

Race and Socio-economic condition in Suzan Lori Parks'

Father comes Home from the Wars Parts 1, 2 and 3

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically explores various challenges faced by the suppressed slaves in western societies. The paper highlights the way in which history and learned narrative forms exclude certain voices using the backdrop of the civil war. The play illuminates the silencing of black women's experiences in the author's subversive use of style. It tells the story of Hero, a slave who makes the decision to go to war with his slave master. Parks explores the dealing of Hero and redefines the texture of human existence involving the suffering of women and the obstacles of adversity. She explores the lives of women who transcend the boundaries driven by their situation. Her main female character, Penny, grapples with both her pain and external pressure as she continues her journey with Hero. This is about a bondage that could not voice out against any kind of discrimination and damaged the lives of African women in America.

Keywords: Civil war, Slave, Discrimination, Race, Oppression.

The Play *Father Comes Home from the Wars Parts 1, 2 and 3* focusses on the struggles of Afro-Americans to form a new self at the time of civil war. Parks focusses on the life condition of the Afro-American Negro community on the plantations of America. The fabled epic poem handed down from ancient Greece appears repeatedly in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Father Comes Home from the Wars parts 1, 2 and 3*. In parts one, two and three the character Homer, shares the name with the poem's creator. The focus of the play is exploration of freedom and home. The title of the play describes the Odysseus plot of a father returning to his family after many years away in battle. "The Odyssey is in our drinking water" said Park in an interview in 2016. Hence bits and pieces and shards and shrapnel of a lot of things are identifiable in *Father Comes Home from the Wars parts 1, 2 and 3*. Attributed to Homer of the eighth century BCE, the Odyssey was told orally for several generations before it was written down. The story follows king Odysseus of Ithaca on his harrowing journey home from the Trojan War as he faces deadly obstacles of menacing creatures, and punishment of wrathful Gods. Back home, his wife Penelope and son Telemachus encounter their own challenges, including dozens of intrusive suitors vying for Penelope. After twenty years Odysseus reaches Ithaca, after succeeding in his revenge on the suitors with the help of the goddess Athena and reunites with his wife Penelope. The character in *Father Comes Home from the Wars parts 1, 2 and 3* who most closely matches Odysseus is Park's protagonist, Hero. His very name is a potential reference to Odysseus' legendary status among his fellow Greeks for his courage and success in the Trojan war. Many characters in the Odyssey praise Odysseus's skill in combat and credit him with the idea for the Trojan Horse, which was crucial to the Greek victory. The name Hero also provides Parks with the opportunity for the word play that she loves, allowing her to invert the type of behavior that is expected from a character named Hero. At the end of part one, it is understood that Hero betrayed Homer years earlier when Homer tried to escape and that Hero was promised his own freedom for doing so. Shortly after this is revealed, Hero resolves to go to war.

Colonialism enslaves the Africans and slips them into the feudal system where the African slaves work for their masters honestly expecting nothing in return. This transition has diminished the pride of the Africans who were once great warriors and had one of the ancient civilizations in the world. The enslaved Africans gradually understand their plight and begin to express their feeling of liberty. This positive thought becomes the mantra of the colonial slaves to set their generation free from the cruel hands as colonizers enjoy the pleasures of life. According to classicist Emily Wilson's introduction to her 2017 translation of the *Odyssey*, the archaic Greek word *beros* implies skill at war, but not the virtues associated with "heroes" today. Indeed, the Gods in the poem favour Odysseus for some attributes that no longer praise a contemporary hero, including his aptitude for deception. Wilson's translation underlines the moral ambiguity in Odysseus, labeling him a complicated man. By this definition, the name Hero suits the complexity of the character in *Father Comes Home from the Wars parts 1, 2 and 3* and evokes the shadowy legacy of his counterpart from the *Odyssey*. Neither of these multidimensional characters is simply benevolent or good. What separates Parks' Hero from Odysseus is his social rank. Odysseus is a king, but Hero is an enslaved man, lacking the autonomy and mobility enjoyed by his noble Greek counterpart. In part 1, Hero is perplexed in choosing between staying in Texas or going to war.

Naming the protagonist Hero appears ironic as he is a slave to his master. The notable quality of Hero is that he is fearless and strong. Liberty is his aim. He decides to go to war as the Master has assured him liberty if he fights for him. Hero's friend Homer has the perception that their condition will never change in any circumstance as the Masters have great control over the slaves. Suzan Lori Parks gives clarity to the thought of colonial slaves that are multi-dimensional. While some are pessimistic and do not attempt to take any risk, some are optimistic and hope to liberate their community from the iron chain of slavery that weighs them down. Yet others are passive in fear of punishment and torture. Transition differs from individual to individual though they may belong to the same community and social living. Hatter comments, in *Gender*,

Power and Violence: Responding to Sexual and Intimate Partner Violence in Society Today, “When violence is analyzed using an intersectional framework, several important patterns quickly appear and rise to the top. There are, for example, many important differences in the ways that violence is gendered. Men perpetrate far more violence than women, and most of it, they perpetrate upon each other via war, gang violence, gun violence...” (4).

The master never lets his slaves undergo a positive transition because he does not want them to be exposed to the outer world through which they may gain knowledge and thereby instill in them a spirit of rebellion against him. Hero and his fellowmen are being controlled by the Master, and they live within a confined circle. Though the choice of going to war appears to be the choice of Hero, it is the master who has slyly convinced Hero to participate in the war. By establishing this lack of agency early on, Parks sets up the audience to understand the power of her play’s conclusion. In part three we learn that Hero has changed his name to Ulysses, the Latin variant of Odysseus while away to war. Not only is this an incredibly bold statement for an enslaved soldier serving the confederate Army, but also a true, meaningful choice. Ulysses finally has control over something. Hero renames himself Ulysses, a legendary Greek name, who is known for his valour. Hero might have heard the story of the gallant Ulysses and might have been impressed by his war skill. Hero’s exposure to the outer world, especially the war, has equipped him with knowledge of the world, war skills, invincible spirit and diligence.

Arthur Miller, a modern American playwright in his famous essay ‘Tragedy and the Common Man’ argues that common people can be tragic heroes in modern times if they can sacrifice their lives for individual human dignity: As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing-his sense of personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to

Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his "rightful" position in his society. (4).

Parks advocates that women, particularly Afro-American women, should be given access to occupy the legitimate space to lead a successful life in an alien country. Parks always furnishes the position of African women in her narration in context to the era she depicts. Hero in *Father Comes Home from the Wars parts 1, 2 and 3* is identified as the counterpart of Odysseus, and Penny is a resemblance of Homer's Penelope. Hero goes to war against the wishes of Penny, and she eagerly awaits her husband's return. This is the condition of most of the women during the civil war. Women do not enjoy equal status, and they are not provided enough space to voice their rightful thoughts and feelings. Penny's state is initially meek, but she emerges powerfully making her choice when Hero deceives her. Parks rejects the Odysseus's portrayal of Penelope's reunification with Odysseus through each character's true home coming. When Hero finally arrives in part three, Penny discovers that he has married another woman and has planned to live with her. She reacts by making powerful choice of her own to leave him and his new wife behind. Penny does not surrender herself to Hero considering herself weak and meek. She decides to explore new avenues of life. She boldly and pragmatically handles the complex situation without the assistance and guidance of a male character. She resolves to give meaning to her life by making choice of her own. She realizes the importance of loving herself and her feelings.

The state of transformation from the level of property to that of an emancipated individual ushering into the threshold of freedom proclaims that the new identity gained by the victim will continue as far as the destination is achieved. The characters of Suzan Lori Parks are the epitome of the last lines of Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Ulysses*, "To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield" (18).

Unlike Odysseus, who restores the comfort and safety of his home by expelling Penelope's suitors, Hero and the other enslaved characters of *Father Comes Home from the Wars Parts 1, 2 and 3* never seek

comfort or safety. Parks sets a hero, navigating domestic partnerships, finding a change dramatically for an entire population of enslaved people by using a classical Greek text as a lens to explore these complex and nuanced ideas in *Father Comes Home from the Wars parts 1, 2 and 3*.

Parks highlights not only the past, but also the present. Transition from past to present is the focus of the play. The move of the continuously suppressed community in the past helps readers to understand their nature of life that is unpleasant and disgusting, as they have been living like animals for no cause. Suzan Lori Parks reveals that freedom will never be granted, and that it should be grasped with required energy.

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