

# Race, Gender, Slavery- a Reflection upon Park's *Venus*

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## **Abstract :**

Parks's *The Venus* is taken for study in this attempt to reflect upon the subjugation of Black Women. In this play, Parks presents the protagonist Venus as a victim of oppression. The victimized Venus Hottentot suffers victimization out of three issues - gender, race and slavery. The gender bias to a Black woman is more problematic than others because she is thrice subjugated as a BLACK SLAVE WOMAN. Being 'black' and being a 'woman' is a biological issue, which is not a choice, which results in creating a social status 'slave'.

Drama, the genre, is different from the other genres for its direct impact with the audience. The plays written for stages have a communion with the large mass at a time and its visual impact would be better and direct than a novel or a poem where the impact would be indirect.

The African American drama began with the performance of the slaves in the slaveships from Africa. Hence it could even be said that the emergence of Black playwriting is directly linked to African Theatrics. Oral drama was transferred to American soil by enslaved Africans. The slaves were asked to perform even in the ships by their masters. Later it continued in their plantations also. Their performances included song, dance, and drums and these three modes evolved as contemporary Black theater at a later stage. Later it took its long journey and during 1980s and 1990s entered the mainstream American Theatre.

The African American Women playwright took the Dramatic Literature to the next level by defying the stereotypical portrayal of Blacks commonly seen on the American stage by substituting realistic images. Among these writers Suzan Lori Parks, a great follower of James

Baldwin, projects the African American people in different dimensions. Parks suggests for re-reading, re-constructing and re-interpreting the Blacks. Parks's plays were experimental in both form and content. She has written more than ten plays of which the play *Imperceptible Mutabilities of the Third Kingdom* won an Obie award and *The Topdog/ Underdog* won the Pulitzer. Parks was successful in establishing herself in the mainstream with her uniqueness. Parks continued writing plays and has won Obie award recently also for her play *Father Comes Home*. This play brings out the freshness of her writing even after all these 34 years of drama writing career.

Parks's *The Venus* is taken for study in this attempt to reflect upon the subjugation of an African American Women. In this play, Parks presents the protagonist Venus as a victim of oppression. The victimized Venus Hottentot suffers victimization out of three issues- gender, race and slavery. The gender bias to a Black woman is more problematic than others because she is thrice subjugated as a BLACK SLAVE WOMAN. Being 'black' and being a 'woman' is a biological issue where there is no choice which resulted in creating a social status 'slave'.

Suzan Lori Parks tells the story of Baartman's life and death in 31 scenes in a reverse order in her play *The Venus*. It is a revisit to history. Baartman is a koikosian Women from Africa. She was brought to Europe and was displayed in freak shows. Her physique was considered unique and a naturalist Cuvier announced that she does not fall under the normal human race. This historical Saartjee Baartman of 1800 becomes Venus in Parks play *Venus*. This historical event though brought out in literature of early period gains a different angle in the hands of Suzan Lori Parks. She handles this subject to bring out many issues that include race, gender, science, love, slavery, colonialism, art, pleasure and death. The oppressed voice does not merely lament upon its suffering, instead it makes the audience to have a clear perspective of what it is to be a subjugated, oppressed, victimized as a whole.

Parks portrays 'Venus' in the play *Venus* as "a poignant figure, heavy with history, a source of horror and fascination for the greasiest of citizens: the mob and academic naturalists"(81, Philip.C.Kolin).

The play begins with the resurrection of Venus. The play Venus starts with the announcement of Venus's death. The immediate response to this information is not pity or sympathy but irritation or sense of loss for being paid the money to watch the show. This idea reflects the loss of humaneness and valuing life merriments with a consumerist attitude. The character Venus is dead and the other characters shout, "It's an outrage, outrage". The spectators' emotional outpouring is an expression of moral revulsion, not at the inhuman conditions that led to Venus's death but at the fact that they were lured into the show under false pretences and have already paid their money. "Gimmie, Gimmie back my buck!" the spectators demand. Thus the show woman apologises but explains and gives reasons saying that it was raining continuously and then some other adds if Venus was drunk. The Brother later the Mother showman says "Behind the curtain just yesterday awaited; wild Female jungle creature of singular anatomy. Physiqued in such a backward rounded way that she outshapes all others".(14) A member of chorus as witness says, " A Spectacle, a debacle, a priceless prize, thuh filthy slut coco candy coloured and dressed all in a naturel she likes when people peck and poke." (17) The crowd watches her like watching an animal in the zoo.

In "May I Present to You 'The African Dancing Princess' she'd make a splendid Freak" Parks shows how the Whites mesmerized the Black people with false promises. The White Man and the Brother convinces the girl as follows. "Think of it as a vacation! 2 years of work take half take –come back here rich. Its settled then"(27) . The exploitation of the girl begins where the man who brought her to England abuses her sexually deceiving her that he is in love with her. Then the girl is sold to the mother showman where she is introduced to another freak as, "The most lowly and unfortunate beings in Gods Universe." And again in the scene 27 a footnote #3 of The Negro Resurrectionist explains the worst situation as :

"Historical Extract : Category: Literary : From Robert Chambers'- Book of Days-  
(Rest)

"Early in the present century a poor wretched woman was exhibited in England under the appellation of "The Hottentot Venus. The Year was 1810. With an

intensely ugly figure, distorted beyond all European notions of beauty, she was said by those to whom she belonged to possess precisely the kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen, the Hottentots". (46).

At another place in the play both the mother showman and the Venus are shown counting the money that they have earned out of the freak show. While they count, the former counts in tens and the latter in ones. She says 10, 20, 30, while the poor innocent Venus counts one, two and three. Though the girl Venus is smart enough to count, she does not understand the way she is being exploited. Parks shows how inhuman the treatment to the Venus was and also stresses the emotional outpouring of the Venus, "the things they noticed were quite various but no one ever noticed that her face was streamed with tears"(57). Parks projects Venus as a protest when she demands good food and a private boarding. But then she is not given anything she demanded and is pushed back to the same point. There is but one change; that is to tour around the world. But however she gains name and fame; she still remains a circus creature. Her identity as a human comes in the last of the list. The voice of the voiceless is not heard and she is denied the basic right. The inhumanity of the mother showman gets intensified when she announces- "Uh gift of chockluts is customary. Place yr treats at her feets and watch her feed"(69). This animal like treatment on Venus magnifies the superiority of one race over the other. The play also digs the gender bias by accusing Venus as the sinner while the men who exploited her are all only victims of her witchcraft. With such blames she bears she is produced in front of the court. The court announces she is indecent and she herself confesses without any realization that she willingly accepts to perform in the freak show. The court enquires the witnesses and they finally supply their statements that she attracts through her witchcraft. The court passes judgement saying the country is so honest enough even to review a Hottentots' status.

Venus exchanges her position from The Mother Showman to the Baron Docteur –from the frying pan to the smoking fire. The Baron Docteur introduces himself as the biggest fan of hers, as a friend. He gives her a red heart box of chocolates. The deal between them is that he would take her to Paris, teach French, pay well, and give new clothes and good meals and a room

of her own. But then he adds that she would sleep with him. The next scene brings the audience the report prepared by Baron Docteur after the death of Venus. The scene is titled Dis(re)memberment of The Venus Hottentots. The report gives all the biological observations of Venus as if she is a rare specimen. This height and breadth of hers make the audience feel that there goes a study on a chimpanzee or such an animal. The physical, biological, sexual behavior are all recorded and read in front of the other scholars. Here Parks brings out the exploitation of the superior race over the other. The “other” has no place in the world of the so called civilized “jungle”. At the end of this scene it is clear that the character Baron Docteur heartlessly has killed ‘Venus’ for his own selfish reasons. He deceived The Hottentots by saying that he is her friend. The civilized doctor has lost his own values when he murdered Venus for establishing himself personally and academically. By doing this he gets his wife back and gains more fame and name. The Docteur when he talks of the language Venus used he says, “her native language of this woman is said to have consisted entirely of an almost, uninterrupted succession of clicks and explosives”(99)

When the Docteur is intimately discussing his whims and fancies to Venus he reminds her that she has got a homeland and a family back there. But she does not like to go back. Parks brings back the detailed physical description of Venus associating with a monkey. When Parks brings the news of Venus’ pregnancy, the doctor says, “God, Is there anything we can do about it? I’ve a wife. A career. A reputation. Is there anything we can do about it we together in the privacy of my office. I’ve got various equipments in there we could figure something out.”(130)

For this the poor woman Venus replies that in her place its cause for celebration. Parks brings out the fact that Venus has got no choice in this matter. The Baron Docteur is advised to publish his discovery and he decided to dissect her soon. Towards the end of the scene The Baron Docteur confesses that he loves her.

In “She’ll Make a Splendid Corpse” Parks opens with the whims of Venus where she imagines herself to be the Mistress of the Doctor, being attended by many servants. She thinks that she will be respected by the society. This scene reveals the audience of her pregnancy once

again and the way she is convinced by the Docteur to abort it. “History dictates she must end up a victim, but while still alive on Parks’sstage she aims to oppress and impress: “Servant girl! Do this and that!/ When I’m Mistress I’ll be a tough cookie./ I’ll rule the house with an iron fist and have the most fabulous parties” (135).

The deceptive ground is already set and slowly she is misled when she asks of ‘maceration’. He says that it means lunch in French. In their sleep the Grade School Chum interferes and persuades the doctor to leave Venus. He is given a tablet to swallow and is been warned of his reputation in danger. He also warns him that some other doctor with some other Hottentot would be publishing the report. When Venus wakes up she is alone. The Grade School Chum takes the doctor away. She asks the audience, “Is it uh little hot in here or is it just me?”(147). It becomes clear for the audience that there is no choice left for the doctor who is the only help left for Venus to come out of the wretched life. At one point the doctor himself has been persuaded to leave her.

In the next scene Venus is shown in chains and is guarded by the negro resurrectionist. But then he is also counselled to give her corpse to the doctor for medical analysis. The negro resurrectionist does not agree. But then the Grade School Chum convinces, bribes him by threatening and makes him accept the demand.

The last but one scene reveals the history of Venus herself. Venus expresses her dream of minting money when she started from her home town. She does not like crowds towards the end. She says to the Negro Resurrectionist. “Don’t let them in”(159). While recollecting her past she dies. The Negro Resurrectionist announces the fact about Venus as a chorus does in a play. Scene 1 titled final Chorus sums up and tells what has happened to Venus after her death. “When Death met Love Death Deathd Love and left tuh rot Au naturel end for thuh Miss Hottentot. Loves soul which was tidy, hides in heaven yes that’s it/Loves corpse stands on show in museum. Please visit.”(162 )

Venus being exploited dies even without an opportunity to voice herself. She is denied a human value by civilized society. Her remains are stored up in a museum even after her death for

display. Parks through the representation of Venus questions the establishment. Protests of a black slave woman could not be heard and hence she become a valuable, worthy object displayed in museum for public gaze.

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