

Transcultural Feminist Black Surrogacy in Suzan Lori Parks' Plays: *Venus* and *Fucking A*.

الاستبدال النسوي للسود العابر للثقافات كما تجسده مسرحيات

سوزانا لوري باركس: فينوس وفكينج آيه

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Abstract

This study contends that the concept of Transcultural Feminist Black Surrogacy challenges the cultural and gender biases the Black woman has been subjected to for ages. Black women have historically been objectified and stereotyped with negative physical and cultural standards. This objectification has led to the marginalization and oppression of black woman's diaspora, in addition to the perpetuating oppressive structures of gender and racial, and social inequality. Playwright Suzan Lori Parks is the First Black woman writer to win Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Her plays *Venus* and *Fucking A* portray a transcultural Feminist Black surrogacy to the global White literary/historical models of the Classical, Epic, and Brechtian Theatre. *Venus* tells a part of history during the Middle Passage of the Colonial Era of England while *Fucking A* narrates a vague time that seems like the Thirty Years War in America. Despite the different geographical/historical settings, they re-objectify the Black woman's feminist consciousness against cultural, gender, and socio-political biases. Through the concept of Feminist Black Surrogacy, the plays indicate that the Black woman's survival is worth echoing equally to the White pairs. The study emphasizes how the concept of Transcultural Feminist Black surrogacy could militate the Black woman's diaspora that has long been prevalent for epochs.

Keywords: Suzan Lori Parks, *Venus*, *Fucking A*, Transcultural Feminist Black Surrogacy, Feminist Consciousness, Black Woman diaspora.

المستخلص

تسلط الدراسة الضوء على مفهوم الاستبدال النسوي الأسود العابر للثقافات الذي يعمل على تحدى التحيزات الثقافية و العرقية و الجنسية التي طالما تعرضت لها المرأة السوداء عبر العصور. فقد تم تجسيد المرأة السوداء تاريخيا وتنميطها من خلال معايير جسدية وثقافية سلبية. و لقد أدى هذا بدوره الى تهميش الازمة النسوية للمرأة السوداء، بالإضافة الى ترسيخ مفاهيم محجفة لعدم تحقيق المساواة من النواحي الجنسية و العرقية و الاجتماعية. تعتبر سوزان لورى باركس هي أول كاتبة مسرحية سوداء تحصل على جائزة البولتيزر للدراما. وتصور مسرحيات باركس المختارة *فينوس* و *فكينج/يه* مفهوم الاستبدال النسوي الأسود العابر للثقافات للنماذج الأدبية/التاريخية البيضاء بالمسرح الكلاسيكي والمسرح الملحمي و مسرح برتولد بريخت. تحاكي مسرحية *فينوس* الفترة التاريخية الوسطى لعصر الاستعمار الانجليزي، بينما تصور مسرحية *فكينج/يه* فترة زمنية غير محددة تشبه الى حد كبير حرب الثلاثون عاما بأمريكا. وعلى الرغم من اختلاف الأطار الجغرافي/التاريخي، تعيد المسرحيات تجسيد الوعي النسوي للمرأة السوداء ضد كل التحيزات الثقافية و الجنسية و الاجتماعية السياسية. كذلك توضح المسرحيات من خلال هذا المفهوم أن صراع المرأء السوداء يستحق التقدير و التسجيل أسوة بقرينتها البيضاء. و من الجدير بالذكر، أن الدراسة توضح أهمية مفهوم الاستبدال النسوي الأسود العابر للثقافات و الذى ينهض بدوره بقضية المرأة السوداء التى استمرت لأجيال و أجيال عبر العصور.

الكلمات الدالة : سوزان لورى باركس ، *فينوس*، *فكينج/يه*، الاستبدال النسوي الأسود العابر للثقافات، الوعي النسوي ، قضية المرأة السوداء.

This paper sheds light on the concept of Feminist Black surrogacy and how it trans-culturally functions to emphasize the development of the Black heroines' feminist identity. Playwright Suzan Lori Parks is the First Black woman writer to win Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Black Surrogacy is a coined term used to describe the transcultural technique of replacing White literary/historical characters or the dramatic technique identified in the classical Epic and Brecht theater with Black ones in her plays. Black surrogacy serves as a transcultural lens to reexamine the American identity based exclusively on the White mask.

Parks resounds the story of Baartman, through her play *Venus*, highlighting the surname which echoes that of the Roman goddess Venus. In the Script of the whole play, Parks never calls her by her real name "Saartjie/Sarah" except once. In this way, the text portrays the attempts of erasing the local African American history and interacts with global cultural diversity. The text surrogates the global model with the national black one to organize the relationship between the local and the global context which invokes transculturalism. Onghena explains that "Transculturation is born of a clear desire to organize the relationship between local and global, which can provide a framework within which to rethink processes" (184).

In Roman mythology, Venus was the goddess of love, sex, beauty, and fertility. She was the Roman counterpart to the Greek Aphrodite. However, Roman Venus had many abilities beyond the Greek Aphrodite. She was a goddess of victory, fertility, and even prostitution. Venus, due to her natural beauty and sexual career, has been often depicted and sculptured nude. Comparably, Sarah Baartman was known in real life as The Hottentot Venus; a title given to the play and a figure paralleled. Baartman was brought to England by the human traders and deceived to seek a dream that doesn't exist. This transmigration is justified by the Western colonization that will make a goddess of her. Baartman was exposed as naked all the time to the public as the Roman goddess Venus who is depicted and calved nude. Parks wrote in *Venus*,

"Exposure iz what killed her, nothing on and our cold weather. 23 days in a row it rained..."(3), "She gained fortune and fame by not wearing a scrap..."(6)

The Roman goddess Venus is used to symbolize “ the mistress/beloved”. Garcia adds, "Venus had several mortal lovers as well. The two most famous would be Anchises and Adonis, but she was also the lover of the Sicilian king Butes and mother to their son Eryx and Paethon with whom she mothered Sandocus, who fathered Metamorphoses' Cinyras" (2). Baartman is persuaded by the colonizer to seek the same sexual and sometimes sluttish career in England and Paris. First, She gets naked for money, then she is allured to have sexual/intimate relationships with men, and the French Docteur for money too. When the Baron Docteur feels sympathetic to her position knowing that he can't marry her, he encourages her to go back to Africa, but she refuses blinded by the illusion of love and the passive acceptance of the first stage like the Roman goddess Venus:

THE BARON DOCTEUR: Ive got a wife. You've got a homeland and a family back there.

THE VENUS: I don't wanna go back inny more.

I like yr company too much.

Besides, it was a shitty life. (*Venus* 105)

Moreover, the text invokes surrogacy to other mythical figures, such as Helen of Troy & Achilles. All the mythical and godly figures are depicted as White persons. According to the mythical stereotype, if the creator is White, his creatures should be of the same race. The play questions the identity of the Black woman who could also be created by a Black god and have super qualities similar to the White figures. Schafer points out:

Parks uses Homer's *The Iliad*, composed long before it was written, as a model and inspiration. The events of the Trojan War that are chronicled in Homer's epic commence when Paris takes Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, to his home in Troy where she will live as a wealthy princess. Helen's destiny has been determined by the gods; it is her fate. The character of *The Venus* is Parks' African version of Helen. (185)

Like Helen, *The Venus* leaves her country because she falls in love with *The Brother* who promises to take her to England. He wants to present her as "The African Dancing Princess" and persuades her that she will be "Like Cinderella"(16). As the play depends on true historical events, Parks' heroine parodies the Epic heroic figures like Achilles, Odysseus, and typically Helen of Troy. Helen possessed the historical female beauty which seduced the Prince of Troy to risk his country for her love while Baartman possesses the African black beauty, the curved body, and the large buttocks, which are sexually attractive.

Another invocation of transcultural feminist surrogacy is "the dialogue". *Venus* is written in verse to echo the epic adventurous journey of the heroine from her homeland till her death and resurrection where her skeleton and a plaster cast of her body are displayed at the Musee de l'Homme. However, the text's dialogue mixes the epical verse with some distinct written English words that could simulate Old English as, "thuh", "tuh", and others reflect contemporary English texting. For example, *The Bride-to-Be* in scene 26 says, "Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee/he doesn't care/uh whit uhhout meeee "(38), *The Venus* tells the *Mother Showman*, "Im thuh one they come to see./Im thuh main attraction./Yr other freaks r 2 nd fiddles"(53). The text transcends the present to the past, and vice versa, in a unique transcultural dramatic technique.

Based on Aristotle's claim, that epic should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, Parks' *Venus* encompasses thirty-one numbered scenes and an Overture, although scene twenty is further divided into ten sections. Parks follows a post-revolutionary dramatic technique in her two plays *Venus* and *Fucking A*. Inspired by the Black Arts Movement, epic theater, and postmodern theatrical revolution, *Venus* is divided into three acts consisting of 31 scenes announced in numerically reversed sequences despite the fact that the action moves forward linearly.

The scenes are preceded by an overture, "orchestral music played at the beginning of an opera or oratorio" (Baldick 156). which declares the death of The Venus and the end of her shows. As the play unfolds, she is brought back to life. The Negro Resurrectionist and the chorus repeatedly call for "Order" throughout the play. All the scenes are entitled with attractive headlines vary from interrogatives, sentences, and historical references like scene 31: May I present to you " The African Dancing Princess"/She'd Make a Splendid Freak, Scene 13: Footnote 39, Scene 5: Who Is She to Me?, Scene 17: You Look Like You Need a Vacation. Schafer explains, "the plot spans several years, thus making it grander in scale, and it is the story of the hero's journey told in a linear fashion" (184).

Epic theatre usually begins with an introduction, identifying the characters and themes. The play follows the same technique providing her audience/readers with the historical information they need to get acquainted with The Black Venus. The characters introduce The Venus and themselves in the overture:

The Venus facing stage right. She revolves, counterclockwise, 270 degrees. She faces upstage.

THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST: The Venus Hottentot!

THE MAN BROTHER, THE LATER MOTHER-SHOWMAN, THE LATER GRADE SCHOOL CHUM: The Venus Hottentot!

.....

THE CHORUS: The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders!

THE MAN, LATER THE BARON DOCTEUR: The Man, later The Baron Docteur.

THE NEGRO RESURRECTIONIST: The Negro Resurrectionist! (*Venus 1*)

Later on, the Negro Resurrectionist informs the audience about the fate of the heroine before narrating the plot, "I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead." (3) The character of "The Negro Resurrectionist" and The Chorus of the 8 Human wonders evoke a transcultural surrogacy of the Epic theatre's resurrection of the heroic figure after declaring his death. Their epical roles are to pave the minds of the audience/readers to see the flashback of linear events of the plot of *Venus*. However, the scenes move on to reversal numeration. Act II starts in Scene 12 while Act III starts in Scene 8. Thus, the text stylizes a unique dramatic technique that could be absurd, at first time but its motif unfolds later. The play connects the past with the present both historically and technically.

The plot is heavily centered on one character, Hottentot Venus, which surrogates the monomyth epics. It derives the sympathy of the audience/readers when they know that the heroine of the coming story is dead like the heroic figures due to her tragic flaw, "Tail end of r tale for there must be an end is that Venus, Black Goddess, was shameless, she shinned or else completely unknowing of r godfearin ways she stood totally naked in her iron cage" (*Venus 5*).

According to Joseph Campbell, "The hero's journey as exhibited in tales from all cultures is comprised of three stages: the departure, the initiation, and the return. After the heroic quest has been accomplished, the hero returns with her or his transformative wisdom" (15). Baartman surrogates the Monomyth Heroic figure through the same stages: First, Baartman accepts the adventurous travel to London departing her homeland and family behind. Secondly, she initiates her heroic role persuaded by the Mother showman, the creator of "the Great Chain of Being" who ironically exposes her with the other 8 human wonders as the most eccentric creatures that have ever lived, " THE VENUS HOTTENTOT / THE ONLY LIVING CREATURE OF HER KIND IN THE WORLD / STEPSISTER-MONKEY TO THE GREAT VENAL LOVE GODDESS..."(35). Finally, she returns back to her humble start after passing feminist development and ends tragically with her imprisonment and death in pain.

Moreover, The Venus insists like all tragic heroes, to finish her journey with nobility. She refuses to go back home, otherwise, she makes a fortune and a career. She accepts to exhibit herself in a cage in return for fortune and fame. This choice of resistance has been depicted earlier by heroic figures such as Achilles who refuses to fight after he had been dishonored. Schafer illustrates:

Achilles chooses not to go home without his share of the booty, but it is honor and fame that he truly hopes to achieve. The Venus, like heroic Achilles, refuses to go home without having made her fortune (she already has booty); however, the goal of money is secondary to the goal of achieving love and adoration. (188)

Comparably, *Fucking A* is a transcultural feminist Black surrogacy of the classical masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter* and the dramatic technique of Brecht theater. The text explores the feminist identity and motherhood of the underclass Black women by replacing Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne with Black

Hester. While the White Hester is doomed a sinner, and bears a scarlet A letter upon her chest, symbolizing "Adulterer", the surrogacy by the play is horribly cast when the letter A is carved upon the skin of the Black Hester symbolizing "Abortionist". Parks wrote, "...She wears a simple dress with an oddly cut-out square just above her left breast. There we can see the large "A" deeply branded into her skin." (*Fucking A* 117) Hester continues in her career, despite of the scorn of society, and letter "A" keeps shining and looking fresh on her skin. Hester says, "The A looks so fresh, like they branded me just yesterday..."(*Fucking A* 125)

The white Hester commits adultery bearing an illegitimate daughter while the black Hester bears an illegitimate boy spending all the course trying to pay bail to set him free from prison after being accused of stealing a piece of meat when he was a little child. The White Hester is depicted to be a self-reliant heroine who is never truly repentant for committing adultery with the minister because she feels that their act was supported by their deep love for each other. The Black Hester also never regrets working as an abortionist despite the scorn of society. She believes that this act supports her sole son's freedom whose, "three year sentence has doubled and tripled and quadrupled and –since hes been in jail hes committed several crimes," (*Fucking A* 134), and even after his horrible death, she makes her mind up to continue her career helplessly.

When Black Hester is scorned due to her job being called "Babykiller" (*Fucking A* 122) even by the abominable criminal hunters, the text justifies such career in a society full of adultery. Canary, the White whore, says to Hester, "...We need you too much. Like me, you perform one of those disrespectable but most necessary services."(*Fucking A* 121) In scenes 14 and 16, the play dramatizes many treacherous wives and unmarried women who keep knocking on the door of Hester and looking for her everywhere to get rid of their illegitimate pregnancy:

WAITING WOMAN #1: Loverboys seed growing inside you, huh?

WAITING WOMAN #2: You got the guilties and needs to get rid of it before the husband finds out. (*Fucking A* 190)

Within this Black bloody context, *Fucking A* adopts a dramatic technique that surrogates the Brechtian theatre. Bertolt Brecht believed that theater should entertain while encouraging the audience to question their ethical choices. Schafer explains, "Epic theater, like earlier epic poems, focuses upon a cultural hero, but in Brechtian epic theater the hero embodies the choices that the playwright wishes the audience to question" (159).

Brecht theater used the episodic structure to achieve the effect of alienation. Both Brecht and Parks alienate the audience by choosing a setting that is unknown, but familiar " a small town in a small country in the middle of nowhere." (*Fucking A* 129) Scenes 4 and 8 are described to be located in a park, "in the middle of *nowhere* overlooking the sea" (*Fucking A* 136 and 154). In this regard, the text transmits the vision of the audience/reader into a global perspective letting them imagine this racial & gender diaspora happening anywhere/possibly everywhere in the world. Parks describes her play *Fucking A* as, "An otherworldly tale." (*Elements of Style* 5).

Black Hester derives sympathy through her exclusion from society. Consequently, the audience feels alienated from the heroine paralleling the Brechtian style. The Black Hester here surrogates for the famous heroine of Brechtian character; the White Mother Courage of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* in 1939. Both conflicts of the plot are not on territory but on the human body. The action of *Mother Courage* takes place during the Thirty Years War which is similar to the implicated time of *Fucking A*. It takes place during a time when Black women and underclasses are objectified as pieces of meat

by the ruling patriarchal class, such as the Mayor. Canary tells Mayor, "You are the Mayor they are the people. You are the shepherd they are the sheep. You set the clock you style the fashion you define the taste" (*Fucking A* 152).

Like Brecht's *Mother Courage*, Hester is forced to work continually to support herself and, most importantly, to free her child from prison; she tells Canary in a song that she is, "a woman who does all she can" (*Fucking A* 123). She works with the enemy in a society where women are alienated from their own bodies and expected to see them as tools for production or nonproduction. The Mayor represents the racial & gender patriarchy that victimizes all women around him. He has an audacious affair with Canary and reprimands his barren wife saying, "...Yr a disgrace to the nation. Everyone agrees. I should remove you from our town house and put you in our country house" (*Fucking A* 129).

The text also enhances the feminist revelation of the heroine against the ruling patriarchy by using the Feminist Talk language which is spoken only by the female characters in the play represented by Hester, Canary, and Waiting Women. This Feminist TALK language invokes the feminist linguistic diaspora which faces women when talking about the female body. Most of the time, Hester, Canary, or the Waiting women use this feminist language in order to refer to their bodies, sexual organs, menstruation, or abortion. Canary and Hester enjoy their triumph after aborting the First Lady saying:

CANARY: *Hester, weh Seven-leagues swich tue ee meh. Ya weh tahrum sah Dinkydow, eh?*

HESTER: I understand.

CANARY: *Eee sah Le traja scrapeahdepth. Ki bunda-ley?*

HESTER: *Weh race. Pabala weh fihnder. Pabala.*

CANARY: (Rest) I guess we can take her home now?

HESTER: Please. (*Fucking A* 215)

For the first time, this language sounds like Black English as both have similarities in pronunciation. Bigspy explains that this language is “based on a black demotic.” (*Fucking A* 310) The feminist TAIK language is dramatized as a racial & gender expression of the anger of revelation against White/Black patriarchy. It is never spoken at all by the males in the play. They could understand it, but they despise using it as a reflection of the White & Black patriarchy. The Hunters insist on firing Hester out of the tavern, ironically because of her job:

HESTER: *Le doe-dunk eyesee Frahla ehle dunk seh
Frahla ah ma, Mister Hunter.*

SECOND HUNTER: Thats private family business.
I'll smash yr face for blabbing that!

...

FIRST HUNTER: Didnt know you spoke TALK.

SECOND HUNTER: Just enough to get by.

FIRST HUNTER: My wife wants me to learn it but I
say no way. Keep that stuff private. Like it should be.
Thats what I say. (*Fucking A* 146)

This linguistic feminist language invokes Spender and Catherine MacKinnon’s feminist concept. They argue that male power over language has allowed them to create a male reality. Instead, they believed that they need to create a new reality more congenial to women:

Some feminists have argued that the only way to achieve this is for women to create their own language, either by redefining terms already in use, or by inventing a new language, with new words and new rules. Only in this way, they suggest, will women be able to break free from the constraints of male language and male thought, to articulate a competing vision for the world, and to work toward it. (MacKinnon 96)

The feminist language is understood by the males, but they never appreciated it. The text elucidates how colonialism and patriarchy, through the imposition of this language, dispossessed African-American woman, generally, and the Black woman, specifically, from boasting their cultural and feminist identity. Indeed, Parks considered the interpretation crisis that could face the audience/readers upon hearing/reading these words in many situations in the play. The instructions in the Author's note provide an English translation, "The play employs the foreign language of TALK. Translation for TALK could be found on page 223. The production should present a nonaudible simultaneous English translation."

Fucking A is a transcultural contextualization within the lens of Brechtian alienation. All the Black characters surrogate Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Butcher rejects his own imprisoned daughter whom he refers to as "a bad seed," which is similar denotatively and contextually to the character of the Cook named Lamb who wants Mother Courage to leave her daughter behind. Both characters are named after their job: "Butcher" and "The Cook named Lamb". The soldiers who fight in the bloody war that serves a capitalist government in *Mother Courage* are substituted for the Hunters who serve the ruling power by chasing the outlaws and tearing their bodies apart. Canary Mary, like Mother Courage's friend Yvette, attempts to help Hester save her son.

Black Hester is similar to Mother Courage or Medea, whose bargain ends with losing her children. Hester slays her son to die quickly and protect him from being tortured by the Hunters. Both mothers lost their children miserably and were left alone while they take up their tools and resume their work. The conclusions of *Mother Courage and Her Children* and *Fucking A* are similar; the respective heroines return to work. Hester surrogates Mother Courage when they both end the play singing. While Mother Courage continues in her career joining the last regiment of soldiers who depart singing, Hester goes back to her tools and recalls her favorite song from the first scene, but she couldn't finish it as usual, unlike Mother Courage.

Compared to Brecht's play *Mother Courage and Her Children*, transcultural symbolism functioned widely in *Venus*, especially in the names of the characters. All of them are entitled to their professions. In *Venus*, Parks prefers to call the heroine, Saartjie Baartman, by her Western title, The Venus, without mentioning, except once, her real name. The text implies the colonizer's attempt to erase the Afro-American history and its representatives within a transcultural lens, the contact zone of the colonized and the colonizer. The other characters are entitled The Negro Resurrectionist, The Mother- Showman, The Brother, The Baron Docteur, The Bride-to-Be, and The Grade-School Chum.

In *Fucking A*, the heroine is entitled "Hester" as a surrogacy of the White Hester of *The Scarlett Letter*. The other characters are named by their profession or their dominant trait, such as The Hunters, Waiting Woman, Butcher, Canary, Mayor, First Lady, Monster, Jailbait, and Freedom Fund. Both plays invoke transcultural characterization which symbolizes how people are labeled in society by their position or doing whatever their names are remarkable. They were in the past and are in the present judged and privileged by their positions.

The selected plays combine the oppressive and bloody context of the Black theater with the Greek Epic and German Brecht style which fosters the transcultural perspective. The texts transcend African, American, Greek, and German cultures to reflect that all of them are active and integrating with each other. Through these plays, Parks offers a transcultural lens of feminist Black surrogacy to challenge traditional narratives, give voice to marginalized perspectives, and emphasize the development of feminist consciousness for Black women. Humanistic objectification has historically been manipulated to perpetuate systems of oppression and inequality. Suzan Lori Parks' plays, *Venus* and *Fucking A*, challenge this objectification through the concept of feminist black surrogacy. Ultimately, the concept of feminist black surrogacy provides a powerful tool for challenging objectification and promoting feminist empowerment for the Black woman's diaspora along the ages.

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