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The Female Immigrant Experience in *La Préférence Nationale* and “La noire de....”

The film “La noire de....”¹ (1966) and the novel *La Préférence Nationale* (2001) are both stories of young Senegalese women who come to France for the first time. Satou, the protagonist in *La Préférence Nationale* written by Fatou Diome, is a highly educated woman. Diouana, the main character in the film “La noire de....” written and directed by Ousmane Sembene, is illiterate. In both the film and literary representation of the immigrant experience, social milieu in Senegal does not change the fate of the women once they are in France. Both Satou and Diouana face discrimination in employment, their mastery of the French language is questioned, and they are considered the "Other." Regardless of their different social status and historical period, the characters Satou and Diouana have extremely similar experiences when they leave Dakar for France. Both women are miserable and alienated in France, they work as maids, are abused by their employers, experience racism, and are regarded as "symbols" of Africa.

In the book *Peau noire, masques blancs*², Frantz Fanon describes and analyzes the racial dynamics of the colonial experience. Fanon states that race exists only in relation to other races. "White" is defined by its assumed opposite, "Black" and one does not exist without the other. When someone comes into contact with someone of another race, their own race becomes important. This racial difference, and the way a person is treated as a result of the difference, cause alienation and the creation of "the Other". For Satou and Diouana, race does not come into

¹ Film titled “Black Girl” in English

² *Black Skin, White Masks* in English

their consciousness until they leave Senegal for France. It is in France, where their racial difference takes on a meaning, that both women begin to feel the alienation described by Fanon.

Satou is a highly educated woman but when she moves to France, she is forced to work as a maid for a French family. Satou is treated very badly by her employers and is resentful that she cannot find other work. Satou sees hypocrisy in what the French require of their maids and nannies: “Il faut dire que les gens qui cherchent des baby-sitters s’y prennent parfois comme s’ils recruteraient pour la NASA. En fait, pour toucher le cul de leurs charmantes têtes blondes, il faut avoir toutes les qualités imaginables, un sac de diplômes et être suffisamment pauvre pour accepter un salaire de misère” (Diome 68). The employers expect their maids and babysitters to be extremely over qualified yet pay them badly and treat them as if they were completely uneducated. They take advantage of the fact that the women have no other opportunities. Women like Satou have no options, they cannot find jobs anywhere else and they are taken advantage of because of this situation.

Later in the novel, Satou responds to an ad requesting private language classes for a child. She meets the mother at a café with the hopes of finding a better employment opportunity than working as a maid. But, when the mother sees that Satou is neither French nor White, she says: "Je veux une personne de type européen Je ne veux pas qu'on me bousille l'éducation de mon enfant" (Diome 91). In this situation, Satou's education and qualifications do not matter. She is not considered for the job because she is Black. Throughout the novel, Satou experiences this kind of racism in France.

At her job, in the home of a French family, Satou is continually disrespected and treated poorly. Satou is not treated as a human being by her employers, in this passage, she describes how the husband refers to her: “C’était donc ça. C’est pour cela qu’on me regardait comme ça. Je

n'étais pas moi avec mon prénom, ni madame, ni mademoiselle, mais *ça*. J'étais donc *ça* et *l'autre*" (Diome 67). The husband has absolutely no regard for her and hardly acknowledges her existence. Satou comments on the abusive relationship: "La relation entre employeur et employé n'est pas personne à personne, mais de ventre à pain" (Diome 103). This analogy indicates that Satou feels consumed by her employer, she is being sucked dry because she is forced to work in an extremely unpleasant situation.

When Satou and her employer meet for the first time, Madame says to her: "Ah, je ne m'étais pas trompée, à ton petit accent au telephone, j'ai compris que tu étais africaine, mais c'est mignon!" (Diome 64). This exclamation is condescending and insulting to Satou. And even though Satou speaks perfect French, at times better than her employers, her language skills are judged because she is not French: "From the exaggerated simplification of language (return to "petit nègre" speak) to tutoiement, to the lack of respect and the type of work granted or kept from the narrator, Diome details the daily manifestations of racism for the visible foreigner" (Cazenave 81). The idea of "visible foreigner," that is so say, someone obviously not French (i.e. not White), is a reoccurring theme in the novel.

In a symbolic act, the wife gives Satou an old dress: "Un jour, elle me donna une robe devenue trop serrée pour elle. Je n'en voulais pas, elle était moche et datait au moins des années soixante-dix" (Diome 73). This shows the employers not only do not respect Satou, but also they see her as only worthy of their cast offs. This racism is ingrained in the wife:

Pour madame Dupont, africain est synonyme d'ignorance et de soumission.

Monsieur saurait maintenant que faire avec ça: une bonne-à-tout-faire. Je me dis que c'est sans doute pourquoi, dans ce pays, même les métiers ont des visages.

Surtout les plus mal payés. Quand vous entendez un marteau-piqueur, inutile de

vous retourner, c'est à cou sûr un noir, un turc, un arabe, en tout cas un étranger, qui tient la manette. Quant au bruit des aspirateurs, il signale presque toujours la présence d'une Africaine, d'une Portugaise ou d'une Asiatique (Diome 70).

Satou comments on the role immigrants are forced to play in France. They have no options for employment other than low paying jobs of service. She, like other immigrants, feels marginalized in France.

Satou, a highly educated and intelligent woman, feels degraded by her employment as a maid. She is victim of what Franz Fanon calls intellectual alienation: "l'aliénation intellectuelle est une création de la société bourgeoise. Et j'appelle société bourgeoise toute société qui se sclérose dans des formes déterminées, interdisant toute évolution, toute marche, tout progrès, toute découverte. J'appelle société bourgeoise une société close où il ne fait pas bon vivre, où l'air est pourri, les idées et les gens en putrefaction" (Fanon 182). Satou experiences this same close-minded, insular and limiting society in France. She cannot be respected in an academic setting because of her race.

Satou is an outsider in France and the color of her skin is all people notice. This attention to race makes Satou want to be invisible: "Dans la rue, je marchais vite, mais j'avais l'impression que les gens me regardaient plus que d'habitude. Soudain, j'eus envie d'être invisible" (Diome 63). Her color is everything in France: "Le visage, réceptacle de gènes et de culture, une carte d'immatriculation racial et ethnique. Voilà donc pourquoi on me regardait tant: l'Afrique tout entière, avec ses attributs vrais ou imaginaires, s'était engouffrée en moi, et mon visage n'était plus le mien mais son hublot sur l'Europe" (Diome 63). She is just seen as the "Other" and her race is her defining feature. Satou is seen as a representative of "Africa," a vast and diverse continent: "The profile of the non-European immigrant is reduced to a mix of

various stereotypes, anchored in the collective French imagination” (Cazenave 31). Satou is not seen as having any identity outside of her race.

Satou feels like people judge her and expect certain things from her because of her race, and she ends up acting the role: “Pour situer le ridicule de ses manières j’hésiterais entre le mauvais clown et la danseuse maldroite” (Diome 65). Satou characterizes the imposed role of the African as “le mauvais clown et la danseuse maldroite” and also compares the French treatment of animals and foreigners: “J’ai fini par prendre conscience que, dans ce pays, il y a la SPA pour les animaux abandonnées par leurs maîtres, mais rien pour les étrangères que des Françaises ont livrées à la misère. En fait, alors qu’on me refuse la nationalité, mon chat sénégalais, lui, a ses papiers français. C’est peut-être parce qu’il a le poil roux” (Diome 84). In this comic, yet tragic, anecdote, Satou shows that she feels as if the French would be more accepting of her cat than of her. Again, Satou struggles with the fact that color is a defining feature in France.

Satou believes there is only one way to enter French society: marry a French man. And yet this too is complicated: “Si vous êtes marié à un ou une Française, nous dit-il, il vous faudra deux années de baise pour capter l’odeur française, la nationalité. Pour les femmes africaines mariées à des Français, les chances de naturalization augmentent proportionnellement à l’élasticité de leur uterus, où poussent des foetus français qui ignorant la préférence nationale” (Diome 83). Entrance into French society is conditional; one has to meet the correct requirements. Historically, this has been the experience of many Blacks trying to make their way in France. In the book, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Franz Fanon says very simply: “En Europe, c’est-à-dire dans tout les pays civilizes et civilisateurs, le nègre symbolize le péché. L’archétype des valeurs inférieurs est représenté par le nègre” (Fanon 153). It is this mentality that Satou encounters in France and prevents her from being accepted into society.

In *La Préférence Nationale*, Diome paints a grim picture of life in France for the postcolonial woman. She is critical of French society because it is judgmental and racist towards immigrants of other races: “In the case of Diome, one of the first Twenty-First Century Senegalese writers on the issue of migration, the idea of *acculturation* seems to have given way to a desire to avoid the host culture, whilst continuing to build and change the ‘home’ culture from within, and with a fiercely critical eye” (Hogarth 81). The novel portrays the need for change in a society increasingly confronted by the issues of immigration.

In the film “La noire de...”, Diouana leaves Senegal to work as a nanny for a French family. The film follows the tragic journey of Diouana from Dakar to her self-inflicted end in France. Diouana goes through four stages in the film: excitement, realization, disillusionment and despair. Diouana is almost crazy with excitement when she gets the job as nanny. She says again and again: “J’ai du travail chez les blancs!” et “J’ai trouvé du travail!” Diouana is overjoyed and says “J’étais toute contente!” She has had trouble finding work and is ecstatic when she is chosen to work for the White family. After being hired, Diouana buys her employers a gift: a traditional African mask. The mask “represents the connection between Diouana and her employers, as well as their inevitable lack of connection” (Hamid). At first the viewer does not know the importance or symbolism of the mask, but as the story unfolds, the mask becomes increasingly important.

Diouana does not speak French and is uneducated, she cannot read or write. She is so excited to leave for France yet only has a romantic vision of the country:

The illiterate Diouana has no knowledge of France apart from that gained in the alluring verbal reports of French women and the glossy pictures of an *Elle* magazine, bought by her boyfriend on one of their outings in Dakar. Her image of

life in France springs entirely from these commodified representations of women. Slowly, she begins to erect a self-image based on them. She expects that, when in France, her wages will allow her to buy elegant clothes in beautiful shops; the *Elle* women in bathing suits lead her to imagine her own picture taken on the beach and sent to Dakar, where ‘they will be envious (Spaas 177).

Diouana has a naïve vision of France as a paradise of beaches and high culture: “there is a version of “La Noire de . . . “ (generally not seen), which contains a ten-minute sequence in color showing her trip from Marseilles, where she docks, to Antibes, and conveying her first sensations of France, as beautiful, as magnificent. This sequence was omitted when the film was first shown” (Pallister 77). Her initial vision of France, and excitement for travel, make the reality of her actual situation even more difficult for her to handle.

When Diouana arrives in France, she quickly realizes that her life is not how she imagined it would be. She enters the small apartment in France and sees “the mask hanging alone on a white wall, forlorn, separated from its companions in the African house. Like Diouana, it is isolated and out of context” (Hamid). The mask hanging on the wall, out of place, mirrors Diouana’s experience. She is alone and in a completely foreign environment.

After some time passes, Diouana understands that her life in France is confined to the small apartment, not the beach or fancy stores. This causes her to enter a stage of disillusionment. She feels deceived. She realizes she is not there as a nanny, but as a “bonne à tous faire.” She says, multiple times, with desperation: “Où sont les enfants?”

Diouana arrives wearing a stylish black and white dress and high heels. She continues to wear this for what seems to be several weeks. Finally, Madame tells Diouana to change her clothes because she “is not going to a party.” Madame gives Diouana some of her old clothes and

shoes to wear around the house. Madame is putting Diouana “in her place” and demonstrating her own power by demanding she change her clothes. Diouana’s changing from her stylish dress to work clothing is one of the first signs the viewer has that Diouana’s reality is much different than she expected.

Diouana begins to realize that she has been misled by her employer during a dinner scene. She is expected to do everything around the house, including waiting on guests: “the whites treat her African cooking like an exotic if not primitive curiosity and speak of her as if she were a token savage enrages her: it is one of the memorable scenes of the film. They talk about her in her presence, as if she were an animal who didn't understand. Then, one of the condescending guests is compelled to jump up and kiss her, "fatuously saying he has never kissed a Negro woman before” (Pallister 78). This scene also highlights how Diouana is a symbol of Africa. The male dinner guest wants to kiss the “Other” because she is exotic and different. The man would never treat a French woman that way, yet deems it appropriate to get up from the table and kiss Diouana without her permission.

Diouana works all day, cooking and cleaning and has no chance to leave the house other than to buy food for the family. She says: “La France est la cuisine, la sale de bain et ma chambre à coucher.” Diouana is alone in a country in which she does not speak the language. She has no way to escape, she says: “Je suis seule.” This simple statement is powerful because Diouana speaks very rarely in the film. In the house she says only, “Oui, Madame” et “Oui, Monsieur.” Her limited speech conveys her desperate situation.

Diouana is not completely passive when faced by her employers’ abuse: “In the film as in the story, Diouana grows more and more hostile and resentful of her patronizing and overbearing mistress and the obtuse husband, both of whom are representatives of the colonial mentality”

(Pallister 78). She is showing them she is unhappy, yet Madame's only response is that Diouana is ungrateful and useless. Diouana also shows her anger through the mask:

As a final act of defiance, Diouana takes back the mask. She fights with Madame over it; they both hold onto it and spin around, tugging at it. The camera is placed above the mask so that we see the two women spinning around with grotesque expressions of anger. In the process, they wear masks of their colonial roles as the cruel oppressor and the outraged oppressed.....for Diouana it is a piece of home that she gave away as an appreciative equal, happy to work but expecting respect and pay (Hamid).

By taking the mask back, Diouana shows that she will not be abused and taken advantage of by her employers. She will not let them take her identity and trivialize it as a souvenir hanging on the wall.

The trauma of realizing her situation causes Diouana to question her own identity and the reason she is in France. She says, "Qu'est-ce que je suis ici?" This same question is brought up in the title: "The French title, *La noire de.....* contains an ambiguity which is lost in the English title, *Black Girl*. The suspension after the proposition *de* leaves unspecified whether the word means "from," that is so say, coming from a specific place, or the possessive *of*, indicating that the black girl is someone's property. The syntactic device evokes both meanings in French. The anonymity of the title strips the girl of every possible attribute of identity, other than being black" (Spaas 177). Diouana does not seem to know who she is in France, away from her family and friends. She has no connects with anyone and is completely alienated.

The title can also be interpreted as a way of universalizing the story. It allows viewers to relate to Diouana and her emotions of alienation: "The universalizing of the theme through the

namelessness of the titles-which thereby cannot fail to touch the hearts of black viewers and assist them in making an identification with the protagonist-is not surprising, of course, in view of the fact that Sembene Ousmane uses film as the best vehicle for conveying his ideas to the people (especially for those who cannot read). The title allows for spectator identification” (Pallister 80). Regardless of interpretation, the title of the film underscores the central theme of race in the film.

Diouana is not only isolated because she knows no one in France, but she also has no way of communicating with her family in Dakar: “In the film, her employers read a letter her mother is alleged to have written to her, complaining of her selfishness and asking for money. Diouana doubts the authenticity of this letter, and, later when her employer tries to give money to her mother, the mother refuses it, thus validating Diouana's suspicions. But in either case-both in story and in film-, her alienation comes not only from race and social class, but from her illiteracy and her linguistic ineptitude-in French, at least” (Pallister 79). Being uneducated, in a country in which education is very highly valued, is yet another way Diouana feels separated from humanity.

The feeling of alienation has serious psychological implications for Diouana. This alienation, or sense of being “the Other” in a society is very dangerous: “La nonvalorisation affective amène toujours l’abandonnique à un sentiment extrêmement pénible et obsédant d’exclusion de n’avoir nulle part se place, d’être de trop partout affectivement parlant....Etre ‘Autre,’ c’est se sentir toujours en position instable, demeurer sur le quivive, prêt à être répudié et....faisant inconsciemment tout ce qu’il faut pour que la catastrophe prévue se produise” (Fanon 61). This kind of stress, instability and pressure lead to Diouana’s ultimate death.

In the end, Diouana commits suicide in the bathtub of her employers: “Her throat slit, Diouana swims in her own blood. Shortly afterward, the tub is shown quite white and spotless again. The symbolism is obvious. All trace of that black body and its blood has been obliterated” (Pallister 76). Diouana’s employers erase her existence and she is reduced to an article in a newspaper. In a symbolic scene, the camera shoots the beach of the French Riviera and then to an article about Diouana’s death. This image refers one of Diouana’s fantasies about France. She imagines she will have her picture taken on the beach, send it home and then everyone back in Dakar would be jealous.

The viewer then sees the couple prepare Diouana’s belongings to be taken back to Dakar: “When Monsieur returns the mask to the Senegalese boy who was its original owner, it underlines the separation between the colonizer and the formerly colonized. Monsieur wears sunglasses to hide his face and his fear as he walks through the streets of Dakar; he dons a mask of rather unconvincing Western confidence” (Hamid). The symbol of the mask represents the complicated issue of the African identity. What does it mean to be an African in France? For Diouana, it was the life of a slave. This is still an issue in contemporary France, as can be seen in *La Préférence Nationale* as well as through the experiences of other postcolonial women in France.

Maryse Condé is an interesting case of a francophone woman coming to France. Although her situation is very different from the two previously discussed women, Condé experiences the same feeling of being the “Other.” Condé, like Satou and Diouana, experiences feelings of alienation while in France. Condé understands the feeling of being an outsider in France: “Césaire et Condé feront à Paris l’expérience de leur étrangeté, de leur aliénation, d’un exil négatif par rapport à une communauté métropolitaine qui les exclut sans qu’ils sachent

vraiment où placer leur loyauté, leur appartenance, leur retour. En France, ‘la première découverte que je fais,’ dit Maryse Condé, ‘c’est que je ne suis pas française’” (Rosello 97). This realization, that she is not French and never will be, manifests itself in many ways.

Condé comes from an educated middle class family in Guadeloupe. In the beginning of the novel, before arriving in France, Condé struggles with the idea that her parents are alienated. Her older brother uses this word to describe their parents and it confuses the young Condé. She comes up with her own definition of the word: “Une personne aliénée est une personne qui cherche à être ce qu’elle ne peut pas être parce qu’elle n’aime pas être ce qu’elle est” (Condé 16). And as it turns out, her parents *are*, in a way, alienated. They have very high regard for France and their children are only allowed to speak French, not Creole, at home. When talking about her parents, Condé says: “Comme ma mère, il était convaincu que seule la culture occidentale vaut la peine d’exister et il se montrait reconnaissant envers la France qui leur avait permis de l’obtenir” (Condé 18). Once in France, Condé experiences alienation, but in a very different way than her parents.

Condé arrives in France at a younger age than Satou and Diouana, she is still in high school. Condé describes her arrival in France with ambivalence, she arrives: “Sans enthousiasme. Sans déplaisir non plus. Avec indifférence. Une vieille connaissance” (Condé 137). Condé is sent to France by her parents to attend school. Because she is so young, Condé misses her family: “Je me réveillais de sommeils fiévreux espérant que j’allais me retrouver serrée contre sa poitrine. Je lui écrivais chaque jour des pages et des pages, la suppliant de me pardonner ma mauvaise conduite de récentes années et lui repentant combien je l’aimais” (Condé 138). In France, Condé is forced to grow up because it the first time she has been separated from her parents.

In her high school in Paris, Condé notices the differences between her classmates and herself. Most of her classmates were mulattos from Martinique, she observes: "...j'étais la seule à porter peau noire et cheveux crépus" (Condé 137). Her physical appearance suddenly becomes important because she looks different than her peers. She is also regarded as different by her teachers at school. When talking about her professors at high school, she says "leur attitude signifiait que cette petite Guadeloupéenne n'était pas à sa place ici, pas une candidate pour les grandes écoles" (Condé 141). Already, in high school, Condé notices she does not have the same opportunities as her peers.

Unlike Satou and Diouana, Condé does not work in France, she attends school. And yet, this experience is equally alienating. Condé does not feel comfortable at university: "...Je rejoins la Sorbonne comme un prisonnier touché à la terre de son éviction. Je me coulais, anonyme et radieuse, dans ses amphithéâtres surpeuplés" (Condé 147). She is an unenthusiastic student. And, like Satou and Diouana, Condé is faced by the preconceived notions of the French because of her race. She says: "...j'avais à chaque fois conscience d'avoir tenu le rôle de la négresse à talents. Non, je ne sortais pas d'un champ de cannes. Oui, mes parents étaient des notables. Oui, j'avais parlé le français dans ma famille" (Condé 143). It seems Condé does not have the energy to counter the predetermined ideas of the French about her identity. She is continually asked the same questions about her social status, her parents, her language, that she is resigned to answering without a fight. She takes on the role of "la négresse" because it is too difficult to challenge.

The experiences of Satou, Diouana and Condé highlight the similarities in the immigration narrative of francophone women in Paris. The female characters in these literary and cinematic representations experience similar situations and emotions, even though they come

from diverse backgrounds and time periods. The expression of racial alienation found in each story is complicated by the gender roles and expectations associated with being a Black woman in France.

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