



## Discursive (Re) Construction of Black Femininity: *Venus* from Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis Perspective

## Siyahi Femeninliğin Söylemsel Yeniden İnşası: Feminist Eleştirel Söylem Analizi Perspektifinden Venüs

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### Abstract

One of the striking plays by a black female writer, Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* is analyzed through Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) in this study. Inspired by a brutal historical reality, Parks (re)positions black women in the patriarchal and racist system. Her black woman, *Venus*, is objectified through her body, while she also struggles to be the subject of her own inner world. Focusing on the playwright's discourse, this study sheds light on the complex relationship between discourse and gender through FCDA. Its main concern is that gender is discursively constructed based on ideological and political factors. It claims that discourse justifies and perpetuates gender-based discrimination, resulting in strengthening the patriarchal system at a linguistic level. Based on FCDA's principles, this study infuses that Parks's discourse of positioning the black female body as an object of male domination is constructed to reflect power relations, which systematically oppress black women. Relatedly, this study suggests that Parks's discourse in *Venus* illuminates the pervasive nature of the objectification and exploitation of the black female body and dismantles historical and societal realities through the systemic oppression and marginalization that black women have faced. By exposing these deep-rooted power imbalances based on white hegemony and patriarchy, Parks's discourse challenges the longstanding societal norms that have subjugated black women for centuries.

**Keywords:** Feminist Discourse, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, *Venus*, Suzan-Lori Parks, Black Femininity.

### Öz

Bu çalışma, siyahi kadın yazar Suzan-Lori Park'ın çarpıcı oyunlarından biri olan *Venus*'ü Feminist Eleştirel Söylem Analizi (FESA) ile incelemektedir. Parks, tarihsel bir gerçeklikten esinlenerek yazdığı oyununda siyahi kadını, ataerkil ve ırkçı düzende yeniden konumlandırır. Siyahi kadını, *Venus* bir yandan bedeni üzerinden nesneleştirilirken, diğer yandan kendi iç dünyasının öznesi olarak çabalar. Yazarın söylemine odaklanan bu çalışmada, FESA aracılığı ile söylem ve cinsiyet arasındaki karmaşık ilişki ağına ışık tutulmaktadır. FESA'nın temel savı, cinsiyetin söylemsel olarak kurgulandığı ve bu kurgunun temelinde ideolojik ve politik unsurların yer aldığıdır. Söylemin cinsiyete dayalı ayrımcılığı meşrulaştırdığını ve devam ettirdiğini ve böylece ataerkil yapının dilsel düzlemde de güçlendirildiğini iddia eder. FESA'nın ilkelerinden yola çıkan bu çalışma, Parks'ın siyahi kadın bedenini eril tahakkümün bir nesnesi olarak konumlandırıran söyleminin, siyahi kadını sistematik olarak ezen güç ilişkilerini yansıtacak şekilde kurgulandığını ileri sürmektedir. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, Parks'ın *Venus*'teki söyleminin, siyah kadın bedeninin nesneleştirilmesinin ve sömürülmesinin yaygın doğasını aydınlattığını ve tarihsel ve toplumsal gerçekleri, siyahi kadınların maruz kaldıkları sistematik baskı ve ötekileştirme yoluyla ortaya çıkardığını iddia etmektedir. Parks'ın söylemi, hem beyaz hegemonyasına hem de ataerkilliğe dayanan bu köklü güç dengesizliklerini açığa çıkararak, yüzyıllardır siyahi kadınları boyunburuk altına alan uzun süredir devam ettirilmiş toplumsal normlara meydan okumaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Feminist Söylem, Feminist Eleştirel Söylem Analizi, *Venus*, Suzan-Lori Parks, Siyahi Femeninlik

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## Introduction

The mutual aspects that bring people together as well as the differences polarizing them constitute the cornerstone of social order. The common language, culture, and history have a unifying role while some factors such as race, religion gender, or ethnicity have discriminative effects on social relations. Inevitably then, societal norms are shaped on the axes of both contrasts and similarities. In this context, the social positions of black individuals in a white-dominated society are defined by the perceived hierarchy of skin color. From this vantage point, it is also possible to say that the notion of gender, as a part of individuals' identities, has a determining role in this social order. Relatedly, this study aims to analyze Suzan-Lori Parks's discourse in *Venus* to discuss the position of black woman to explore the complex intersections of race, gender, and power. It is obvious that women and men have societal roles determined by ideological, sociological or political perspectives and those roles construct gender. The word 'construct' is significant since it implies that gender is not a fixed concept, rather it is shaped in line with societies' priorities. It is also possible to argue that familial and social responsibilities assigned to women and men throughout history become norms, which turn into stereotypes in time. The transformation of such stereotypes into behaviors, behaviors into actions, and actions into discourses is an inevitable end of societal unity as Edibe Sözen (2014: 12) highlights, "Society is a hierarchy of discourses and social hierarchies are based on hierarchal discourse structures".

Surrounded by historical, cultural, political, and ideological elements, discourse is broader than the scope of language. This indicates that individuals consciously use language and their linguistic preferences are purposive since discourse is considered "a form of social practice to construct some aspect of reality from a particular perspective" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 63). Analyzing discourse from linguistic, critical, ideological, and political perspectives, studies have focused on the implicit meaning of linguistic units. In a broader sense, discourse studies mainly focus on how language functions not only as a communication tool but also a mechanism for conveying and sustaining power, ideology, and other social norms because "question of power in social class, gender and race relations is a question of discourse" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: vii). Feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) is used to convey power relations and dominance, providing a better understanding of gender oppression. Highlighting that "all knowledge is socially and historically constructed and valuationally based", Michelle M. Lazar is the pioneer in feminist discourse studies and she defines FCDA as "a political perspective on gender, concerned

with demystifying the interrelationships of gender, power and ideology in discourse" (2005: 5). Parks's discourse in the play reconstructing historical facts through black woman's experiences and imagination is analyzed from a black feminist perspective. How the ideological elements stimulate her discourse and clarify the position of black women in white society is the essence of this study.

### **A Striking Dramatist: Suzan-Lori Parks**

One of the marginal voices of American literature with her distinctive language and innovative style, Suzan-Lori Parks (1963-) is known for pushing the boundaries of theatre. Winning an Obie Award and Pulitzer Prize, Parks stands out as a distinguished playwright in representing black issues. She splendidly combines her African heritage with present conditions, (re)constructing history and (re)presenting realities. The complexities of race, gender, identity, ideology, and power dynamics shape her language. Rather than solely being a significant figure of African-American literary tradition, Parks mirrors historical realities through re-constructions. This purports that Parks has her own style to portray black people's experiences that closely relate to slavery, racism, and discrimination, which determine black people's destiny and shape their history in the white community. According to Jennifer Larson (2012: 11), Parks revises history with an eye toward putting absent or neglected groups back into it. Her plays are the combination of facts and fiction; past and present; reality and illusion, which are taken from black people's pain and happiness; despair and hope; life and death.

Parks (1995: 9) underscores the significance of theatre in order to make history. She explains her role as a playwright between theater and real life to "locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones, sing, and write it down". Philip C. Kolin (2010: 8) highlights that central to her plays' core is the question of black cultural memory and contemporary black identity and Parks reflects it in her heightened theatrical, haunting language, satirically historicized sets, and surreal characters. In that sense, history is more than recorded or remembered facts; it both hurts and heals black people. Accordingly, black bodies in her plays serve as the nexus where colonialism, discrimination, and the self interact, which constitutes black identity. She portrays blackness as a symbol of subjugation by converting the black body into a theatre of trauma (Kolin, 2018: 10). Inevitably then, Parks is essentially interested in exploring the complex problems, challenges, and dilemmas faced by African American women at the intersection of race and gender. She delves into their experiences with a keen focus on understanding the multifaceted nature of their struggles.

Beyond Parks's adept handling of black issues, her language emerges as a profound and integral facet that elevates her to a distinctive position in the realm of American literature. For Parks (1995: 11), "*language is a physical act*". More precisely, Parks uses language as a sign system and combines linguistic features with theatrical performance. Including vernacular features, however, makes her narrative difficult to understand. Accordingly, Kevin Wetmore (2007: 127) draws attention to the complexity of Parks's plays, underlining that it is necessary to go into uncharted waters to characterize her plays since she does something different with each new work. As a postmodernist writer, she employs postmodernist elements such as intertextuality (including literary works), footnotes, historical extracts or newspapers, fragmentation, indeterminacies, multiple meanings or interpretations. Also, she uses a "*Repetition and Revision (Rep and Rev)*" technique from jazz music. Parks remarks that her writing is considerably influenced by music and realizes that the idea of Rep and Rev is an integral part of the African and African-American literary and oral traditions (1995: 10). Clearly, it is not possible to characterize Parks's dramatic style from a single perspective. She is influenced by various factors and she constructs her own identity as a playwright who challenges American theatre with her impressive issues and linguistic talent.

### ***Venus: A Play of Complexities***

*Venus*, like other plays of Parks, is an outstanding representation of black experiences. Written in 1996, the play has been the focus of much controversy because of its striking details regarding black femininity and sexuality. It focuses on the life of Saartjie Baartman who is a South African woman taken to England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Actually, Parks was inspired by this African woman whose story caught her attention because she is a woman who has an exceptional bottom (Parks, 1997: 166). According to the historical records, a Khosian woman from South Africa was exhibited in freak shows as the "Hottentot Venus" because of her unusual size of buttocks and genitals.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35240987>. This photo shows how Saartjie Baartman was exhibited in her cage to entertain modern! Europeans.

She was treated like a wild animal, being directed to move back and forth by coming and going into her cage resembling more of a bear restrained by a chain than a human being. She was trained in a cage to exhibit herself and expected to be perfectly obedient to her keeper like a tamed animal. After a while, she was taken to Paris and sold to an animal trainer. Her conditions seemed 'better' than in England since she was not in a cage with chains under a strict keeper. Her physical features took a French anatomist, Baron Georges Cuvier's attention and he examined her in detail, writing medical reports regarding her genital anatomy after he dissected her body when she died at the age of 26. When Cuvier concluded his scientific experiment, he declared that she was the missing link between animals and human beings, meaning that Africans or black people were not a race; they were neither animals nor human beings; they were something in between. Her skeleton and genitals were preserved and displayed in a museum in Paris until the 1980s and were finally repatriated to South Africa in 2002. In history, Saartjie Baartman remained as a collection of sexual parts which turned into a site of inscription for the values of the dominating culture (Eşrefoğlu, 2018; Kornweibel, 2009; Oddenino, 2011; Tobias, 2002). Her body which does not meet European standards of beauty, led to her objectification and although Parks constructed her play from the vantage point of re-writing history, Baartman's otherization and de-humanization process turned into an inspiration for Parks's play, *Venus*.

Parks (1997: 166) explains her perspective about writing *Venus* as "history, memory, dis-memory, remembering, disremembering, love, distance, time, a show". For her, Venus is a multi-faceted woman who is vain, beautiful, intelligent and complicit. The play is related to her world experiences and it is more complicated than "the white man down the street is giving me a hard time". She thinks that black people who deserve so much more are encouraged to simplify the race issue (Williams, 1996). Essentially, the play epitomizes the effects of colonialism and the harsh and cruel treatments experienced by black people who are viewed as inferior. It is, however, of crucial importance that the play digs into history through Parks's eyes and delves into the racism and sexism that Baartman faced during her life, combining historical facts with the playwright's broad perspective about race and gender issues.

The story of *Venus* is the same with the real Saartjie Baartman's story but Parks's perception of history, her perspective regarding blackness, and her dramatic techniques distinguishes her play from the historical plays. She depicts history from postmodernist and 'black' lenses to reveal how blackness turns into discrimination as a part of 'constructed reality' to sustain power relations: Parks examines the forms of voyeur-

ism and historical violence that Black people in the West have been especially subjected to, while also subverting that voyeurism to uncover and possibly restore Baartman's sense of humanity and agency in this dynamic (McCormic, 2014: 189). Relatedly, this paper aims to analyze her play from FCDA since the aim of this approach is to "show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities" (Lazar, 2007: 142). By this way, an in-depth analysis is provided to dismantle the historical facts on the fictional arena.

### ***Venus* from Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) Perspective**

As a multidisciplinary method, critical discourse analysis (CDA), seeks the underlying meaning of texts shaped by political, ideological, societal and historical factors, which qualifies for multifaceted *Venus*. CDA is mainly interested in the relationship between discourse and power dynamics in societies. Functioning as a method between linguistic (re)productions and social practices, CDA was, however, thought to lack a feminist perspective. Accordingly, Michelle M. Lazar (2005: 4), who views discourse as a site of struggle, where forces of social (re)production and contestation are practiced, developed the feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), which primarily focuses on a gendered point of view in discourses. It is possible to say that CDA left a room for feminist criticism whose focus is on the construction, negotiation, and contestation of gender ideologies, and power dynamics reinforced in the depictions of social practices, interpersonal relationships, and social and personal identities of individuals within textual and discursive contexts (Lazar, 2005: 11). To discuss black femininity, however, feminist perspective is insufficient since the feminist movement is not color-blind. In that vein, FCDA adopts a black feminist perspective which deals with black women's position at the intersection of race, class, and gender to reveal that "as victims of racism black women were subjected to oppressions no white woman was forced to endure" (Lazar, 2005: 11). Because in reality, white racial imperialism allowed all white women, regardless of their own experiences with sexist oppression, to take on the role of oppressor in relation to Black women and Black men (hooks, 1983: 123). Within this context, the position of black women should be argued through the fundamental dynamics that constitute blackness. *Venus* has been analyzed through various critical perspectives, including slavery, racism, historical representation, postmodern theatrical space, and ethical literary criticism (Bergner, 2024; Lyu and

Zhang, 2023; Warner, 2008; Zhuo, 2021). Scholars have explored how Parks engages with these themes to challenge dominant narratives and reconstruct history through performance. However, despite the various analytical approaches applied to *Venus*, FCDA has yet to be utilized as a framework for analyzing the play. This study, hence, seeks to fill that gap by applying FCDA to focus on gendered discourse, power dynamics, and resistance in Parks's discourse. While FCDA is often used for micro-level linguistic analysis, its scope extends beyond language studies since discourse involves the societal dimensions of language. Relatedly, Sanna Lehtonen (2007: 11) used FCDA to analyze gender in children's fantasy fiction based on gendered discourses and constructed representations through the multiple voices in the texts. She concludes that "FCDA offers both a poststructuralist theory of gender as a variable, fluid identity category and a model for detailed textual and discursive analysis of gender, examining texts in their social contexts rather than as isolated works". Similarly, Franck Amoussou and Issa Djimet (2020: 140) applied FCDA to *Purple Hibiscus* by Ngozi Adichie and *Everything Good Will Come* by Sefi Atta. They analyze how the female characters in the novels in question challenge and move away from traditional ideologies concerning the depiction of women in fictional works written by female authors. This study also uses FCDA's main principles in parallel with black feminist thought in order to discuss the (re)construction of black femininity congruent with Parks's sophisticated and postmodern perspective.

The primary argument of black feminism is that black women's experiences and their positions among white women can only be understood through the relations between overlapping systems of oppression since they are positioned at the intersection of race, gender, and class, which differentiate them from both black men and white women. As their experiences of oppression are distinct from those of other groups, it is significant that FCDA should include a black feminist perspective in this study. In this vein, FCDA recognizes that analyzing discourse of black authors requires an attitude that incorporates both racial and gendered dimensions. Unlike mainstream femininity, black femininity is shaped by historical marginalization and resistance against both racial and gendered oppression. Black feminist thought aims to "resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it and to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions", because it argues that empowerment of black women is only possible through the elimination of intersecting oppressions (Collins, 2000: 22). Accordingly, FCDA's main principles in parallel with black feminist thought are used to understand black femininity through critical lenses. The (re)construction of black femininity is dis-

cussed through FCDA's critical lenses congruent with Parks's sophisticated and postmodern perspective.

Lazar (2007: 145-156) outlines the fundamental principles for feminist discourse praxis under five main titles as feminist analytical activism, gender as ideological structure, the complexity of gender and power relations, discourse in the (de)construction of gender, and critical reflexivity as praxis. This framework emphasizes the pivotal roles of activism, intersectionality, and critical reflexivity in understanding and addressing the intricacy of gender and power dynamics that shape black women's experiences. This connection features the essentiality of incorporating racial considerations into feminist analyses to fully capture the unique challenges and struggles faced by black women in their pursuit of self-determination, integrity, and social justice. In parallel with these main principles, *Venus* has been analyzed under three main themes including humiliation, objectification and subjugation to scrutinize the primary factors determining her femininity.

### **Venus, humiliated or glorified?**

As mentioned before, Parks's dramatic technique is innovative and unusual. She delves into the known history in an unfamiliar way. *Venus* is also not an exception, which opens with 'Overture' and moves backward from the last scene to the first. Parks uses 'countdown' or 'backward' device, according to Mehdi Ghasemi (2014: 126), "to flashback to history with a focus on The Venus's story/history, and gather the pieces of The Venus's body, fragmented into anatomical parts during the autopsy operation", which means to remove the cavities and fill the hole with the restorative materials. To put simply, Parks re-writes the history of blackness with fragmented parts of a black woman, Venus.

In Overture, Venus is introduced by other characters in the play. Parks constructs the first image of this black woman:

***"The Mans Brother, later The Mother-Showman, later The Grade-School Chum<sup>2</sup>:***

*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. Behind this curtain just yesterday alive uhwaits a female-creature [...]"* (Parks, 1997: 5)

She is described as a 'wild female jungle creature' to emphasize her ignorance and inferiority like wild animals. This discourse is clearly a depiction of how social practices are discriminated and gendered. As Glenda Dickerson (1990: 110) points out the depiction and perception

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<sup>2</sup> This character in the play is called as 'The Mans Brother, later The Mother-Showman, later The Grade-School Chum', but in subsequent quotations in this study, it will be referred as 'The Mans Brother'.



of African-American woman through stereotypes have garbled her voice and distorted her image. They were thought triply locked out by class, by race, and by history. It is hard to imagine them under silk parasols and in satin dresses after they had been made the mule of the world in slavery. Accordingly, Parks's discourse justifies black women's secondary or maybe tertiary position because of her femininity. The playwright portrays the black individual marginalized and oppressed by institutionalized slavery, and through her discourse, she shows how the fact of femininity turns into pain and misery in the relevant social order:

***"The Mans Brother:***

*tail end of r tale for there must be an end  
is that Venus, Black Goddess, was shameless, she sinned or else  
completely unknowing of r godfearin ways she stood  
totally naked in her iron cage."* (Parks, 1997: 5)

Venus will be used for the stage show because of her extraordinary physical appearance. As a first principle of FCDA, feminist analytical activism is related to social practices which are far from unbiased. FCD analysts focus on analyzing discourses that perpetuate a patriarchal social order, where power structures systematically privilege men and disempower women by ignoring them. While CDA recognizes that social practices are reflected in as well as constituted by discourse (Fairclough, 1992: 12), a feminist perspective highlights that many social practices are gendered rather than neutral. The definition of Venus is ideologically gender-based and discriminatory which clarifies her social position as inferior. She is humiliated by being pushed into a secondary position through societal norms which are the constructions of historical realities. Analyzing discourse to discover the power dynamics that maintain oppressive social structures and relations contributes to ongoing struggles of contestation and change, which can be described as 'analytical activism' (Lazar, 2007: 145). Congruent with this principle, the discourse of Parks in *Venus* reveals inequalities and discrimination based on racist practices of white society. That a black woman, however, is humiliated and discriminated by the white men because of her body and sexuality makes her discourse more suitable for a feminist critical analysis. It is clear that discrimination against blacks is doubled when black women are the main issue. Her black body is seen as sinful because of her race, which is used to justify oppressing her. Arrestingly, Parks creates a historical and discursive reality in which Venus, subjected to humiliation through her body in a position of a sex object, serves as a slave to the white masters. For the entertainment of white men like a toy, Venus appears in different scenes of the play as a woman who is perpetually humiliated:

**"The Mother Showman:**

*THE VENUS HOTTENTOT*  
*THE ONLY LIVING CREATURE OF HER KIND IN THE*  
*WORLD*  
*STEP SISTER-MONKEY TO THE GREAT VENAL [...]*  
*COME SEE THE HOT MISS HOTTENTOT*  
*STEP IN STEP IN*  
*HUR-RY! HUR-RY!*<sup>3</sup> (Parks, 1997: 35)

Remarkably based on hegemonic relations of gender, this discourse is an indication of why whiteness is thought to be superior to blackness. The connection drawn between the black female body and the monkey is a concrete sign of dehumanization. Such dehumanization paves the way for stereotypes and biases that have historically marginalized and degraded the black woman, reducing her to mere physical appearance and perpetuating notions of her ignorance, ugliness, and inherent inferiority. As Hill Collins (2005: 100) emphasizes, the family resemblance between Africans and animals as embodied creatures ruled by "instinct or bodily impulses" serves to humanize apes and dehumanize black people.

Similarly, Parks's discourse is woven with the signs that remind us of the secondary or tertiary position of black women. When the white man goes to Africa to take Venus, she is portrayed as a reflection of ignorance as a woman without any worldview. She does not have any information about England and Europe. Venus is thought to be civilized after she spends five months in Europe. She starts to learn French and her experiences even if as a 'sex slave' in Europe are considered as modernization or civilization: "Its only been 2 years and yr sounding like a native! Yr a linguistic genius!" (Parks, 1997: 137). This sarcastic tone regarding her efforts to survive at the hands of her white masters is clearly related to both being men and white as a part of discrimination. Also, the details in Venus's autopsy report, which compared "her muscles to chimpanzee and all inferior Primates" (Parks, 1997: 149) highlight the devaluation of black women within white society. This is closely connected to the central concern of FCDA, which addresses the unequal distribution of power in patriarchy. Accordingly, Venus is humiliated by the patriarchal, and racist system, however, she is glorified by Parks as the playwright essentially aims to reveal black women's painful experiences to understand their present conditions.

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<sup>3</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks prefers capitalization as a part of her style of elements.

### Venus as an Object or Subject?

In the second and third principles of FCDA theory, Lazar relates the concept of gender with ideology and power structures. From feminist perspective, gender is thought of as an ideological structure that hierarchically categorizes people as men and women. In this sense, patriarchal gender ideology is structural since it is enacted and renewed by a society's institutions and social practices, which mediate between the individual and the social order. Actually, gender ideology is sustained through power relations, which are exercised, reflected, maintained, and resisted through a variety of modalities, extents, and degrees of explicitness and FCDA focuses on discursive constructions of power and dominance through textual representations of gendered social practices (2007: 146-149). Inspired by a real historical event, Parks's *Venus* is the reflection of power structures. She includes newspaper documents, and scientific reports to reveal historical facts from her own perspective regarding the perceptions of 'black female body'. Based on FCDA's ideological assumptions and Parks's purposes to concern black women, her discourse in *Venus* epitomizes how black women have been marginalized under the ideologically constructed conditions throughout the historical process. Relatedly, Venus is re-named in line with the historical contexts of the scenes. The historical context is Southern Africa in 1800s in Scene 31, in which Venus is called as Miss Saartjie Baartman or Girl:

*"The Man: Her-? Saartjie. "Little Sarah"*

*The Brother: Saartjie. Lovely. Girl! Girl!?"* (Parks, 1997: 13)

Both men insist on calling her 'Girl' during the whole scene although they learn her actual name. This is an intentional choice by the playwright since "language is used to construct identity, including gender, from a particular ideological perspective" (Sunderland and Litosseliti, 2002: 10). This black girl turns to Venus after being taken to England and her show name is 'Hottentot Venus' which means a woman of "frightening beauty" (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999: 138). She is always Venus during the time she spends in Europe. As a black woman, her identity is disregarded to silence her voice, diminish her presence, and deny her respect and dignity. However, she deserves to be called Venus thanks to her role in white society, which is nothing more than an object of patriarchal entertainment. This gendered discourse demonstrates that black women are perceived as lacking value or importance in the eyes of white men. Gender discrimination, needless to say, is closely related to and often intersects with the issues of race. It is noteworthy that black men are also the victims of institutionalized racism; however, black women are dehumanized by both patriarchy and white hegemony. Even in her homeland, Venus is unable to exercise her right to be called by her

own name. Tellingly, Parks's discourse shows that oppressive systems seek to control and dominate, not just physically but psychologically.

Parks constructs her discourse based on the femininity of Venus. Her word choice while describing Venus is primarily related to her sexuality. And Parks uses a white female character whose gender is defined by 'mother' rather than 'woman':

*"The Mother-Showman: What a bucket!*

*What a bum!*

*What a spanker!*

*[...] Go on Sir, go on.*

*Feel her if you like."* (Parks, 1997: 45)

Parks shows the multifaceted nature of discourse that may turn into a site of conflicts. In this sense, her discourse is of value to FCDA as it focuses on the discursive constructions of race, class, and gender intersection. Inevitably then, Venus's sexual humiliation by a female character who is actually the victim of male domination is regarded as a sign of de-construction of gender roles. Parks reveals the intricate ways in which societal hierarchies and oppressions are perpetuated and internalized. It is safe to say Parks does not disregard white women as she positions her as an object of male dominance, resulting in patriarchy that can be regarded as a control mechanism for sustaining their power over women.

It is also crystal clear that Venus's objectification is justified through specific words such as 'bucket or bum'. She is used like a puppet who is expected to behave according to the oppressive rules. She is Venus in Europe, however, more dehumanized and humiliated than in her 'non-civilized' hometown, Africa. Her sexual exploitation is highlighted by Parks's discourse to figure out the systematic oppression against black women through their bodies. As a core idea of all critical discourse studies, Parks pinpoints to the societal issues that black women faced throughout history. More precisely, historically and racially being as the target of control and dominance, black women are exposed to physical violation, rape, and torture. Parks's discourse invites audience to confront the annoying truths about the legacy of slavery and as in the real story of Saartjie Baartman, Venus represents all black women whose sexual stigmatization is ideologized, politized, and accordingly 'justified' by white male oppression.

Venus rarely speaks before she is sold to The Baron Docteur. She repeats what the white man says in the Africa scene while she asks some questions or gives shorts answers after she starts to work as a sexual object. Her experiences as an object are summarized by witness #2 as:

*"She was surrounded by many persons, some females!*

*One pinched her, another walked around her;*

*one gentleman poked her with his cane;  
uh lady used her parasol to see if all was, as she called it,  
'natural'*

*Through all of this the creature didn't speak."* (Parks, 1997: 69)

Venus tries to endure white men's and, in some cases, white women's torture as a part of their sense of fun. The words such as 'pinch' and 'poke' indicate how she is sexually abused at the hands of her 'gentleman or lady exploiters' which is seen as unexceptional, on the other hand, she is called as 'creature' because of her black femininity. The discursive constitution of the social situations is related to representation of black femininity. Relatedly, FCDA closely pay attention to gendered relations of power, which are re-produced, negotiated and contested in representations of social practices (Lazar, 2007: 150). In line with these main tenets of FCDA, Parks re-creates Saartjie Baartman and reproduces history through her discourse. Her representation reinforces the power dynamics and shapes the perceptions regarding black women. Parks voices the harsh realities of history to mirror how power relations function to sustain the dominance. Under this hierarchal system, it is inevitable for women to be an object as the historical figure, Venus. Unlike real Saartjie Baartman, Parks's Venus seeks to go beyond her own boundaries. Rather than merely survival efforts, she tries to understand herself, to validate her existence, and to find her liberation. She reminds her boss of their deal for her stage shows and she shows her determinacy:

***"The Venus: Im out of here***

*I'll make my own mark*

*Im all decided*

*[...] I want whats mine!*

*[...]*

***GIMMMMMIE!"*** (Parks, 1997: 57)

Parks challenges the black women's position here to break the ideological borders. The tone, punctuation, and certainty of words in Parks's discourse highlight the possibility of resistance and self-assertation to overwhelm the oppression. The audience witnesses the humane feelings such as desire, hope, or anger of Venus who has so far been reflected as a creature devoid of these. Arguing that "Venus is about a woman who makes choices" (Young, 1997, 701), Parks humanizes Venus, transforming her from a passive object into a fully realized individual with her own thoughts, feelings, and agency. Power dynamics, however, prevent black woman from following her own path, making it more difficult for her to become the subject of her own life than to remain the object of their white masters:

***"The Mother-Showman: Dont push me Sweetie.***

*Next doors a smoky pub*

*Full of drunken men*

*I just may invite them in*

*One at a time*

*And let them fuck yr brains out*

***The Venus: They do it anyway."*** (Parks, 1997: 56)

Her master tries to control her through sexual threats. In actuality, Venus lacks the right to speak or make free decisions which does not leave any chance or hope for her to improve her conditions. Parks's discourse re-positions her as an object as an indication of her subjugation which sustains white patriarchy over her body. Her femininity turns into a battleground where the power dynamics of race and gender are brutally exercised. Venus also accepts her body as a property of those who hold power. Thus, her response justifies male domination since her life in civilization is possible through men's exploitation. As Young (1997: 706) argues that the positioning of black women as the "ultimate other" perpetuates the ideology of domination and race, gender, and class oppression to endure. Stereotypes and myths about black women reinforce the underpinnings of gender-specific "Otherness" and sustain an oppressive system based on oppositional differences. Relatedly, Parks's discourse mainly depends on oppositional differences to reveal gender inequalities that emerged from racism. White men clearly benefit from racial privilege to make money through black female bodies while white women ride crest of feeling superior to black women.

### **Venus, Free or Captive?**

The fourth principle of FCDA, discourse in (de) construction of gender infuses that every act of meaning-making through language contributes to the reproduction and maintenance of the social order as well as resistance and transformation of that order (Lazar, 2007: 150). That perspective is significant for the analysis of *Venus* since Parks transforms the historical process to the stage by re-defining the roles. Although it is clear that the real black woman, Saartijie Baartman was undoubtedly the victim of harsh racism, Venus's relationship with The Baron Docteur considerably changes her in the play. Naturally, this position does not denote that Parks's Venus is not a victim; yet experiencing her own emotions behind her victimization drives this fictional black woman into action. The effect of her actions turns into discourse, making a clear distinction between the real Venus and fictional one:

***"Venus: Lets have some love.***

*[...]*

*More me. Kiss?*

*[...]*

*Lie back down. Hold me close to you. Its cold.*

*Love me?*

*[...]*

*Touch me.*

*down here". (Parks, 1997, 105)*

Venus persistently shows her passion towards the doctor and she uses her femininity to reveal her feelings, which break her silence. It may be regarded that Venus is now beyond male domination, however white people's desire to control and benefit from black people confines Venus to white hegemony. FCDA's role to scrutinize male domination and power relations beyond language is crucial to understand Venus' position as FCDA focuses on how people's linguistic behaviors create their identities in specific historical and cultural contexts, implying that discourse is a social act to re-construct or manipulate realities. Parks also uses language as a tool to construct or de-construct gender roles to create new identities. Venus's identity is discursively constructed to break the traditional stereotype of black women. Hence, it is possible to say that gender identities are not fixed as are gender roles, which are shaped by societal norms. Parks's discourse thus plays a crucial role in shaping and perpetuating the norms and values associated with black woman's femininity in their particular historical and cultural settings.

Parks epitomizes the social process in which discrimination and inequality are practices through women's bodies. Subsequently, the letter from the doctor's friend reminds the black woman's position. Parks re-constructs realities through her language to manipulate the facts, emphasizing the fluctuating nature of discourse:

*"[...]*

*In yr liason with that Negrees, Sir, you disgrace yrself*

*Not to mention the pain yr causing yr sweet lovely wife*

*[...]*

*Send the Thing back where she came from*

*And return yrself to the bosom of yr senses." (Parks 1997: 113)*

The doctor's white wife is defined as sweet and lovely while Venus is defined as a 'thing'. Her blackness is emphasized by a humiliating word, Negrees and the word 'disgrace' is linked with Venus who subverts the doctor's stance as a prestigious white man. Venus is reflected as if she did not have a name, a specific history or past, any real emotions or any significance. Treated as a commodity to be sent back, just like a bag or a piece of paper, Venus is undoubtedly ignored by the white men. Parks's discourse poignantly positions the black woman at the lowest status, in which Venus is clearly a captive within the hegemonic boundaries of the male-dominated world. The key factor that confines her to captivity is

her black femininity. Parks also reinforces Venus's dilemma under captivity with her discourse in two different scenes:

**"The Baron Docteur:** *I've got a wife. You've got a homeland and a family back there*

**The Venus:** *I dont wanna go back inny more.*

*I like yr company too much*

*Besides, it was a shitty life.*

[...]."(Parks, 1997: 105)

She reveals her deep feelings about her past in the last scene, which contradicts the scene above:

**"The Venus:** *You dont have anything you miss?*

*Yr lucky, Watchman.*

*I always dream of home*

*In every spare minute*

*It was a shitty shitty life but oh I miss it."* (Parks, 1997: 158)

Although her relationship with the doctor makes her feel free enough to sever ties with her homeland and equal to the white woman, societal norms harshly contradict Venus portrayed as an accepted member of white society. In the last scene of the play, Parks confronts the reader with the facts as real as the black woman's black skin and emotions. Her discourse epitomizes the harsh truths of racism, sexism, and oppression of black women with a powerful and vivid representation.

## Conclusion

Focusing on the how Suzan-Lori Parks reflects black women through her linguistic choices scrutinizes the position of black women from a critical perspective. FCDA which connects language with critical and feminist theory discusses the gendered (re)constructions of linguistic elements. Accordingly, this study analyzes Parks's discourse from a black feminist perspective based on gendered factors and considers the reflections of these factors for the social order from a critical perspective. It also explores the discursive portrayal of gender relations and identities that subverts societal norms and ideological structures. Her discourse is open to multiple interpretations and analysis because of the playwright's style. Under the main tenets of FCDA, it is noteworthy to say that Venus is both the victim of patriarchy and racism although Parks tries to create a black woman having deep feelings and desires.

FCDA aims to reveal linguistic constructions of the complicated relationships between gender and other social norms since each categorization includes otherization. A rich and nuanced understanding of gendered roles in societies, it is vital to analyze the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, class, or religion. In this sense, discourse plays a crucial role to discover ideological factors beyond language. Specifically, this study emphasizes the close relationship between Parks's discourse in *Venus*



and gender discrimination mainly based on racism. Evoking victimization along with encouraging self-assertions, Parks's discourse is forged to create a black woman through (re)construction and (re)imagination. The otherization, objectification, or oppression in institutionalized racism is a disgrace of history that black people personally experienced and helplessly endured. Parks reflects historical facts through *Venus* in line with black feminist thought regarding her black identity. It is, hence, possible to define *Venus* as a play in which historical facts are intertwined with the playwright's personal experiences and shared past. Inspired by a specific tyranny in the dark pages of history, Parks's discourse enlightens not only the historical truths but also reveals the complex relations of power, patriarchy and gender discrimination. In conclusion, Parks's discourse justifies that *Venus* is a self-reliant character with pain, resilience, and strength who hopes to escape the constraints of the male-dominated social order.

*Venus* is analyzed through the perceptions of both black and white society, revealing the sharp contrast between two. *Venus* is glorified, symbolizing resilience and cultural significance for black community while she is subjected to humiliation and dehumanization within the framework of white societal norms. This dilemma reflects a broader historical reality in which black bodies, despite being the subjects of their own lived experiences, are systematically reduced to mere objects under both the patriarchal system and the racist social order. *Venus*, as an individual, has her own emotions, desires, and ambitions striving to control her life. Yet, in the eyes of her white exploiters, she is nothing more than a disposable commodity, stripped of autonomy and reduced to an object of spectacle. This paradox underscores the broader struggle faced by black women, who exist simultaneously as subjects with rich inner worlds and as prisoners of oppressive capitalist and racist structures. Although *Venus* may find freedom in her imagination and emotional world, she remains physically and socially confined by the systems that seek to control her. In light of these dynamics, this study employed FCDA to analyze how societal power structures are reflected and reinforced through Parks's discourse and aimed to offer new insights into how linguistic constructions in *Venus* expose the deep intersection of race, gender, and systemic oppression.

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