

## Archeology of Racism in Suzan Lori Parks's *Venus*

آثار العنصرية في سوزان لوري باركس "فينوس"

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### Abstract:

Racism is still an ongoing critical concern governing the relationship between the white and black people in the history of English Literature. It is a reflection for the ethnic and the color conflicts between these two entities of the American society. Throughout time, the differences in race and skin color regulate the relationships between them. Many writers talked about the different forms of racism; physical and verbal violence, transgression, injustice, slavery ...etc. One of them is Suzan Lorie Parks who approaches the problem of race in her plays. Past studies examined the racist attitudes in Parks's plays. However, this article examines the racist manipulation of black woman's body and the way of resisting this racist behavior in *Venus* (1996). Methodologically, the research examines the performative dimension of Parks's archeological endeavor to locate racism in her play. She uses digging in history as her main archeological and dramatic tool in revealing the unrecorded and forgotten parts of racist history. Therefore, the study concludes that through highlighting the exploitation of black women bodies, Parks succeeds in rehistorizing the African American history by bringing unremembered and unrecorded characters into the stage. Thus, she challenges the oversimplified and binary discourse of racism in her *Venus*.

**Keywords:** Racism, Susan Lori Parks, Venus, black woman, slavery.

**المستخلص:**

لا تزال العنصرية مصدر قلق بالغ الأهمية يحكم العلاقة بين البيض والسود في تاريخ الأدب الإنجليزي. وهو انعكاس للصراعات العرقية واللونية بين هذين الكيانين من المجتمع الأمريكي. على مر الزمن، تنظم الاختلافات في العرق ولون البشرة العلاقات بينهما. تحدث العديد من الكتاب عن الأشكال المختلفة للعنصرية مثل العنف الجسدي واللفظي والتعدي والظلم والاسترقاق ... إلخ. وواحدة من هؤلاء الكتاب هي سوزان لوري باركس التي تناولت مشكلة العرق في مسرحياتها. تناولت الدراسات السابقة المواقف العنصرية في مسرحيات باركس. ومع ذلك، تبحث هذه المقالة في التلاعب العنصري بجسد المرأة السوداء وطريقة مقاومة هذا السلوك العنصري في مسرحية "فينوس" (1996). من الناحية المنهجية، يدرس البحث البعد الأدائي لمساعي باركس لتحديد مكان العنصرية في مسرحيتها حيث تستخدم التنقيب في التاريخ كأداة أثرية ودرامية رئيسية في الكشف عن الأجزاء غير المسجلة والمنسية من التاريخ العنصري. لذلك، خلصت الدراسة إلى أنه من خلال تسليط الضوء على استغلال أجساد النساء السود، نجحت باركس في إعادة تأريخ التاريخ الأمريكي الأفريقي من خلال جلب شخصيات غير مسجلة ومنسية إلى المسرح. وهكذا، فهي تتحدى الخطاب الثنائي المبسط للعنصرية في مسرحية "فينوس".

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** العنصرية، سوزان لوري باركس، فينوس، النساء السود، العبودية.

**Introduction**

Suzan Lorie Parks was born in 1963 in the United States. She is a dramatist and novelist and is the first African American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama for her play *Topdog/ Unerdog* (2002). Being an African woman who lives in the racist society of America, she struggles to reshape and question not only her identity but the identities of the Africans Americans. Throughout her plays, she takes the responsibility of making a history for the blacks believing that there is a lack of space for the blacks in it. She expresses this opinion in an interview in 1994 saying that "I take issues with history because it doesn't serve me-it doesn't serve me because there isn't enough of it" (Saal, 1994, 26). She finds a solution for this historical problem by taking the responsibility of writing plays that challenge the frustration felt by such African American citizens and playwrights as well as facing this type of hegemonic historical oppression. Noticeably, in

America, the issue of racism is a complex and overlapped issue intersected with race, gender, and class. In a try to reflect authentically and to help the readers and audience to think more critically about these various issues, she re-historicizes African American history (Ghasemi, 2016). This endeavor needs a new technique to be represented on the stage. Figuratively, she uses digging as a main technique by which she reveals racist unremembered parts of history. In other words:

this radical attitude towards history bespeaks not only the playwright's frustration with a Western tradition that in the spirit of Hegel has tended to erase or subsume black history under the white sign, but, above all, her determination to challenge such hegemonic historiography by opposing it with her own. (Saal, 2015: 67)

### **Suzan Lorie Parks's *Venus***

The play, *Venus*, was written in (1996) and it is a pseudo-historical drama written by Suzan-Lori Parks. Like many other of her plays, she is “fundamentally concerned with the problem of history, especially the problem of the self in relation to history, i.e. the problem of identity.” (Wetmore & Howard, 2007: 2).

Parks portrayed a lady in South African, Venus, who was sent to England to be sold into slavery and later taken as a sideshow attraction in England. According to some historians “Baartman was brought to England illegally” (Holmes, 2008). Due to her protrusive posterior, she appeared on

public stage in a freaky show to “display this pathophysiological abnormality in her body” (Jasim, 2018:143). By the female character, Venus, Parks shows how selfish and racist the Westerns are when they put Venus on stage to act like an animal show. The play begins with the announcement of the death of the Venus Hottentot, who was displayed in the nineteenth century Europe as an anatomical curiosity.

The play is a real story of a South African woman who was sent to Europe in the early 19th century whose name is “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. What made her worthy of sustained attention was her ample buttocks which is named steatopygia, which Parks defines in the glossary included in Venus as “an excessive development of fat on the buttocks, especially of females, which is common among the so-called Hottentots and some Negro peoples” (qtd in Giroux, 2013: 134). Parks heard about Baartman at a party and thought of writing about her. Although, the play is about a real character but Suzan incorporates unreal and fabricated characters and events to suit the theme and concern of the play. Historically speaking, Saartjie Baartman was taken to Europe from Africa during the colonial era and exposed to public view in the early 19th 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 (Jasim, 2018). Venus was exploited two times, one time by a director of the freak show named the Mother-Showman and then by the Baron Docteur, who claimed loving her but ultimately her body dissected to

retain the specific anatomical data (Tadokoro, 2021). Her story aroused issues of colonialism, racism, human rights, and feminism. The play *Venus* exposes “the cruelty of the western mentality which is still practiced today and colored by the arbitrary discourse of scientism and discourteous curiosity of the “other” (Jasim, 2018: 144).

### **Parks’s Hisrtoriopoesis**

In 1994, the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks declared that there is a prevalent lack of black historiography in one of the interviews. She proposes to remedy the situation by "making up some history," or more precisely a history thft "serves" her, and consider its implications for asserting contemporary black identities” (ibid). In most of her plays, she repeatedly “probes the implications of history's "fabricated absences" for contemporary African American lives” (Drukman, 1995: 67). In her *Venus*, Parks portrays African American women facing the racism, discrimination and inequality in the western societies. She aesthetically reveals various challenges obstacles the progress and self- fulfilment of the African American women through the heroine of her play.

Parks is a distinctive dramatist in her approach to the past and in her search for racism. She uses a special mechanism in her engagement with the black past-particularly her deployment of the trope of "digging”. This approach is termed “hisrtoriopoesis” and she wants to:

conceptualize the distinctive new quality in her approach to the past. The term is to highlight the performative dimension of Parks's notion

of historiography-the making (poiesis) of history through poetic means-and to distinguish it from more conventionally mimetic approaches. (Saal, 2015, 68)

Digging in *Venus* is a distinctive form of racism which incorporates different issues of racism, gender, slavery, exploitation...etc. Parks focuses on the African female character's body, how it is utilized for freak shows and how did her parts of her body were kept for display even after her death. This didn't happen with males or white woman before. This gendered inequity and focus on the Hottentot people and on the female body indicate "a grim fascination [with Baartman], not as a missing link in a later evolutionary sense, but as a creature who straddled that dreaded boundary between human and animal" (Gould, 1985: 294). By constructing her main character on a historical figure, Parks repaints the past with the present and represents the events concluded in the past as something which continues to the present. This is truly the act of "re-membering" the history of the Africans, which Parks aims for in her playwriting. However, this also becomes one reason why Parks gets criticized as being complicit in colonial oppression and exploitation by repeating the history of colonization and racism by re-acting it on the stage. But what Parks does is depicting Venus as a "victim" on the stage by arguing that she is repeatedly exposed to the people's gaze and being exploited. However, by this historical character, Venus Hottentot, Parks 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?", Venus replies, "Never. No. I am just me...To hide your shame is evil. I show mine". Here, Parks taking role in the painful process for the empowerment of Africans by treating them as humans with choice, instead of freaks of

amusement. Parks doing this by objectifying her and digging up her past. In a figurative sense, digging serves as one of Parks's primary tools in her archaeological endeavor to "locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down". (Saal, 2015: 68)

### **Digging Up Past, Digging Up Racism in Parks's *Venus***

Parks's *Venus* starts with the announcement of the death of its main character, Baartman who is named later on in the play 'Venus' as Parks attributes her lines of dialogue at the beginning of the play to 'The Venus Hottentot' whereas later to 'The Venus'. The most repeated refrain is the line "The Venus Hottentot iz dead". Parks perhaps would need reminding the audience throughout the performance of her death. The character, Negro Resurrectionist announces that, "I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead" and "There won't b inny show tonite" (Venus, 1997:3). Venus, is an African American woman. She is used by Parks in the play to elucidate the plight of black women in western societies. She is depicted as a marginalized, objectified, and subjected character. Throughout *Venus*, Parks emphasizes the ways in which society "objectified Baartman and robbed her of her chosen identity". (Giroux, 2013: 138)

After having travelled to England and after having been exhibited throughout the countryside, the character Baartman agrees to an offer made by Baron Docteur to move to France and to become an oddity on display there. She is longing to get profits to improve and change her position as an African woman, in other words, an object. Parks describes Baartman's wish as an opportunity to "Move in a better circle' (Venus, 92). Baartman expresses financial gaining when she announces in the play that her fee is '100 a week' (92). She is looked at by people in the shows and museum and

by Baron Docteur who was infatuated by her when she was displayed. Therefore, she is an object, looked at, whereas the watchers and Baron Docteur, the lookers, are the subject. In this sense, he is the self and she is always the other (Wetmore & Howard, 2007). So, from the beginning of the play the fact that Venus' body is utilized to earn money in freak shows. However, in contrast to this declaration of her death, her body is presented on the stage. It is like an invitation to look and gaze more on her body which arises at the same time the unconscious complicity of racism and colonialism inside the audience. (Elm & Rayner, 2001)

Venus as the main African woman character is exploited in the play as in reality. She was exploited two times. Venus was first exploited by the Mother Showman who is the owner of exhibition in which The Venus' body was displayed to people in her freak shows to profit from her nominal body. She and others were used to earn money by exhibiting them from city to city. Without paying her fairly for this it can be claimed that she was exploited and enslaved by this lady. (Putri, 2020) The first time by Mother-Showman. She bought her from The Mans Brothers who takes advantage of her sexually. The brother subsequently sells her to The Mother-Showman, who, in turn, features Baartman as The Venus Hottentot in her traveling circus/freak show. Parks expresses Venus' exploitation and racial oppression as a black woman, her attraction in the Overture as such:

An ass to write home about. Well worth the admission price... Coco candy colored and dressed all in au naturel She likes the people peek and poke. (Venus, 7)

In this excerpt, Parks uses the term ‘ass’ as a pun both to mean buttocks and the animal, two prominent images in this play. The term ‘coco’ also appears as a pun, which means ‘buttocks’ and also refers to a style of African-influenced musical show. It also stands for the abbreviation of coconut palm, and it recalls hot chocolate (Ghasemi, 2016:7). Moreover, the word of ‘coco’ signifies the remarkable back or the past of exploitation of the blacks by the whites. They have been exploited aggressively in the same way. Coco has been exploited throughout history for profit or pleasure.

This system of exploitation is symbolized by the numbers and letters assigned to the cities where Venus and the Mother-Showman visit for the freak show. This fact is expressed by The Negro Resurrectionist, a character in and also the narrator of this play, announces, “Town A! Town B! Town C! Town E! / Town 25! Town 36! Town 42! Town 69!” (Venus, 58). These letters and numbers is a very clear indication to the variety and big numbers of the cities and town travelled by Venus in the journey of her exploitation by the westerns. As the Mother-Showman and all the freaks including Venus travel to many places in the world, it does not matter where they really are. That is to say:

in the routine of the freak show tour, the Mother-Showman treats the city as a market for the show, transforming it into a simple signifier, an act that ignores the features of the locality. Hence, Venus is nothing but a tool for the freak-show in this structure of capitalism where business is repeatedly conducted

without any interest in the localities.  
(Tadokoro, 2021:43)

Parks shows how others systematically and literally controlling and manipulating The Venus's movements and life. She became a slave who does what she was asked to do. She was ordered to do things such as cleaning and dancing and she did and when asked to stop, she did:

The Brother: Dance.

The Girl: Dance.

The Brother: Dance! Come in!

I'll clap time.

The Brother claps time.

The Girl dances.

The Brother: stop dancing. Stop!

The Girl stopped. (Venus, 13-15)

And even when was asked to lift her skirt in the freak shows, Venus did "For now, lift up yr skirt" (Venus, 23), she did not refuse "She lifts her skirt" (Venus,23) The same case with The Mother-Showman, she likewise forces her to dance (24.44), as well as resorts to kicking her (24.45), as a means of enlivening her performance. Though, The Venus tries to face her and be independent but she couldn't since she needs her protection. When she asked her for higher payment than the others in the shows, and a private place for her, The Mother Showman refused and threatened her. Though Venus told that she will leave the exhibition, she has no will to do so:

The Venus: I am out of here.

I'll make my own work.

I'm all decided.

The Mother –Showman: you should be arrested. You need Mother

Protection. (Venus, 55-56)

Venus is perceived as weak and passive that she couldn't do anything and takes a decision, therefore she didn't get anything money, room, clothes, and even food. (Putri, 2020) The desperate situations in which The Venus is weakened and exploited become more obvious in the play. Parks depicts her protagonist as an object when she was treated as an animal being in a cage in which The Mother-Showman's keeps (21.61) She is not only caged abut worse than this, she is chained like an animal as Parks describes "Not caged but chained like a dong in the yard. (Venus, 146) Her physical movement is limited through cages and chains which is an indication of physical suffering and agony. Thus, The Venus is slaved when she has no will and control on her body. she is even deprived of the earnings of her labor in shows as she gets nothing. (Giroux, 2013)

The Venus suffers different forms of oppression and humiliation. She is threatened by The Mother-Showman with rape when she demands food, clothes, and private room as she tells her that:

Next doors a smoky pub full of drunken men.

I just may invite them in one at a time

and let them fuck yr brains out. (Venus, 22.56)

The Venus suffers not only physically but more significantly, psychologically a lot by these different forms of racism such as exploitation, oppression, and humiliation. Paradoxically, she was noticed and looked at her body especially her ample bottom, but, no one cares about her feelings,

no one even notices her tears as Parks mentions this fact saying that “The things they noticed were quite various/But no one ever noticed her face was streamed with tears” (Venus, 47). Even her feelings were ignored when she was touched by the scientists as she tells The Baron Docteur about but he replied her that it is natural and part of their job to do so:

The Venus: They touch me sometimes.

When yr not looking.

The Baron Docteur: how could they not?

Touching you is well, it’s their job.

The Venus: they are lascivious.

The Baron Docteur: Jesus.

Don’t be hyperbolic. (Venus,139)

Venus is also exploited by The Baron Docteur who purchased her from The Mother-Showman and forced her into another form of servitude. He utilized her African unique and strange body. She becomes the object of his and the scientific community’s studies, and she is kept as his mistress. He regularly presents her for scholarly study at the Academy since she has ample buttocks which is named steatopygia, Thus, her body is exposed and gazed by the other like in freak shows of The Mother-Showman though for different purposes. The Venus complains that they always dine in and that when they do go out, it is within a closed carriage (9.126). Indeed, throughout the play, “Parks shows others as systematically and literally controlling and manipulating The Venus’s movements” (Giroux, 2013: 139). The Baron Docteur oppressed her many times for his sakes in the play. The Venus loves him but unfortunately is one-side love. Although he has a relationship with her, but he was worried about his position and reputation. Moreover, he has a

wife. After a long time of staying together, he does not care about her feelings what does he care about is his career. He tells her that:

The Baron Docteur: you can't stay here forever you know.

The Baron Docteur: ive got a wife. you've got a homeland and a family back there.

The Venus; I don't wanna go back innny more.... (Venus,105)

When he finished his studies, he kicked her like a pet to a jail even though she is pregnant. He does not care and treats her like an animal saying:

She is pregnant

The Baron Docteur: God. Is there anything can do about it.

Ive a wife. A career.

A reputation. Is there anything we can do about it we together in

The privacy of my office.

Ive got various equipments in here.  
(Venus,128)

He did dump The Venus out by the help of the Grade-School Chum by finding an excuse to kick her into the jail by charging her as being indecent:

the Grade-School Chum: "indecency!"

We could clap her into jail for that.

.....

the Grade-School Chum: she's just a 2-bit  
sideshow freak. (Venus,143-144)

Being objectified, Venus throughout the play tries to improve her status and be a subject by assimilating herself as a black and be white. She declares this in the play when she is asked by the chorus of the court whether she is free in displaying her body to the gaze of the others or not she says:

The Chorus of the Court: . . . Are you here of  
yr own free will or are you Creating Venus on  
Stage under some restraint?  
The Venus: Im here to make a mint. . . . Good  
people. Let me stay. . . . If Ibear thuh bad mark  
what better way to cleanse it off? Showing my  
sinful person as a caution to you all could, in  
the Lords eyes, be a sort of repentance and I  
could wash off my dark mark. I came here  
black. Give me the chance to leave here white.  
(Venus, 75-76)

She confesses that she chooses to make money by exposing herself at the freak show. Furthermore, she exposes her desire to transform herself from black to white by becoming the lover of the Baron Docteur. She dreams of going back to her hometown stating firmly, "I dont wanna go back innny more" (Venus, 105). Venus has the illusion of assimilating and even transforming herself to white, winning the position of the Baron Docteur's legal wife. Very clearly, she looks for a new identity in which "she can assimilate herself into Western society, eliminating her racial identity as an African Khoikhoi woman" (Tadokoro, 2021: 45). In fact, whatever she tries to do to assimilate herself, she won't gain identity other than hers. Thus, her dreams are clear indication of her suffering from racism. It can be said that though she chooses to be looked and gazed at by others for money gaining,

she is still a victim of racial discrimination. Thus, “Baartman was a victim, not an accomplice, not a mutual participant in this demeaning objectification . . .” (qtd. in Thompson, 2007: 175). It is not her decision-making but the economic factor.

At the play’s end, her lover leaves her in the cold—clapped in the clap allegedly with the clap—for twenty-three days to die (Overture, 3), The Venus remains as mentioned “chained like a dog” (7. 146). Additionally, during the scenes involving her trial in England, Parks describes court officials as keeping her separate from the proceedings, placed in a jail cell at one time (Venus,65) and a cage at another (Venus. 74). By the end, The Venus regretfully says:

I would live here I thought but only for uh  
minute!  
Make a mint.  
Had plans to.  
He had a beard.  
Big bags of money!  
Where wuz I?  
Fell in love. Hhh.  
Tried my hand at French.  
Gave me a haircut  
And thuh claps. (159)

Though Venus tries to be rich and acquire new identity, her dreams have been deferred. She has suffered mental and physical suffering to improve her status but in vain. Venus was a tool to make money for others not hers, she has not achieved her goals. Rather, she and her body:

have been abused to postulate racist theories in order to justify black racial inferiority and to protect systems of oppression. The use of the phrase “thuh clap” as a pun in the excerpt

implies both applause and the sexually transmitted infection, used colloquially for “gonorrhoea”. (Ghasemi, 2016: 8)

Noticeably, by this play, Parks is resurrecting Venus’ character but putting her body on the stage to be looked at. She is neither alive nor dead “caught between the texts of Baartman’s life and the illusions of theatrical representation” (Tadokoro, 2021: 44). By digging the past of Baartman’s Life, she is digging racism and oppression of the whites against the blacks. Refiguring her body symbolizes Parks’ opposition to colonial exploitation and dehumanization. On the other hand, the play represents and re-inscribes these same systems of oppression and degradation by putting her once again on display before the gaze of an audience (Elam & Rayner, 2001: 267). Parks’s play denounces the dominant ideologies used in the past to deprive the African women their rights by shifting attention to historical figures and characters trapped within the systems of racism and oppression (Ghasemi, 2016: 9). Parks has concentrated on crafting provocative plays that represent and emphasize the question of identities for African Americans. In other words, Parks manages to call into question dominant race limits in her plays. It is right to say that, she re-historicizes African American history by blending it with her creative and imaginative abilities. Parks, by *Venus*, presents an archeology of the racist history against the black people, especially the African women bodies.

## Conclusion

*Venus* is a pseudo-historical drama by which Parks reconstructs history to deal with the issue of racism. In this play, Parks digs the past in an attempt to show deliberately how racism effected the lives of so many black people, negating them the possibility of individual personal development. In this

play, racist attitudes and acts are exercised against Baartman, the major character. The white people brought Baartman to London under dubious circumstances if not illegally and put her on display, used her for economic gain and to further their careers. Parks borrowed a real character to highlight the issue of racism. She did not choose to write a biography or history but to re-historicize to write about discrimination and exploitation of the western societies to the blacks. She portrays an image of a black woman who is inhumanly maltreated by the social system in a society that considers Africans as outcasts. Venus, the protagonist, is oppressed by western society in London and Paris. Thus, the study concludes that Parks employed the body of black woman as a site of resistance through reenacting its exploitation and through rehistoricizing of African American history via her archeological digging into the racist history.

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