

## Oppression and Emancipation of African American Women in Suzan Lori Parks' *Venus*

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to critically explore various challenges faced by oppressed and suppressed African American women in the western societies. It also explores the varied emancipatory efforts they make when striving to absolve themselves of the forces of oppression and dehumanization as portrayed by Suzan Lori Parks in her play, *Venus*. The paper uses the postcolonial feminist theory of the Subaltern as the basis for the analysis to thoroughly examine the play extrinsically and intrinsically. In her play, Suzan- Lori Parks portrays African American women facing the turbulence of racism, discrimination and inequality in the western socio-geographical setting. She confidently and aesthetically reveals various challenges hindering the progress and life fulfilment of the African American women through the heroine of her play. The paper traces the history of *Venus*, unveils the cruelty of the European mentality and racial discrimination against African women. It also shows the rights of African women and identifies new ways for them to express their identities. Finally, the paper reveals that despite the obvious and prevalent acts of discrimination for African women for over the years, the problem persists. However, unlike the pre-Civil Rights era, today's discrimination is less readily identifiable.

**Key words:** Discrimination, Racism, Subaltern, Suzan Lori Parks, and *Venus*

### INTRODUCTION

As a black American playwright, and novelist, Suzan-Lori Parks expresses the plights of African women in general like many other scholars. She is American-born in the 1960s and has produced many dramas, two screenplays and many essays and novels. In most of her works, she asks for the rights of African Americans women through questioning the metanarratives and central philosophies that dehumanise them. She delegitimizes some of the predominant stereotypes forced on them and takes out the responsibility of the media in propagating discrimination, racism, lynching and there after effects. In her writing, Parks evokes slavery, stimulates considerations on the countless intersections of race, sex, class and gender orientations. Finally, in helping interested readers think and rethink critically, more judgmentally of the problems that African Americans face in their western societies, she suggests different perspectives from which the problem could be viewed (Geis, 2008; Parks, 2013; Solomon, 1990; Wilmer, 2000).

From her third writing (play), *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, Parks won the Obie Award for best new off-Broadway play in (1989) after the failing the first two attempts. He also gained another award in 1996 for her play *Venus*. The achievements showed that Parks appeared at the American stage when the discourse on race seemed the most vulnerable to change (Goto, 2007, p. 107). From

historical perspectives, inequality has been fought by Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America since its inception in the late 1950s until the mid-1980s. However, that does not stop racism as agreed by both Goto and Parks. According to the duo, the fight by Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America shows the need for Black people look harder and longer into their language, history, and movements to fully understand how racism harms America's democratic potentials. This requires new ways of seeing, acting, and speaking that may seem unconventional, if not outright strange. This is what Parks has been doing in her plays. Parks, using the stage as her tool, creates new ways of expressing and representing identities that go beyond the idea of essential blackness and oppression for African-Americans. This new kind of representation challenges the oversimplified discourse on the difference, which critics and audiences seem to expect and demand from African-American playwrights.

The play, *Venus* was written in (1996) and it is a pseudo-historical drama written by Suzan-Lori Parks in the play, Parks portrayed a lady in South African who was tempted to go to England by empty promises of success only to be sold into slavery and later taken as a sideshow attraction in England. Due to her protrusive posterior, she appeared on public stage to display this pathophysiological abnormality in her body. Before she died, Georges Cuvier, a French nat-

uralist and zoologist named commissioned an artist making a plaster moulding of her body. *Venus* has been examined methodically by various scholars who commented on the sexuality and femininity of African female offspring. For example, Lisa M. Anderson in her book, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, portrays how black women were sexually exploited both in colonial Africa and in America. Another theatre scholar, Jean Young also depicts the perverse imperialist mindset against black Africans. Despite the various studies on the maltreatment and exploitations of African women in both Africa and in the West, the depiction of *Venus* has not been widely discussed by scholars. Suzan-Lori Parks is among the few that expresses the plights of African women.

Therefore, this paper specifically focuses on the suffering and problems that black women encounter in American societies as portrayed by Parks in *Venus*. In the play, the character (*Venus*) is used to elucidate the dilemma of black women in western societies. The study shows replete with ignorance, racism, discrimination, disregard, sexual abuse and inequality against African Americans women in the plays of Parks. The mentioned elements lead to a revolution of African American black women against the current rules, and concluded rehistoricization of their past, improve what they could not say and have, through their voices and tongues, to construct their identities and liberate black females. They concentrated efforts upon *Venus* as a marginal and subjected character. Parks show how selfish the Westerners are when they put *Venus* on stage to act like an animal show.

### SUBALTERN AND LIBERATORY APPROACH

The subaltern theory is based on the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida. The theory describes "other" as any person with no voice due to his/her race, class, or gender. According to the theory, people in power establish norms and imposed themselves on the "other". Subaltern theory, laid much emphasis on signifiers as reflected by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Specifically, it stresses on the way the signifiers are constructed in the colonialist discourse socially, giving no real voice to the oppressed and colonized.

According to Homi Bhabha, Subaltern theory tells another story of the effect of signifiers on the dominant discourse where ideas are expressed in regions in which the oppressed and colonized are not well acquainted with. Thus, they lack the skills of expressing validity of claims. In addition, their claims are often expressed in poor imitations of the master discourse, and thus, not given good faith hearing by those skilled in the use of the dominant discourse (Beverley, 1999).

In the Western world, women have voices. However, in many other countries, women are deprived of their voices. Thus, they remain silent despite the most interesting and jarring stories they have to tell. In *Venus*, Parks examines the lives of these discriminated and subjugated women and attempts to bring attention to the other silenced nations such as Africa and all third world countries.

Using the postcolonial, feminist theory as represented in the concept of a subaltern of the feminist theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this paper analyses the literary work

of Suzan- Lori Parks, *Venus* to display a subaltern character. The play represents the efforts made by Suzan is trying to change the contemporary events in American society through writing. Based on the theory, the most important reporters in Parks works are seen as silenced due to the oppression of Western societies and their exertion power through their constitutions and judgements.

The subaltern is used in analysing Park's work is because it is not of Western origin and it is not based on their ideologies. The term "subaltern" is derived from the works of an Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. It refers to "non-elite or subordinate social groups" within a society. Another concise definition of the term is given by Vincent Leitch in the introduction to excerpts written by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as, "the subaltern always stands in an ambiguous relation to power – subordinate to it but never fully consenting to its rule, never adopting the dominant point of view or vocabulary as expressive of its own identity" (Mukhuba, 2017, p. 14)

Scholars such as Spivak (1988) hold a belief that the subalterns have been silenced continuously by the postcolonial intellectuals despite the need, efforts and best intentions to give them a voice. She believes that the subalterns should be listed to as much as possible, stressing the need for readers to "hear the faint whisper of what could not be said" (Giglio, 2007, p. 1). In her popular essay, a theory of subalternity "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak portrays the limitations of the subalterns by asking if they could speak. She explains that subaltern means the oppressed subjects or more generally those "of inferior rank". She added that subaltern has no history and cannot speak in the colonial context. As for the female subalterns, theirs is the worst, as they are "even more deeply in the shadow" (Patai, 1988, p. 287). Spivak's statement "subaltern cannot speak" has generated flames of controversy in the post-colonial context. The statement is actually considered a one-stop answer to all the questions. It is an outcome of her lifelong search for truth and it is being formulated based on socio-cultural backgrounds. The theory formulates that the subaltern can speak yet they are not patiently listened to by others. In other words, the message conveyed by the sender does not reach to the receiver as it is hindered by the element of noise. However, many people misinterpreted Spivak's conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak. In her plays, Parks echoes the voices of African Americans who have not been accepted as members of the new land and cannot go back to their homelands. They are historically regarded as nomads.

### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF VENUS

In *Venus*, Suzan Lori Parks depicts an African woman as a subaltern character who suffers maltreatment in her nation. The play is a true life story of a South African woman who was sent to Europe in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and presented as "Venus Hottentot". *Venus* is about a Khoisan woman called Saartjie Baatman whose stage name in Europe was "Hottentot Venus". The woman was exhibited in a show tent in London and in Paris. Her body parts were preserved in formalin and her skeletal specimen and anatomical model were displayed in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until the mid-1970s. Parks heard about Baartman at a party and thought of

writing about her. Parks wrote the play, *Venus* by incorporating an autopsy report, fabrications and some fictional people. The play contains a complex play-within-a-play structure and many descriptions from scientific records; which are based on episodic chronicles of actual events. The play was first featured in 1996 at Yale Repertory Theatre.

From the historical perspectives, Saartjie Baartman was taken to Europe from Africa during the colonial era and exposed to public view in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. She died in Paris in 1815 at the age of twenty-six and her body was dissected for analysis her genitals were preserved, displayed with her specimen, in Paris. These are some of the reasons why scholars make reference to colonialism, racism, feminism, and human rights when discussing the life and body of Baartman. Scholars like Shawn-Marie Garrett explain that telling the story of Baartman is dangerous especially the way Parks has told it because many African-American audiences, members and critics were nervous and angry (“The Possession of Suzan-Lori Parks”).

### CRUELTY OF THE EUROPEAN MENTALITY

*Venus* has been criticized most severely by a scholar, artist, and filmmaker, Jean Young, in a critical essay “The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*.” She criticizes the description and complex exploitation of Baartman in the play. Parks was criticized for dramatizing the woman and it is considered as ‘re-objectification and re-commodification’. In addition, a New York theatre critic criticised Parks’s framing of Baartman for lack of a societal indictment. Therefore, he argues that Baartman is victimized twice: first, by nineteenth-century Victorian society and secondly by Parks in her play, *Venus* and its chorus of critics (Young, 1997).

In the real sense, *Venus* is not an attempt to “re-objectify and re-commodify” Baartman but to expose the cruelty of the European mentality which they still practised today and coloured by the arbitrary discourse of scientism and discourteous curiosity of the “other.” It also shows apparition that dominated European mentality in the past is still manifesting around in the present time. In *Venus*, Parks tries to prove herself as a playwright capable of offering historical narratives to make us face our consciousness under the influence of Western mentality in the past beyond time and space. She succeeded in showing how African American figures have been segregated from the centre stage in the history of America.

It is believed that Parks certainly started to criticize the difficult compatibility of art and business by learning about “show business” from capable Broadway directors of the time. However, as Diamond asserts above, Parks has the ability to find her own way and will never be torn apart between her aesthetics and commercial value. In addition, as an African American playwright, her plays are always studied and scrutinised by African American critics. It is only by putting *Venus* on stage that we can liberate her from the cage named history. Beyond featuring a performance of *Venus* in a stage it would be a test to examine how cruelty dominated the European mentality in the past is still manifesting around in the present time.

### RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION OF AFRICANS

Racial and ethnic discrimination against black females in the entire American societies is timeless and still persists. Scholars and critics highlighted that blacks and women, in particular, are more subjected to various categories of a personal attack than the white women and men. These categories of racism include stereotyping and differential treatment by surrounding people, working area, police stations, educational fields, and job opportunities. These discriminatory incidents have been documented in all area of human endeavour and become the subject of performances in theatres. Many social postcolonial feminists believe that if blacks and females could have legal and moral equality, they may easily succeed in dealing with dominant discriminations against them in their community and generate the favourable conditions required to gain the personal achievement. Thus, they believe that inequality in gender hinders fulfilment and personal achievement of these black women.

Discrimination in whatever form has negative tendencies that are capable of subjecting individuals to denial of opportunity, unfair treatment in selection processes, promotion, or transfer. It is commonly practised based on age, sex, origin, race, ethnicity, religion and political belief, (Kamara, 2013). From this definition, it could be concluded that to discriminate means to differentiate, disfavours, make a distinction or single out one from others. For instance, in daily lives, people often discriminate in arriving at almost every choice they make when they are given more than one choices. However, in the context of civil rights law, unlawful discrimination is considered as partial or uneven treatment given to an individual(s) (or group) based on their personal affiliations such as age, disability ethnicity, gender, marital status, nationality, race, religion.

Discrimination against women, African women especially in the United States of America has been discussed rigorously by many scholars, politicians, lawyers, sociologists and other related scientists. However, it still persists and continues to be experienced in the United States of America wherever the contemporary workspaces are (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2006). Despite the persistent cases of certified discrimination of African women in the Western societies, most of the cases are considered as “non-obvious” ones (Dainty & Lingard, 2006; Hunter, 1992). They are ignored by most people because Africans are considered as “others” (Connolly, 2006; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986). This explains why African women still experience maltreatment (Barrett & Swim, 1998; Gyll, Matthews, & Bromberger, 2001) in spite of heavy efforts for women’s right (Feagin & Feagin, 1978; Parks, 1990).

### RECALLING AND RE-RECORDING THE AFRICANS’ RIGHTS

Based on the discussion on the discrimination against African women so far, Suzan Lori-Parks (1990) explains,

“since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to ‘make’ history--that is because so much of African-American history has

been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as a playwright is to... locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down" (p.81).

Recalling and re-recording the African American nation rights is of great interest to Suzan Lori Parks and she encourages her nation to fight for their lost rights and dignity. Moreover, it is an established fact that historians did not document the inhuman treatment meted against black women during the period of slavery. Specifically, Parks' task as a black playwright is to recall their lost justice as a discriminate and racist nation. Therefore, she intends to call for their rights and humanly treatment as someone who has great power and reputation in the American society. Furthermore, the American institution is vested with a responsibility to safeguard and protect the rights of Africans, especially black women, the way it protects the rights of white people. In fact, Suzan's plays are inflicted by racism, discrimination, inequality, disrespect, ignorance, and sexual abuse. These denigrating elements lead black women to revolutionize against the current norms and act out what they could not say with their tongues on the stage in order to liberate themselves from the discriminatory white tendencies and construct their own identities.

To measure the existence and the degree of racial discrimination that exists, be it in the social or economic realm, it is necessary to adopt a theory (or concept or model) in order to examine the existence of such behaviour as well as its effects and consequences towards humanity. The theory or model to adopt will describe the right data to use in such an exploration, suggest an appropriate methodology for the data analysis, and provides the assumptions that the data and analysis must be satisfied in order to support a finding of the discrimination understudies. Without such a theoretical framework, researchers may conduct studies that are not valid and lack reliability.

Historically, in order to ensure equality among women, United State Civil Rights Movement made a giant stride from its inception in the late 1950s to the mid-1980s. However, "Does that mean racism no longer exists?" asked by Goto (2007, p. 70) in his thought-provoking article. The answer to this question, Parks seems to agree with Goto, is 'absolutely No.' For both of them, this only means that black people must look harder and longer into [their] language, history, and movements to extract that mould of racism harming [America's] democratic potential. The extraction requires new tools – new ways of seeing, acting, and speaking that may seem unconventional, if not outright strange.

### NEW WAYS FOR AFRICANS TO EXPRESS THEIR IDENTITIES

Parks is determined by introducing a new theatrical tradition of stage performance which offers African-American a new opportunity to express and construct their identity beyond colour and oppression. This new kind of representation

changed the old way of narrative from the oversimplified discourse on the difference, which critics and audiences seem to expect and demand from African-American playwrights, to stage performances where the African American Black women construct their identity. In fact, Parks often disagrees with critics who repeatedly see the construction of her African-American characters as another form of oppression. This kind of construction, in Parks' viewpoint, is outrageously simplified and conventionalised. Meticulously surveying the representation of the black people on the American stage, she thoughtfully wonders: "Can a Black person be onstage and be other than oppressed? For the Black writer, are there Dramas other than race dramas? Does Black life consist of issues other than race issues?" (Parks, 2013, p. 2).

In her seminal essay, "Elements of Style" Parks explains that she is an African American Woman and that is the form she takes, her content predicates that form, and that form is inseparable from her content. And finally, she could never become otherwise. This sheds light on the centrality of the two elements, i.e. black and woman to Parks' theatrical enterprise. These two elements, according to Parks, contribute to greatly in 'otherizing', 'inferiorizing' and 'marginalizing' the black women not only within the white-dominated society but also within black communities. This shows the need to use a black feminist approach in interlocking factor such as the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class in the works of Parks. In fact, it is an "absolute necessity" if a full understanding of her plays is to be achieved (Lewis, 2012, p. 119).

Gender and Race are two dominant themes that represent authors' interest in the life of black women. Her main concern here is not the discussion of race gender-based ideas per se. Rather, she is more interested in showing the role these elements play in deepening the already existing gap(s) between the Afro-American women and the representatives of the dominant white society. At the centre of this race, gender discourse in relation to the representation of black women is the question of the status of the female body which is controversial in the modern social and political discourses. The complexities and intricacies involved in the exposure of women's bodies on stage performance constitute "part of a complicated system of patriarchal referents" (Ibid) that tend to either objectify or mystify them. Parks usually criticizes the stereotypical representations of the female body in her plays. However, in none, this criticism is as clear and strong as in *Venus*. It is often regarded as the master narrative in which black women have been constructed continually (Lewis, Looking Forward, 2012, p. 161). Parks dramatizes an extraordinary story of Baartman, Venus Hottentot, a 19<sup>th</sup> century South African woman whose unusual anatomy (the abnormal protuberance of her buttocks and genitalia scientifically termed as *steatopygia*) made her the object of "sexualized glory, ethnographic documentation, imperialist practices and market commodification as she was exhibited naked in the freak shows of London and Paris inspiring both horror and fascination" (Sanchez-Palencia & Cuder, 2012, p.143).

## TECHNIQUES USED BY LORI PARKS TO LIBERATE THE SUBALTERN WOMAN

At the beginning of her education as a creative writer, she never imagined she would be a playwright. In an interview granted in 2012 Parks said, "Theatre to me was hanging out with people who did theatre. To me, they were people who wore funny hats and spoke 'dahling'. They were all from, like, Long Island or something" (Robinson, 2015, p. 1). So, how did this early bias of the theatre lead to her formidable playwriting style as a social critic against the Eurocentric view of the African- American Diaspora? Parks constructs characters with truth and heart that can mistakenly be played as saccharine and trite. She paints a picture that travels through both time and space, and that can confuse and alienate an audience if not directed incisively. The challenge will be to illuminate that painting, never allowing the canvas to stray from the story at hand.

Parks style of writing emanates from a concept she refers to as "Rep & Rev" – (repetition and revision) which is a means of accessing and utilising the musicality of oral African traditions. This technique of repeat and revise historical moments in time and text to mould a theatrical form, as employed on numerous occasions in *Venus*. For example, three distinct chorus groups are utilized to announce certain events; Parks modifies the listener's perception when the text is repeated slightly different each time:

### The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders

"I've been in this line of work for years  
and yet every time the crowds gather and the lights flash up  
I freak out.  
My first 5 months in this racket were like hell.  
I didn't sleep I didn't eat my teeth were chattering nonstop.  
That girl they call The Venus H. is holding up  
holding up pretty well I think. And her crowds have been  
stupendous.  
(Some audience is better than none at all and since she's  
come  
we're in another economic bracket.) Stupendous!  
Stupendous! Still."  
Much later in the play, the same chorus revises the text as  
such:

### The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders

I've been in this line of work for years and years  
And every time the crowds gather  
And the lights flash on me  
I freak out.  
That girl they call The Venus, The Venus Hottentot, she's  
Holding up, well,  
Pretty well: Stupendous, Stupendous. Still:

In the above passages, the cynical Wonders who perform in the freak show alongside. The Venus eventually attracts empathy toward her body structure. The original exclamations on "Stupendous!" refer to the excessive fat developed on the buttocks of the Venus known anatomically as "steatopygia" (Parks, *Venus*). In the second version, the shock of

this exaggerated phenomenon has worn off. Parks' use of the Rev& Rep technique interest audiences to consume text voyeuristically at first, and then reintroduces it much later in the play, refocusing up to the contemporary standard of acceptability; in this case, the black woman's enlarged buttocks as normative and beautiful. We see this in society today where it is sexually normalized to advertise large buttocks jeans specifically designed for black women.

Parks' writing style, reveal her curiosity to explain Venus life in line with the Eurocentric history of this enigma: "I knew this Saartjie Baartman woman was going to end up in a play of mine. She was a woman with a remarkable bottom; a woman with a past, and that got me interested in her" (Parks, *Venus*). *Venus* begins at the end, counting down in sequence from scene thirty-one to one, as narrated by The Negro Resurrectionist, a vagrant wanderer who used to dig up graves illegally for a living. This "digger" (his title purposefully rhyming with a racial slur) guides the audience from The Venus' South African hometown in 1810 to her European lodgings in London and then Paris, highlighting the prejudicial tones against black women every step of the way. The Venus paired with the Negro Resurrectionist causes the audience to re-evaluate their traditional ideas about slavery from European perspectives, and acknowledge how entrenched North American roots are buried in African memory.

Lisa M. Anderson in her book, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, the historical Venus Hottentot confirmed black women were sexually exploited both in colonial Africa and in America. For example, in the play, when asked by The Chorus of the Court in London if she had, "ever been indecent?" The Venus replies, "Never. No. I am just me... To hide your shame is evil. I show mine". Here, Parks begins the painful process of the agency for The Venus promoting Africans as humans with choice, instead of freaks of amusement. Parks is asserting her own legacy as a woman of colour in America, fully capable of writing a non-commercial play that can still succeed as artistically legitimate, winning the coveted Obie award in 1996 for *Venus* (Parks, "Suzan-Lori Parks").

## CONCLUSION

The primary objective of the paper is to critically explore oppression and suppression of African American women in the western societies as depicted by Susan Lori Parks in her play, *Venus* using the Subaltern theory. Parks addresses the audience at the end of the twentieth century in *Venus*. She portrays an image of a black woman who is inhumanly maltreated by the social system in a society that considers Africans as outcasts, as such, has no sympathy for them. Venus, the protagonist, is oppressed by western society in London and Paris and subjected by patriarchal society till she reaches a convention that "I don't think the world likes women much." She believes that all bad things happen to her because of her race and gender. This forces her to violently destroys herself and her future. In her plays, Parks focuses on the important role race and subalternity play in making a large number of young black women illiterate and unemployed; a fact that leads to their marginalization and impoverishment. Numerous efforts Parks spends for giving the subaltern people who are repre-

sented in African American women an opportunity of raising their voice in the society through the stage and improve that subaltern can speak if they want to. In her own, Parks has been searching for ways to demonstrate the life struggles of black people in a world that are filled with malice against them. Thus, she is a mighty warrior and explorer fighting her way through the uncharted forest named America.

Finally, this paper has unveiled the ill-treatment of Africans particularly, African women in the West. This includes racial inequality in employment, housing, and a wide range of other social domains has renewed interest in the possible role of discrimination as portrayed by Parks in *Venus*. The paper also reveals that despite the overt and widespread acts of discrimination for over seventy years ago, the problem still persists. In contrary to the pre-Civil Rights era, when racial bias and discrimination were obvious and common, today discrimination is less readily identifiable and clear.

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