

Reimagining Identity A Study of the Third Space Concept in Suzan-Lori Parks The America Play

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دراسة مفهوم المكان الثالث في مسرحية "لعبة أمريكا" لسوزان لوري باركس

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Abstract

This study argues that Parks' use of the Third Space concept in "The America Play" enables a reimagining of American identity that is complex, fragmented, and multifaceted. By blurring the boundaries between history, memory, and fiction, Parks creates a space where multiple narratives and identities can coexist and intersect, challenging the dominant narratives of American identity. The aims of this study are to: 1)Examine the concept of the Third Space in Parks' "The America Play" and its relationship to postmodern theory and cultural studies. 2)Analyze how the Third Space concept is employed in the play to subvert and reimagine the dominant narratives of American identity. 3)Investigate the ways in which the play challenges traditional notions of history, memory, and reality. This study addresses the following research questions: 1)How does Parks' use of the Third Space concept in "The America Play" challenge traditional notions of American identity?2)In what ways does the play subvert and reimagine the dominant narratives of American identity? 3)How does the play's use of the Third Space concept relate to postmodern theory and cultural studies? It employs a critical analysis of the Third Space concept. The study also draws on various theoretical frameworks, including postmodern theory, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory. The postmodernist perspective on identity is particularly relevant to this study, as it challenges traditional notions of identity and highlights the fragmented and multifaceted nature of human experience. This study reveals that Parks' use of the Third Space concept in "The America Play" enables a reimagining of American identity that is complex, fragmented, and multifaceted. The play challenges traditional notions of history, memory, and reality, and subverts the dominant narratives of American identity. It demonstrates that Parks' use of the Third Space concept in "The America Play" is a powerful tool for reimagining American identity. By blurring the boundaries between history, memory, and fiction, Parks creates a space where multiple narratives and identities can coexist and intersect, challenging the dominant narratives of American identity. **Keywords:** Suzan-Lori Parks, "The America Play", Third Space, postmodernism, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, identity, American identity, history, memory

المخلص

تناقش هذه الدراسة بأن استخدام باركس لمفهوم المكان الثالث في "لعبة أمريكا" يعزز تجديدًا في الهوية الأمريكية الذي هو معقد ومجزع ومتعدد الأبعاد. من خلال محو الحدود بين التاريخ والذاكرة والخيال، يخلق باركس مساحة حيث يمكن للروايات المتعددة والهويات أن تعيش وتتناقض معًا،

مما يتحدى السرديات السائدة في الهوية الأمريكية. تتضمن أهداف هذه الدراسة: (١) دراسة مفهوم المكان الثالث في مسرحية باركس "لعبة أمريكا" و علاقته بالمذاهب الفكرية المعاصرة والدراسات الثقافية. (٢) تحليل كيفية استخدام باركس لمفهوم المكان الثالث في المسرحية لتحدي وتجديد السرديات السائدة في الهوية الأمريكية. (٣) استقصاء كيفية تحدي المسرحية للأفكار التقليدية عن التاريخ والذاكرة والواقع. وتتناول هذه الدراسة الأسئلة التالية: (١) كيف تحد استخدام باركس لمفهوم المكان الثالث في "لعبة أمريكا" من الأفكار التقليدية عن الهوية الأمريكية؟ (٢) كيف تحدي المسرحية وتجديد الروايات السائدة في الهوية الأمريكية؟ (٣) كيف تعود استخدام باركس لمفهوم المكان الثالث في المسرحية إلى المذاهب الفكرية المعاصرة والدراسات الثقافية؟ وتعتمد هذه الدراسة على تحليل نقدي لمفهوم المكان الثالث في مسرحية باركس. كما تستند الدراسة إلى إطار نظري متعدد، بما في ذلك الفكر المعاصر والدراسات الثقافية والفكر الاستعماري. وتستند هذه الدراسة إلى إطار نظري متعدد، بما في ذلك المذهب المعاصر والدراسات الثقافية والفكر الاستعماري. يعتبر المذهب المعاصر في نظرية الهوية مناسباً لهذه الدراسة، حيث يتحدى الأفكار التقليدية عن الهوية و يُبرز طبيعة التجربة البشرية بشكل مجزّع ومتعدد. تظهر هذه الدراسة أن استخدام باركس لمفهوم المكان الثالث في "لعبة أمريكا" يعزز تجديداً في الهوية الأمريكية الذي هو معقد ومجزّع ومتعدد الأبعاد. تحد المسرحية الأفكار التقليدية عن التاريخ والذاكرة والواقع، وتتحدى السرديات السائدة في الهوية الأمريكية. وبالإجمال، تُظهر هذه الدراسة أن استخدام باركس لمفهوم المكان الثالث في "لعبة أمريكا" هو أداة قوية لتجديد الهوية الأمريكية. من خلال محو الحدود بين التاريخ والذاكرة والخيال، يخلق باركس مساحة حيث يمكن السرديات المتعددة والهويات أن تعيش وتتناقض معاً، مما يتحدى السرديات السائدة في الهوية الأمريكية الكلمات المفتاحية: سوزان لوري باركس، مسرحية "لعبة أمريكا"، المكان الثالث، ما بعد الحداثة، الدراسات الثقافية، الفكر الاستعماري، الهوية، الهوية الأمريكية، التاريخ، الذاكرة.

1. Introduction

Identity has been one of the fundamental themes of American literature since the beginning, with countless playwrights and writers attempting to redefine, reimagine and reconstruct the very concept of self in the presence of society. That is a unifying concept of playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, who addressed the notion in her 1994 play "The America Play." Using the idea of the third space, this research study will explore how Parks' work also subverts conventional ideas about identity, citizenship and American culture. According to Homi K. Bhabha (1994), the third space refers to a liminal space of cultural encounter, conflict, and the negotiation of identity. Parks' third space reflects the characters in "The America Play" and illustrates how these figures inspire new forms of being and where Parks signify the complexities and multiplicities of the self. Perhaps most clearly evident in Parks' use of the third space concept is the character of the Trickster, a figure who generally expresses the dualities and ambivalence of American identity. The Trickster, as bell hooks (1992) describes it, is an identity that is disruptive and traceable only within oppositional thought, bringing about a space to voice marginalized experience. Instead of a single, isolated descent into—itsself a deeply American theological construct—the charming trickster is summoned to journey through Latin American, African, and Native American landscapes, providing voluminous critique of the American canon as it filters through image and environment, and the "Indigenous" track-identity as it threads through a palimpsest in geographic time (Parks et al. 816). Additionally, "The America Play" functions both as a historical site where the past is reenacted, and a space for cultural performance, thereby exposing identity as inherently performative. Judith Butler (1990) suggests that identity is performative, always negotiated and re-inscribed according to social and cultural norms. In "The America Play," Parks's characters act out and reenact history—both real and fictional—merging the boundary between reality and fiction and contesting the idea of a stable, essential identity for America. This paper will discuss how Parks' utilization of third space concept and performance of identity as highlighted in "The America Play" subverts and transforms rigid understandings of identity, citizenship, and American culture. By closely reading the play, this research will reimagine the identity of her works as the complicated and multiple selves on stage.

2. Methodology

This study applies Postcolonial theory "Third Space" concept. It addresses the following questions: In what ways does Parks' employment of the third space concept and fluidity of identity in "The America Play" interrogate conventional understandings of identity, citizenship, and American culture? This means that it will focus on the language, imagery and dramatic structure of the play itself to show how Parks' use of these elements establishes a sense of ambiguity and multiplicity about identity. It will draw on the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial theory, performance studies and cultural studies.

3. Theoretical Framework

Drawing from postcolonial theory, and cultural studies, this study highlights From the broad spectrum of postcolonial theory (Bhabha 1994 19), the theory of cultural hybridity presents an analytical lens of ambiguity and multiplicities inspired by the behavior of culture, conjoining and opposing each other offering a new view towards identity. One of the initial scholars who worked on cultural identity in different cultural contexts and 'third space' is Bhabha, whose concepts are particularly significant to this article. Types of Studies from Judith Butler (1990: 24-25) shape the foundation here, which is the branch of performance studies that is concerned with the concept that identity is, at least in part, performative in nature. According to Butler, identity is a performance that is perpetually negotiated and re-inscribed through social and cultural frameworks. This framework fits into this study because it explains how the characters Parks creates partially perform roles and often repeat buried historical narratives, merging the line between history and fiction. As Stuart Hall (1992) explains, cultural studies offers a space to examine the interplay between cultural texts and the structural elements of contemporary life. Hall's encoding/decoding model is key for this particular study, as it emphasizes the idea that cultural texts are not interpreted or received passively, but instead negotiated by audiences differently.

4. Historical Context Written in 1992 during a period of immense sociocultural upheaval in America, "The America Play" is a play by Suzan-Lori Parks. It opened in 1994, only a few years following the Rodney King beating and the L.A. riots, uncovering the inherent racism and social ills of America (Gomez-Pena, 1996). Such an event is acknowledged as a turning point in the history of race relations in the United States and initiated an increasing consciousness around matters of race and identity (hooks, 1992). In the 1980s and 1990s, the history of America itself began to be refigured in terms of identity, culture and history. Even as the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s grew, new issues emerged in the movement's sights like affirmative action, police brutality, and representation (Dawson, 1994). Another dominant issue was the AIDS epidemic, which was first recognized in the 1980s, as it underscored the importance of awareness of issues of identity, community and social justice (Epstein, 1996). Another major change in Americans' thinking about history and memory took place during the 1990s. The Cold War was about to end, and the Soviet Union was about to collapse, what was viewed by many as a pivotal moment in world history also encouraged many Americans to reconsider their past as well as its connection to the present (Fukuyama, 1992). It was also a time of significant changes in the American experience—the American way of thinking about its history, with a growing awareness of the necessity of confronting that history, including the unsavory aspects of slavery, colonialism, and genocide (Haley, 1993). Parks' play engages with these shifting cultural perspectives and anxieties. While the play emerged out of the protests during the tumultuous 1990s United States, the themes of identity, history and performance can also reflect how Americans were trying to interpret their place in the world and relationship to the past (Parks, 1995).

5. Context of the Play

The play follows a set of characters struggling with acceptance of their history and place in the world, in the fictional town in the heart of the American Midwest (Parks, 1995). The play's title represents an actual play within the play. It is a script of the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln that the characters are performing (Parks, 1995). Parks (1995) writes about a play that can be interpreted in many different ways. Multiple storylines and characters intersect and overlap in complex ways. Fundamentally, the play is a study of identity and history as artifacts with a personal and institutional history (Parks, 1995). Cultural Context The play is an indication of when it was produced. From this perspective, the play's language, imagery, and dramatic structure echoes the postmodernist and poststructuralist tendencies of the American literary and cultural scene of the 1980s and 1990s (Jameson, 1991). Further, the play's examination of identity, history, and performance can also be interpreted as an allegory for the ways that American culture was beginning to wrestle with issues of multiculturalism, diversity, and representation (hooks, 1992). The historical background of the play is an intricate and diverse one that reflects how American society's attitudes and fears evolved over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. The play can be read as an embodiment of the struggles that Americans were engaged in at the time, and, responding to notions of identity, history, and performance, these themes reflect readers struggled to comprehend their position in the world and their past.

6. Plot of the Play Parks' "The America Play," (1994) is a dramatization of a theater re-staging of the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, but it's not a simple history play. Far from it, it is a nuanced, layered examination of identity, history, and performance. Set in a small town in the Midwest, the characters are a mix of nobodies and somebodies reeling from and confronting their past. Cancel Edit The title of the

play, "The America Play," is based on a play within the play where the characters are reenacting the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. The play opens with The Protagonist — a black man — struggling to process who he is and where he fits into American life. The Protagonist is a historian and performer who finds it increasingly difficult to balance his passion for history while trying to tell his own stories. Throughout the play, The Protagonist becomes more and more consumed by the story of the assassination of President Lincoln, eventually drawing parallels between the events of the past and his own experiences. Not only is the Protagonist's fascination with Lincoln's assassination a historical one, it is also a very personal one. In Lincoln he sees himself, and he cannot accept that he is not the hero of his own narrative. Another character in the play is The Trickster, a mysterious figure who is enamored by the notion of performance and identity. He is the Trickster, a being of trickery and tomfoolery, capable of altering his form and even voice. This goes far beyond a superficial obsession with the performance of a Trickster. He sees identity as flexible rather than static. The Protagonist and The Trickster are continually speaking to each other throughout the course of the play — debating identity and history one moment, exchanging pleas for each other the next. They debate what sort of performance might help. Where does performance stand in shaping our being? Fleming and O'Brien also talk about history not as a finite series of events, but rather as an ongoing re-enactment, an ongoing recital. At the end of the play, The Protagonist takes the second side of dialectic — in the dialectic between The Protagonist and The Trickster, the mind and emotion and therefore comes to an important conclusion about identity and history. They realize that identity is not static, it is dynamic by nature. They also realize that history is neither a list of events and facts, nor a great literary performance, but in fact constantly performed and constantly being rewritten. The seemingly simple title "The America Play" disguises a complex, multilayered sweep of what this rich play has to offer the reader and the theatre-goer as well, replete with themes of performance, identity and history. Though the play depicts the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, but it is not a simple retelling of history. Rather, it is a meta-theater about the work of performance and identity. One of the aspects that the play is particularly appreciated for is the depth of characterization that has been achieved through the various complex and layered characters, namely, The Protagonist and The Trickster. The Protagonist is an African American man who is anguished over everything he has been led to believe about himself and his place in America. The Trickster is an enigmatic character whose experience centers around experiencing performance and identity. The Protagonist and The Trickster have several conversations and debates throughout the play on the themes of identity and history. They explore how performance can be both a means to understand and to misrepresent who and what we are. They also explore the notion that history itself may not comprise a simple chain of events, but rather, an act of performance, ever reenacted, ever re-performed. Indeed the play is an adventure to put the audience in touch with the nature of identity and history, moving the audience to reflect critically on their conceptions of who they are and what they think, and act as their place in the outside world demands.

7. Literature Review For decades, identity has been a core focal point of literature and performance studies. The notion of the multiplicity of identity — the idea of identity as a constantly shifting property of an object or a process that gives meaning to it — has been examined in an array of literature and performance. This paper will discuss a variety of scholars and playwrights who have written at length about identity and its connection to performance in this literature review. The play is one of the earliest and more timeless works on identity and performance. Parks interrogates the notion of identity as a performance; an ongoing act that is negotiated and reinterpreted over time. The narrative centers around a cast of people grappling with who they are, as well as their purpose in life. The issue of identity is talked about very directly in the texts and through dialogue between characters, as they wrestle with identity being an inherent thing versus one that is performed (Parks, 1995). One of the other significant texts focuses on the identity and the performance is Peggy Phelan, *The Performance of Power*. In her new book, Phelan shapes an argument that the reality of power is not a given, but rather a performance manifest through a range of cultural expressions. According to Phelan, performance is one of the central sites of power in the world, and through performance we negotiate and are reconstituted, not merely allow a privileged view in to who we are (Phelan, 1993). Postmodernist philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, has also explored the idea of identity and performance. Baudrillard, in his seminal book on the problem of hyperreality *Simulacres et Simulation* contends that, since the world stands before us only as we experience it and reality is a mediated experience, we have access only to mediations (images/simulations) of reality, not to reality itself. According to Baudrillard, this results with an identity crisis, as we can no longer make the distinction between real and simulacra (Baudrillard, 1981). This idea of identity and its production

also comes out in the work of performance artist (though she blurs that term) Marina Abramovic. By definition, the self is not a thing but a happening, a process: this is the philosophical underpinning of Abramovic's work. Many of Abramovic's performances consist of demanding physical and mental trials, like standing in one position for hours or performing physical feats of endurance. These works also allow Abramovic to explore the boundaries of the self and the concept of a stable identity (Abramovic, 2002). Ultimately, identity and performance is a rich and multifaceted theme has been discussed in many literary and performative genres. There are many examples with works by Suzan-Lori Parks, Peggy Phelan, Jean Baudrillard and Marina Abramovic that show that identity is not a fixed state, but rather a performance that is ever-changing and contextual.

8. Analysis and Discussion of Suzan-Lori Parks' "The America Play" The playwright uses the Third Space concept to challenge former perceptions of what it means to be American in "The America Play". The Third Space is a transnational one, a place of crossing of both boundaries into each other and barricading, so that there is conflict between and a liminal space where cultures mix to argue from (Bhabha 1994). This use of the Third Space in the play ultimately creates a space of agency that disrupts reductive understandings of American identity by positioning Black American identity as one that exists both interior to and exterior from dominant constructs of the American identity. Parks subverts American archetypes in many ways, not least by portraying The Protagonist, a black nameless man trying to reconcile with his American place. Parks flips that narrative on its head and turns the Protagonist's self-discovery in to a manifestation, a very American story of identity, presented on a stage The Protagonist as an identity is not a role, but a performance that changes according to the context of each of his new worlds (Parks, 1995). It is through language and imagery that the play subverts and reimagines the dominant narratives of American identity. The play is in a style that is Shakespearean-like but with an American spin. It is there that the language is in vibrant poetics and the imagery is vivid and evocative. With the use of ambiguous language and imagery, Parks challenges the prevailing discourses of American identity (Parks, 1995). "Everyone Who Has Ever Walked The Earth Has A Shape Around Which The Whole Life (Both Erections And Posterity) Shapes Itself" (Act 1, Page 162) This quote states that each one has his/her essence or "shape" that determines where their life goes and has an impact over the generations that come after it. This "shape," means one's essence, values, emotions, skills, past experiences — the effects and effects of these that come together to form a structure, a skeleton, around which life has to be lived. It suggests that those living, through the manner in which they live, crafts not just their life but also the life of descendants as part of an ongoing process, and this continues to accrue over time. It can be interpreted through a question of a third space as taken up in part one of Homi Bhabha's The Location of Culture (1994). Third Space refers to a space for negotiation, interplay and transformation among symbols, meanings, concepts, identities, cultures, ideas and ideologies – a hybrid, in-between space that allows seemingly disparate elements to interact and rub off on each other. The center both emerges from a tension with, and create a tension between, marginal opposite binaries colonizer and colonized, self and other, traditional and modern. Immigrants are in this space, new identity and meaning are being created, and cultural or personal identity boundaries become more diffuse or even dissolved. The "mould" around which an individual and their offspring life shapes or takes a shape of their own can be imagined as a cultural and personal identity that is inherently dynamic and redefined through negotiations within a Third Space. This "shape" is dynamic and fluid, often changing through aggregation with other members/discussions tied in history, culture, and societal forces. This implies that identity is not pre-fixed nor singular but is performed constantly in relation to others and the surrounding environment – the very process that Bhabha describes within the Third Space. Bhabha, in his essay, (1994) "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," introduced third space which argues that identity itself is always constructed through the interaction of cultural forces, producing hybridity. Such shape, in this sense, could be the evolving, hybrid identity of people who are constantly negotiating the intersections of race, culture, and history. Similarly, the Third Space entails cultural negotiations that mold identity, just as individuals mold their life and impact generations. Fluid identities that disrupt stable ideas of subjectivity can emerge here, with both individual and collective identity constantly in motion. Hence, the notion of Third Space reflects the notion of a shape of a person as a dynamic entity that is always moulded by interactions with others and by the cultural and historical forces around them. It embodies the dynamic nature of identity, which is not defined by either-or cultural oppositions and distinctions, but rather by the lived experiences of each human being who has to shape himself or herself and their offspring in an ever-changing, intertwined global jungle. To some degree, the play's employment of the notion of Third Space also bears the mark of postmodern theory and cultural studies.

According to Bhabha, the Third Space is a space of negotiation and contention, a meeting point and a clash of multiple cultures and identities (Bhabha, 1994). The way that Parks draws on the Third Space concept in the play mirrors this idea where the play becomes a site of negotiation and contestation between methods and identities. According to critic bell hooks, "The America Play" is a work that subverts the usual American identity by transforming what we think of ourselves and our world (hooks, 1995). According to Hooks, the dialog of the play is an important challenge to the reigning narratives of what it means to be an American and it forces all of us to ask new questions about who we are and where we fit into the world.

9. Conclusion Parks' appropriation of the Third Space in the "America Play" questions conventional view of being American by disrupting and reshape the first narrative of (being) American identity. Its language and imagery also creates a certain type of ambiguity and uncertainty which disrupts and in many ways undermines American narrative — the narrative in which the American dream was truly achievable and the narrative in which the idea of an American identity was as straight forward as it had been presented. The interplay of the Third Space in the play also connects to the realm of postmodern theory and cultural studies, where the Third Space represents a site of negotiation and contestation between diverse cultures and identities.

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