

KADIR HAS UNIVERSITY
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A Journey To The Terrible Enlightenment in Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood* and *The Fucking A*

American Culture and Literature M.A. Thesis

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“I, Nalan Emirsoy, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.”

Nalan Emirsoy

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nalan Emirsoy', written in a cursive style.

ABSTRACT

This thesis will address a comparative investigation of the portrayal of the sin, guilt, immoral act, fault and the search for salvation in the embodiment of the three different female characters in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* and Suzan-Lori Parks' plays *In the Blood* and *The Fucking A*. Contemporary playwright Suzan-Lori Parks is associated with what is called "revisionary" artistic style in which she believes that revising the history of literature is a tool for constructing the new literature. For this reason, she has a tendency to use historical figures and refer to famous old writers within the framework of her "revisionary" and "experimental" theatre. This idea is the reason why understanding Nathaniel Hawthorne's character of Hester Prynne is pertinent when analyzing the characters Hester La Negrita and Hester Smith within the texts *In the Blood* and *The Fucking A*. By revising Nathaniel Hawthorne's literary character Hester Prynne, the thesis also aims to reveal the conflicts and nonsensical behaviors of these characters in order for the readers/audiences to understand the absent rather than the present on stage.

ÖZ

Bu tez ile Nathaniel Hawthorne'un *The Scarlet Letter* adlı romanı ve Suzan-Lori Parks'ın *In the Blood* ve *The Fucking A.* adlı oyunlarında yer alan üç farklı kadın karakterin canlandırmalarındaki günah, suçluluk, hatalılık ve kurtulma arayışının betimlenmesi, karşılaştırmalı bir inceleme ile ele alınmaktadır. Çağdaş oyun yazarı Suzan-Lori Parks, edebiyat tarihinin gözden geçirilmesinin yeni edebiyatın oluşturulmasına yönelik bir araç olduğuna inandığı ve "revizyoner" sanat tarzı olarak adlandırılan tarz ile ilişkilendirilir. Bu sebeple yazar, tarihi figürleri kullanma ve kendi "revizyoner" ve "deneysel" tiyatrosu çerçevesinde eski meşhur yazarlara atıfta bulunma eğilimindedir. Bu düşünce, *In the Blood* ve *The Fucking A.* metinlerindeki Hester La Negrita ve Hester Smith karakterleri analiz edilirken Nathaniel Hawthorne'un karakteri olan Hester Prynne'nin anlaşılmasının neden ilgili bir unsur olacağını ortaya koymaktadır. Nathaniel Hawthorne'un edebi karakteri Hester Prynne'ini gözden geçirerek, okuyucuların/izleyicilerin sahnede olandan ziyade olmayanı anlayabilmeleri için, bu karakterlerin fikir ayrılıklarını ve mantıksız davranışlarını ortaya çıkarmak da amaçlanır.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PLAGIARISM	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
ÖZ	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
1 INTRODUCTION: Rethinking the Past to Restart	1
2 CHAPTER ONE: Representing the Masked Femininity of Hester Prynne <i>in The Scarlet Letter</i>	9
3 CHAPTER TWO: The Unmasked Femininity of Hester La Negrita <i>In In the Blood</i>	22
4 CHAPTER THREE: Breaking Free From the Conventions: The Tragic <i>Journey of Hester Smith in The Fucking A</i>	33
5 CONCLUSION: Journey Completed	43
END NOTES	47
WORKS CITED	48

1 INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING THE PAST TO RESTART

Being one of America's most productive, innovative and recognized playwrights, the idiosyncrasies of Suzan-Lori Parks have strongly influenced the contemporary American drama. The contents of her writings (e.g. novels, screenplays, and a considerable amount of plays) have been discussed and critically analyzed by scholars in order to understand her contributions to the field of drama. In the atmosphere of her innovative and experimental plays, it is easy to depict her recurring themes such as history, violence, race and gender issues, sex, trauma, memory and tainted human relationships. In addition to these themes, she has achieved in creating her own niche such as the "elements of style"¹, which she uses in all of her plays. Her "elements of style" includes "a spell"², "repetition and revision"³ and "foreign words and phrases"⁴ which mostly cover her experimental theatre.

The anthology of "The Red Letter Plays," consisting of *In the Blood* and *The Fucking A*, is the profound plays that provide clues to their readers/audiences on the kind of playwright Suzan-Lori Parks is and her methods in constructing the historical literary Hester "figures." The Hester figure, originating in Nathaniel Hawthorne's fictional character Hester Prynne, presents a new approach toward the fictional Puritan character. Suzan-Lori Parks rewrites the story of Hester Prynne at the turn of the century by choosing a new place, a race, a look and a literary genre. As a result, the methods used in resolving the vital issues within these plays display the revisionary aspect of Nathaniel Hawthorne as well. Since Hawthorne states in "

The Custom House” section, the events take place in Boston around 1642-49. That means that like Parks, Hawthorne also has a revisionary style which aims to “draw attention to the contrast between Hawthorne’s contemporary world and the Puritan past in which the main narrative takes place” (Hunt 27). The fact that Hawthorne completed his novel in 1850 but he referred to the past Puritan time in his novel makes Parks and Hawthorne interconnect with each other in such a way that they deliberately combine the past and present with a critical eye. Eventually, another aspect that binds these three Hesters is their journey that brings the readers into a terrible enlightenment.⁵

In these two plays, Suzan-Lori Parks tells a story of two black women Hesters, and these two Hesters reference Nathaniel Hawthorne’s fictional character Hester Prynne, who was created by the author in 1850. As stated in the novel’s introduction, the theme of “Scarlet Letter” deals with “adultery” and its significant results within the characters’ lives. The story is presented in such a manner that the entire novel revolves around the norms of what we know as the classical five-act tragedy. In other words, this novel has the same structure as both Suzan-Lori Parks’ plays *In the Blood* and *The Fucking A*. The sins of the past are exposed (exposition) and this leads the audiences/readers to confront the rising action, climax, falling action, and to conclude with the denouement. For these reasons, while it can be criticized and analyzed under different headings, this study will focus on the tragedy of human nature with a cathartic impact. Suzan-Lori Parks has chosen this classical character for her two plays after more than a century to reveal the ongoing quests of two black female characters being present in an absent place.

This thesis will seek to answer the following questions. What is the relation between these three different Hesters? Is there a necessary relationship or is Parks’

naming her characters as Hesters just a coincidence? If it is not a coincidence (no doubt it is not), why is Suzan-Lori Parks bringing back this literary figure to the stage after two centuries? These central questions will bring light to the understanding of Suzan-Lori Parks' theatre and her characterization.

In the experimental and revisionary style of these writers, our perception of the characters' motives and representation is solely controlled by characters' performances. Parks and Hawthorne belonging to two different eras might be exposing the ambiguity of human experience that lies beyond human nature or life. That is why in the life and actions of Hester Prynne by Hawthorne and the lives of Suzan-Lori Parks' ghostly figures, we, as an audience, are left with the sole input of the texts on the possible meaning that the writers are not capable of providing. That is why most of the modern tragic playwrights are unable to conclude their plays in a comprehensible manner due to the fact that "life is absurd and that human behavior is nonsensical," (Gassner and Little 8). Under these circumstances, the characters in Suzan-Lori Parks' plays suffer from the incurable conflict between the obscurity of human nature and inexplicable life experiences such as the forces of reality, taboos, social customs and material possibility that each individual confronts during their lives. Therefore, the inevitable result of these experiences steers these characters to commit a sin/crime or something foul, illegal, and immoral.

In addition to killing their own children, the Hesters in *In the Blood* and *The Fucking A* have to serve a system that alienates them, are sexually abused, live in poor conditions, and suffer other abhorrent consequences that are the majority of the issues that cannot be explained within Suzan-Lori Parks' stage stories. The playwright leaves the stage with a lingering perspective for the audience to critically think about in an uncomfortable manner. When Hester Prynne's non-reactive

position to the forces of her social realm is considered, it is easy to say that Hawthorne makes his character suffer from the same issues and in the same manner he makes his readers uncomfortable about the tragic events that Hester Prynne experiences. There is always a silence between the conversations of the characters (Hester-Dimmesdale) as this silence gives time for readers to explain the things that the writers cannot. Similarly, we are confronted with a similar silencing strategy which is called “a spell” by Suzan-Lori Parks. In her words, it is “a place where the figures experience their pure true simple state.” She writes the names with no dialogue and they stand for a silence in which the audiences/readers can have a journey into the “pure true simple state” of the characters. To support the idea of the writer’s withdrawal from the scenes, Suzan-Lori Parks’ thoughts on giving meaning to a text should be given here. In her interview “Doo-a-Diddly-Dit-Dit”, referring to the interviewer’s comment on the word “meaning”, she clearly expresses that she has no tendency to interpret the word “meaning” as other people do. She says:

People are welcome to understand the production in any way they choose, but I see that process completely unhelpful. So I don’t understand your notion of “giving up meaning.” I mean, I don’t understand that whole idea of meaning anyway, so I don’t think we are giving up anything, I think we’re together, giving meanings. (59)

Furthermore, in an essay by her in “The America Play and Other Works”, she plays around with the word “meaning” as follows:

Bad math $x+y=$ meaning. The ability to make simple substitutions is equated with clarity. We are taught that plays are merely staged essays and we begin to believe that characters in plays are symbols for some obscured ‘meaning’ rather than simply the thing itself. As Beckett sez: ‘No symbols where none intended. Don’t ask playwrights what their plays mean; rather, tell them what you think and have an exchange of ideas. (14-15)

As can be easily grasped from her comments, she prefers to hide her identity as a writer and expects her readers/audiences to attribute different meanings to her

plays. Therefore, this study aims to be part of this collaborative notion by deeply analyzing the Hester figures in Suzan-Lori Parks' plays and Hawthorne's novel. It is these characters that generate the actions which in the end turn out to be tragic. Overall, five tragic elements are completed within the elements of the characters' sins, choices, and fates.

Correspondingly, it may be assumed that the conflicts and nonsensical behaviors of these characters are hidden on the stage and in conversation. The writers allow both audience and reader to observe these elements through the language, atmospheric lightening, and symbolic settings and, most importantly these writers provide the audience and reader with a metaphoric atmosphere. Hence, we deal with what is absent rather than what is present in the characters' personalities and relationships with the others. As previously mentioned, in Suzan-Lori Parks experimental theatre, readers/audiences observe these elements with her special style that includes rhythmic conversations, projection of a new language between characters on stage, the use of traditional Greek tragedy components such as chorus, for which she composes the music herself. The most important part of her experiment is her "rebellion and reaction, with new forms challenging the old and old forms in turn providing the basis for the new" (J.L, Styan xi). This perspective of her plays (*In the Blood* and *The Fucking A*) smoothly guides us to her essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1999). As it can be understood from the title, this essay refers to T.S Eliot's essay with the same title. Parks' revisionary and rebellious theatre surprises her audience and sets the ground for them to give a meaning to the new work through revising old literary works. So, before moving on to Parks' "Tradition and the Individual Talent," it might be useful to remember Eliot's ideas on criticism of old and new literary works and how they relate to Parks'

ideas. In Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," he clearly emphasizes the difference between past and present works with these lines: "... the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show" (6). In this light, it can be argued that Parks shows us Hester La Negrita's and Hester Smith's "complex" or "unusual" life experiences by associating those experiences with Hawthorne's Hester Prynne's. This relation between three Hesters, even if we have not experienced them, will make us think about the ones that are familiar to us or those which have gone unnoticed in the old literary works. Eliot also suggests in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that "art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same" (6). This perception of Eliot's constitutes the revisionary and experimental theatre of Parks'. The fact that Parks chooses the theme of two women who are pushed into improper situations by patriarchal society might show us that "art never improves" and a writer's "business is not to find new emotions, but to use ordinary ones" (Eliot 10). However, while discussing almost the same subject as Hawthorne's, Parks improves the medium she uses. She presents the theme with experimental devices such as "spell", "rep&rev", "the Talk", projecting subtitles on stage and changing the race of the characters to make us realize the same theme from a different perspective.

Additionally, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" by Parks carries an important message for the interpretations of these plays. In this piece of writing, Parks discusses how human lives, jobs, and art are shaped, especially how her works are formed as a playwright. She speaks of three traditions, "The Great Tradition" (tradition of the past), the "Personal Tradition" of the writer's own life story, and "The Tradition of the Next New Thing", which is about the future and the place of

literary work. Inspired by T.S Eliot's essay under the same name, she opens up a new way how to read her plays and other literary works.

Based on the ideas she suggests in this essay, her intentional choice of Hester characters for these two plays gains meaning. According to the first tradition, "The Great Tradition", as writers, she believes in developing an artistic skill or being a revolutionary writer, depending on her reading of classical literary figures such as Shakespeare, Stein, Aristotle, Williams, and Hawthorne. As a result, she cannot categorize writers based on their color, gender, or age. So, for her, past writers and classic literary works are always there for use, since they act as the catalysts for every present work as well as future ones.

The second tradition, "The Personal Tradition," focuses on the idea of reflecting the emotions of the writer that he has gained in his life-time. While a writer reflects on his or her experiences, the writer should avoid copying the old works that influence the individual to use the same traditional style all the time. As a playwright she gives an example from her plays by saying that "There isn't any such a thing as a Suzan-Lori Parks play" ("The Tradition and The Individual Talent" 3).

On the last point, she always refers to the "The Tradition of The Next New Thing." She believes that present writers are responsible for the future generations as their works will be used as a guidance, reference, or appreciation. Even if in the future there will be no theatre or literature, she believes that writers should do their best and "the rest will follow" ("The Tradition" 3).

The explanations of the playwright bring us to a sound analysis of her ghostly figures in *In the Blood* and *The Fucking A*, where every Hester figure fits perfectly in her understanding of the literary work. Therefore, it might be useful for readers/audiences to think about the writer's experience and thinking while giving up

finding a meaning to a text even if the writer is alienating herself or himself from the work the writer has created.

As T.S Eliot suggests in his essay, "Tradition and The Individual Talent," "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone," (4) *In The Blood* and *The Fucking A* gain meaning with the understanding of the original Hester Prynne. So, before turning to the plays, in the first chapter the character of Hester Prynne will be analyzed and in the following two chapters Hester La Negrita and Hester Smith will be examined. At the end of this study, it is aimed to add another point of view to the "notion of giving up a meaning", which in the end makes the readers/audiences of Suzan-Lori Parks' capable of revealing hidden situations, elements and the characters that shape the whole atmosphere of these two plays. Therefore, it might not be wrong to suggest that this study will be more meaningful together with all the studies on Suzan-Lori Parks and her "A Letter Plays."

Since one of the most effective adjectives that describes the artistic skill of Suzan-Lori Parks is "revisionary", in the first part of this study, Hester Prynne from "The Scarlet Letter" will be revised in order for readers/audiences to "see these works again with more modern, more critical eyes-eyes that see beyond the surface of the work to the contexts that inform its creation" (Larson 3). Moreover, another reason to revise this old literary figure is to be able to locate absent or neglected groups in the history of literature, as Jennifer Larson claims in *Understanding Suzan-Lori Parks* (3). In the light of the information given in the first chapter about Hester Prynne, it will be easier to understand the playwright's intended aim of choosing the name Hester for her new black female characters.

2 CHAPTER ONE: REPRESENTING THE MASKED FEMININITY OF HESTER PRYNNE IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from that inauspicious portal, we could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader. It may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow. (Nathaniel Hawthorne 36)

This is how Hawthorne informs his readers in the first chapter, “The Prison Door,” of *The Scarlet Letter*. In the very beginning of the novel, he hopes to bring some light to the world of his readers through the journey of his characters and their sorrowful story.

The Scarlet Letter is the story of a transgressor, Hester Prynne, living in a Puritan society with her illegitimate daughter Pearl. The minister, Mr. Dimmesdale, is the father of this child and it takes him a long time to confess his sin. At the end of the novel, he confesses it and dies. On the other hand, Hester is punished by the church and she is sentenced to wear a scarlet letter “A” on her breast to symbolize her sin that completely condemns her life. This symbol “A” is the recurring motif within the novel where it establishes the character of Hester Prynne.

In the very beginning of the story, she is presented as if she has accepted her sin and punishment and has no intention of leaving the community where she lives. The novel starts with a scene in which all the townspeople are waiting for Hester Prynne to be displayed in the market place. They are waiting for a woman who committed adultery which is considered to be a life-long shame that would stain Hester Prynne’s being. Like Hester La Negrita and Hester Smith, Hester Prynne

refuses to reveal the name of her illegitimate child's father and she keeps enduring the pains of her sin alone in a cruel community that she intentionally chooses to live in as in chapter five (The Scarlet Letter):

What she compelled herself to believe what finally, she reasoned upon as her motive for continuing a resident of New England was half a truth, and half a self-delusion. Here she said to herself, had been the scene of her guilt, and here should be the scene of her earthly punishment, and so, perchance, the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity that that which she had lost: more saint like, because the result of martyrdom...Hester Prynne, therefore, did not flee. (Hawthorne 60-61)

As readers, we witness a moment where Hester Prynne is giving herself to the hands of her fate, which is the patriarchal Puritan society. To be able to live in the same town with the man she committed adultery with, she sacrifices her own life. Her recognition of herself starts with her sin belonging to the past and out of forces beyond her control. Let us expand the question of this recognition of our first Hester figure in terms of feminist psychoanalysis. Nancy J. Chodorow suggests in her book *Feminism and Psychoanalytic theory* that:

The first and most extreme position holds that women's oppression is political, economic, and social, and that psychology has nothing to do with it.

A second position claims that women are certainly psychologically oppressed, but that we do not need a theory as mystified or complicated relying on the unconscious and intrapsychic to explain and understand female socialization and how women turn out the way they do. It has nothing to do with the unconscious but it is obvious in daily life. (166)

Thus, it can be claimed that Hester's crucial decision that will shape her entire life is imposed on her by the "society" which expects her to live within its rules. Additionally, Chodorow also adds that "people respond according to the social situation they are in and the rewards they get." (166). It can be strongly inferred from Hester Prynne's decision that she is so helpless towards the power of her community. This demonstrates that the limited social structure that Hester Prynne lives in does

not allow her to gain her subjectivity owing to the patriarchal nature of this structure, and Hester's subjectivity is to mean that she holds power over patriarchy.

Not only the society, but also Hester Prynne seems to be accepting her position without questioning it. Thus, as the years pass, she starts to have a repressed but accepted place in society. The writer describes her position as follows:

Hester Prynne did not now occupy precisely the same position in which we beheld her during the earlier periods of her ignominy. Years had come and gone. Pearl was now seven years old. Her mother, with the scarlet letter on her breast, glittering in its fantastic embroidery, had long been a familiar object to the townspeople. As is apt to be the case when a person stands out in any prominence before the community and, at the same time, interferes neither with public nor individual interests and convenience, a species of general regard had ultimately grown up in reference to Hester Prynne. (Hawthorne 119)

The change in Hester's position is narrated by the writer with the citation above. The writer says that the shame of this woman has become something that all the townspeople get used to and her position has reached a stage that is respected by the people who degraded her for her sin. This sin/virtue paradox becomes central in the novel and Hawthorne keeps commenting on this dramatic change in Hester's position and continues his narration:

She never battled with the public, but submitted uncomplainingly to its worst usage: she made no claim upon it in requital for what she suffered: she did not weigh upon its sympathies. Then, also the blameless purity of her life during all these years in which she had been set apart to infamy was reckoned largely in her favor. With nothing now to lose, in the sight of mankind, and with no hope, and seemingly no wish, of gaining anything, it could only be a genuine regard for virtue that had brought back the poor wanderer to its paths. (Hawthorne 120)

This is how the silent state of Hester is put into words. The reader is implicitly woken up to a fact that Hester Prynne is transformed into a "Collective Man" in Aldous Huxley's words (qtd in Lewis: 41). That is to say Hester Prynne is now a person who functions out of her desires and she simply wants to fit in to the

society in which the father of her child lives. And, as the citation about the townspeople's acceptance of Hester shows, she achieves to fit in by completely conflicting with her identity. And this contrast intensifies when her desires are unfulfilled by the social realm. For this reason, to cope with the conflicted self, she seeks more reconciliation. In return, although her desires, ambitions, and identity are taken from her, she gains a respected place in that Puritan society as well as acknowledgment by "the rulers, and wise and learned men of the community. (Hawthorne 121). The clash between the individual and society is expressed clearly as it follows:

The impact of the great organizations of American life on the individual, says William H. Whyte, has had the effect of reducing him to a prototype personality, dominated by group thinking, consensus, participation, togetherness and belonging. Men do not simply work for organizations, they belong to them. They have enslaved themselves. Everyone has to accommodate himself to the needs of this society, and ideological conditioning makes legitimate and justifies the tremendous pressures of society against the individual. (Lewis 41)

Thus, it can be claimed that what makes this character tragic is the fact that she is enslaved and suppressed by society's forces that are out of her control. As the novel suggests, what makes her life tragic is not the sin that she committed but rather it is her surrounding from where she decided not to escape. Whenever she confronts the conflict that consumes her identity, she helps the poor people of the community with the little resources she possesses. Through her altruism, she is always the first one to help if a plague occurs. However, no matter how she suppresses her identity and hides her desires, it is undoubtedly true that Hester transforms into an inquisitive existence throughout her struggle with society. Yet, she still cannot turn into an individual who can perform any action. She rather thinks and evaluates the actions around her and the situation that makes her more independent of her environment. This situation is expressed by the narrator:

It is remarkable that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society. The thought suffices them, without investing itself in the flesh and blood of action. So it seemed to be with Hester. (Hawthorne 123)

So, why is Hester giving herself to the authorities of the town that do not recognize her as a subject? Why does she constantly think about social taboos and arrive to analytical stage after the cruelty she has experienced? We can answer these questions by using Lacan's theory of the Mirror Stage. As the narration showed us, long before she surrounds herself to the demands of society, she experiences a recognition process with the help of her child Pearl. This process is depicted in the novel when Pearl sees a mirror in the Governor's hall:

'Mother,' cried she, 'I see you here. Look! Look!'
Hester looked, by way of humoring the child; and she saw that, owing to the peculiar effect of this convex mirror, the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance. In truth, she seemed absolutely hidden behind it. Pearl pointed upward also, at a similar picture in the head-piece; smiling at her mother, with the elfish intelligence that was so familiar an expression on her small physiognomy. That look of naughty merriment was likewise reflected in the mirror, with so much breadth and intensity of effect, that it made Hester Prynne feel as if it could not be the image of her own child, but of an imp who was seeking to mould itself into Pearl's shape. (Hawthorne 79)

The things she has seen through this mirror lead the readers towards two different points that are crucial in explaining Hester Prynne's identity. Thus, the basis of Suzan-Lori Parks Hester figures that will be further explained in chapters two and three.

The first point is that the process of Mirror Stage explains the motive of Hester Prynne's efforts to adaptation to the society although it alienates her. She gains her subjectivity and she continues to repress her desires with the help of her recognizing herself in the mirror. She sees nothing but the embellished big scarlet letter in a huge shape, which surprises her. As she comes to realize, her personality is

hidden behind it and cannot see anything but the scarlet letter on her breast. This might help readers to explain why she devotes herself to her town in which her sin is hidden. It is a very important climax for her to distinguish “the Other.” The subjecthood that Hester gains is another kind of subject though her subjectivity depends on the other forces in society not her real self.

The image of the mirror- both reflection in the mirror, and the representation of the mirror itself- is a frequent one in literature, and the character’s examination of herself or himself in the glass often marks a textual turning point, but the reflection of the self mirrored by the Other that is, precisely, not the self (because it’s a reflection) does not have to occur in a mirror, or even a photograph or portrait. Frequently, the not-self is given back to the self by another person: that is, subjecthood is dependent on the definition provided by an Other. (Green and LeBihan 166)

Actually, what Hester thinks she sees in that mirror is not the real shape of the scarlet letter. She sees nothing but a big scarlet letter and begins to ponder that her real self is hidden behind it. Thus, what she sees through the mirror effect is nothing but the reflection of the Puritan court and the townspeople degrading her. All she can see is the object which is given to her by society, thus leading her to demonstrate her devotion and endurance in the town.

The second point to consider is the perception of Pearl by Hester through the Mirror Stage. She fakes the image of her daughter Pearl to be the embodiment of evil rather than the innocent child she sentimentally considers. This can be read as a disturbing image for Hester to see her “other” self. Unlike the self that belongs to the society, she confronts her monstrous and repressed self which gives us the signals of a fragmented self. In addition to a self-belonging to social forces, she also faces a subject that constitutes her own perceptions. It is thus a reflection of both Hester’s self and “not-herself” that Hester sees in the mirror, it is the scarlet letter that is given by society and Pearl proves to be an “evil” by the same society.

Later in the book, this child is regarded as an “evil” itself, and is thought to be sent to the Heaven by her own mother. Hester Prynne, after this recognition of her child, starts to transgress to the dark side of her soul and thinks about her child’s death as it is described by the narrator:

Thus Hester Prynne, whose heart had lost its regular and healthy throb, wandered without a clue in the dark labyrinth of mind; now turned aside by an insurmountable precipice; now starting back from a deep chasm. There was wild and ghastly scenery all around her, and a home and comfort nowhere. At times a fearful doubt strove to possess her soul, whether it were not better to send Pearl at once to Heaven, and go herself to such futurity as Eternal Justice should provide.(Hawthorne 124)

Obviously, it can be inferred from this excerpt that while public punishment tries to discourage people from committing a sin like adultery, it also pushes them to commit other sins such as murder. In Hester’s case it becomes worse because she thinks about killing her daughter, who is branded as an “imp” by her own mother. Considering Hester’s state of mind (it is important to note that she has reached this state after the Mirror Stage), it suggests that Hester starts to question her womanhood and motherhood. Further to her degradation and alienation, her womanhood has also been taken. As can be inferred from the excerpt below, Hester cannot locate herself anywhere as she cannot find peace anywhere. She reaches a state in which she questions herself of her own sin and starts to think about her sexual identity immediately after narrating her position. It is said that sending Pearl to Heaven might be a salvation for her. As she stops conducting herself as a woman, she begins to claim her identity. This time, she searches into her womanhood since she can only achieve it by ending her motherhood. Hester’s complicated stage of womanhood is explained in the following excerpt:

Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman. Such is frequently the fate, and such the stern development, of the feminine character and person,

when the woman has encountered, and lived through, an experience of peculiar severity. If she be all tenderness, she will die. If she survive, the tenderness will either be crushed out of her, or-and the outward semblance is the same- crushed so deeply into her heart that it can never show itself more. The latter is perhaps the truest theory. She who has once been a woman and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman again, if there were only the magic touch to effect the transfiguration. We shall see whether Hester Prynne were ever afterwards so touched and so transfigured. (Hawthorne 122)

It is evident that we witness Hester's struggle for transfiguration, as the narrator suggests. Yet it is clear that the way to her transfiguration passes through being a woman again. Thus, it can be read that being a mother is an obstacle for Hester to be recognized as a female individual. That survival depends on her denying her sexuality. Either way, we witness a dilemma that totally invades the soul of Hester. This dilemma can be explained through this quotation:

The understandings of motherhood we have been describing are larger than life and seen only in extremes. For Dinnerstein, women's mothering generates conditions that threaten to destroy human existence. For DuPlessis, a feminist theory of motherhood must begin with the inextricable link of motherhood and death; motherhood, she says, relates to heaven and hell, and to speech and silence; the overcoming of the institution of motherhood will be the end of dualism. For Friday, we must choose to be sexual or maternal. For Firestone, we must either accept inequality or give up our reproductive biology.

Rage is an inevitable outcome of this extremism. Psychological theory and cultural ideology have focused on the harm that mothers can do to their children, and some feminists continue to focus on this harm. (Chodorow 91)

Chodorow argues, then, that the definition of motherhood includes binary oppositions. Women in society are always in between extremes such as heaven and hell, talk and silence, and most importantly it is a decision for women to be sexual or maternal. Hence, Hester's extreme anger is unavoidable for women which can result in violence. Relatively, Hester Prynne's seeing her child as an evil while Pearl is considered to be her treasure, as stated throughout the novel, can be an excuse for Hester to kill her. This extreme duality causes Hester to choose to "accept

inequality.” However, at times, we understand that it is her “reproductive biology” that defines her womanhood, which she is giving up. Before thinking about abandoning her motherhood (such as sending Pearl to heaven), she thinks about the equality between man and woman. Yet, as she realizes it is something impossible, she considers killing her daughter. Her thoughts to question the society are in the excerpt below:

Indeed, the same dark question often rose into her mind with reference to the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth acceptance, even to the happiest among them? As concerning her own individual existence worth accepting, she had long ago decided in the negative, and dismissed the point as settled. A tendency to speculation, though it may keep woman quiet, as it does man, yet makes her sad. She discerns, it may be, such a hopeless task before her. As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Then the very nature of opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. (Hawthorne 124)

Following these lines, Hester starts to consider getting rid of her motherhood and seeks her desire in protecting her own daughter to avoid such difficult experiences of a woman living in a society that offers no hope for female emancipation.

The “revisionary” aesthetic of Suzan-Lori Parks helps to explain the conflicts, sins, guilt, immoral acts, and salvation of Hester Prynne as well as Parks’ own Hesters. What seems nonsensical to us might appear logical if we revise the literary history far beyond Hawthorne.

Revising Euripides’ play *Medea* can help readers to examine the position of woman throughout history and literature. First produced in 431 B.C., it also demonstrates that women are regarded as helpless victims both in the eyes of the characters and writers throughout the history of literature. Hester Prynne’s desperation is caused by her abandoned position towards men due to the unfortunate

events in her life. Her actions and way of thinking is molded by her social upbringing, thus defining her morals. However, that is the argument of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, Suzan Lori Parks' *A Letter Plays*, Euripides' *Medea*, and even Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Similar to Medea, Lady Macbeth also experiences a conflict like Hester Prynne's. The conflict between her searching for an equal existence with men and her feminine existence in society makes her state that she would kill her baby rather than pass up an opportunity:

I have given suck, and know
 How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.
 I would while it was smiling in my face,
 Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,
 And dashed the brains out, had I sworn as you
 Have done this. (*Macbeth* 1.7. 71-76)

Surprisingly, there is a remarkable resemblance in the portrayal of these different female characters belonging to different eras and writers. One can easily see this resemblance by following the structure of the literary works. Starting from *Medea* and *Macbeth*, the other women characters such as Hester Prynne, Hester La Negrita and Hester Smith are presented in a similar story line which is exposition of a past sin, rising action, turning point (climax), falling action, and, conclusion. Their sins and motives might be different, but there is an inevitable conclusion for all these characters. Such a conclusion is a salvation through the characters' destroying themselves. In Medea's case, she killed her children, to take revenge for her betrayal. However, one can easily understand that it is not justified for a mother to kill her own children. Hence what does this "evil force" do to make all these motherly characters desire to kill children?

In addition to Medea's revenge, being alone in the world is another extreme feeling that Chodorow suggests. She wants liberation for herself and for her children. Therefore, the only liberation for her is to escape from her feminine identity caused

by the experience of unequal treatment and aggression from both men and society. Her identity as a female seems to be the source of the sins and corruption within her soul. Escaping from her sexual association as a female and mother can be achieved through the murder of her children. For her vengeance, she kills her children but with this action, she can attempt to change the stereotypical view of the female's motherly nature. She explains the reason of murdering her sons through these following lines:

My friends, I have now decided what to do with all haste I shall kill my children and leave this country. I shall not delay and so surrender them to other crueler hands to kill. There's no escape from it, none at all. They must die. And since they must, I who bore them, shall kill them. But come, my heart, arm yourself. Why do I delay to do the terrible but necessary crime? Come my cruel hand, take the sword, take it, go forward to where life's pain begins. Do not prove a coward, do not think how very much you love your children, how you give them birth. Forget your feelings for them for this one brief day and then lament. For even if you will kill them, still they were born your dear children and I am an ill-fated woman. (Euripides 33)

What we can decipher from these lines of Medea is that, she is trying to make herself forget about her motherhood and female identity that has been an obstacle for her in taking revenge. As J. Michael Walton suggests in *Euripides Our Contemporary*, "Medea the avenger who, to destroy her husband, destroys her own motherhood" (110). This urge for revenge and wanting to destroy her womanhood arises from her husband Jason's speech in which he emphasizes on her being non-Greek and his superiority to her on a racial basis. Jason shows his thoughts about Medea's position in Greek society and he states she owes her status to him by these words:

... You helped me and I'm pleased with the result. However by saving me you took more than you gave, as I shall tell you. First of all, you live in the land of Greece instead of a barbarian country, you understand the workings of justice and know what it is to live by rule of law and not at the whim of the mighty. (Euripides 15)

This speech plays an important role in Medea's decision which is to destroy the boys. She cannot bear any more indignity towards her existence as a woman in a foreign society without anyone to trust, and of course, hearing the word "evil" from Jason many times, she starts to regard her feminine identity as a challenge. If more of Jason's speech is read, it will be understood that her children are the only way to prove her identity as powerful. The duality of Medea's existence starts from the contrasting views of society and her own identity.

Similarly, Lady Macbeth begs the evil spirits to free her from her female body. She says:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here;
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty... come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers, (Macbeth 1.5. 51-59)

No matter how different their motives may be, it is clear that there is something in common between these characters. It seems that Medea, Lady Macbeth, and Hester Prynne face a hindrance, and it prevents them from becoming what they really are. Their rage, pain, unhappiness and tragedy emerge from their female existence in a male-dominated society.

Killing their children might be a salvation for these characters, which it was indeed for Medea. Nevertheless, the salvation of all these characters including Medea is a paradoxical one that includes an unpleasant escape from the limitations of life. However, Hester Prynne's turning back to Boston at the end of the novel is not as complicated as it seems. "When she no longer has the responsibility of parenting and has the freedom to live wherever she wills," (Hunt 30) she prefers to stay in the community that has changed her life completely. She could not physically kill her

daughter like the other mother figures, yet she attempts to restart her life in the same place without her motherly identity.

By Parks' referencing these stories from earlier literature, it might be assumed that Hester Prynne (in the following chapters Hester La Negrita and Smith) is being captured by the same evil spirits of male-dominated society. Hence, proving that a similar investigation can be traced through the actions of these female characters, it can be asserted that they also provide a creative and constructive substructure for the readers of Suzan-Lori Parks to understand the causes and results of Parks' Hester characters' behaviors which are seen as evil, immoral, or corrupted. On account of this, the story of Suzan-Lori Parks' theatre "is one of rebellion and reaction, with new forms challenging the old and old forms in turn providing the basis for the new." (Styan x)

2 CHAPTER TWO: THE UNMASKED FEMININITY OF HESTER LA NEGRITA IN *IN THE BLOOD*

Place

Here

Time

Now (The Red Letter Plays 3)

This is how Parks starts her play *In the Blood* by adding one more important detail which is the setting's "spare" to indicate the poor condition of the character Hester La Negrita. This play takes place in contemporary America since stage directions tell us the time is now. In the very beginning of the first scene, we confront a family consisting of five children and a mother trying to survive living under a bridge. The representation of Hester is a desperate ideal mother whose only aim is to feed their children even if it means that she spends her days hungry. Besides, she does her best to survive in these conditions despite all other factors outside her control. Doctor and Welfare Lady want to "spay" her, Reverend D. one of her children's fathers, refuses to help her and sexually abuses her. Furthermore, Chili, her first love, abandons her on account of the fact that she has had other children from different men.

Apart from all the suppressing social pressure, there is another suppressive group and that is Suzan-Lori Parks' creation stemming from the chorus that belongs to Greek tragedy. This element in her work is a kind of proof that her revisionary style is not only coming from the content of classic literary works but also from the old devices used in drama. Although Parks calls this group of people "all", there is no doubt that it functions as a medium between the audience and the characters.

Before the first scene, “all” including the other characters in the play introduces the main character Hester as an illiterate who makes wrong decisions, and it prepares the audiences for the end, which we know will be bad for Hester. It is true that the chorus itself functions as something belonging to the society that alienates Hester.

The function of the chorus is stated by Harvey Young like this:

The play begins with a chorus comprised of all five individuals, talking to one another about Hester. Their voices overlap and they speak together as one, not necessarily in unison, but from a single mindset. It is clear that they view Hester as being socially beneath them. More to the point, they blame her for her various predicaments single motherhood, poverty and homelessness. (33)

As these words are uttered, we see Hester on stage and they influence the audience before we actually meet her. If it is considered that the function of the chorus is to provide the audience a deeper understanding of the character, what is the function of Parks’ chorus in this play then? Clearly, it does not awaken a feeling of empathy or sympathy. Parks makes the chorus repeat the blaming and degrading phrases about Hester for the purpose of serving “symbolic strategies.” As Kathleen George quotes from John C. Condon in *Rhythm and Drama*:

They are “the ways in which we may manipulate our symbols in lieu of altering reality. In one sense all of language and thought is a strategy for coming to symbolic terms with that muddled world of process and change. Every time we impose order on the outside world through language, we are applying some kind of strategy.” Verbal strategies may be as little important as the “how” of a character’s attempt to accomplish some isolated task in a play or as vastly important as the “how” of many characters’ attempts to deal with the world of the play. (68)

Indeed, the repetitive and accusatory language that the chorus uses is a strategy for Parks to reveal her characters to the audience. As stated in the introduction, the inexplicable experiences of the characters can be revealed by the language that Parks strategically fabricates. As the chorus continues to give some clues about Hester La Negrita’s social realm, we, as the audience, start to frame the

character in our minds. Therefore, the repetitive introduction of Hester La Negrita seems to focus on these phrases as they are repeated many times by the chorus:

CANT READ CANT WRITE
SHE MARRIED?
WHAT DO YOU THINK?
SHE OUGHT TO BE MARRIED
THATS WHY THINGS ARE BAD LIKE THEY ARE (The Red 5)

Correspondingly, these phrases are telling us how Hester La Negrita deals with her situation and as audiences, we might think that if she was married, she would not have these problems. The repetitive language functions as a tool to prepare the audiences for the end or possible actions of the characters. As in the Greek chorus, the chorus might also be associated with the townspeople who offer the community's view in the opening scene of *Scarlet Letter*. One might think that the chorus is the society which "devalues" Hester because of a lack of etiquette. Parks also analyzes the term marriage in modern America by making her audiences go back and remember a mother (Hester Prynne) who has an illegal child. One should also reconsider religious facts about women by witnessing the accusations of Hester:

Since the "sin" of the child's father was more difficult to prove, it was on the unmarried mother that the full penalty fell; as the eternally guilty party, she was considered by the Church to be "the root of the whole sex problem." (Rich 259)

Accordingly, Hester Prynne is accused of the same sin and now we see that Hester La Negrita is put through the almost the same position. With the help of this revision and by remembering the first scene, "Market Place", we can easily start to question the society rather than questioning Hester La Negrita despite the aggressive attitude of the chorus.

Another subtle strategy about the language of Parks is the function of the letter "A." Actually, it is quite the same as the letter "A" in *Scarlet Letter*. We know that Hester La Negrita does not know how to read and write, thus the letter "A" is the

only letter that she can read. As the sequence continues, the word “slut” is written on a wall, which is under the bridge. Since Hester cannot read, she asks her son to read it but he rejects to say it aloud, although he knows how to say it. At this point, the stage direction says that the word is “mysterious” to her. Hence, she interprets the word by assuming there is the letter “A” in it. The letter “A” gains more dangerous meaning in Hester La Negrita’s life compared to Hester Prynne’s considering the fact that the power of the letter pushes her to lose her womanhood as well as her motherhood. She is also more helpless in her struggle to stay in a place or the opportunity to feed her children. Furthermore, race is another lingering issue that one might easily sense, especially for the cynical interpretation of the letter “A.” Of course, we should remember the attributions of the letter “A” in *Scarlet Letter* as the quotation explains:

The reader too must wrestle with the Prior Hester and her scarlet letter because they both still haunt literary and cultural history with their persistent warnings about sin, sexuality, and patriarchy. Yet the Prior Hester and her letter are simultaneously inadequate, barely a beginning for expressing the hardships of our twentieth-and twenty-first-century Hesters. (Larson 57)

The condition of Hester La Negrita is much worse than Hester Prynne’s, yet it is an undeniable fact that they both suffer from the same institutional restrictions. The letter “A” gains its meaning outside of Hester La Negrita’s realm, where it becomes a devilish fact within the experience of Hester Prynne. Hester Prynne’s ghost still follows Hester La Negrita in this century, and Parks continues to reflect old sins, patriarchal and sexual issues until her audiences realize them. Accordingly, Parks makes Hester La Negrita realize that this letter carries several deconstructive meanings as she attributes the word “slut” as the letter “A”. She says:

A mean ugly word. I’ll bet. A word to hurt our feelings. And because we aint lucky we gotta live with it. 5 children I got. 5 treasures, 5 joys.

But we aint got our leg up, just yet. So we gotta live with mean words and hurt feelings. (The Red12)

Of course, as the audience, we relate the letter “A” to Hester Prynne’s and draw some meanings from these lines. Hester is trying to justify her happiness, her identity based on the existence of others and their views about her. She is hurt by what other people say and wants to be recognized by those others. Although she is alienated from the society because of her non-conforming choices, she seems to represent a rebel when compared to Hester Prynne. One thing to remember about Hester Prynne is that she does not say anything against her fate. On the contrary, she obeys the rules of the society more than anybody else. She gives up her womanhood and has no sexual relationship after her sin. However, no matter how much she suffers from society’s pressures, we cannot see La Negrita trying to live a “pure” (from the view of others) life. She wants money from Reverend D., lets him abuse her sexually, and has a threesome orgy with Welfare Lady and her husband. Additionally, her friend Amiga Gringa says in her confession that Hester La Negrita “liked the idea of the sex”(The Red 72). What we face here, is a rebel woman who does not orchestrate the things that society wants her to do. Yet, her attitude is not as a conscious rebel to the dominant patriarchal society, it is just her pure nature that seeks recognition and acceptance in the way she is. On the other hand, her right to be herself depends on the other forces and she cannot be recognized unless she becomes an individual like Hester Prynne. Leaving her children to social services, letting the doctor “spay” her, being abused and not able to openly admit anything, nor confess the names of the fathers, and getting married are the only ways that can save Hester from the ugly words that hurt her feelings. Her pure rights are restricted by these institutional rules and this can be explained by Foucault’s comments on valid relations:

It is a question of imagining how the relation of two individuals can be validated by society and benefit from the same advantages as the relations perfectly honorable which are the only ones recognized: marriage and family. (Foucault 162)

Indeed, the question of fitting the norms and having a normal life seems to be the central questions for the three Hesters. For Hester La Negrita, it seems, wearing the female identity as a mask is one of the answers. As Sean Homer discusses Lacan's theory of womanhood and masquerade, she suggests "the notion of masquerade foregrounds is not *essentially* identity of women but rather the *constructed* nature of that identity" (Homer 101). Thus, together with Foucault's perspective about the constitutionalized relationships of human beings, Lacan's theory of the feminine masquerade completes the identity struggle of Hester La Negrita. And, as audience, we witness her transition from a devoted mother into a monstrous one.

Additionally, if Juliet Mitchell's theories about the feminine identity are considered, the tragic end of Hester La Negrita gains more meaning from the audience's point of view. With regard to constitutional expectations and society's threats to human beings, especially to women, she asserts that:

It is not simply a question of the by-now familiar thesis that mankind, in effecting the move from nature to culture, 'chose' to preserve women within a natural ('animal') role for the sake of propagation and nurturing of the species, for this suggestion sets up too simple a split between nature and culture and consequently too simple a division between the fate of the sexes. The very inauguration of 'culture' necessitated a different role. It is not that women are confined to a natural function but that they are given a specialized role in the formation of civilization. *It is thus not on account of their 'natural' procreative possibilities but on account of their cultural utilization as exchange-object (which involves an exploitation of their role as propagators) that women acquire their feminine definition.* (408)

Hester La Negrita, then, is a perfect example of a woman who was exploited for her sexual identity and only considered an "exchange-object." To exemplify Mitchell's thesis about the definition of womanhood as well as Lacan's femininity

and masquerade theory, scene six called “The Reverend on the Rock” can be analyzed. This scene carries an important role in the transformation of Hester La Negrita since it is in this scene that Reverend D. represents the whole atmosphere of the play explicitly. Hester visits Reverend D. in the church because he tells her that he will give her money. She says that she wants her money, but Reverend D. is changing the subject and at the end says he does not have the money at that moment. He wants Hester La Negrita to leave, but she refuses. She stays there to share her experience but he does not listen to her:

Hester

Today we had uh E-clipse. You seen it?

Reverend D.

You should go.

Hester

A shadow passed over the sky. Everything was dark. For a minute.

Reverend D.

It was a cloud. Or an airplane. Happens all the time.

Hester

No clouds out today. It was uh E-CLIPSE.

Reverend D.

I am taking a collection for you on Sunday. Youll have to wait until then. Good night.

Hester

Uh E-clipse

Reverend D.

There was no eclipse today! No eclipse!

(Rest)

Good night (The Red76)

Here, like a normal person, Hester is trying to share something that is really important for her. Eventually, we understand that she is trying to say something to Reverend D. yet he does not listen to her because the only thing he can think of is sex. Hester is not an individual to be listened to or to be understood, for him she is an object, a tool for his sexual pleasure. As Hester continues to talk about her eclipse experience, we understand that Reverend D. is not really interested in what she is saying:

Hester

...It was a big dark thing. Blocking the sun out. Like the hand of fate.
The hand of fate with its 5 fingers coming down on me. (The Red 77)

When Hester finishes the only thing that Reverend D. says is “Suck me off.”(The Red 77) He makes Hester perform oral sex and sends her home without giving her any money. Thus, what we can grasp from these conversations is that as the audience it is our job to understand Hester and understand what she is signaling with her eclipse experience. Since her individuality depends only on her special role within society and that is her so-called “natural” sexual and propagating role. Other than that, she stands for a non- married woman and her status as being single with five children is something that would be exploited for a man like Reverend D. In the final part of this scene we are confronted with Reverend D.’s confession in which he says the phrases of “fatherless mouths” and “fatherless house” repeatedly. In order to understand Reverend’s perception of Hester, the “rep&rev” strategy of Parks’ might be a good solution for the audience. Here, it is important to note that although Parks states in her essay that repetition and revision is a part of jazz aesthetic, she also uses it as a tool to represent the internal situations of the characters. Thus, we face the same question she asks in “From Elements of Style”, “What does it mean for characters to say the same thing twice? 3 times?” (The America Play 10). Deborah R. Geis answers this question in a quite satisfactory way by quoting from Gertrude Stein in her essay “Elements of Style: Early Plays”:

Repeating then is in every one, in every one their being and their
feeling and their way of realizing everything and every one
comes out
of them in repeating...
Slowly every one in continuous repeating, to their
minutest variation,
comes to be clearer to some one.(24)

Indeed, by having a look at the confession of Reverend, it becomes clear to us that the way he treats Hester arises from his perception of Hester as indefensible, desperate, objectified, ignorant, and as a sexual identity rather than a human one. What we might assume from the repetition of “fatherless mouths” and “fatherless house” is that Reverend D. tries to justify his sexual abuse. Since Hester La Negrita is an unmarried woman with five different children from different fathers, society has every right to abuse her, blame her, and impoverish her. Hester La Negrita cannot be recognized until she has an honorable marriage status in society. Hence, from Reverend D.’s point of view, he “coulda stepped aside but” a woman who has “fatherless mouths” and a “fatherless house” always needs a man and this can be a justified reason for him. (The Red 78-79)

Following this chapter and Reverend’s confession, the play comes to its falling action and denouement. Being rejected by everyone including her children, we witness a course of actions in which Hester Prynne loses her mind and kills her oldest child Jabber by beating him. Of course, it might seem for most of the audiences, it is something that should not have occurred but the playwright prepares us for this tragic end from the very beginning of the play. Since, as the audience, we listened to Hester La Negrita and paid attention to what she said, unlike the characters in the play, it might be easier for us to make sense out of her nonsensical behavior.

Jabber says the word “slut” out loud and asks the meaning of the word although he says he knows the meaning of it. Hester tries to stop him but she cannot, as he repeats the word over and over. Finally, Hester kills him by beating him “again and again and again.” Symbolically she writes the letter “A” on the ground with her son’s blood. Verna A. Foster explains this murder as follows:

...Parks shocks her audiences into confronting their own prejudices, recognizing the two Hesters as individual human beings, and acknowledging the appalling social injustices that produces the murderous rage or despair that causes loving mothers to kill their own children. (76)

The quotation states that Parks makes us confront our evil sides and make us feel uncomfortable with the sympathy that we start to feel for Hester La Negrita. In the same essay Foster continues with the reasons for Hester's child murder:

Hester's motivation for murdering Jabber is psychologically and sociologically almost overdetermined. Meyer and Oberman comment on how "sociocultural and economic influences... combined with the pressures associated with being the sole caretaker for an infant prefigure the infants' deaths... in a remarkable number of twentieth century infanticide cases." Hester's case demonstrates many of Meyer and Oberman's "influences." Hester is a single parent with no support system, either familial or various "othermothers," who is unable to provide for her children. (80)

Of course, Foster's thesis about the motive of Hester's killing her child but there is also another aspect that should be considered here. That is the examples of the other murderous mothers or mothers who also think about killing their children. The first chapter puts Hester Prynne, Medea and Lady Macbeth's characters and cultural identities in a comparative perspective. Hence, as in the examples of these literary mothers, Hester La Negrita attempts to get rid of her sexual identity by killing her son as well. Her first love Chilli refuses her because of her motherhood, and Reverend D. does not listen to her because he knows she wants money for her children. Everybody around her is somehow trying to use the womanhood/motherhood of Hester La Negrita against her. Killing her son might be a symbolic transformation for her to free herself from her imaginary or maybe illusory identity.

To conclude this chapter, it can be asserted that in terms of the parts of the five-act tragedy, the resolution part can be regarded as salvation for Hester La

Negrita despite all the dark consequences of this tragedy. It is because, perhaps, for the first time with the final scene, we witness a real tragedy of a real person rather than a person who gains meaning through the eyes of the constructed society. She, perhaps, tries to prove to us that the natural self of a woman is not only about carrying children, feeding them and protecting them, contrary to the common norms defining the subjectivity of womanhood.

4 CHAPTER 3: BREAKING FREE FROM THE CONVENTIONS: THE TRAGIC JOURNEY OF HESTER SMITH IN *THE FUCKING A*

As it has been suggested in the introduction section, with the inclusion of Hawthorne's Hester, it is possible to integrate the presentations of these two Hesters to the concepts of tragedy by Aristotle. Thus, in this chapter the character of Hester Smith's resolution will be analyzed in terms of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement.

The last play of *A Letter Plays* is *The Fucking A* which focuses on Hester Smith's tragedy in relation to Parks plays with language and experimental stage settings. The Hester in this play is also illiterate and her ultimate aim is to earn enough money to save her son from jail. In this play, language plays an important role to decode the meanings of the characters' "troubled beginning" and "difficult end." Thus, it is crucial to start with the exposition of Hester Smith in the play. At this point, it might be useful to compare it to the presentation of Hester La Negrita, which has been analyzed in the second chapter.

To begin with, the paradoxical atmosphere of the whole play is signaled by Parks at the very beginning of the play. After the first stage directions, we hear Hester saying these lines:

... 3 babys killed between the hours of 10 and midnight and at least one before the nights out if I know whats what. Their troubles yr livelihood, Hester. Hhh. There aint no winning. (The Red 117)

These sentences are uttered shortly after the stage directions where Hester's scarlet letter is "deeply branded into her skin." Hence, like Hawthorne's novel, these

two different plays of Parks' start with the signification of letter "A." Of course, *In the Blood*, this letter is planted on stage with the word "slut," yet the connotation of this word is the letter "A." Furthermore, for the exposition of Hester characters, the letter "A" is used and the weaknesses of these three characters arise from this letter. This weakness to the letter can be associated with the term tragic flaw because the letter plays an important role in their decisions and their tragic ends. The signification of Hester Smith's letter is the abortionists, since she works as one, with the lines above, she reflects her contradictory position. Also, it is important to pay attention to the word she chooses for carrying a child. Since she aborts women, she regards pregnancy as "trouble." She says herself that "their trouble is yr livelihood" (117). These lines signal the paradoxical ending of Hester Smith and her decision, which will be analyzed later on.

Let's focus on the recognition phase of the play through which the audience can reveal some facts about the character's identity. During Hester's journey of revelation, there are some crucial tools that Suzan Lori Parks uses to help the audience. One of them is the songs that function as the confession parts or sometimes as the chorus in *In the Blood*. The explanation of Hester's job choice is given with Canary's and Hester's singing through the following lines:

Its not that we love
 What we do
 But we do it
 We look at the day
 We just gotta get through it.
 We dig our ditch with no complaining
 Work in hot sun, or even when its raining
 And when the long day finally comes to an end
 We'll say:
 "Here is a woman
 Who does all she can."(The Red 122)

As the audience, we are reminded of the fact that Hester is not doing something she wants. She presents it as if there are other forces that make her be an abortionist. Later in scene nine, in her conversation with Butcher, Hester confesses why she chose her job by saying, "Go to prison or take this job. That was my choice. Choose A or choose B. I chose A" (Parks 165).

Moreover, with regard to the letter "A" that Hester Smith carries on her breast, Butcher asks her the reason. Hester says "That's the law. Everyone knows what I do but then, my A is also like a shingle and a license," (Parks 164-65). What we decipher from this dialogue is that Parks is creating another dimension that does not belong to the real world. She is creating a totally different one, a unique society (but patriarchal as in Hawthorne's Puritan society) with its own rules, and characters who are called First Lady, Boy, Butcher, Mayor, and Hunter. She tries to refer to Hester Prynne's society (a patriarchal one) by doing this, and makes her character obliged to wear a letter as Hester Prynne does.

Furthermore, we understand from the conversation of Hester Smith that like Hester Prynne, she chooses to stay in a society that punishes marks, degrades, and alienates them. This striking resemblance between these two Hesters also leads us to another similarity which is the recognition of their selves. Actually, the three Hesters have so much motherly love in themselves that they cannot take actions or analyze their lives without their maternal instincts. However, it is also the same love that prepares us for the violent end that involves a paradox to it.

The issue of maternity is also a key element in *The Fucking A*. In addition to Hester Smith's black female identity, she also has to suffer from her maternal instincts. It is something that prevents her from choosing the job she wants, having consensual sex, or living where she wants. She needs to earn money to save her child

but we see no other personal desire which is purely related to Hester's own identity. Her body is just a body of a mother where she can only exist within it. The different position of women is emphasized by Parks with her another experimental tool of inventing a new language for the women in the play. Besides, it is not only Hester who is devalued in the play, it is all the female characters such as Canary and the First Lady. In retrospect, women can continue to be repressed and doomed to their female identity which only functions as having sex and giving birth. When we also look at the conversations of First Lady and Mayor, we can easily see that although they represent a higher status of society with a respective economic condition, the tragic flaw of First Lady is inevitable. In scene two, First Lady and Mayor have a conversation about First Lady's incapability of conceiving. Of course, Mayor thinks there is no problem with him and accuses her with these lines:

That kind of thinking is the kind of thinking that keeps us back. Born with a silver spoon in yr mouth never had to work so its no wonder you don't produce.

(Rest)

Yr a disgrace to the notion. Everyone agrees. (Parks 129)

There is no doubt that economically First Lady is coming from a better family but it is not something that can stop Mayor from thinking that he is superior to her in every aspect. Women's fate can be decided by patriarchal forces, not for the things they have done in society, but for the female identity that they have done nothing to have. Naturally, they are inferior creatures and can easily be regarded as evil as in the example of Medea. Thus, women challenge men with the children that they promise to give them. However, in the end these children start to become a challenge for the female's quest for finding her true self. If so, what Parks tries to do is create a language "Talk" just for female characters, a way to help them in their identity struggle. Moreover, this language also functions as a defense mechanism for women.

When they experience an unpleasant situation or they are offended, they use this language as a defense towards men. It can be argued that in a world that does not belong to any real existing country or society, Parks is trying to find a way to differentiate her female characters from the males. Also, the times they speak the “Talk”, they discover their true state of their personalities even if it is for a brief time. To exemplify the usage of “Talk” as a defensive tool, or a way to expose their anger, Parks’ special language is enlightenment where, to quote from Lacan and his understanding of language,:

Here the function of Language is not to inform but to evoke.
 What I seek in the Word is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question. In order to be recognized by the other, I utter what was only in view of what will be. In order to find him, I call him by a name which he must assume or refuse in order to reply me.(63)

Indeed, Parks’ intention of creating a new language probably is not to inform the audiences about the inner side of the female characters. Yet it stimulates us to think the times they are using that “Talk” and it makes us to think about the reasons for the usage of that language. One possible reason might be, as Lacan suggests, the recognition by the others. As this is the case with Hester Prynne and La Negrita, these female characters suffer from not being recognized as an individual and not going beyond a female body that gives pleasure and bears children. This is, therefore, a chance for female characters to find their “pure true simple state.” As a result, the “Talk” provides a metaphoric atmosphere for the audience, in which they can recognize the presence of female characters by going beyond the absence on stage.

Another “element of style” of Parks is the “spell” that transfers us to the other dimension. As Parks states in her essay “From Elements of Style”, “A spell is a place of great (unspoken) emotion. It’s also a place for an emotional transition” (The America Play 17). Especially, in the climax where Hester Smith is raped by a

prisoner who she thinks her son, the “spell” technique helps the audiences to think about the possible actions of Hester Smith and what kind of path she will follow in the following chapters:

Jailbait

You gonna gimme some or what?

Hester

Hester

Hester (Parks The Red 184)

This silencing strategy is a time for us to interpret the emotions of Hester. And one can understand from her nonreactive position that she will not stop him. Not surprisingly, in the following scene we see Hester planning to kill First Lady since she has learned her son has died. From Hester’s silence to exploitation of her body, it can be understood that something bad will happen within the rising and falling action.

As for the denouement, after Hester kills her son Monster, at the end “spell” functions again. Parks withdraws herself from the final scene, and leaves the stage to Hester and the audience:

After a moment, the backdoor bell rings insistently.

She ignores it.

It rings again, more insistently.

She gets up and puts on her apron,

Then wearily sits back down.

After a moment the bell rings again.

Hester

Hester

Hester

She gets up, picks up her tools and goes back to work. (Parks 221)

This scene is immediately after she kills Monster. What we grasp from this scene is the duality of Hester’s position about her life after she kills Monster. The thing is, as the audience, we question and wonder about the next step for Hester Smith. In *In the Blood*, we know what happens to Hester La Negrita after she kills

Jabber, and she is going to jail. However, what about Hester Smith? As the stage directions lead us, we learn that she continues to work as an abortionist. She sings the same song that she sings in the beginning with Canary, which is “Working Womans Song.” Through our understanding, it is implied that she is just a woman “who does all she can.”(The Red 123) Thus, losing the center of her life, the only way left is the recognition and acceptance in society. Hester Smith does not kill herself, she continues to live as an abortionist. Maybe this time, she can have a chance to try to find her true self by freeing herself her traumatic motherly body.

It might be the appropriate time to mention the motive behind Hester Smith’s killing her own son. Verna A. Foster suggests:

There is no point in presenting so horrendous an act as a mother’s murder of her child without attempting to understand the woman who commits the act, and understanding requires at least some degree of sympathy. Beyond that, writers who are also social critics like Parks wish to explore the material conditions that produce their character’s behavior. Finally, perhaps, in so far as literary mothers who kill their children are mirrors as well as scapegoats, female readers and spectators especially need such characters to be sympathetic because they need to understand and forgive their own ambivalence as mothers. (86)

Of course, Parks plans this disturbing action that needs to be resolved in the mind of the audiences. So, one attempt to resolve it might be having a look at the “Medea Fantasy” asserted by Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, who states in her essay:

Medea’s fate surely confronts us unconsciously with one of the most profound taboos of our western civilization, a form of female destructiveness in which intense unbearable counter-transference reactions arise in us analysts, making it hard for us accurately to perceive and recognize the dimension of the ‘dark continent’ of femininity in our female analysands. (170)

With the above quotation, it is easy to see that our job in analyzing the intricate motive of Hester Smith, Hester La Negrita, and Medea’s killing their children is difficult. However, due to the poor material conditions and discrimination

because of their race and gender, their action might be a call for their liberation from the forces that make them trapped in a body that they did not choose within their own discretion. In considering Shakespeare's characterization of Lady Macbeth, it should be remembered that desires of women for power, ambition or being heard are a depiction of Puritan society through the eyes of Hester Prynne to notice the unchanged perception of women many years after Shakespeare. Similarly, womanhood is constructed in a quite similar way in Parks' characterization of Hesters. That is, Parks "continues to present us with stereotypes of male and female behaviour that she deconstructs, inverts, subverts or obliges us, readers and spectators, to reconstruct, recreate, reject, or recognize as our own" (Ozieblo 49). While the experiences of these murderous mothers' are difficult to understand, we recognize that Hester Smith and Hester La Negrita try to escape to a terrible but an enlightening end. It is enlightening, we assume, from the last scene that after she kills her child and sings the "Working Womans Song," she continues to live. She is not giving up and, as the audience, we want to believe that as she "goes back to work" (The Red 221), she also goes back to her subjectivity in an unsexed state. Maybe, unlike Hester Prynne, she finds her sexual identity, which helps her get rid of her destructive motherly motives.

In order to bring more light for Hester's decision to kill her son on the grounds that the other people will not be able to hurt him, their conversation might be demonstrated here:

Monster

When they catch me theyll hurt me. Run me through and plant me in yr front yard so you can hear me scream. They catch me and theyll run me through. You hide me they'll run you through too. I wonder how much itll hurt? They'll keep me alive and cut me up and I wonder how much itll hurt?

(Rest)

Hear the dogs? Take the gun. Shoot me with it. (The Red 219)

Upon Monster's offer, they have a "spell" moment where they emotionally connect with each other, and thoroughly understand that Hester is thinking of killing him in order to save him from the hunters. Not surprisingly, Hester "slits his throat like Butcher taught her" (The Red 220). This is the end of Hester's life-long struggle. Hester's murder scene on stage can also be associated with "the mother's battle for her child with sickness, with poverty, with war, with all the forces of exploitation and callousness that cheapen human life needs to become a common human battle, waged in love and in the passion for survival. But for this to happen, the institution of motherhood must be destroyed." (Rich 280). Therefore, Hester's rebellion, here, is Parks' rebellion and reaction to the vulgarity of her society as this conclusion also perfectly matches Parks' social critical identity.

Furthermore, the paradox between trouble and peace in Hester's catharsis also creates another contradiction between life and death. Parks' way of presenting this character also transfers us into a kind of understanding stated as follows:

Women (mothers) are experienced here not only as omnipotent givers of life who provide invulnerability and paradisa-orgastic unification but also as furies and avengers who, if wounded in the extreme, put out the life to which they themselves have given birth.(Leuzinger-Bohleber 171)

Indeed, the audiences witness a similar paradox in the tragedy of Hester Smith as well as Hester La Negrita. Similarly, in the first chapter, it has been argued that Hester Prynne has undergone a comparable experience with her daughter Pearl. Parks is surprising her audiences with unexpected endings with unexpected resolutions. She also makes us go through time and rethink the representation of women in literature as well as the non-representation of black female bodies within the stage of literature.

Speaking of black female bodies, Parks' revolutionary and experimental perspective of art can be interpreted when her African-American identity is portrayed by her choosing black characters to represent white female characters belonging to the past. It might be useful to remember Parks' ideas about black plays. For her, "a black play recognizes the importance of the evidence of things unseen" (New Black Math 582). Thus, what is significant about the experience of these black characters is their aim to create another dimension to see what was gone unseen in the past. With the transfiguration of Hester Prynne into new Hesters, Parks shows us the relation between the new and old art. Parks' quest for a voice is stated clearly below:

Modern black culture, in its insistently revisionary quest for an authoritative voice, wants to remake that fundamental activity of mind we call "art". At the same time, whether revisionary or revolutionary, resurrective or iconoclast, it has come to realize that all real transformations in the form of expression, especially when envisioned as integral to fundamental shifts in the structure of collective consciousness, can take place only within a transfiguration of the idea of expression itself. (Benston 115)

As the quotation above suggests, the song Hester Smith sings, the usage of "spell" at the end, and Hester's wearing her apron and going back to work are the ways of Hester's expressions. It is through the song that we understand Hester is a villain of the environmental consequences, and it is through the "spell" we observe Hester's interaction with the audience. Thus it is through her absent voice during the "spell" that we realize she is in search of an "authoritative voice."

5 CONCLUSION

Unless we can relate past literature, however indirectly, to the struggle of men and women against exploitation, we shall not fully understand our own present and so will be less able to read texts, or to produce those art forms which might make for a better art and a better society. (Eagleton 70)

What Suzan-Lori Parks achieves in her characterization of Hester L Negrita and Hester Smith and their presentation on stage is suggested by T.S Eliot and also Terry Eagleton above. “The importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors” and the “conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written,” (Eliot 7) consist the core element of *In the Blood* and *The Fucking A*. The relation of two Hesters by Parks to Hester Prynne by Hawthorne, Medea by Euripides, and Lady Macbeth by Shakespeare is the indicator of Parks’ envisioning of unresolved past issues and her insistence to evoke the same emotions in her audience. By doing so, she makes us understand these old literary figures’ experiences through their expression within the experiences of new characters. What she puts on stage is certainly not “the expression of personality” but rather “escape from personality” (Eliot 10). We revise, remember and experience sins, immoral acts and faults of old and new literary figures and then we escape from all these emotions after understanding “what it means to want to escape from these things” (Eliot 11). Thus, together with Hester La Negrita and Hester Smith, we go on a terrible but enlightening journey with the memories of Hester Prynne in our minds.

In Parks’ experimental and revisionary theatre, she gives her audience a chance to understand their present culture, society and politics. She tries to make things better through art. That is why her most important artistic skill is her rebellion

and reaction by creating totally new, disturbing and quier plays by interrogating the past that prepares the ground for her plays. As she refers to three different traditions in her essay "Tradition and Individual Talent," tradition of the past, tradition of the new, and the personal tradition are the three components of her plays. Thus, this concept of hers can be easily adapted to her plays *In the Blood* and *The Fucking A*. First of all, choosing the name Hester and the same tragic fault as a letter "A" for her characters refer to "The Great Tradition." Secondly, the plays represent new Hester figures that kill their children to attribute "The Tradition of the Next New Thing." Finally, Parks' re-representation of these women is totally from an African American point of view (black characters, jazz traditions, poor conditions of black people) where she states "I am an African-American woman this is the form I take, my content predicates this form, and this form is inseparable from my content" (*The America Play* 8). So this can be directly associated with "The Personal Tradition."

In order to understand the characters of Suzan Lori Parks one might go beyond the visual aspect. That is to say, one should play with the language, her elements of style, and most importantly, revise the history and literature. The meaning is something which is hidden on stage and waiting for the audience to dig into. Thus digging into the history, language, metaphoric environment, and the social realm of the three Hesters are the key tools for us to reach the other dimension of these stories. Although hidden meaning is something terrible, these plays also offer some "enlightenment" for the audience in a way that Parks lets her characters to rethink the past to restart a new form of life even if it is achieved through terrible experiences. In Parks interview "It's an Oberammergau Thing," she says "my characters often feel that, no matter what they do they can't seem to make any progress." She also adds that most of her characters are "following in the footsteps of

a man who lived in the past.” So, “walking forward in the footsteps of someone who is behind” them makes these characters “confused and angry and lost” (132). Hester La Negrita and Hester Smith try to find some possibilities to transcend this confusion and the sense of being lost. In *In the Blood* and *The Fucking A*, Hesters attempt to transcend it with their terrible but in a way enlightening ends. If the title of Parks’ interview is viewed, it might also be asserted to explain Parks’ views about her characters and plays. Oberammergau is a town in Germany where all the villagers represent the death of Jesus and his resurrection. It is an important information when Hester La Negrita and Hester Smith’s terrible enlightening is considered because thusly in this religious play, we first witness death and violence but than a transfiguration like Jesus’ resurrection. It is also important to understand these plays since Parks says like in the town Oberammergau, her “work is a new kind of community pageant” (140). She invites her audience to come together on a show and revise, reuse, rethink the past to rebuild a new literature and a new life.

In addition, throughout this study, three different Hesters have been analyzed from different perspectives ranging from gender, sexuality, language, and their connection with other literary characters such as Medea and Lady Macbeth. Hester La Negrita in *In the Blood*, and Hester Smith in *The Fucking A* showed some similarities and differences to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s character Hester Prynne in *Scarlet Letter*.

Parks’ aim of choosing these names for her characters is stated by Jennifer Larson. For her, Parks can be associated with historians and writers that deal with the “absent and neglected groups” in the history. What she does by adapting the “themes or characters” from old writers is to shape new texts for present by remembering the old texts. (3)

For the reader, Parks achieves her aim to constitute new texts and it is her strategy that makes us go through the experiences of past literary characters and evaluate them with a new perspective. So, it can be said that inexplicable life experiences, obscurity of human nature, sins, transgressions, and salvation have always been key words in traditional five-act tragedies. However, the reader is always allowed to track the reasons of these characters' experiences.

To conclude, it can be argued that Parks calls the audience to witness Hester La Negrita's and Smith's transfiguration by taking part in the old literary female-dominated stories that are brought into the present to make us participate in rethinking and restarting by giving meaning to their absence rather than presence since it is only "through participation that we work out the demons" (New Black Math 582).

END NOTES

1. For a good definition see “From Elements of Style” in *The America Play* by Parks.
2. This term is used by Parks to describe her special strategy in her plays. See *The America Play*
3. This term is also used as “rep&rev” by Parks and it is also used in this thesis to describe her experimental strategy. See Parks’ *The America Play* for further definition.
4. This term is also another style that Parks uses in her plays. Especially it can be used to explain “Talk” *In the Blood*. See Parks’ *The America Play*.
5. In this thesis I used the phrase *terrible enlightenment* as the title of my study and also in the introduction I used the term to describe the endings of Hawthorne’s and Parks texts. For a good definition of the term see Kennedy and Gioia.

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