

## African American Woman Representation in Suzan Lori Parks's "Venus"

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### Abstract:

The twentieth century period is viewed from many cultural. Economic and political perspectives with deep relevance to literature. There are important events which swept the modern world such as the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia, the First World War (1914-1918), the great economic depression of the 1930s in the United States of America, and the Second World War (1939-1945). It is good to mention that other events include the Cold War and the arms race, the predominance of America as a world power, the collapse of the Communist bloc by 1989 and of the Soviet Union in 1991. All these clashing factors generate new trends in the global community such as the emergence of the women's movement and rights; the growth of various labour parties throughout Europe, and their struggle on behalf of the working classes. Not forgetting the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which is led by Martin Luther King, who is assassinated in 1968. This movement is deeply reflected and expressed in African American literature. These movements and trends have a vivid influence on the distinctions and interests of class, gender, race, nation and religion in modern life.

The African American writers are aware of the devastating movements and events that reshape modern literature and express social dilemma of modern life. Thus, modern African American Women playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry (1930- 1965), Alice Childress (1912-1994), Lynn Nottage (1964- ), Suzan Lori Parks ( 1963- ) portray woman as a real human being with fortified identity. African American womanhood stereotype is reshaped from the subservient and fragile image into a vital and authentic visage in the modernized world. Suzan Lori Parks in her *Venus* 1996 tries to bring the past into the present with an up to date vision. *Venus* is a history play where the heroine Venus is taken as a slave black woman from the south of Africa to work as a show off woman in Europe. She is victimized and deeply exploited due to her black color and gender. The paper tries via the African American criticism theory to assert Venus dilemma as a black woman in a savage world.

**Keywords:** *African American Woman, Venus, Twentieth Century Period, Suzan Lori Parks.*

## صورة المرأة الأمريكية من أصل أفريقي في مسرحية فينوس لسوزان لوري باركس

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### الخلاصة

يمكن رؤية فترة القرن العشرين من عدة جوانب مثل الثقافية والاقتصادية والسياسية حيث لها صلة عميقة بالأدب. هناك أحداث مهمة اجتاحت العالم الحديث مثل الثورة البلشفية عام 1917 في روسيا، والحرب العالمية الأولى (1914-1918)، والكساد الاقتصادي الكبير في ثلاثينيات القرن العشرين في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، والحرب العالمية الثانية (1939-1945). ومن الجيد أن نذكر أن الأحداث الأخرى تشمل الحرب الباردة وسباق التسلح، وهيمنة الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية على العالم بأعتمارها قوة عالمية، وانهيار الكتلة الشيوعية بحلول عام 1989 وانهيار الاتحاد السوفييتي في عام 1991. كل هذه العوامل المتضاربة أوجدت اتجاهات جديدة في المجتمع العالمي مثل ظهور حركة المرأة وحقوقها؛ والظهور القوي إلى أحزاب العمال المختلفة في جميع أنحاء أوروبا، ونضالها نيابة عن الطبقات العاملة. ولا ننسى هنا حركة الحقوق المدنية في الخمسينيات والستينيات، التي قادها مارتن لوثر كينج، الذي اغتيل في عام 1968. وتنعكس هذه الحركة وتتجلى بعمق في الأدب الأمريكي الأفريقي. وتؤثر هذه الحركات والاتجاهات بشكل واضح على التمييزات والمصالح في الطبقات والجنسين والعرق والأمة والدين في الحياة الحديثة.

إن الكتاب الأميركيين من أصل أفريقي على دراية بالحركات والأحداث المتفاقمة التي أعادت صياغة شكل الأدب الحديث وعبرت عن المعضلة الاجتماعية للحياة العصرية. وبالتالي، فإن كاتبات المسرح الأميركيين من أصل أفريقي مثل لورين هانسبيرري (1930-1965)، وأليس تشيالدرس (1912-1994)، ولين نوتاج (1964-معاصرة)، وسوزان لوري باركس (1963-معاصرة) يصورن المرأة كإنسان حقيقي له هوية قوية. حيث تم إعادة صياغة الصورة النمطية للمرأة الأميركية من أصل أفريقي من الصورة الخاضعة والضعيفة إلى

صورة المرأة القوية والفاعلة في الحياة العصرية. تحاول سوزان لوري باركس في مسرحيتها فينوس 1996 دمج الماضي مع الحاضر برؤية حديثة. فينوس هي مسرحية تاريخية حيث يتم أخذ البطلة فينوس كعبدة سوداء من جنوب إفريقيا للعمل كامرأة استعراضية في أوروبا. لقد تعرضت للاضطهاد والاستغلال بسبب لونها الاسود وجنسها. تحاول هذه الورقة البحثية، من خلال نظرية النقد الافريقية الامريكية التأكيد على معضلة فينوس باعتبارها امرأة سوداء في عالم متوحش.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المرأة الامريكية من أصل افريقي، فينوس، حقبة القرن العشرين، سوزان لوري باركس.

## 1.1 Introduction

Kerstin Schmidt (1971- ) discusses in her “*The Theater of Transformation Postmodernism in American Drama*”, that the twentieth century underwent significant changes as a result of World War I, World War II, and their subsequent effects.[1] These events likely transformed human society more deeply than any other comparable period. In hindsight, this era can be regarded as a sort of Golden Age, marked by new trends and movements that influenced the modern world. As usual, literature profoundly engages with the emerging cultural and literary theories of the time. Consequently, modern playwrights strive to present their subjects and themes through contemporary perspectives. African American women playwrights, in particular, vividly express their interests in historical issues such as racism, equality, colonization, and the rights of African American women, along with other everyday concerns.[2]

Brenda Murphy in her book “*The Cambridge Companion to American*

*women playwrights*”, argues that Suzan Lori Parks tries to reflect in her authentic style the real daily problems of the African American woman in the modernized world of the United States of America. A world which is affected by various clashing factors such as racism, gender marginalization, a male dominating society besides domestic limitations. In her plays Suzan addressed these issues and sheds light on their side effects on the human psyche. Thus, her dramas show an up to date subjects with real people with their ups and downs. Her characters are blend of modern stereotypes revealing the positive and negative aspects in modern America.[3]

Philip C. Kolin in her book “*Suzan Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works*” comments that Parks in her “Venus” 1995, introduces a black woman who is exploited by other people due to her race and gender. The injustices Venus faces stem from both female exploitation and enslavement, framed through cunning codification and utilitarianism. The play addresses the story of an

African American woman called Venus Hottentot. She is taken to London to work in a freak show, then she is used as a sexual object to be presented naked on stage. The audience looks at her and eagerly examining her body. Parks tries via Venus to come across contemporary discourses on race through exploration and female entrapment during the Nineteenth Century era. Eventually, the surrounding characters to Venus sell her to a doctor who also uses her for his own scientific experiments. Tragically, after her death, the doctor preserves her body for exhibition. The play confirms female right to live and to prove herself regardless to race, gender, class, place, and time. Parks emphasizes that Venus is beautiful despite her Blackness, suggesting that her unique beauty captivated others, leading to her exploitation even after her death.[4]

## 1.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip C. Kolin refers that Suzan Lori Parks is born on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1963 in Fort Knox in Kentucky in the United States of America. Her father is Donald McMillian Parks is a colonel in the United States Army who served in Vietnam. Her mother is Francis McMillian Parks is a university lecturer and social activist. Suzan has a brother and a sister. Her English accent reflects the distinctive dialect of West Texas, where she spent her childhood. In 1974, the family moved to Germany due to her

father's military assignment, and there, Parks attended local schools and became fluent in German. During this time, her artistic talent flourished, and she developed a deep appreciation for mythology and folklore, which inspired her to pursue her dream of becoming a writer.[5]

Kevin J. Wetmore Jr., and Alycia Smith-Howard, in their book “*Suzan-Lori Parks: A Casebook*” comment that Suzan entered Mount Holyoke College in 1981, where she met the versatile writer, James Baldwin. She demonstrated a remarkable talent for poetry and prose. Then, Baldwin encouraged her to focus on literature, leading her to study fiction writing. Parks earned her BA degree in drama from Mount Holyoke College in 1985. Following Baldwin's advice, she continued her theater studies to enhance her skills as a playwright, attending the London Drama Studio School, where she graduated with a professional degree. Her literary works are mixture of plays, screenplays, poems and novels. Her prominent plays are *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1989), *Devotees in the Garden of Love* (1992), *New American Play* (1994), *Venus* (1996), *In The Blood* (1999), *Topdog/Underdog* (1999), *Unchain My Heart* (2007), *The Book of Grace* (2010), *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (2014), *White Noise* (2019), *Sally and Tom* (2022), *The Harder They Come* (2023).[6]

Kevin J. Wetmore Jr., and Alycia Smith Howard highlight that Parks' major themes resonate with everyday struggles, addressing issues such as race, class, gender roles, drug addiction, romantic relationships, human sacrifice, self-denial, self-strife, the rights of Black women, and self-recognition within contemporary American society. She also demonstrates a deep interest in African American cultural heritage and history. Parks has received numerous awards, particularly in drama, including the Obie Award for Drama for the years 1990 and 1996, Pulitzer Prize Drama for the years 2002 and 2015, Tony Award for Best Play Revival 2023. In 2001, Parks married the musician Paul Oscher; but they divorced in 2010. However, in 2017 she gets married to Christian Konopka and they have one child. Currently, she teaches playwriting at New York University, Tisch School of the Arts Faculty, Department of Dramatic Writing.[7]

### 1.3 Suzan Lori Parks's "*Venus*" (1996)

Philip C. Kolin examines Suzan Lori Parks's "*Venus*" (1996), a historical play structured in 31 scenes presented in reverse order, starting with scene 31 and concluding with scene 1. The setting of the play is in London during the Nineteenth Century period. The play tells the story of Sarah Saartjie Baartman, a Southern African girl who is brought to

London by a tradesman under the false promise of wealth and fame. Upon her arrival, she realizes that she has been sold to a sideshow owner known as The Mother Showman. Consequently, she is displayed nude on stage, earning the stage name "The Hottentot Venus" due to her physical appearance. She becomes tremendously popular and her name marks the hottest ticket in London. Eventually, people from all parts of Europe travel to see her naked body and wilde blackness.[8]

Kevin J. Wetmore Jr., and Alycia Smith-Howard, comment that the Nineteenth Century era, was marked by colonialism as a devastating force in Europe, alongside a culture of entertainment that exploited enslaved individuals and plantation workers. During this time, circus freak shows gained immense popularity in Britain, where Black women and enslaved people were often dehumanized and treated as mere exhibits. In this context, a man known as the Baron Docteur becomes deeply fascinated with Sarah, traveling frequently to witness her beauty and stage performances. He ultimately purchases her from The Mother Showman and makes her his mistress. After taking her to Paris, he begins to study her body. Unfortunately, Sarah contracts gonorrhea from the Baron, who later becomes enraged and arranges for her imprisonment for the rest of her life. After spending a short time in jail, she

dies in her cell. Following her death, the Baron exploits her remains for profit, displaying her skeleton and body parts at the Musée de l'Homme for financial gain.[9]

Philip C. Kolin in her *"Suzan Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works"* comments on the play stating that:

In Particular, Venus centers on the postmortem of a black woman's body, especially her private parts, making them the subject of grotesque spectacle. Words are an essential part of a white culture's transformation of black flesh into a commodified sexuality. The black woman's name, Saartjie Baartman, is stripped away and replaced by a new exploitative title, "the Venus Hottentot." Under that name, her body is paraded around as a circus freak.[10]

#### 1.4 The African American Criticism Theory

Charless E. Bressler in his book *"An Introduction to Theory and Practice"*, sheds light on the origins of the African American Criticism theory and its relevant to literature:

The growing interest in post colonialism in American literary theory during the late 1970s to the present helped propel a renewed interest in the works of African American writers and African

American literary theory and criticism. African American criticism challenges established ideologies, racial boundaries, and racial prejudice. It also acknowledges and incorporates the writings of past and often suppressed and forgotten African- American literature, the major historical movements that have influenced African-American writings, and both historical and current attitudes toward African-Americans themselves. [11]

Kerstin Schmidt (1971- ) truly emphasizes Suzan Lori Parks's commendation about her idea in regard to the African American cultural heritage and she states that:

So much of the discussion today in literary criticism [...] concerns how the African-American literary contribution should be incorporated into the canon. The history of Literature is in question. And the history of History is in question too. A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature. 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 playwright is to—through literature and the special

**relationship between theatre and real-life—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.[12]**

Charless E. Bressler thinks that eventually the African American criticism theory focuses on the various abuses perpetrated by white individuals against Black people in America, including racial discrimination and segregation. African American writers explore themes such as the struggle for independence, emigration, national heritage, slavery, the quest for identity, race, gender discrimination, the fight for equality, and women's rights. African American women playwrights asserted these ideas in their writings. They criticize the male dominating society in addition to racism, gender role, woman's personal freedom and equality with her peer man in a modernized world.[13]

### **1.5 African American Woman Representation in Suzan Lori Parks's "Venus"**

Debby Thompson in her "*Digging the Fo'-fathers Suzan-Lori Parks's histories*", highlights the historical and cultural components in the play:

**Foolhardy as it is to attempt to encapsulate Suzan-Lori Parks's aesthetic in three words, I offer the phrase "Digging the Fo'-fathers." This phrase gets at the primary activity of Parks's plays—digging—as well as at**

**their radical ambivalence towards the material that gets dug up. The resurrection and remembering of histories—painful and pleasurable, factual and fictional,**

**literal and figurative, simultaneously—are both the form and content of Parks's operating theatre. Playfully signifying on American and Western history through African American accents, Suzan-Lori Parks performs archaeologies and genealogies on contemporary racial discourses and identities.[14]**

Philip C. Kolin argues that Parks aims to recount the historical narrative of sexual exploitation and racial segregation faced by African American women, all under the guise of scientific progress. Parks transforms heartbreak into an aesthetic exploration of human freedom and dignity through her forms and presentations. The character Venus, whose name signifies beauty and allure, adds a unique dimension to the play. Her striking black beauty is juxtaposed with a deformity in her back, drawing attention to her naked body on stage. In this way, Parks uses Venus to address the challenges and dilemmas faced by Black women in European societies. [15] Parks shows Venus's exploitation and gender subjugation as a black woman; her naked body is described at the

beginning of the play in the Overture as an odd and whimsy:

**The Mother Showman:**

**Behind that curtain just yesterday awaited:**

**Wilde Female Jungle Creature. Of singular anatomy. Physique**

**in such a backward rounded way that she outshapes**

**all others. Behind this curtain just yesterday alive awaits**

**a female-creature**

**an out-of townner**

**whose all undressed awaiting you**

**to take yr peek. So you've heard. ( "Venus", Scene 31,p. 8).[16]**

Jorunn Svensen Gjerden et al., in "Exploring *the Black Venus Figure in Aesthetic Practices: Cross Cultures Readings in Post-Colonial Literatures and Cultures in English*" "believe that the amount of suspense placed on the part of the audience by the Mother Showman indicates the amount of superficiality and degradation that Venus envisaged in. The description highlights her naked body to the audience; still, it uncovers her caged soul and exploited humanity. Actually, Venus's state is associated with the ongoing effects of the African American diaspora issue and outcomes of slavery in western society.[17]

Heidi J. Holder in her "*Strange Legacy: The history plays of Suzan-Lori Parks*", *asserts* the importance of countdown dramatic technique used by Parks in the play as stated herewith:

**In Venus, the counting intensifies. And much of it involves the act of counting down. The very structure of the play is a counting down, with the 31 scenes announced to us by 'The Negro Resurrectionist' in reverse order; Scene 1, the last of the play, is in fact the 'Final Chorus'. As with the much more low-key counting of 'Prisms and Prunes', there is the momentum of the movement towards an event, in this case one that has apparently already happened: the death of the Venus Hottentot, Saartjie Baartman. If the death has in fact just occurred as the play begins, towards what are we moving?[18]**

Heidi J. Holder argues that Parks in the countdown scene technique invents a new dramatic style to assure the historical problem of the African American women in a savage world of enslavement and racial discrimination. Further, Parks uses the chorus as a vital dramatic device to comment on the play scenes and actions by this she succeeds to mimic the classical dramas written earlier by Sophocles and Euripides, yet in a newly invented dramatic manner.[19]

Jorunn Svensen Gjerden et al., clearly indicate that Parks make use of the



Spectacle dramatic technique to present the historical story of Venus with an up to date vision:

**Parks rewrites and reinterprets Sarah Baartman's well-known story by moving away from biographical attempts at historical accuracy in favour of making an engaged artistic statement. To do this, she focuses on the culture of spectacle that made it possible for Baartman to be exhibited as a spectacular "object." More precisely, Parks employs the aesthetic features of epic theatre that is spectacle in itself, to create a political play that requires the readers to choose their own position with regard to the spectacle of the black female body displayed as an object of curiosity, a freak, fully dispossessed of personhood and human rights.[20]**

Philip C. Kolin comments that the issue of diaspora identity and cultural heritage as portrayed in Suzan Lori Parks's "Venus" is deeply blended via the idea of the lost homeland. Parks's characters re-figure the language fragments they have, hoping that their words can be coined into lively elements in the play course of actions to erect genuine nationality. Through this mixture Parks relies on her spectators and tries to dive deep in the lost history of African Americans to come up with authentic images, reflections and variations of walking human beings.[21]

Debby Thompson confirms the role of the chorus in the play as stated hereby:

**The fact that The Chorus of the Court is played by the same cast as The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders as well as The Chorus of Spectators would seem to suggest a continuity between freak show and the Law, between spectacle and surveillance, with one transforming into the next as easily as the members of the Chorus transform their roles.[22]**

However, Parks deeply asserts the importance of the Chorus as a classical dramatic technique:

**The Chorus: Legend has it that The Girl was sent away from home. Those who sent her said she couldn't return for a thousand yrs. Even though she was strong of heart even she doubted she would live that long. After 500 years they allowed her to ask a question. She wanted to know what her crime had been. Simple: You wanted to go away once. hundred 99 of the years were finally up Just one more year to go. She had in all that time circled the globe twice on foot Saw 12 hundred thousand cities and had a lover or 2 in every port. She spent her last year of banishment living in a cave carved out Outside the city wall. She spent that whole year longing not looking but longing not looking. They let her go home right on time all of her**

**friends had died and well she didn't recognize the place. ("Venus", Scene 21, p. 58)**

Debby Thompson thinks that Parks heightens the focus of the play through reciting a song by the chorus to figuratively describe the original whereabouts of a girl as she firstly comes to the freak show. She is trapped for years in her plight and has no right to speak. She toured many cities in her trip which lasted for hundreds of years then finally reaching unrecognized place. Parks beats on the racism note to re-histories the African Americans journey from slavery to liberty.[23]

Parks indicates that Venus exploitation is also can be figuratively seen through the numbers and letters assigned to the places which she visits for the freak show:

**During this scene The Baron Docteur watches The Venus and the others from his chair. He grows more and more interested and watches more and more intently. The Venus, The Mother Showman and The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders stand in a knot. They are traveling. The Negro Resurrectionist: Town A! Town B! Town C! Town E! Town 25! Town 36! Town42! Town 69. ("Venus", Scene 21, p. 58)**

Jorunn Svensen Gjerden et al., suggest that the letters and numbers in Venus

symbolize the exhausting series of towns and cities that Venus visits during her exhibition journey. Notably, once Venus joins the freak shows and begins working for The Mother Showman's group, she gradually becomes its leading star; however, she receives no financial compensation for her efforts. Instead, The Mother Showman retains all the profits from the shows featuring Venus. Venus is provided only with food and shelter, enduring treatment that is both humiliating and demeaning.[24]

Heidi J. Holder discusses the symbolic significance of the Resurrectionist as a character in the play:

**The name of the Resurrectionist deserves comment, since it calls to mind the criminals of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who illegally disinterred corpses (and occasionally murdered people) in order to sell the bodies to medical schools (the best-known figures of this sort being the infamous Burke and Hare). The name links the Resurrectionist with the Baron Docteur and the Anatomists, suggesting that his character is not merely 'our host', as Parks calls him,<sup>1</sup> but someone who has a more participatory role. With his backward counting, he disinters the Venus for our edification.[25]**

Heidi J. Holder argues that Parks allegorically suggests that past is an

inseparable part of one's identity, and it cannot be escaped. She employs the character of the Resurrectionist as a broader symbol to illuminate historical events and figures in the lives of black individuals. The Resurrectionist by the end stands for those criminals during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries who used to sell the corpses of black people and in many occasions kill them to sell their bodies for Anatomists for their scientific studies. In this context, he is tasked with overseeing the handling of Venus's body after her death, alongside the Baron Docteur, in the final scenes of the play.[26]

**The Chorus of the Court: . . . Are you here of yr own free will or are you Creating Venus on Stage under some restraint?**

**Venus: I'm here to make a mint. . . . Good people. Let me stay. . . . If I bear 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, Scene 20, p. 75-76)**

Debby Thompson comments that Venus informs the Chorus of the Court that she chooses to work at the freak show to earn money. She reveals her desire to transform herself from a black woman into a white one, particularly as

she becomes the mistress of the Baron Docteur. Venus harbors high hopes of returning to her hometown as a changed person. With her affection for the Baron, she envisions a brighter future and begins to entertain the idea of becoming his legal wife. Parks suggests that Venus attempts to elevate her status and gain recognition by exchanging her identity as a black woman for that of a white woman. This is evident in the play when the Chorus of the Court questions her about her freedom to display her body for others to see. In response, she asserts her agency and perspective, highlighting her struggle for autonomy and recognition within a society that objectifies her.[27]

**Venus: He spends all his time with me because he loves me. He hardly visits her at all.**

**She may be his wife all right but she's all dried up. He is not thuh most thrilling lay I've had**

**but his gold makes up thuh difference and hhhh. I love him. He will leave that wife for good and we'll get married. (Venus, scene 7, p.135)**

Philip C. Kolin indicates that Venus is striving to achieve a new identity in order to navigate Western society. She desires to exchange her black identity as an African woman for that of a white woman, if not in spirit, then at least in appearance. However, her attempts and declarations ultimately prove fruitless, as

she remains rooted in her African identity. Additionally, her visible suffering from mistreatment and enslavement leads her to express her inner thoughts. In this process, she sees herself as a victim, at times as an actress seeking financial gain, and on other occasions as a woman in love who wishes to experience life from a female perspective.[28]

After buying Venus from the Mother Shawman, the Baron Docteur uses her to be his mistress at home. Despite his love declarations for her, he keeps her confined and he displays her for his peer doctors:

**Anatomist 8: That's excellent! And she's only been here what, Sir, 6 months?**

**The Baron Docteur: 6 months that's right.**

**Anatomist 8: Throws all of those throw-back theories back in the lake, I'd say. Throw em back in the lake!**

**The Baron Docteur: Not entirely, Gentlemen. We study a people as a group and don't throw away our years of labor because of one most glorious exception. ("Venus", Scene 12, p. 112)**

Philip C. Kolin argues that Venus is further exploited by the Baron Docteur who subjects her to a new form of enslavement. He utilizes her distinctive black body for his scientific experiments

and keeps her as his mistress. Additionally, he showcases her in separate scientific exhibits for his medical colleagues, particularly highlighting her curved ample buttocks, known as steatopygia. Her body is exposed and scrutinized by the Baron Docteur and his fellow doctors, much like in the freak shows run by The Mother Showman, but for different purposes this time. Parks emphasizes how Venus is dehumanized and subjugated by the scientific community rather than being liberated and respected.[29]

Jorunn Svensen Gjerden et al., deeply criticize the hypocrite nature of the Baron Docteur in relevant to his treatment and speech with Venus:

as Baron Docteur reads Venus' anatomical details from his notebook. Although he slept with her, made her pregnant and forced her to abort his babies several times, fed her chocolate, and admitted that: "She's my True Love. / She'd make uh splendid wife" (142), his notes are cold and clinical; at one point there was a comparison with chimpanzee and inferior primates (102), suggesting that Venus was merely an exotic, black body to him. The fact that the reader learns various details as a chronological fragment contributes to the sense of shock and detachment from Venus's situation precisely because they prevent

## identification and, thus, emotional catharsis.[30]

Jorunn Svensen Gjerden et al., argue that the Baron Docteur exploits Venus for his own needs and experiments throughout the play. Although she harbors a deep emotional love for him, he fails to reciprocate any genuine affection. While their relationship is physically intimate, Venus becomes pregnant, but the Baron forces her to undergo multiple abortions. This illegal and inhumane act reveals a cruel side to the Baron Docteur, who prioritizes his social status and reputation over her well-being. Additionally, as a married man, he plans to abandon her once he has completed his medical experiments on her body.[31]

Parks emphasizes that at the end of the play, the Baron Docteur leaves her to suffer under cold weather and die after twenty three days of imprisonment;

**The Negro Resurrectionist: I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead.**

**Ail : Dead?**

**The Chorus: Dead!**

**The Negro Resurrectionist: Exposure iz what killed her, nothing on and our cold weather. 23 days in a row it rained. Thuh doctor says she drank too much. It was thuh cold I think. (Venus, The Overture, p.3)**

Philip C. Kolin comments on the tragic fate of Venus, whose body is preserved by the Baron Docteur after her death, with her organs kept in a medical solution for display in a museum. Through the character of Venus, Parks retells the historical narrative of racism and the enslavement of African Americans, particularly black women. The subjugation and oppression that Venus endures illuminate the ongoing struggles faced by modern Black women and their quest for identity in the Western world, especially in the United States of America. This underscores the enduring importance of advocating for African American women's rights and their full inclusion in modern society, complete with rights and privileges.[32]

## Conclusion

Suzan Lori Parks in her “ Venus” addresses a significant issue in African American history, focusing on gender roles and human identity through the character of Venus, a Southern African woman who is brought to England and then taken to Paris to perform in freak shows under false promises of wealth and fame. The events of the play take place during the Nineteenth Century era in a time of great oppression and subjugation for black women. Although new laws have been established to protect the rights and freedoms of black individuals, many parts of Europe continue to disregard them. Venus is deceived by

The Mother Showman, who profits from her performances and ultimately sells her to the Baron Docteur, who exploits her until her death. Even after she passes away, her body is preserved and displayed in a museum for visitors.

Written and firstly performed in 1996, Parks's play received a widespread acclaim in the American literary community. It earned multiple awards for its subject matter, historical references, and contemporary language. Although some characters take on multiple roles throughout the play, this technique is employed by Parks to echo classic dramatic conventions.

Venus is portrayed as a weak and passive black woman who lacks the ability to make her own decisions. As a result, she has no money, no separate room, no personal clothing, and even her food is not guaranteed. She is treated merely as a laborer, surviving in a harsh world of enslavement. Parks depicts her protagonist as an object, illustrating how she is treated like a caged animal by The Mother Showman. Not only is she confined, but she is also threatened with rape if she fails to comply with orders.

Suzan Lori Parks aims to highlight the struggles of black women in a male-dominated society while also illuminating the dehumanizing acts inflicted upon them. Thus, the true human identity and personal freedom of African American women serve as

central themes in the play. Parks addresses historical contexts and examines the wounds of African American women with a keen and eloquent perspective.

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