

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## BLACK GIRL / La Noire de ... (1966)

Ousmane Sembène

### OVERVIEW

*Auteur* Senegalese writer, producer, and director Ousmane Sembène was born on January 1, 1923 in Ziguinchor, Senegal. He died on June 9, 2007, in Dakar, Senegal. Sembène attended both a quranic school and a French school until age thirteen. He then worked with his father, a fisherman, before moving to Dakar in 1938, where he did a number of odd jobs. In 1944, he was drafted into the corps of Senegalese *Tirailleurs* (sharpshooters) and sent to France to fight in the Free French Forces. In 1944 and 1947, Sembène was involved in union strikes, respectively, in Senegal as a railroad worker, and in France as a dock worker and member of the Communist Party. Having dropped out of school early, Sembène had to teach himself to read and write properly. He went on to write several novels, some of which he adapted into films. Sembène's only film training was one year spent at the Moscow Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, at the age of forty. Sembène produced nine features: *Black Girl* (1966), *Mandabi* (1968), *Emitaï* (1971), *Xala* (1975), *Ceddo* (1977), *Camp Thiaroye* (1988), *Guelwaar* (1992), *Faat Kiné* (2001), *Molaadé* (2003).

*Film* *Black Girl* explores the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, more specifically between France and its former colonies, six years after the independence of most French-speaking African nations. From this perspective, metaphors abound in the film. Diouana, the black girl, is more than a mere isolated character. She is Africa; and the gaze cast on her by the film's white protagonists is that of the West on the entire black continent. It is a gaze laden with paternalism, disdain, pretension, and exoticism.

*Background* *Black Girl* is Sembène's first feature and the very first African feature, which has led film critics to credit Sembène with being the "father of African cinema." The film is a Senegalese and French co-production. *Black Girl* is based on a short story from the filmmaker's novella, *Voltaïque: La Noire de... et autres nouvelles* (1962). *Black Girl* won the 1966 Prix Jean Vigo, in France, and the Tanit d'Or at the 1966 Carthage Film Festival, in Tunisia. The main actress, Senegalese Mbissine Diop (Diouana), had never acted before being cast in *Black Girl*. With this film, she became the first black African woman to ever hold a major role in a feature film. Sembène, himself, played the role of the schoolteacher in this film. The dialogue in *Black Girl* is entirely in French, and even though the main character, Diouana is ssaïd by her employers not to speak French, her French, like that of most people (literate or not) in French-speaking Africa is quite understandable. By having French as lingua franca in *Black Girl*, Sembène certainly wanted to signal that the post-colonial African unconscious is already structured by things French.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

<b>DIOUANA</b>	The black girl
<b>MONSIEUR</b>	husband, who employs the black girl.
<b>MADAME</b>	wife, who employs the black girl.
<b>THE LITTLE BOY</b>	boy, who sells a mask to the black girl.

### SYNOPSIS

In Dakar, in the days following Senegal's independence from France, a black Senegalese young woman is hired by a white French expatriate couple to babysit their children. To thank her employers for offering her a job, the black girl offers them an African mask she purchases from a young boy in her neighborhood. Later, as the white couple returns to France, they invite the black girl to join them there and continue the work she was doing for them in Senegal. Once in France, the black girl is unhappy to see that her employers expect her to work from early morning to late night, not just as a babysitter, but also, as cook, launderer, and housekeeper. Furthermore, the promise her employers made her to give her some time off to visit the country and do some personal shopping does not materialize. Instead, she is confined to her employers'

home, abused by the lady of the house (Madame) and her guests. One day, the black girl protests and refuses to do more than babysitting the couple's children. Madame warns her that she will not eat unless she agrees to do what she is asked to do. The black girl decides that she will not even take care of the children if she is refused food for not doing extra work. She stays in bed and starves herself. When the exasperated lady of the house comes to her bedroom and wakes her up with abusive words and physical blows, the black girl vows that her employer will never again have the opportunity to humiliate her. She takes back the mask she gave her employers, packs her suitcase, goes to the family bathroom and, using Monsieur's razor blade, slashes her throat in the bathtub. Monsieur returns the black girl's suitcase, her mask, and her last wages to her family in Senegal, but he is met there with hostile gazes. Overtaken by panic and fear, he runs back to his boat for France.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **DIOUANA**

Diouana is a naïve, lonely, and abused young woman. She trusted Madame, believing that she will only be babysitting in France and will have a lot of free time. She refused to believe her boyfriend's warning that she was being dragged into a snare. He was right. Her confinement and humiliation in France drove her to suicide.

*Naïve* Diouana is a naïve girl, who believes that Madame's choosing her to be her babysitter was a favor done for her. Therefore, she buys Madame a gift to thank her. She also falls for Madame's promise that in France she will have enough time to visit the country and shop. Her boyfriend tries to warn her that her stay in France will not be what she thinks, and that she will be exploited as a slave, but Diouana is too thrilled by the prospect of going to France to listen to him. She realizes, too late, that she was wrong to trust Madame.

*Lonely/melancholic:* Held between the walls of Madame's home and unable to enjoy some time off work, Diouana feels lonely and melancholic. She recalls the open, friendly atmosphere she left in Senegal, the romantic moments with her boyfriend, the time she spent playing with her little friend, and she feels isolated. She concludes that France is a big, black hole.

*Abused:* Diouana is emotionally and physically mistreated by Madame and by Madame's guests. Madame scolds, insults, and physically beats her. Madame's guests treat her as an object of desire, call her an animal, and invade her space without her consent. The emotional and physical abuse she suffers leads Diouana to do the unthinkable: She kills herself by slashing her throat in the family bathtub.

### **MONSIEUR:**

Monsieur is a nonchalant and presumptuous man, but an empathetic man, nonetheless. He does not seem to pay much attention to what is going on in his household. Therefore, he is not really aware of the torment his wife is putting Diouana through. He wants to help her, but his help comes out awkwardly when he decides to write a reply to Diouana's mother's letter and put his own words in the letter. If he were not so trusting of his wife, he would have pressed his idea that Diouana needed a break from work, and maybe he would have saved the girl from death.

*Nonchalant:* Monsieur is a nonchalant man, who has not really been paying attention to what is going on around him. His wife has been abusive to Diouana, but Monsieur's inattentiveness prevents him from seeing what the young Senegalese girl is going through. When he is not absorbed in his newspaper, Monsieur is drinking his whiskey, to chagrin of his wife, who complains that he has not been spending much time with her.

*Empathetic* When his wife tells him that Diouana has been losing weight, he is empathetic enough to tell Madame that Diouana might need some time off to enjoy herself and visit the country. He is also the one who suggests that she reply to her mother as soon as he read to Diouana the letter from Senegal. He is also the one who tells his wife that Diouana has the right to have her mask back because, after all, it belonged to her. And he undertakes the task of finding Diouana's family in Senegal to return the mask and her unpaid wages.

*Presumptuous* Despite his good intentions towards Diouana, Monsieur is a pretentious man, who displays towards the young Senegalese woman his paternalistic tendencies. After reading Diouana's letter to her, which is laudable since she cannot read, he decides, without asking her, that a reply must be written immediately. He fetches some stationery and starts writing on his own, assuming that what he says on her behalf meets her consent.

## **MADAME**

Madame is a lazy and violent woman. She is completely helpless without Diouana, who does all the chores in the house. Yet, she thinks that Diouana is idle. She is abusive to her husband, her children, and to Diouana. The constant humiliation Diouana suffers under Madame drives the young woman to kill herself.

*Lazy:* The stereotype that Madame uses to describe Diouana applies more to herself than to the black girl. Madame is a lazy woman. Left alone, she cannot look after her children or even fix them a mere cup of hot milk. When Diouana goes on strike, Madame's whole world crumbles around her. The dishes pile up, the house is unclean, her children are left to themselves, and she burns herself trying to boil some water.

*Violent:* Madame is a verbally and physically abusive woman. She insults her husband and calls him a drunk. She scolds her children when they try to get too close to her. She chastises Diouana, calls her lazy and reminds her that she is a maid and must dress as one. She even starves Diouana and goes as far as to hit the black girl. It is her ruthlessness that drives the black girl to suicide.

## **THEMES**

### **SOCIETY**

**Class/gender** Sembène subtly raises the issue of gender as it relates to employment and class. One day, while looking for work in Dakar, Diouana comes across Senegalese parliamentarians, men, who are debating the question of freedom of political expression. It is clear that for these men, having won the victory of education and independence, the issues they debate are those of the elite. For Diouana, a subaltern in Senegalese society who, as the writer Gayatri Spivak would say, has no voice, the crucial question is first of all to find a job that will allow her to survive. To do this, like many other Senegalese women, Diouana goes to sit in the sun, in the square where job-seekers gather to wait for a heavenly employer. This providential employer arrives in the form of Madame, a white woman, who, in her cultural space, has already obtained the right to speak, but who, paradoxically, chooses Diouana among all the women precisely because Diouana is the least talkative and the least agitated of them. It would seem that Madame, this white woman, who gained her voice thanks to women's fight for freedom of expression, a voice that she uses all day long to cover Monsieur with insults, does not want female competition. She prefers a mute and submissive woman as an employee. For Madame, the slogan seems to be: "No solidarity possible among women. Every woman is a competitor to be defeated, a rival to be kept at the bottom of the social ladder." And Madame works hard to ensure that Diouana never emancipates herself.

**History** A major theme of the film, presented symbolically and largely in the background, is the colonization of Africa. During the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, most European countries raced to Africa to deal, no longer in slaves as was hitherto the case, but in commodities. Ivory, gold, timber, cocoa, coffee, rubber, palm oil, nuts, and tropical fruits. By the late 1800s, Africa became so crowded with European fortune-seekers that conflicts became inevitable. To better regulate trade in Africa and to avoid conflicts among the international actors in the region, the European powers held a conference in Berlin between November 15, 1884 and February 26, 1885, under the chairmanship of German Chancellor, Otto Von Bismarck. Although the organizers publicized the conference as a meeting for discussing issues of humanity, peace, and the « civilizing » and « welfare » of the native populations of Africa, it was definition of the rules to govern the Europeans' claims of territories in Africa that actually dominated the talks. The Conference resolved the question of territorial conflicts among European countries by deciding that any European nation that formally gave other nations notice of its occupation of a territory would be recognized as the rightful owner of that territory. So, having defined the rules of the game, European powers rushed to cut up large slices of the African pie. When the dust of the European global dash to Africa settled, the continent was parceled into fifty territories. France's overseas empire comprised the territories of present-day Mauritania, Senegal, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Togo, Gabon, the Congo (Brazzaville), the

Central African Republic, Cameroon, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, the Islands of Mauritius, Reunion, Seychelles, Madagascar, Comoros, and Mayotte.

In the early 1960s, when this film was made, most French African colonies, including Senegal, became independent. Nevertheless, France found schemes to remain in control of their former colonies' politics, military, and economy. This colonial history is the not-so-hidden undercurrent of the story in this film.

**Racism/Exoticization** At a dinner, while Diouana is serving Madame's guests, one of them gazes at her intently. Finally, the guest walks to Diouana unexpectedly and kisses her without her consent, exclaiming, with the smile of someone who senses that he is about to experience something extraordinary, since he had never kissed a "Negress" before. For that guest, Diouana is a mere object of experiment. He has certainly heard recounted many times the adventures of white explorers in the "heart of darkness," which tend to represent the natives in sexual terms. The guest's words, "kissing a Negress," and the act that follows these words, the kiss that the guest violently plants on Diouana's cheek, are not devoid of sexual insinuations. Even though Madame came to the kitchen later to apologize to Diouana on behalf of her guest, telling Diouana that the man was just joking, the guest's words and gesture are charged with the ambiguities that govern the relationship between the white colonizer and the black colonized. Indeed, colonial rhetoric is such that it has caused the words "negro" or "negress" to trigger in some white people sexual impulses. For the racist white, and there is no question that Madame's guest is one, the "negro" connotes genital hyperbole, and superlative sexual potency, and the "negress," who is naturally outfitted to bear this genital hyperbole and sexually potent man, must, herself, be an oddity, something to "discover" and "explore." Thus the kiss. Why would kissing a black woman be different from kissing a white woman? What could be the inference behind the thinking of Madame's guest other than sexual? Madame's guest is representative of the imperial mentalities that come to the colony with the outlook of the "discoverer," their heads filled with fantasies about the natives and their environments, usually sexual fantasies that they hope to fulfill.

**Beauty** "France is a lovely country." This is one of the first sentences that Monsieur utters to Diouana on the day she arrives in France, as he drives her from the harbor to his home. France, Diouana concludes, is certainly a beautiful place, but it is inhabited by ugly people. Indeed, the few French people that Diouana encounters in France—as her condition allows her little freedom of movement—have a disgraceful story to tell about the French. As Diouana discovers, Monsieur is a drunk who fantasizes about her when Madame is not looking. Madame is a mean, racist, and irritable woman, who wore the mask of a kind person when she was in Senegal, and who, in France, cannot help but show her true, repugnant self. Madame screams at her, insults her, beats her, and starves her. Madame and Monsieur's guests do not fare better in the decency category. They are racist. One of Madame's female guests compares Diouana to an animal that acts instinctively rather than a human being who reasons. Another one uses her as an object of experiment to fulfill his long-held dream of kissing a "negress." A third one will not visit Senegal because, for him, the African continent is a war-ridden, dangerous place. France might be a lovely place according to Monsieur. For Diouana, however, it is an ugly place, the land of a people whose hearts have hardened to the point that they cannot see that, beyond superficial racial differences, she is one of their fellow human beings. How lovely, then, can a place be if what it generates are heartless people, people with no empathy? Diouana recalls that in Senegal, neither Madame nor Monsieur were that insensitive. They were good people there. In spite of Senegal's relative poverty as compared to France, there at least, people are friendly, helpful, sensitive and happy. To this extent, Sembène's message is clear: Senegal brings the best out of people and France the worst out of people. It is Senegal that is the paragon of beauty and not France. France's beauty is only superficial. Senegal's beauty is deep. It comes from the soul of its people, and not from the height of its buildings, the width of its roads, or the wealth of its population.

**Oppression and defiance** Despite appearances, Africa is not a continent that endures Europe's assaults without rebelling. Africa had its great fighters, who stood up against the oppression of racist Europe, but whose struggles, unfortunately, were lost to the technological advances of Western weaponry. Sembène dramatizes Africa's defiance through Diouana's boldness. In this France, where Diouana has no other support than herself, no other alliance than the one she can form with her own will to resistance, the young Senegalese woman rebels against Madame's abuse. When Madame forbids her to eat unless she does work which was not stipulated in the gentleman contract that binds them, the young woman decides that she will no longer do anything in the house, not even watch the children. She sleeps in, leaving Madame to get frustrated with her children and burn her clumsy fingers on the coffee maker. And when Madame

pushes the outrage to the point of calling Diouana 'lazy', like any other African and beating her, Diouana considers this humiliation as the straw that breaks the camel's back. In a gesture which is an allegory of the return of the oppressed to their dignity and their native land, Diouana snatches the mask that she offered Madame from her employer's hands, packs her bags, telling herself that Madame will never again have the opportunity to humiliate her, and opens her veins in the bathtub. In this ultimate act of defiance, Diouana disposes of her own life, wrests from Madame all control over her, gains the last word over Madame, like those proud slaves, who suffocated themselves by swallowing their own tongues rather than submit to slavery.

**Paternalism:** Diouana has supposedly received a letter from her mother from Senegal (the girl does not believe that the letter is really from her mother). Monsieur calls Diouana to the dining room table and proposes to read the letter to Diouana. Madame, who was sitting in the living room, gets up and joins them in the dining room, curious to hear what Diouana's mother has to say to Diouana. Diouana is visibly displeased to see Madame's invasion of her privacy, and she gives Madame a disapproving look. Madame does not budge. She has not lost her resolve to know the contents of Diouana's mother's letter. Diouana listens, impassively, as Monsieur reads the letter. After he is done, Monsieur tells Diouana, "Now, we shall write a reply to your mother right away." He fetches some stationery and a pen, and, without asking Diouana what she will tell her mother, writes the first line of the letter: "Dear Mother, I am doing well in France. I am not sick." Then, Monsieur stops and asks Diouana what he must write next. The girl remains silent. Monsieur decides to proceed without her help. When he is done, Diouana snatches the letter and tears it, to the amazement of Monsieur and Madame. Then she gets up and leaves the table. In this scene, Sembène criticizes the blatant paternalism of France, which continues to treat African states as its dominions and Africans as children who need France's guidance and approval in every decision they make. One symbol of French paternalism, which is decried by many French-speaking Africans, is the continued use of the CFA franc, France's colonial currency in Africa, which allows France to appropriate the foreign exchange reserves of French-speaking Africa, to control its raw materials, its armies, maintain its total monopoly and dominance on French-speaking Africa. In this sense, Sembène's social and political critique of France's paternalism, pretentiousness, and presumptuousness in Africa is timeless.

**Objectification/animalization:** During a conversation that Madame has with one of her friends invited to dinner at her house, the two women speak of Diouana in terms that animalize the young Senegalese woman. Indeed, Madame's guest asks her if Diouana understands French. Madame replies no, but that Diouana responds well to orders. Madame's guest suggests that Diouana reacts by instinct, like an animal. Madame accepts her friend's explanation. Thus, Diouana is for Madame and her guest, not of the human species, but rather of the animal species. Moreover, Madame calls Diouana with a bell when she needs her services. In this case, it would not be surprising if, seeing Diouana respond to her boss's call, the guest established a link between Diouana's (instinctive) response to a Pavlovian response stimulated by successful conditioning. In which case, Diouana would be a successfully trained animal. Besides being treated like an animal, Diouana is treated like an object. People talk about her as if she were not present in the apartment, or as if she were a mere inanimate object with no sentiments.

**Freedom/bondage** The mask that Diouana purchased as a thank-you gift for Madame was a free artifact in Senegal. It was for Diouana's friend a toy that he took everywhere he went to the point of exasperating his father. Held by the boy, worn by him, or simply forgotten on the ground in a street of Dakar and retrieved later, the mask went everywhere Diouana's little friend went, and the artifact was a known member of the community. This is, until Diouana decided to buy it from the boy and offer it to her employers. Once the girl's employers received the mask, they carefully kept it in their house, among other masks that Monsieur had purchased and which they later shipped to France. The journey of Diouana's mask, from Senegal to France, resembles the journey of the slave from Africa to Europe. Once free individuals in their communities, the slaves are captured or purchased by an African slave dealer, then sold to a European slave dealer, who holds them in a locked space with other slaves before transporting them to Europe as goods. Without suspecting it, Diouana undertook the trip of the slave to France as a slave herself. Her mask on the wall of her employers' living room, on which her gaze lingered the first day she arrived in France, was an ominous message to her that she, like it, was henceforth a slave that had just lost her freedom of movement. In fact, before she left Senegal for France, Diouana was told by her employers that she would have ample opportunities to visit France and shop in nice boutiques. However, once in France, she became

a slave whose movement and actions were controlled by her employers. She could only dress the way they wanted; she could only go to the grocers, and she could only eat what she was given and when she was allowed to eat. In fact, at one point, she was refused food. When Diouana understood that her life was but that of a slave, she claimed back her mask from Madame, went to her room and packed her suitcase, vowing to never again be treated as a slave. And, in a gesture that symbolized the (improbable) voluntary return to her native land, she cut her own throat in the bathtub. Diouana decided that she would not live under bondage.

**Work** Sembène emphasizes work as an essential element in human development. The film opens with Diouana stepping out of her family's backyard and announcing to the school teacher (played by Sembène) that she is going to look for work. Diouana goes up and down the residential districts of Dakar, ringing in vain at the doors of residents disdainful of such soliciting. Finally, she lands in the "Maids' Square." There, she realizes that she is not the only woman looking for work, and that under the arid Dakar sun, dozens of women are waiting to be hired as maids. All these women could have waited, as tradition dictates, for a man to marry them and be their protector and provider. All too often, however, this assumption of responsibility for women by men comes at the price of the loss of women's dignity and freedom. The joy with which Diouana runs through the streets of Dakar, the lightness with which she twirls around the water fetchers to celebrate her new job, the self-assurance with which she announces the news to the school teacher and her mother are all signs of the satisfaction of knowing that she can preserve her dignity and freedom by taking charge of her life. In this way, Sembène calls on decision-makers to address the issue of women's work in the same way as they do for men. He seems to be saying that women's dignity must be preserved. However, let it not only be through a maid's work, acquired after hours of combing the streets and being grilled by the African sun, but dignified work for which women are prepared through equal education.

**Power abuse/education** Critics rarely mention Sembène's name without mentioning that he is self-taught. Indeed, Sembène dropped out of school at the age of twelve. Everything he learned after that, he taught himself. Sembène's informal education and his membership in the Communist Party made him a champion of the struggle for workers' rights, which he led both in Dakar against the railway company and in France on the Marseilles docks. For Sembène, then, education of the masses is important, as educated workers know their rights and are better equipped to fight the abuse that powerful and malevolent employers can exert on their employees. Sembène explores the tension between employee and employer in *Black Girl*. Madame takes advantage of the fact that Diouana is far from home and, above everything else, due to her lack of education, that Diouana does not have the resources to denounce her employers and officially claim her rights against excessive working hours imposed on her and the psychological and physical abuses she endures. Diouana knows she is being exploited. She understands that the terms of the contract between her and her employers are not respected. She understands that the language and behavior of her employers and their friends towards her are abusive. And she revolts. However, Diouana's revolt is hampered by her lack of information and exit strategies. Rather than make her tormentors pay, the young woman kills herself. Diouana's situation is comparable to that of many victims of abuse in the workplace who prefer to remain silent or blame themselves for the abuse of power by their employers, a situation that education on employee rights could significantly reduce and perhaps even eliminate. Seven years before President Nixon signed the Occupational Safety and Health Act, Sembène, the activist and trade unionist, made a film calling for safe and healthful working conditions for workers. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Sembène was among the precursors of the struggle for education and workers' rights.

**Guilt/burden** Diouana buys a mask from her little friend for 50 francs just so that she can offer it to Madame, who has just hired her to be a babysitter for her children. In Diouana's thinking, Madame deserves to be rewarded for giving her a job, even though, by this job, Madame and Diouana enter a contract whereby they promise to ease each other's burden. By hiring Diouana, Madame relieves herself of the burden of looking after her own children, thereby affording herself more time to do other things. By getting this job, Diouana relieves herself of the burden of depending on her parents for her material needs. Madame and Diouana serve each other mutually, and there is no reason for Diouana to feel indebted or obligated to Madame beyond measure. Yet, Diouana thinks that she owes Madame something. She feels the burden of guilt towards her employer, who needs her as much as she needs her employer. Diouana's burden is symptomatic of the unequal rapport between the colonizer and the colonized and unfurls from the colonial education given to the colonized by the colonizer. The colonized was made to believe that whatever he

received by right from the former was undeserved and must therefore be accepted with much gratitude. This colonial brainwash continues to have repercussions in North-South relations, where some African heads of state still find it difficult to get rid of the inferiority complex which leads them to accept subordinate treatment from the West even when it is the Western countries that are the applicants and it is Africa that is the donor.

**Appearance** By pretending to be Africa's benefactor, by playing on insincerity, dissimulation and concealment, France is making Africa accept its slag and harmful waste. In fact, Diouana followed Madame and Monsieur to France on the promise they made her in Senegal that she would work as a babysitter for their three children, and that she would have free time now and then to go out and do her own shopping or visit the country. Upon her arrival, Diouana noticed that the only knowledge she would have of France would be the view of the town of Antibes from her bedroom window and whatever scenery she could catch on her way to and from the grocers. Most of her time would be spent working from the wee hours to the late hours, cleaning, cooking, and washing under the abusive words and blows of Madame. Now, Diouana realizes that Madame is not the nice woman she pretended to be, and that she is in reality a heartless woman that brought her in France to be a slave to her family. Diouana starts questioning the motives of Madame in every act of kindness the latter posed back in Senegal. Diouana concludes that in Senegal, Madame was not honest. She was putting on an act. She wore a mask of deception. Why, then, did Madame give her the leftovers from her dinner table to take home? Why, then, did Madame give Diouana her old clothes to wear? Diouana is convinced that she has found the answer to Madame's apparent act of kindness: Madame was just using her as a dumping ground, a place to dispose of things she did not need. She was just a convenient recycling bin for Madame. Sembène's critique here is subtle and poignant. How often have we seen French-speaking African states receive old police cars, old ambulances, old sanitary equipment and old clothes from France, under the guise of North-South cooperation? Sembène is telling us here that there is no such thing as cooperation, but rather only exploitation of French-speaking Africa as France's dumping ground, a place to get rid of its scrap metal and old chemicals and clothes.

## QUESTIONS

1. What do you make of Madame telling Diouana "you break, you pay" soon after she receives a gift from the young woman.
2. What does the mask represent in the film?
3. Why did the filmmaker choose a little boy to be the owner of the mask?
4. What do you make of Diouana wearing her African dress and high heels?
5. Why does Madame resent seeing Diouana look elegant?
6. Explain the irony in Diouana's words when Diouana says, "France is a black hole."
7. Madame calls Diouana lazy. How is Madame's perception of Diouana ironic?
8. Why did Diouana refuse her last wage? What would she have liked instead?
9. The filmmaker is trying to contrast African collectivism and France's individualism. Explain two scenes in the film that dramatize this contrast.

## SCENES

### Part I

**Diouana arrives in France** Diouana, a black girl from Senegal, disembarks from a boat at a French harbor. She is known as *la bonne* ('the maid'). She wonders if someone has come to fetch her. A white man (Monsieur) comes to the harbor to fetch her. Monsieur greets Diouana, picks up her suitcase, and asks her to follow him to his car.





**France is lovely!** They start driving. Monsieur remarks to the young woman that France is a lovely country. She does not respond. They arrive at Monsieur's apartment building and get out of the car. Diouana lifts her eyes in the sky to appreciate the height of the building.



**Madame greets Diouana** Madame greets Diouana kindly. Diouana's eyes linger for a while on a Senegalese mask on the wall of the apartment. Madame shows Diouana her room and tells her that the children will be coming home soon. Madame makes Diouana admire the French Riviera from her bedroom window and shows her the kitchen.



**Diouana's work** Diouana is at work at Monsieur and Madame's home. She cleans the bathroom and the bedrooms, makes the beds, and cooks. Diouana's thoughts are revealed. She reflects on her work and laments that that these chores define her daily life in France. She notes that she is neither a cleaning lady nor a cook. Yet this is all she does every day under Madame's constant scolding. She wonders what people in France are like. She notes that their doors are always closed.



**You are not going to a wedding!** Diouana dresses elegantly, puts on her makeup and her jewelry, and gets ready for her daily work. Madame scolds her, saying that she is not at party, and that she has been dressing as if she were going to a wedding. She asks Diouana to dress more appropriately for her work.



**An apron for Diouana** Diouana ignores Madame and carries on with her work. Madame leaves and comes back with an apron. Madame wraps the apron around Diouana's waist. She asks Diouana to cook a good *mafé* (a Senegalese chicken stew served with rice) for tonight because they are expecting guests.



**More questions** Alone in the kitchen, Diouana has more questions. She wonders why she is asked to wear a cook's apron while she has no cook's training. She wonders why Madame wants to eat some *mafé* while she never asked her cook in Senegal to make rice. She wonders if this has to do with the better quality of rice in France.

**Diouana's dreams** Diouana dreams of visiting Cannes, Nice and Monaco, and doing some window shopping in the nice commercial districts. Diouana also thinks of spending her first wage on nice dresses, shoes, and silk underwear. She dreams of taking some nice pictures on the beach and sending them to Dakar to impress her friends and relatives

**A *mafé* for a tour?** Again, Diouana wonders where the children are. She is curious to know why Madame sent for her to look after children who do not live with her. Diouana hopes that after cooking them some good rice, Madame and Monsieur will show her around France.

**The *mafé* is good** Diouana hopes that Madame's guests like her rice. She worries that it might be too spicy for them, but the guests enjoy Diouana's rice. They like the fact that they are eating a genuine African dish in metropolitan France.



**Ringing Diouana** Using a handbell, Madame rings Diouana for some more rice and wine. Diouana brings them the rice and the wine. She thinks that they eat like pigs and talk a lot. Monsieur tells his guests to come to Dakar sometime. One of the guests retorts that Africa is not a safe place to be now with all the wars going on there. One of the guests proffers that Africans only eat rice and hope that it has aphrodisiac qualities.



**KISSING a Negress** As Diouana returns to the kitchen, one of the guests hails her. He asks to kiss her, and before she can reply, he kisses her on the cheek, exclaiming that he never kissed a Negress before. His wife tells him that Diouana does not seem pleased to be kissed. He replies that independence caused the Blacks to become less natural.



**Diouana is upset** Diouana returns to the kitchen, upset. Madame joins her there and explains that the kiss was just a joke, and that her guest meant no harm. Madame congratulates Diouana for her excellent *mafé*, and she orders her to bring the guests some coffee.



## Part II

**The mask** In a flashback, Diouana recalls how she ended up in France. Her neighbor, a schoolteacher, who also acts as a public writer for people who are illiterate, is installed at his desk in front of his compound, on the outskirts of Dakar. His son is playing with a mask. The father scolds the child and asks him to get rid of the mask and come sit quietly. The child throws the mask on the ground and sits by his father.





**Looking for a job** Diouana comes out of her compound elegantly dressed in a traditional Senegalese outfit. The teacher asks her where she is headed. She replies that she is going to look for a job. Diouana walks the city of Dakar for hours in vain. She cannot find a job as a maid.



**No freedom of expression** In front of the National Assembly building, Diouana eavesdrops on a conversation among some members of parliament. They complain that they are not being allowed to express their free opinions. They think that the post-independence system is as repressive as the colonial administration was.





**No luck** Diouana rings the doorbell of a residence, and a big German shepherd chases her away. She enters a residential building and randomly rings the bell of an apartment. A white woman opens the doors, sees her, curses, and slams the door on her before hearing what she has to say.



**Go to the maids' square** The young man keeps talking. He tells her about the maids' square where prospective employers come to look for maids. He takes her there and leaves. She promises to see him again, and she sits with the other maids in the sun.



**Madame wants a maid** Diouana returns to the square every day to wait for a providential employer. Madame comes to the square one day. She is wearing dark sunglasses, and no one can see her eyes. She scrutinizes the maids.



**Madame notices Diouana** The women understand that Madame is looking to hire a maid. They rush towards her with their hands stretched out to her. Madame backs off. Diouana is sitting and about to get up, too, and offer her services. Madame walks towards Diouana. She asks Diouana if she is looking for a job. Diouana says yes.



**Madame hires Diouana** Madame asks Diouana if she knows how to take care of children. Diouana answers yes. Madame asks Diouana if she has experience working with white people. She answers no. Madame hires Diouana anyway. Diouana is happy. She runs home to tell the good news. On her way, she sees her little friend playing with his mask and snatches it from him.



**Diouana shares the good news**

Diouana wears her little friend's mask and circles around a woman carrying a bucket of water, singing that she got hired by some white folks. Diouana hails the school teacher and tells him that she has a job. She runs to her mother and gives her the good news. Her mother throws away the mask and asks her to be strong. The boy picks up his mask from the ground. Diouana says she will give him 50 francs for it on pay day.



**A thank-you gift**

Diouana takes the mask to her employers' place and offers it to Madame as a thank-you gift. Madame shows the mask to her husband, who carefully examines it. He already has a collection of African masks on his wall. He surmises that Diouana's mask is authentic. He looks for a place to display it. He puts it on a coffee table by the wall, next to a smaller African mask.



**You break, you pay!** Diouana is impressed with the garden sprinkler at Madame's house. She sits on the veranda and watches it move from one side to the other. Madame introduces Diouana to the cook and asks the cook to explain the house rules to Diouana, especially to make it clear to her that if she breaks something, she must pay for it. Madame asks the cook to feed Diouana.

**Diouana meets the children** The children are playing in the dining room by their mother. Madame calls Diouana to introduce her the kids: a little girl, Sophie, and two older boys, Damien and Philippe. Diouana greets them by shaking their hands, and their mother sends them away to play in the garden.



**Work was different in Dakar** In Dakar, she did not do the laundry or cook. She was only in charge of the children. As seen on the screen, she took them out for walks or to school and brought them home.



### Part III (Back in France)

**Come visit Senegal!** Madame's guests are done eating and are chatting and smoking in the living room. Diouana cleans the dinner table and serves them coffee. Monsieur and Madame are trying to convince their guests to visit Senegal. However, their guests are reluctant, saying they are afraid that Senegal will fall into a civil war like the Congo. Monsieur tells them that Senegal is not the Congo, and that the country has a president, Senghor, who is a good guarantee of stability.



**Instinctively, like an animal** One of the female guests asks Madame if Diouana speaks French. Madame says no, but she understands imperative verbs. The guest replies, "Instinctively, then, like an animal?" Madame agrees and remarks that one thing is certain, she cooks well. The guests leave. Diouana cleans until late at night. She tells herself that she understands now why she was brought to France. Madame wanted a slave, not a babysitter for her children.



**She is lazy** Monsieur and Madame are sitting in the living room. Diouana returns home from doing some errands. She is elegantly dressed. Madame asks Monsieur if he has noticed anything. She tells him that Diouana has been losing weight. Monsieur replies that it must be the climate. Madame counters that it is laziness, and she adds that they have to do something about Diouana's laziness, for the kids will be coming home soon from school.

**The gaze** Monsieur serves himself a drink and tells Madame to excuse him, and that he is going to take a short nap. Madame snaps at him for not spending enough time with her and for drinking too much. On his way to his room, Monsieur stops at the kitchen entrance and gazes at Diouana.



**They were not like this in Dakar** Monsieur can be heard snoring in his bedroom. Madame crushes her cigarette in the ashtray, picks up her pullover, and tells Diouana that she is going out for some fresh air. As she is cleaning the table, Diouana recalls that neither Madame nor Monsieur used to be like this in Dakar. Then she wonders if she will still be the one to cook and clean when the kids are back.

**France is a black hole** Looking at the Senegalese mask on the wall, Diouana wonders what people must be thinking of her in Dakar. They must be thinking that she is living well in France, while France for her is the kitchen, the living room, the bathroom. Yet, she recalls, in Senegal, Madame promised her that she would see beautiful places in France. Now, Diouana laments, France is a black hole to her. She wonders if Madame's intention in bringing her to France was to keep her prisoner. She complains that she is lonely.



**Madame is angry** Diouana is in bed sleeping. Madame is serving coffee to the children. She burns her finger with the hot coffee pot. She rushes to Diouana's bedroom and shakes her, telling her to get her lazy bones out of bed. She tells her that this is France and not Africa. Diouana opens her eyes, looks at Madame, and goes back to sleep.





**Diouana locks herself in the bathroom**

Diouana finally gets up and goes to the kitchen. Madame reminds her that she did not come to France to stay in bed but to take care of her children. Diouana goes to the bathroom to fix herself. Madame bangs on the bathroom door and orders her to come out. Diouana ignores her.



**She will not work**

Madame keeps banging on the door. Monsieur hears the commotion and goes to see what is going on. Madame complains that Diouana has locked herself in the bathroom and refuses to work. Monsieur does not say a word. He turns around and goes to the dining room. Monsieur kisses his son, sits at the table, and grabs his newspaper.

**Diouana needs no break**

Madame brings Monsieur his coffee. He tells her that a few days' break might do some good to Diouana. Madame asks what Diouana would do with a few days' break. Monsieur replies that she could visit the city. Madame retorts that it is not necessary, for Diouana knows no one around here except the grocer, and besides, she is responsible for Diouana.





**Diouana ignores Madame** Diouana goes through the living room and glances at Madame and Monsieur without stopping. Monsieur finishes his coffee and withdraws into his bedroom. Madame is visibly irritated. She scolds Philippe, who is playing in the living room, and asks him to go play outside.



**African dress over high heels** Diouana is in her bedroom. She opens her suitcase and takes out a picture of her and her Senegalese boyfriend, taken in Senegal. Her boyfriend has his right arm around her shoulder, and they are standing in a street in Dakar. From her suitcase, Diouana picks out the same dress she had on in the picture and puts it on. She also puts on her jewelry. Then she wraps her apron around her waist, put on her high heels, and heads to the kitchen, through the living room.



**Don't forget that you are a maid!** Madame sees Diouana going through the living room and is shocked. Madame orders Diouana to remove her high heels. She tells Diouana not to forget that she is a maid. Diouana removes her shoes and walks barefoot into the kitchen. She sits at the kitchen table for breakfast. She wiggles her toes on the cold floor to keep them warm.



**No work, no food** Madame joins Diouana in the kitchen. She asks Diouana what is wrong, if she is sick. Diouana tells her that she is not sick. Madame tells Diouana that she has not been working and warns her that she will not eat if she does not work. Madame turns around and leaves the kitchen. Diouana tells herself that if she does not eat, she will not look after the children.



**A letter from Senegal** Monsieur has received some mail from Dakar. He hands two envelopes to his wife. He calls Diouana and tells her that there is a letter for her, too. He asks her if she would like him to read it to her. She says yes. She sits at the dinner table in front of him. Madame leaves the living room and comes sit at the table to listen to the contents of the letter.



**Monsieur reads Diouana's letter** The letter is from Diouana's mother, who was able to find Diouana's bosses' address through a third party. She is worried because she has no news of Diouana. She tells her daughter that her health has been declining and asks her to think of sending her some money instead of spending all her wages on shopping.



**May God bless your bosses!** Diouana's mother asks her daughter not to forget her and to write her a letter with Madame's help. She tells her that Madame has always been a great lady, like a mother to Diouana. She reminds Diouana how Madame was nice in Dakar, always making sure that they gave her leftover meals. Madame turns to Diouana with an air of vindication. Diouana closes her eyes tightly as if she does not want to hear these words. Diouana's mother concludes her letter by asking God to bless Diouana and her bosses.





**Monsieur wants to write a reply** Monsieur tells Diouana that he will help her write a reply right away. He goes to fetch some stationery and a pen. Madame looks at him and chuckles, saying, she hopes this will satisfy Diouana.



**Diouana will not participate** Monsieur starts Diouana's letter with "Dear Mother. I received your letter, and I am in good health." Then he asks Diouana how she wants him to continue. She does not say a word. Madame urges her to say what she wants. Diouana casts a hostile look at Madame. Monsieur decides to continue writing on his own if Diouana has nothing to say.



**These are not my words** Diouana says to herself that whatever Monsieur is writing is not true. These are not her words. She picks up the letter from Senegal and tears it to pieces, saying to herself that this letter is not from her mother either. She leaves the pieces of the torn-up letter on the table, leaving Monsieur and Madame astounded. Madame tells her husband that Diouana is crazy.



**I am a prisoner** Diouana cries. She tells herself that the whole situation is a farce, and that Madame is not a good woman. She thinks that if she could write, she would be able to write about the true nature of Madame, and she would tell that in France she is the prisoner and the slave of Monsieur and Madame. She tells herself that in France she has no family and no one she knows who cares about her.



**This mask belongs to me** Monsieur and Madame are ready to go out. They tell Philippe to go play with Diouana. Diouana ignores Philippe. She removes the Senegalese mask from the wall, saying that it belongs to her, that Madame tricked her, and that she will not look after Philippe since Madame refuses her food.



**Diouana ignores Philippe** Diouana goes to her room. Philippe opens the door and asks when his brother and sister will be coming home. She looks at him, impassive. The boy leaves and closes the door behind him. Diouana tells herself that she has no information about the children and, besides, she is not eating, so, she is not working. She hears the neighbors fight upstairs. She sighs that this is life in France.



**Diouana regrets her trip to France** Diouana asks herself why she was so keen on going to France. She recalls that on the eve of her trip, she was walking in Dakar with her boyfriend. He made an indiscrete gesture towards her, and she was angry with him. All she could think about was that Madame had asked her to go back to France with her.



**The boyfriend's warning** Diouana recalls sitting in downtown Dakar with her boyfriend and telling him that her boss wanted her to travel with her to France. She recalls asking her boyfriend if France was more beautiful than Senegal, and he telling her that he did not know because he had never been to France. She recalls her boyfriend warning her that she would be slaving in France, and she being giddy about leaving, skipping on the wall of the memorial to the dead of World War I.



**Diouana is nostalgic** Diouana recalls how she used to play with her little friend, the boy with the mask. She also recalls her secret meetings with her boyfriend and their walks in the city. She recalls the melancholic look of her young friend, the boy with the mask, who was afraid of losing her each time her boyfriend came to fetch her. She recalls telling her boyfriend about all the interesting things she would do in France, the good life she would have there, and making him unhappy and jealous.



**Philippe falls asleep in a chair** Diouana falls asleep next to her mask and the picture she took in Senegal with her boyfriend. Madame goes directly to the kitchen and complains that Diouana did not do the dishes. Monsieur finds Philippe sleeping in a chair and carries him to bed.



**Madame hits Diouana** Madame goes to Diouana's room and hits her to wake her up. Madame notices that the mask is not on the wall. Monsieur goes to Diouana to inquire and she throws her apron at his feet just as he enters. He asks her if she is sick. She says no. He pays her her wages. Diouana collapses on the floor, crying. Monsieur calls Madame over and tells her to see what is wrong.



**Diouana wrests her mask from Madame** Madame finds the mask in Diouana's room and is about to take it to the living room. Diouana wrests the mask from her, telling her that the mask belongs to her. Madame calls her husband to the rescue. Monsieur reminds Madame that the mask belongs to Diouana after all. Madame accuses Diouana of being ungrateful.



**Diouana packs her suitcase** Diouana packs her things in her suitcase. She swears to herself that Madame will never again have the opportunity to order her around or humiliate her. Diouana picks up the money that she dropped when she collapsed on the floor. She walks into the living room, where Monsieur and Madame are having a drink, and tosses the money on the coffee table next to the apron, telling them that she did not come to France just for the apron and money.





**Diouana kills herself** Diouana braids her hair and swears that Madame will never see her again. She says that Madame lied to her, that she has always lied to her. She swears that Madame will never again have the opportunity to lie to her. Diouana goes to the bathroom, fills the bathtub with water, sits in it, and opens her veins with Monsieur's razor blade. Diouana dies in the bathtub.



**Fait divers** Outside Diouana's bedroom window, on the Riviera, life goes on. Tourists are sunbathing on the beach and swimming. In the *Faits divers* ('brief news') section of the local Antibes paper, there is a story about a young Senegalese woman who cut her throat in a filled bathtub because she was homesick.



CE  
ON COMPLETE  
**LAN**  
COTS  
13

**ENTIÈRES**  
COUTANTS  
JOURS  
DI 26 JUIN

**otre ville**

**REVETEMENTS DE SOL  
GERFLEX**  
CARPETTES EN SÉPIOLITE  
CENTRAL CAOUTCHOUC

## LES FAITS DIVERS

**A ANTIBES**  
**Une jeune négresse se tranche la gorge dans la salle de bains de ses patrons**

**Le perdu découvert dans les bois d'Antibes a été identifié...**

**Le Congrès des Combattants Volontaires de la Résistance**

**FESTIVAL DU BAISSE SEN**  
JUDE DROITE  
TAILLEUR  
LAINEUX  
DALETOT  
RANG TOUTE

**FRANK**  
MODE • PLUS

**NICE, APPELS URGENTS**  
SERVICE MEDICAL

**A ANTIBES**  
**Une jeune négresse se tranche la gorge dans la salle de bains de ses patrons**

Gomis Diouana, une jeune négresse de Dakar, a mis fin à ses jours dimanche, vers 13 h., en se tranchant la gorge dans la salle de bains de sa patronne.

Lorsque des coloniaux rentrant en France s'étaient attachés les services de la jeune Gomis Diouana, qui avait vu le jour à Boutoupa, au Sénégal, ils n'avaient certes pas

**L'assurance ne paraît chère qu'avant l'accident**

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**Monsieur is going to Dakar** Monsieur decides that they must go to Dakar. He grabs Diouana's suitcase and mask. He first thinks of returning the mask to the wall, then he changes his mind. He opens the suitcase and sees Diouana's picture with her boyfriend. His wife places Diouana's nightgown in the suitcase.



**Monsieur returns to Dakar** Monsieur goes to Dakar with Diouana's suitcase and her mask. He has trouble finding the compound where her family lives. A young man offers to take him to the school teacher. There, a group of young men, who learn that Monsieur is Diouana's former boss, look at him with anger. Diouana's little friend is there, too, and he recognizes the mask that he sold to Diouana.

**Monsieur returns Diouana's things** Monsieur returns Diouana's things to her mother. He hands her some money. She looks at it with disgust and refuses to take it. He insists.



**She does not want your money** Diouana's mother leaves. The school teacher tells Monsieur that the mother does not want his money. The school teacher and Monsieur separate and leave. Diouana's friend is left alone in front of Diouana's suitcase and mask. The child picks up the mask, wears it, and follows Monsieur into the street, past the hostile gazes of the young men by the school, all the way to the harbor, with Monsieur intermittently glancing back in fear.

