

**The Rhetoric of Resistance in Suzan Lori Parks' *'The Death of the Last Black Man'***

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Article Received: 19/05/2023

Article Revised: 25/06/2023

Article Accepted: 28/06/2023

Published Online: 30/06/2023

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.06.207

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**Abstract:**

Suzan-Lori Parks' *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* stands as a bold intervention in American theater, using language and form to resist historical erasure and racial stereotypes. Unlike traditional plays, Parks rejects linear storytelling, opting instead for a fragmented, rhythmic structure that mimics the oral traditions of African American culture. This deliberate disorientation forces the audience to engage with the complexities of Black identity, history, and oppression in ways that challenge preconceived notions. The play's characters function as both symbols and voices from history, embodying racial archetypes that have long been imposed upon Black individuals. By exaggerating and distorting these images, Parks exposes their artificiality and reclaims the space in which Black stories are told. Moreover, her use of repetition and nontraditional dialogue serves as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of racial violence and resistance.

By deconstructing language, employing cyclical structures, and presenting fragmented identities, Parks critiques the persistent misrepresentation and marginalization of Black history. The play disrupts the dominant discourse by reclaiming Black voices, exposing the violence of racial stereotyping, and emphasizing the need for cultural remembrance. This paper explores how Parks' rhetorical strategies function as acts of resistance, offering a reimagined space where Black identity is not confined by history but actively reshaped through artistic expression.

**Keywords:** Suzan-Lori Parks, Black identity, historical memory, resistance, racial stereotypes, narrative disruption, performative language

Aristotle, the father of rhetoric is known for his treatise on *The Rhetoric*. His idea that logos, ethos and pathos should be balanced within a text is typically represented by an equilateral triangle. Though a balance among all these three is to be maintained by a writer/speaker, instead one may find that sometimes a particular aspect of a text will represent more than one of these appeals. This paper is an attempt to examine a play by an African American woman playwright Suzan Lori Parks who is trying to resist the dominant ideology that has successfully erased their history and their very existence. The intersections of race

and gender call for a rhetoric of resistance. Parks attempts to disprove the white patriarchal rhetoric of lies, treachery and erasure of history and prove their existence calls for a new rhetoric.

Suzan-Lori Parks is a prominent African American playwright, screenwriter, and novelist known for her distinctive use of language, innovative storytelling, and bold exploration of themes like race, history, identity, and the African American experience. Her rhetorical strategies are central to her artistic success. Her play, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990) is a complex play wherein she helps the Black race redefine their history. The dominant racist culture fabricated the absence of the Black race which is figuratively in a 'black hole'. For centuries African Americans not had to deal with questions of identity and being reduced to fungability, but when their very existence is denied, it poses a strange predicament. The negation of their existence calls is absurd and therefore Parks' play is a bizarre experience. It presents a playwright's endeavor to use 'language as a tool' to empower the Black race.

Parks chooses to employ various elements of language such as repetition, characters with significance and non-linear plot to help the African-Americans to reclaim their history of existence. But the Black race as whole becomes 'whole' when they trace their ancestry to Ham of the Old Testament and Queen Pharaoh. Parks prefers to choose to make audible impact than a logical sense as she exploits the stage to present the dilemma of the black people who are making sense of their existence. Language becomes a 'physical act' in the process of the black man and the black woman's effort to figure out their existence. The postmodern elements of the play are mirrored in her adept use of the 'language of difference' that attempts to discard the 'language of power' (both racial and gender). As the *Black Woman with Drumstick* tries to accept the resurgence of the proverbial *Black Man with Watermelon* who is supposed to be non-existent (if not extinct) the repetition of the words and sentences makes the reading of the play a formidable task. Her mission to cover the 'history that has fallen through the gaps, the cracks' and write about 'those un-chronicled events' takes the reader on an acrobatic exercise of reading, and, the reader is confronted with a new lexicon as the playwright violates all the rules of language.

Suzan-Lori Parks' *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* is a striking act of resistance that reclaims Black history, subverts racial stereotypes, and challenges dominant narratives through its unique storytelling techniques. The play does not follow a traditional linear structure; instead, it embraces repetition, musicality, and a non-linear form that reflects the cyclical nature of Black oppression and survival. Through this, Parks dismantles historical erasure and highlights the resilience of Black identity, ensuring that Black voices are heard and remembered.

Language in the play carries a distinct musicality, deeply rooted in African American oral traditions. Parks weaves rhythm, repetition, and improvisation into the dialogue, creating a

linguistic experience that mirrors jazz and spoken word traditions. This musicality is not merely an aesthetic choice but it serves as a form of cultural resistance, preserving Black linguistic heritage and affirming its value within a theatrical space. By incorporating elements of African American vernacular and oral storytelling, Parks reclaims the language that has often been distorted or dismissed by dominant cultural forces. The rhythmic structure of the dialogue forces the audience to engage with the play's message in a dynamic and immersive way, ensuring that Black voices resonate beyond the stage.

The play also foregrounds a womanist perspective, recognizing the essential role of Black women in the survival and empowerment of the Black community. Characters like "Black Woman with Fried Drumstick" symbolize strength, strength, and the nurturing spirit that sustains Black culture through generations. Parks does not depict Black women as passive figures; rather, they are central to the collective fight against systemic oppression. By giving them a commanding presence, she highlights the necessity of unity and partnership between Black men and women in confronting historical and contemporary injustices. Black women in the play serve as both witnesses and active participants in the struggle, ensuring that their narratives are not sidelined but celebrated.

The structure of the play itself reflects the cyclical nature of racial violence and Black resistance. Parks does not present history as a series of isolated events but as an ongoing cycle where oppression is continually met with survival and defiance. The play's characters, dialogue, and events repeat in loops, mirroring the historical reality of recurring racial injustices. This cyclical storytelling forces the audience to recognize that the struggles depicted on stage are not confined to the past, but they persist in the present. By refusing a linear resolution, Parks highlights that the fight for Black identity and existence is continuous and that resistance must be ongoing.

Through her innovative narrative techniques, Parks ensures that *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* is more than just a retelling of history, and it is a call to action. By reclaiming erased histories, subverting harmful stereotypes, integrating musicality in language, amplifying Black women's voices, and reflecting the cyclical nature of oppression, she crafts a powerful statement on the endurance of Black identity. The play insists that history is not just something to be remembered but something that must be actively redefined and reclaimed by those who have lived it. Parks' work resists historical silencing and reasserts the presence, power, and resilience of Black culture in a world that has long sought to erase it.

Parks' plays illustrate the arbitrary relationship between the signified and the signifier, effectively dismantling the racist notions embedded in language. Numerous reviewers examine Parks' innovative linguistic techniques, frequently citing Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s work, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. In his essay

"The Instability of Meaning in Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play*," Frank (2002) effectively summarizes Gates's linguistic theory of "signifying on the signifyin'," stating that "one signifier can be made to carry more than one meaning as is the case when a speaker of the black vernacular consciously empties the white signifier of its original white signified, substituting it with a different signified that expresses the black experience" (6). Parks engages with the arbitrarily assigned "meaning" of the signifier by translating it into black vernacular, thereby revealing multiple layers of meaning.

The most effective illustration of Parks' "signifying on the signifyin'" is found in *The Death of the Last Black Man*. The play examines the tragic life of Black Man with Watermelon, serving as a metaphor for the African American slave experience.

This character exists outside of linear time, re-experiencing the traumatic aspects of slavery, including lynching, beating, execution, and historical erasure. Ambiguous figures, including Black Woman with Fried Drumstick (his wife), Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut, Before Columbus, Ham, and several others, enhance his narrative by interweaving their own stories throughout the work. However, it is Queen-Pharaoh Hatshepsut who emphasizes the significance when she states,

"Before Columbus, the world used to be round; they placed a 'T' at the end of round, making it 'round'." Thus, they initiated the conclusion" (102).

Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut elucidates the flourishing of black vernacular during the pre-colonial period in America, a time characterized by the absence of oppression for the people. Columbus's colonial endeavours transformed the world, marking a definitive conclusion to its previous state: "Thuh /d/ thing ended things ended" (102). In the play, the term "round," in contrast to "roun," signifies the significant impact of colonial power. Humorously, "Without that /d/, we could have continued spinning indefinitely." Hatshepsut utilizes the colonial rationale that the oppressor intervenes to aid its uncivilized counterparts (102). The distinction between "round" and "roun" is primarily a dialectal issue outside the play; however, within the text, this variation signifies that alterations in speech not only affect pronunciation but also influence our perception of reality.

In *The Death of the Last Black Man*, pre-colonial America, or "pre-Columbus," is depicted as a markedly different environment than it is today. In pre-colonial periods, uneasiness of the unknown instilled humility in men. Humble, that is, only until science persuaded the aspiring explorer that his ship could not possibly plunge off the edge of the world due to its spherical shape.

Contemporary belief during the era was that the world was flat. They believed the Earth was flat. During the period when they believed the globe was flat, they were fearful and remained indoors. people desired to venture out during a time when people believed the globe was flat, yet they feared the dragons who were thought to inhabit the waters. They remained at home. Their belief that the world was flat maintained its

roundness. Their belief that the sun rotated around the earth rendered them satellite-like. They discerned the truth and hastily exited. Uncovering the facts positioned them appropriately, prompting their hurried exit to re-establish our position. (103)

Exposing the dishonest rationalizations of colonialism. Prior to Columbus, there exists a colonial perspective that regards scientific knowledge as a benchmark of civilization, although frequently exhibiting barbaric behaviour. The colonists fled Europe like famished rats, successfully subjugating the indigenous populations that existed prior to Columbus.

Understanding the figure of BEFORE COLUMBUS necessitates familiarity with the discourse around the Columbus story. In challenging this myth, Hooks (1994) argues that America's celebration of Columbus as the nation's creator exemplifies the mindset that hinders the attainment of racial peace in the country. Hooks argues that Columbus's "discovery" of America should not be celebrated, but rather serves as "an occasion to grieve for what this world was like before the coming of the white man" (198). The cultural beliefs of colonial civilizations that facilitated the dual processes of colonization and the enslavement of indigenous Americans also rationalized the enslavement of Africans and subsequently, African Americans. While Hooks mourns the era preceding Columbus, Parks adopts a proactive approach, urging her audience to recall this period and utilize this recollection to guide our future efforts in eradicating the racist ideologies embedded in language and to "turn back to a concern for the collective harmony and life of the planet" (199), as Parks articulates, to revert to the time before Columbus when the world was "ronn."

The language of Parks' plays transcends simple dialogue or story. The *Death of the Last Black Man* illustrates how reconfigured language can convey histories, places, and concepts that have been either historically neglected or newly uncovered. The vocabulary in Parks' plays expands the limits of communication; nonetheless, this approach may alienate the playwright's listeners. In addition to being challenging to read, some portions are arduous for actors to articulate and practically incomprehensible for spectators.

Excerpts from *The Death of the Last Black Man* are among the most intricate in all of Parks' works. Phrases like "Do in dip diddly did-did thuh drop" (116) and "Sure ya dontcha sure gaw ya dontcha sure ya dontcha do yall gaw" (117) may look nonsensical, although they are designed to convey that impression. Parks informs her listeners about the potency of language, with significance emerging from apparent meaninglessness. Parks' audiences cannot disregard the dialogue of her characters by merely seeing their actions or expressions; they must listen to the sounds and comprehend their utilization to derive meaning. The playwright intends for her audience to contemplate the phrase.

Parks employs unconventionality to remind her audiences of the significant impact their modes of expression have on themselves and their listeners, rather than merely arranging words in a normal manner. Her delight in linguistic play may arise from the arbitrary essence

of words, enabling her to create expressions for unexplored or unnamed emotions or places. In commemoration of the boundless essence of language, Benjamin (1996) elucidates,

"[A]ll language encompasses its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity."  
"Its linguistic essence, rather than its verbal content, delineates its boundary" (64).

Embracing what Benjamin refers to is the inherent ambiguity and boundlessness of language. Parks imbues her plays with vibrant language, enabling the words and their speakers to convey several interpretations. Parks similarly avoids confining her writing to a singular manner of expression regarding any specific subject; yet, this necessitates her continual evasion of what Alisa Solomon describes as "white institutions seeking to impose that flattening onto her round writing" (80). Parks imbues her plays with vibrant language, prompting words to thrive, evolve, and, importantly, convey many meanings that transcend traditional symbolism. This linguistic approach clearly aligns with the playwright's objective to portray African Americans:

"We should make an effort to show the world and ourselves our beautiful and powerfully infinite variety," she asserts ( 22).

No more explicit illustration of ludicrous and repressive prejudices can be found than in Parks' *The Death of the Last Black Man*. The names of the principal characters in this play. 'The Black man with a Watermelon' and 'The Black Woman with a Fried Drumstick' evoke prevalent depictions of folk plantation life. Few critics would contend that such images serve as genuine representations of African Americans at any point in American history; however, their labels conjure "types" with which the society appears thoroughly acquainted. In her essay, Elinor Fuchs (1994) recognizes the Black Man With Watermelon and his spouse. A Black woman with a Fried Drumstick is characterized as "two rural characters," yet more significantly, she perceives them as possible "stereo-archetypes, archetypal in their rural simplicity and mutual devotion" (48). The playwright subverts the conventional significance and authority of the stereotype. She does not, however, contest the folk image by constructing folk figures that display a profound, personal mentality. Parks constructs her characters as precise replicas of two-dimensional stereotypes to reveal their entire nonrepresentational nature concerning African Americans. Destined to exist as the personification of a cultural stereotype, BLACK Man With Watermelon stays ensnared in the most egregious aspects of African American history.

Parks demonstrates how his archetypal slave experience, akin to his archetypal name, functions as a dual oppression. Oppression leaves the Black man with a watermelon uncertain about what, if anything, truly belongs to him:

I kin tell whats mines by what gots my looks. Ssmymethod. Try it by testin it and it turns out true. Every time. Fool proofly. Look down at my foot and wonder it its mine.

Foot mine? I kin ask it and foot answers back with uh "yes Sir"—not like you and me say "yes Sir" but uh "yes Sir" peculiar tuh thuh foot. Foot mine? I kin ask it and through uh look that looks like my looks thuh foot give me back uh "yes Sir." Ssmymethod. Try by thuh test tuh pass for true. Move on tuh thuh uther foot. Foot mine? And uh nuther "yes Sir" so feets mine is understood. Got uh forearm thats up for question check myself out teeth by tooth. Melon mines?—. Dont look like me. (106-07).

A Black Man With Watermelon displays the profound dislocation and alienation of his character by cataloguing his body parts as if they were merchandise on a store shelf. The character, a corporeal embodiment of a stereotype, illustrates both the repressive force and the absurdity inherent in stereotypes, as he questions the ownership of his own body parts. In a straightforward manner. A Black man named Watermelon cannot comprehend how his physique resembles a watermelon, despite his name implying such a connection. To expose the absurdity of the cliché, he enquires of his wife whether he is, indeed, a watermelon:

"Were we green and striped when we first emerged?" (107).

Although A Black Man with Watermelon does not physically resemble a watermelon, he represents the oppression associated with the folk caricature. The weight of the stereotype he carries restricts the roles accessible to Black Man With Watermelon. For instance, because to the stereotype, he is unable to achieve success in the corporate realm predominantly occupied by white guys. In Parks' play. A Black man with Watermelon perceives that white America necessitates his conformity to prevailing stereotypes. For example, to function. A Black man, adorned in a striped suit coat including elaborate patch pockets, perceives himself as like a melon from the patch (127). Unsurprisingly, his portrayal of this role jeopardizes his life, as the character he emulates, akin to his name, is based on a caricature that emerged during America's racist history.

**Black Woman With Fried Drumstick:** [...]. Let me loosen your collar for you you corned home after uh hard days work. Your suit: tied. Days work was runnin from them we know aint chase-ted you. You corned back home after uh hard days work such uh hard days work that you cant breathe you. Now.

**Black Man With Watermelon:** Dont take it off just loosen it. Don't move thuh tree branch let thuh tree branch be.

**Black Woman With Fried Drumstick:** Your days work aint like any others day work: you bring your tree branch home. Let me loosen thuh tie let me loosen thuh neck-lace let me loosen up thuh noose that stringed him up let me leave thuh tree branch be. Let me rub your wrists. (118)

A Black man adorned with a watermelon-themed tie, symbolizing a figurative noose, is suspended. By demonstrating the significant impact preconceptions may have on a

character. Parks illustrates the difficulties encountered by African Americans in a society that conflates racist prejudices with reality. The obstructed state that Parks presents renders Black Man With Watermelon unable to act—he stays eternally subjugated:

"Hands behind my back."

This instance is tied" (118).

Parks contends in an interview with Savran that the "black police," referring to those who dictate the standards of black identity, bear some responsibility for the sense of entrapment experienced by African Americans due to their subjugated history (157). She articulates that the black police "ensure that your writing is sufficiently black, that your romantic partner is adequately black, that your speech is appropriately black, and that your attire is suitably black" (157). Parks posits that the requisite blackness imposed by the "black police" on African Americans severely restricts personal representation, akin to how racial stereotypes inhibit the expression of black identities.

For instance, the appellation Black Man With Watermelon reflects his incapacity to articulate himself beyond a metaphor for the collective experience of the community. The persona, referred to as "Black Man," might represent any African American male, implying a lack of distinction among them. Parks' image thus serves as a metaphor of the "black experience," which has been developed over time, a burden that the writer deems unachievable and ludicrous due to her assertion that "there is no single 'Black Experience'" ("An Equation" 21).

In the form of a metaphor, the depiction of a Black man with a watermelon exemplifies the contradictory dilemma that African Americans may face in the formation of their identity. The "black police" demand a singular portrayal of African Americans, however this representation confines individuals by requiring them to conform to a singular expression, essentially, as a stereotype. If an African American resists the expectations of the "black police" and assimilates into the culture that formerly oppressed them, these individual risks becoming a minstrel to white America. Employing the image of the Black Man with Watermelon as the archetypal "Every[black]man," who is unable to articulate his identity beyond his name or the burdensome history it represents. Parks presents the dilemma that African Americans confront daily.

The portrayal of a Black woman with a Fried Drumstick evokes the "Mammy" stereotype, a well-known image among American audiences. In his essay regarding this caricature, Phil Patton characterizes Mammy as the "Southern earth mother, source of nutrition, wisdom, comfort, and discipline, cook, advisor, mediator" (par. 2). Despite being affectionate and resolute, the portrayal Patton delineates is devoid of potency:

Nurturing and protective, self-sacrificing, long-suffering, wise, often world-weary but never bitter. Mammy mixed kindness with sternness and wrapped her own identity inside the weight of her heartiness, her own sexuality inside her role as surrogate

mother, teacher, and cook. [. . .] And she never escapes her sense of the limitations of being black, (par. 5)

The depiction of a Black woman with a fried drumstick evokes the Mammy stereotype, portraying her act of force-feeding her husband as her sole purpose, reflecting her perceived limitations. Parks once more appropriates racist stereotypes in *The America Play*; however, rather than employing a caricature, she utilizes a well-known nursery rhyme rooted in racist discourse. In the play, a black man referred to as The Foundling Father abandons his wife and son to travel West, where he reenacts the assassination of President Lincoln. The well-known racist jingle that commences with "Eeny meeny miney moe" persists in contemporary playgrounds; however, the latter part of the rhyme, "catch a nigger by the toe," has been altered to "catch a tiger by the toe." Parks revives the racist interpretation of the rhyme by associating the term "nigger toe", referring to a Brazil nut, with a character in the play. The Foundling Father states that he named his son Brazil after the nuts "in a fit of mean-spiritedness following the poor joke about fancy nuts and old men's toes" (162). David Pilgrim and Phillip Middleton's (2004) examination of the term "nigger" elucidates the rationale for The Foundling Father's choice of the Brazil nut/"nigger toe" as his son's namesake. Considering that the term "nigger" perpetuates "the stereotype of the indolent, unintelligent, filthy, valueless parasite," The Foundling Father designates his son with the moniker "nigger toe" since "his son resembled a nobody" at birth (par. 4; 162).

The depiction of a Black man with a watermelon does not resemble a watermelon, just as Brazil does not resemble a nut. Moreover, a Brazil nut bears no resemblance to a black man's toe any more than a peanut resembles a white man's toe. Although it was initially a racist and nonsensical depiction. Parks recontextualizes it, enabling the stereotype to convey a novel meaning. The graphic represents Brazil's emotional volatility. For instance, although the son does not resemble a nut, he exhibits somewhat eccentric behaviour. Brazil refines his craft of sobbing, having learnt it from his father, over time. He converses with his mother regarding how he ascertained the suitable manner to grieve the demise of a family acquaintance:

Brazil: Couldnt choose between wailin or gnashin. Weepin sobbin or moanin. Went for gnashing. More to it. Gnashed for her and her like I have never gnashed. I woulda tore at my coat but thats extra. Chipped uh tooth. One in thuh front.

LUCY: You did you rjob son.

Brazil: I did my job. (176)

In *The Death of the Last Black Man*, composed approximately fifty years subsequent to *Native Son*, Parks demonstrates that Bigger Thomas's character has deteriorated to such an extent that his initial intent in the novel, as articulated by Wright, has been obscured or fundamentally distorted. *Bigger And Bigger And Bigger* encapsulates this notion when he

asserts, "I am grown too big for thuh world thats me" (116). As an archetype, And Bigger And Bigger And BIGGER believes he has lost control over his portrayal, prompting him to plead for a return to the pages of the book from whence he originated:

"I would like tuh fit back in thuh storybook from which I earned" (116).

The burdensome stereotype he embodies, akin to many of Parks's archetypal character portrayals, compels him to plead for his liberation, not from the narratives that shaped him, but from the society that persistently misappropriates him. as demonstrated when he exclaims,

WILL SOMEBODY REMOVE THESE STRAPS FROM ME, PLEASE? I DESIRE TO UTILISE MY HANDS" (110).

Parks concedes her choice about the casting of black versus white performers in specific roles, although she recognizes that "not everyone else is obligated to share that preference" (156).

Parks' plays provide a novel realm where the roles of her characters cannot be assumed or anticipated; these roles, enigmatic, transcend mere reversals. This strategy challenges the playwright's listeners to transcend conventional notions of race and character. Similar to how the position of the African American mother/wife was veiled under enslavement, it becomes murky in Parks' plays.

The chaotic ambiguity permeating Parks' plays is not a mere rejection of form, character, or substance; it serves a significant purpose. This rhetorical portrayal of language, character, geography, and history undermines categories and hierarchies from within: on the surface, the playwright's characters appear simplistic and oppressed, yet they transcend their conventional roles, evolving into intricate and enigmatic figures. However, ambiguity occasionally results in bewilderment, maybe elucidating why certain modern audiences reject her plays, deeming them excessively challenging or unattainable. Her plays disrupt conventional expectations, refusing to offer clear resolutions, and instead immerse the audience in ambiguity, a deliberate resistance to linear storytelling and racial essentialism. Parks' new rhetoric, therefore, is not about rewriting history in a straightforward manner but about destabilizing it, compelling audiences to engage with the unresolved tensions of Black identity in performance. In doing so, she creates a space where the past is not merely reenacted but continuously reexamined, challenging the very structures that seek to contain it.

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