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Article abstract

This study proposes to compare Claire de Duras’s Ourika (1824) and Ousmane Sembène’s “La Noire de...” (1962). The two novellas concern the assimilation of a Senegalese woman in the French society. Ourika is a young woman raised and educated in an aristocratic environment, while Diouana, the protagonist of Sembène’s story, who works as a maid, is illiterate. But the difference between the two women disappears as racism emerges. Using Fanon and Bhabha, this study focuses on the following aspects: Commodification and the loss of self; stigmatization and the protagonist as the Other; alienation and death; and suppressed voices and posthumous narratives. The essay concludes with a discussion of the significance of the struggles of the two protagonists, by extension, for Francophone African writers in the postcolonial context.

Disillusionment and Death in *Ourika* and "La Noire de..."

Sudarsan Rangarajan

Claire de Duras's *Ourika* (1824) is recognized as a literary landmark for its treatment of assimilation and the ensuing challenges. *Ourika* is the story of the eponymous heroine of Senegalese origin brought from her homeland as a child and educated and raised in an aristocratic milieu in France. However, her assimilation in and of the foreign culture eventually goes awry as she discovers that the indelible color of her skin is an impediment. The traumatic experience leads to her alienation and death. The work became an instant literary phenomenon, but soon fell into oblivion until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The renewed interest in the novel is attributed to its principal themes that reverberate through Francophone African literature of the twentieth century.[1] According to Little, "Il faudra attendre les romanciers de la Négritude, au XX^{e} siècle, pour retrouver une […] situation [comme celle d'Ourika]" ("Préface" ix). For O'Connell, Ourika's "psychological disintegration" (53) "exemplif[ies] one of Fanon's main theses in *Peau noire masques blancs*" (56). And, in Miller's view, "Ourika is the precursor of other tragic exiles in French colonialism, those punished for attempting to dwell between cultures" (171). As this essay will show the phenomenon continued in the postcolonial period.

In Ousmane Sembène's short story "La Noire de…" (1962), the protagonist Diouana, like Ourika, is brought to France from Senegal with the promise of a better life.[2] She, too, is disillusioned when she discovers that her skin color represents an insurmountable barrier between her and the French society. Like Duras's heroine, Diouana falls victim to racial prejudice. I will begin my comparative study by laying out the basic affinities between Ourika and Diouana, and then, discuss the commodification of the protagonists and their loss of self. In the next two sections, using Fanon and Bhabha, I examine the stigmatization of their skin color and their identity as the Other; and, their subsequent alienation and death. The essay will, then, proceed to analyze the suppression of their voices in the two posthumous narratives. The study concludes with a discussion of the broader implications of the two narratives for postcolonial Africa.

Ourika is a well-educated protégée of a noblewoman, and Diouana an illiterate housemaid who works for a French family. Although the dialectical relationship between the protagonist and the characters who belong to the dominant culture in the two works is different, the two fictional compatriots share many affinities. The exact age of neither protagonist is stated in the respective stories, but they belong to the same age group at the time their stories unfold.[3] Ourika is bought and brought from Senegal to France to save her from slavery. The transaction happens unbeknownst to her, for she is only two years old (205). Both Ourika and Diouana travel by ship, a symbol of the illusive journey toward a better life that, in reality, ends in their death.[4] While Ourika's mother is dead,

1 According to Betts, the origin of colonialist practices in twentieth-century Africa can be traced back to nineteenth-century Europe (312, 314).

2 The title "La Noire de..." is translated as "The Promised Land." Sembène's own cinematographic adaptation of the story has attracted more critical attention than its print version. The film broadly follows the latter with a few changes. For this study, I will use the print form, and comment on the film when necessary. While "La Noire de..." is not a mirror reflection of *Ourika*, the two stories follow similar plotlines with a tragic ending.

3 Ourika and Mme de B.'s grandson, Charles, are about the same age, and therefore, based on the latter's age, Little concludes that "Ourika [...] devait avoir entre vingt-cinq et trente ans au moment de sa mort" ("Madame de Duras et *Ourika*" 35). Based on Diouana's year of birth, 1927, noted on her identity card (161), and Madame's affirmation that she and her husband brought her from Africa in 1958 (160), she commits suicide the same year at the age of 30.

4 Even today, migrants travel by boat, and sadly, many die before reaching their destination.

Diouana practically loses all contact with her mother whom she would not see again. Ourika assumes the role of the "mother" to Charles who has complete confidence in her just as Diouana is the "surrogate mother" of her employers' children. While the children are overtly hostile toward Diouana, Charles unwittingly causes Ourika anguish when he describes his relationship and future with his fiancée, Anaïs (308–09).

Although both race and gender play critical roles in the two stories, race is a predominant factor that determines the protagonist's subaltern status, for both Ourika and Diouana interact primarily with (white) women.[5] After Chevalier de B. *gives* Ourika to his aunt, Mme de B., the principal actors in her life are Mme de B. and the inimical marquise. In Sembène's story, Monsieur being mostly absent, Diouana executes the commands of Madame and her sister, Mlle D.... The close relationship between the two sisters in "La Noire de..." is akin to that between Mme de B. and the marquise. Therefore, Mlle D...'s aggressive attitude toward the maid is comparable to the marquise's toward Ourika.

Commodification and the Loss of Self

The transactions described at the beginning of Ourika's narrative define her as a being devoid of personhood: "Je fus rapporté du Sénégal, à l'âge de deux ans, par M. le chevalier de B., qui en était gouverneur. [...] M. de B. m'acheta, et à son arrivée en France, il me donna à Mme la maréchale de B., sa tante" (295).[6] In her pivotal conversation with Mme de B., the marquise describes, in monetary terms, the difficulty of finding a man who would be willing to marry Ourika:

> Qui voudra jamais épouser une négresse ? Et si, à force d'argent, vous trouvez quelqu'un qui consente à avoir des enfants nègres, ce sera un homme d'une condition inférieure, et avec qui elle se trouvera malheureuse. Elle ne peut vouloir que de ceux qui ne voudront pas d'elle. (298)

As Waller writes, Ourika "derives her sense of self from her value as an object of social exchange" (qtd. in Miller 165). When Duras wrote the story, marriage and family were considered institutions of the natural order, and women were treated as subalterns confined to the domestic sphere (Chilcoat 13–14). As an educated African woman, Ourika is perceived as an anomaly, and as a single woman, she falls outside the natural order. In the marquise's words, "elle ne peut rien contre les maux qui viennent d'avoir brisé l'ordre de la nature" (298).

In "Nostalgie," an elegy that follows "La Noire de...," the description of Diouana as "victime comme nos ancêtres/Du troc" (*Voltaïque* 186) is redolent of the transaction at the beginning of *Ourika*. Madame entices Diouana to go with her and her family to France (166), but her real motive is purely monetary, for maids in France command a higher wage and want a day off (165). Hired as *bonne d'enfants* in Dakar, Diouana is asked to work as *bonne à tout faire* in France. She realizes that she has been bought as a "slave": "On m'a achetée. Je fais tout le travail ici pour 3000 francs. On m'a attirée, ficelée et je suis rivée là, comme une esclave" (182).[7] For her employers, she is "un objet utilitaire" (180), and what matters to them is her work, which she does like an automaton (182).

Ourika and Diouana are described as belonging to someone rather than individuals. The fictional character Ourika is modeled on a real-life child of the same name (Little,

5 Joseph Toundi in Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy* (1956) is an example of a male protagonist who is treated as a subaltern in colonialist Africa.

6 The treatment of Ourika as a commodity conforms to Article 7 of the *Code noir* which was promulgated in 1685 by Louis XIV, abrogated in 1794, and reinstated by Napoleon. It remained in force until 1848.

7 In the film, the place where Diouana and other prospective maids wait for future employers is called "la place des bonnes" which is "uncomfortably reminiscent of a slave market as filmed by Sembène" (Mortimer 65).

"Madame de Duras et *Ourika*" 38–39). The Chevalier de Boufflers, who brought the "petite captive" from Senegal, lists her along with animals and birds he brought as gifts (38). John Fowles, who translated *Ourika*, describes the fictional character as Mme de B.'s "black pet and protégée" (qtd. in Little, "Madame de Duras et *Ourika*" 41). A pet is "kept for pleasure rather than utility" (*Merriam-Webster*), and receives the master's affection as a reward for being obedient. Ourika evokes the image of herself as Mme de B.'s obedient pet: "[A]ssise aux pieds de Mme de B., j'écoutais, sans la comprendre encore [...]. [J]'étais heureuse à côté de Mme de B.: aimer pour moi, c'était être là, c'était l'entendre, lui obéir, la regarder surtout" (296). Although Mme de B. says that she treats her like her daughter (298), the relationship between them is unlike the one between a mother and her child. As Ourika laments, "Je n'enviais pas sa tendresse à ses petits-fils [...]; mais j'aurais voulu pouvoir dire comme eux: Ma mère!" (300). She would later realize that she is merely "un jouet, un amusement pour ma bienfaitrice" (298).

In Sembène's story, Diouana is identified as her employers' black servant: "Les voisins [de Madame] disaient: c'est la Noire de… Elle [Diouana] n'était pas Noire pour elle" (180).[8] A similar sense of a lack of individuality obtains in *Ourika*. Ourika's attachment to and dependence on her benefactress show that she is *her* Ourika. Further, the marquise represents public opinion (Massardier-Kenney 191), and based on the prevalent racial prejudice, it is quite possible that Mme de B.'s other acquaintances privately refer to Ourika as "La noire/négresse de Mme de B.," or by a similar moniker. In fact, Ourika says that, every time a new visitor came to Mme de B.'s house, "j'éprouvais un nouveau tourment […] j'étais sûre d'être bientôt l'objet d'une conversation à voix basse; car il fallait bien se faire expliquer comment une négresse était admise dans la société intime de Mme de B." (306). For instance, she says she did not have to suffer Charles' fiancée Anaïs' contemptuous look, because Charles had spoken to her about Ourika (307).

Stigmatization: The Protagonist as the Other

Fanon writes that, exposed to and influenced by European culture—textbooks, newspapers, cinema, etc.—the people of the Antilles were ignorant of the black culture (124). When young Antilleans, who lived under the illusion that they belonged to the white culture, visited France, they discovered their true identity (125, n. 16). Both Ourika and Diouana wear a white mask so to speak and experience a *crise identitaire* like the Antillean youth.[9] While Ourika is raised and educated in a protective environment with little or no exposure to black culture,[10] Diouana views France as superior to Africa. In Dakar, she is proud of working "chez de 'Grands Blancs'" (173), and "Tout ce qui vivait autour d'elle était devenu laid" (163). Upon arrival in France, viewed through the prism of the enchanting landscape, Africa appears to her "come un taudis sordide" (174).

Before overhearing the fateful conversation between the marquise and Mme de B., Ourika was unaware of the impact of her skin color on her life (296). The marquise's reference to Ourika as *négresse*, a term that subsumes her race, color, and gender, forces her to reflect on her identity and status as an outsider in the French society (298). Diouana, too, is unconscious of the color of her skin until her employers' children sing an improvised song calling her "la Négresse, Noire comme le fond de la nuit" (176). The

8 "La Noire de...," too, "is based in fact, drawn from an incident which Sembene read about in the French press" (Mortimer 65).

9 O'Connell describes Ourika as "an average black person trying to preserve some sort of identity" (53) which is contrary to her portrait in the text as an exceptionally talented young woman. She suffers because she realizes that her identity is determined by the color of her skin.

10 The preparation for the ball shows Ourika's and others' lack of knowledge about African culture: "On consulta les voyageurs, on feuilleta les livres de costumes, on lut des ouvrages savants sur la musique africaine, enfin on choisit une *Comba*, danse nationale de mon pays" (297).

effect of the racially charged incidents on the protagonists in the two stories is akin to what Fanon describes: "Je suis sur-déterminé de l'extérieur. Je ne suis pas l'esclave de 'l'idée' que les autres font de moi, mais de mon apparaître" (93). According to Bhabha, "uttered *inter dicta*," discriminatory colonial discourse is "at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such *both* against the rules and within them" (89; emphasis original). In *Ourika*, the conversation between Mme de B. and the marquise, which takes place in a space that is part of the salon, but separated from it by a screen, reveals Mme de B.'s true thoughts about Ourika's future in the French society. Similarly, in "La Noire de...," discriminatory discourse is both overt and covert. The children's racist remarks show the influence of the conversations between their parents and their neighbors in Africa in which "intervenaient des notions de discrimination raciale" (176). When Madame calls her neighbor for help, she refers to Diouana as "*Négresse*" (159), but when she talks to the *juge d'instruction*, she mindfully uses the maid's name (158). The (partial) anonymity of the characters who belong to the dominant culture in the two stories translates their ambivalent stand on discrimination and fear of being identified.[11] On the other hand, their lack of complete identity allows for a generalization of the dominant culture's relationship with its (post)colonial subjects.

Ourika is an ambivalent Other, that is, "*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha 86; emphasis original). Despite her aristocratic acculturation, her education and talents are devalued because of her race and she becomes a kind of subaltern.[12] While the marquise's remarks are blunt, Mme de B.'s are even more hurtful. Mme de B., who had raised and treated her like her daughter, represents the world to her. That world turns out to be just an illusion, for Mme de B. "avait des intérêts qui passaient bien avant moi" (300). Likewise, Diouana realizes that, while she was in Dakar, "Madame était bonne d'une bonté intéressée. Sa gentillesse n'avait d'autre raison que de la ficeler, l'enchaîner, pour mieux la faire suer" (179).

In both stories, the protagonist is showcased as an exotic object. Mme de B. organizes a ball to show Ourika's dancing skills "dans un quadrille des quatre parties du monde" (297). The ball, however, is ostensibly for her grand-children (297), and therefore, reflects Mme de B.'s apprehension of the spectators' response to the event, and undermines Ourika as a subject. Just like Diouana is not "Noire pour elle-même," Ourika cannot be independently presented. For the ball, she must learn an African dance and represent Africa (297). According to Doane, "colonialist discourses [...] frequently equated the African woman and the African continent—the conquest of the former signified the successful appropriation of the latter" (qtd. in Hurley 29). Furthermore, as Bhabha affirms, "the force of ambivalence [...] gives the colonial stereotype its currency" (66). The dance is an attempt to stage hybridity, but it underscores the ambiguity of the Other in every respect. Ourika dances with an anonymous white male partner who wears a black veil (an instance of white skin, black mask). The veil is a symbol of the barrier between Ourika and the society she lives in, and functions as a fetish[13] which "represents the simultaneous 'play' or vacillation between metaphor as substitution (masking absence

11 Mme de B., the marquise, who is also simply referred to as Mme de..., and the doctor (*Ourika*); Monsieur, Madame (Mme P...), their children, Madame's sister, Mlle D..., and the neighbor, le commandant X ("La Noire de...").

12 Ourika occupies the intermediate position between the elite and the "true" subaltern exemplified by Diouana. On the types of subaltern, see Spivak, *A Critique*, pp. 272–73.

13 Bhabha writes that the fetish and the stereotype function in a similar manner: "[F]etishism is always a 'play' or vacillation between the archaic affirmation of wholeness/similarity—in Freud's terms: 'All men have penises;' in ours: 'All men have the same skin/race/culture'—and the anxiety associated with lack and difference—again, for Freud 'Some do not have penises;' for us, 'Some do not have the same skin/race/culture'" (74).

and difference) and metonymy (which contiguously registers the perceived lack)" (Bhabha 74–75). Further, the dance exemplifies the scopic drive, "the drive that represents the pleasure in 'seeing,' which has the look as its object of desire" (Bhabha 76). In fact, Ourika says that "j'[ai] été citée pour l'élégance et la beauté de ma taille" (297), and she is applauded for her performance at the ball. However, the crucial conversation between Mme de B. and the marquise, which takes place soon after the ball, confirms her status as the Other.

In "La Noire de...," colonialist desire is both visual and gustatory. At the beginning of the narrative, the police and the media covering the case are more interested in the exhibits (statues, masks, animal skins, etc.) in the house, the symbols of colonial conquest, than the maid's death (158). The scopic drive is, perhaps, best exemplified by the neighbor who climbs up the ladder, breaks a window pane, and looks inside the bathroom where Diouana lies in a pool of blood. When he sees the key to the door in the inspector's hand, he says that he broke the window "seulement pour voir" (159).

Like Ourika, Diouana is treated as a representative of Africa—"on l'exhibait comme un trophée" (180). She is cited as an example in discussions on the psychology of the colonized (180) and asked to demonstrate her culinary skills under the watchful eyes of the guests. Just as Ourika's dance partner wears a veil to appear black, Madame disingenuously refers to herself and her parents as "*nous les Africains*" (178; emphasis original). While Ourika's dance and the meals cooked by Diouana represent their respective hosts' desire to know Africa and its culture, they are also symbolic of the colonial conquest. In ontological terms, there is an equivalence between knowing by seeing and knowing by eating: "Connaître c'est manger des yeux" (Sartre 624). And, the desire to know implies a desire to possess: "ce que [...] nous désirons nous approprier, dans un objet, c'est son être et c'est le monde" (643).[14]

According to Bhabha, "'otherness' [...] is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity" (67). While the marquise recognizes Ourika's charming personality and intellectual ability, she points to her skin color as the ultimate factor that will decide her fate in French society. The close relationship between Mme de B. and the marquise, and their thoughts suggest that they are each other's alter ego. While Mme de B. tells the marquise that Ourika's future is bleak (298), she keeps her thoughts from Ourika. As Cunningham observes, "The voice of the Marquise is one to which Mme de B. can offer little resistance. [...] It is the Marquise who puts Mme de B.'s fears into words" (21). As a child that is not her own and not of her race, for Mme de B., Ourika is a plaything, that is, an object of desire. Bhabha writes that "contradictory beliefs, one official and one secret, one archaic and one progressive" are common in colonial discourse (80).[15] It is not until Ourika decides to take the veil that Mme de B. tells her that she has, however unintentionally, caused her pain (315).

In "La Noire de...," guests view the food Diouana cooks and serves with apprehension, yet they "gloutonnement dévorèrent tout" (178), and therefore, demonstrate an ambivalent attitude toward her and her culture.[16] When Madame speaks like Diouana, she seems to do so for communicative reasons, "Pour se faire comprendre de la bonne" (180). However, as Bhabha, underscoring the ambivalence of mimicry, says,

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14 In the film "La Noire de...," knowing by seeing and eating and the desire to possess all come together at a dinner, when a guest says that he has never kissed a black woman and kisses Diouana against her will.

15 The ambivalence is reflective of Duras's own beliefs and status as a woman writer. Marginalized as a woman writer (she published the novella anonymously), to some extent, she identifies herself with Ourika. (Chilicot 16). Yet, while she criticizes racism, she does not denounce slavery (Miller 170).

16 In the film, when Diouana takes back the mask she had given, Madame tries to wrest it from her hands and expresses desire and derision. The mask functions as a fetish like the veil worn by Ourika's dance partner at the ball.

it is a strategy to appropriate the Other (86). The ambiguity becomes obvious when mimicry turns into mockery. First Madame, and then, everyone else in the house, call her "Missié" (Diouana's pronunciation of *Monsieur*) (180).

Alienation and Death

Ourika and Diouana live like prisoners in the house of their hosts. Ourika's life is confined to Mme de B., her grandchildren, and her acquaintances. Except for her close relationship with Charles, she lives a segregated life: "je ne voyais presque pas d'autres enfants" (296). However, her relationship with Charles, who considers her a confidante, is hardly reciprocal (305). As for Diouana, "Elle ne sortait jamais. Ne connaissait personne, si ce n'est que les enfants de Madame" (161). But the children's hostility intensifies her alienation.

As the color of their skin haunts them, Ourika and Diouana undergo an emotional upheaval. To hide her blackness from others and herself, Ourika removes all the mirrors in her room, wears a veil, covers her body, and closes her eyes (306). As she broods over Mme de B.'s assertion that she is destined to live a lonely life (299), she finds herself in "un abîme avec toutes ses terreurs" (299). Likewise, "N'ayant personne dans son univers avec qui échanger des idées" (177), Diouana is alienated. And, her mental state is strikingly similar to Ourika's: "Les larges horizons de naguère se limitaient à la couleur de sa peau qui soudain lui inspirait une terreur invincible. Sa peau. Sa noirceur. Craintivement, elle fuyait en elle-même" (177). As they cannot escape from the inherent part of their identity, they think of their country of origin where it would not be a discriminating factor. Ourika contemplates returning to Senegal, but realizes that, there too, she would be isolated (300). She is "étrangère à la race humaine tout entière" (300), that is, an *apatride*.[17] As for Diouana, she nostalgically reminisces about her life in her village and compares it to France where she is "deux fois étrangère" (181). Both find themselves in an impasse, for they cannot leave their masters on whom they are fully dependent.

Fanon affirms that "le nègre infériorisé va de l'insécurité humiliante à l'auto-accusation ressentie jusqu'au désespoir" (48). Ourika and Diouana are accused of acts they did not commit. Following Mme de B.'s assertion that Ourika's position in French society is "sans remède" (298), a "crime," of which Ourika is innocent (299), Ourika is mortified and horrified by her appearance. Racism becomes overt toward the end of both the narratives. Attributing Ourika's melancholy to "une passion insensée" for Charles (313), the marquise admonishes her for refusing to accept (in the marquise's view) her identity as "négresse" (313). Ourika, then, in a self-accusatory way says: "je ne sais quelle voix crie, au fond de moi-même, qu'on a raison et que je suis criminelle" (314). In "La Noire de ...," when Diouana says that the children, not she, left the bathroom in a mess, Madame calls her "sale" (183) and accuses her of lying like the "indigènes" (184). This scene is the last straw that drives her to commit suicide. After hearing the marquise's words, which are like a death sentence, Ourika has suicidal thoughts (310–11, 314), but resists committing suicide. In the hope of finding peace, she becomes a nun and moves to the convent where she dies as her health gradually deteriorates.

Suppressed Voices and Posthumous Narratives

As I have tried to show in this essay the initial difference between Ourika and Diouana—the former's aristocratic upbringing and the latter's lack of education and subservient status as a housemaid—disappears once their skin color becomes the sole determining

17 Her estrangement intensifies after the *massacres de Saint-Domingue*: "jusqu'ici je m'étais affligée d'appartenir à une race proscrite; maintenant j'avais honte d'appartenir à une race de barbares et d'assassins" (302).

factor of their identity. Although Ourika's narrative is in the first person and Diouana's in the third person, both are posthumous narratives, and neither protagonist has a fully independent narrative voice. While "La Noire de..." begins with the investigation of the maid's death, and her story is narrated as a flashback, in Duras's novella, the doctor's frame narrative which circumscribes Ourika's is ominously proleptic. He first describes her as disintegrated—"l'âme vivait encore, mais le corps était détruit" (294)—and declares that her death is imminent (294). The doctor's role is deemed necessary to authenticate the black woman's narrative: "[C']est un homme blanc respectable. [...] Il incarne la voix de la science" (Bertrand-Jennings 34). He, therefore, represents "l'autorité morale" in the narrative (34). He, like others, views Ourika as a social anomaly, for, when he first visits her, he is surprised to see a black woman and even more surprised to hear her speak eloquently and courteously (294). Ourika's attachment and indebtedness to Mme de B. prevent her from expressing herself freely. Even when she is distressed, she blames herself for being ungrateful toward her benefactress (299, 300, 306). And, despite her close relationship with Charles, she never tells him the reasons for her suffering (305). She suffers silently, "nourrissant à part ma plaie secrète" (301). When she talks about death and dying, she refers to herself in the third person—"la forme verbale qui a pour fonction d'exprimer la *non-personne*" (Benveniste 228)—the pronoun used in "La Noire de...."

Unlike Ourika, Diouana doesn't speak French well, and therefore "s'enfermait et vivait recluse en elle-même" (180). The need and the possibility of a white person's narrative voice is broached, when Diouana wants to write home, but cannot. Madame offers to write on her behalf, but obviously, Diouana would not be able to tell her everything she has in mind.[18] Moreover, Madame's sister takes away the stamps from Diouana (183). Just as Ourika suffers in silence, Diouana, apart from uttering monosyllabic words, for the large part of the story remains mute. And, like Mme de B. and Charles are oblivious of the cause of Ourika's pain and suffering, Diouana's employers are unaware of the reason for hers. While Monsieur attributes her demeanor to illness, Madame says "On dirait qu'on la dégoûte" (183).

In the film Sembène makes up for Diouana's muteness using the voice-over technique. Sembène explains his adaptation of his works for the cinema in an interview with Guy Hennebelle. Illiteracy was pervasive in Africa and written works were only accessible to a small percentage of the population (Hannebelle 7). The film being a mass medium, it is particularly appropriate for "La Noire de...." In the novella Sembène sparsely uses interior monologues and there is more telling by the third-person narrative voice than showing. In the film, on the other hand, he exploits the voice-over technique for interior monologues to good effect, and gives the viewers access to Diouana's intimate and unexpressed thoughts.[19] Diouana's suppressed thoughts in the final critical moments—"Elle garda le silence, pendant que la nervosité faisait trembler ses lèvres" (184)—are revealed in the film. The scene immediately preceding her suicide encapsulates the heroine's anger, frustration, and refusal to submit to Madame's oppression. As Diouana packs her bag as if for her final journey, the words that the quivering lips could not utter can be heard in the voice-over. Saying that "Madame m'a toujours menti" and wanted to keep her as a slave, she vows to never see Madame or be seen by her again. Yet, the disparity between Diouana and the well-articulated voice-over

18 In the film, it is Monsieur, not Madame, who offers to write on Diouana's behalf in response to a letter supposedly from her mother.

19 According to Seymour Chatman, "since films *show* everything, offscreen voices in general have come to be thought obtrusive and inartistic" (194; emphasis original). But here it is justified because the protagonist is illiterate.

in French (of which she only knows a smattering) underscores Diouana's lack of freedom to express herself.[20]

Both Ourika and Diouana arrive at their final decisions independently: Ourika takes the veil despite Charles' insistence to stay, and Diouana refuses to continue to be mistreated by Madame. They also symbolically protest the lack of a meaningful voice in an oppressive, smothering environment. Ourika ends her narrative abruptly, as if she has *une extinction de voix*, and Diouana slits her throat, the source of her voice. The conclusion of each story is a response to the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that is the title of an essay by Spivak. Spivak is particularly relevant here, for her focus is on subaltern women, and the suppression of their voices. Donadey attributes Spivak's assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak" as "nostalgia for unmediated speech" (208). Later, Spivak, while dismissing her own initial remark on the subaltern's inability to speak as "inadvisable" (*A Critique* 308), makes a subtle yet crucial distinction between speaking and being heard or read (309). Ourika's voice can be heard and Diouana's story can be read, but only after their death, and that, too, through an intermediary, who is male and elite: the doctor in *Ourika* and the author/director of "La Noire de...."[21]

Beyond the local reading, each story in its own way provides insights into postcolonial Africa's challenges. The suppression of Ourika's voice and her subaltern status, by extension, are symbolic of and portend the struggles Africans face at different levels, not only political, social and economic, but also linguistic and literary. Pascale Casanova describes the literary landscape as the world republic of letters with Paris as one of its capitals (241–42) where the struggles of writers from former colonies are played out, however, unconsciously (257). While Paris offers these writers an opportunity to gain global recognition (242), it also marginalizes them and denies them entry into the mainstream (186). The dialectic that opposes dependence on and independence from France applies equally to cinema, for "la cinéphilie parisienne est un héritage direct du capital littéraire parisien" (242). At the time Sembène began making films, cinema was a nascent area in Africa. Funds were scarce and film distribution was controlled by European companies (Mortimer 67). For the film "La Noire de..." he had to seek the French government's financial support, and that entailed conforming to certain restrictions—the use of French rather than Wolof and keeping the length under one hour to avoid scrutiny by the French Centre National du Cinéma (Virtue 558).

The writers of former colonies face a dilemma as they have to choose between assimilation and dissimilation. The former involves "l'intégration, par une dilution ou un effacement de toute différence originelle, dans un espace littéraire dominant" and the latter "l'affirmation d'une différence à partir notamment d'une revendication nationale" (Casanova 258). For these writers, assimilation into and of the colonizer's culture is a necessary, albeit illusory, pathway to universal recognition. They will, therefore, always have a schizophrenic identity.

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20 For the voice-over to be authentic, it must "be identifiable as the character's" (Chatman 195).

21 Ironically, before Sembène made the film, Diouana's story was unknown to Africans who could identify themselves with her but were unable to read. Even the film, which is in French, is not entirely accessible to them.

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