

## ORIENTALISM, COLONIAL POWER, AND SILENCING IN OUSMANE SEMBÈNE'S *BLACK GIRL* (1966)

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### **Abstract**

*To explore the way in which colonial discourse still influences power relations, representation, and identity in a postcolonial situation, this paper analyzes the work of Ousmane Sembène's *Black Girl* (La Noire de..., 1966) based on the theoretical background of Edward Said Orientalism. Despite the fact that the political autonomy was the formalization of the colonial rule, the movie shows that colonial subjection continues to exist in the form of daily habits, language, and cultural subordinations. It is the story of a young Senegalese woman Diouana who moves to France where she hopes to find an economic stability and social mobility, but instead becomes racialized and exploited sexually and psychologically in a French family home. This paper applies a qualitative analysis design by conducting a systematic analysis of verbatim dialogues of the original film script translated into English to facilitate analysis. The coded conversations were named into themes to determine common themes in relation to the Western superiority, colonial power, racial othering, objectification, silencing, loss of identity, and resistance in NVivo. The results show that the marginalization that Diouana undergoes is not a personal phenomenon but a structural effect of Orientalist ideology that would turn the African subject into an inferior being of the passive and having a value only through the work. The analysis also shows how language, commands, and silences are all means of domination, which strengthens colonial power even in a post-independence environment. Finally, the paper suggests that *Black Girl* reveals the long-term effects of the colonial system by showing how the roles of Orientalist images in the creation of social relations and subjectivity are still valid. The tragic destiny of Diouana allows Sembène to criticize the postcolonial illusion of equality and presupposes the immediate necessity to revisit Western discourses that are silent and inhuman to the formerly colonized nations.*

**Keywords:** Orientalism; Postcolonial Cinema; Colonial Power; Silencing; Othering; Ousmane Sembène; *Black Girl* (1966).

### **Introduction**

The postcolonial film has become a significant tool of questioning the historical frameworks of colonial domination as bequeathed to them (Ponzanesi, 2018). Although the formal sovereignty of the former colonies signified the departure of the empire, the cultural, psychological, and financial impacts of the colonialism practice are still in effect to influence the relationship between the Global North and the global South (Grosfoguel, 2011). African cinema, specifically, has been instrumental in highlighting these remaining hierarchies through the anticipation of lived experiences of the once colonized subjects. *Black Girl* (La Noire de..., 1966) by Ousmane Sembène's (Filmes Vertes, 2020) is one of the most influential films in this tradition because it

provides a harsh and uncompromising depiction of postcolonial exploitation, labor that is racialized, and alienated culture.

*Black Girl* is an account of the journey of a young Senegalese woman, Diouana, who goes to France to stay with a family of French people with the hope that she will get some economic security and social position. Rather, she gets stuck in the domestic realm where she loses agency, becomes a servant and experiences racial humiliation and mental loneliness. The colonial legacy of power in colonial situations is revealed through her slow understanding of the fact that France is not a symbol of freedom but a symbol of freedom. By following the tragic story of Diouana, Sembène criticizes a false image of the postcolonial equality and shows the ways of how colonial relations still exist in everyday life, in the language and social norms (Ní Chreachain, 1998).

This paper will analyze *black girl* using the theory of Orientalism by Edward Said. Said believes that the non-Western world has been historically created by the West as inferior, passive and unable to represent itself (Said, 2009). Even though the concept Orientalism applied initially to the western depiction of the Middle East and Asian states, its theoretical implications can be applied to the African context. Diouana appears to be the Other in *Black Girl* as an exoticized, mute, and useful only to some degree, which is her labor as a manifestation of the Orientalist logic according to which the colonized subject is transformed into an object of domination instead of a speaking one.

Although the theme of migration, identity crisis, and racial discrimination has been examined in preceding studies of *Black Girl*, most of them are based on a descriptive analysis and have not systematically criticized the role of Orientalist discourse in the language and structure of the film (Agger et al., 2024). The gap that this research fills is in direct conversations that take place in the original film script and discussion of them as places where colonial power and representation are produced. The analysis of verbal directives, racial comments, silence, and internal monologues, through close reading, brings out the slow disappearance of subjectivity by Diouana.

This study aims to consider the ways *Black Girl* reveals the processes of Orientalism via colonial power, othering, objectification and silencing, and how some modes of resistance are created in the face of these restrictions. Through integrating the postcolonial theory with the qualitative discourse analysis by using NVIVO, the proposed study is expected to demonstrate that the suffering of Diouana is not a personal tragedy but an institutionalized outcome of colonial thought and to analyze the *Black Girl* (1966) by Ousmane Sembène's through the theoretical framework of Orientalism by Edward Said to discuss how colonial discourse creates the African subject in the postcolonial world based on the use of power, othering, and silencing (Alamu and Ololade, 2025). Finally, the movie is an effective reminder of the fact that even in the postcolonial world, identities, relationships, and power structures are still influenced by the legacies of colonialism.

### Research Questions

1. How does *Black Girl* reflect Edward Said's concept of Orientalism?
2. In what ways does colonial discourse silence and objectify Diouana?
3. How does the film represent resistance within a colonial framework?

### Theoretical Framework: Edward Said's Orientalism

Butz (1995) in his passage of Orientalism by Edward Said (1978) believes that the west has historically created the east as an Other in order to justify political domination and cultural superiority. Alghamdi (2020) argues that Orientalism is not just a set of stereotypes, but an organized body of knowledge according to which the Orient is irrational, passive, and unable to

represent himself. This discussion enables the west to place it as rational, modern and commanding.

Though the main focus of the Aboul-Ela (2020) analysis was focused on the Middle East and Asia, the Orientalism theoretical implication can be applied in Africa, especially in colonial and postcolonial representation. African subjects, as Oriental subjects, are depicted as childish, uncivilized, and reliant on Western instructions. In *Black Girl*, this subject is Diouana in its orientalized form where identity is made entirely by the Western perception and domination.

### **Literature Review**

*Black Girl (La Noire de..., 1966)* by (Filmes Verdes, 2020) by Ousmane Sembène takes a leading role in African and postcolonial cinema as the film often cited as the first African movie to achieve international attention. According to Langford (2001) and WALTERS (2016), the basic idea seems to be that in a consistent appreciation of the film as an effective critique of colonial and neocolonial organizations, the film can be seen especially in the way it deals with race, labor and cultural alienation.

### **Ousmane Sembène and Postcolonial African Cinema**

Generally, Ousmane Sembène is considered the father of African cinema because he pioneered in expressing the African views in a film (Murphy and Williams, 2019). Sembène was a novelist before he dealt with cinema, and his early novels dealt with class struggle and colonial exploitation. According to Scott (2007), he moved to film after realizing that he wanted to reach the African audience that was marginalized in the literature culture because of the colonial education system. This stance of accessibility influenced the filmmaking approach of Sembène, which considers simplicity, symbolism, and political activism in the first place.

Some of the critiques states that *Black Girl* was a turning point of colonial cinema, which frequently depicted Africans in a so-called exotic or infantile manner (Shohat and Stam, 1994). Rather, Sembène focuses on an African woman as the subject of the story, which is a challenge to Eurocentric narrative patterns (Orlando, 2006). This change has been broadly debated as an extreme form of cultural defiance, especially in the situation of the African post-independent countries in search of the control of the narrative.

### **Black Girl and Postcolonial Labor Relations**

*Black Girl* has been the subject of a large amount of scholarly work that analyzes it as a criticism of postcolonial labor exploitation. According to Landy (1996), the film can be viewed as an exposition of domestic labor neocolonialism where the French household replicates colonial relationships inside a domestic setting. This aspect of Diouana being a domestic servant can be regarded as the extension of the colonial master/slave dynamic under the pretense of the employment and an act of kindness (Filmes Verdes, 2020).

Luxton (2023) compares the situation of Diouana with the one of modern migrant domestic workers, especially the African and Ethiopian women who serve in Europe and the Gulf. Comparative approach will underline the timelessness of the film, meaning that the circumstances in the film *Black Girl* remain timeless and relevant to contemporary manifestations of global inequality. These studies place Diouana as a symbolic figure of transnational worker exploitation, but one that is based on the past of colonialism.

### **Identity Crisis and Cultural Alienation**

The other theme that is eminent in the literature is the identity crisis and cultural dislocation. Luxton (2023) can also be argued to have collapsed due to the failure of her European dream. First,

France is a symbol of modernity, prosperity, and social mobility, which is broken after Diouana finds out that she is only defined as a worker and a race. This experience is associated with the idea of internalized inferiority developed by Frantz Fanon when the colonized subject internalizes the values of the colonizer and, consequently, loses their human identity (Ifeakandu & Omonigho, 2025).

The same is highlighted by Dovey (2009), who points out the psychological isolation of Diouana, as she cannot speak fluent French, so her alienation is aggravated. Language is a tool of exclusion, which positions her as an outsider at the French home. These readings highlight the interplay of race, language and power in creating the postcolonial subject.

### **Orientalism and Representation of the Other**

A key method of interpreting the nature of representational relations in *Black Girl* is through the theory of Orientalism by Edward Said (Edwards, 2021). Though Said is mainly referring to the situation in the West in the description of the Middle East and Asia, it is believed that scholars can apply his findings to African situations as well (Shohat and Stam, 2014). In the definitions of this term given by Alamu and Ololade (2025), orientalism works by creating the non-Western subject as his/her object, inferior, irrational, and unable to represent himself/herself.

As a number of critics point out, Diouana is always designated by the eyes of her French masters who see her as exotic, childish and subservient (Nicholson, 2014). The African mask used in the film has received specific attention of the scholars. Though Diouana gives the mask as a gift in the light of cultural identity, the French family changes it into a decoration. This deed is interpreted by scholars as a metaphor of Orientalist appropriation when the non-Western culture is deprived of its meaning and degraded to aesthetic value (Sweet, 2017).

### **Gender, Race, and the Black Female Body**

Feminists have highlighted interplay between race and gender in *Black Girl*. The experience of Diouana echoes what most theorists describe as the two-fold marginalization of Black women in colonialist and patriarchal institutions (Aflihaou, 2022). According to Andrews and McClain (2022), Black women in movies are degraded with simplistic stereotypes that rely on being servants, sexual or silent (Armstrong, 2023). *Black Girl* plays with these tropes by prefiguring the interiority of Diouana with voice-over narration, despite how the narrative is proven to be oppressive of her voice.

The question of whether the subaltern can speak, like Spivak (1988) allows applying to the character of Diouana and especially in terms of her inability to write a letter herself or express her misery in the French home (Ashcroft et al., 2024). According to Calhoun (2020), the suicide of Diouana is the final sign of the failure of colonial institutions to acknowledge her as a human being, and it can be ethically questioned how the issues of representation and agency.

### **Methodology**

The current paper will adhere to the principles of qualitative research to interpret the *Black Girl* (1966) by Ousmane Sembène in the framework of the Orientalism theory as developed by Edward Said. It was viewed in its original French version in order to perceive the narrative of the movie, its tone, and its cultural background. The English subtitles were translated into a written version of the English script since the dialogues were in French so that the text material could be analyzed. This was an imported translated script to NVivo software to undergo systematic qualitative analysis. The conversations were coded with NVivo through creating thematic nodes and sub-nodes in which recurring patterns were made on the subject matter of colonial power, Western



superiority, racial othering, objectification, silencing, identity disillusionment, and resistance (See figure 1). The Orientalist discourse in the movie was tracked through the language and representation of each relevant line of dialogue by attaching them to the corresponding node. This process of coding made a systematic and systematic investigation of the ways in which colonial ideology is implicitly encoded within vernacular speech, orders and silences. NVivo aided in the organization of the analysis and decreased the subjectivity of interpretation because it allowed systematic categorization and comparison of themes throughout the film. On the whole, the given approach provided the presence of a clear relationship between the dialogues of the film and the theoretical concepts of Orientalism enabling a strict qualitative interpretation of the postcolonial power relations.

**Figure 1: NVivo coding framework showing thematic nodes and sub-nodes used for qualitative analysis of *Black Girl* (1966)**

○	ORIENTALISM	1	1
○	Western Superiority	1	3
○	Representation of the Other	1	2
○	COLONIAL POWER & AUTHORITY	1	1
○	Commands and Control	1	6
○	Economic Exploitation	1	7
○	OTHERING & RACIALIZATION	1	1
○	Racial Remarks	1	3
○	Cultural Difference	1	1
○	OBJECTIFICATION	0	0
○	Labor Objectification	1	3
○	Exoticization	1	2
○	SILENCING & VOICE	1	1
○	Verbal Silence	1	2
○	Internal Monologue	1	4

## Results and Discussion

The work on the analysis of the *Black Girl* (1966) assists in observing how the Orientalist discourse operates through the assistance of the common language, the power relations, and silence within the postcolonial setting. The concept of orientalism by Edward Said (2007) proves useful particularly in the process of explaining how the French characters define Africa and Diouana as inferior, passive, and dependent. The film demonstrates that the colonial rule has not ended in the political freedom but remains in the cultural representation and racial superiorities and subordination and economical domination culture. This section of the paper includes the analysis of the Orientalism in the superiority of the West, the colonial domination, racial othering, objectification, silencing, the identity disillusionment and the resistance based on the systematic analysis of conversations. A word cloud as an outcome of the coded conversations was drawn to present an overview of the existing discourse patterns in the film, and the imagery of the most frequent words related to work and control and space hierarchy were drawn (see Figure 1)

**Figure 2: Word cloud illustrating the most frequently occurring terms in the film dialogues, emphasizing themes of labor, authority, and Orientalist power relations in *Black Girl* (1966).**



The most noticeable characteristics of Orientalism in the movie are the clear East-West dichotomy, where France is constantly placed in the superior position, and Africa is deprived as backward and unsafe. This dichotomy captures the fact that the West has constructed itself in relation to the construction of the non-West (Said 1978). This ideology is internalized by Diouana at the beginning of the film when she says that France is a land of opportunity and development when she says, « *La France est bien!* » (“France is good!”). This is an expression of how the ideology of colonialism has already influenced the thinking of Diouana even prior to her arrival in France. The concept of who France is as good is not put into question and is sold out as something that cannot be argued with. This internalized orientalism is a depiction of the actions of colonial power at the psychological level, which make the colonized subject believe that the solution is in the west. According to Said (1978), Orientalism functions best in cases where the colonized believe that Western superiority is a natural consensus, and that is why Diouana is optimistic at the beginning.

The binary of East-West is also supported by the fact the French characters represent Africa as something that is chaotic and dangerous. This can be seen through the comment that one-character makes, which is, « *L’Afrique n’est pas sûre maintenant, avec toutes ces guerres civiles* » (“Africa isn’t safe now, with all these civil wars”). The dialogue recreates one of the most famous Orientalist stereotypes that eliminate the historical and political nuances of the world by making an entire continent a place of violence and instability. This discussion makes Africa a place of violence and chaos, which is a typical Orientalist cliché. Through such generalization, historical and political complexities are wiped out, and Africa is portrayed as an example of a nation that needs to be governed. According to Said (2007), the Orient is commonly characterized as being inherently unstable as a justification of the superiority of the West, and this type of line serves just that purpose. The French speaker puts France in a position where it is a safe and rational place as compared to the perceived anarchy in Africa.

The colonial power in *Black Girl* is established by ordinary orders that control the body and work of Diouana. When Madame tells her, « *Tourne-toi. Nous avons des invités. Fais du bon riz* » (“Turn around. We have guests. Make good rice”), Diouana is not given agency and becomes a machine. The lack of courtesy or reciprocation depicts the colonial masterservant relationship where the colonized subject is only in existence to satisfy the wishes of the West. This order deprives Diouana of agency, and makes her a functional object instead of a human one. She is not consulted

but told, and it is another aspect of the colonial master-servant relationship. According to Said (1978), Orientalist discourse deprives the colonized of subjectivity, leaving them with a role of showing what is wanted by the West. Diouana is therefore limited to being a servant and obedient. This loss of voice as it is best expressed by Diouana leads her to say, « *Ce n'est plus ma lettre... Ici, je suis une prisonnière* » (“This is no longer my letter... Here, I am a prisoner”). This scene is a representation of the total loss of her subjectivity since even communication with her mother is at the will of her employer. Orientalism, according to Said, (1978), represents the voices of the colonized, and permits the colonized to speak on their behalf, however, in the case of Diouana, this silence is a commanding feature of colonial rule (Spivak, 1988).

The economic exploitation becomes one of the most important aspects of Orientalism power in the movie *Black Girl*, where the work of Diouana is directly connected to her survival; she has no freedom of choice or bargaining. This abusive relationship comes out clearly when Madame tells her, « *Si tu ne travailles pas, tu ne mangeras pas* » (“If you don’t work, you won’t eat”). By using such a statement, the most fundamental human need is turned into a weapon against Diouana, which could be seen as an example of how economic dependence substitutes physical violence in the postcolonial setting. Instead of being directly brutal, the control is done through material deprivation, which strengthens the colonial hierarchies in the domestic space. Orientalism, as Edward Said describes, functions both at representation and at an institutional and material level and this instance evidences how the economic structures perpetuate domination of the colonized subject by making it entirely reliant on the colonizer (Said, 1978; Landy, 1996).

Racial othering also enhances the dehumanization of Diouana whose Blackness is turned into a spectacle in the French home on numerous occasions. This becomes clear especially when a visitor says, « *Je n'ai jamais embrassé une femme noire* » (“I’ve never kissed a Black woman”). The statement puts Diouana into racial otherness instead of appreciating her as a human being as she becomes an exotic figure of fascination. These are the unconscious comments that show how normalized racial objectification is in the social context of the movie. According to Said (1978), the Orientalist discourse often exoticizes the Other whereby the difference has become something that can be viewed, consumed or remarked upon but not to be comprehended in its own terms.

The process of cultural othering becomes even clearer when the fact of humanity in Diouana is directly negated with the usage of dehumanizing language. This is rudely brought out by the comment, « *Je suppose... par instinct. Comme les animaux* » (“I suppose... by instinct. Like animals”). Having compared Diouana to animals, this dialogue reflects the colonization ideologies that traditionally deprived colonized people of rationality and intellectual capabilities in order to be able to rule over them (Fanon, 1967). According to Said (1978), Orientalism tends to depict non-Western subjects as people who act on impulse as opposed to reason, and this scene is one of the most violent episodes of symbolic racism in the movie, which takes away the human dignity of Diouana.

The objectification can also be observed in those or other moments, which seem to admire Diouana on the surface but make her becoming a piece of labor solid. When Madame boasts, « *Notre cuisinière est excellente* » (“Our cook is excellent”), the only way Diouana can be valuable is in regard to her productivity. The compliment fails to address her as a human being but as an aspect that is working well in the home. The Orientalist representation tends to deprive the people in the role of serving the needs of the West to a point of individuality being eliminated in the name of

utility. The identity of Diouana is therefore limited to her act of a domestic worker which supports her subject of being an object and not a subject (Said, 1978).

This objectification and exclusion are also brought out further by the spatial confinement of Diouana. Her increased consciousness of her limited life is summarized as she thinks, « *La France ici, c'est la cuisine, la salle de bain, la chambre* » (“France here is the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedroom”). This is a wake-up call to the extent to which her experience of France is confined to the domestic realm, depriving her of the rest of the social world. Said notices that Orient is commonly perceived as a closed and restricted place, and the physical limitation of Diouana reflects her social limitation, which supports her status as an outsider in the French society (Said, 1978).

The theme of silencing is at the centre of reinforcing the dominance of the Orientalists in the movie. The fact that Diouana does not speak French fluently and that she is illiterate does not allow her to speak out her suffering or to have the power to control and shape her own story. The fact that she loses her voice is excruciatingly evident as she cogitates, « *Ce n'est plus ma lettre... Ici, je suis une prisonnière* » (“This is no longer my letter... Here, I am a prisoner”). Even the way she communicates with her mother is mediated and controlled by her employer and represents the absolute destruction of her subjectivity. According to Said, Orientalism represents the voicelessness of the colonized and does not enable them to express their voices and Diouana being forced to remain silent is the perfect example of this domination process.

As the movie unfolds, Diouana then feels an immense identity disillusionment as the illusion of postcolonial mobility falls. This wake-up call is expressed as she confesses « *Je pensais venir vivre, mais je suis venue devenir une esclave* » (“I thought I came to live, but I came to become a slave”). This line represents the crushing realization that migration was not the source of freedom but only led to another kind of slavery. The theory developed by Said can be used to understand how colonial discourse is used to promise development and growth and at the same time recreate exploitation and subjugation.

Although she is marginalized, the film has small instances of resistance, but the resistance is limited and ends up tragic. The effort of Diouana to revive her cultural personality is symbolically represented when she tells, « *Ce masque est à moi* » (“This mask is mine”). Diouana recovers a part of her identity and cultural heritage by establishing her ownership of the mask the French family had turned into a decorative object. Though she ends her protest with suicide, this climax is a denial of further living as an object of colonial domination. Her death is then used as a strong condemnation of the Orientalist formations which make meaningful resistance almost impossible. Altogether, the data analysis proves that *Black Girl* potently reflects Edward Said Orientalism with words, relations of power and representational practices. The movie reveals that colonial ideology has continued to be felt in the postcolonial contexts, which determine identities, relations, and subjectivities in subtle but profoundly rooted processes of domination. The tragedy of Diouana is not purely a personal failure but is systemic in its nature as the Orientalist system still isolates people once colonized.

### Conclusion

In this paper, it is possible to conclude that the *Black Girl* by Ousmane Sembène is a very cinematic critique of the concept of Orientalism and its presence through the ages in the postcolonial societies. Using the character of Diouana, the movie shows the way in which colonial power remains in the post-political independence era and this takes place through linguistic, racial,



economic and cultural forms of control. This analysis shows that the oppression of Diouana is created by the daily context of interactions which objectify her as a house-help, mute as a speaking subject and racialized Other. These pieces of evidence can be well related to the argument made by Edward Said that Orientalism creates non-Western subjects as inferior and unable to represent themselves. The mood of the psychological cost of the prolonged colonial domination is highlighted by Diouana realizing her imprisonment eventually and by the fact that this is the point at which she finally resists. Her misery is the representative one of the former colonized subjects, the subjects whose identity is disjointed by ongoing exclusionary and dehumanizing systems. So, *Black Girl* cannot be viewed only as a personal narrative of oppression but as a critique of postcolonial inequality. Further studies can build on this discussion by comparing *Black Girl* with modern films that deal with the topic of migrant labor and racialized domestic work in order to understand how the power of colonialism can persist in modern global contexts. Also, further research can take into consideration feminist and intersectional consideration to understand the dynamics of race, gender, and class to construct postcolonial subjectivity. This type of research would further investigate the effects of colonial legacies on cultural representations and social relations that can be still seen in the modern world.

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