

الهوية والتوترات العرقية: قراءة في مسرحية باركس "المستقوي والمستضعف"

Identity and Racial Tensions: Reading in Parks' Topdog/Underdog

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Abstract

This paper delves into Suzan-Lori Parks' Topdog/Underdog, scrutinizing how it inspects themes of racial identity plus frictions within the U.S.A. The drama orbits around siblings Lincoln and Booth; two Black males wrestling to sculpt their identities amidst economic hardships and racism's enduring shadow. By dissecting the duo's monikers, ancestry, financial standing, and inter-sibling dynamics, this manuscript critiques how internal alongside external elements mold Lincoln and Booth's conflicted self-perceptions. The prime motif in the play is the brothers' psychological entanglement with America's slave-holding past and suppression saga, epitomized by their names tethering them to seminal historical personas. The fringe societal slot obstructs total dominion over how they are publicly perceived and furthers crime-poor cycle's continuance. Furthermore, persisting race-based philosophies still shape how characters discern themselves; for instance Booth's unease over his paler skin tone.

Through repeated scenarios and conversations repetition in her work, Park mirrors Lincoln along with Booth's sensation of being ensnared in a cycle of revisiting former traumas. The play is an observation on complex trials facing African-American identity creation within a community chronically negating Black Americans self-sovereignty. Via showcasing her protagonists' inner plus outer conflicts grappling Parks spurs discussions regarding personal will against sociocultural limitations positioned by history at large scale limits beyond individual control. She sheds light on contradistinctions along tensions lingering above racial narratives inside America articulating identity comprehension as influenced individually albeit shaped significantly by exogenous barriers.

Keywords: Parks, identity, racial tensions, topdog/underdog, slavery

الملخص

يتعمق هذا البحث في دراسة مسرحية "المستقوي والمستضعف" لسوزان - لوري باركس، ويدقق في كيفية تفحصها لموضوعات الهوية العرقية بالإضافة إلى الاحتكاكات داخل الولايات المتحدة. تدور الدراما حول الأخوين لينكولن وبوث: رجلان أسودان يصارعان لنحت هويتهما وسط الصعوبات الاقتصادية والظل الدائم للعنصرية. من خلال تشريح ألقاب الثنائي، ونسبهم، ومكانتهم المالية، وديناميكياتهم بين الأشقاء، تنتقد هذه المسرحية مدى تشكيل العناصر الداخلية إلى جانب العناصر الخارجية للتصورات الذاتية المتضاربة لدى لينكولن وبوث. إن الدافع الرئيسي في المسرحية هو التشابك النفسي للأخوين مع ماضي أمريكا المتعلق باستعباد العبيد وملحمة القمع، والتي تتجسد في أسمائهم التي تربطهم بشخصيات تاريخية مؤثرة. حيث إن المجال المجتمعي الهامشي للسود يعيق السيطرة على كيفية النظر إليهم ويعزز استمرارية دورانهم في الجريمة والفقر. علاوة على ذلك، فإن الفلسفات القائمة على العرق لا تزال تشكل كيفية تمييز الشخصيات لأنفسهم؛ على سبيل المثال، عدم ارتياح بوث بشأن لون بشرته الشاحب. من خلال السيناريوهات والمحادثات المتكررة في مسرحيتها، فإن باركس تعكس شخصية لينكولن جنباً إلى جنب مع إحساس بوث بأنه وقع في شرك دورة من إعادة النظر في الصدمات السابقة. المسرحية عبارة عن ملاحظة حول التجارب المعقدة التي تواجه خلق هوية الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي داخل مجتمع ينفي بشكل مزمن السيادة الذاتية للأمريكيين السود. من خلال عرض الصراعات الداخلية والخارجية لأبطالها، فإن صراع باركس يحفز المناقشات المتعلقة بالإرادة الشخصية ضد القيود الاجتماعية والثقافية التي وضعها التاريخ على

نطاق واسع خارج نطاق السيطرة الفردية. إنها تسلط الضوء على التناقضات على طول التوترات العالقة فوق الروايات العنصرية داخل أمريكا، موضحة فهم الهوية كما يتأثر بشكل فردي وإن كان يتشكل بشكل كبير من خلال الحواجز الخارجية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية، التوترات العرقية، باركس، "مستقوي/مستضعف"، العبودية

INTRODUCTION

The term "identity" has been used in various contexts and for many purposes; it is a challenging word to define. In his discussion about identity, David Buckingham (Buckingham, 2008, p. 1) points out that the concept is rested on an inherent contradiction in the very definition itself. Actually, identity is derived from the Latin word "idem," which means "the same," posits both similarity and difference. On one hand, identity refers to the uniqueness each individual has, with an element thought to be fairly constant over time. On the other hand, an individual possesses his/her own specific identity that recognizes him/her from others. Buckingham also asserts that identity means a connection with a larger community or social group. He clarifies that national, cultural, or gender identity shows how our identity is informed by the qualities that make us alike to those with whom we feel a similarity, though not necessarily identical, on some significant aspect.

Identity is a sophisticated idea that is explained through various inner and outer forces. In her play, *Topdog/Underdog*, Suzan-Lori Parks (1999) highlights the theme of identity formation upon two African American brothers in today's America. The play examines how their names, family records, socio-economic reputation, and race all come together to shape the struggles of Lincoln and Booth regarding self-definition and their tumultuous dating with each other. At its core, the play is an introspective reflection on the racial tensions that persist in shaping African American identity in a society that still struggles to cope with the legacy of slavery and racism. In the play

Lincoln and Booth were named in a clever way through the utilization of their father in an attempt to jab at them, a matter that reveals how, from an early age, their identities were out of their control. Their names mirror their father's preference to bind them to iconic but problematic characters from America's history of racism; Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator who helped end slavery, and John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's murderer. Being named after historical figures related to America's racial records loads Lincoln and Booth with a legacy they have no choice but to inherit. Their names, in fact, turn out to be something that cannot be shrugged off and are relevant to how they become the men others can see as being as well as to how they see themselves.

In *Topdog/Underdog*, living in economic poverty further complicates Lincoln and Booth's struggle with identity. Without much of a line, they default to illegal activities such as theft, hustling 3-card monte, which provides them with a little enjoyment of the financial safety and social fame. Booth is specifically concerned with the outside symbols of wealth, like expensive clothing, as a way to identify himself (Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, 1999, pp. 43,61) . However, the marginal social fame of the brothers, by virtue of age-old racial disparity, stops them from being totally free in defining themselves. Being orphans lacking a circle of relatives, Lincoln and Booth are shaped in large part through the external forces outside their control. In the play, race plays a great role to show how they define themselves and other black members. The fact that they are acutely aware of societal prejudices against their color and the dark staining on their pores and skin makes them feel like black people are not equal. The relationship of the two brothers is shaped by inner racism and calling one another a "fucking Lincoln" because he is excessively pale. His mate is race-infused, as well as by general feelings like he was attempting to surpass as white (Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, 1999, pp. 75,93). It speaks to the legacy of colorism within the black community, and the self-doubt it could engender. In the

international arena, they encounter discrimination and limited prospects that make race as a defining characteristic more inescapable.

In the context of the previous discussion, Lincoln and Booth keep on trying to attain a stable, independent identity and to differentiate themselves from one another. From pretending to be famous figures like Abraham Lincoln in an arcade to becoming a three-card monte dealer, Lincoln continually reinvents himself in different jobs and personas. However, he is never fully in control of these fabricated identities and cannot seem to settle on one. Meanwhile, Booth attempts to assert his own identity through theft, gambling scams, and petty criminal schemes, which serve to further undermine his sense of self (Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, 1999, pp. 75,93). Their struggle to define themselves apart from each other only pushes them further into codependency and conflict.

In this respect, the repetition in “*Topdog/Underdog*” symbolizes how Lincoln and Booth are caught up in reliving their traumatic pasts. Scenes replicate with minor changes, indicating how the characters are never able to progress or transform. The repetitive and revising dialogue, the “Rep & Rev” technique Parks employs, as characters revise and revisit the same dialogues, captures their inability to break away from history that they had nothing to do with. This cyclical theme not only indicates how historically ingrained systems of racism and oppression still continue to confine the agency of two generations but also strengthens the ability of the African-American individual. Indeed, while they would wish to throw off the burdens of their lineage, they remain psychologically chained to it.

Through “*Topdog/Underdog*’s” examination of identity as a constantly evolving, culturally mediated process, Parks offers a critique of broader societal forces that have historically marginalized Black Americans and inhibited their self-determination. Parks highlights how racial ideologies from slavery onwards have profoundly shaped

Black identity politic and psychology in America at both the collective and individual levels. In creating characters that are weighed down with the sins of their forefathers but are striving to be autonomous, Parks captures the paradox of forming one's Black identity within a society that has long denied the very possibility of such autonomy.

In the end, Parks poses complex questions concerning identity, history, and responsibility that have continued to echo today. Her play probes how racial legacies from hundreds of years ago still present within Black lived experience and perceptions of self in the present. In this sense, it is important to describe Lincoln and Booth's struggle for self-authorship against immense challenges—that is, the enduring impacts of racism on Black identity and the inner struggles it can occasion. "Topdog/Underdog" stands as a dramatization of the racial tensions ingrained at all levels of American society and a testament to the resilience of the human spirit against oppression. This rich characterization and recurring motifs provide a compelling thematic structure for Parks' work and make a powerful commentary on how identity is both determined by personal force and constrained through outside constraints.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In his discussion about the theme of family in *Topdog/Underdog*, Nicholas Grene (Green.N, 2014, p. 185) regrets that the play was poorly accepted by some critics. However, some other critics find the strange and new style of the play as being a unique departure from the regular style used by the playwright and they assert that the play is one of the excellent works. Abdel Kader, in his discussion about the play (2009), believed the change detrimental to the realism by which Parks was equated, which was represented as backtracking to the rules of a classical tragedy. Through this play, Park is moving away from his auto analogous previous theater, with a story that is fully crafted of two male characters fighting for dominance inside the

confinement of a single room. "Topdog/Underdog" can be considered to be a distilled and in a way simplified version of Parks' earlier play "The America Play," where the focus is deliberately directed on a minimum caricature of the family house on stage and the family relationships through a model of two male characters.

The setting for the play is a timeless and open realm of surrealism, because of its successive seven days' plot through the lives of two brothers in their infernal shelter (echo chamber). The private and family issues that find their voice in "Topdog/Underdog" through the eyes of the main character Mr. Wolf, symbolically represent several broader themes of history. Though the show is mainly concerned with depicting the brotherly murderous competition for positioning in a cramped slum, the production manages to create a special atmosphere that is not just monotony and darkness; rather it is a mixture of enchantment through a haze of despair, surrounded by light. Dynamics in power relationship are not stationary, and by the brotherhood aspects of this novel we touch on the issues people history, their families, and most importantly the lasting history that includes everyone in its bounds.

In his article "The Money Shot" (Tucker–Abramson, 2007) highlights the play "Topdog/Underdog" by Suzan–Lori parks known to tell the story of the lives of two black brothers namely Lincoln and Booth. Nevertheless, they occur to be plagued by economic issues, racial imbalances, and the gender stereotypes. The play has been laid in the slums of the urban area. The characters in this play can be considered the one to be away from the most productive sector of society. Therefore, the play uses the role of social and economic marginalization to showcase their experience. Parks successfully lines up the repetition and revision with the purpose of revealing the social traits of the society that finally resulted in the historical painful event, emphasizing the interaction of the history, economics and psychology.

The play develops a social drama, into which racism and classism in contemporary society are the keys, as well as a psychodrama; it is about the psychological disintegration of the brothers and their relationships. Some philosophers perceive Parks's play as a postmodernist, post-Capitalist or racist work. These philosophers see that there is a psychological and social dysfunction in the characteristics of the drama. Besides, the play is considered to be a trans-figurative script that contributes not only to cultural presentations of the history but perhaps also one integrating the economic and psychological consequences of the past. It offers a profound figurative showcase of the lost American factory worker. It seeks to deal with the issues of capitalism and the complexity of Communism by applying Marxist Theories in the modern world. To conclude, "Topdog/Underdog" is an insightful play that effortlessly mixes humor and sadness and covers the topics of economy, racism and masculinity. This complex play gives a critical look at the problems of contemporary male black Americans.

Discussion and Analysis

I-The Representation of Identity in Topdog/Underdog

The idea of identity is commonly linked to studies of ethnicity, gender, and race. Prior to the 1950s, it was not widely known, but gained popularity with the emergence of renowned German psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson (1902–1994), who is often referred to as the father of the concept. Erikson argues that throughout all stages of life, individuals go through an identity crisis, which he defines as a critical period of increased vulnerability and potential. Elsewhere, Erikson presents another perspective on identity crisis, stating that it involves an inability to establish intimacy, a sense of time urgency, a lack of focus on necessary tasks, and a rejection of family or community norms. From a psychological standpoint, identity encompasses personal and group identifications. It pertains to self-definition, with the self being seen as a

relatively stable, internal entity that is not easily altered to fit the situation. In fact, a stable sense of self is considered normal, while a lack of stability suggests a problematic, deficient, or disconnected identity. In contemporary understanding, identity has become a significant concept in various fields, particularly with the advent of globalization and its resulting impact on life (Al-Khazali, 2018, p. 2) .

The play Topdog/Underdog depicts the struggles of two brothers, Lincoln and Booth with their identities and relationship dynamics. Their conversations mainly focus on their concerns, grievances and the search, for individuality. Booth asks Lincoln to stop using his given name showing a desire for an identity. Lincoln questions Booth about this change hinting at a conflict regarding self-identity. Booth tries to assert control by taking on a persona during card games believing it will elevate his status compared to his brother. This act of renaming himself as "3 Card" reflects his attempt to emulate Lincoln's dominance. As noted by James Utz this choice signifies Booths inclination, towards imitating his brother's character traits (Al-Khazali, 2018, p. 4) .

The second scene is in which Booth hits the town again and finds his daily job challenging by spiking the cash on Spike's desk. In that he sought to part positively with the possessions that have been stolen from him somehow. At the beginning of the scene, Parks characterizes him as at the beginning of the scene, Parks characterizes him as:

From his big coat sleeves he pulls out one new shoe then another, from another sleeve come two more shoes. He then slithers out a belt from each sleeve. He removes his coat. Underneath he wears a very nice new suit. He removes his jacket and pants revealing another new suit underneath. The suits still have the price tags on them. He takes two neckties from his pockets and two folded shirts from the back of his

pants. He pulls a magazine from the front of his pants. He's clearly had a busy day of shoplifting (Parks, 2002) (scene 2, p.37).

The clothing worn by theatrical characters in the Parks' plays symbolizes their own personal identities and the difference between various sectors such as social and racial. The fact that Booth begins 'shopping' such for resale is a strong sign of his plight over his identity perception. Jennifer Larson brings to light the idea that Booth's behavior stems from him seeking to construct a novel type of personality as well as answer the question about his real personality. As his every-lasting-layer of identity is peeling off, the revelation is not more clothes that are worn, but longer withholding of the real person whom he is. Moreover, Lincoln's spirit for mentoring his brother's preferences for good looks and a desirous personality is the avenue he takes to channel his individuality's soul (Al-Khazali, 2018, p. 5)

Booth and Lincoln stay in the thrall of their past memories, a toxic mental space where the tormenting and suffering of their experiences always cry out. As a result, individuals live with their pain and distress. The inheritors are keen to put the blame on their creators for not being in a position to improve the social status of the persons they had created, and whom they therefore thought should enjoy living a luxurious life. This yearning for a bonding with their family history would be a proof that they have already felt a genuine desire to have a real sense of belonging. Lincoln and Booth came across as both prisoners of a destiny and this destiny described many times out of their identity as black American infanticides in the movie, which is illustrated in the first line by what writer, Ed Blank, Tribune-Review, implies. (Craig, 2004, p. 276).

Booth and Lincoln are the maîtres traits in the play Topdog/Underdog. They are African Americans sometimes referred to as Grimes siblings, who were given these names by their father as a means of making fun of them. Although Booth treats

the room like his personal classroom to be counted a gentleman after learning his skills in card game cunning to defraud people in near future, Lincoln receives money as an impersonator of Abraham Lincoln in an arcade. First, the play may seem to be a traditional family drama with the main subject staying on two characters, who give the impression of being realistic, different from some of the playwright's unusual and avant-garde plays. The initial impression is that the play is a straightforward piece devoid of the profound, but when closely examined, it is full of metaphor and double-meanings. In Parks' work, theatricality issues are very prominent but the SH key Lincoln symbols still highlight historical moments. Meanwhile, whereas Parks writes about the familiar tale of the emancipation of slaves by Lincoln, she offers a different version that loops two brothers, who seem to be tied to their own destinies, which is reanimated by their names. When both first and last names of the narrator and his best friend are referred to in a rather irrelevant way, there seems to be an unquestionable link between the narrator and Lincoln (Abraham Lincoln) and his assassin Booth (John Wilkes). Yet the names of the historical characters of this play creates one of the many different theatrical approaches for the audience, and it triggers meta-dramatic consciousness (Vanmarsnille, 2009, p. 17) .

Suzan-Lori Parks' play "Topdog/Underdog" centers on identity and treats the characters of Lincoln and Booth as individuals who are orphaned by their parents and has survive by being drown in the dangerous and unfair street culture to keep them staying a live. The William play focuses on the complicated bond communicated through the acting and the acting of which certainly the most important challenges the citizens of the hierarchical American society encounter when they have to give up the individual independence which is considered most valuable. The depiction of identity in "Topdog/Underdog" is illustrated through a range of factors: The depiction of identity in "Topdog/Underdog" is illustrated through a range of factors: First, the play destines the characters to live on the stage in similarity to string puppets. Lincoln, by

his custom, he portrays dead president Abraham Lincoln, and his rival, Booth, becomes immersed in his own imaginary world which he confuses for the real one (Larson, 2008, p. 32.24) . Second, the author, here known as John Parks, uses a stylistic and repetitive technique called "Rep&Rev," which is based on the repetition and revision of dialogues. In the process of this, the characters may ask themselves whether they need these words to verbally express those thoughts and feel a new experience of what they are living. This procedure in some way means exaggerating the moment and disorienting memory which makes person doubt his individuality (Larson, 2008, p. 24).

The play "Topdog/Underdog" by Suzan-Lori Parks, along with an examination of the role language plays in forming, and redefining, the narrative of history, is at the foundation of her challenge to the traditional concepts behind the identity. Parks believes that theater is a form of literature that can make history in its own way, scripted using the language and using performance to contradict the misfits in the conventional account of history (Jabboury, 2023, p. 18). The author, employing language, produces new ways of looking at things, so that, at the end, the style becomes non-mimetism, non-reference, surrealism. Commonly a story about typical black-white conflict is portrayed in Parks' play and the sense of dismay is replaced by the faces of Abraham Lincoln the icon of American and African American histories and the protagonists' interaction with him. Palmer puts into practice the idea of identity through the characters' inner struggles. The stage for identification and self-realization is shaped, particularly against the figure of Abraham Lincoln, who is a sort of "founding father" and becomes a symbol. The play also questions the dominant idea of race and identity, which are based on an arbitrary factor like the name. Parks' questioning of language, her highlighting of how language imposes people into identities, and her discussion of the ideals which language incorporates, all pose the

method in which the classifying of the self is a decision- making process rather than a declaration of self by a society (Tudorica, 2008, pp. 50,51).

The play, Topdog/Underdog, draws a story of two brothers, grown in under privileged family environment that is being oppressed by the problems of the society and economic situations. It deals with the journey of the brothers and also demonstrates about how they turn as perpetrators while they initially face the functions of a community that is rejecting them in terms of basic rights to live with the respectable members of community. Many circumstances affect the personality of the characters and these diverse components create their identity. They are dogged in social stigma and barely survive as the society's marginal (Guerrero, 2017, pp. 30,31). As put by Pineda, Misbah (Misbah, 2022, p. 17) asserts that a white supremacist affirmation would reflect this view that black people hold a position of being different and deficient in the qualities that the bourgeois establishment has put value for. As a consequence of this, the major characters are conditioned by the social environment they are living in, the criminal activities they are indulging in, and lack of required skills and unemployment. Because most of them have a weak or no relationship with their family and friends together with desire for belonging to the nation and place of their residence, this is where they get their self-concept. Eventually, when they are attacked by the rising trend of poverty and fail at that attempt to escape such humiliating's life, they will start stealing, cheat, and even hurt each other physically and emotionally. This very destructive act to themselves can be viewed by others as one in the same since it is as if they are themselves minding other bodies. Likewise, the investigation of the play has to consider society matters like family system, social status and race that shape or influence the characters' identities.

Yet, Parks overlaps with the 20th-century thought on language and its function as a tool for cultural depiction but then she defers from other established stage conventions in a representation of the past on stage. Just like Kennedy, Parks doesn't utilize her play *Topdog/Underdog* to write a black counter-history that will be exclusive to blacks only. Unlike this, she rather brings the knowledge of black American history and culture by generalizing the major event of an assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865 that is highly symbolic of white America gathering much importance for its history in the USA. It is through this showing what it means to Black people that she tries to stress African-American identity at large. Lincoln, who presided over the Union at the time of the Civil War or even was the most influential person in the fight against slavery, is often considered as mythic hero by Parks. The reputation under which Lincoln stands today is washed in black and white as Parks mentioned in Joshua Wolf Shenk, "Towards Inclusion: Breaking the Two-Dimensional Barriers through Lincoln," (Wolf Shenk, 2002, p. 2).

To me, Lincoln is the closest thing we have to a mythic figure. In days of great Greek drama, they had Apollo and Medea and Oedipus – these larger than-life figures that walked the earth and spoke – and they turned them into plays. Shakespeare had kings and queens that he fashioned into his stories. Lincoln, to me, is one of those.

In the above way or interpretation, Lincoln is not just a figurehead and a symbol of remembrance, but more central to the story; his influence on the main characters' culture and their self-realization through identification with him is the primary concern and source of the author's attention (Parks) than an attempt at a realistic historical depiction (Paulun, 2012, p. 205).

Lincoln's tragic story discloses not to lack of choices and individual control, but rather inability to reconcile the past and current reality. Running through the play, Lincoln strives to Instagram previous history that stops him from being true fair of his present self. Initially, when he embodies Abraham Lincoln, he not only moves to the distant and legendary era in American history that slavery was a part of but also brings back to life a famous and legendary character. Even though this past, yet for a while, becomes real to him during the shooting, he is being just instantly brought back to his present world. Moreover, his remembering the photos on his family album and considering his childhood experiences shows that another way he tries to get close to the past is through the newer period. Yet, he discovers that this unsettled and nostalgic past cannot fulfill the secure family model he has in mind and daily routine that he wishes for. This background of the given name of H concerned his father as the circumstances of its received were clouded by drunkenness. The last and final scenario is when Lincoln abandons his career as wannabe impersonator and is forced to go back to his old job as a card dealer, later on leading to dispute with his brother and then, his death. On each of these moments, Lincoln's parallel self with the past not only confirms who is the dual personality and reality-orientation but also shows who cannot distinguish between these dimensions. Finally, just as he cannot use the past as his basis of identity, there is no past he can depend on since factuality for his being depends on nothing (Paulun, 2012, p. 208).

Topdog/Underdog is a play whose structure is static and composed of various two-dimensional characters, focussing on the rough relations of the two African American. The plot throws the confrontation between the two characters into the astonishing leanings of what is the truth and what is the theatrical performance. Furthermore, the play has a pivotal historical event where Lincoln, the sixteenth President of the United States, was assassinated. This historical feature comes in life once again by a change in the style of minstrel shows, where now black actors

represent white characters. Hence, the play is remarkably commenced with jokes on human identity and the ridiculous use of a nationally and historically commercialized American persona to illustrate the vital role humanness plays in the construction of history and identity (Eugene, 2016, p. 90) .

Lincoln acting as an impersonator and putting money in his pocket found in the arcade Unlike Amy, who gets to a social position based on heritage, Booth, the younger brother, is doing different activities aiming to achieve a distinct identity. Through this strategy, both the president and the leader of the South are unmasked. Duality is then represented by Lincoln's deceptive personality in a brilliant way in this approach (Eugene, 2016, p. 90).

Booth's stance, somehow, somehow makes it possible for the reader to perceive there is no different private identity that is not one with a public persona. He highly regards how a person carries themselves in the company of others, also the impression that one gets. As an example, he argues that Lincoln's true self is revealed through his attire. As an example, he argues that Lincoln's true self is revealed through his attire:

"You look sharp too, man. You look like the real you. Most of the time you walking around all bedraggled and shit. You look good. Like you used to look back in thuh day when you had Cookie in love with you and all the women in the world was eating out of yr hand." (Parks, 2002)(scene 2, p.44).

Through Tom Booth's interactions, it is evident he has two distinct personalities; one is that of a businessman and the other one is his own self or life outside of the place of work. This appearance can be regarded as for Him, his public perception which he fashioned with a purpose of making others view. In Booth's opinion, for most of

people the identity is created around what is visible and people use the visual behavior to define and attribute qualities to the individuals based on what is seen. He concludes that one's identity is strictly obtained through the vision of others, through their physical contact and validation. Consequently, Booth is compelled to compose an identity for himself centered on his reflections (Eugene, 2016, p. 93).

What stands out in Booth is the rough and ready side of his identity. He seeks his image and fulfillment in the economic arena through his belief in black supremacy and the stereotypes of masculinity, whilst living in a world which undermines the black community. All these facets of his identity are rewarded in his way of acknowledging the manhood measure. Thus, Booth was indeed responsible for the creation of gender norms along with the attainment of economic success which were both secondary to his deep desire for masculine idealism. Along the journey of figuring out who he truly is, he examines the role of the men around him. The innate urge to craft a new self is expressed through the character acquiring proficiency in the game of fiction where he dons various roles according to the social norms (Eugene, 2016, p. 93).

Moreover, the acquisition of Western society's axioms and regulations entails a Gentoo-like manner of black men impersonation. These stereotypes combined make up the depiction of a violent, dominant, (greedy) instinctive, (sex-crazed) African-American male. Booth immerses himself into various actors within the play by showing his pride in particularly the ones that attempt to prove his manhood. While Booth is suffering from devastation of what he perceives as his masculinity, it is becoming clearer as the film progresses that he clings to his self-esteem by tuning in to the role of an underdog in a racist society. Hence, by implementing Butler's theory of gender performativity Booth's masculine supremacy and dominant position are being secured and re-shaped through repetition of It may be a result on one hand of

his view of what being a real man means, consequently, he asserts himself as the leader and on the other hand serves as a process of the identity development. In consequence of the fact that his parents neglected him and gave him up completely, Booth then resorted to stealing minor things in the shopping centers at the city center. The items that are snatched are primarily clothes which he has presumed can improve his self-estimation. He wants to establish his superior gender in order to get either recompense or compensation for his masculinity being constantly denied by his current reality. Booth regards his growth toward manliness in virtue of paying more attention to the financial value – a sensitive economic topic, which is correlated with poor manly characters of poverty and dependency and, instead, with the enriched ones of wealth, independence, and achievement. He does so by assuming a role that revolves around fantasy/imaginative base for portraying himself as an ideal man with personal traits expected from a firm man (Eugene, 2016, p. 94).

The author of the play *Topdog/Underdog* possibly suggests revising the historical view of America by using modern perspective. The main protagonist is on a quest to a relevant past which is one of the expansions of the black American cultural recollection medium in which Abraham Lincoln is a forgiving source and one of the sources of his identity. In contrast to being dialed out of American history, Parks employs the *kao* means teaching individuals to access facts and review history as an entity for creation of African American culture identity. Black Americans history has the gabs when considering the events of those days. This becomes an opportunity for the Parks to rewrite the narrative and include black people in white American history. Parks starts her essay "Elements of Style" with a very striking conclusion that history is a persistently powerful and compelling force. Theatre becomes an exceptional outlet for the celebration of history by creating memory and re-evaluating the past. It can be argued that the stage is a beautiful way for the community to share their interpretation of African American history since the 1920s (Paulun, 2012, p. 209).

To simply say, throughout the 20th-century theatre has proved itself as a vital and essential factor in the reassessment of the African-American history and legacy. Angelina Weld Grimké, among other female playwrights, have developed African-American play writing tradition that includes Mary Burrill, Zora Neale Hurston, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, and Ntozake Shange. By doing this, the playwrights used the theatre as a device to address four traumatic experiences and the cultural history of the African-Americans, particularly that of the black people who had undergone discrimination and racism. They illustrated these realities through family narratives and showed how younger, even the older women overcame these obstacles, shaping their own female viewpoint in the process. Their writings were an exhibition in the making of a counter-history in the African American community, which had a tremendous impact on the development of a cultural identity unique to the dominated by a white society (Paulun, 2012, pp. 209,210).

It is apparent that present day black American theater conforms to the vision of Bergman, Frost, and Hitchcock that is trying to create new forms and techniques for this trope to acquire renewed attention. While contemporary playwrights have the same urge as their predecessors to fill the gaps of history with their playwriting, their approaches distinguish each other in their handlings of historical and cultural references through which the story development is shaped on the stage. In both *The Alexander Plays* and *Topdog/Underdog*, the characters investigate their identity as a cultural marker, and the pride in being black as entrenched identification underlying their sense of identity is no more (Paulun, 2012, p. 210).

II-The Representation of Racial Tensions in Topdog/Underdog

Race is one of the major themes in the play that is marketed in a subconscious manner—an echoing element that marks Parks' characters. Deliberate naming of the elements in the book recalls obvious and unintentional images of pain that echo in one's mind. Even though the experiences of racism and slavery may be historical, anyone who relates to the African American history may attest to such exchanging of the painful memories. This point of view is underscored during the Unit when Foster talks about park's anxiety of assassination and her tenacious attempt to reveal African American history either how it has been forgotten or how it was repressed. It cannot be ignored that Abraham Lincoln, the influential figure in the American history, is also notable for his issuing an Emancipation Proclamation in the year 1863 which gave freedom to African Americans. Thereat, his life was soon abruptly terminated and it all happened from a guy that could have easily become his friend, actor John Wilkes Booth who assassinated him while he was watching a play in a theater. Initially, the problem how a play, which worshiped much the American history, especially the connection between the African Americans and this epoch, carried out the task of Parks' arose for me. On the contrary, we still need to think in the two argued perspectives; the humanistic and racial world views.

It is essential to comment that Lincoln was not only a human being but also a racist man at the same time, even though he passed a law involved with the emancipation of Africans. Many blacks were viewed with this complex figure who felt strongly about the physical and geographical segregation of black people. Thus, Lincoln had his own viewpoint that preferred the removal of many rights and chances that were well-being with white people. Even while he won the respect of the opponents of slavery as a strong opponent of slavery, many signed documents from his hands left no doubt in the deep-rooted racism of the president. One should keep

in mind that his stand against slavery had little to do with his conviction in racial equality because study has demonstrated this can be easily mixed up with the argument that his opposition to slavery notwithstanding, he might have equally been against racial equality. Hegel held it irrational and incompetent to advocate the rights of Negroes equal to white ones, since it was disputable that freedmen deserve to be considered national equals of those who always held precedence over them (Kader, 2009, pp. 5,6).

Moreover, Booth portrayed in *Topdog/Underdog* the imageries of various historical features that influenced the way in which contemporary societies established themselves over time. Gene embraces multiple roles throughout the plot. He is not only the unsurpassed killer who murdered his great brother, but also the legendary assassin who attempted to kill the President of the USA. This correlation surfaces the past and serves as a remembrance of how much injustice and atrocities have been committed to the African-Americans, especially in the south of the America. As a matter of fact, during this period, Abraham Lincoln, who was the leader that finally brought Black slaves their freedom, was severely criticized by the Southern slave-owners who believed that, after getting rid of them, he was also the one to take away their economy from them. These people, they arrogantly defined themselves as enemies of the government just for the use of black bodies on their land. Hence they revolted against the actions of Lincoln and were determined to assassinate Lincoln and the repellents led by Booth. So, it definitely cannot be overlooked in Parks's play, but of course, to make an attempt to understand more about when the interactions between Lincoln and Booth happened. Yet, they exist not only as brothers, but also as two-separate-dwelled people as Lincoln represents the endless fight against slavery, while Booth is an example of how a person can be racist, intolerant, as well as violent.

Abramson points out the plays characters especially the characters of Lincoln in Shakespeare's Hamlet critically investigate some major social problems that include racial and economic inequalities that both existed in the early America and United States of today. Abramson's statement, which also talks about individuals of various races as the audiences, has performed a universal theme clarification that has shown the limits of the issue. However, anyhow, Abramson's avoid of using the word "black" is in line with Parks's idea of the play focuses on the common humanity experience since despite the various skin shades of humans, they all share the human experience. But, reading of even word "racial" in analysis conducted by Abramson, supports our proposition that racism is depicted in the play and even if Parks calls it not like this (Kader, 2009, pp. 6,7).

The directors adopt a hierarchical structure of the title Topdog/Underdog, which is deliberate and is as a result of the term "dog" being used to symbolize the social standing that is assigned to the black man who achieves success by emulating the white leading figure and this is contrary to his lost brother who supports himself through the streets. Hence, the title "topdog" can be regarded as the struggle for power within the black community and refers to the attainment of a respectable profession in the European-American sphere using the disrespectful racial stereotype of the black man and his black virility. In this play, it is not the older, born-to-be-a-president brother named Lincoln who is obsessed with Booth (nobody but him), who tries to overcompensate for his social inferiority through his sex life, which resembles that of a werewolf (Daniele, 2013, p. 52).

In Suzan Lori Park's play, Topdog/Underdog, two main characters named Booth and Lincoln are struggling with their lives where apart from card playing, both stealing activities also plays a major role. By carrying out their nefarious activities,

these unscrupulous individuals use a twisted mind to get unsuspecting people's wealth, thus messing up the social pyramid, which instead turns to sorrow. This can be strongly felt in Lincoln's consideration of how things have turned out, and these sentiments are brought out in his soliloquy.

"We took that man and his wife for hundreds. No, thousands. We took a father for the money he was gonna get his kids new bike with and he cried in the streets while we vanished. We took a mothers welfare check, she pulled a knife on us and we ran" (Parks, 2002)(scene 4, p.80).

The white supremacy spent nearly a century in course that is from 1865 to 1964, but prior to granting the civil rights to the African Americans in the USA. And whereas this event is a huge milestone, the discriminating white people in the society do not stop there, which means that African Americans are always stigmatized in the society. Thereafter, life remains agonizing for the most African American, whose daily struggle with the puzzling fact that the racist are no different is unending and they revile at how these meat-headed individuals treat them inhumanely, the same way they do with their white counterparts (Ntoko, 2023, pp. 44,45).

Important life advice for Booth is given by Lincoln in this quote. Having struggled to find jobs himself, Lincoln understands the struggles of systemic racism and lack of opportunities that plague both brothers. Grace may want him now, but he will lose her if he does not take responsibility for his life and have a source of income. As Lincoln confesses, Grace is a clever woman who wouldn't like to always financially support Booth as long as he sits at his home doing nothing. There were no means of livelihood available for black men except menial jobs or dangerous criminal activities that could provide some dignity and economic stability in their society other than this hustling cards time experienced by Lincoln himself. Lincoln loves his brother and doesn't want him to fall into another fate of being unstable, jobless or even self-

destructive. This is how Lincoln encourages Booth through a speech that is both critical and loving in nature so that he can confront the racism head on instead of pretending there are no problems or blaming others for having inadequate skills or motivation levels.

Lincoln: She might want you now but she wont want you for long if you dont get some kind of job. Shes a smart chick. And she cares about you. But she aint gonna let you treat her like some pack mule while shes out working her ass off and yr laying up in here scheming and dreaming to cover up thuh fact that you dont got no skills. (Parks, 2002)(scene 6, p.125)

Lincoln warns Booth about facing the realities and challenges of racism, including difficulties finding work. The book "Overcoming Our Racism: The Journey to Liberation" by Derald Wing Sue discusses the challenges faced by individuals, including difficulties finding work, due to racism. It acknowledges the impact of racism on employment opportunities, such as the fear of not being able to find a job as a White man (Sue, 2003, p. 14) . The book also emphasizes the importance of recognizing one's privileged position in society and the need for individuals to engage in self-reckoning to become effective allies in the struggle against racism (Sue, 2003, p. 184).

The book "Overcoming Our Racism: The Journey to Liberation" by Derald Wing Sue provides specific strategies for addressing the challenges faced due to racism, including difficulties finding work. Some of these strategies include: first, actively placing oneself in situations that challenge biases and preconceived notions to develop a healthy racial identity and understanding of racism (Sue, 2003, p. 191). The second strategy is creating personal learning experiences by engaging in

activities such as making home visits to minority communities, doing internships in agencies with minority clients, and attending or participating in special ethnic events or religious holidays (Sue, 2003, pp. 194,223). The third strategy is expanding healthy contact with minority members by frequenting minority-owned businesses, attending services at various places of worship, inviting colleagues or neighbors of color to social gatherings, and living in integrated or culturally diverse neighborhoods (Sue, 2003, p. 209). These strategies are aimed at fostering understanding, empathy, and meaningful connections across racial and ethnic lines.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the play "Topdog/Underdog" by Suzan-Lori Parks provides a striking examination of the layered personal and social forces shaping racial identity in America. Through the tragic relationship between Lincoln and Booth, the play reveals how histories of racism and oppression continue to affect self-perception for Black individuals long after legal discrimination has ended. Her unique dramatic style is meant to emphasize the psychic scars that would have been inflicted from unjust systems and ideologies that denied Black people ownership over their public image and economic security. While the brothers search for autonomy, Parks argues that racial identity remains entwined with broader social and political conditions outside of any single person's control. The play provides a unique and thought-provoking piece of original drama that makes an important contribution both to theater and the ongoing discussion about the racial experience within the United States.

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