

Brothers' Quest for the American Dream: Representations
of Multicultural Theater in Topdog/Underdog

رحلة شقيقان للبحث عن الحلم الأمريكي:
مظاهر التعددية الثقافية في مسرحية المتسلط والمضطهد

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Abstract:

Suzan Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* debuted at The Joseph Papp Public Theater on July 22, 2001. The play sheds light on two brothers' quest for the American Dream. They can be described as Cain and Abel of modern times. Booth, the younger brother, betrays Lincoln, the older brother with his wife. In turn, Lincoln robs Booth of his inheritance in a Monte Card game. The play ends with Booth killing his older brother. It reflects the termination and futility of the American Dream and proves that it is a mere illusion. This paper examines demonstrations of multicultural theater in Parks's play which represents ethnic, racial and cultural issues. It deals with the characters' self-concept and its effect on their behavior and choices in life. It illustrates that characters' actions and decisions are influenced by their family standards and social class.

Keywords: family, African Americans, American Dream, multiculturalism, self-concept.

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الملخص:

كان الظهور الأول لمسرحية "المتسلط والمضطهد" للكاتبة سوزان لوري باركس من خلال مسرح جوزيف باب في الثاني والعشرين من يونيو في العام ٢٠٠١. تلقي المسرحية الضوء على رحلة الشخصيات للبحث عن الحلم الأمريكي. وبرغم هوس الشقيقين بلعبة القمار إلا أن علاقتهما الفريدة من نوعها قد تحولت إلى علاقة خصومة، وبذلك يمكن أن يشار إليهما بأنهما قابيل وهابيل العصر الحديث؛ فقد خان بوث أخاه لينكولن مع زوجته، وفي المقابل، سلب لينكولن ميراث بوث من خلال لعبة بطاقة مونتني. انتهت المسرحية بقتل بوث أخاه لينكولن. وتعكس المسرحية نهاية الحلم الأمريكي وعقمه، وتتناول المسرحية المفهوم الذاتي للأفارقة الأمريكيين، حيث تتأثر أفعال وقرارات الشخصيات بالمعايير العائلية والطبقة الاجتماعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العائلة، الأفارقة الأمريكيين، الحلم الأمريكي، التعددية الثقافية، مفهوم الذات

Brothers' Quest for the American Dream: Representations of Multicultural Theater in Topdog/Underdog

1. Introduction:

Suzan Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* debuted at The Joseph Papp Public Theater on July 22, 2001. The play received a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2002. Parks is a notable playwright and is "described as a 'black Samuel Beckett'" (Al-Khazali, 2018). The play sheds light on two brothers' quest for the American Dream. They dream to achieve success and economic prosperity in order to have better lives than their parents. They dream of equality in a society where social mobility is possible for everyone regardless of race or color. Their version of the American Dream is legitimate but they depend on chance rather than hard work. The play criticizes characters' materialistic approach to life which causes Booth to kill his brother Lincoln after 3-monte card game. It reflects the termination and futility of the American Dream and proves that it is a lie. Accordingly, Pete Hempstead believes that Parks's play "dismantles the idea of the American dream" (2019).

The play puts into focus the irregular relationship between two brothers, Lincoln and Booth, who can be described as Cain and Abel of modern times. The two brothers led a difficult life, trying to survive their parents' abandonment. They form a dysfunctional family and share the **past** and the present challenges in life. They remember how they worked really hard just to pay for electricity to keep them warm, regardless of their need to feel the warmth and love of caring parents. The two brothers have unique family dynamics that turn into rival interactions whenever the **past** resurfaces in their discussion of the present problems. Parks states that "This is a play about family wounds and healing" (Parks, 2002). The playwright uses flashback and foreshadowing techniques to put into focus the effect of the past on the present and to give a hint of the upcoming events in the play.

Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* has received very little critical attention. All studies published on it are one doctoral dissertation, an MA thesis and two articles. The dissertation, "Enacting Black Suffering and Laughter: Creative Restorations of Black Experiences in Suzan-Lori

Parks's Plays" (2015) by Rie Anada, explores Parks's dramatization of black experience in her plays. The MA thesis, "The Pursuit of Happiness: The State of the American Dream in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*" (2012) by Sabrina A. Abid, examines the fallacy of the American Dream in *Topdog/Underdog*. Wadhah Hassan Muhi Al-Khazali's article, "Anxiety and Personal Identity in Suzan-Lori-Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*" (2018), deals with anxiety and personal identity in Parks's play. N'Guessan Koffi Eugene's article, "Between the Imaginary and the Real: Exploring Duality in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*" (2016), puts into focus the phenomenology of identity in the play.

The aim of this paper is to examine demonstrations of multicultural theater in Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* which represents ethnic, racial and cultural issues. This paper examines the struggle of a black family to survive economic and social challenges. Moreover, it questions existing social systems reluctance to do their role toward the poor, the downtrodden and parentless children. Firstly, it puts into focus the challenges that face African American nuclear family which is influenced by social and economic forces. It discusses social inequality that suppresses African Americans in US. Secondly, it analyzes Parks's play which portrays the journey of two brothers who are abandoned by their parents. Finally, it points out the characters' self-concept and its effect on characters' behavior and choices in life. It intends to answer the following questions: What is multiculturalism? How does Parks use multicultural theatre to explore people's experiences in order to enrich social and cultural life? How characters' perception of their self-concept and self-esteem are affected by family standards, social class and race?

The focus of this analysis is to discuss the characters' racial and social background which affect their perception of themselves as social outcasts. It investigates the history of an African American family in society as represented in Suzan Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*. It underlines family dynamics with a special reference to underprivileged black man in America. Furthermore, it tackles black minorities' self-concept and self-esteem which are shaped by social circumstances, family standards and race. The play puts into focus the characters' struggle

against generational poverty and their effort to live in a society whose social systems are intentionally blind to the needs of the disadvantaged.

Booth and Lincoln are raised in a family that does not have the basic ideals to raise a good child. Both parents betray each other, and their children know about their parents' love affairs. Their mother has an affair with another man. Therefore, Lincoln doubts that Booth is his real brother. Accordingly, Lincoln betrays his dad by having an affair with his mistress while Booth betrays Lincoln with his wife. The play sheds light on characters' racial and ethnic background and criticizes the fact that there is no system to support black families. It explores the social and the personal sphere. In the social sphere, it examines social classes and racial discrimination. In the personal sphere, it puts into focus characters' inner struggle to accept each other as brothers instead of rivals.

2. Theoretical Background:

Topdog/Underdog does not only reflect on black families, but it also extends to include black and white families. Therefore, Parks's theater represents multicultural issues that face modern families in general. Multiculturalism appears as a way to include the experiences of people from different cultures, ethnicities, and colors. Ethel Pitts Walker maintains:

University and regional theaters market the concept in an effort to diversify their audiences and affirm their "political correctness." The appearance of diversity permeates the media and the artistic and cultural institutions of America's communities, as well as textbooks, journals, and magazines. More visual images than ever portray females, the disabled, and people of color in formats and environments unheard of 50 years ago. (1994)

The aim of multicultural theatre is to propagate the experience of minority groups and share their cultural background to represent similarities and differences which encourage social solidarity. Therefore, multicultural drama raises audience awareness regarding discrimination, inequality, among other social, cultural and economic problems. Walker believes that "Multiculturalism means not only including people as

'nons,' but, more importantly, recognizing the equality and value of many cultures and peoples”.

Multicultural theater supports cultural diversity. It sheds light on different issues that are of interest to larger groups who belong to different social and cultural backgrounds and need to be represented on stage. However, Walker suggests, “The most difficult aspect of multiculturalism in the theatre is the time needed to develop attitudes not fostered in the larger society”. Multicultural theater needs more time to change public attitude toward controversial issues. Actually, a society that embraces cultural pluralism should also support diversity on stage. Therefore, multicultural theatre makes it easier to discuss important issues related to race, gender, class and color, because

All involved must know that it is alright to disagree and voice the disagreements without losing sight of the goal, to meet the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs of the society. Quick remedies and superficial solutions are dangerous and force all involved to retreat at the first sign of chaos. (1994)

Multicultural theater could be a good site to discuss problems and propagate for common/shared values that open channels to community dialog. It also examines social acceptance of these new cultural perspectives. Likewise, Robert Longley believes:

In sociology, multiculturalism describes the manner in which a given society deals with cultural diversity. Based on the underlying assumption that members of often very different cultures can coexist peacefully, multiculturalism expresses the view that society is enriched by preserving, respecting, and even encouraging cultural diversity. (2019)

Multicultural theater implies acceptance, understanding and familiarity with other cultures. This means that individuals could retain their cultural heritage. Thus, individuals, who belong to minor cultures, can participate in and enrich the prevailing culture. As interested in the sociological aspect, Longley states, “Proponents of multiculturalism

believe that people should retain at least some features of their traditional cultures. Opponents say that multiculturalism threatens the social order by diminishing the identity and influence of the predominant culture.” In fact, multiculturalism develops social experiences by including other cultural traits. Therefore, **multiculturalism supports the construction of diverse identities and focuses** “on identity formation analyses that study cultural, social, gender sexual and ethnic difference” (Pineda, 2015).

There are two theories of multiculturalism that represent the interactional nature of predominant and subordinate cultures in one society. They are the “melting pot theory” and the “salad bowl theory”. Longley argues, “The melting pot theory of multiculturalism assumes that various immigrant groups will tend to ‘melt together,’ abandoning their individual cultures and eventually becoming fully assimilated into the predominant society.” This theory refers to individuals’ immersion and embracement of dominant social culture. However, the salad bowl theory is “A more liberal theory of multiculturalism than the melting pot, the salad bowl theory describes a heterogeneous society in which people coexist but retain at least some of the unique characteristics of their traditional culture.” The salad bowl theory supports and encourages the coexistence of varied cultures that enhance the main culture of a society that respects its individuals’ cultural background. According to this theory, people still hold on to their cultural heritage and are familiar with the prevailing culture. Therefore, cultural diversity “makes humanity stronger and may, in fact, be vital to its long-term survival. In 2001, the General Conference of UNESCO took this position when it asserted in its Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity that ‘...cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature.’” Multiculturalism brings understanding, respect and strength to the society and other cultures because people know about others’ experiences, skills, traditions and new ways of thinking. It defends equality, social justice and democracy which entail respecting other religions and creeds.

The African Americans identity is subject to different factors. Some of these factors are inherent in the past. Pineda assumes, “American identity has been shaped by power relations and social and racial tensions. In this identity formation process, African Americans have suffered

historically because they were prevented from obtaining the national promise of justice implied in American identity.” For example, Census Demographic Profile Highlights on poverty in 2008 states that “24.7% of the individuals living below the poverty level in the US were black.” **Moreover, the report of** Bureau of Justice Statistics states, “in 2002 blacks were 12.7% of the American population but 39.9% of all murder victims; this figure increased in 2005 when blacks accounted for 49% of all homicide victims (Black Victims of Violent Crime, 3).” Accordingly, black people’s identity formation is deeply affected by social circumstances and violence. Black families suffer from the dire consequences of social inequality. Parks’s play highlights this victimizing social situation of black families, focusing on marital and familial relationships that threaten the image of the nuclear family, thus, jeopardizing the future of the next generation.

Topdog/Underdog presents two brothers as a byproduct of an indigent family which is victimized by social and economic problems. It tells about the journey of the victimized brothers and how they turn into culprits in a society that victimizes them in the first place by denying their basic needs to live as honorable citizens. The characters’ personalities reflect a combination of factors that build their identity. They are presented as social outcasts who live at the margins of the world. Pineda believes, “From a white supremacist perspective black people have been considered as ‘the other’, lacking the ‘summum bonum of the bourgeois order.’” As a result, the characters’ self-concept is shaped by the impoverished social circumstances, crime, lack of skills and unemployment. Their poor social status and need for a feeling of belonging to a family, nation and place determine or constitute their self-concept. At the end of the play, when they failed to overcome humiliating poverty, they resort to stealing, deceiving and harming each other physically and emotionally, which in a way is similar to harming themselves as they are considered a reflection of each other. Therefore, the analysis of the play must consider social circumstances that affect or help form their identities such as family standards, social class and race.

3. Discussion and Analysis:

Topdog/Underdog deals with representations of a shattered family in American society. It puts into focus the social and economic challenges that traumatized familial relationships, giving birth to a family image which is unable to survive real world challenges. This paper examines Parks's account of black families' social challenges. It presents a family whose dream is to settle in a good house and live according to humane social standards. Unable to fulfill their basic needs and because of problematic life affairs, the two parents left two children to face the world with 1000 dollars as an inheritance. The two brothers find no other way to survive the harsh life of real world but to steal and hustle, skills the two brothers learned and excelled in such poor circumstances.

Parks uses foreshadowing in order to give an advance hint of the upcoming events in the play. The title of the play implies the rivalry relationship that takes place between the two brothers throughout the play. The name of the play "implies that a struggle will take place. Given that the cover art sports two pit bulls, this image alludes to the illegal activity of dog fighting" (Abid, 2012). Both brothers struggle to achieve the American dream of wealth and prosperity. Booth believes that he can achieve this dream if he succeeds to persuade Lincoln to return to hustling. However, Lincoln prefers to work at an arcade where he impersonates Abraham Lincoln, the president of US. Regardless of the adversary relationship between the two brothers, they share the challenges and rewards of life. Although they face life hardships together, they are deprived of this sense of belonging and loyalty. For example, Booth hides his inheritance from Lincoln which signifies deep-rooted suspicion. He lies to Lincoln about his love life with Grace, whom he kills at the end of the play. It turns out that Booth's violent actions could be justified by his fear of loneliness and abandonment. Therefore, he kills his brother and his beloved to punish them for planning to leave him.

Foreshadowing is used again as the predestined ending of the rival relationship between the two brothers is suggested by their names, as one of them is named after the president of US and the other is named after his assassin. Although the names were their father's idea of a joke, they foretell their destiny. While the figure of Abraham Lincoln is appreciated

by Black people as he played a significant role in freeing them from slavery, it sheds light on Lincoln's detachment of his real identity. Dramatizing the figure of Abraham Lincoln suggests the fact that Lincoln is in pursuit of his true identity. Al-Kahzali argues that Parks "dramatizes the horrid liquidation of Lincoln whom the African-Americans admired for freeing them from the tyrannical yore of slavery....Seen from this perspective, the figure of Lincoln has been connected with the blacks 'search for identity'". Lincoln is a topnotch gambler, who decides to work as an impersonator which suggests that he experiences an identity crisis.

As social outcasts, the two brothers are nearly homeless, as they live in a rooming room which is poorly furnished. They try to reestablish a deformed family. Both brothers are in control of the family which gives way for a new power problem regarding who is in control. The battle over supremacy and authority highlights the heated discussion between the two brothers and their effort to explain their right to take control. Booth's lack of knowledge and skills keeps him in a peripheral marginal position in the society. This is clearly noticed in his failure in his endeavors in the play. Most prominently is his desire to work as a hustler and his girlfriend's rejection of his marriage proposal. Moreover, his brother rejects his demand to form a team to play 3-card Monte. Booth knows that he is bad and confessed this to his brother: "Im bad." Surprisingly, he asserts this throughout the play. The play underlines environment influences, social experiences and personal choices and the influence of these factors on both brothers' life and destiny.

The play touches upon work opportunities and low wages of black people. It satirizes the fact that there is discrimination between black and white people's salaries. The aim is to raise awareness, inform and initiate a change. Actually, Parks

is attentive to questioning literature and history and the ways in which African Americans are represented in both of those canons. Again, however, she is not concerned with the old dramatic equation of black people and the white oppressive other, but is starkly concerned with stories untold,

the unfamiliar or unknown ways of understanding, knowing or representing the black lived experience. (Keene, 2012)

The play is not about black and white people who are involved in oppositional relations. However, “it helps us to better understand the workings of the world in which we live” (83). It is about social responsibility for parentless children, suggesting that no one is beyond accusation. Moreover, it puts into focus social forces that lead to the characters’ constitution of self-concept.

The play tells the story of a disintegrated family. The mother left the house when Lincoln was sixteen and Booth was eleven. Their father left two years later. The two brothers have different attitudes toward family memories. While Booth takes good care of family belongings, Lincoln burns his father’s clothes. Booth keeps his mother’s stocking that includes his inheritance with great care, while Lincoln spends his money right away. Both brothers have different attitudes toward each other and toward life altogether. Booth wants to achieve his dream of wealth and prosperity through teaming up with Lincoln. However, Lincoln decides to quit gambling after the murder of his friend.

Topdog/ Underdog presents familial relationships/ dynamics that are affected by deep psychological complexes. It underpins the effect of dysfunctional family, and parents’ betrayal on the psychological, social and mental life of their offspring. Like *The America Play*, *Topdog/ Underdog* “connotes a history of racial and national identity in a metaphorical setting” (Anada, 2015). The dramatist’s realistic approach represents victimized children as a result of disloyal, selfish parents who escape from their responsibilities to satisfy their desires, leaving two children to face a fierce world on their own.

The two brothers establish a dysfunctional family in which each brother plays a role. At the beginning, Lincoln works as a 3-card monte player. He gains a thousand per day. When his partner Lonny is shot dead, Lincoln quits the game. Then, he works in an Arcade to sustain their daily living expenses. Booth works as a shoplifter and brings clothes and other things. He deeply believes that the social system is responsible for the family breakdown. Therefore, he does not prefer to work in any

fixed job as he dislikes oppressing working environments. He says, “I seen how it cracked them up and I aint going there” (Parks, 2002). He assumes that their parents escape to establish another family, and they were in agreement to abandon the house. Booth states, “maybe they renewed they wedding vows, maybe they got another family.” Booth puts into focus social circumstances that affect African Americans in the past and the present. He still believes that African Americans still suffer from racial discrimination. Therefore, he is convinced that working is a kind of slavery. He also underlines the fact that African Americans are still paid less than their American counterparts. He rejects his brother’s work which entails painting his face in white to look like the president of US. He compares his brother’s humiliating position to that demeaning position endured by blacks during the old times of slavery. He says, “You play Honest Abe...you going all the way back. Back to way back then when folks was slaves.” Actually, Lincoln’s personification of Abraham Lincoln puts into focus his consent to compromise his identity.

Flashback is used to shed light on the effect of past events on the present. The characters recall their childhood events/memories. However, Booth and Lincoln have different impressions about past family life. Lincoln cherishes his childhood memories, while Booth pretends to forget these memories. The playwright reveals background information about the characters’ past which affects their present and future choices in life. Parks believes that “theater...has the ability to bring the past and possible futures to life in the present, thereby reconstructing our perception of who we were, who we are, and who we wish to be” (qtd. in Al-Khazali, 2018). Booth asserts his mother’s prophecy that he is a wicked person as he brags about betraying his brother with his wife. As he has a materialistic approach to life, he only cares about gambling as the fastest way to achieve the American dream. He believes that money is the key to all the pleasures of life. Booth says, “Pockets bulging, plenty of cash! And the ladies would be thrilling! You could afford to get laid!”

As Parks challenges how people see history, she presents neglected groups’ stories, because “people without ancestors are like a tree without roots” (Ghasemi, 2016). Parks sheds light on social, economic and cultural circumstances that affect characters’ actions. The

play depicts their struggle to define themselves against economic circumstances that compelled them to work and steal to survive life after their parents' desertion. The play investigates black families' social circumstances in the absence of social care systems.

Parks uses a stylistic element, which she calls "repetition and revision" throughout the play. The characters go through certain experiences repeatedly. This gives the chance to the characters to reflect and revise their identity. For example, Lincoln's death takes place several times on the stage. Additionally, Lincoln repeatedly rejects his brother's request to team up to play 3-card monte. Parks uses repetition and revision "to create a 'drama of accumulation,' where the story does not simply move logically from one scene to the next, but rather builds both in tension and in theme. These tools can be used to explore the meaning of a line or phrase within the play" (Schnebly, 2019). The play questions the effect of past events on the future, leaving the audience to ponder over the characters' past and present. It puts into focus social and economic forces that shape their identities. It gives them the chance to evaluate their current position in order to make a change in the future.

Parks uses flashback to underpin the effect of past incidents on the life of the two brothers who are alienated from the society. As a by-product of disintegrated family, their past memories cause pain and unrest. Lincoln describes his life as a chain of failures, mischief and desertion. He sings:

My dear mother left me and my father's gone way
Ain't got no money, I don't got no place to stay.
My best girl, she threw me out into the street.
My favorite horse, they ground him into meat
I'm feeling cold from my head down to my feet.
My luck was bad but now it turned to worse.
My luck was bad but now it turned to worse
Don't call me up a doctor, just call me up a hearse.

Likewise, Booth remembers the difficulties they have gone through. However, he takes solace in Lincoln's existence. He says, "It was you and me against thuh world" (74). Both brothers recall their

parents' merciless abandonment because of hard social circumstances. Therefore, they relate money to happiness.

The parents abandoned their children and left them some money. Every parent chose only one child to support financially. The mother left Booth a nylon stocking, claiming that it contains 500 dollars. She asks the younger child to take care of his elder brother, reversing the normal order of things. The father leaves Lincoln 500 dollars, and warns Lincoln against Booth, which seems to be verified at the end of the play. Ironically, Lincoln had a relationship with his father's mistress. He burns his father's clothes, which symbolizes deep feelings of anger and resentment towards his father. Later, Lincoln recollects that the family moved to a bigger house. The parents intended to buy the house of their dreams, but in reality, they bought a house full of garbage. He maintains that the house has a "Cement back yard and a frontyard full of trash." Ironically, he asserts that it is the best house in the world. He declares, "We had some great times in that house, bro. Selling lemonade on thuh grass and looking at thuh stars."

Both characters have no self-esteem and limited self-concept. Sanjeev Kumar Mishra defines self-concept as "the mental and conceptual understanding" (2016). It is a constant understanding of individual's existence which is influenced by his/her concepts about his/her surroundings. Since individual's concepts are reflected on his/her behavior and judgment, they also affect his/her mental and social development. Booth perceives himself as a bad person; a concept which is supported by his mother's advice not to marry. Since his concepts about his parents are distorted by their betrayal of each other, his family background and social class formulate his mental growth, perception of the society and his merit in the society. Thus, his self-concept plays a dominant role in defining his behavior and decision-making process. Accordingly, Booth's behaviors and choices reflect his self-concept.

Self-concept refers to an individual's abilities which grow and develop with time. Mishra believes, "self-concept refers to the way a person thinks about their abilities in a variety of facts of like: academics, athletics and social interactions....As the teen improves his/her cognitive

skills and increases experiences, the self-concept continues to grow up to higher education” (2016). Booth is supposed to have a clearer view of his abilities now than before. Ironically, he becomes more deluded. He cannot judge his abilities as a player. He is misguided by his love to Grace who rejects him for the second time. He does not accept his brother’s rejection of the idea of forming a hustling team.

Booth judges himself as a bad character. His whole existence depends on mastering 3-card game, gaining a lot of money, and getting married to Grace. Eugene argues, “Booth displays a particular character which is different from his real or private self.... Consequently, Booth is committed to an identity construction based on his external appearance” (2016). Booth is interested in appearances; therefore, he steals stylish clothes. He “constructs his reality and negates his inner self for a life of appearance in order to preserve a sense of dignity and selfhood, as he indulges in behavior and attitude that conform with values beyond himself.”

The characters develop low self-worth. According to Mishra, ‘self-worth’ is “developed in early childhood and were formed by interaction of the child with the mother and father” (2016). Booth’s self-worth is shaped in his childhood and is influenced by three main characters; his mother, father and brother. Although Booth remembers his mother’s downfalls, he cherishes her advice regarding life. He trusts her to the extent that prevents him from checking the sum of money she left in the stocking as his inheritance. Additionally, he reveres his father and longs to wear his clothes when he grows up. Meanwhile, he follows the lead of his brother, as he wants to be a good hustler. He does his best to master gambling as he defines his self-worth according to his success as a gambler. Mishra maintains that “Perceived success and failure affect self-concept”. While failure lowers individual’s evaluation, success increases his/her evaluation. The characters’ low self-worth is defined by their failed efforts to find their real identity. Therefore, Booth has low self-worth because he fails as a lover and a hustler. He does not succeed to establish a family, gain money, or acquire needed skills for 3-card monte. Likewise, Lincoln has low self-esteem as he fails in his marriage. He

spends his inheritance money and rubs his brothers' inheritance at the end of the play.

Parks sheds light on the wide gap between social classes in the 70s and 80s in the US. Anada states, "Coontz shows an increase in the gap between rich and poor through the 70s and 80s as a socioeconomic problem in the U.S." (2015). Parks gathers Lincoln, who belongs to the downtrodden class, and a child who belongs to a wealthy class in order to put into focus social inequality. The child pays Lincoln 20 pounds for a signature. An amount which is more than what Lincoln expected.

Parks uses flashback to underline positive traits of Lincoln's character. Lincoln declares how he hates stealing low-class people whose plans include seeing the city or buying a new bike for their kids. He recounts an incident with a man and his wife:

We took that man and his wife for hundreds. No, thousands. We took them for everything they had and everything they ever wanted to have. We took a father for the money he was gonna get his kids new bike with and he cried in the street while we vanished. We took a mothers welfare check, she pulled a knife on us and we ran. She threw it but her aim werent shit. People shopping. Greedy. Thinking they could take me and they got took instead.

Lincoln implies that he is not to blame for rubbing people's money; it is their selfishness and greed that should be blamed. For self-preservation reasons, he leaves hustling after the assassination of his friend Lonny. According to Lincoln, working as an impersonator with a low wage is better than getting killed. As an impersonator, Lincoln has to wear Abraham's Lincoln costume which symbolizes white society supremacy. According to Lincoln, it is a living. However, Booth suggests, "But you aint living." While Lincoln considers this a chance to make an honest living, he is paid less than his predecessors because he is black. He is also threatened to be replaced by a wax dummy, which is seen as a more valuable object than Lincoln himself.

The play puts into focus characters' double identity, as they are in a continuous searching journey for a real identity. However, they are misguided by their faulty perceptions of themselves which originate as a result of low socioeconomic conditions. In the dialogue below, Lincoln clearly indicates this dual nature. Booth asks, "He shoot you?" Lincoln replies, " He shot Honest Abe, yeah." Lincoln's double self is asserted as a black man who impersonates a white man. Eugene argues, "Lincoln's double self works as a split awareness of both an external self and an internal self, which is pervasive in the play. It is exposed through the role of Abraham Lincoln he has to enact and his sense of self" (2016). Lincoln experiences life from different points of view, as a white and a black man. Parks "adopts a postcolonial perspective by positioning African-Americans as a formerly colonized...and as a people who, having lost their roots, their identity, and their self-esteem, remain alienated in the modern American metropolis" (Wilmer, 2000). The play puts into focus African-Americans' search for a true identity in a society which is still affected racism. As the characters' identity is shaped by the dominant culture, their true identity is seen as inferior.

Parks uses historical characters such as Abraham Lincoln- the 16th president of US. During the play, Lincoln is dressed up like Abraham Lincoln and performs the assassination scene every day. Parks does not judge Abraham Lincoln; however, she sheds light on his influence on the characters' life. Parks presents president Lincoln as a mythic figure or a symbol of a greater meaning that is related to black people's history. Shenk quotes Parks, "In days of great Greek drama, they had Apollo and Medea and Oedipus—these larger than-life figures that walked the earth and spoke—and they turned them into plays. Shakespeare had kings and queens that he fashioned into his stories. Lincoln, to me, is one of those" (2002). Parks adds, "Can Lincoln be the Great Emancipator and a white supremacist? Hmmm. Yes. Both, both. I think both" (2002). Parks reveals the ambivalence of Abraham Lincoln without adopting a clear stance on his inconsistent policy which arouses two incompatible attitudes. Some see him as a great emancipator, others believe that his decisions are actions of discrimination.

When Lincoln comes home with his weekly paycheck, they imitate the conversation of a husband and wife. They call each other “Ma” and “Pa.” Lincoln acts as the husband who earns a living to support the family, while Booth acts as the wife who takes care of domestic matters. When Booth brings home new boosted suits, he shares the luxurious clothes with his brother. He makes a dinner table and asks his brother to gather around it like old times. To Booth, Lincoln is a surrogate father, a brother, and an idol. Booth says, “I didn’t mind them leaving cause you was there....It was you and me against thuh world, Link. It could be like that again.”

The storyline of the play is often interrupted by a series of flashbacks that signifies the characters’ longing for past memories. As Booth makes a table so he can gather around it with his brother for a family meal, he declares that he still keeps the family photo album to remember old days. However, he exploits the moment to convince his brother to be his partner in gambling, which is the clue of achieving his aspirations in life. Eugene argues, “Booth’s world is made of dreams, sometimes unattainable dreams that hide his reality. He envisions a successful life, a future that will be made possible by his teaming with Lincoln in the three-card monte game” (2016). When Lincoln refuses Booth’s idea to return to hustling, he perceives him as an obstacle. Booth says, “YOU STANDING IN MY WAY? LINK!” Lincoln’s negligence of the importance of this familial bond and indifference to Booth’s pleadings shattered his hope to restore old times connection. However, the connection between the two brothers is mainly based on materialistic gains. Abid maintains, “We can better understand their relationship through the writing of social critic Slavoj Žižek, who argues that the exchange of money for a personal service functions as a ‘social link’ that creates ‘the capitalist society in which intersubjective relations are mediated by money’” (2012). The two brothers’ relationship is dictated by capitalist ideals, especially the motive to make a profit. Therefore, Booth’s reaction to rejection surpasses Lincoln’s imagination.

Booth prepares dinner and is dressed up in his new suit that he boosted earlier. He thinks that if he dons his boosted suit, Grace will marry him. Superficial as he is, he does not pay attention to the fact that

Grace, who is studying to get a degree in cosmetology, will not accept to marry a thief. Anada suggests, “Tied to his own dream, Booth cannot think of his lower social hierarchy or form proper human relationships in the real world” (2015). He is not aware of the fact that he has no skills except the sleight of hand. He also lives in a room which Lincoln describes as a part of the Third World. He believes that Grace is still in love with him, but she does not know. Booth thinks in spending his inheritance on a wedding ring, which symbolizes the value of establishing a family to Booth. As Grace rejected him before, Booth chooses a smaller size ring to make sure that she will not take it off again. The fact that Grace never appears on the stage poses the possibility that his story with Grace is pure fantasy. Eugene believes, “Definitely, he indulges in representations of masculinity through sexual fantasies which take him to the invention of Grace and the projection of his official union with her” (2016).

Booth asks Lincoln to leave the apartment. Lincoln responds with a quick and calm tone, “No Sweat. Ill just pack up.” Booth is irritated by his brother’s response. Since Booth is obsessed with his loved ones, he is annoyed to see his brother packing to move. Likewise, he trusts his mother to the extent that he does not open the stocking she gave him to make sure if it includes any money. He gets infuriated when Lincoln teased him that their mother deceived him and there is no money in the stocking. Doubting the existence of money in the stocking jeopardizes the meaning and value Booth assigns to the inheritance money. Although Booth’s mother and girl friend do not appear on the stage, they have a great effect on his decisions and life altogether. Any suspicious implications threatens his sense of belonging and belief in the most important characters in his life, which in turn will force him to suspect himself and his decisions.

Earlier, Booth declares that he changes his name, which signifies giving up his cultural identity. Lincoln advises him of the importance of his name as a black man in white societies. He asks, “You gonna call yrself something African? That be cool. Only pick something that’s easy to spell and pronounce, man ...no ones gonna hire you if they cant say yr name.” Lincoln asks his brother to stick to his cultural heritage; however,

he suggests that his brother should make a compromise by choosing an easy name that could be pronounced by white people. Booth names himself “3-Card” which assures his love to the game and represents his new identity. According to Booth, life is a game of gambling. However, he does not accept to lose; he wants a win or die game. He has to win at any expense, even if this includes killing his brother. Myka Tucker-Abramson asserts, “In a world where even our names – our symbolic identities—are formed through the economic, it is unsurprising that the rest of our lives and relationships are also formed and altered by class” (qtd. in Eugene 2016). Parks chooses a language that is unique in structure in order to underline the characters’ attitude toward white people’s understanding of black culture. She, “employs a language which functions as a vehicle to express her own ethnicity and attitudes towards various problems that face the black race” (Al-Khazali, 2018).

Hustling is a kind of addiction to the two brothers. Lincoln appears at the beginning of the play afraid to touch the cards. At the end of the play, he does not manage to get over his obsession. He returns to gambling and gains 500 dollars. Knowing of Booth’s obsession with the game, he conceals the news, claiming that he gains the money from solitaire. Booth already knows the truth and urges his brother to play. The play reaches its climax when they play on Booth’s inheritance from his mother. Their avidity makes Lincoln wonder if they are real brothers. He poses an existential question which disrupts Booth’s perception of life. Lincoln asks:

LINCOLN. You think we ’re really brothers?

BOOTH. Huh?

LINCOLN. I know we brothers, but is we really brothers, you know, blood brothers or not , you and me, whatduhyathink?

BOOTH. I think we’re brothers.

The question carries different connotations, which alludes to their mother’s disloyalty. Meanwhile, Booth believes that she leaves him his inheritance as a kind of bribe. He says, "She musta known I was gonna walk in on her this time cause she had my payoff—my inheritance—she

had it all ready for me. 500 dollars in a nylon stocking" (105). Although Booth knows of his mother's infidelity, he still idolizes her. The nylon stocking is a symbol of belonging, which gives Booth emotional satisfaction that he needs in order to pursue life. The inheritance could also be a symbol of African Americans' sense of cultural belonging that is usurped from them by White people. When Lincoln asks Booth to open the stocking, he does not realize that he may jeopardize his brother's faith in his mother. Al-Khazali believes, "Booth has never untied the knot that secures his inheritance which binds him to his mother. The money in the stocking in Topdog/Underdog either promises to redeem the beliefs and actions of the characters or threatens to undercut them" (2018).

When Booth gambles his inheritance, he does not expect to lose the most precious token in his life to his brother, his rival. Lincoln deceives Booth and lets him win the first two rounds in order to encourage him to play. Abid argues:

Booth loses considerably more. But the family history is also at stake because Booth's five hundred dollars expose and render vulnerable the memory of his mother, as well as his own identity based on this memory. Winning seriously in the decisive game when Booth cannot guess the winning card, Lincoln is not only challenging Booth's skill as a three-card monte player...He is challenging Booth's whole sense of self as it develops out of the familial constellation of his childhood.(2012)

The stocking symbolizes Booth's bond with his mother. He kept it as a reminder of his mother's love. therefore, it "becomes an object that both reminds Booth of abandonment and suppresses the emotional trauma of that same event" (Abid, 2012). However, the audience never knows whether the stocking has money or not.

When Booth bets his mother's inheritance, he believes he has the needed skills to beat Lincoln. Ironically, he loses the game, his inheritance, his brother and his family. Finally, he loses his temper and shoots his brother in the head. The play ends by his agonizing scream, "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" (Parks, 2002). Booth loses his

brother in a trial to gain all and lose nothing. Anada believes, "However, when he shoots his only brother, his visionary family disappears forever. Not knowing who is real and who is not, Booth loses his only family at last" (2015). When Booth shoots Lincoln, he kills whiteface Lincoln who represents white people who stole the cultural heritage from African Americans.

Some of the characters' aspirations and ambitions are related to their family values. Both brothers owe their parents a lot of their traits such as irresponsibility, disloyalty and relentless search for money. Margaret B. Wilkerson states, "Topdog/Underdog invites us to think beyond the personal drama onstage and to contemplate familial and national ties bound together through blood and beyond" (qtd. in Abid, 2012). The play deals with issues of interest to both black and white people. It play reveals/ dramatizes untold stories of black people and their experiences.

The playwright uses flashback technique to underline the effect of past events on the present. The play moves from the present to the past disrupting the chronological order of the events of the play in order to explain the influence of characters' background and past struggles on their current situation. The playwright continues to use flashback in order to explain the development of the characters' relationship overtime and reveals the reasons behind their actions. Furthermore, flashback is used before the killing scene to shed light on the two brothers' relationship with their mother. Talking about her disloyalty brings on painful feelings of rejection. This painful flashback emotionally charges the assassination scene at the end of the play.

The play presents Cain and Abel of modern times. There is a prominent power conflict between the two brothers, who exchange upper hand position during the play. Sometimes Lincoln has the upper hand as he possesses the needed skills that make him a successful gambler. In other times, Booth has control as the owner of the room and the one who holds the gun. The play underlines rival relationship between two incompatible brothers who share the same aspirations and experiences. Economic pressure breaks their family apart and forces Lincoln and

Booth to work as shoplifters. Aside from the importance of money to survive life, the characters' main objective is to lead a wealthy life. Abid believes, "Through Lincoln, Parks presents an example of a hopeless, impotent member of a capitalistic society.... A member of the working poor and unable to pull himself out of poverty" (2012). The two brothers have big dreams that surpass their actual skills. The only skill they have is sleight of hand that helps Booth in shoplifting and Lincoln in hustling. In a way or the other, the two brothers have the skills that enable them to deceive people and steal their money. As a byproduct of the society, they are not to be blamed to rise up as criminals or scoundrels. The play suggests that social care systems are the major culprit, as they neglect the poor and parentless children who belong to low social classes. Topdog/Underdog touches upon individuals' rights to lead a stable family life and to have sufficient economic resources that cover their life expenses. Individuals should be able to support themselves and their families economically through the help of social care systems.

Topdog/Underdog incites the audience to think of the social and economic circumstances. It urges the society to take the responsibility to help low classes and support minorities through enacting social care systems. Myka Tucker- Abramson states, "It is not predestination that has led to this tragedy but the confluence of economic degradation, systemic racism and definitions of masculinity" (qtd. in Abid, 2012). Parks's drama does not propose suggestions to solve the problem, it instigates resistance in order to raise social awareness of the challenges in the real world. The play asserts that human beings' behavior and self-concepts are shaped by family background which affects individuals' actions.

The title Topdog/Underdog reveals the characters' conflicted identities. It "is used as a strategic discursive device....The underlying binary of the "real or true self" and its social "referent" or external self, a dualistic frame represented in multiple disguises inside the bounds of the artificial/real universes of the characters" (Eugene, 2016). The play deal with the characters' search for a true identity, suggesting that the characters live in a world full of dichotomies; therefore, their identities are manifestations of the existing duality.

Conclusion

Topdog/Underdog reveals the futility of the American Dream. It highlights characters' dreams and aspirations to live a respectable life. It underlines the effect of economic strain on poor families, as they face unusual challenges. It dramatizes untold stories of black people and their experiences, drawing attention to social and economic circumstances. It shows a competitive relationship between two brothers which owes a lot to the mythic old tale of Cain and Abel. The two brothers' fatal confrontation highlights a rivalry relationship that is nourished by social conditions. The play investigates black families' problems and social challenges. It puts into focus the effect of the past on the present. It calls for social care systems to do their role and to consider the challenges that face marginalized groups/families in society.

Multicultural theater appears as a way to include the experiences of people from different races, ethnicities and colors. It sheds light on different issues that are of interest to larger groups who need to be represented on stage. Thus, it supports cultural diversity. Likewise, Parks's theater represents multicultural issues that face modern families in general. It propagates the experience of minority groups and encourages social solidarity. It makes it easier to discuss issues related to race, gender, class and color, raising audience awareness regarding discrimination and inequality. However, it needs more time to change public attitude toward controversial issues.

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