

Double Victimization for Black Woman in Susan Lori Parks's *In the Blood*

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Abstract:

Susan Lori Parks, although young, is one of America's most prolific and distinguished playwrights. She has produced remarkable plays, screenplays, books, and essays.

*Parks's *In the Blood* presents the problem of social oppression of the people in poverty, especially black women. All the characters in the play have taken an advantage of Hester, the protagonist, and let her down when she is in need to feed her children and seek a secure shelter for them.*

Parks presents a clear picture of a victimized black woman. She emphasizes the social ills of hypocrisy, violence, discrimination,

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and sexual harassment. She calls for a reform of social organizations to take care of all people regardless of their color. She criticizes her society because Hester is oppressed by both the whites as well as the blacks. The problem is not of color; rather it is with who is responsible for Hester's dilemma. She is a homeless welfare black woman who works hard day and night in order to find a shelter for her children in a society devoid of mercy for the poor. Despite being belittled by the social forces, still she keeps a powerful spirit that enables her to work hard in order to satisfy her children's needs.

*This paper deals with Susan Lori Parks who is the first American black playwright who won the Pulitzer Prize. She is the first Afro-American woman to achieve this honor for her writing on issues of African American women. Her play, *In The Blood*, in which she adopts Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* with a new perspective, deals with the big problem in the American society, i.e., the social victimization of the black women. Just as Hawthorne uses a white female Hester Prynne to criticize the hypocrisy of 19th century puritanical society, which was the mainstream at that time, Parks contrives the black Hester to satirize contemporary American mainstream culture in her play *In The Blood*. The paper consists of an abstract, an introduction, and two sections: the first deals with a general view of the play, while the second tackles the social forces and how they treat Hester, and the paper ends with a conclusion that shows the findings of the research.*

Key words: victimization, black woman, Susan Lori Parks, *In the Blood*

I. INTRODUCTION: SUZAN-LORI PARKS: STYLE, LANGUAGE, AND CHARACTERS

Suzan-Lori Parks, born on May 10th, 1963 in Fort Knox, Kentucky, U.S. ,is an American playwright who was the first Afro-American woman who won the Pulitzer Prize for drama for her *Topdog/Underdog* in 2002. Parks, who was writing stories at age of five, had a wondering childhood as the daughter of a military officer. She attended Mount Holyoke College, South

Hadley, Massachusetts (1985), where James Baldwin, who taught a writing class there, encouraged her to try playwriting.³ Parks has been influenced by him a lot as she answered a question about the person who influenced her in an interview: "Well, James Baldwin is one because he told me that I should try writing theater. He told me to go down that road."⁴ Baldwin called Parks "an utterly astounding and beautiful creature who may become one of the most valuable artists of our time."⁵ Scholar Philip C. Kolin said that, "Parks may be the most prolific and diverse playwright America has ever produced."⁶ Mel Gussow of the *New York Times* called Parks as "the year's most promising playwright."⁷

Although Parks is a unique American black playwright for her style, but she has been influenced by key modernist writers like James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Gertrude Stain. Parks refers to her affinity to modernist writers by saying:

I'm fascinated with what they are allowed to do, I guess. What Joyce was allowed to do or what Joyce allowed himself to do, what Beckett allowed himself to do, what Faulkner allowed himself to do, Woolf... What they got away with... Doin' "diddly-did-did the drop" comes out of that tradition of doing whatever you want (laughter) and saying: "Here it is! You Mr. and Ms. Critic, you guys go away and think about it and exercise your brains and come up with something thrilling!"⁸

³"Susan Lori-Parks. American Playwright" <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Suzan-Lori-Park>. Retrieved Feb. 17th, 2016.

⁴ Shelby Jiggets. "Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks." *Callaloo*. Volume 19, Number: 2 (Spring 1996), pp. 309-317.

⁵"The Power and Audacity of Spoken Black English" <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/par1bio-1>. Retrieved Feb. 19th, 2016.

⁶ "'A' is for Abject: The Red Letter Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Volume 26, Number 2, Spring 2012, pp. 31-56.

⁷ Shawn-Marie Garrett, "The Possession of Suzan-Lori Parks." By *Theatre Communications Group, Inc.* 2006 <https://www.tcg.org/publications/at/2000/parks.cfm>. Retrieved Feb. 20th, 2016.

⁸ Steven Drukman, "Suzan-Lori Parks and Liz Diamond." *The Drama Review* 39:3 Fall 1995, p. 72.

There are also two other African-American writers who influenced Parks: Adrienne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange who started publishing respectively thirty and twenty years before Parks.⁹ It was only in 1994 Parks and Kennedy first met, but Parks always had a great admiration for her as she claims that Kennedy's work "inspired her to take weird riffs and shifts of character."¹⁰

Parks owned an early desire for writing, but it did not take her first steps until her college years. She graduated with a B.A. (cum laude) from Mount Holyoke College in 1985. She had two early efforts that failed, but her third play, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, won an Obie Award, 1989, for best new off-Broadway play. She continued writing at a feverish pace and won another Obie in 1996 for *Venus*, based on the legend of "Hottentot Venus." Parks has been described as a "black Samuel Beckett."¹¹

Parks is one of the most highly acclaimed Afro-American woman playwrights in contemporary theater for being innovative and occasionally controversial. She, along with other Afro-American playwrights, has a great impact on American literature and culture. Her managing of space and time in her postmodern plays has continued what had become typical of mainstream Broadway Theater, i.e., the use of realistic characters and time restricted situations. As projects of revision, her plays give voice to absence and question and revise presence. The space between history and the contemporary moment is removed, and history is rewritten, this time to include African Americans voices in particular, which history has traditionally ignored.¹² In her essay "Elements of Style,"

⁹ Alisa Solomon, "Signifying on the Signifyin': The Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks." *Theater* 21.3 (1990), p.75.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Anthony D. Hill and Douglas Q. Barnett, *The A to Z of African American Theater*, (Lanham, The Scarecrow P, Inc., 2009, p.386-7.

¹² Dana A. Williams, "Contemporary African American women writers." *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*. Edited by Angelyn Mitchell and Danille Ktaylor, (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), p. 83.

Parks explains her personal concept for developing plays for the stage. In this essay, she refers to her “characters” as “figures which take up residence inside me, figures that do not fit inside the more traditional forms or “the naturalism of, say, Lorraine Hansberry.”¹³

Concerning her style, she writes, as “a playwright, I try to do many things: explore the form, ask questions, make a good show, tell a good story, ask more questions, take nothing for granted.”¹⁴ She bases her new form on repetition and revision. Her characters engrave the very stereotypes they are designed to critique on a larger scale. In *In the Blood* (2000), she draws upon Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne* to give voice to these overwhelmed literary heroines, her black female character, Hester La Negrita, is homeless and has five children by different fathers, thus engraving the loose black woman and the black welfare woman stereotypes.¹⁵

The first plays of Parks are called “the history plays” in which the playwright renews historical events to fill a gap in history caused by the exclusion of any Afro-American presence. Parks explains why history matters to her the way it does through an interview with Jiggets:

I think because if you looked back into the past or looked up onto a screen, a film screen, or looked in a show, or looked on the shelf in the library, you don’t see enough of you. Or even if you do see enough of you, I do think you have the right to put some of you up there by any means necessary. ... I think it is just as valid as what we are told happened back then.¹⁶

Parks is much-admired for her attempts to fill in the gaps of Afro-American memory and history, and for her refusal to depend on the Eurocentric history that has been dominant for

¹³ Suzan-Lori Parks, “Elements of Style.” *The America Play and Other Works*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), P. 9.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Dana A. Williams, P.83.

¹⁶ Quoted in Jiggets, p. 317.

centuries. Parks claims, "Through each line of text I'm rewriting the Time Line--creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined."¹⁷ In her article "Possession," she states that her concern is about American history as is known today. She says,

A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature. Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to "make" history --that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to -- through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life --locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.¹⁸

Through *In The Blood*, she shows the theocratic society, the Puritans as well as contemporary society to contain and devaluate "otherness". As Hawthorn's Hester is marked with a scarlet letter A and designated as an outcast, Parks's Hester is shunned and marked by her race, class, and gender.¹⁹ Shawn-Marie Garrett in her essay "The Possession of Suzan-Lori Parks" denotes Parks's black experience by writing:

Parks has dramatized some of the most painful aspects of the black experience Yet even as her plays summon up the brutality of the past, they do so in a manner that is, paradoxically, both horrific and comic--irresistibly or disrespectfully so, depending on your point of view. Parks's opening question and answer provide a ringing tribute to the nature of what is to follow.²⁰

¹⁷ Suzan-Lori Parks, "Possession," *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), p. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, P. 4.

¹⁹ Deborah R. Geis, Susan Lori Parks, (USA, The University of Michigan Press, 2011), p.128.

²⁰ Garrett.

Her innovative use of language and staging is praised by audiences and reviewers alike. Garrett says that Parks “has already indisputably altered the landscape of American drama and enriched the vocabulary of contemporary playwriting and theatre practice.”²¹ According to Liz Diamond, who has directed most of Parks’s plays in close connection with Parks, her plays contain two stories, reminiscent of jazz, suggesting that her plays be read as musical scores.²² Furthermore, Parks explains the “rep” and “rev” strategy used in her work, the repetition and revision of history that can be seen in some of her plays, where characters and historical events happen first as tragedy, second as farce, and then as theater of the absurd. This “rep” and “rev” strategy, Parks states, “keeps the spectator/reader ever-vigilant, looking for something missed in the last repetition while scrutinizing the upcoming revision.” Her plays depict the world as a complex and multidimensional place.²³ Her aim behind using the method of Rep & Rev is “overcoming fixity, or stereotyping, through the returns of memory.”²⁴

Parks’s style, unlike any other playwright, draws upon the aesthetic of a technique called the “spell” which presents a challenge to the audience. She uses language indicative of Afro-American dialects and vernacular to give multiple meanings to the spoken word and expose the veiled message behind the dialogue of her characters. She often depicts and exaggerates black stereotypes and their search for identity to draw attention to their invalidity and the ignorance upon which they are based.²⁵

Parks writes in a nontraditional style where she uses dialectal spelling to show the low environment of the people of

²¹ Ibid.

²² Williams, p. 83.

²³ Ibid, p. 205.

²⁴ Jeanette Malkin, “Suzan-Lori Parks and the Empty (W)hole of Memory.” In *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.), p. 158.

²⁵ Geis, p.2.

whom she speaks. David Krasner claims that, "Hester uses language symbolizing her life beneath, below, and beyond the gaze of society."²⁶ She removes certain types of punctuation in her plays with using silences and dramatic pauses to substitute the conventional punctuation by repeating character names for emphasis and putting parenthesis around things she thinks are necessary for the play progress. In addition, she uses a very distinguished stylistic feature of naming her characters with words that bear meaning of the traits of each character, and using a series of a soliloquy-like "confessions" that work as divisions of her work to introduce the inner thoughts of the characters other than the protagonist through monologues and songs.²⁷

Parks refuses to be considered an African-American writer concerned only with the Black culture because she deals with the issue of giving rights to people regardless of their race and color. She says, "Our life is about that. My life is not about race. It's about being alive. . . Why does everyone think that white artists make art and black artists make statements?"²⁸ She states that she gets ill when people use her African Americanness to talk about her plays. The plays go beyond subject matter, the characters, and beyond the plot, to a kind of world view that is made up of a cultural history.²⁹ Although African-American characters, like Hester La Negrita in *In The Blood*, are oppressed by the white mainstream, the oppressors are not necessarily white Americans. Sometimes, African Americans are victimized and mistreated by their own race. In addition, the victims are not necessarily all African Americans,

²⁶ Quoted in Istebraq Talib Joody, "Racial Discrimination in Selected Plays by Afro-American Female Playwrights A Gender-Based Study", Unpublished Thesis. University of Baghdad, 2015.

²⁷ J. T. Peterson & S. Bennett. (1997). *Women Playwrights of Diversity: A Biographical Sourcebook*. (Westport CT: Greenwood Press CT.), p. 271.

²⁸ Solomon, p. 73.

²⁹ Ashraf A Hadia, "Parks' In The Blood: An Image of a Black Woman Who Is More Sinned against than Sinning". *English Language and Literature Studies*, Vol.2, No.2; June 2011.)

the whites are also oppressed. For example, Hester is sexually oppressed by Reverend D. and The Welfare Lady, who are African Americans, as well as by The Doctor and Amiga Gringa, who are white in the same play.³⁰

II. THE WORLD WHERE NOBODY CARES FOR THE POOR

Parks wrote *In The Blood* in 1999, one of two plays known collectively as *The Red Letter Plays: In The Blood* and *Fucking A*, after borrowing many aspects from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. She wanted to create a play based on that novel. Originally, she wanted to call the play *Fucking A*, but she scrapped the idea. Later, she wrote the story based on the main character of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester, and turned the story into more modern era and changed the title into *In The Blood*.³¹ Y. N. Park assures the fact that "Parks's dramatic strategy of rewriting Hawthorne's Hester and her suffering can be accepted as a subversive critique against contemporary American society."³²

By replacing the white character with a black one, Parks succeeds in criticizing American society. The character of Hester presents the image of all the African-American women who suffer from the social system, where they face financial and sexual oppressions. Moreover, Parks works on gathering "characters and stories that revel in the fact that identities and places are highly mobile and integrated. She creates works that inhabit the margins."³³

³⁰ Wendy Wasserstein and Tony Kushner, "The Melting Pot Where Nothing Melted. The Politics of Subjectivity in the Plays of Susan Lori Parks." (Indiana University of Pennsylvania August 2008), p. 67.

³¹ "Steven Barclay Agency." (2008) Petaluma, California. <http://www.barclayagency.com/parks.html> Retrieved Jan. 31st, 2016.

³² Quoted in Hadia.

³³ H. J. Elam, & D. Krasner, (Eds.). *African-American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 233.

In The Blood consists of nine scenes, and is of a linear plot style. It tells the story about an impoverished mother, Hester, and her five fatherless illegitimate children, with names like Jabber (13-year-old boy), Bully (12-year-old girl), Trouble (10-year-old boy), Beauty (7-year-old girl) and Baby (2-year-old boy), remind Hester of both her mistake and of the joy of having them as her "treasures,"³⁴ trying to find help to make her children's lives successful. Living in poverty and having the reputation as a "slut" (1, 1) on her, her children and her future begin to grow blurred. Bad boys have written the word "slut" on the wall in a place that Hester calls her "practice place." (1, 8) Hester claims, as home for herself and her children, the underside of a bridge, a place isolated from civilized world. She seizes the opportunity to receive help from her children's fathers, with hopes that one may help them. Help seems near when Chili, the father of her first "treasure," Jabber, appears and offers rescue. When he knows about her four other children, he withdraws, never to come back. Hester was involved with other characters that owe her money. She is person who is ready to give herself to others when they are in need, but, in return, she only receives little money. She attempts to work hard and make profit. Hester is abandoned and ill-treated by society and her lovers, and the play ends in tragedy. Though Hester tries her best to help her children, she murders her old son, Jabber, who was a sweet youth, but has become a violent and brutal man, and she ends up in jail.

The meaning of the title "*In The Blood*" is that Hester's own state of mind on how the adulterer, poor, and reckless person is in her blood.³⁵ The idea of the hand of fate is symbolized by the eclipse, giving some implications that

³⁴ Susan Lori Parks. (2003). *In The Blood*. (New York: New York Shakespeare Festival). All subsequent references to this play are cited parenthetically within the text by scene and page numbers. (1, 9)

³⁵ Margo Jefferson.; 'The Scarlet Letter,' Alive And Bitter in the Inner City." *NY TIMES THEATER REVIEW* .<http://www.charlavnewoodard.com/reviews/blood.html>. Retrieved 23rd, Feb. 2016.

Hester's fate is unpreventable and she will live with the stigma she has in her blood.³⁶

Hester is mocked by people because she is sexually promiscuous. She does not have "A PENNY TO HER NAME." (9, 69) This lack of economic status makes Hester an alienated person in this dominant culture. Zygmund Bauman says, "Whereas mockers are economically privileged "tourists," Hester is the "vagabond," who represents the socio-economically impoverished underclass."³⁷ As the play proceeds, it is revealed that every person who mocks Hester as a slut is in fact involved with and responsible for her sexual promiscuity. They make it clear, through their confessions, that "each of them has literally screwed Hester by profiting from their sexual exploitation of her."³⁸

These people sexually take advantage of Hester by using their superior socio-economic status. Wendy Weinert suggests that "everyone who is economically better off than Hester takes advantage of her."³⁹ It is obvious from this point of view; they are all responsible for Hester's promiscuity and her social rejection. Therefore, they do not have the moral authority to accuse Hester of being immoral. Rather, their irresponsible sexual exploitation has aggravated Hester's economic poverty and suffering.⁴⁰ Hester herself refers to the fact that instead of helping her and her children, the social helping agencies are interfering in her life through their representative who systematically exploits her. She says, "The shelter hassles me. Always prying in my business. Stealing my shit. Touching my kids."(4, 32)

³⁶ Carol Schafer. " Staging a New Literary History:Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus, In the Blood, and Fucking A.*" *Comparative Drama*. Vol. 42, No.2, Summer 2008.

³⁷ Wasserstein, p.72.

³⁸ Deborah R. Geis. , "Hawthorne's Hester as a Red-Lettered Black Woman?: Suzan-Lori Parks's *In the Blood and Fucking A.*" *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 16.2, 2004 ,p.81.

³⁹Wasserstein p. 73.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Parks shows her own vision of modern American black women who face tension and restriction as single black women within a modern society. Illiteracy and unemployment have marginalized and impoverished large numbers of young black women which are behind forcing the Hester to resort to violent acts of destroying herself and her own family. Hester herself is responsible, to some extent, for her own catastrophe and her social exclusion. She is persecuted and manipulated by forces she cannot control. Nevertheless, she still has a will to survive as well as a hope to keep her life going on.⁴¹

Through Hester's ignorance and illiteracy, Parks wants to emphasize the fact that illiteracy has been used as a powerful means of oppression for many underclass people, especially for African American women. In fact, at one time in America, the teaching of reading and writing to African Americans was considered a criminal offense.⁴² Hester wants to learn the alphabet in an attempt to overcome the oppression. That is why Hester asks her old son, Jabber, about the meaning of the word "slut" (1, 1) written in graffiti on the wall under the bridge where they live. She asks him whether it is a good word or a bad one. She says, "Zit uh good word or a bad word?" (1, 1) In the beginning, Jabber refuses to answer, but at the end of the play when Jabber sees his mother being insulted by Reverend D., who calls her a 'slut', he finally tells what he knows leading to the critical moment of the play in which she beats him to death.⁴³ Parks makes her heroine know to write the letter A only as it becomes a kind of bodily marking, as we see when Jabber reminds her of its shape: "Legs apart hands crost the chest like I showed you." (1, 8)

As it is seen in her fairy tale, Hester does not think of herself as a proverbial slut as the people around her see and judge her; rather, she considers herself as the Princess of her

⁴¹.Hadia.

⁴² Solomon, pp.75-6.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p.134.

own land. That is why she sacrifices her dearest son whom she calls her 'treasure' for the sake of her dignity. Arthur Miller, a modern American playwright, argues in his famous essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" that common people can be tragic heroes in modern times if they can sacrifice their lives for individual human dignity:

As a general rule, to which there may be exceptions unknown to me, I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his "rightful" position in his society.⁴⁴

The only thing that Hester, her children, and society agree upon is of her being a "mommie"(1, 8) and at this she surpasses, not only in her fertility but also in her ferocious protection of her children. She starves herself so that they can eat; she spends sleepless nights in her attempts to provide for her "treasures." Like Hawthorne's Hester Prynne and Euripides' Medea, she is a model for motherhood.⁴⁵ There's some kind of sweetness in Hester's house because of her feeling of strong motherhood towards her children. Her children are portrayed as sitting around her as she ladles out a dinner of soup; she is trying so hard to keep them together as a family. Deborah Gies comments on Hester's character by suggesting that "Hester has a gifted imagination" seen especially when "she helps the children to enjoy the meager soup that she feeds them for dinner by telling them that it has everything they love in it."⁴⁶ After that, when Hester makes up a fairy tale in which a princess makes her new law which enable her to get married to

⁴⁴ Arthur Miller. "Tragedy and the Common Man." *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*. Ed. Robert A. Martin. (New York: The Viking, 1978.) P.4.

⁴⁵ Schafer.

⁴⁶ Gies, Hawthorne's Hester as a Red-Lettered Black Woman?: Suzan-Lori Parks's *In The Blood and Fucking A.*, p. 83.

all the five men who court her, audience realize that those folk tales they love so would be narratives of misery and woe if poor and powerless storytellers hadn't invented supernatural forces to save the day.⁴⁷

The stereotype of the "black mother" is clearly portrayed in this play. She is the figure who is always shown historically in literature as someone who, "at all costs, nurtures, protects, self-sacrifices" and cares for her children. In contrast to the mainstream culture that stigmatizes Afro-American woman as mindless, crude and expendable.⁴⁸ As a mother, Hester has a deep love for her children despite the fact that the chorus calls them 'BASTARDS.' (9, 69) She calls them her treasures because they give meaning for her life. Verna A. Foster states that "this 'mother love is soured and corrupted by societal evil' leading to a horrible act of bloodshed by the end."⁴⁹ She could not become a mother without errors. Her status as a social outcast partly results from the fact that, according to the chorus, 'SHE OUGHTA BE MARRIED,' (9, 69) but she is not. It is her fault not to marry and live a normal life. She could not differentiate between love and love making.

III. THE HELPLESS AGENCIES

- **The Welfare Lady: "We are at the end of our rope with you"**

Hester tries to sew in order to afford for her children a good life, but it seems that she has difficulties even in threading a needle; her struggle in sustaining herself and her children involves regular interviews with different characters. One of whom is named Welfare Lady, an African American woman, who represents the Welfare system in society and who performs acts of oppression upon Hester, asking Hester through their

⁴⁷ Jefferson.

⁴⁸ Philip C. Kollin (ed.) *Suzan- Lori Parks: Essay on the Plays and Other Works*, (New York: McFarland & Company, Luc publisher,2010), p.11.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Hadia..

interview whether her hands are clean or not and makes her wash them again. When Welfare hands her the cloth to be sewn, she warns her, "Make sure you don't get it dirty." (4, 34) Hester views the fabric as an opportunity toward a new and better life, and she speaks a monologue in which she pictures the cloth: "Let's see what we making. Ooooooh. Uh evening dress. Go to a party in. Drink champagne and shit." (4,38) Welfare, although she classifies herself as "a black woman too just like you," (4, 35) is another picture of Hawthorne's Puritan society that claims to take care of Hester Prynne yet keeps her in her place.⁵⁰ When she offers Hester the sewing job, she gives her the fabric without teaching her how to sew it. She does it not for the sake of offering a real honest help, but to do her job only. She never lets Hester speak; she just obliges her to do the work⁵¹: "WELFARE: Needles, thread and the pattern, in this bag. Take the cloth. Sew it. If you do a good job therell be more work. Have it sewn by tomorrow morning, yll get a bonus." (4, 35)

Welfare blames Hester for not appreciating what she is given. She is blaming the victim whom she and her own society have made. She says, addressing Hester:

We at Welfare are at the end of our rope with you. We put you in a job and you quit. We put you in a shelter and you walk. We put you in a school and you drop out. Yr children are also truant. Word is they steal. Stealing is a gateway crime, Hester. Perhaps your young daughter is pregnant. Who knows. We build bridges you burn them. We sew safety nets, rub harder, good strong safety nets and you slip through the weave. (4, 32)

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 129.

⁵¹ Tamika Keene, "Theory, Praxis And Transformation: The Dramatic Writing of Suzan Lori Parks as Liberatory Critical Pedagogy." Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Louisville ,2012. p.63.

Welfare begins her words with a rope and ends with a net as if Hester were an animal to be trapped. This is the attitude of the society towards the unmarried black welfare mothers.⁵²

Parks wants to show that Welfare Lady is another symbol of institutionalized social help for the poor like Hester, but she is not helpful at all. Hester's labor and sexuality is exploited for herself. This is obvious through her confession that she invited Hester to her home for a cup of tea and had a threesome with her husband for "a little spice." (4, 36) She takes a massage service from Hester and gives her just one dollar as payment for her service. When Hester asks for some more, she makes Hester speechless by asking her if she can change a 50\$ bill.⁵³ Welfare does, however, offer Hester a way to secure financial assistance asking her to name the deadbeat fathers of her treasures, and thus giving the government an opportunity to access their salaries and gain income for both herself and her children. Hester is unwilling to take this step, mainly because she does not wish to bring harm to Chilli, her soul mate, her first and only love, who is the father of her eldest child, Jabber.⁵⁴

The problem with the Welfare Lady is that she is only interested in showing off. She makes Hester feel worse by accusing her daughter of making adultery a generational sin. There is no doubt that this kind of accusation creates a kind of a frustrated and a desperate spirit inside Hester's character. It becomes clear that Welfare lady treats Hester very cruelly and Hester cannot resist her aggression for she expects to receive help from her.⁵⁵

HESTER: I want my leg up is all/ WELFARE: You wont get something for nothing./ HESTER: I been good/.WELFARE: 5 bastards is not good. 5 bastards is bad./ HESTER: Don't make me hurt you!/ (HESTER raises her club to strike WELFARE)/

⁵² Ibid, p. 130.

⁵³ Wasserstein, p.76.

⁵⁴ Keene, p.63.

⁵⁵ Hadia.

WELFARE: You hurt me and, kids or no kids, I'll have you locked up. We'll take yr kids away and yll never see them again./ HESTER: My lifes my own fault. I know that. But the world dont help, Maam./ WELFARE: The world is not here to help us, Hester. The world is simply here. We must help ourselves. (4, 34)

Welfare Lady makes the socio-economic class issue clear in her dialogue with Hester. She asks Hester to get a hysterectomy; she emphasizes through her speech that Hester is an impoverished underclass woman and does not represent the ideal living that she cannot achieve. She says: "a balanced diet, three meals a day, strict adherence to the food pyramid, money in pocket, clothes on my back, teeth in my mouth, womanly parts where they should be, hair on my head, husband in my bed." (4, 33) She refers to the factors that divide the Welfare and the struggler Hester. These are the privileges that only high-class people achieve and enjoy in this capitalist society; and Hester is supposed to be deprived from them since she is part of the marginalized underclass.⁵⁶ She is supposed to Help Hester, but in fact she makes her feel the class distinction more clearly and increases Hester's alienation as an outcast. This is clear in her confession: "I walk the line/ between us and them/ between our kind and their kind. / The balance of the system depends on a well-drawn boundary line/ and all parties respecting that boundary." (4, 36) This means that there are two groups of people, the privileged and the underclass and Welfare desires to emphasize the fact that Hester belongs to the last group. The privileged people feel that the poor may cause them a feeling of uneasiness the poor can be "a threat and an obstacle to order"⁵⁷ in society.

⁵⁶ Wasserstein, p.77.

⁵⁷ Zygmund Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), p. 109.

- **The Mainstream: “Results! Solutions! That’s what they want”**

The mainstream feels the danger of the poor and they want a remedy for this problem. They want to remove such poor people from society. The underclass is considered the enemy of society by the mainstream since they can cause latent social insecurity. That is why The Higher Ups asks Welfare Lady and Doctor to perform a hysterectomy on Hester. They, as The Doctor says, want “results! Solutions! Solutions! Solutions! That’s what they want” (2, 23). The surgery involves the removal of Hester’s uterus from her body, which symbolically includes the destruction of her body and self. This affects Hester’s independent subjectivity in life. From Parks’s point of view, the reason behind this is that Hester’s relationship with others of the privileged social class is oppressive and exclusive, rather than cooperative and coexistent. Parks sees the divisive social class distinction as the basis for an oppressing human alienation not only between people but also between social classes in American society.⁵⁸

Parks uses a dramatic tactic of double casting to show that Hester’s society is responsible for her oppression. Her children are the outcome of the seeds her oppressors planted in the past. Therefore, her society is responsible for her suffering despite hypocritically denying the possibility of being like Hester by saying, “THAT EVER HAPPEN TO ME YOU WOULDNT SEE ME HAVING IT / YOU WOULDNT SEE THAT HAPPENING TO ME” (9, 68), but in fact, it is not true. She attacks the contemporary American society for their hypocrisy just as Hawthorn did with the Puritans in *The Scarlet Letter*. Despite being involved in Hester’s sexual life as partners, they criticize her, mock her, and judge her, writing the word “slut” (1, 7) on the wall of her home. Their hidden deeds are more blameworthy and disgusting than Hester’s

⁵⁸ Wasserstein, p.79.

because they take advantage of a poor woman's helpless situation merely to please their greedy instincts.⁵⁹

Parks ends her play with an epilogue. The epilogue the characters form presents a chorus indicating the society which rejects Hester. This chorus mocks Hester at the end as being an illiterate woman who cannot read or write. In addition, they all refer to her as a slut, a hussy, and a burden to society:

(All circle Hester as they speak.) ALL: LOOK AT HER! /WHO DOES SHE THINK SHE IS/ THE ANIMAL. NO SKILLS. CEPT ONE. CANT READ. CANT WRITE/ SHE MARRIED? WHAT DO YOU THINK? SHE OUGHTA BE MARRIED. SHE AINT MARRIED/ THAT'S WHY THINGS ARE BAD LIKE. THEY ARE CAUSE OF GIRLS LIKE THAT. THAT EVER HAPPEN TO ME YOU /WOULDNT SEE ME DOING THAT YOU WOULDNT SEE THAT HAPPEN- ING TO ME. WHO THE HELL SHE THINK SHE IS AND NOW SHES GOT TO PAY FOR IT. (9, 68)

In this epilogue, Parks sets the tone for the play, a severe attack on the political, medical, capitalistic, and religious systems that define the American ideal. Besides all the action of the play occurs out-of- doors, because Hester is never allowed inside literally or symbolically, and that indicates the unity of place. Parks designates the place for the play as "Here" and the time as "Now" (1, 5) which refers to the poverty of the whole atmosphere of Hester's life. Hester is victimized by her race, gender, her naïveté, intense longing to be a good mother, and economic status.⁶⁰

- **The Doctor: "Times Are Tough: What can We Do?"**

Throughout the play, Hester is suffering from severe stomach pains as a result of not eating regular meals. Her children eat very little as well. They often ask their mother about their

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 74.

⁶⁰ Tyrone Williams, *Masterplots II: African American Literature*, Revised Edition, (New Jersey: Salem Press, 2009), p.799.

fathers, but none of them pays child support nor helps Hester and her family in any way. Some of the fathers curse Hester even while they continue having sexual relationships with her. They use their power to control her without feeling any shame or mercy towards her.⁶¹ That is why she ought to see a doctor, but the Doctor who personifies the health agency perceives her as less than human. He is supposed to hold a humane job, should take care of his patients, and looks after them; but here he plays a very different role with Hester. He joins forces with Amiga Gringa in treating Hester in an inhuman manner by examining her in the street, like a mechanic, and looking up into "her privates". The Doctor claims that the "Higher Up"— the federal Medicare system- is pressuring him to 'spay' her to end her fertility. (2, 24)

The Doctor wants to remove her womanly parts in order to prevent her from begetting more children. He exploits Hester sexually and manipulates her body to satisfy his desires. In so doing, he contributes to subverting her womanhood, motherhood, and humanism just to keep his own position high.⁶² The Doctor represents the capitalistic powers who want to utilize the black nation, represented by Hester. Thus, Parks gives her play another political and social dimension by creating the character of the Doctor.

- **Amiga Gringa: “They Don’t Call it Capitalism for Nothing”**

Hester's best friend, Amiga Gringa, is an entrepreneur in a capitalist economic system; she has sold her own children, “the fruit of [her] white womb” (5, 43) for profit without feeling guilty, and schemes to convince Hester to participate in the production of obscenity.⁶³ She says,

⁶¹.Hadia.

⁶² Debby Thompson, "Digging the Fo'-fathers: Suzan-Lori Parks's Histories," in *Contemporary African American Women Playwrights: A 113 Casebook*, Ed. Philip C. Kolin (New York:Taylor& Francis e-Library, 2007), p.181.

⁶³ Jefferson.

I had me some delicious schemes/ To get her out of that hole she calls home./ Im doing well for myself/ Do you have any idea how much cash I'll get for the fruit of my white womb?!/ Grow it./ Birth it./ Sell it./ And why shouldn't I?/ (Rest)/ Ah, what do you expect in a society based on Capitalizm.(5, 43)

She regrets the money they could have made together as Chocolate and Vanilla: "We coulda done a sex show behind a curtain/Then make a movie and sell it/for 3 bucks a peek."(5, 43) She tries to exploit Hester by convincing her to follow the same way she does, i. e., to use her body to get money. Although she is so poor, Amiga refuses to work and criticizes sewing as a good profession, implying that it is beneath her. After refusing Hester's offer to find her sewing work, she explains, "That's not for me. If I work Hester, I would want to be paid a living wage. You have agreed to work for less than a living wage. May as well be a slave. Or an animal." (5, 40) She calls that kind of work a "Chump work" (5, 40) that leads to nothing and enslaves the worker.⁶⁴ She takes the fabric given to Hester by the Welfare Lady to sell it in the open market in order to offer help, but she is actually trying to steal it as she did before with the money she got from selling Hester's watch without returning all the money back. She is a real cheater who exploits the poor Hester to the end. Instead of helping Hester, she makes things harder and dimmer for her.⁶⁵

Parks presents the character of Amiga as a person who pretends to help Hester, but in fact she herself victimizes her. Amiga is a victim to the society and at the same time she is a convict because she claims that she can help Hester but in fact she cannot help herself and that is why she steals food and money from Hester.⁶⁶ Jennifer Larson stats that Parks

⁶⁴ Hadia.

⁶⁵ Joody.

⁶⁶ V. A. Foster. "Nurturing and Murderous Mothers in Suzan-Lori Parks's *In The Blood and Fucking A*". *American Drama*, 16(1), 2007, p. 83.

introduces the character of Amiga to "reinforce the growing modern separation between black and white women."⁶⁷

- **Chilli: "I've Been Looking for You"**

Chilli, who is the father of Hester's oldest son and whom she loves a lot, comes back after changing his name not to be found by the Welfare. He did so to avoid any responsibility towards Hester and his own son, Jabber. He tells her that he has been searching for her in order to get married, but in fact he is a double-faced person. The moments of meeting Chilli reflect how much naïve and simple Hester is, she wears the wedding dress offered by Chilli over her old clothes and gets out new special shoes to wear as if she has been preparing all her life for that moment. But, in a tragic moment, all her dreams to be a good woman collapse once Chilli discovers that she is not the woman he imagines to be. Ironically, he rejects her for the same qualities that he once admired in her, i.e., passion and love making. Indeed, Chilli imagines Hester as a Virgin Mary figure and her son like Jesus. Chilli takes back his proposal of marriage as soon as he meets all her other children.⁶⁸ He explains:

CHILLI: Im—. I'm thinking this through. I'm thinking this all the way through. And I think—I think—./ (Rest.)/ (Rest.)/ "I carried around this picture of you. Sad and lonely with our child on yr hip. Struggling to make do. Struggling against all odds. And triumphant. Triumphant against everything. Like—hell, like Jesus and Mary. And if they coulddo it so could my Hester. My dear Hester. Or so I thought."/ (Rest) But I dont think so./ (He takes her ring and her veil. He takes her dress. He packs up his basket.) (7, 60)

- **Reverend D.: "I Want My Poor Looking Good"**

Hester is wrong to think that she can get love through being used by those who are in power. In fact, every one of them has

⁶⁷ Larson, p. 97.

⁶⁸ Hadia.

used her for sex and they try or pretend they try to help her, especially the priest, Reverend D., who represents the religious institution and who is the father of Hester's last child "Baby". He also participates in oppressing Hester when he promises to give money if she keeps quiet, but he is a big hypocrite. He treats Hester as a mere source for his sexual satisfaction regardless of giving her any kind of emotional or financial support. He acts cowardly as if he has nothing to do to take responsibility towards the child. Parks, in a very famous confrontation between Hester and Reverend D., presents a very effective satire directed to the hypocrite church. When Hester asks Reverend D. how to confront a father, who does not pay any kind of support for his child, he tells her to go and tell him to take his child and help her. As soon as he knows that he is the father of that child, he rejects her cruelly by calling her a "slut". When Hester asks him to help her with money for his baby, he refuses even to acknowledge neither her nor her youngest child as his own baby. Although he preaches about charity and social uplift of the poor, he humiliates and threatens to "crush" her "underfoot" as well:⁶⁹

REVEREND D.: "Slut./ (Rest)/ Dont ever come back here again! Ever! Yll never get nothing from me! Common Slut. Tell on me! Go on! Tell the world! I'll crush you underfoot." (8, 64)

He is more troubled with building his church, the religious institution, than he is with his duty toward Hester and their illegitimate child.⁷⁰ He asks Hester to be out of his face so he can get on with his new ministry. Like the social worker, he uses his social empowerment destructively. He says that "Suffering is an enormous turn on../ She had four kids and came to me asking me what to do/ She had a look in her eyes that invites liasons/Eyes that say red spandex."(6, 48) The irony

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Schafer.

of this situation is that he is a priest, but he is devoid of ethics. He, like other influential figures in Hester's life, marginalize, oppress and forsake Hester and her children. Thus, he is as liable as them in aggravating her plight that leads to her tragic fate. His treatment of Hester does not only mark the systems of race, class or gender as inherent issues, his character functions more as an institution or a system, similar to Capitalism, which promises a reward, but often fails to deliver.⁷¹

The confrontation between Hester and Reverend D. takes place when the children sleep. Hester approaches Reverend D. a final time to ask for love and support, but he calls Hester a "Slut." (8, 64) Jabber wakes, overhears Reverend D., and recalls that this label was written in Hester's practice place. He asks Hester to define the word for him. When she refuses, he brands her with the word, repeating it one time too many. Hester, in a desperate effort to refuse this identification, takes up a stick and brutally beats her son to death. With his blood, she sketches the scarlet letter A in the dirt. It is her last attempt to write her story and create her own identity rather than accepting what is given by a society that will condemn her.⁷² This fatal "violence against the child does seem to be motivated in part by her desire to destroy the 'weak and despised' part of herself."⁷³

- **Confessions: "They wouldn't really fit in with us"**

Parks uses the technique of characters' confessions to prove that all of them expose the hypocrisy and duplicity of their claims and declarations. They are involved with Hester's struggling predicament. She uses these confessions from various characters, the Doctor, Welfare, Amiga Gringa, Reverend D, Chilli, and even Hester herself who speak directly to the audience. Amiga Gringa, for instance, says, "It took a

⁷¹ Keene, 64.

⁷² "Talking Shop (Which Takes in the World)," *New York Times*, Retrieved 25th February 2016.

⁷³ Foster, p. 82.

little cajoling to get her to do it with me/ for an invited audience. / For a dime a look. / Over at my place.” (5, 44) In her confession, Gringa states that she is better than Hester, due to her "white womb" that makes her more valued. People desire her white children; she can sell them without feeling guilty. On the contrary, Hester's black womb lacks value and proves itself a threat to society. Gringa's main concern is to get the cash by selling "the fruit of [her] white womb." (5, 43) The Doctor also confesses,

I was lonesome and she gave herself to me in a way that I had never experienced even with women I've paid. She was, like she was giving me something that was not hers to give me but something that was mine that I'd lent her and she was returning it to me. (2, 27)

Through this confession, Parks manages to criticize the stereotypical images of black female "bodies as possessions, as objects of desire, and as bloody biological battlefields".⁷⁴ In his confession, the Doctor blames not himself but Hester who, he claims, tries to seduce him and not the other way around. He perceives himself a victim to her seduction. Combined with Reverend D's description of illegitimate babies who are born out of matrimony as "The ultimate disaster of modern times,"(3, 28) these lines contain a clear reference to the prevalence of prostitution in modern American society. The play itself bears witness to the prevalence of this problem as most of the characters engage in various forms of illicit, unlawful and extramarital relationships.⁷⁵

Even Welfare confesses by telling the story of her and her husband using Hester together for their sexual satisfaction which shows the implication of her earlier attempt to correct Hester's behavior.⁷⁶ According to Elam , both the Doctor and the Welfare Lady gives a justification to their organized

⁷⁴ Thompson. p.181.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Schafer, p. 131.

exploitation of Hester through finding that the sexual desire enables them to cross boundaries of class and good manners in order to attain some kind of self-pleasure. But the case is different with Hester who “finds no sense of self, no freedom in these acts. Sex does not liberate her from but only imprisons her more in the system.”⁷⁷ In the confessions, Parks seeks the audience to question their objectification of Hester. The Doctor, who expresses his desire to help those in need, suggests that each of “us” take in one person who needs help and make this person a member of her/ his family. However, he rationalizes, “They wouldn't really fit in with us,” (2, 26) and instead he gives Hester a dollar for a sandwich.⁷⁸

Reverend D. makes no difference from others because he exploits Hester's sexuality although he feels like one of the pilgrims and wants to build a magnificent church, ironically, when a helpless woman comes to him with “four fatherless mouths,” he admits, “Add insult to injury was what I was thinking.” (6, 48) Later, when Hester visits him with his two-year-old Baby to ask for some help, he encourages her to report to the authority who Baby's father is because he cannot recognize her face. But when she reveals her face, he denies what he said and asks her not to inform the authorities, promising her “a much larger amount of money.” (3, 30) But he lies and does not keep his promise at all; rather, in the end he calls her a ‘slut’.⁷⁹

Finally, Hester's confession is about men's quick love and that she should have thousands of bad children. In the last scene, she calls her children “mistakes” (8, 69) rather than “treasures.”

It is through these confessions that Parks criticizes the objectification of the African-American female body as source extinguishing their desire. The descriptions of the sexual acts

⁷⁷ Elam, p. 123.

⁷⁸ Schafer, p.131.

⁷⁹ Wasserstein, p.76.

in the confessions show Hester as exotic Other, a mere pot for their animal desires, and Hester's claimed willingness to participate in these acts appears in stark contrast to the ideal mother that has been presented during the scenes of the play.⁸⁰

- **Hester's Inescapable Fate**

The Chorus appears at the end of the play, in the epilogue, to tell about Hester's fate that "IT WONT END WELL FOR HER." The end is terrifying but it is a step in the process of catharsis; catharsis of all those who watch and read that tragedy.⁸¹ Elam suggests that Hester La Negrita "is a victim, but also tragically complicit in her own oppression. Her tale offers a poignant, contradictory conjunction of suffering and survival, institutional neglect, and individual abuse."⁸² Hester, at the end, is incapable to express herself and unable to bear more children and create the "whole army" of "Bad Bastards" (8, 67) that may offer her a shelter from the aggressive world.⁸³ All the characters: the community, Amiga Gringa, the Welfare Lady, the Doctor, Reverend D. Chilli, and of course, Hester herself are shamefully involved in her downfall.

Towards the end of the play, Hester's frustrations come to a dramatic climax when she becomes infuriated on hearing her son echoing the word "SLUT" for several times. She murders her firstborn son, Jabber, with a police club, in a violent fit of disappointment.

Jabber: Them bad boys had writing. On our house. Remember the writing they had on our house and you told me to read it and I didnt wanna I said I couldnt but that wasnt really true I could I can read but I didnt wanna/ Hester::Hush up now./ Jabber: I was reading it but I was only reading it in my head I wasnt reading it with my mouth I was reading it with my mouth but not with my tongue I was reading it only with my

⁸⁰ Schafer, p. 132.

⁸¹ Quoted. in Schafer, p. 194.

⁸² Elam. p. 123.

⁸³ Parks, "In The Blood." , p. 1648.

lips and I could hear the word outloud but only outloud in my head./ Hester: Shhhh./ Jabber: I didnt wanna say the word outloud in your head. (8, 64-5)

After she kills Jabber, she writes an A on the ground in his blood: "Looks good Jabber, don't it? Don't it, huh?" (8, 66) She stands alone on the stage wet with Jabber's blood. "*Grief-stricken, she cradles his body. Her hands wet with blood, she writes an A on the ground.*" (8, 66)

The word "slut" denotes the mark of judgment against Hester, as others find the A on the ground and attempt to decipher its meaning after Hester has been arrested for the murder.⁸⁴ Foster concludes that "the child's behavior is simply the last in a series of abuses inflicted on Hester throughout her life and over the course of the play."⁸⁵

Parks calls the closing scene of the play as (The Prison Door) that is the same title of the opening scene in Hawthorn's *The Scarlet Letter* when the chorus appears and frame Hester's tragic downfall. All her accusers close in on her, blaming her for her lack of education, sexuality, lack of a husband, and poverty. She is accused of failing to get further than the first letter of the alphabet, and forced sterilization awaits her to put an end to her mistakes. The choice of the scene's title is very suggestive as Hester is trapped and imprisoned in various forms of psychological and emotional deprivation, social alienation, and financial insecurity. Harry J. Elam Jr. suggests that Hester La Negrita is a victim, but also tragically complicit in her own oppression. He argues: "Hester's tale offers a poignant, contradictory conjunction of suffering and survival, institutional neglect, and individual abuse".⁸⁶ She is confined to various prisons: her color and gender, her illiteracy, and her poverty.

⁸⁴ Schafer, p. 139.

⁸⁵ Foster, p. 79.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Larson, p. 105.

The conclusion of *In the Blood* is terrifying yet incomplete. In an interview, Parks inserted, "I just write tragedy and devastation. It's like bleeding, like when they used to bleed folks. The play creates a wound that is actually the first stage in the healing process."⁸⁷ This wound is what Parks hopes to heal by reconfiguring the literary canon. She calls for a reform to the society where the societal institutions exploit the poor instead of supporting them. Helman states that Parks "does not demonstrate a loss of hope in humanity, but mistrust of a powerful and corrupt system."⁸⁸ Parks insists that all her plays share an important quality: "the yearning for salvation: that particular kind of salvation that only the theatre, of all the art forms, can offer."⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

Through the character of Hester and her own society, Parks tries to reflect a clear picture of poverty, ignorance, violence, illiteracy, hypocrisy of social institutions, social injustice, sexual harassment, and the importance of word in our lives. As an outcast black, Hester tries to make her life better many times, but she is pulled down again and again by her own society. The social institutions that are supposed to support her are the same forces that victimize her harshly. This leads Hester to a critical tragic moment in the play when she is driven mad hearing the word 'slut' and kills her dearest son.

Parks does not give her audience a solution to that problem; instead, she leaves them shocked because of the tragic end of Hester. Parks wants her audience to reconsider their social values and the discrimination between the poor and the rich; between the victims and the oppressors. She calls for a reform to these societal institutions that represent an obstacle

⁸⁷ "Talking Shop (Which Takes in the World)."

⁸⁸ E. V. A. Helman. "A Society Unmasked: Globalization And The Drama of Suzan-Lori Parks" Unpublished Diss. (University of Oregon,2006),p. 169.

⁸⁹ Garrett.

to the progress of the society and that represent the real enemy to the individuals.

Parks focuses on the important role of race and gender in making large number of young black women illiterate and unemployed; a fact that leads to their marginalization and impoverishment. That's clear in the last scene when Hester reaches a convention that "I dont think the world likes women much," (4,35) she believes that all bad things happen to her because of her race and gender which force her to resort to violent acts of destroying herself and her own family.

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