

## Echoing the Voices of African American Women in Suzan Lori Park's Venus

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### ARTICLE INFO

Received: July 15, 2019

Accepted: August 11, 2019

Published: September 30, 2019

Volume: 2

Issue: 5

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2019.2.5.26

### KEYWORDS

*black African women, emancipation, post-colonial feminism*

### ABSTRACT

This study examines the discrimination, exploitation and oppression of black African women in western societies in Suzan Lori Park's Venus. Specifically, the study investigates how the playwright portrays liberation of the black African women from such oppression using Spivak's concept of Essentialism and Mohanty's transnational as part of modern postcolonial feminist theory. The study reveals many ways in which black African women could be emancipated from discrimination, exploitation, oppression and ensure their voices are heard. These include embracing education, creating awareness on racism and objectification of African-American woman, opposing the pseudoscientific belief of white supremacy, rewriting the history of black African women and recreating identity for African-American females.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Despite criticism by scholars, psychologist, politicians, lawyers, sociologists and many other related scientists, discrimination against women, especially black African women persists and continues to be experienced in the United States of America (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2006). Majority of the certified cases of discrimination against black African women are not given required attentions and often considered as non-obvious ones (Dainty & Lingard, 2006; Hunter, 1992), as the result, many people who discriminate against black African women go undetected (Connolly, 2006; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986). Thus, the prejudicial treatment against black African women increases (Barrett & Swim, 1998; Guyll, Matthews, & Bromberger, 2001) in spite of heavy efforts for women's right (Feagin & Feagin, 1978; S.-L. Parks, 1990).

Black African women have been suppressed and oppressed in the western societies and has been always a double-headed. They are suppressed for of their gender and colour; they are oppressed by both the colonizers and by their own black men. In all spares of life, working areas, police stations, educational institutions, theatres and job opportunities, these women are racially discriminated, stereotyped and given differential treatment by all sort of people surrounding them, in

and many others. In short, they are denied of opportunity to relate and function like any other person in a society. Thus, critics believe that this may prevents from achieving their personal fulfilments of life.

Therefore, there is need to further bring the suffering of black African women in the western societies to light in order to liberate them.

To achieve this goal, Suzan Lori Parks who is an African American playwright has a great interest in recalling, re- recording and retelling the history of African American women. She believes that the severe sufferings, which blacks, specifically black women, encountered in slavery-era are not fully presented by historians. Venus (produced 1996) is one of her plays in which she portrays the suffering exploitation of African women by whites in the western societies.

The play which is a pseudo-historical drama was staged in the United States. It is about a South African lady who was lured to go to England by empty promises of success only to be sold into slavery. Due to her protrusive posterior, she appeared on public stage to display this pathophysiological abnormality in her body. A French naturalist and zoologist named (Georges Cuvier) has commissioned an artist to make a plaster molding of her body before she died.

The play has been examined methodically by Anderson as a commentary on the sexuality and womanliness of African female offspring.

Nevertheless, not all art reviewers and evaluators have admired this drama. It gained deep criticism as Jean Young (1997, 699), who wrote in a published manuscript "The Re-objectification and Re-commodification of Saartjie Baartman" said many things to express her with the idea that Baartman was involved with others in wrongdoing through her profiteering. Despite the criticism by many scholars, most have to examine how Suzan Lori Parks uses the play in order to emancipate the black African women. Therefore, this study attempts to look at it from postcolonial feminism point of view.

## 2. POST-VOLONIAL FEMINISM

One of the theories that emerged in response to Western mainstream of feminism which paid little or no attention to the issues related to class, race, segregation, discrimination, oppression and gender inequality of women within colonized territories challenge oppression of culture is Postcolonial feminist theory (Badri & Tripp, 2017; Vickers, 2017). It was initiated by activists and academics of mostly partially or fully colonized countries. The theory somewhat a novel branch of postcolonial studies that identifies and addresses problems of women of the Third world nations.

One of the postcolonial feminist philosophers who identifies and defines the central problematic issues in postcolonialism is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her essay, "Can the Subaltern speak?" (Spivak 2003), she refutes and criticizes the views of Western imperialist against Eastern women. Spivak introduced two concepts, subaltern which describes the Eastern women, and essentialism which emancipate the women from all sort of discrimination. According to Spivak, a subaltern is a person who is rendered and reduced without organization by economic status. She uses the term subaltern to depict the lower classes and the social gatherings who are at the edges of society margins (G. C. Spivak, 1988).

On the other hand, the term "Strategic essentialism" was coined by Spivak in order to deconstruct readings of the Subaltern Studies work in which many in the West believe in concept of idealism. The concept "essentialism" was purposefully introduced to proffer postcolonial solutions to the plight the subalterns from the depression of Western authority and grants them opportunities of giving have an improved identity and their voices be heard. According to Spivak, all

members of certain groups of people, such as those with the same sexual orientation, race, gender, and age, commonly have essential behaviors inherent to the group feature definition. Essentialism means that all human beings are naturally good but the evil is a production of society (Legg, 2007).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty is another postcolonial feminist who made effort to emancipate the subaltern from western discrimination and oppression. She dismissed terms like "international" and "global" and introduced a term "transnational". In her essay, "Under Western Eyes" (1984), she criticizes the Western feminism ideology towards the lower-class nations and accused the West for not paying attention to women residing in postcolonial nations and their unique experiences and existence. She upholds the view that all women as a homogeneous and similar group without any differences between white and black women.

Mohanty condemned the various colonial tricks, which are applied to the third world women. She also investigates to improve the East identity for those who are neglected and enslaved (Mohanty, 2003). She uses the concept "transnational" to refer to "global sisterhood" which ensure equal treatment of third world women and the back women, women of colour everywhere in the globe. Therefore, this study uses Spivak concept of "essentialism" and Mohanty' concept of "transnational" to examine emancipation of black African women in Suzan Lori Park's *Venus*.

## 3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the current study is to explore the how Suzan-Lori Parks portray emancipation of female African American in *Venus*. This is to ensure that women voices are heard and be considered and treated equally as any other human being.

## 4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research question was formulated to guide the study:

How does Suzan-Lori Parks portray emancipation of female African American in *Venus*?

## 5. METHODOLOGY

To answer the research question of the study, qualitative content analysis method was used. Sentences and quotations explaining the liberation of black African women in the western societies

are identified, coded and categorized based on emerging themes. Spivak's concept of Essentialism and Mohanty's transnational were used as basis for the analysis.

## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Issues of racism, discrimination, inequality subjugation and other forms of exploitations exhibited to female African- American, have been identified and portrayed by many dramatists. Thus, this study specifically examines emancipation of the female African American from such discrimination, racism and inequality as portrayed by Suzan Lori Pack in *Venus*.

In the pre-colonial era when slavery was the norm of the day, American societies were described as matriarchal-racist in nature. However, this system of society sees a significant change in the colonial period when African American women received a back seat. During the Independence struggle of the blacks in America, women stood side-by-side with men to fight for their nation. Since then African American women had struggled to be a part of the political system of this country and to emancipate their gender from cultural stereotypes, social discrimination as well as racial segregation; though they had not been successful until the recent past. This status of women had been aptly portrayed in a number of fictional and non-fictional works of the African American female writers. The following sections reveal some strategies through which black African can be liberated.

## 7. EDUCATION AS A MEANS OF EMANCIPATION

Education is one of the colonial impacts on most of the colonized nations including Africa. Where the colonized races endured the pangs of slavery and torture, they also learned the art of reading and writing. The black race took advantage of this learning and set out to explore the "New Horizons". Both genders were not left behind in this act of gaining wisdom through learning. This learning gave even the African American females a voice that they made use of. They merged their voice with the voices of the "Shrieking White Women", who had been trying hard to make their presence felt in the male-driven world. For the black women, it was "double-trouble" as they had to face dual oppression – for being women and being black. Thus, Parks shows that black African women can be emancipated from the discrimination and oppression if they could embrace education, their voices could be heard.

## 8. CREATING AWARENESS ON RACISM AND OBJECTIFICATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN

Most of the cases of discrimination, oppression racial abuse and the objectification of black Africans are unreported or unattended to (Dainty & Lingard, 2006; Hunter, 1992) simply because they are considered as "others" (Connolly, 2006; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986). This has been a universal phenomenon that flourishes in our world and as the result, racism still persists especially in the United States (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2006). It is believed that the black race is the largest victims of racial abuse than any other race. This abuse comes in many forms and in different places. From homes, streets, working areas, learning centres, the black populations, especially women, are subjected to unending hardships and segregations. These open humiliations have been recorded in different paces of human life and serve as the subjects of literary dramas and performances. Scholars of postcolonialism with a strong interest in women welfare believe that the question of equality is attainable if social and legal can be adjusted to conform to the universality of fairness and justice. Thus, they believe that inequality in gender hinders fulfilment and personal achievement of these black women in many areas of their lives such as fail to realize their potential in business, skill, education.

Therefore, Parks sees the need to create awareness and broadcast the issues of discrimination against black African women with the hope of emancipating them from such oppressions. She sees the task to unveil this discrimination and therefore provide the basis for eradicating it in *Venus*. For instance, Parks tells her audience that sexual abuse is partially rooted in the patriarchal culture of America, which treated all black women as property (Foster, 2011). This is evidently depicted in scenes in which white Americans are seen poking at Saara in the cage with various "phallic objects"; another is where The Baron Docteur and other physicians lustily gaze at her and masturbate; and scenes which metaphorically identify her as a commodity consumed for pleasure akin to the chocolates she consumes for pleasure. This represents what Hortense Spillers terms the "pornotroping" of the black female body as a part of the justification of African colonization and slavery (qtd in Abrahams 223). Another incident that portrays the sexual exploitation of the African woman is in scene 14. Here, the Baron Docteur is

seen feeding Venus with chocolates as he

THE BARON DOCTEUR: Don't look at me.  
Look off Somewhere Eat yr chokluts Ear  
em slow That's it Touch yrself Good.  
Good.  
Another instance is on the dialogue  
between The Man and The Brother:

THE BROTHER: Big Botto I need  
Girl. A novelty.  
Shes vigourous and meticulous. (Watch  
this, Brother!)  
(Oh, whats her name?)  
THE MAN: Her - ? Saartjie.  
"Litt.le Sarah." THE BROTHER:  
Saartjie. Lovely.  
Girl! GIRL!? THE GIRL: Sir?  
THE BROTHER: Dance.  
THE GIRL: Dance?  
THE BROTHER: Dance! Come on!  
I'll clap time.  
(*The Brother claps time. The Girl dances.*)

THE MAN: An "African  
Dancing Princess"? THE BROTHER: The  
Britsll eat it up.  
Oh, she'd make a splendid freak.  
THE MAN: A freak?  
THE BROTHER: Thats what they  
call em  
"freaks," "oddities," "curiosities."

Perhaps, Parks aims at exposing and creating awareness on the consequences of racism and sex slavery in the western world. In order to achieve this, Parks reconstructs Saara Baartman to depict the pain and agony associated with forced sexual activities. However, it is discovered that forced sexual activities of girls for commercial sex works have psychological or emotional implications that impinge on their growth, health and general well-being. The victims are oftentimes seen as social misfits and outcasts of the society; hence, this affects them psychologically or emotionally since people do not want to associate with individuals that have been trafficked and sexually exploited. In essence, the strong negative stereotype is attached to victims who are viewed as a disgrace to their family and country.

masturbates while embracing her:

THE MAN: Of course. Of  
course.  
THE GIRL: Can I stop, Sir?  
THE BROTHER: No no keep up.  
Fasted Ha hat  
(I still don't recognize her.)  
THE MAN: (She nlight. know you  
though.  
Their kind remember  
everything.) THE BROTHER: (I've grown a beard  
since then.) THE MAN: Thats true.  
THE BROTHER: Stop dancing. Stop! THE  
GIRL: Stopped.  
THE BROTHER: Girl?  
THE GIRL: Sir.  
THE BROTI-IER: How would you like to go  
to England? THE GIRL: England! Well.  
"England." What's that?  
THE BROTHER: A big town. A boat rides  
away.  
Where the streets are paved with gold.  
THE GIRL: Gold, Sir?  
THE BROTHER: Come to England. Dance a  
little. THE GIRL: Dance?  
THE BROTHER: Folks watch. Folks clap.  
Folks pay you gold. THE GIRL: Gold.  
THE BROTHER: We'll split it 50-50...Half  
for me half for you. May I present to you "The  
African Dancing Princess."

## 9. OPPOSING THE PSEUDOSCIENTIFIC BELIEF OF WHITE SUPREMACY

To ensure that black African women are emancipated, Parks opposed the pseudoscientific belief of White supremacy. She disapproves the belief of empirical proof that puts a particular race different and, therefore, above others. It is believed in the western world that the white men are biologically superior to black and the blacks are not with but some biological organs that the whites do not possess. It is on this notion that Parks represent how the American society uses Saara as a biological specimen and "wondrous freak". After his conspiracy that led to Saara's imprisonment, the Baron Docteur made sure that her corpse was dissected in the science and immortalized as a biological specimen. Thus, it can be concluded that to the white people, the black woman is not more than an animal used for scientific empirical research. Although there may be claims that approve this scientific postulation, it seems naive

for one to agree. Therefore, Parks has launched a campaign against the African American females' domination in the west through disapproving such scientific claims in her plays.

#### 10. REWRITING THE HISTORY OF BLACK AFRICAN WOMEN

The narratives of black Africans in the western society has also been negative, always portrayed as the "other" and subservient. The west is well known for depicting a stereotypical story that favours its audience. These kinds of narratives on Black Africans in the western literary canon are in most cases half-truths or, at worst, untrue. African American females also suffer from these narrative injustices. Therefore, the narratives need to be changed and told from different perspectives. Rewriting the stories remain the only alternative for black writers to correct these injustices of the western giant masterpieces. Parks and other African American female writers use their writings to voice as well to unveil the cruelty of the western world against the African American females. *Venus*, in particular, exposes the brutally harsh and aggressively hostile nature of the European societies, which, according to Hassan (2019), "it is still practised today and coloured by the arbitrary discourse of scientism and discourteous curiosity of the "other." Parks also moves on to showcase Western Mentality of putting its people as supernatural, remarkable and startling against the black Africans. In *Venus*, Parks sets to rekindle our consciousness against this imposed inferiority complex for she is able to bring to the surface the humiliation and segregation on the African American females to the pages of history in America. 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).

*Venus* is an attempt to recall the actual story of Saara Bartmann, a South African Khoikhoi lady who was taken to Europe to be exhibited as a freak show attraction because of her rare large sexual organs under the name "Hottentot Venus". Philip C. Kolin (2010) notes that the play intends not to

give accurate history, but rather uses the concept of Baartman's career to explore racism and objectification; as Parks explained, "most of its fabricated...its questioning the history of history...it embraces the unrecorded truth" (78). In the 1997 first edition of *Venus*, Parks writes that she learned about the "Hottentot Venus" at a cocktail party; she explains that she was eavesdropping on a conversation and "bells started going off in my head and I knew this Saartjie Baartman woman was going to end up in a play of mine" (166). Her play(s) focuses on how women's issues are blurred by the consequences of prejudice based on ethnicity and racial differences.

Therefore, Parks, as mentioned earlier, writes this play to recreate Saartjie Baartman Venus in order to challenge the question of racism, inequality and discrimination faced by black women in America. This is akin to Spivak's postulation of subaltern which advocates for the rights of women in the patriarchal western society. She has achieved this by unveiling the injustices of the society upon Baartman Venus through some powerful literary tools, centring on the exploitations Venus suffered in the hands of the society and explicitly portraying them to bring the issue to limelight and provide the basis for a campaign to eradicate it. In addition, Parks uses *Venus* to tell the larger story about Bartman and her experience of being exhibited in London, Paris, and posthumously in the Musee de l'Homme. McCormick (2014) contends that Parks creates dynamic in *Venus* that requires the audience to shift its perspective constantly and to think continually about its participation in the spectacle.

In doing so, Parks also provides a larger context for her subversive depiction of the complex relationship between the violent, misogynist white and the segregated, discriminated black. It is in this regard that the play can be situated on the banner of postcolonial feminism which bases its tenets on political demands of "nationalism, socialist feminism, liberalism, and ecofeminism, alongside the social challenge of everyday patriarchy, typically supported by its institutional and legal discrimination: of domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape, honour killings, dowry deaths, female foeticide, child abuse" (Young, 2003). 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. If not for the recreation of Venus Hottentot by Parks that black

women were sexually exploited in the west, several people may not have gotten the actual picture of her (Saara Baartman) story. People may have mistaken her to be the object she has been portrayed as. But Parks gives a sense of humanity and decency. In a particular scene, when asked have you “ever been indecent?” 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”).

### 11. RECREATING IDENTITY FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALES

Identity has been a central issue in the literary discourse of black Africans in the diaspora; this issue is highly contentious and still relevant. The Eurocentric view of black Africans is one that denies them of their identity. This is simply because the white society lives in a binary line divided by race: the superior whites and the blacks. Parks is one of novelists, essayist, poets and playwrights who embark to a journey of unveiling the commonness that exists between blacks and white people. They converge on a task that will redefine and re-establish the black race with dignity and pride. She uses her pen to introduce other possible ways for fellow African Americans to reconstruct their identity through theatre, and this seems to be a better platform than the much-celebrated form of narration as it involves live performance which has a direct effect on the audience. However, many critics believe that Parks also represent the oppression of African Americans but she often disagrees with them.

In her seminal essay, “Elements of Style” Parks explains that she is a woman writer with African blood running in her veins and that is what informs the choice of her form, style and even content. This sheds light on the centrality of two forces that contributed to the success of this play: black and woman, and these two forces aid in monopolizing the discrimination of African American female in the white 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).

The two most important themes with which Parks shows the audience her characters temperaments are racism and gender. It can be concluded that her main focus here is not the just the representation of race and gender biases, rather the way in which their elements signal the widening of the already disparity that exists in the American society. 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. Therefore, gender narratives vis-à-vis African American female is key to understanding the role of biological construction of a woman. This is a universal subject of contention in social and political discourse. The complexities and intricacies involved in the exposure of women’s bodies on stage performance constitute “part of a complicated system of patriarchal referents” 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 19th 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.).

Parks explores the oppression and suppression of African American women in western societies as depicted in her play, *Venus* to campaign against western subjugation and provide the basis for emancipating the African American females. She talks to her the audience in a language that shows *Venus* is a product of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. 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. “I don’t think the world likes women much,” Venus said at the peak of

facing humiliation in patriarchal societies of London and Paris. She believes that all bad things happen to her because of her race and gender. This forces her to violently destroy 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 represented in African American women 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.

## 12. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The aim of the paper is to examine Suzan Lori Park's play, *Venus* to investigate ways in which black African women could be emancipated from discrimination, exploitation and oppression in western societies using post-colonial feminism. The study found that through embracing education, creating awareness on racism and objectification of African-American woman, opposing the pseudoscientific belief of white supremacy, rewriting the history of black African women and recreating identity for African-American females, these women could be free from discrimination and oppression.

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