurred during the period throughout West Africa, but Senegal was located at the center of the colonized region. In 1960, Senegal gained its freedom under President Leopold Senghor (d.2001); this film would have been released in the beginning of the country's independence.

Plot and Symbolism

Diouana, a "black girl" from Senegal, eagerly accepts a job with a white French woman who, she believes, is a position as caretaker of the woman's children. She had been sitting on a curb with other women, patiently waiting to be hired. Since Diouana and others had been physically waiting at the France's disposal, the scene symbolized Senegal's people value in the eyes of the French. For the young Senegalese woman, this was an opportunity to visit the beautiful places of France that she has only seen pictures of. It becomes clear to Diouana after starting work that the job was truly a housemaid position because she was asked to fetch coffee, cook dinner, and keep the house in order. Diouana rarely interacted with the children and as a result she believed she was treated like a slave, as the white French woman seems to have no regard for her well-being or interests.

The guests at the white family's house treated Diouana terribly, calling her an animal and questioning whether she could speak proper French. Her employer perpetually tells lies to Diouana, and she continuously speaks French to others in front of her and about her. These moments symbolize the French hesitancy to admit the extent of the influence they have had on the Senegalese through the process of colonization. The French language was, however, spoken by many black Senegalese people, including Diouana's family and village. Diouana dressed neatly and nicely for her work despite the nature of the job. When she attempted to wear high heel shoes in the home, her employer reminded her that she was only a maid.

Diouana continued to feel imprisoned and opted to commit suicide as a way out of the entrapment she experienced. In this scene, the filmmaker seemed to be suggesting that there was no cure for the effects of colonialism; they must be accepted, or they could only be avoided through an act of suicide. As this was the first African and African-made film to receive international attention, perhaps the shock-factor of a suicide was necessary to drive home the message to an international (white) audience. The white community's reaction to her suicide was insightful as well. A newspaper headline following her death read: "Black girl slashes throat in employer's bathroom." This rhetoric depicted Diouana as a crazy, nameless woman who could not conform to her field of work. The community did not take blame for the woman's fate; this is quite similar to what one witnesses in the West at present. It does not take responsibility for the current issues in Africa that had been brought about by colonialism.

Themes & Cultural Context

This main theme addressed in the film was colonialism, which was addressed through a blend of community, culture, and politics. From a political perspective, we saw the way in which colonialism - that involved exploitation of the Senegalese (and other African societies) - continued even after the country had gained its independence. While Diouana 'willingly' accepted the position as a caretaker/housemaid, her labor was fully exploited. And while Senegal was technically free from French control, the audience was forced to examine whether political freedom constituted true freedom, or if there was any form progress in that direction.

One of the largest issues in the film was the fetishization of "Africa" by the French people. We see this being shown on various times with the family's dinner guests. In one scene, a man grabbed Diouana and kissed her, excited by the idea that this was his first kiss with a black woman. To kiss a black person seemed to be, in his eyes, a conquest. She was an exotic and alluring thing to him. Diouana's employer asked her to make rice with maffe for dinner, and the group raved about how terrific the African dish was. They liked the idea of experiencing the piece of Senegalese culture that they were interested in, one guest claimed, "Africans only eat rice." This type of ignorance showed how little investment the Europeans have had in understanding an African culture, except where it could benefit them.

Diouana brought with her a mask of cultural significance from her village. The French family disregarded its sacredness and importance to their maid, and they hung it on their wall to display it as a mere piece of art. This was a form of cultural appropriation; the mask was displayed for its visual beauty while its symbolism and importance in Senegalese culture was neglected. Diouana politely removed the mask from the wall several times. In response the white employer exclaimed, "After all I've done for her!" which raised another issue. The French woman believed that Diouana could not be upset about the way that she was treated or about her current situation, because she has been helped out of her pedestrian village life. This was a familiar theme that reflected both a racist and colonial discourse that we witness to this day. When a minority or oppressed group questioned their authority or treatment, there was a tendency for the oppressing group to criticize the people of color for not being more grateful for what they *have* been given, as though their opinions were invalid due to their social standing.

Resolution

The husband of Diouana's employing family traveled to her village in Senegal to return her things and pay Diouana's mother what the daughter had earned. While this initially seemed to have been a kind gesture, it could also be viewed as the French family wanting to rid

themselves of association with and memories of the tragedy. The audience was left to wonder if the husband tried to pay Diouana's mother out of guilt that he and others had bottled up in them. Ultimately, Diouana's mother rejected the payment, which was yet another powerful symbol in the film's conclusion. Perhaps she implied that white people could buy themselves out of colonialism's ill effects, and that no action such as payment by the French – or by any other European colonial power - can fully heal the situation for the Senegalese or any other African society that was brutally colonized for decades.

Research Africa

Copyright © 2017 by Research Africa, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA's Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.

ISSN 2575-6990