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Research Article

The Watched without Organs: A Deleuzian Reading of Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*

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ABSTRACT

Suzan-Lori Parks, as a female black playwright, in her postmodern drama, *Venus*, has portrayed the condition of living of a black South African girl, subjugated under the hegemonic power of dominant colonizers. Saartje Bartmann, later renamed as Venus Hottentot, is seduced and then exploited by the colonizing power, both men and women. In the process of being sent from Africa to Europe, she is being watched, performing ritual dance and then, scrutinized by the colonizers. In this regard, the present study aims to read *Venus* by borrowing a different perspective from Deleuzian terminology to clarify and open up the less-discussed and investigated aspects of Parks's drama to conclude that *Venus*'s slavery narrative, resembling a Deleuzian *Watched without Organs*, while entails a process of becoming different and against the dominant power, a schizoid person. It can be inferred as a form of Parksean resistance against the dominant metanarratives and creating her own mini-narrative.

Key Words: Deleuzian BwO, Love, Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus*



1. INTRODUCTION

Written in 1990, *Venus* was first staged on March 28, 1996, at Yale Repertory Theater in 31 scenes. Suzan-Lori Parks, in this play, depicts the life of Saartjie (Sara) Baartman, a Khoisan woman who was brought from South Africa to Europe in 1810 and, because of her physical features (the steatopygia, or protruded buttocks), put on display in freak shows where she is called “the Hottentot Venus”. Being exploited by both men and women, she dies in 1816 and her body, as a source of scientific curiosity or scientific racism, while her organs removed through an autopsy, was displayed at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris. But after 187 years, her remains were returned to Africa in 2002 to memorate her glory and have a great funeral for her. Parks records the story of Baartman’s life and death in thirty-one scenes that play out in reverse order. *Venus* incorporates a range of archival material, including court documents, dairy entries from spectators, newspaper editorials, broadsheet ballads, and selected scenes from *For the Love of Venus*, a three-act drama based on a popular vaudeville show, *The Hottentot Venus or the Hatred of French Women*, produced in Paris in 1814. Warner notes that the play *Venus* dramatizes the life of Baartman as “a means without end, and as such holds out the opportunity of reimagining recovery without dignity and reconciliation without truth”. *Venus* “dislocates, alienates, and disorders history and the ‘truth’ as we know it”. (2008, p.9)

Parksean world of play attempts to dig up the lost historical bones to question the cruelty that went upon black people, in this case, African women, throughout History. In this regard, her drama, not only unsettles the dominant powers but tries to redefine what is lost and forgotten under the vehemence of white hegemonism. Her play digs up the past-forgotten stories of the cruelty that happened to black people, especially black women, and leaves it there be for all people to be seen and understood. Parks, in *Venus*, not only attempts to write the lost history of African Americans, but she wants to challenge the ways that her readers or spectators, imagine about History. She sees her job as “a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature” (Parks, 1995, p. 4) In this regard, the present study aims to investigate *Venus* from a different angle, by having a Deleuzean attitude to reexamine the less-investigated parts of the



play to clarify the aim of the playwright in historicizing the past events and the lost history which can be inferred as a form of resistance and creating her own form of narrative while questioning of the dominant power.

2. The Watched without Organs

The play is overwhelmed with the question of who is the watcher and who is the watched, what is the role of the watcher in the process of being watched? There are some spectators or watchers in this play. The Docteur is watching Hottentot, The Blackman is watching the Doctor, the people who pay to watch Venus's freak Shows, The Mother-Showman who is in charge of Venus's freak show, The Chorus of 8 Human Wonders watching Venus caged, and The Negro Resurrectionist is watching everybody, propounding the question that 'who is the watcher and who is the watched?'

Parks's dramatization of *Venus* ponders about how Sartije Bartmann, Venus, is victimized to be watched. First, by The Brother, a black man and Venus's ex-lover, who now seduces her in bringing to Europe, presenting the capitalist or colonizer's made-believe promises and lies in victimization of African people. Secondly, by the viewers of freak shows, both men and women, who gather for watching Venus's dances and pay The Mother Showman for her shows, denoting as a way of encouraging the act of colonization and exploitation. The Mother Showman's shows are the capitalist propaganda of the colonizers' society, which sees everything in the form of a commodity and the relations are defined according to monetary status. Thirdly, the spectators of the play, who are watching the whole dramatized event and are expected and enquired to reflect upon the events.

Therefore, Venus, in Deleuze's account resembles a Body without Organ, not in the sense that she is an organ-less body, but as a person who lives in a "stratified field of the organization" of capitalist society. The body, according to Deleuze, may experience "an alternative mode of being and existence" (Message,2010, p. 35), becoming a schizophrenic person. Clarifying his notion that conforming to the coded rules of society, Venus must submit her sexual energy in one of the 'coded' behaviors of society, which is, usually, marriage,



as a social norm, but while she performs her ritual dances for the freak shows, she disobeys the system and becomes a different person who in Deleuzian account is named as schizophrenic. Schizophrenia has a positive entailment and meaning for Deleuze since it embodies the process of becoming different. The schizophrenic body, in this case, the watched Venus, deterritorialize the dominant territory of Western society in the form of lines of flight. Her soloist performances, while she understands and laments for her condition, though there will be no getting rid of the imposed condition, perform, at least, a form of resistance against the colonizers' or watchers' power.

It can be inferred as a process of 'becoming' different for Venus, which will be resulted in her death in the end of play, becomes a form of resistance as well. Venus, who behaves against the social norms and rules of society, by exhibiting her body during the freak shows and her ritual dancing, she displays the role of a schizoid person who disobeys the rules to resist the capitalist and colonialist society. The process of becoming different, has started in Africa, where she is called "girl" by her colonizers, then, her name is changed during the play which ends in becoming Docteur's beloved. As she arrives from Southern Africa to England, her real name, "Saartjie", which means "little Sarah", is altered to "the girl" by her deceptive colonizers. In the subsequent scenes, her name is changed to "Venus Hottentot" by The Mother Showman, her new master exploiter. To the end of the play, however, the name Venus remains for her. In the scenes that a play within the play is performing, "For the Love of Venus", a drama in three-act, Venus plays the role of The Bride-to-Be as well. In Deleuze's account, the process of 'becoming different' challenges the concept of identity since "the primacy of identity is what defines a world of re-presentation (presenting the same world once again) while becoming [becoming different] defines a world of presentation anew." (Stagoll, 2010, p. 21) Becoming does not tend toward a goal or an ending but is "the very dynamism of change" (21).

In this regard, this process 'becoming different' can be traceable in Venus's desires, as a young person, to reach fame and fortune but results in unjustifiable exploitations. Her name changes throughout the play as



her roles change as well. The nomadic movement and dynamism of various forces toward becoming, is evident throughout the play that put into question the supremacy and stability of “Platonic being, originality and essence” (Stagoll, 2010, p. 22) of the colonizers, through which, Parksean-Deleuzean ‘war machine’ accelerates this process and white male-dominated institution of capitalism is going to be challenged.

In this regard, the intermingling of white mythologies and mythological names with black slavery narrative in the form of the first character’s name, Venus, “the Black Goddess” (Parks, 1997, p. 14) and use of biblical names and references are meant to subvert the white dominancy. Since Venus, in Greek mythology is the Roman counterpart to the Greek deity, Aphrodite, and can be associated with positive and negative attitudes but is mainly known as the goddess of love, sex, beauty, fertility, prosperity, and victory, but Parks has nominated her main character as Venus to have both these features while none of them. The meaning of love, recalls an ironical intention behind the usage of the word. Apart from Parksean anti-supremacist standpoints, the play *Venus* is entangled with the meaning of love and the question of the truthfulness of love, lover, and beloved. As the Negro Resurrectionist plays the role of Parksean announcer, in the last scene of the play, he declares that the play is “A Scene of Love” (162) which seems to be ironical since the theme of love is investigated from different standpoints in the play.

First, Venus, the main character, is in deep love, or desiring, of becoming famous and rich. She trusts her ex-lover and becomes easily deceived to leave her land for reaching a better life in England and it resulted in her oppressive condition in the freak shows and life in the iron cage, which will finally lead to yielding for the love of the Docteur Baron, her scientific exploiter. In the last scenes of the play, while being sad and regretted, Venus laments that:

I was born near the coast, Watchman.

Journal some worked some
ended up here.

I would live here I thought but only for uh minute!



Make a mint.

Had plans to.

He had a beard.

Big bags of money!

Where was I?

Fell in love. Hhh.

Tried my hand at French.

Gave me a haircut

And the caps.

You get thuh picture, huh?

Don't look at me.

Dont (*italics are hers*, 159)

In this scrap, Venus's life story is summarized, from where she has come from, what happened during the time and by whom, and what is going to happen at the end, the process of being watched and subjugated by the colonizers. Though she feels being regretted for her present condition and she laments and "dreams of home in every spare minute" (158), she has got to an understanding that "it was a shitty shitty life but oh I miss it" (158) and implicitly reveals the fraudulences of her seducers, The Bother and the Docteur.

On the other hand, love is investigated from the lenses of the watchers, from Docteur Baron's view, who exemplifies the scientific exploitation and is at the service of capitalist power to colonize and exploit the 'other' nations under the flag of science. He, also, represents the language, or the logos, of the dominant culture whose aim is not only to teach but to colonize the oppressed people. Docteur Baron, as his name is written in French, is against Deleuzean 'nomos'. In Deleuze's account, 'nomos' is related to the nomadism or movement of the nomadic tribal people. And since they prefer movement and instability, they reject the logic and the laws of 'logos' or the dominant power. They favor improvisation and chaos to question the



fixed and defined territories of their dominancy toward “making smooth” (Deleuze and Ghattari, 1987, p. 69) or free spaces.

Furthermore, the love of Venus’s ex-lover for her is changed to the love of seeing and scrutinizing everything as a commodity, as a way of gaining money, and in order to reach more money, he is going to bargain Venus to white purchaser. And finally, the love of the watchers of Venus’s freak shows, the ordinary people, both men and women, who desire to watch the caged girl, and intensify the condition of victimization and colonization. They are the mere representations of and the tools of colonializing power. As they pay for the freak shows, the dominant power perpetuates its action in exploiting the subjugated nations.

Although, the quest for ‘love’ has overwhelmed the play, none of the characters intends for the true meaning of love. In the Overture of the play, the chorus after the announcement of Venus’s death, says: “She thuh main attraction. She iz loves thuh side shows center ring. Whats thuh how without thuh star?” (7) Even The Mother Showman, introduces her in “Great Chain of Being”, nominates her as a “love goddess”. In another scene, The Mother Showman or chorus invites people to visit her plaster and corpse in the museum, saying: “come and see love.” One can find the affinities between Parksean inquiries for love and Deleuze’s theory of ‘affect’ which seems the two concepts, love and affect, can be used interchangeably here. Since, within Deleuzean framework, ‘affect’ happens when the bodies collide or make a connection, it is a change, a “product of an encounter” (Coleman,2010, p. 11). Entailing both positive or negative meaning it can be part of the process of becoming more understandable and comprehensible. Since affect contains a broader sense than love when Deleuze uses the term to refer to the additive processes, forces, powers, and expressions of change. Affect in “Kiss Me”, one of the recurrent sentences throughout the play, is that audible, visual, and tactile transformation produced in reaction to a certain situation, event, or thing. In it, affect is an independent thing, sometimes described in terms of the expression of an emotion or psychological effect, but all the while transhistorical, transtemporal, trans-spatial, and autonomous.



Affects expresses the “modification of experiences as independent things of existence, when one produces or recognizes the consequences of movement and time for (corporeal, spiritual, animal, mineral, vegetable and or conceptual) bodies.” (Colman, 2010, p. 11) Moreover, it involves a “dynamic of desire within an assemblage to manipulate meaning and relations” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 12). In this regard, Venus’s desire to gain fortune and fame, represent Deleuzean affect whereas she is in search of a better quality of life is highlighted at the beginning of the play.

Meanwhile, it is important to note that, the word love, as Deleuze and Guattari discuss, acts like a ‘black hole’ that attracts and does not release the person, one cannot escape from it. As the play portrays, Venus’s desires entangled the condition in not being able to escape from it and hence, she remains effortless in the process. The ‘black hole’ can be a representation of a possible ending point to certain acts of deterritorialization. In *A Thousand Plateau*, the term black hole has been sourced from contemporary physics. Referring to spaces that cannot be escaped from once drawn into, Deleuze and Guattari describe a ‘black hole’ as a star that has collapsed into itself. Although this term is used as a metaphor, it maintains an effect that is fully actualized, effective, and real, it has been relocated away from its original. Deleuze and Guattari refer to the relationship of philosophy and psychoanalysis with desire and subjectivity, that “if the black hole is one possible outcome faced by the overly convulsive, self-consumed desiring subject, then it works to illustrate their contention that every strong emotion- such as consciousness or love - pursues its end,” (Message, 2010, p. 29-30) the death of pursuer at the end.

3. Conclusion

Venus, one of Parks’s controversial plays, has attracted scholar’s critical attention so far. The multi-layered structure of the play results in various interpretations and commentaries, what Parks always refers to, and wants her readers or viewers to consider. Out of this labyrinthine structure, the story of a black girl is dramatized that Parks has borrowed from the real story of Saartje Bartmann. This present study has tried to demonstrate the less investigated aspects of *Venus*. The approach, that is handled here, is from Deleuzean



perspective having a look at Parksean dramaturgical style whereas, the subject of Deleuzean becoming and Body without Organs are investigated by having a Parksean flavor. Venus throughout the play, undergoes a process of becoming and comprehension toward herself which seems agonizing and suffering for her. Throughout this process, she becomes a different person whose story of life and suffering can be the representation of a form of resistance toward the dominant exploiter power.

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