

## **The Assertion of Individual Agency in Suzan-Lori Parks' Father Comes Home from the Wars**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims at exploring Suzan-Lori Parks' Father Comes Home from Wars (2014) to highlight how the assertion of individual agency starts and grows. Parks portrays the individual agency as a basic intention that encourages the individual to act seriously. This drama exposes the intense personal challenges that come with the path from slavery to freedom through the story of Hero, an oppressed man divided between loyalty and autonomy. The bewilderment, remorse, and displacement that endure even after physical freedom are reflected in Hero's experiences. Parks depicts freedom as a place of ambiguity where past traumas emerge and identity needs to be reconstructed rather than as an instantaneous state of tranquility. By exercising the proper choice and resistance, the characters articulate autonomy to transform their situation toward true life devoid of slavery restrictions. Parks reinvents what it means to be free by emphasizing that individual agency needs both change and emotional healing by concentrating on the psychological rather than the political aspects of emancipation. Thus, Father Comes Home from Wars serves as a profound reflection on how the psychological effects of slavery remain, warning audience that the actual cost of liberty can often be found in the oppressed individual's emotions and reason. In this context, the assertion of individual agency is viewed as a continual process that has been created by the impact of conflict, environment, and self-actualization desire.

**Keywords:** (Enslavement, Hero, Individual Agency, Language, Parks).

## اثبات الفاعلية الفردية في مسرحية سوزان - لوري باركس (يعود الأب من الحروب)

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### الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى استكشاف مسرحية سوزان- لوري باركس (يعود الاب من الحروب) (٢٠١٤) بهدف تسليط الضوء على الكيفية التي تبدأ وتتنامى بها فكرة اثبات الفاعلية الفردية. حيث تصور باركس الفاعلية الفردية على انها دافع رئيسي يستحث الفرد للعمل بجدية. كما تكشف هذه المسرحية التحديات الشخصية العميقة التي ترافق الطريق من العبودية الى التحرر، من خلال قصة (هيرو) الرجل المضطهد و الممزق بين الولاء والاستقلالية. حيث تنعكس في تجارب (هيرو) مشاعر الحيرة، الندم، والاغتراب التي تستمر حتى بعد نيل التحرر الجسدي. تعمل باركس على تصوير الحرية كمكان يسوده الغموض، حيث تعاود الصدمات القديمة الظهور، و تصبح الهوية بحاجة الى اعادة بناء، بدلا من ان تكون حالة مؤقتة من السكنة او الاطمئنان. ومن خلال ممارسة الاختيار الصحيح والمقاومة، يعبر الأشخاص عن استقلاليتهم لتحويل وضعهم نحو حياة حقيقية بعيدا عن قيود العبودية. كما تعيد باركس ابتكار ماذا يعني ان تكون حرا من خلال التأكيد على ان الفاعلية الفردية تتطلب التغيير والتعافي العاطفي معا، وذلك بالتركيز على الجوانب النفسية للتحرر بدلا من الجوانب السياسية. تعد مسرحية (يعود الاب من الحروب) تدبرا عميقا في كيفية استمرار الاثار النفسية للعبودية، اذ تحذر جمهور المشاهدين من ان العبء الحقيقي للحرية غالبا ما يكمن في عواطف وعقلية الشخص المضطهد. وفي هذا السياق، يُنظر إلى تأكيد الفاعلية الفردية باعتبارها عملية مستمرة وجدت نتيجة لتأثير الصراع والبيئة والرغبة في تحقيق الذات. الكلمات المفتاحية: (استعباد، هيرو، الفاعلية الفردية ، لغة، باركس).

### 1-Introduction

Although some complex reality is revealed by its human aspects, yet agency is considered as a final achievement of justice and freedom in historical discourse. The abolition of slavery in the United States was not found in psychological freedom immediately, it pushed former slaves to live in dislocation and trauma

while struggling with reestablishing themselves in an ethnically discriminatory community. Therefore, the concerns associated with asserting one's identity, in a society where freedom is totally uncertain, was included to the assertion of individual agency in addition to the burden of slavery. Parks' *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (2014) highlights these shocking circumstances, yet the playwright hopes to open doors for those repressed people by bringing their challenging situations to the attention of the public. Parks sheds light on the struggle of a man who was enslaved and torn between his pursuit of being free and his tendencies to stay loyal to his master. Hero, the protagonist of the play, shows a prime illustration of the emancipation dilemma through his struggle, which confirms that seeking freedom involves difficult choices, betrayed allegiances, and unresolved issues regarding one's role in his society. Accordingly, the play reveals Hero's painful misery but praises his spirit of self-control and resilience.

## **2- Parks' Theatrical Vision**

Parks integrates a bold form of language and history as a foundation of her dramatic vision. Her drama aims to subvert traditional realism through applying experimental structures which reveal the complexity of Black identity and its historical consciousness. To connect past with present, Parks has exploited the appropriate use of language by using repletion, fragmentation to reveal the individual's shattered psyche as a result of slavery. Her engagement with African American oral and musical traditions is seen in in her structural innovation, which she considers as revision and repetition. Parks investigates African American historical narrative and myths in everyday language as being a kind of cultural critique and an experimental framework. She strives to significantly increase the potentials of "African theatre by challenging repressive narratives and creating new platforms for African identities and experiences on the American stage through the

use of language and historical research"(Thompson, 2007, pp.210-220). This grants her plays a voice that reflects both individual and collective experience. African American theatre has significantly been influenced by Parks, since her plays are considered today as reinterpretations of stories and challenges of traditions that merge resistance with cultural representations.

The African American experiences are shown by her plays as well as the intersection of gender, identity, social injustice, racism, and the need for freedom and equality for civilians in American society (Hamilton, 2018). Language is at the foundation of Park's worldview because it serves as a performative medium that transforms social concepts. Through the use of poetic, rhythmic and frequently fragmented language, she reveals the historical conflicts and emotional depths within her plays. She demonstrates how language can challenge oppressive ideological structures through linguistic structures, in which words framed her plays with historical and social significances that serve as instruments for self-definition and freedom. By dismantling conventional patterns of language, she reasserts communication as a source of empowerment that transforms meaning in order to represent color people as inseparable part of social formation. However, at a public symposium, Parks once noted "It's insulting when people say my plays are about what it's about to be black, as if that's all we think about, as if our life is about that. My life is not about race. It's about being alive" (Kolin& Young, 2014, p.155). Therefore, Parks is considered as an authentic playwright who dealt with collective social issues without being bias to her own cultural background.

Parks' theatre is also firmly rooted in history and politics. In order to give voice to people who are marginalized in the prevailing cultural memory, she reinterprets well-known myths and historical accounts. Frequently, her plays serve as historical restoration initiatives, re-examining America's past to uncover its

hidden realities. She intends to prove that the pride of the Africans, who were once challenging warriors and possessed one of the world's oldest civilizations, has been battered by the Americans. Her plays urge spectators to see history as an active discussion between recollection, values, and imagination. Parks' use of psychological depth, symbolic imagery, and fractured narratives to reveal the intricacies of racial identity and the fight for liberation is one way that her theatrical style recalls the impact of previous African American women dramatists like Adrienne Kennedy. In her interview, Parks was asked about Kennedy, she asserted that " I like Adrienne Kennedy because she made me feel like I could do anything at that moment. I admire the hell out of her as a person, as a courageous person"(Jeggetts & Parks, 1996,p.314).

### **3-Discussion: The Assertion of Individual Agency**

Parks challenges the conventional celebration of liberation as a glorious time in American history by exposing the inner development connected to the path from slavery to freedom. Hero, whose fractured identity and confused allegiances emphasize the terrible contradiction of being both legally free and internally alienated, best embodies the mental growth of freedom in this drama. Hero claims at the start of this play that " This morning when Boss and me spoke alone together. He promised me: My Freedom for My Service."(Parks, p.51). However, according to Parks, freedom must be sought with the necessary determination because it will never be given. Parks' depiction of freedom reveals that it is as much an existential battle as it is a political accomplishment by shifting the focus from the outward circumstances of freedom to the interior costs of existence, choice, and identity. The emotional instrument of freedom is highlighted by Parks, who shows that liberty is a complicated process characterized by internal conflict, uncertainty, and the remaining weight of slavery rather than a single moment of release. James M.

Vardaman (2011) claims that one of the reasons the North freed slaves was to get away of "the workforce at the home front by giving them a chance to run away from there"(pp.88-97). Parks, however, challenges simplistic notions of Black liberation and struggles, which are frequently present in popular American historical discourse.

The psychological effects of slavery are shown in Parks' play through the use of language, which also provokes contemplation on the necessity of emancipation. Characters in slavery frequently exhibit hesitancy, insecurity, and internal turmoil in their speech, which reflects the psychological burdens of bondage. Hero, for example, finds it difficult to express himself when discussing whether or not to accompany the Colonel to battle, demonstrating how slavery compels him to weigh his value against the prospect of freedom. The sense of hesitation was viewed through his language "I'll harm myself in some bloody way"(p.78). Because he fears death, Hero is psychologically distressed about how to gain his freedom without fighting in the battle. Hero's answer to his master's question proves how frequently slaves struggle to articulate themselves in a way that is persuasive. Viewers are urged to think about liberation as a necessary restoration of completeness as the broken language reveals how slavery deprived people of their agency. Accordingly, she has asserted, "As a playwright I try to do many things: explore the form, ask questions, make a good show, tell a good story, ask more questions, take nothing for granted"(Parks,1995, p.6). Parks dramatizes the exceptional voices of African Americans, which have been disregarded, to show how much pain and suffering they endured..

By using chorus voices and repetitive speaking patterns, Parks mirrors oral tradition while stressing the collective misery of the oppressed population. The difficulty of envisioning life outside of slavery and cycles of servitude are echoed

by this repetition. In this way, the echoing sounds confirm the psychological limitations of slavery and inspire those who hear them to see freedom as a break from tedious repetition. The white master colonel conceals harshness with arrogant and perhaps scornful rhetoric. Some slaves act hypocritically out of fear and flattery despite their desire for liberty. Colonel's words support the feeling of superiority and oppression, "I am grateful every day that God made me white. As a white I stand on the summit and all the other colors reside beneath me, down below"(p.154). In order to emphasize the urgent necessity of freedom for individuals who have been enslaved and oppressed for a long time, Parks has been successful in portraying slavery as a social dilemma. Consequently, the Africans eventually get their predicament and start to announce their sense of freedom. Hero's desire for emancipation stems from adopting the same male "Victorian values that were denied to him as a slave" (Prendergast, 2000,p. 68), is the source of his complex identity.

Through the play's dialogue, Parks purposefully employs ellipses, silences, and interruptions, especially when people are faced with difficult realities such as Hero's betrayal, the promise of freedom, or the memory of running away. These speaking pauses highlight the psychological damage of slavery and the necessity of emancipation as a form of healing, reflecting suffering that is difficult to completely express. All enslaved people aspire to freedom, but they often want one of them to be the first to experience it, and they often want to do it with the least amount of hardship. The Old Man, who is thought to be wise, is the voice and the language that Hero and the other individuals must hear. He implies that Hero would be better off cutting his foot than engaging in combat to fulfill his master's wishes. Consequently, he outlines the scheme:

We'll do it or get beaten dead for his defiance. One of you will whet the knife. And Penny, you'll hold him while I make the cut. Leader whets the knife. Hero puts his foot on a rock to be cut off. (p.79)

Due to the difficult circumstances they endured, "Parks' character are victims of a society that denies them selfhood and erases their history. Conscious of efforts to render them invisible, her characters frequently assert a desire to be heard, recognized, and remembered"(Kolin & Young, 2014,p.8). Parks often confirms that Africans are enslaved by the colonizers and forced into the feudal system, where they work obediently for their owners with no expectation of compensation.

Discrimination is confirmed through language, especially in the Colonel's cool-headed and collected handling of Smith, a white captive, as opposed to his treatment of African slaves. Hero has been given some authority by the colonel to demonstrate his fake humanity and justice. Order is given by the colonel, "Hero, take hold of this rope and lead the Yankee along. With his leg he won't be able to move as fast as you so carry him if you have to"(p.181). There is a clear shift of power in the exchange between the white captive Smith and the slave Hero. Despite Hero's legal enslavement, his words and actions toward Smith portray the captive as weak, dependent, and beneath him. This dynamic draws attention to Parks' criticism of racial hierarchy and reveals the contradiction of slavery.

The feeling of inferiority that the oppressed people lived frequently results in internal conflict and psychological anguish. Within this framework, the father of individual psychology, Alfred Adler (1870–1937), provided a realistic and logical interpretation of human behaviour. According to his fundamental view of the individual, "striving for superiority to compensate for universal feelings of inferiority, when combined with social concern, favor mental health. Egocentric strivings devoid of concern for the welfare of others lead to neurosis and

unhappiness"(Page,1975, p.56). If the audience does not forget about social constructions before seeing this performance, "they will probably understand Smith's desire to improve the slaves' conditions as a condescending act "(Warren, 2014, p.291). In this sense, Parks additionally works as a reminder to her audience of the shortcomings of African American liberation, which must be more rational and accessible.

Since the slave is certain that being given authority or a great position is a kind of fantasy, he has truly proclaimed his inferiority in his community. A person without freedom cannot make that decision, as Hero's response reveals, "I don't know if I'm qualified to give freedom to another man seeing as how I'm not a free man myself but I give it to you just the same" (p.138). Smith is a former slave who is now a Union soldier. He is a respectable model of a man who seeks freedom and self-determination to liberate himself from the chains of oppression. Hero and Smith's story exhibits how slavery distorted authority to the point where one enslaved person may seem to grant or deny another's freedom while, in fact, both remained imprisoned by the cruel sense of the system. In Parks' play, almost each slave who works for Boss-Master, the owner of the plantation where Hero resides, comes to terms with the fact that their bodies are property. The majority of the play's plot is on the emancipation question, which has dominated the thoughts of the oppressed people. Consequently, "these first three parts are set during the Civil War following the slave Hero and his relationship to freedom" (Dougherty,2015,p.360). Parks goes back to the Civil War in this play to explore its moral and psychological impact on enslaved people and their fight for freedom. The Civil War was a historical result of systemic discrimination and ingrained racial inequality.

The change in name from "Hero" to "Ulysses" shows how names have psychological meaning. Both potential freedom and servitude are symbolized by self-renaming or being renamed. Since this language act depicts the fight for autonomy, the audience is encouraged to recognize emancipation as psychological relief in addition to legal freedom. In this play, the Hero's metamorphosis into Ulysses stands as a humorous reminder of the unmet promises of freedom as well as an empowering act of self-naming that proclaims individuality beyond enslavement. This procedure also demonstrates how Parks exposes the psychological wounds left by bondage while placing the captive subject inside an atmosphere of epic tradition.

Parks often uses fractured speech, irony, repetition, silences, and the weight of naming to describe the internal horrors of slavery. Characters and spectators are required to think about the reasons that freedom is not only a political need but also a profoundly psychological one as language itself becomes a reflection of sorrow and defiance. For many African playwrights, language itself echoes as a nonviolent weapon that enables the oppressed to articulate their struggle, reclaim their identity, and make gradual progress toward total freedom. In this regard, Hero's emotions can be seen as those of a shattered self-in-slavery, caught between hope for personal release and guilt for betraying others like him. Nevertheless, Parks shows that slavery stains relationships and renders fidelity, trust, and love terrible. The person's central agony works for as a small segment for the emotional cycles of concern, fault, and misunderstanding that continue even after physical autonomy that looks possible. The play suggests that psychological captivity constitutes the most enduring legacy of slavery and, therefore, liberation implies not only physical but also mental emotional restoration.

Given that he is a slave to his master, it seems absurd to name the protagonist, Hero. His greatest qualities that enable him to meet the requirements for being a true hero are his bravery and strength. He chooses to go to war because he wants liberty and the Master has promised him it if he fights for him. Despite his bravery, his explanation is dominated by uncertainty. He once argues that "but can you see Boss-Master and me coming home from the war. And him giving me my Freedom like he says he will" (p.53). First and foremost, agency is a privilege to be reclaimed, frequently through force when nonviolent means fail, rather than a gift to be given. 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. Because he does not want his slaves to be exposed to the outside world, where they could acquire information and develop a spirit of revolt against him, the master never permits them to go through a positive transition. Thus, Hero undergoes a symbolic act of self-actualization and metamorphosis by changing his name to Ulysses. His name's change signifies his moral and psychological transformation from a slave who was defined by others to a person who is trying to define himself. By giving the character the name Ulysses, Parks makes a comparison between the journey of Hero and that of the famous Roman mythological character Ulysses. Because of his perseverance, curiosity, and triumphant return home, the allegorical character was honored through history.

### **Conclusion**

Parks highlights in her artistic writings that her primary concern is not just the suffering of Black people in specific but also her humanitarian empathy for all oppressed people, regardless of their nationality or culture. The individual assertion can be truly completed if it is cooperatively practiced not privately. Any attempt of change to be more effective and find a track to progress, should begin form within

the individual and then turn into other intelligent persons who suffered the same agony. Parks has planted the seed of individual agency to urge the burdened people to protest peacefully to obtain their humanitarian rights. To conclude, Parks succeeds in depicting how the individual's will enables him to turn intention into action in his search for freedom. Whenever the slaves realize the way to liberation is not merely a dream but an actual right, they will be able to reach their freedom not through violent confrontation but by creating regularly peaceful demonstration. Hero's experience in this play reflects a thoughtful challenge that supports and empowers the individual agency.

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