

**A Comparative Study on the Proletarian Condition
in Sembène Ousmane's *Le docker noir* and
Claire Etcherelli's *Élise ou la vraie vie***

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මේ පර්යේෂණ ලිපියේ අරමුණ වන්නේ සෙම්බේන් උස්මාන්ගේ *Le docker noir* - 1956 (Black docker) හා ක්ලෙයාර් එටිෂෙරෙලීගේ *Élise ou la vraie vie* - 1967 (Elise or the real life) යන නවකතාවල දැක්වෙන කම්කරු පංතියේ ජීවන තත්ත්වය පිළිබඳ තුල්‍යාත්මක අධ්‍යයනයක් කිරීම යි. එටිෂෙරෙලීගේ නවකතාවේ එලීස් ලෙටැලියර් (Élise Letellier) හා උස්මාන්ගේ නවකතාවේ දියවි ෆල්ලා (Diaw Fall) යන කතානායකයන්ගේ ජීවිත පිළිබඳ සමීප ව අධ්‍යයනය කර, ප්‍රංශයේ වර්ගවාදය නිසා දුක් විඳින කම්කරුවා පිළිබඳ ඒ ඔස්සේ අවධානය යොමු කෙරේ. මේ අධ්‍යයනයට ඇතුළත් කරුණු වන්නේ ජාතිහේදවාදය, පංති අරගලය හා කම්කරු පන්තියේ පීඩනය පිළිබඳ පාලක පංතියේ පවත්නා උපේක්ෂා සහගතභාවය ය. නවකතා ද්වයයේ එන කතානායකයන්ගේ ජීවිත බේදනීය තත්ත්වයට පත් වීමට මූලික හේතුව වී ඇත්තේ ඔවුන් අයත් සමාජ ස්තරයට උරුම අසාධාරණය යි.

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සංස්. ජයමල් ද සිල්වා, දිල්ශාන් මනෝජී රාජපක්ෂ, දුලන්කා ලංසකාර,
දිනේෂ් සඳරුවන්

'ප්‍රභා' ශාස්ත්‍රීය සංග්‍රහය, තුන් වැනි කලාපය - 2013/2014

මානවශාස්ත්‍ර පීඨය, කැලණිය විශ්වවිද්‍යාලය

« Ils marchaient à pas lourds, rompus par la fatigue, les échine courbées ; il émanait d’eux une odeur moite de sueur. »¹
(They walked with heavy feet, bent and broken with fatigue, a moist smell of sweat spewed from them)

The above citation taken from Sembène Ousmane’s novel *Le docker noir* (1956) denotes a negative connotation on the proletarian condition in France as it portrays the plight of the proletariat in a precise manner. *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (1971) defines proletariat as “the laboring class: wage earners; *specif*: the industrial workers. (...) in Marxist doctrine: the class of wage earners who lack their own means of production and hence sell their labor to live” (p. 1814). The objective of this research is to present a comparative study on the proletarian condition in France depicted in Sembène Ousmane’s *Le docker noir* (Black docker) appeared in 1956 and Claire Etcherelli’s *Élise ou la vraie vie* (Élise or the real life) in 1967. The researcher examines the lives of the protagonists: Élise Letellier’s in Etcherelli’s novel and Diaw Falla’s in Ousmane’s novel in order to portray the misery and the suffering of the working class during the period of French colonization in the African countries in the years 50 s and 60 s in France.

Sembène Ousmane is a Senegalese, born in 1923 in Ziguinchor in Casamance in rural Senegal. He is a writer, actor and a film director. In 1947, Ousmane goes to France in search of opportunities where he worked in many factories and then on the docks in Marseille.² *Le docker noir* (1956) is his first novel published in French language.³ Muriel Ijere in his article *Victime et Bourreau: l’Africain de Sembène Ousmane* (1983) states that *Le docker noir* narrates the author’s life experience working as a dockworker on a ship during his youth in France. Ousmane died in 2007 by the age of 84. His novels such as *Ô Pays, mon beau*

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peuple! (1957), *les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* (1960), *Xala* (1973) and some of his films such as *la Noire de...* (1966) *Ceddo* (1977) and *Moolaadé* (2004) prove his success in literary and film career.⁴ The French writer Claire Etcherelli was born in 1934 in Bordeaux, France. During her youth she went to Paris and worked in the production line in an automobile factory for two years in order to earn a living.⁵ *Élise ou la vraie vie* (1967) is her first novel that wins the Femina Prize in 1967.⁶ The article *premières journées en usine* (2005) states that Etcherelli in *Élise ou la vraie vie* narrates her personal experience working as a factory worker in Paris.⁷ In fact, Etcherelli reveals that everything in this novel about racism and problems of the Algerians are real and that she wrote what she knew.⁸ Some of her other novels are *À propos de Clémence* (About Clemence) published in 1971 and *Un arbre voyageur* (A traveler tree) published in 1978.⁹ Thus it's evident that Ousmane in *Le docker noir* and Etcherelli in *Élise ou la vraie vie* in their novels narrate an authentic experience of their lives.

This research article portrays how racial oppression in France in the years 50 s and 60 s causes misery and suffering to the lives of the proletarians. Furthermore, this study examines racism, the conflict between the superior race and inferior race and the indifference of the masters towards proletarians.

Ousman's *Le docker noir* (1956) is based on the life of a Senegalese named Diaw Falla, « le docker noir » the black docker who works on the docks in Marseille. Diaw arrives to Marseille with an aspiration of becoming a writer by publishing a novel that he has written in French language. In Paris he meets a French woman who promises to publish his book for him. However, she publishes his novel under her name. The book wins an award and it becomes a success. When Diaw discovers the truth he kills her in a fight. The murder leads to a trial and finally Diaw was found guilty

and was sentenced to hard labor in prison for perpetuity. Etcherelli’s *Élise ou la vraie vie* (1967) narrates the life of Élise Letellier, a provincial young French woman from Bordeaux who arrives to Paris in search of opportunities amidst Algerian war and racial prejudice. She works in an automobile factory in the production-line for nine months. Élise begins an affair with an Algerian worker named Arezki but it ends in tragedy as Arezki was arrested by the French police and Élise returns to Province to live with her grandmother.

Firstly, the protagonists of the novels: in *Le docker noir* (1956) Ousmane presents the young Senegalese named Diaw Falla as the protagonist of the novel. The precarious existence of Diaw in a small hotel room, working as a docker in a port in Marseille is depicted in a vivid manner. For example, Ousmane describes Diaw’s accommodation; « un lit en fer » (the steel bed), « le lavabo » (the sink) and « le bidet » (the bidet), « un armoire » (a closet), « un rechaud à pétrole recouvert de poussière » (a dirty oil stove), few chairs and a table are all in the same narrow room¹⁰ indicates the deplorable living condition of the proletarians. The worker’s claustrophobic accommodation is described by its unhealthiness and lack of comfort. Thus, the abject poverty has reduced them to the level of destitute. Then, in Etcherelli’s *Élise ou la vraie vie* (1967) the protagonist Élise Letellier belongs to the proletariat like Diaw because of poverty. The young woman from Bordeaux comes to Paris and works in a factory for nine months. Through Élise’s perspective the author presents the mode of luxury that is provided for the proletarians. During her stay in Paris Élise lives in a room; « au Foyer de la Femme » at the women’s club. She describes her room; « (...) chambre à deux lits, séparés par un lourd rideau. Un casier, une patère, un lavabo, une fenêtre sur la rue. Trois mille francs par mois ». ¹¹ (twin bedroom, separated from a heavy curtain.

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A locker, a coat-peg, a sink, a window onto the street. Three thousand francs per month). In contrast with Diaw's room, Élise's room is in a better condition; as Élise says « tout cela me parut très bien, presque luxueux »¹² (everything appeared fine to me, almost luxurious). However, it's evident that the objects that occupy her room are the basic needs of a person. Élise finds her room luxurious which indicates that the proletarians are accustomed to live without basic facilities. Thus, the precariousness of the lives of the proletarians is evident.

Secondly, in both novels the authors reveal the superiority of the Whites and the inferiority of the immigrant proletarians in an effective manner. In Ousmane's novel one could observe the prejudice of the French towards the Africans. The racial oppression in France affects the lives of the inferior race. Muriel Ijere (1983) states that Ousmane in his novel presents the Africans who are perturbed by racial prejudice in France and in Africa (p. 01). Furthermore, Ijere (1983) affirms that an African proletarian is exploited by his/her French master and is also rejected by the native people who serve for their masters. For example, in *Le dockeur noir* (1956) the African state employee who works for the Whites in Africa, accuses Diaw as the murderer of the French woman and affirms that Diaw is engaged in illegal activities in France. He says this to a group of natives of Yoff; « pour des types comme lui, les lois doivent frapper dur »¹³ (the law should be severe for men like them). It indicates that the civil employee who belongs to the African bourgeois is critical of his own race. His indifference regarding Diaw's situation suggests the superior attitude of the African bourgeois towards the African proletarians. Even though Diaw is an African he is rejected by the people of his race because of his social status. According to Ijere (1983) Ousmane not only criticises the Whites but also the Blacks who behave like Europeans as he

confirms that the origin of racism is capitalism (p. 01). Thus, the Blacks who are considered as the inferior race suffer injustice in the hands of the Whites, the superior race. The immigrant proletarian is oppressed, powerless and is treated as an inferior in France and in their native country. In *Élise ou la vraie vie* (1967) one observes the attitude of the inferior race, the Algerians towards the superior race, the Whites. In the factory, majority of the workers are immigrants. Thus, Élise feels the hostility of the immigrant workers; « c’était amer, froid, décourageant, ces contacts sans suite, ces phrases jettées au hasard, ces sympathies mort-nés ».¹⁴ (it’s harsh, cold, discouraging, these vague contacts, these random phrases, these vain sympathies.) reveals the prejudice of the Algerians towards the French. Although Élise belong to the proletariat, she is rejected by the immigrant workers in the factory because of the superiority of her race. Thus, Élise feels isolated; « ma solitude était grande et je la ressentais intensément ».¹⁵ (my loneliness was great and I felt it intensely.) indicates the pathetic plight of the French proletarians amidst racial oppression in the years 60 s in France. Thus, it’s evident that in both novels the authors present the racial conflict of the superior race and the inferior race in an effective manner.

Furthermore, it’s important to examine how racism affects the lives of the proletarians. *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1996) defines racism as “the belief that people’s qualities are influenced by their race and that the members of other races are not as good as the members of your own, which results in the other races being treated unfairly.”¹⁶ Diaw and Élise are presented as representatives of the proletariat who suffer injustice due to racism. In Ousmane’s novel the title *Le docker noir* reveals the racial segregation. The title refers to Diaw Falla, « le docker » the docker who belongs to the African race « noir ». The

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anonymous title indicates the unfortunate destiny of Diaw, a victim of racism as it resembles the fate of the immigrants who work as dockers in France. In Ousmane's novel one observes many forms of discrimination. The prejudice of the Whites towards the Blacks is evident when they address Diaw as; « *monstre* » (a monster), « *la brute* » (the brute), « *sauvage* » (savage), « *un fou* » a maniac.¹⁷ For instance, in the news flash the journalist accuses Diaw as the murderer of the white woman even before the trial takes place; « *LE NEGRE DIAW FALLA, ASSASSIN DE LA CELEBRE ROMANCIERE SERA JUGE DANS TROIS JOURS PAR LA COUR D'ASSISES DE LA SEINE* ». ¹⁸ (the negro, Diaw Falla, murderer of the famous novelist will be judged in three days by the Seine Court of Assies). The words such as; « *le Nègre* » (the Negro) and « *Assassin* » (murderer) suggest the attitude of the Whites towards the Blacks. The above title in capital letters on the newspaper article implies that the journalist has already given his judgment regarding the murder. Besides, the Whites distinguish the Blacks by stereotyping their race. For example, in the court, the lawyer questions from André Vellin, professor at the medical faculty who was in charge of examining the mental state of the accused: whether Diaw appears as a sexually obsessed person for him and the professor opines; « *chez les Noirs, c'est une chose naturelle et surtout quand il s'agit d'une femme blanche. Ils sont fascinés par la blancheur de la peau qui est plus attirante que celle des négresses* ». ¹⁹ (among black people it's a natural thing and especially when it comes to a white woman. They are fascinated by the whiteness of their skin which seems more attractive than that of black women). Moreover, the professor affirms that; « *le témoin déclare que les Noirs sont des obsédés sexuels,* ». ²⁰ (the survey suggests that the Blacks are sexed obsessed people). Thus, his statement reveals the xenophobic attitude of the Whites towards the Blacks. In fact, the powerlessness of the African proletarian is evident in the novel.

For example, Diaw explains as to why he didn’t complain the police regarding the injustice that happened to him; « ils’ ne m’auraient pas cru » (‘they’ would not have believed me), says Diaw in court and the lawyer asks; « Et pourquoi? » (and why is that?) and he says; « parce que je suis un Noir »²¹ (because I am a Black man) suggests his despair. The word ‘they’ in inverted comas refer to the French police officers as Diaw believes that they are also racists.

Etcherelli in her novel (1967) divides racism into two categories. Firstly, racism between the Algerians and the Whites based on the colour of one’s skin. Secondly, in the novel ‘racism’ is also the misconception regarding the superiority of males over females. To begin with, it’s important to examine the racial prejudice due to colour of one’s skin. In the novel even though Élise belongs to the superior race, she feels powerless amidst the Algerian workers. For example, the Algerians stereotype the French as cold, unfriendly and indifferent; Arezki says to Élise « Les Françaises sont des championnes du... raffinement ».²² (the French women are champions of sophistication). It indicates that Élise is recognised by the immigrant workers as a ‘White’ woman not as an ‘individual’. Initially the Algerian workers think that Élise is cold and unfriendly. Therefore, she becomes a victim of racial discrimination. For instance, when Élise greets to one of the Algerian men in the factory, the man looks at her with enmity and says; « Vous dites bonjour aujourd’hui et pourquoi pas hier? ».²³ (you say good morning to me today? Why didn’t you say it yesterday ?) which reveals the attitude of the Algerians towards the French as they believe that the French are prejudiced towards the immigrants. Thus, the Algerians reject being friendly with a white woman. As a result, Élise feels alienated and isolated; « personne ne me salua » (nobody greeted me) and « le petit cloueur cracha de côté d’un air de dégoût. Je compris tout à coup qu’il avait pu prendre mon silence pour

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quelque réflexe raciste (...)».²⁴ (the short man who nails in the car next to me, spits on the ground with an air of disgust. I knew all of a sudden that he took my silence as a racist behaviour). However, Élise is not a racist as she says to her Algerian lover, Arezki; « je ne peux pas être raciste ».²⁵ (I cannot be racist).

Despite the deplorable working condition Élise endures the hostility of the male workers in the factory. The male workers are unsympathetic towards her not only because she is a white but also because she is a woman working in « atelier 76 ».²⁶ (Section 76). Thus, she feels feeble in the presence of the male community in the factory. For example, when Élise says to her master that she is feeling sick; « il me semblait que j'étais l'objet de tous les regards. J'eus peur ».²⁷ (I felt myself becoming the center of everyone's attention. I was afraid). The above phrase indicates her vulnerable position as she finds it difficult to perform the hard manual labour unlike the male workers in the factory. The limitations of her physical strength make her feel inferior to others. Thus, the men in her factory treat her in an offensive manner. In the above phrase 'becoming the center of everyone's attention' denotes a negative sense as she feels herself being judged, scrutinised and evaluated contemptuously by men. Therefore, in both novels the xenophobic attitude that stirs in both sides: the prejudice of the immigrants towards the French and the prejudice of the French towards the immigrants are evident.

In addition, Ousmane and Etcherelli emphasise the difficulty of the work of the proletarians. In *Le docker noir*, the metaphor of the fish where Diaw works is compared to a mammal that grinds the dockers until they are reduced to a mush; « (...) les cales vomissaient de leurs entrailles cette scorie humaine ».²⁸ (the holds from the depths spouted this human dreg.) signifies the inhumanity

of the work. In fact, the workers are forced to work in dreadful conditions for long durations as the work last from eight to ten hours and sometimes even much longer.²⁹ They work like slaves and their masters ignore the weak and the sick; « les accidents étaient innombrables. Le machinisme avait dépassé leur faculté physique (...) ».³⁰ (there were numerous accidents. Mechanization had surpassed their physical ability ...) indicate the infernal cadence and the uncertainty of the lives of the proletarians. For example, Diaw questions from N’Gor, the chief in his section; « combien de nous sont dans les hôpitaux?. ».³¹ (how many of our people are in hospitals?) As it reveals the hazardous position of the work. The masters are indifferent to the suffering of the proletarians. Despite the fatigue the workers are obsessed with their work. For instance, the phrase; « Chaque fin de journée il se promettait de ne pas revenir le lendemain et le lendemain, il était le premier à venir ».³² (at the end of every day, he promised himself not to come back the following day, and the following day, he was the first to come) signifies Diaw’s obsession with work. In Etcherelli’s novel, Élise compares the chain of the factory to a serpent that strips the worker; « les moteurs se mirent en marche et le grand serpent mécanique recommença à nous dévorer ».³³ (the engines began to move and the mechanical snake began to devour us). The metaphor of the serpent indicates the atrociousness of the work. For example, Élise says that she works in the factory for nine hours; « j’aurais voulu m’arrêter, demander la permission de souffler un peu. Les jambes dures comme du bois, rouillées aux articulations, je descendais moins vite ».³⁴ (I wanted to stop and ask permission to breathe a little. The legs are as hard as wood, rickety joints, I descended slowly). The above phrase suggests the laboriousness of the work as many workers suffer from various illnesses due to fatigue. Moreover, Élise’s suffering is more intense than that of Diaw. Especially because the work in the production line is extremely

difficult for a woman; « Grimper, enjamber, m'accroupir, regarder à droite à gauche, derreier, au-dessus, voir du premier coup d'œil ce qui n'est pas conforme, examiner attentivement les concours, les angles, les creux (...) dans la voiture suivante, recommencer sept fois par heure ». ³⁵ (Crawl, climb over, squat, look right and left, behind, above, notice the errors at first glance, carefully consider the complexity, the angles, the hollows (...) in the next car, repeat seven times per hour). The above phrase with a lengthy description, separated by commas suggest the rapidity and the complexity of the work. Hence, in the novels one could observe the continual struggle between « la chaîne » (the chain) and the worker; « La chaîne, ô le mot juste... Attachés à nos places. Sans comprendre et sans voir ». ³⁶ (the chain, oh the right word ... Attached to our seats Without understanding and without seeing.) reveals the proletarian condition. The phrase; « (...) aucun temps n'était prévu pour le besoin le plus naturel, les hommes réussissait à souffler un peu en trichant mais moi je n'y arrivais pas encore ». ³⁷ (no time was provided for the most basic need, the men managed to do a bit of cheating but I just could not) signifies the plight of the proletarian women in factories. Élise is enslaved by work as Diaw in Ousmane's novel. After an exhausting day she feels; « je ne dormirai plus. En somnolant. Je rêverai que je suis sur la chaîne ». ³⁸ (I will no longer sleep. Dozing off, I will dream that I'm on the chain) reveals Élise's distress as she finds it impossible to detach herself from the infernal cadence of the work in the factory.

In conclusion, it's evident that the indifference of the superior race regarding racism, class conflict and proletarian condition eventually aggravated the misery of the proletarians in the years 50 s and 60 s in France. By focusing on the lives of Diaw and Élise one could observe the plight of the proletarians. In fact, this research article has revealed that the protagonists' lives were

lead towards destruction due to the indifferent treatment that their class has received. Thus, the researcher has presented the conflict between the superior race and the inferior race, victims of racism and the indifference of the masters towards the proletarians in an effective manner.

End Notes

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15. Etcherelli, 1967, p. 93
16. p.1166
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21. Ousmane, 1973, p. 56
22. Etcherelli, 1967, p. 238
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24. Etcherelli, 1967, p. 92
25. Etcherelli, 1967, p. 159
26. Etcherelli, 1967, p. 76
27. Etcherelli, 1967, p. 101
28. Ousmane, 1973, p. 130
29. Ousmane, 1973, p. 131
30. Ousmane, 1973, p. 128
31. Ousmane, 1973, p.144
32. Ousmane, 1973, p. 141
33. Etcherelli, 1967, p.116
34. Etcherelli, 1967, p. 88

- 35. Etcherelli, 1967, p. 88
- 36. Etcherelli, 1967, p. 98
- 37. Etcherelli, 1967, p. 94
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