8-7-2008

"The Melting Pot Where Nothing Melted": The Politics of Subjectivity in the Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks, Wendy Wasserstein, and Tony Kushner

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“THE MELTING POT WHERE NOTHING MELTED”: THE POLITICS OF SUBJECTIVITY IN THE PLAYS OF SUZAN-LORI PARKS, WENDY WASSERSTEIN, AND TONY KUSHNER

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2008

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This study explores the issues of “being American” in light of race, class, gender, and sexuality, which construct contemporary American identity as represented in the plays of Suzan-Lori Parks, Wendy Wasserstein, and Tony Kushner. Whites, the economically privileged middle class, males, and heterosexuals constitute the American mainstream, and many (in)visible types of social discrimination and prejudice by the mainstream culture against “the others” exist in contemporary American society. Despite their marginalization, these individuals refuse the mainstream’s views and seek for their own selfhood, autonomy, and subjectivity in life.

Suzan-Lori Parks’s history plays protest against the erasure of African American history in American history and reclaim African Americans’ racial subjectivity through demanding their right to be fairly written and remembered in

American history. In The Red Letter Plays, Parks criticizes the mainstream's hypocrisy and economic oppression of the economic underclass by replacing Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne with two black urban Hesters. Wendy Wasserstein dramatizes women's dilemma of "having it all" in life and their pursuit of autonomous feminist subjectivity. Tony Kushner raises the AIDS issue to the level of a national problem, challenges the judgmental mainstream's views of homosexuality, and seeks sexual subjectivity in Angels in America.

The great melting pot as a metaphor for American society, at least as represented in these superlative contemporary American playwrights' plays, is nothing but a myth and not a reality. Individuals are not completely melted as one; rather, they challenge the mainstream's social mores and strive to recover their own autonomous subjectivity. Therefore, a quilt – harmonious, beautiful and preserving the uniqueness of its component parts – serves as a better metaphor for American society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank living God, who has been my Provider and Way-Maker throughout my life. He has guided me and has protected me through the valleys of life until today. I want to glorify Him with this dissertation and I want myself and my knowledge to be used for His purposes.

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Shin Eun Suk, who has trusted me and shared hardships with me while always standing beside me, hand in hand. I cordially express my special thanks to her for her love, sacrifice, perseverance, and encouragement.

I would like to thank my dissertation advisor Dr. Ronald G. Shafer not only for his academic guidance but also for his spiritual encouragements whenever I faced giant Goliaths of my life while studying in America. Thanks to his kindness, prayer, and help, I could finish my dissertation. And I am also grateful to my committee members, Dr. Ronald Emerick and Dr. Susan M. Comfort, for their incisive comments and their reading of my dissertation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

ONE INTRODUCTION……1
Notes ……27

TWO RACE AND CLASS ……28

Suzan-Lori Parks's Use of History as Racial Resistance ……..28
"Miss Me, Remember Me": Reclaiming Racial Subjectivity in American History in Suzan-Lori Parks's The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World……31
"Note the Death Wound: thuh Great Black Hole": Recreating Racial Subjectivity by Digging up History at "an Exact Replica of the Great Hole of History" in Suzan-Lori Parks's The America Play ……50
Class and Suzan-Lori Parks's The Red Letter Plays……..66
"Between Us and Them, Between Our Kind and Their Kind": Class Stratification and the Quest for Subjectivity in Suzan-Lori Parks's In the Blood……71
The Power of Money in the Formation of Class and Social Justice and Resistance in Suzan-Lori Parks's Fucking A……...86
Notes……108

THREE GENDER ……111

Feminism and Wendy Wasserstein's Plays ……..111
"Having It All": Women's Dilemma and Feminist Subjectivity in Wendy Wasserstein's Isn't It Romantic?.....120
"Who Are You? My Knight in Shining Armor?" Negotiating Women's Life without Men with Sisterhood in Wendy Wasserstein's The Sisters Rosensweig……..…135
"Our Task Is to Rise and Continue": Professional Women's Vulnerability, Victimization, and the Restoration of Feminist Subjectivity in Wendy Wasserstein's An American Daughter……...156

FOUR HOMOSEXUALITY…….177

AIDS, Homophobia, and Gay Plays in the Late Twentieth Century America …….....177

"We Won't Die Secret Deaths Anymore": Wrestling with the Angel and the Quest for Sexual Subjectivity in Tony Kushner's Angels in America …….……...184

Notes …….…..….217

FIVE CONCLUSION…….…....219

WORKS CITED …….……..234

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The melting pot is a metaphor that is used to describe a homogeneous society where the ingredients – people from different cultures and races – are mixed and assimilated. The melting pot is one of the most well-known of America's iconic symbols to people around the world. Many people argue, thus, that America is a melting pot since America is a nation of immigrants founded upon the diversity of race, ethnicity, and culture. Europeans were the first group that immigrated to America. However, since millions of immigrants from Latin America and Asia added their complexity and multiplicity into the Eurocentric American society, the issues of "being American" have become in recent years a more controversial focus of discussion in many arenas of academic research. Furthermore, because of the history of slavery, the issues of "being American" regarding race have raised questions which are difficult to clarify and answer. In addition to this, gender and class themselves have become controversial issues which are heatedly discussed in American society. Since many class issues are inextricably intertwined with race issues, it is more difficult to answer the questions or even find common ground. Despite the tremendous advancement of women's rights during the 20th century, many invisible obstacles for women with professional careers still exist in society. There is one more

issue to be considered in this discussion of “being American”: sexual orientation has become a critical issue in American society of late and further problematizes the issue of what is an “American”? As Michael S. Kimmel indicates, homophobia is intimately interwoven with both sexism and racism (90), which causes some people to be marginalized in American society. Especially since the advent of the devastating pandemic of AIDS during the 1980s, homosexuality has become one of the most controversial issues regarding the American identity. Therefore, I think these four issues – race, class, gender, and homosexuality – are the primary components that construct contemporary American identity. These four issues are the key ingredients that need to be melted in the great melting pot of America.

Generally speaking, it is believed that every ingredient loses its unique properties in a melting pot. Because differences are melted away, everything is reduced to a common element. There is no distinctive individuality in a melting pot. Every person who came to America from different backgrounds from all over the world was expected in the past to become melted in the great melting pot of America and to blend into the homogenous mass with other “Americans.” Israel Zangwill, who was an early American playwright, expressed his prophetic wish of assimilation in The Melting Pot. David, who is the protagonist of this play, uses the metaphor of the melting pot in the last scene:

> It is the fires of God round His Crucible. There she lies, the great Melting Pot – Listen! Can't you hear the roaring and the bubbling? There gapes her mouth – the harbour where a thousand mammoth feeders come from the ends of the world to pour in their human freight. Ah, what a stirring and a seething! Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian, – black and yellow (184).

David's aspiration for the great American melting pot has become a stock metaphor, and since then, this metaphor has been widely accepted as a truth by people all around the world.[1]

In Tony Kushner's acclaimed plays, Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part One: Millennium Approaches and Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika, however, a Jewish Rabbi, Isidor Chemelwitz, challenges this unshakable American myth. He calls America a "strange place and the melting pot where nothing melted" (10) in his speech to people at a Jewish woman's funeral. He stridently denies this American myth: "You do not live in America. No such place exists" (10). Given the fact that many Europeans, Africans, Latin Americans, and Asians immigrated to America and assimilated themselves as Americans, his remark is quite interesting, perhaps even subversive. What exactly does Rabbi Isidor's remark mean? Why does he say this? Does this comment of his

really make any sense regarding the American identity? If it does, why, how and in what ways? Kushner prompts the huge but simple question: is America indeed a great melting pot? This question is the appropriate starting point of this dissertation.

My answer to this question is, at least in part, no. I agree with Rabbi Isidor's position since his remarks in Angels in America can be interpreted as saying that America is not a complete melting pot. Of course, it is true that there has been assimilation in American culture, at least on the superficial level, but it is difficult to deny that the assimilation has had its limitations if American society is viewed on a much deeper level. Although America has been the headmost democratic country in the world, lots of invisible walls and borderlines between people exist within the society. There are divisions between the mainstream and the marginalized. People tacitly differentiate themselves or others as "we" and "they," largely because society is comprised of what is called many "others."

Many (in)visible types of social discrimination and prejudice by the mainstream culture against the marginalized exist in American society. The full acceptance of "the others" as community members, therefore, is limited. Rather, for example, many contemporary African Americans are shunned by the mainstream and face "aversive racism" (Dolvidio 134), unlike old-fashioned racism, which was more direct and overt. The underclass, which is economically less privileged in capitalist

society, is also discriminated in their socio-economic life by the privileged mainstream society. Women, as a social minority, are still marginalized by their unique (in)visible socio-sexual burdens and oppression. Homosexuals are shunned by the straight, mainstream society. These marginalized people have only limited access to the benefits as citizens in the community, but they rarely resolve and assimilate into the mainstream in the great melting pot of America. They still have their own distinguishing peculiarities. Therefore, I argue that America is more like a quilt than a melting pot and that the quilt metaphor is more accurate and suitable. The melting pot as a typical iconic symbol of America is just a myth, not a reality, because American society is not homogeneous. Many diversities are not resolved in it, and conflicts, in which the marginalized try to recover their autonomous identity and subjectivity against the mainstream culture, are numerous. Many American playwrights of the late twentieth century depict this marginalization and people's quest for subjectivity and autonomy in their plays. Through analyzing the marginalization of characters and their politics of subjectivity which are represented in the plays of Suzan-Lori Parks, Wendy Wasserstein, and Tony Kushner, this dissertation explores the great melting pot metaphor to determine if it is merely myth – exaggerated and obsolete – or reality – accurate and relevant.

In this dissertation, I use the term *subjectivity* rather than *identity* since identity

is not fixed and can change depending on contexts (Ryan 2); subjectivity refers to an individual's fixed personal views of oneself. Ross Muffin, the author of The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms, defines the term subjectivity:

> A term sometimes used to refer to the evident presence, in a literary work, of the personal feelings and opinions of the author. [. . .] Authors writing subjectively may comment on the actions of characters in a moralizing way, making judgments based on their own life experiences. Subjectivity can also refer to the thoughts and feelings of the characters themselves in a work. (388)

Harry Shaw also defines this term as "Concentration upon self: the personal, reflective involvement of a person with himself or of a writer with his material. Subjectivity refers to writing in which the expression of personal feeling and experience is primary" (361). Donald E. Hall defines subjectivity as "the intersection of two lines of philosophical inquiry: epistemology (the study of how we know what we know) and ontology (the study of the nature of being or existence)" (4). In other words, subjectivity is about "How [. . .] our understanding of knowledge relate[e] to, impact[s], and/or constrain[s] our understanding of our own existence" (Hall 4). Thus, although both subjectivity and identity refer to the independent individual self, *subjectivity* is a more encompassing and broader concept than identity, which

expresses the writer or character's independent "self-awareness" (Hall 25) and autonomous point of view. Therefore, in my definition, while identity centers on mainly "who I am," *subjectivity* comprehensively addresses not only "who I am" but also "how I see and/or interpret myself and the world that I live in." *Subjectivity* focuses on the way of viewing, interpreting, and determining the social value of my existence in the world as an autonomous individual. It involves an individual's personal attitudes, values, and opinions about him/herself, regardless of mainstream's prevalent perspectives of them.

My interpretation of subjectivity is that it means more fluid self and changes according to the context and the person that we interact with. In this, socially-situated identity is for the multiple identities we take on in different practices and contexts so that the term core identity is for whatever continuous and relatively fixed sense of self underlies our contextually shifting multiple identities (Gee 39). In a society, an individual may have many social identities, which can be called an individual's subjectivity. Thus, an individual's subjectivity contains his/her various social identities and their independent, autonomous perspectives to see themselves and the society in which they live. In accordance with Descartes' postulate, "I think, therefore I am," the ways that an individual thinks and sees oneself determine his/her ways of existence in society as an autonomous social being. Therefore, subjectivity is a crucial

determinant of “who I am” and “how I exist” as a subject in a certain society. Since subjectivity centers on how individuals reclaim their own sovereignty over their lives as subjects, it can be viewed as rebellious and subversive by the mainstream. Thus, this dissertation uses the term subjectivity to express a playwright’s or a character’s quest for independent selfhood, perspectives, and autonomy. However, I use the term identity when it is more suitable for the context.

The term *politics*, as used in this study, centers in the main on the conflicts and struggles between the mainstream and the marginalized in the texts. Many inner/outer conflicts happen between the characters or between the characters and the mainstream cultures outside of the stage; these conflicts are often political. Their pursuit of selfhood can be called the process of politics.

Suzan-Lori Parks, Wendy Wasserstein, and Tony Kushner are often viewed as three of the most acclaimed contemporary playwrights in America. A more encompassing appreciation of American identity issues results from an in-depth exploration of their drama, since their plays thread a common theme through the fabric of contemporary American drama – namely, the politics of subjectivity. A central theme evident in the work of these three dramatists is the quest for self. People who are marginalized by mainstream American culture are inevitably preoccupied with recovering their own identity and asserting autonomous subjectivity in an

attempt to reestablish their own distinct identities of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. They want to make their unique voices clearly heard. As American society became more democratic as a result of the Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century and other initiatives, the minorities' resistance against the dominant mainstream became more evident and their desire to acquire their subjectivity more pronounced. The conflicts surrounding their acquisition of autonomous selfhood as Americans were more explicit in contemporary American society and, predictably, evolved into a seminal theme in drama.

This dissertation problematizes four major issues of contemporary American drama –race, class, gender, and homosexuality – all of which can be understood as centerpieces of the contemporary American society as well as American drama, since these four issues are the main sources of controversy surrounding social inequality and marginalization in American society. Of course, inequality and marginalization are inevitable in all societies: no society can completely distribute its power and privileges to people in egalitarian ways. Moreover, it is impossible to satisfy every diverse constituency of the society. That society would be a literal utopia, which does not exist anywhere. However, even if we admit the impossibility of an equal society, we can still ascertain and delineate notable differences in the level of inequality. While some societies are more egalitarian than others, others are drastically unequal.

While some societies are unequal directly and overtly, others are invisibly unequal so that public manifestation of inequality is less evident. The latter constitutes a more contemporary type of inequality. People are less aware of this inequality because it is hidden through the devices of legitimate apparatuses and dominant mainstream ideologies. Because people accept mainstream ideologies as factual truth, behind-the-scenes inequalities and injustices, like a cancer, eat away at the body politic, slowly but insidiously destroying it.

Societies create many pretenses and use them to justify their inequality. These societies need some plausible reasons to persuade people to believe that inequality is inevitable. For example, some 19th century racists rationalized the enslavement of Africans, invoking the Genesis account of Noah's curse on Ham, who, because he saw his father Noah naked and intoxicated, was cursed. Hence, not only racial inequality but also subsequent class inequality, which developed in modern times, eventually was accepted as plausible and inevitable by some racists. Misogyny is another traditional oppressive ideology for women. Along with Eve's ensnaring image as the "femme fatale" in the Bible, traditional male-dominated patriarchy, which creates oppression for women, has been accepted as a natural way of life for men. These pretenses have been accepted as normal cultural traditions by mainstream society.

Paula S. Rothenberg cites major pretenses for social inequalities of the United

States as sex, race, and class (5). Unequal social privileges, apportioned to individual components of the society, surround all three of these areas. Although these amount to little more than personal differences and preferences between people, the mainstream traces these differences back to the quality of individual race and gender. That is, the mainstream, to justify their discriminative prejudices or unequal distributions of wealth, opportunity, and privilege, cites these differences. Thus, race and gender differences have been portrayed as “unbridgeable and immutable” (Rosenberg 5) by the mainstream as a way of justifying American social inequality. Even though the United States is a leader among the democratic countries in the world, inequality still exists, and society hides it under the guise of institutions and mainstream ideologies. Since this inequality is often not overt and direct as in the past, few people question its existence or unfairness. However, Parks, Wasserstein, and Kushner question the unfairness and injustice of these issues of (in)visible social inequalities through their plays. As social critiques, these three playwrights reveal how mainstream society plausibly marginalizes “the others” and how the marginalized try to recover their subjectivity in life.

As aforementioned, this dissertation discusses the four issues of race, class, gender, and homosexuality in light of the quest for autonomous subjectivity. Since these are perhaps the four most pivotal issues of contemporary American society, a

deeper analysis of them facilitates not only the encompassing appreciation of the contemporary American drama but also the American society which is mirrored in it. Regarding race issues, African Americans constitute the crux of American racism. Of course, other ethnic groups have also become very controversial these days since an influx of other ethnic immigrants from Latin America and Asia was evident during the twentieth century. However, racism toward African Americans dominates other types of racism and is the focal issue of Suzan-Lori Parks's plays. Thus, this dissertation focuses on African Americans regarding the issue of race.

African Americans did not come to America in a favorable way, but a miserable way, which is called the "Middle Passage." Even though they were freed from slavery by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, they were marginalized in Eurocentric America due to racial discrimination and prejudice. Although slavery is often reduced to mere historical fact by mainstream Americans, its legacy nevertheless continues to haunt African Americans' memories and their present social life. Their historical memories of trauma persistently remain as a vital source of artistic inspiration for African American playwrights. In a key article, Alisa Solomon says, "African Americans," who continue to experience societal oppression, "are 'in a perpetual state of middle passage'" (74), which is searingly depicted in Suzan-Lori Parks's plays. Alice Rayner and Harry J. Elam point out that "Black Man with

Watermelon's plight reflects the current dislocation, fragmentation, and disillusion," so to speak, the "postmodern condition of contemporary black America" (451). They suggest that the nightmare of African Americans' historical experience has not been completely forgotten. It still exists in African Americans' collective memory, crying for release and requiring a cure.

Many American sociologists indicate the existence of "false fronts" and "unleveled playing fields" for African Americans in their socio-economic life in contemporary America. Julianne Malveaux summarizes African Americans' predicament in American society:

> For many, then, living in the latter part of the twentieth century was like living in the midst of a party that one hadn't been invited to. It was like putting your nose up against the window of a candy store, watching others buy the brightly colored sweets while understanding that you had not the means to afford them. (293)

This metaphor of "putting your nose up against the window of a candy store" offers a powerful social critique about African Americans' socio-economic status as uninvited quests in affluent America. Parks's characters, such as Hester La Negrita, Hester Smith, and Monster, are profitably viewed from this perspective. Parks's characters are discriminated against and marginalized in capitalist American society like

uninvited guests.

It is interesting that the issues of racism inevitably are interwoven with those of socio-economic considerations. In his book, Globalization: The Human Consequences, Zygmunt Bauman explains class inequality with his theory of consumer society, using the powerful metaphor of “tourists and vagabonds” (77-102). Bauman divides the people in modern consumer society into two categories: tourists and vagabonds. While the tourists are the group of privileged people who are welcomed by society wherever they go, the vagabonds are the group of people who are not welcomed and who are socially marginalized. Whereas the tourist group of people can buy and consume anything that they want, the vagabonds are not able to consume in the consumer society because of their poverty. Bauman’s theory explains the marginalized African American characters’ lives and hardships in the plays of Suzan-Lori Parks. Sometimes, African American parents’ poverty is passed on to their children systematically. Their children do not improve their lives because they cannot or choose not to access good education. They are apt to have limited access because they are poor and their families dysfunctional. Therefore, it may be difficult for some African Americans to escape the vicious cycle of unprivileged life due to the legacies of their ancestors.

Another element aggravates African Americans’ marginalization in American

society – namely, juridical discrimination which operates invisibly within the institutionalized American system. In the book, The Real War on Crime, which was released by the National Criminal Justice Commission in 1996 after two years of investigation, Steven R. Donziger accuses American society of discriminative justice conventions, which is conducted in the three American criminal justice systems (CJS): police, court, and prison. African Americans' rate of arrest by police is more than five times that of white Americans. For instance, since African Americans are liable to be arrested by police more than four times that of white Americans while driving, people parody DWI (Driving While Intoxicated) as DWB (Driving While Black) (Devey 4). These inequalities in the justice systems have been anticipated because the majority of police and judges are white. Many people believe, in other words, that inequality in the justice systems (the police, the judges, and the prisons) exists just because the majority of officials are white.[2] As a result, people are suspicious of racial prejudice in their enforcement of the law. Regarding the high percentage of African Americans in prison, Michel Tonry says:

> African Americans make up more than 50 percent of the prison population but only 12 percent of all U.S. residents. When all punishments – probation, intermediate sanctions, incarceration – are taken into account, one in three African American men in their

twenties are currently under correctional supervision. (24)

While so many African American men are behind bars, their families are likely to become dysfunctional. Furthermore, inmates cannot vote for politicians who advocate their rights since they lose their right to vote in prison. The vicious cycle is obviously perpetuated.

Some Christian criminologists insist that the Bush administration should delete the word "war" in their slogan, "War on Crime." They argue that the word *war* invokes the image of violent antipathy against others, psychologically making people think that it is acceptable for them to kill enemies or to incarcerate them forever behind bars. These criminologists further allege that this word makes people feel isolated and divides people into a friend-or-enemy dichotomy. In short, the word *war* promotes conflict between the social classes. Because of this, some criminologists, such as Pepinsky, McDermott, and Quinney, suggest new paradigms of peacemaking criminology in which love, care, forgiveness, harmony, and cooperation are more valued rather than harsh punishment by the government.[3] Hester Smith and Monster, who has to be incarcerated in prison for 30 years for stealing some meat out of poverty in Parks's Fucking A, can be viewed from this criminological perspective as a critique of the justice inequality and class disparity in American society.

Race and class issues are not the only oppressive inequalities dramatized in

the works of these three playwrights. Gender issues constitute a third main issue. While discussing the gendered identity politics in her classic work, The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir calls women "the other" (16). In this book, she argues that women traditionally have been considered incomplete beings who need men to become complete. She opines that whereas a woman cannot be complete without a man, a man can be complete without a woman:

> Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. [. . .] The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself. [. . .] Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. (Beauvoir 16)

Of course, Beauvoir's view will seem extreme to many. However, her view is, at least in part, plausible since history shows that women have been unfairly oppressed under the patriarchy in many cultures. It is true that there has been social inequality between males and females. Besides, this inequality is not innate and natural, but social.

Paula S. Rothenberg points out that while *sex* is a biologically-based concept, *gender* "refers to the particular set of socially-constructed meanings that are associated with each sex" (6). That means *gender* is not natural but social. Society

constructs the models of gender roles and imposes responsibilities apportioned to each category. Therefore, socially-constructed gender roles and responsibilities can be arbitrary and mutable according to society. The difference of gender (roles) need not be understood as a matter of value, ability, or superiority of one over the other since it is socially constructed rather than naturally innate.

Unfortunately, however, women have been regarded as inferior to men and have been oppressed by a male-dominated patriarchy, which is defined as “the structural and ideological system that perpetuates the privileging of masculinity” (Enloe 4). Under patriarchy, many women’s lives have been oppressed both domestically and socially by the male-dominated society, and their autonomous subjectivity has been disregarded. What is interesting is that those oppressions imposed on women have been accepted as natural under the guise of dominant ideologies that the social mainstream culture constructs. This has been possible since males have been in the center of mainstream culture throughout history. Women, marginalized as “others,” have been rarely able to access the mainstream to make their subjective voices heard.

In many women’s plays, such as those by Maria Irene Fornes and Marsha Norman, the audience sees the patriarchal oppressions imposed on women by men on the stage. The female victims of traditional patriarchy in these plays are illiterate, poor,

and physically mistreated by men. In many cases, they are sexually violated by men, and their bodies are directly abused. Mae in Fornes's play, The Conduct of Life, and Arleen in Marsha Norman's Getting Out are typical victims of patriarchal oppression. They are illiterate, poor, and physically raped or killed by men, who frequently appear in traditional feminist drama. The victimization of these women is overt and visible through the damages inscribed on their physical bodies.

However, there are new types of women's oppression which are imposed on today's new generation of women by the male-dominated contemporary American society. Just as Timber Tucker in Wendy Wasserstein's An American Daughter asks his friend Walter Abrahamson, "Walter, is your wife one of those remarkable young women who does everything right?" (86), society demands too many responsibilities from women and has too many high expectations for them. "Superwomen" are expected to assume multiple roles perfectly, juggling the roles of a daughter, a wife, a mother, and a professional. None of these can be neglected. Furthermore, women are expected to be more moral and responsible than men in their gender roles which society imposes on them. These are new types of challenges and oppression against the women of the new generation which Wasserstein's female characters face.

Wendy Wasserstein's women are not illiterate, poor, or socially underclassed like Fornes's and Parks's women. On the contrary, Wasserstein's women are well-

educated, rich, and have professional careers like doctors and professors. But they too feel oppressed. Why? According to Wasserstein's point of view, they see themselves faced with too many social burdens or with social jealousy against other professional women, as Lyssa Dent Hughes, a woman professor and a nominee for Surgeon General, says: "There's nothing quite so satisfying as erasing the professional competency of a woman, is there?" (Wasserstein, An American Daughter 92). Wasserstein sees that women's professional competency can be an object of social jealousy by a male-dominated society. Society expects females to be dutiful in all traditional gender roles as daughter, wife, and mother. In many cases, Wasserstein's women are "at odds with the existing socio-sexual traditions that make their desire to achieve autonomy and balance their private desires with professional ones problematic" (Ciociola 11). Therefore, Wasserstein's feminist point of view for the new generation centers on how women can live subjectively, pursuing their professional goals in life without marrying a man and having a family. How can women have it all in life? Wasserstein's plays can be viewed from this perspective, which evidences a more contemporary feminist perspective in American society.

Besides race/class and gender issues, this dissertation also discusses the issue of homosexuality, which is developed in the gay plays. According to William Hoffman, a gay play can be defined as a drama "whose central figure or figures are

homosexual or one in which homosexuality is a main theme," (Gay Plays ix) though the drama is not necessarily written by a homosexual. Because an individual's sexual orientation is an important element that constitutes his/her identity, the issue of homosexuality cannot be excluded from the discussion of American identity. Homosexuals are a sexually-marginalized group in a heterosexual mainstream culture, and for this reason they too, as in other countries, can be called "others" in America.

The homophobia during the 1980s is often compared to the antipathy toward communism during the 1950s in America. Homosexuality has been abominated by the mainstream since it is viewed as subversive. This is because homosexuality challenges the traditional structure of the family. The act of sex is not just an expression of love, but it can be an act of social power. Thus, homosexuals have been considered not only sexually immoral but also destructive challengers of social structures. Lesbians are especially viewed as challengers against patriarchal social power. They have been regarded as a social cancer to be removed from society. With the advent of pandemic AIDS in 1980s, some mainstream voices criticized minority groups, such as drug-users and homosexuals, saying that AIDS is God's scourge against human depravity and immorality. The Reverend Jerry Falwell as a representative of the conservative Christian mainstream, for example, proclaimed that "AIDS is God's judgment against a society that does not live by His rules"

(Kistenberg 8). This notion was reinforced by the mass media and supported at least in part by the conservative American government at that time. American society in that era tried to find scapegoats to which they could ascribe the responsibility for "God's scourge." They found this scapegoat in homosexuals. Because of this, in 1982, the term "GRID" (gay-related immune deficiency) became popular and accepted in some circles although it was not the official name for the syndrome (Kistenberg 7). Tony Kushner sees this homophobia as American mainstream's backlash against the gay rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s in America. In his play, Angels in America, he critiques this otherization of homosexuals.

Prior Walter's wrestling with the angel, just like the biblical Jacob's wrestling with an angel, can be interpreted as his wrestling with American public opinion, which opposes homosexuals. Just as the term "Perestroika" means change and reformation, Kushner expects American society to change, so that it can embrace the people who have different sexual preferences as citizens. Kushner's handling of AIDS patients is different from William M. Hoffman's. While Hoffman's gay drama, As Is, shows the humane love story between two male homosexuals, Kushner's play demands change and social acceptance of sexual "others." This dissertation will discuss the issue of homosexuality, focusing on the acceptance of sexual "others" as seen in Tony Kushner's plays, because this topic is another crucial component of the

American identity quandary.

It would be too broad and unwieldy to discuss every American playwright who deals with these problems since many American playwrights touch on these issues in their plays. Thus, I have chosen three major, outstanding American playwrights, all of whom were awarded the coveted Pulitzer Prize for Drama – Suzan-Lori Parks, Wendy Wasserstein, and Tony Kushner. Parks was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2002 with Topdog/Underdog, Wasserstein in 1989 with The Heidi Chronicles, and Kushner in 1993 with Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes Part One: Millennium Approaches. Because they are regarded as leading American playwrights, their plays represent many of the centerpiece ideas of contemporary American society. Since the Pulitzer Prize for Drama is one of the most prestigious prizes for dramatic art in America, its recipients can be seen as the superlative practitioners and exemplars of contemporary American drama which so efficaciously mirrors various social phenomena in America today.

In addition to these three, other playwrights – Maria Irene Fornes and William M. Hoffman, for instance – will be discussed as good examples because they are a remarkable contrast to and provide context for a discussion of the three playwrights of this study. Fornes and Hoffman's plays make possible a better understanding of the main playwrights. For this reason, Fornes's The Conduct of Life and Mud will be

discussed with regard to gender in Chapter 3. Hoffman's As Is will be discussed with regard to homosexuality in Chapter 4.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss Suzan-Lori Parks's plays in light of racism and class stratification. Suzan-Lori Parks, as the first African American female playwright who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, deals with the erasure of African American identity and history in American history. Through the reenactment of history on the stage in The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World and The America Play, she seeks to dig up the forgotten history and to "hear the bones sing" (Parks, "Possession" 4). By doing this, Parks reveals her trenchant protest against American black racism in both plays. These plays can be understood as an African Americans' quest for racial subjectivity through history. Regarding class issues, Parks's The Red Letter Plays, which contains In the Blood and Fucking A, will also be discussed. She shows the inevitably interwoven connections of racism with class issues with regard to African Americans' socio-economic situations and social justice. Since The Red Letter Plays is Parks's urban revision of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter and Hester Prynne, these two plays are especially rife with Parks's implicit social critiques against contemporary American society regarding class.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss, in the main, Wendy Wasserstein's plays in light of

contemporary gender issues, critiquing invisible barriers and obstacles that exist in women's socio-political life. She criticizes the overwhelming expectations of society toward women, both domestically and socially. Unlike Fornes's traditional oppressions of women, these burdens of "the perfect woman" create a new type of oppression for the new generation of females in American society. For these issues of feminist subjectivity, Wasserstein's Isn't It Romantic?, The Sisters Rosensweig, and An American Daughter will be discussed since they enable the readers/audience to see the striking differences in women's oppression, which are depicted in Fornes's plays.

In Chapter 4, I will discuss Tony Kushner's plays to deal with the otherization of homosexuals in straight American, mainstream culture. Kushner, a homosexual playwright, critiques mainstream American society that excludes homosexuals as sexual "others" and shows how the marginalized attempt to recover their sexual subjectivity in life. He opposes the way homosexuals are socially marginalized, especially during the 1980s in America. For the homosexuality issues, Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part One: Millennium Approaches and Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika will be discussed.

Although this study touches on some negative aspects of American history and society, I do not wish this to be read as a blind criticism of America. As William J.

Bennett's book, America The Last Best Hope, suggests, in truth, America can be said to be the last best hope in the world. No country in the world was and is willing to fight for other peoples' freedom and human rights as eagerly and sacrificially as America. Of course, great wrongs in the past or in the present time do not need to be covered up since "injustices need sunlight – always, as Justice Brandeis said, the best disinfectant" (Bennett xv). I do not agree with the one-sided critics today who see America as nothing but a failure. Rather, as Bennett says, I believe that "America is still a great story," and this is why I want my dissertation to be read as a "loving critic[ism]" (xv), not a blind criticism.

Notes

1. The term “melting pot” symbolizes the idealized nation of immigration that goes beyond all the differences of race and ethnicity in America. This utopian metaphor of America came into general usage in 1908, when Israel Zangwill’s play The Melting Pot successfully premiered in Washington, D.C. on 5 October 1908. This play was dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt, “in respectful recognition of his strenuous struggle against the forces that threaten to shipwreck the great republic which carries mankind and its fortune” (Zangwill v). It is alleged that Theodore Roosevelt liked this play, saying, “That’s a great play, Mr. Zangwill, that’s a great play” (Leftwich 252). Roosevelt’s compliment played a part in making this play a success and circulating this term publicly.
2. According to “Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin,” which was released in July 2006, African Americans comprise 11.4% of all federal government officers in 2004. See the website, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/fleo04.pdf>.
3. M. J. McDermott insists that American policies on “War on Crime” should change to more peaceful directions. He says that “peacemaking priorities also include a nonviolent ethic that compassion, forgiveness, and love lead to understanding, service, and justice” (26). See “Criminology as Peacemaking, Feminist ethics, and the Victimization of Women.” Women and Criminal Justice 5.2 (1994): 21-44.

CHAPTER TWO: RACE AND CLASS

Suzan-Lori Parks's Use of History as Racial Resistance.

In her essay, "Elements of Style," Suzan-Lori Parks declares that she avoids writing any "Theatre of Schmaltz" (6), which refers to writing that is too sentimental or too shallow, since she desires to write problematic political drama regarding African Americans. In her other essay, "Possession," she asks herself, "Who do I write for? Who am I?" (1) and subsequently answers her own questions: she does not write for herself but for her figures in the plays, who are African Americans. This makes it clear that Parks intends to write about African Americans and their inescapable issues, most of which center on matters of race, and most of these, in turn, are ultimately political.

Suzan-Lori Parks, nevertheless, does not like to be considered as a political playwright or a political spokesperson. In fact, she complained in an interview, "It's insulting, when people say my plays are about what it's about to be black – as if that's all we think about, as if our life is about that. [. . .] Why does everyone think that white artists make art and black artists make statements?" (Solomon 73). She, in my opinion, is right. It is not appropriate to interpret literary art of African American artists solely from the perspective of racism. Nevertheless, noticing the political undertones in her plays is unavoidable since they are so amply evident. Because her

plays are rife with political innuendoes and critiques, the readers/audience read/see them as explorations of racial and social issues. Political interpretations of Parks's plays are reinforced by her essay, "Possession." In fact, this article, despite her disclaimer, reinforces the notion that she is a political playwright and writes plays containing serious political overtones:

> 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. ("Possession" 4)

This manifestation is very important for the understanding of her plays since her theater becomes a perfect place to remake and reclaim (African American) history like "an incubator to create new historical events" ("Possession" 4-5), as she calls it. Just as a new healthy baby is born again from an incubator, a new African American history is born from her theater.

Parks can be compared to a digger, an excavator of history since “Writing for [her] is so much like archaeology” (Savran, Playwright’s Voice 161). She tries to dig out forgotten African Americans’ identity and their racial subjectivity through writing plays. Like an archaeologist, she excavates the erased African American history and makes it visible and audible to the readers/audience. She reenacts the history on the stage and, through it, enables the readers/audience to realize how much they have forgotten. In other words, Parks’s plays make the readers/audience perceive African American’s presence in American history, to which they have paid inadequate attention in the past. In that sense, Parks’s theater can be called an incubator for the creation of new history, and, as in the case of artificial insemination, “the baby is no less human” (“Possession” 5). The baby is real and powerful in asserting African Americans’ racial subjectivity on the stage.

Therefore, it is crucial for the readers/audience to understand that history becomes the site of resistance in Parks’s plays, simply because the playwright uses African American history as a site for such resistance and for reclaiming their racial subjectivity as Americans. The use of history for dealing with racism is what makes Parks unique as a playwright and differentiates her from other African American playwrights.

“Miss Me, Remember Me”: Reclaiming Racial Subjectivity in American History in Suzan-Lori Parks’s The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World

It is a truism that history does not record everything. History is selective in description and inevitably is written from the particular angles and views of the authors. People typically read the history from the perspective from which the historian writes it. Depending on the angle the historian takes, the descriptions of history can change. Therefore, there cannot be an absolute, monolithic history; history is pliable. Many historians agree that history is a story of winners or oppressors, not losers or the oppressed. A Marxist historian, Walter Benjamin, says, “the history of the oppressed is a discontinuous history; [. . .] continuity is that of the oppressors” (qtd. in Malkin: 171). If the Europeans were oppressors in the past, Africans were the oppressed. It is true that African Americans were oppressed as slaves for a certain time in America. If the history of America is viewed as a story of oppressors in terms of race, the story of the oppressed is discontinued, forgotten, or erased. This is because history was selected and written from the oppressors’ point of view. The oppressed people’s sorrow, their suffering, and their story of oppression are not recorded or at least not given full and sympathetic treatment. Part of their life stories disappears into oblivion in people’s minds. As a result, it is impossible for them to assert their autonomous racial subjectivity as Americans since their voices are

suppressed in this distorted history. This is quite unfair for them.

Suzan-Lori Parks, an African American playwright, raises this issue of racial subjectivity of African Americans in American history. Parks reclaims African Americans' racial subjectivity by demanding the right to be remembered as legitimate Americans in American history. In other words, African Americans are reclaiming their right to be included in the narrative accounts of American history. They demand to be remembered and written as autonomous subjects and men, not as objects or slaves who do not have human dignity and individuality. Besides, they demand that American history be written and interpreted from their perspective, not just their oppressor's perspective. This is what Parks's pursuit of racial subjectivity through history emphasizes in this dissertation since there is no one absolute angle to see history; without being fairly written in history, it would be impossible for African Americans to reclaim their racial subjectivity. As aforementioned, Parks perceives that "so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out" ("Possession" 4) in America. She sees that much of African American's stories of suffering and oppression has been forgotten and erased by mainstream culture. According to Parks's notion of history, therefore, restoring racial subjectivity is possible when African Americans can claim their historical presence in American history. Thus, she intends to make African American history more visible and to make

their silenced voices audible through performing her plays on the stage.

Parks's dealing with African American's racial subjectivity is evident in The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World, one of her most abstruse plays which is full of incantatory litanies and ghostlike figures on the stage. Parks prefers to use the term "figures" rather than "characters" in this play (The Death of the Last Black Man 100). Indeed, the play is a kind of ghost story that relates to Black Man With Watermelon and his wife Black Woman With Fried Drum Stick. She is the only living figure in this play. Though Black Man With Watermelon died in the past, he continuously haunts his wife, who cannot comprehend his continued revisitation at first. She thinks he escaped from white executioners, saying, "You got uhway. Thuh lights dimmed but you got uhway. Knew you would" (107). However, though he already died before, Black Man With Watermelon cannot rest in the world of the dead. In fact, he cannot die completely yet. Hence, he continuously haunts her as a ghost because he has, in Rayner and Elam's words, "unfinished business" (451) to accomplish in this world. His wife, Black Woman With Fried Drum Stick, is the only person who can help him to accomplish this unfinished business since she is alive in the present.

This play can be viewed as a ritual process of recovering racial subjectivity both of Black Woman With Fried Drum Stick and of Black Man With Watermelon.

This involves a reciprocal process between them since the Black Man With Watermelon can restore his dismembered body and soul with her help, and, at the same time, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick also can stop her husband's haunting trauma by coming to terms with his death. Since she is the only person/figure alive on the stage, she is the protagonist. Thus, it is appropriate to see this play as her story on the surface level. Because both the black wife and black husband are African Americans, this play is about race. When this play relates to race, however, both of them, as African Americans, can be viewed as protagonists. Both of them achieve their common goal of restoring racial subjectivity in American history, and Black Man With Watermelon can rest as a ghost since he manages to fulfill his unfinished business.

Alice Rayner and Harry J. Elam's interpretation of this play is plausible in many aspects, but there is something with which I do not agree: they view this play as Black Man With Watermelon's merely achieving his identity. Of course, it is true that Black Man With Watermelon's ghost finally achieves rest since he has been remembered and interred properly by his wife in the end – that is, he is remembered in history as he wishes and deserves, plus, he also recovers his identity. However, I would qualify this by noting that this process is more accurately called achieving racial subjectivity, rather than identity. All the figures in this play, including Black

Man With Watermelon and Black Woman With Fried Drumstick, express their autonomous opinions about themselves based on their own life experiences and judgments, not accepting what their dominant oppressors say about them. They deny their oppressors' assessment, prefer to see history, especially regarding race, from their own subjective point of view, and protest that their story is unfairly erased, since it is written from their oppressor's stance. They want to be remembered in history in a fair way. Therefore, the play can be understood as African Americans' quest for racial subjectivity in American history. Thus, this study interprets the play from the perspective of recovering Black Man With Watermelon and Black Woman With Fried Drumstick's racial and historical subjectivity through the dramatic rituals of mourning and funeral for Black Man With Watermelon on the stage.

First of all, the leitmotif theme that penetrates this play centers on the request of "remember me." Black Man With Watermelon's incessant request of "remember me" reverberates on the stage as a keynote throughout the play. Black Man With Watermelon haunts his wife so that she will remember him and his horrible stories of deaths. He is, as his name indicates, the last black man in the world, who symbolizes every black man who has been persecuted, lynched, and oppressed at the hands of white racists in the New World. His death and oppression are common to those Africans who suffered. If his stories are not remembered and written in history, future

generations will not know them. That is why he asks his wife to remember him. His wife, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick, symbolizes contemporary African Americans, yet she simultaneously represents contemporary American society as well as the theater audience, white or black. Of course, she also represents the readers who pore over Parks's play.

Black Man With Watermelon's request of "remember me" has significance in restoring the characters' racial subjectivity in American history, simply because being forgotten means being erased in history. Without being remembered in history, no one can assert or claim his/her racial subjectivity in history: one's significance in life can only be determined through historical records, and if that historical record has been expunged, slanted, or distorted, then obviously the merit and significance of one's life have also been compromised. Because his presence in American history has been erased, Black Man With Watermelon wants to be remembered again. He wants his stories to be recollected and written in American history since this is a starting point to regain his autonomous racial subjectivity. This goes beyond just recovering his identity: it means recovering his real selfhood as an African American – what I call here his racial subjectivity. Therefore, his quest to be remembered in American history can be understood as the playwright's effort to re-insert racial and historical subjectivity into the narrative of the African American people.

Parks contrives a figure, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut, to “comment on the importance of asserting authority over one’s own history, of the need to write that history down” (Rayner and Elam 453). Hatshepsut was the only woman pharaoh in ancient Egypt who ruled Egypt during the seventeenth dynasty. Although she ruled and accomplished remarkable feats in a day when women were not pharaohs, the traces of her stories were erased by her stepson and nephew Thotmes II since he destroyed every remnant of her name and her accomplishments as memorialized on the monuments (Wells 43). Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut says in Panel II of this play, “I left my mark on all I made. My son erase his mothers mark” (116). What Parks suggests here is that the articulation of one’s presence in history is quintessential, since it means being remembered and, through remembrance, one gains and maintains one’s racial subjectivity in history. This is why all the choral figures of this play, who represent oppressed black people including Last Black Man With Watermelon, incessantly demand that Black Woman With Fried Drumstick “should write that [story] down and hide it under uh rock” (111).

The choral figures in this play indicate African Americans’ invisibility in history. Even though these choral figures insist that they once existed, they say that they did not see each other during their time on earth:

Black Woman With Fried Drumstick: Didnt see you. I saw thuh worl.

Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut: I was there.

Lots Of Grease And Lots of Pork: Didnt see you.

Black Woman With Fried Drumstick: I was there.

Black Man With Watermelon: Didnt see you. The black man moves his hands. (104)

Parks is saying through this important exchange that African Americans are invisible in American history. Like Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut, their historical presence and memory have been effaced from the public record. Since they are invisible in history, their voices are not audible, and they have lost their racial subjectivity. This loss embodies Parks's social critique, as well as her notion of history regarding African Americans.

Black Man With Watermelon symbolizes all black people who have been victimized by western racism in the New World. As the archetypical "Black Man" and not an individual black man, he symbolizes every black man who suffered and was killed. This is evidenced in his asking for a larger grave: "Make me uh space 6 feet by 6 feet by 6. Make it big and mark it so as I wont miss it. If you would please, sweetness, uh mass grave-site. Theres company coming soonish" (109). Here he asks for a bigger grave since he has company coming soon. Besides, he exists in the present time as well as in the past – that is, his oppression and death did not end in the

past; they continue in the present. Therefore, “The death of every black man in the past inhabits the death of each black man in the present in the sense that history is lived as a present” (Rayner and Elam 451). He is a universal black man in the world.

Black Man With Watermelon’s atemporal existence can be evidenced in the Voice On Thuh Tee V, which is a figure in this play. He says:

> Good evening. I’m Broad Caster. Headlining tonight: the news: is Gamble Major, the absolutely last living Negro man in the whole entire known world – is dead. Major, Gamble, born a slave, taught himself the rudiments of education to become a spearhead in the Civil Rights Movement. He was 38 years old. News of Majors death sparked controlled displays of jubilation in all corners of the world. (110)

According to Voice On Thuh Tee V, the last black man was born a slave and became a spearhead in the Civil Rights Movement. He exists and dies across long time periods. The repeated eulogy, “Yesterday today next summer tomorrow just uh moment uhgoh in 1317 dieded thuh last black man thuh whole entire world” (102), confirms his atemporal existence as the archetypical black man. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow are all mixed since lineal time does not exist. Black Man With Watermelon’s atemporality is significant since it symbolizes the continuum of African Americans’

experiences, which is the history of oppression. In other words, African Americans, according to Parks, are perpetually frozen in the Middle Passage.

Black Man With Watermelon's death did not end in the past; it continues to go on in present time. Atemporality is a significant dramatic technique that Parks employs, which needs to be recognized by the readers/audience. The figure reiterates his atemporal situation:

> We sittin on this porch right now aint we. Uh huhn. Aaah. Yes. Sittin right here right now on it in it ainthuh first time either iduhnt it. Yep. Nope. Once we was here once wuhduhnt we. Yep. Yep. Once we being here. Uh huhn. Huh. There is uh Now and there is uh Then. Ssall there is. I bein in uh Now: uh Now bein in uh Then: I bein, in Now in Then, in I will be. I was be too but that's uh Then that's past. That me that was-be is uh me-has-been. Thuh Then that was-be is uh has-been-Then too. Thuh me-has-been sits in thuh be-me: we sit on this porch. Same porch. Same me. (126)

Through the Black Man With Watermelon's speech, Parks is saying that the continued history of oppression has existed and continues to exist. There is no time distinction in Black Man With Watermelon's traumatic experiences of being lynched, electrocuted, and hunted down by white oppressors. Black Man With Watermelon's past experience

remains an incessantly haunting trauma in the present, just as it did in the past. There is even a suggestion that it will also exist in the future too, unless it is cured.

The Voice On Thuh Tee V says that news of the last black man's death sparks controlled displays of jubilation in all corners of the world. The world is delighted with his death because he is the last genuine black man as the TV news says. The year 1317, long before Columbus, coincides with the year when, according to Ivan Van Sertima, Africans first started traveling to and trading with America. Sertima, who is an African American historian, providing many sources of documents and evidence, insists that Africans from the Mandingo Empire traveled from western Africa to America and began trading around 1310 (90-107). However, his theory has not been accepted by the mainstream culture, and his voice is not heard anymore. The last black man before Columbus is the real black man, the man who traveled to America before Columbus and who is different from the black men after Columbus' voyage. While the former black man possessed autonomous human dignity and subjectivity, the latter do not since they were slaves. This is the reason, as the TV voice says, why the whole world is jubilant about his death and, simultaneously, why the Black Man With Watermelon's story has to be remembered and re-written into history by the living.

As the play proceeds, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick comes to terms

with her husband's death and understands why he continues to haunt her. She comes to know what he wants her to do. Other figures also urge her to do what Black Man With Watermelon asks her to do: remember me and write down my story. At first, Black Man With Watermelon's body was dismembered from cruel lynches, tortures, and executions which were inflicted on him by whites. In Panel 1, he tells his wife that his present body did not look like his former body: "This thing dont like me! I kin tell whats mines by whats gots my looks" (106). However, when they reconcile with each other, Black Man With Watermelon recovers his dismembered body and is ready to go: "My hands are on my wrists. Arms on elbows. Looks: old-fashioned. Nothing fancy there. Toes curl up not down. My feets-now clean. Still got all my teeth" (128). Re-assembled and cured, he can now take a rest in the world of the dead, because he has accomplished his unfinished business of being remembered. Therefore, at last, he is ready to go.

At the Final Chorus of this play, Black Man With Watermelon's final death becomes clear. Finally, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick accepts that he is dead and at peace, other figures agreeing with her and saying, "yes." Black Woman With Fried Drumstick uses the word "diediduh" (129). The word "diediduh" is different from the "dieded" which she uses earlier. This elongated word symbolizes that the Black Man With Watermelon is really dead now: "He diediduh he did, huh" (129).

What is important in this Final Chorus is Black Woman With Fried Drumstick's question: "Where he gonna go now now now now now that he done diediduh?" (129). My answer is that he went into history, has finally been written into the pages of history as he desired, which means he will be remembered in the public record. Other figures say "blank page" or "thuh page" (129) in this scene. Black Man With Watermelon has been entered into the formerly empty page of history and, through this process, has recovered his racial and historical subjectivity as a black man.

The last scene in my judgment is impressive. Every figure appears in this last scene which looks like a solemn ritual litany. They make one observation: "You will write it down because if you dont write it down then we will come along and tell the future that we did not exist. You will write it down and you will carve it out of a rock" (130). Although there is some variation among their speeches, the common message is the same. Their seemingly innocent observation is really in essence a demand on American mainstream society to remember the Black Man With Watermelon's story.

In addition to characters' demanding to be written in history, Parks employs another way of reclaiming racial subjectivity in this play. I refer to the stage figures who deny their racist names, which, in fact, embody the stereotypes with which the mainstream culture endowed them. Naming someone is important since it can affect others' attitudes toward them as well as their own attitudes toward themselves. It

defines how the outer world sees them and how mainstream society controls them. Thus, it can be a powerful, albeit invisible, oppression to someone who is labeled and harrassed by these stereotypes. Rosenberg comments on this issue:

> The most effective forms of social control are always invisible. Tanks in the streets and armed militia serve as constant reminders that people are not free; furthermore, they provide a focus for anger and an impetus for rebellion. More effective by far are the beliefs and attitudes a society fosters to rationalize and reinforce prevailing distributions of power and opportunity. It is here that stereotypes and ideology have an important role to play. They shape how we see ourselves and others. (511)

As she says, stereotyping can be more powerful in peoples' minds than tanks in the street since it not only lowers self-esteem but also destroys the individual's subjectivity. For the dominant mainstream, such stereotyping rationalizes their discriminating social practices and gives pretenses for inequality. In other words, stereotyping can be a powerful apparatus of oppression: it keeps "the other" subjugated without allowing the mainstream to feel disturbed or uncomfortable by it.

Parks contrives stage figure names related to many typical African American stereotypes in this play. Black Man With Watermelon, Black Woman With Fried

Drumstick, Lots Of Grease And Lots of Pork, and Yes And Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread closely relate to the southern African American food culture. By assigning the figures these stereotypes instead of real names, the playwright criticizes the invisible oppressions that operate in peoples' minds and that disguise the hidden history of oppression against them. These names are rife with racist nuances regarding African Americans. A black man who is eating a watermelon is a well-known African American stereotype that appears in many comic books and magazines. In this racist image, the black man does not have an individual personality and identity as a man but instead is defined by this stereotype which the mainstream fixes on him. In the process, he loses his racial subjectivity as an African American.

The figures on the stage reject and deny such stereotypical names since these names do not signify who they really are and prevent assertion of individuality. It is important to know that "what they signify is not simply the story or history of African Americans but the *spoken* of African Americans" (Rayner and Elam 455). Because of this fact, African Americans deny those iconic racist stereotypes. Black Man With Watermelon repeatedly insists that the watermelon is not his: "This does not belong tuh me. Somebody planted this on me. On me in my hands" (105). As he says, this stereotype has been forced on him by the dominant culture. Another figure, And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger, also refuses his negative stereotypical image: "I

would like tuh be fit in back in thuh storybook from which I camed" (116). He is Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's sensational novel Native Son from the 1940s, who has been identified with an angry, monstrous black man by mainstream American society. These negative images about African Americans function as invisible oppressions and social discriminations in society, and constitute Parks's shrewd critique of racist stereotyping.

The figures named And Before Columbus and Ham also historically relate to African Americans. They are ghostlike choral figures who haunt Black Woman With Fried Drumstick and who represent archetypal ancestors of Africans in African Americans' collective unconsciousness. Christopher Columbus is a well-known European man, often viewed as the first to discover America, the New World. However, he can be viewed from dual perspectives, positive and negative. Depending on historical perspectives, he can be celebrated as the great finder of the New World, or he can be criticized as a chief instigator of brutal colonization in the New World. If someone takes the latter perspective, Columbus can be held responsible for European exploitation, colonization, and even the enslavement of Africans. Parks more or less takes this position in this play.

First of all, in the Overture of this play, Before Columbus manifests his world view, he says, "Back then when they thought the world was flat they were afeared and

stayed at home. They wanted to go out back then when they thought the world was flat but the water had in it dragons of which meaning these dragons they were afeared back then when they thought the world was flat" (103). What he suggests here is that Columbus is responsible for the western colonization and enslavement of Africans. According to this reading, Columbus' voyage and the discovery of the New World are responsible for all the disasters which Africans had to experience.

Ham, who is a biblical character, is also closely related to African Americans and their experiences in the New World. As is well-known in Genesis 9:18-27 in The Holy Bible, the figure Ham is Noah's youngest son who was cursed by his father because he saw Noah's naked body while he was drunk.[1] According to the Bible, Noah cursed him, and his punishment was that Ham's son Canaan would live as a slave to the children of Ham's brothers. This biblical story became the basis for a convincing racial myth and was used by 19th century European slave-traders to justify slavery of Africans who lived below the Sahara desert in Africa since they were considered to be Canaan's cursed descendents.

In Panel IV Second Chorus, however, Ham challenges this myth of biblical oppression through his long, cryptic, and abstruse speech about his genealogy. He explains his complex family relationships which centers on the word "begot." His speech is extremely complex since it contains many biblical-and German-style usages

of language. Furthermore, Ham's monologue contains unexplained footnote numbers and the inexplicable word "Sold" in it:

> SOLD! allyall[9] not tuh be confused w/allus[12] joined w/allthem[3] in from that union comed forth wasshisname[21] SOLD wassername[19] still by thuh reputation uh thistree one uh thuh[2] twins loses her sight through fiddling n falls w/ugly old yuh-fathuh[4] given she[8] SOLD whodat[33] pairs w/you[23] (still polite) of which nothinmuch comes nothinmuch now nothinmuch[6] pairs gone be wentin now w/elle gived us el SOLD let us not forget ye[1-2-5] w/thee[3] given us thou[9-2] who w/thuh they who switches their designation in certain conversation yes they[10] broughted forth. (124)

His speech is so abstract that it is almost impossible for the readers/audience to comprehend it, but its extremely abstruse nature is intentional, since, according to Malkin, "it exposes the ways the trauma of slavery (SOLD) and deprivation of identity (the crazed forms of address) have been hidden by the obscure mechanism of scientific notation, and thus lost as a memorial narrative" (172). Malkin's interpretation of Ham's speech here is plausible since Ham's complex language embodies Parks's diatribe and expose of the dominant culture. As Malkin indicates, this speech places the educated readers of the mainstream culture into the position of

“unlettered” (171) when they see this difficult text. This is a subtle tactic of subversion for both Ham and Parks since this tactic cleverly makes “the lettered” of the western civilization into an “unlettered” status for a moment. Consequently, Ham denies his unfair legacy of a racist curse and stereotyping by saying, “SAINT MINES! Ham. Is. Not. Tuh. BLAME!” (123-24).

Parks’s dramatic strategy of using incomprehensible language in the play is effective for conveying her critical message. The language challenges the mainstream ideology by blaming Columbus and the Western world’s expansion in the past. Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut says, “Before Columbus thuh worl usta be roun they put uh /d/ on thuh end of roun makin round. Thusly they set in motion thuh end. Without that /d/ we coulda gone on spinnin forever” (102). Malkin’s insightful point is that “Parks constructs an elaborate conceit based on the difference between the ‘correct’ written form of the word *round* and its oral sounding in a black diction” (170). The figures refuse to use the grammatical word “round” and prefer to use the ungrammatical word “roun” instead. Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut says the world was “roun” (102) before Columbus, when western colonization started. This suggests that, by adding the grammatical word ending /d/ to “roun,” the western colonizers could “set in motion thuh end” (102) to colonize and enslave Africans. In a sense, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut, who is “instrumental in emphasizing the

importance of the word to the project of the recuperation of identity" (Louis 151), sees that western colonization started with the grammaticality of this one word. In other words, Parks sees that Africans' peaceful paradise and their autonomous racial subjectivity were destroyed by those westerners who had grammatical, "lettered" language. The use of abstruse ungrammatical languages as a means of challenging mainstream culture is one of Parks's unique and powerful dramatic strategies for her social critique. With neologisms, as it is seen in many of her plays, especially in her The Red Letter Plays, Parks challenges mainstream society.

"Note the Death Wound: thuh Great Black Hole": Recreating Racial Subjectivity by Digging up History at "an Exact Replica of the Great Hole of History" in Suzan-Lori Parks's The America Play

Unlike The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World, Suzan-Lori Parks relates a more tangible and specific American historical narrative in The America Play as a way of taking the issue of African Americans' racial subjectivity into unchartered waters. Whereas she recounts the lives of ancient historical figures – Ham, Queen-Then-Pharaoh-Hatshepsut, and Before Columbus – in the former play, she narrates one of the most popular American historical figures, Abraham Lincoln, in this play. Abraham Lincoln, a former president of the U.S., is a famous iconic figure

in American society, and even today he is intricately intertwined with African Americans since he set Africans free from slavery with the historic Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. In a real sense, he is the person who singularly endowed Africans with the status of Americans. Just as she does in The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World, Suzan-Lori Parks, I argue, raises the issue of reclaiming African American racial subjectivity by using this famous American historical figure and his narrative in The America Play. The playwright shows the readers/audience that African Americans are forgotten in American history and that their historical presence is erased in this play. This omission and erasure inevitably lead to African Americans' loss of racial subjectivity. Therefore, I see this play as the playwright's attempt for African Americans to regain their racial subjectivity, and I analyze it from that point of view in this chapter.

Whereas The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World is a kind of abstract mourning and litany, The America Play is more visual, vivid, and earthy. Parks invites the readers/audience to the very site of history on the stage, which the playwright creates and which is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History. Rather than just telling the erased African American history or merely referring to it with language, she actually creates the hole of African American history and makes the audience see it and experience its haunting emptiness; further, she

makes us feel how the African American characters, as the playwright's agents, try to reclaim their racial subjectivity in history. As noted before, Parks again explores one of her dominant themes – namely, that African American history has been erased and forgotten by the mainstream American culture. Thus, she vividly utilizes her unique dramaturgical tactics to "locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, hear the bones sing, write it down" ("Possession" 4). By doing this, she creates a "new historical event" ("Possession" 4-5) in an "incubator," which is a theater for her.

Act 1 opens with a black man's long monologue about himself and his life. His name is The Foundling Father as a black Abraham Lincoln. He impersonates Abraham Lincoln and repeatedly reenacts Lincoln's historic assassination at a theme park called an exact replica of the Great Hole of History of his own making (The America 159). The Foundling Father sometimes calls himself The Lesser Known. The Lesser Known contrasts with "The Great Man" whom he "fakes" at this Great Hole of History. The Great Man refers to the real Abraham Lincoln, the actual former American president. He says, "while the Great Mans livelihood kept him in Big Town the Lesser Knowns work kept him in Small Town. The Great Man by trade was a President. The Lesser Known was a Digger by trade. From a family of Diggers. Digged graves" (The America 160). The Foundling Father originally was a man of a digger family who dug graves as a job, but he moved to the West and now works as an

Abraham Lincoln impersonator at a theme park. The Foundling Father paints his face white, wears a top hat and frock coat like Abraham Lincoln, and fakes his assassination for a penny at a theme park sideshow. In fact, he reenacts the historic event that occurred at Ford's Theater on April 14, 1865, when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth while watching the play Our American Cousin.

There are two reasons that The Foundling Father becomes an Abraham Lincoln impersonator. First, he physically resembles Abraham Lincoln very closely and speaks to the audience about this resemblance in the beginning of the Act 1:

> there was once a man who was told that he bore a strong resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. He was tall and thinly built just like the Great Man. His legs were the longer part just like the Great Mans legs. His hands and feet were large as the Great Mans were large. (159)

The Foundling Father's physique is exactly the same as Abraham Lincoln like "dead ringers" (161). The sensitive readers/audience glimpse Parks's implicit critique of racism toward The Foundling Father here: despite the fact that both men are physically alike as dead ringers, there is inequality. Whereas one man is remembered and revered, the other is forgotten and erased. Through the resemblance between two men, Parks insinuates the racist discrimination that runs through American mainstream culture.

The second reason is that The Foundling Father loves Abraham Lincoln so much after he met him at a theme park during his honeymoon. The Foundling Father saw a historical pageant of Abraham Lincoln at a theme park and became fascinated with that iconic figure of American history:

> So long uhgo. When he and his Lucy were newly wedded and looking for some postnuptial excitement: A Big Hole. A theme park. With historical parades. The size of the hole itself was enough to impress my Digger but it was the Historicity of the place the order and beauty of the pageants which marched by them the Greats on parade in front of them. From the sidelines he'd be calling "Ohwayohwhyohwayoh" and "Hello" and waving and saluting. The Hole and its Historicity and the part he played in it all gave a shape to the life and posterity of the Lesser Known that he could never shake. (162)

His encounter with "the Reconstructed Historicities" (163) through Abraham Lincoln's parade at a theme park makes him fall in love with Lincoln and subsequently makes him leave his family to become an Abraham Lincoln impersonator. He also wants to become the real Abraham Lincoln although he is a black man, which of course makes it impossible. The memory of Abraham Lincoln

remains in his mind “like an echo in his head” (163) from the moment he met him. Hence, he leaves his family and takes a journey to the West.

The Foundling Father’s naïve love for Abraham Lincoln also can be understood as unfair since he incessantly reenacts Abraham Lincoln’s assassination, which is a repeated violent death. His love for Abraham Lincoln and impersonation of his being killed are clearly ironic and incompatible. His repeated assassination can be understood as Parks’s implicit political innuendo. As his son Brazil mentions in the last scene of this play, the bleeding “great black hole in thuh great head” (199) suggests an inequitable reward for his love of Abraham Lincoln. Of course, Abraham Lincoln was a great man who substantially helped African Americans by “the freeing of the slaves” (166), and he should be revered for that. But, before the emancipation, the American nation evidenced a substantial history of oppression and suffering. As it is revealed in Act 2, whereas the mainstream culture of white Americans including Abraham Lincoln is remembered in history, The Foundling Father is buried in his grave, completely forgotten in history with “thuh great black hole in thuh great head” (199). Parks, as an African American playwright, sees this as unfair.

At an exact replica of the Great Hole of History of his own, which is in the theme park, the Foundling Father allows his customers to participate in Abraham Lincoln’s historical assassination. The customers come in, choose a pistol, stand in

position, and finally when the (black) Abraham Lincoln laughs his guffaw “Haw Haw Haw Haw” at a cue, they shoot him (164). When Abraham Lincoln [the Foundling Father] slumps in his chair, the customer jumps from his box as Booth the assassin did and proclaims whatever words they like, such as “Thus to the tyrants!” “The South is avenged!” “Strike the tent,” “Now he belongs to the ages,” or “Theyve killed the president!” (165-70). This pattern repeats several times with little variation during the first Act. As aforementioned, the black Abraham Lincoln’s incessant assassination on the stage is redolent of the continuing racism which Parks exposes and ridicules. This continuing image of assassination is augmented by the constantly echoing sounds of gunshot throughout the play. Parks employs these reverberating gunshots to evoke the image of African Americans’ symbolic social deaths caused by the invisible racist American mainstream culture.

Parks takes the stance of critiquing American mainstream’s racism by contriving the characters’ cynical names – The Foundling Father, The Lesser Known, and The Great Man. The Foundling Father and The Lesser Known, especially, resonate with racism and satiric cynicism as a political pun for the Founding Fathers of America in history. Foundling means an orphan or a child deserted by parents, which implicitly depicts African Americans as orphans in American history. This is an acute political pun that the playwright employs to strongly critique American

mainstream society which, historically, has denied African Americans as its legitimate children. Mary F. Brewer also indicates that African Americans were denied privileges and childhood: “the term ‘foundling’ calls to mind their dissociation from the political parentage of the nation’s Founding White Fathers and other Great Men of U.S. history” (165-66). The Foundling Father, as an orphan of America, does not inherit the same privileges and reverence as other white great Americans, like white Abraham Lincoln. As noted before, The Foundling Father is a dead ringer for Abraham Lincoln, loves him ardently, and therefore impersonates him. Nonetheless, whereas white Abraham Lincoln is well remembered, written about, and revered in American history as a great man, The Foundling Father is forgotten. The playwright implies that The Foundling Father’s racial subjectivity in American history has been lost for this reason. More than that, the black man merely exists to draw attention to the famous white man; in other words, as “a consummate ‘faker’” (Savran, Playwright’s Voice 142), he is simply the instrument, unimportant in and of itself, to draw attention to and further celebrate the white man.

As an orphan, the Foundling Father does not have his racial subjectivity in American history. He merely fakes Abraham Lincoln’s life, just as his life merely mimics others: “Digging was his livelihood but fakin was his callin” (179). He does not have his selfhood in life. The loss of the Foundling Father’s racial subjectivity is

revealed by his absence and void in American history. Although he existed, his memories cannot be found since he does not have his legitimate historical presence in official American history. According to Parks's notion, most American canons, whether social, historical, or literary, are centered on this white racial supremacy. Because African Americans are marginalized and omitted in much of American history, they, according to Parks, do not have their legitimate inheritance and right to be written fairly in history as descendants of the Founding Fathers of the nation like white Americans. This, in turn, leads to African Americans' loss of racial subjectivity.

Parks attempts to reclaim African Americans' racial subjectivity in American history using the leitmotif of a digger in The America Play. Parks adopts the metaphor of digging to demonstrate African Americans' symbolic search for racial subjectivity on the stage. From his first monologue in Act 1, the readers/audience already know that the Foundling Father was a competent digger by trade in his small town. He was good at digging graves as he says: "He was known in Small Town to dig his graves quickly and neatly. This brought him a steady business" (160). The connotation of a digger here is that he is like an archeologist who delves out something important and meaningful from the past. Like an archeologist searching for historical relics, the Foundling Father digs up the Great Hole of History in order to find his history and memory. As Malkin indicates, his performance of digging up on the stage symbolizes

"the search of relics of a black American presence (and past)" (175). Parks explains this symbolism of digging in an interview with David Savran:

> Writing for me is so much like archaeology. That's why I like The America Play so much. The whole action of the play is exactly like what writing it was. Brazil is digging because I was digging. They put things together as I was putting things together. (Playwright's Voice 161)

Thus, this performance can be interpreted as Park's figurative search for her racial subjectivity which has been buried in the Great Hole of History.

In Act 2, when The Foundling Father is dead, the digging job is handed down to his son Brazil and his wife Lucy. Brazil and Lucy came to the West in search of their lost father and husband. They find The Foundling Father's grave and try to dig up his bones. Because of the symbolic importance of digging, this digging job at the hole cannot be stopped. Brazil clearly knows that "this Hole is our inheritance of sorts" (185). He, as a successive digger, receives a spade and takes up the duty of digging:

> Lucy : Dont weep. Got something for ya.
>
> Brazil : (o)?
>
> Lucy : Spade. –. Dont scrunch up your face like that, son. Go on.

Take it.

Brazil : Spade?

Lucy : Spade. He woulda wanted you tuh have it.

Brazil : Daddys digging spade? Ssnnuch.

Lucy : Iswannee you look more and more and more and more like him every day. (190)

Receiving a spade can be interpreted as Brazil's undertaking the mission to fulfill his father's unaccomplished job. He symbolically accepts the task to keep digging in search of his father's memory and history. Under the incessant loud echoing of gunshots, Lucy urges Brazil to keep on digging: "Dig on, son. Cant stop digging till you dig up something" (176). Since Lucy is good at hearing the echo and sound of the dead, she recognizes The Foundling Father's grave and his sound. They are excited with the expectation of finding the Foundling Father's relics: "Ff Pa was here weud find his bones. [. . .] Thereud be his bones and thereud be thuh Wonders surrounding his bones" (177). Therefore, Brazil's performance of digging is a symbolic effort of finding their racial subjectivity as well as their father's memory in American history.

Unfortunately, however, what they excavate from the grave is not the "Wonders" they expected. What they find at the Great Hole of History is just the debris of American history, which is mainly about white Americans. With

disappointment, Brazil makes a long list of relics that he dug up from the hole:

> A Jewel Box made of cherry wood, lined in velvet, letters ‘A. L.’ carved in gold on thuh lid: [. . .] one of Mr. Washington’s bones, [. . .] his wooden teeth, [. . .] uh bust of Mr. Lincoln carved of marble lookin like he looked in life. [. . .] Uh glass tradin bead -- one of thuh first. [. . .] uh dried scrap of whales blubber. [. . .] several documents: peace pacts, writs, bills of sale, treaties, notices, hand-bills and circulars, freeing papers, summonses, declarations of war, addresses, title deeds, obits, long lists of dids. And thuh medals: [. . .] For skills in whittlin, for skills in painting and drawing, for uh knowledge of sewin, of handicrafts and building things, for leather tannin, blacksmithery, lacemakin, horseback riding, swimmin, [. . .] Community Service. For cookin and for cleanin. For bowin and scrapin. (185-86)

These are nothing but relics of American history. Brazil is disappointed with this detritus of American history because he finds that his father’s traces only relate to the history of slavery. Brazil and Lucy recognize that the Foundling Father’s presence was erased in history, except as it relates to slavery. They realize that, as Elizabeth V. A. Helman indicates, these relics only represent the materialistic American culture of

the past, which reveals white racial supremacy (87). The Great Hole of History is nothing but “a void, an absence, a Hole” (Savran, Playwright’s Voice 142), where African Americans’ inheritance of freedom and equality is thoroughly denied. Una Chaudhuri also sees this hole as “the black hole of racism” (263). Brazil cannot find any of his father’s racial subjectivity as an African American in the Great Hole of History since his history was erased. Furthermore, no one remembers him and mourns his death. The Foundling Father’s unmourned and unremembered death reinforces the fact that his life was just a faking of Abraham Lincoln, the white iconic American. Thus, Brazil feels sorry about this miserable fact and mourns his father’s death: “His lonely death and lack of proper burial is our embarrassment. [. . .] Diggin was his livelihood but fakin was his callin” (179). He realizes that “black history is an absence, a gap, a crater, a grave” (Malkin 175). Out of disappointment and pity for his father, Brazil finally bursts out crying at the hole:

Brazil: This could be his.

Lucy: Could well be.

Brazil (Rest. Rest.) : waaaaaahhhhhhhHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

HUH HEE HUH HEE HUH HEE HUH.

Lucy: There there, Brazil. Dont weep.

Brazil: WAHHHHHHHHH! – imissim – WAHHHHHHHHH!

Lucy: It is an honor to be of his line. He cleared this plot for us.

He was uh Digger.

Brazil: Huh huh huh. Uh Digger.

Lucy: Mr. Lincoln was his favorite. (186)

Therefore, through the emptiness of the hole on the stage, Parks visually shows to the audience the absence of African American racial subjectivity in the American historical narrative.

Brazil, however, as Parks's agent, dramatically restores The Foundling Father's racial subjectivity in American history at the end of Act 2. He prepares his father's proper funeral with Lucy. At this scene, although the Great Hole of History turns out to be empty for him, he changes this emptiness into meaningfulness. He calls this empty grave "the Hall of Wonders," addressing the audience with "Welcome Welcome Welcome to thuh hall. Of. Wonders" (198). The Foundling Father's empty grave changes into the hall of wonders by Brazil's authorization and granting it a new significance. This is an act of remaking The Foundling Father's historical presence and his racial subjectivity. In spite of emptiness and oblivion, Brazil autonomously creates a new meaning for his father's life.

The Great Hole of History functions as the place of rebirth in this scene. Like a woman's reproductive genitalia, the hole symbolically births a new history of The

Foundling Father as a subject, not an object. As noted before, Parks declares that her theater is like an incubator for the creation of new historical events. Likewise, she uses this hole to remake history through her dramatic imagination, an interpretation which is supported by Elizabeth Brown-Guillory: “Great Hole of History symbolizes the rupture created by the Middle Passage” (194). Brown-Guillory indirectly argues that the Great Hole of History is a symbol for the female vagina in this play. This assertion is plausible and can be justified by Parks's saying, “people have asked me why I don’t put any sex in my plays. ‘The Great Hole of History’ – like, duh.” (“From Elements” 16). Therefore, the Great Hole of History functions like a woman’s womb and becomes the site of remaking history through rebirth.

Brazil paradoxically eulogizes The Foundling Father’s life and his presence in American history in the last scene. He makes him an American hero who is qualified to be revered like Abraham Lincoln. He approves his life and asks the readers/audience to take note of his historical presence in American history:

> To my right: our newest Wonder: One of thuh greats Hisself! Note: thuh body sitting propped upright in our great Hole. Note the large mouth opened wide. Note the hat and frock coat, just like the greats. Note the death wound: thuh great black hole – thuh great black hole in thuh great head. – And how this great head is bleedin. – Note: thuh

last words. – And thuh last breaths. – And how thuh nation mourns –

(199)

Brazil's speech can be viewed as extremely ironic. Urging the readers/audience to remember his father's life and death, he asks the whole nation to take note of the Foundling Father's great black hole in his head and his last breath, which is the scar that he received from racist American history. Brazil postulates and asks the audience to "Note how thuh nation mourns" (199) for him in this last speech. The paradox of his speech culminates here because, in reality, no one mourns his death. No one in the nation or in the audience remembers him, grieves for him, or pays attention to his death wound, the great hole in his head, or even his last words. Therefore, Brazil's last speech can be understood as Parks's searing invective against American mainstream society, which does not mourn the death of The Foundling Father. Brazil's speech embodies Parks's silent but powerful protest against America's effacement of black history and against the loss of African American racial subjectivity. At the same time, this is Parks's dramatic endeavor to reinstate African Americans' racial subjectivity in American history.

Class and Suzan-Lori Parks's The Red Letter Plays

Suzan-Lori Parks's The Red Letter Plays, which contains both In the Blood and Fucking A, can be viewed as her most subversive plays. The Red Letter Plays are Parks's contemporary American urban version of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, which is one of the most well-known and canonized American novels. By replacing white characters such as Hester Prynne, Arthur Dimmesdale, and Roger Chillingworth with contemporary black surrogate characters – Hester La Negrita, Reverend D. and Chilli – Parks critiques mainstream American society. Just as Hawthorne uses a white female Hester Prynne to critique the hypocrisy of 17th century puritanical American society, which was the mainstream at that time, Parks contrives a black Hester to satirize contemporary American mainstream culture in The Red Letter Plays.

Parks's dramatic strategy of rewriting Hawthorne's Hester and her suffering can be accepted as a subversive critique of contemporary society. While many readers/audience remember white Hester Prynne's scarlet letter 'A' and her suffering, few of them know Hester La Negrita and Hester Smith's scarlet letter 'A's; that is, they do not know about Hester La Negrita's scarlet letter 'A' written with her beloved son's blood in In the Blood , nor are they familiar with Hester Smith's scarlet letter A, which is deeply branded into her skin as a penalty of her hungry son's stealing some meat in Fucking A. Parks's view is that white Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's novel is

not the sole American woman who has suffered at the hands of dominant mainstream culture. Rather, as African American women, Hester La Negrita and Hester Smith are under harsher and triple oppressions – racial, economic, and sexual. This social critique in The Red Letter Plays is realized through her black surrogate characters. Parks's rewriting of The Scarlet Letter provides a powerful and poignant diatribe.

However, there are some ambiguities or limitations in analyzing Suzan-Lori Parks's The Red Letter Plays from the perspective of American black racism. In these plays, the conflicts between the dominant mainstream white culture and the marginalized blacks are relatively vague and obscure. Although African-American characters, including the two Hesters, are oppressed by the white mainstream, the oppressors are not necessarily white Americans. Sometimes, African Americans are victimized or oppressed by other African Americans. Furthermore, the victims are not necessarily all African Americans – that is, the whites are also oppressed. For instance, Hester La Negrita 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 In the Blood. For Hester Smith's case in Fucking A, although she is oppressed, it is not clear whether the oppressors are white or black. Besides, Canary Mary, who is also oppressed by The Mayor as his kept woman and who is Hester Smith's best friend, is a white girl in this play. White and black demarcations in these two plays, in

short, are not clear. The shaping of conflicts obscures the clear-cut racial confrontations as a binary dichotomy of white and black. Therefore, another lens is needed to analyze them and to achieve a deeper understanding of these complicated plays.

Elizabeth Victoria Ann Helman's study of Suzan-Lori Parks's plays, which employs the lens of Zygmunt Bauman's theory, is, in my judgment, plausible and convincing. Helman analyzes Parks's plays from the perspective of economic class stratification using Bauman's theory of consumerism and globalization:

> Among critics who focus on the cultural impact of globalization, Bauman provides a provocative parallel to Parks' drama in his analysis of contemporary society. Like Bauman, Parks reveals the pitfalls of contemporary consumerism, its effect on human relationships, and the failings of modernist universalism. While reading Parks through Bauman's work sometimes overlaps with other forms of critique such as postcolonial or feminist readings, drawing on Bauman's description of globalization augments understanding of her characters and worlds as concretely relevant to current socio-political conditions. Application of an analysis of the social effects of globalization to Parks' dramatic vision reveals a deep concern for the

> privileged and marginalized alike as they move from the present reality to an uncertain but shared fate. (Helman 10)

Bauman's famous metaphor of "tourists" and "vagabonds" is especially well applied in Helman's discussion of Parks's plays. Regarding the class issues, Bauman argues in his book, Globalization: The Human Consequences, that there are two categories of people in modern consumer society, tourists and vagabonds. The tourists are the privileged group of people who can buy and consume any products they want. They can go wherever they choose, enjoy the fruits of material modern life, and are welcomed wherever they go. The vagabonds, on the other hand, are the less privileged group of people who cannot buy and consume products because they are economically disadvantaged. They have to move on, not by their own choices, but by their primary need to find a shelter. Not welcomed by society wherever they go, they are denied access to most comforts or services that modern consumer society can offer. Their lives, as a result, are miserable and oppressed by the tourists. Ironically, however, the vagabonds worship the tourists and aspire to become like them although they are victimized by the tourists who desire to maintain their prosperity (Bauman 77-102). According to Bauman, the individual's ability to consume is the most important factor to become a "tourist" in modern consumer society because "the way present-day society shapes its members is dictated first and foremost by the duty to

play the role of the consumer" (80). Capitalist consumer society divides people into economic classes according to their economic wealth and marginalizes the economically less privileged people as "others." Thus, distinct social strata and divisions exist; people are not melted into one class in society. In terms of this nomenclature, Parks's characters in The Red Letter Plays can be divided into "the tourists" and "the vagabonds." Even among African Americans, there is a clear class stratification or distinction between "the tourists" and "the vagabonds." With this metaphorical point of view, the Baumanian lens is quite appropriate for analyzing Parks's The Red Letter Plays in light of class as well as racial issues.

Helman's point of view on Parks's The Red Letter Plays is similarly insightful. As impoverished "vagabonds" and social rejects in a highly capitalized consumer society, Parks's two Hesters are "the others," since they are shunned and oppressed by the mainstream "tourists" in these worlds of the plays. However, my interpretation of these plays is different from Helman's, in that Parks's African American Hesters are not just simple victims of oppressive capitalist society in these plays. They challenge their economic oppressions and try to recover their autonomous subjectivity in their lives, even though they are under the hardships of harsh socio-economic oppressions. Although the mainstream marginalizes them and otherizes them, Parks's Hesters quest for their autonomy and subjectivity in life. Therefore, I

will discuss Parks's The Red Letter Plays from this perspective in this chapter.

"Between Us and Them, Between Our Kind and Their Kind": Class Stratification and the Quest for Subjectivity in Suzan-Lori Parks's In the Blood

In the Blood, as noted before, is Suzan-Lori Parks's urban version of Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. While The Scarlet Letter keys on the white Hester Prynne, this play is about the black Hester La Negrita, who has five fatherless children. Hester La Negrita is an impoverished African American woman who lives with her young children: Jabber, Bully, Trouble, Beauty, and Baby. Her home is under the bridge, and the word "slut" is scrawled on a wall by someone (In the Blood 9). Whereas white Hester's scarlet letter A is written on her bosom, black Hester's infamous scarlet letter is written on the wall of her house. Just as Hawthorne's Hester appears with public shame and mockery with her illegitimate daughter Pearl, Parks's Hester La Negrita also appears on the stage under the mockery of all people with her "Newborn Baby in her arms" (7).

In the beginning and at the end of this play, all the characters except Hester appear as a chorus. They mock and criticize her as the "normative chorus of social voice" (Fraden 440), which is much stronger in Parks's play than in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. Their voice symbolizes the judgment and ostracism that make Hester

"the other" of mainstream American society. People's sneering at Hester shows the readers/audience how the mainstream society sees her in the prologue. Spitting at her, they sneer at her in the prologue:

> SHE GOT FIVE OF THEM
>
> FIVE BRATS
>
> AND NOT ONE OF THEM GOT A DADDY
>
> PAH! [. . .]
>
> SHE MARRIED?
>
> SHE AINT MARRIED
>
> SHE DONT GOT NO SKILLS
>
> CEPT ONE
>
> CANT READ CANT WRITE. (6)

As they say, Hester is not married but has five fatherless children. She is illiterate and does not have any skills to financially support herself and her children except one thing. She is in a shiftless and hopeless situation. In other words, she is viewed as a "BURDEN TO SOCIETY, HUSSY, and SLUT" (7) by mainstream society.

Mocked and shunned by people because she is sexually promiscuous, Hester does not have "A PENNY TO HER NAME" (7). This economic status makes her an alienated person in the dominant culture. As Bauman's metaphor says, whereas

mockers are economically privileged “tourists,” Hester is the “vagabond,” who represents the socio-economically impoverished underclass:

HERE SHE COMES

MOVE ASIDE

WHAT SHE GOTS CATCHY

LET HER PASS

DONT GET CLOSE

YON DONT WANNA LOOK LIKE YOU KNOW HER

STEP OFF! (7)

People shrink from her and draw an invisible class line between themselves and Hester. Significantly, their otherization of Hester is mainly based on Hester’s poverty-stricken economic status rather than on her sexual promiscuity.

This is evidenced by the fact that no one involved in Hester’s otherization is free from sexual immorality, either. As the play progresses, it is revealed that every person that mocks Hester as a slut is also indeed responsible for her sexual promiscuity. Through confessions, they make it clear that “each of them has literally screwed Hester by profiting from their sexual exploitation of her” (Geis 81). They sexually take advantage of Hester by using their superior socio-economic status. Weinert posits that “everyone who is economically better off than Hester takes

advantage of her" (8). 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 sexual immorality. Rather, their irresponsible sexual exploitation has aggravated Hester's economic poverty and suffering.

Parks's dramatic tactic of double casting implicitly suggests the mutual responsibility for Hester's socio-economic oppression. Chilli, the father of Jabber, also plays the part of Jabber. Likewise, Reverend D., who is Baby's father, plays the part of Baby. Parks's dramaturgical apparatus ingeniously signifies that every adult character is responsible for Hester's young children in this play: they result from the seeds which the adults metaphorically and literally sowed in the past. Therefore, by contriving double casting like this, Parks shows that, in a broader sense, society itself is responsible for Hester's suffering. Although they hypocritically deny 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" (5), in fact, it is not true. Such moral lapses are part of their experience too. Just as Hawthorne accuses puritanical American society for their hypocrisy in the past, here Parks too attacks the hypocrisy of contemporary American mainstream culture. Although they are involved in Hester's sexual life as partners, they criticize her, mock her, and judge her, writing the word "slut" on the wall of her home. On the contrary,

however, their hidden deeds are more blameworthy and repulsive than Hester's because they take advantage of a poor woman's helpless situation merely to gratify and satiate their greedy impulses. Furthermore, as Doctor reveals in his confession in Scene 2, he sexually exploits her, but Hester emotionally bonds in a sacrificial manner:

> she gave herself to me in a way that I had never experienced
>
> even with women Ive 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. (44-5)

In a real sense, Hester gives real love to Doctor, whereas he is merely interested in exploitive, mechanical sex. Contrary to Doctor's selfishness, Hester needs him as a human being to love, not as an object to exploit. Some people may criticize her as sexually promiscuous, but Parks makes us the audience consider that Hester's sexual promiscuity is a pardonable sin since it results from emotional passion, whereas Doctor's sin is comparatively unpardonable since he intentionally exploits her sexuality and her helplessly poor condition. Besides, while Hester's transgressions are openly condemned by the word "slut" on her house wall, Doctor's sin is hidden and

concealed behind the pristine face of hypocrisy. Other characters' cases are similar in this play. This is what Parks makes clear in In the Blood which functions like a jeremiad.

The characters' confessions reveal their hidden desires and hypocritical deeds which they have committed with Hester. Through the dramatic apparatus of confession, Parks allows the readers/audience to know what happened between Hester and other characters in the past. In the first scene of confession, Doctor, symbolizing that august social institution which helps people in need, confides that "at first I wouldnt touch her without gloves on, but then – (Rest) we did it once in that alley there" (44). Although he is stingy in helping her belly ache with a few medicines, he takes advantage of her sexually. Welfare Lady, who is another symbol of institutionalized social help for the poor like Hester, in fact, is not helpful to Hester at all. As she says, "the world is not here to help us, Hester. [. . .] We must help ourselves" (59). On the contrary, she also exploits Hester's labor and sexuality for herself, confessing that she invited Hester to her home for a cup of tea and had a threesome with her husband for "a little spice" (61). 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.

Reverend D., who feels like one of the pilgrims and wants to build a

magnificent church, also exploits Hester's sexuality. Ironically, when a helpless woman comes to him with "four fatherless mouths," he confesses, "Add insult to injury was what I was thinking" (78). Later, when Hester visits him with his two-year-old Baby to ask for some help, he urges 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 notify the authorities, promising her "a much larger amount of money" (51). He does not keep his promise at all; rather, in the end he rebukes her as a slut. Doctor, Welfare Lady, and Reverend D. are all names of specific social institutions that are supposedly dedicated to help those in need like Hester. However, far from being helpful, they use Hester for their selfish satisfaction. Of course, some readers/audience might feel that this is too exaggerated, even caricatured, but Parks sees such exploitation as normative in a corrupt capitalist consumer society like contemporary America. To emphasize her point, Parks clearly articulates the place and time of this play as "Here and Now" (3) in the text.

Hester's oppressors are not necessarily white Americans; as noted earlier, some of them are African Americans. To approach this play merely through the lens of racism, thus, is not appropriate; this play addresses the theme of socio-economic class just as insistently. Welfare Lady, who is African American, makes this socio-economic class issue clear in her dialogue with Hester. Asking Hester to get a hysterectomy, she

emphasizes “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” (56) – a model of ideal living which Hester cannot achieve since she is an impoverished underclass woman. These are the factors that socio-economically divide the tourist Welfare Lady and the vagabond Hester. What Welfare Lady condescendingly recommends here are the privileges that only tourists can enjoy in a capitalist consumer society. Hester cannot achieve these benefits since she is a part of the marginalized underclass. Hester, thus, functions as a foil that underscores Welfare Lady’s socio-economic superiority. Although it is Welfare Lady’s official duty to help Hester, she does not really help her, on the contrary, making Hester feel class distinction more clearly and deepening her alienation as an impoverished woman in a capitalist society. This class distinction between the two becomes more evident in Welfare Lady’s 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. (60-1)

As Welfare Lady says, there is clear class distinction between “us and them” and

between “our kind and their kind” in society. There are two categories of people, the privileged and the underclass. Besides, society demands mutual respect for that well-drawn boundary between both groups for the balance of the system and security. Another important fact in Parks’s plays is that the class line is based on the individual’s socio-economic status, not race. Welfare Lady, along with Reverend D. and Chilli, is an African American like Hester in this play.

According to Bauman, the presence of poor people like Hester draws attention to a social problem which may cause some discomfort to the privileged people. Because poor people can be “a threat and an obstacle to order” (Bauman 109) in society, the mainstream feels the need to solve this threatening problem and find a workable remedy. In fact, 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 the reason why The Higher Ups asks Welfare Lady and Doctor to perform a hysterectomy on Hester. The Higher Ups, as Doctor says, want “results! Solutions! Solutions! Solutions!” (38). However, a hysterectomy involves the removal of Hester’s uterus from her body, which symbolically entails the destruction of her body and self. This affects Hester’s independent subjectivity in life. Because of this, from Parks’s point of view in this play, 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. Needless to say, this class stratification goes against the idea of the melting pot.

However, Parks does not depict Hester La Negrita as merely a submissive woman. Hester La Negrita is portrayed as a strong and resolute woman in spite of her difficult conditions in life. Although she is victimized by socio-economic oppressions, she has an independent subjectivity in her life – that is, she seeks after her own autonomy and self-esteem. She has her own point of view to see her life, which is different from the mainstream's point of view. First of all, she declares her newborn Baby as "My treasure. My joy" (7), despite the fact that the mainstream culture mocks her and calls her a slut when she first appears on the stage. Her love for and affirmation of the baby represent a strikingly different point of view from that of the mainstream society, which sees the baby as a shame who furthers her hardship. This independent point of view, which causes her to see her baby as her treasure and joy, makes Hester a subjective individual, although she is impoverished in capitalist American society. When Welfare Lady demands that she should go to the shelter and get a hot meal, Hester refuses: "The shelter hassles me. Always prying in my business. Stealing my shit. Touching my kids" (55). Hester wants her independent life free from

meddling from others.

Hester's autonomous subjectivity becomes evident in the story which she tells to her children. Like a normal mother, she faithfully devotes herself to feeding, supporting, and playing with her children; in fact, she starves herself to feed her children. After feeding them, she reads a story to them. From her story of five brothers and Princess, the readers/audience notice how subjective a woman she is:

> There were once these five brothers [. . .] And there was this Princess. And she lived in a castle and she was lonesome. She was lonesome and looking for love but she couldnt leave her castle [. . .] And one day the five brothers heard her and came calling and she looked upon them and she said: "There are five of you, and each one is wonderful and special in his own way. But the law of my country doesnt allow a princess to have more than one husband." And that was such bad news and they were all so in love that they all cried. Until the Princess had an idea. She was after all the Princess, so she changed the law of the land and married them all. (19-20)

Metaphorically, this story relates to herself and her five children, and can be interpreted as her rationalization for her sexual promiscuity and for her having five fatherless children. Nevertheless, Hester's story shows her autonomous point of view

and self-determination. Since she is the “Princess” in her life, she can change the law and marry the five brothers according to her independent need and decision. Regardless of the mainstream culture’s point of view, Hester bravely quests for her subjectivity in life.

This quest starts from her trying to learn the English alphabet. 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 (Solomon 75-6). Thus, Hester tries to learn the alphabet from her eldest son Jabber to overcome this oppression. Although Jabber teaches her several times by saying, “Legs apart hands crost the chest like I showd you. Try again” (11), she cannot go beyond “A” yet. She is learning the first letter A at the beginning of the play and is still doing so at the end of this play. The fact that Hester cannot go beyond the letter “A” symbolically suggests that she cannot overcome the social stigma of the infamous adulterer, emblematized in the letter A. Nevertheless, Hester’s yearning for literacy can be interpreted as her quest for the subjectivity of her life.

The most striking evidence of Hester’s quest for her subjectivity can be found in her killing Jabber, the oldest son, by beating him with a club on the stage. As many critics say, this scene is the most incomprehensible and controversial in this play since

it is such a violent and brutal scene of murder by a mother. Hester has shown the readers/audience how much she loves her children and how much she sacrifices herself for her children during the previous scenes. She even starves herself to feed them and becomes sick because of the lack of nutrition. How, then, could she brutally beat her first son Jabber to death?

Hester's killing of Jabber can be understood as a desperate act of defending her self-esteem, holding on to her own views, and preserving her human dignity as a woman and also her subjectivity as a mother. From Scene 1, Hester wants to know the meaning of the word "SLUT" which people scrawled on the wall of her home. Whenever she asks Jabber, "Zit uh good word or a bad word?" (9), he continually refuses to answer her question. At the end of the play, however, when Jabber sees his mother being insulted by Reverend D. who calls her a slut, he finally tells what he knows:

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 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. (103-04)

The social meaning of the derogatory word “slut” is completely different from what Hester thinks of herself. As it is seen in her fairy tale, she does not think of herself as a proverbial slut as the mainstream culture sees and judges her; rather, she subjectively considers herself as the Princess of her own land. Because of this, she cannot, as a way of saving her flagging self-esteem, accept the fact that her own beloved son evaluates her from the world’s perspective. Her dignity and her subjectivity, which she has cherished until now, will not tolerate the contamination of her inner world by these external and hostile views which she cannot accept. Despite Hester’s repeated warnings of “shut up,” Jabber continues to say “Slut” and asks, “You said if I read it yuod say what it means. Slut. Whassit mean?” (105). Finally,

when Jabber says, “I know what it means” (105) to her, Hester cannot but brutally kill him with a club.

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, Media to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his “rightful” position in his society. (4)

Seen from Miller’s point of view, Hester La Negrita is a contemporary American tragic hero, and Suzan-Lori Parks’s In the Blood can be understood as a modern American tragedy. She sacrifices her most precious “treasure,” Jabber, in order to keep her human dignity. As a mother, her first son Jabber is more precious than life itself and her “treasure and joy” (7). Nevertheless, she sacrifices this treasure to secure her personal dignity, which means her autonomous subjectivity in life. Hester stands alone on the stage wet with her son’s blood and his body. “Grief-stricken, she cradles his body. Her hands wet with blood, she writes an ‘A’ on the ground” (106).

Although she is the less privileged, downtrodden African American woman, Hester, like classical tragic heroes, evokes in her readers/audience horror and pity in the Aristotelian sense of the word.

Hester La Negrita challenges the mainstream's view of her personal life, class stratification, and the oppression which the capitalist society imposes on her. Although she is mocked and shunned by mainstream society, Hester does her best to make her own life as a good mother and woman according to self-made norms. She stubbornly refuses to be judged by the mainstream's social norms, even if she has to sacrifice her beloved son for it. Although she is an impoverished underclass woman, she defends her selfhood the best way she knows how. In this play, neither the mainstream nor Hester wants to be melted as one: a distinct difference in class exists.

The Power of Money in the Formation of Class and Social Justice and Resistance in Suzan-Lori Parks's Fucking A

Suzan-Lori Parks's Fucking A is a bizarre story of Hester Smith who is another version of Hester Prynne from Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. Like Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Hester Smith also is forced to wear a scarlet letter A, which is branded above her left breast and which "weeps as a fresh wound would" (Fucking A 125). Unlike Hawthorne's Hester, however, her scarlet letter A symbolizes

her despised job as an abortionist, not as an adulterer. The Hunters, who represent the mainstream of the play, abominate her since she, as an abortionist, is a baby-killer. Hester Smith's scarlet letter A is "deeply branded into her skin" (117) like an animal, which shows her extremely othered social class. As a social reject, Hester is under the triple oppressions in this play: the burden of poverty, the loss of her son, and the unspeakably abhorred social role of abortionist. With many images of blood, killing, and cruel torture, this play is violent and bizarre to us the contemporary readers/audience. The social norms and justice of the world, as depicted in the play, are arbitrary and incomprehensible.

Gerald Rabkin understands Fucking A as "a mythic parable in a Brechtian style," which is "set in 'a small town in a small country in the middle of nowhere'" ("Fucking A"). Whereas Parks indicates the setting of the play as "Here and Now" in In the Blood, she does not articulate the setting of this play in the text. Because of this, it is like a dark fable that can be universally applied to any place and era. It is not appropriate to simply approach Fucking A from the angle of racism because racial distinction is actually obscure in this play. Although Hester Smith and Monster are African Americans, Canary Mary, who is another oppressed woman, is white. Mayor, First Lady, Hunters, and Freedom Fund Lady are also not racially clear. On the contrary, just as In the Blood, this play is mainly about social class stratification based

on the economic power of money and the economic oppression of the lower class rather than on racism per se. Although Parks does not clarify the setting of the play in the text, Fucking A can be read/viewed as her social critique of contemporary capitalist America along with her other red letter play, In the Blood. This is plausible since every play mirrors the society that it describes. Parks's dramas, especially The Red Letter Plays, also can be read/viewed as her acidic and relevant critiques of contemporary society. Therefore, Parks's Fucking A is an implicit representation of capitalist American society where the power of money determines socio-economic class, human relationships, and even social justice.

Hester Smith, an illiterate, impoverished single mother, saves her money to buy the freedom of her son Monster, who has been incarcerated in prison for stealing some meat from a rich family when he was a young boy. His name is Boy, but society calls him Monster. Although he stole some meat out of hunger from the rich family for which Hester works, Rich Girl sent Boy to prison "with a flick of her little Rich Girl finger" (124) in spite of Hester's begging for mercy. Hester makes a scar on Boy's arm and her own by biting at the same place, so that she can identify him later. For her son's petty theft of meat, Hester is forced to choose either to become an abortionist, to wear the branded scarlet letter A on her breast, or to go to prison. Hester chooses to work as an abortionist and earn money in order to buy her son's freedom by paying

gold coins to the Freedom Fund. In this city, “Freedom Aint Free!” (131).

As noted in the previous chapter, Zygmunt Bauman’s powerful metaphor of “tourists and vagabonds” is appropriate to explain this dystopian capitalist world revealed in Fucking A. In his book, Globalization: The Human Consequences, Bauman explains class stratification and inequality in light of an individual’s economic ability to consume in the capitalist consumer society (77-102), which shows the power of money. In this society, social class is stratified according to an individual’s power to access money and wealth. Hester Smith and Monster are typical “vagabonds” in this play. They are shunned and abhorred by The First Lady and Hunters, who are wealthy mainstream “tourists.” Hester and Boy suffer as an abortionist and a runaway convict/social monster because they are economically poor. Since Hester and Boy are poor, Boy steals some food from the rich family, and because of this larceny, he goes to prison. Since Hester needs to buy her son’s freedom from prison, she has to work as an abortionist even though she is shunned as a baby-killer. In addition to this, she faces the disgrace of being raped by Jailbait, whom she mistakes as her son Boy. In the last scene 30 years later, as soon as she meets Monster, she kills him with his knife to save him from the pain of being tortured alive by cruel Hunters. All these tragic events happen to Hester’s family since they are economically poor.

While Hester and Monster are members of the socio-economic underclass, the "vagabonds," Mayor and First Lady are rich "tourists" in this play. Interestingly, good morality is not necessary to become a "tourist" in this world. The text shows that Mayor is not a person who has good morality as mayor of the city. On the contrary, selfish, dominant, and evil, he has a kept woman, Canary Mary, who is his mistress on the pretense of his wife's barrenness. He audaciously has a sexual relationship with Canary in his house in the face of his wife, First Lady. He wants to expel his wife and insults her: "Yr a disgrace to the nation. Everyone agrees. I should remove you from our townhouse and put you in our country house" (129). Furthermore, in Scene 7, he even conspires to murder her with his mistress Canary:

> **Mayor**
>
> I cant think of rings right now.
>
> Planning a murder takes a lot of thought. Shes got to be wiped out just right so that the blame falls on some nobody and not at all on me or my office. Ive got to be kept in the clear.
>
> **Canary**
>
> Have one of yr lieutenants do it. Or a sniper. I'll do it if you want. (151)

However, what matters most in this world is accessibility to money. In spite of his

immorality, money makes him rich and powerful as mayor since he is married to a rich girl, First Lady. If he had not married her, he would have been a “vagabond” like Monster. What this subtly suggests is that money determines an individual’s social class in this play.

For First Lady’s part, money also plays an important role in keeping her social status as Mayor’s wife. Even though Mayor does not love her and wants, like Canary, to expel her, he cannot do this because First Lady’s money prevents him. Mayor needs First Lady’s money to maintain his social status regardless of whether he loves her or not. Although Canary wants to marry Mayor after he divorces First Lady, it is not possible. However, Canary expects to marry Mayor since she knows that Mayor does not love First Lady: “The wifes at the end of her rope. He hates her. Her days are numbered”; nevertheless, Hester knows that their relationship will last because of her money: “But he loves her money so her money buys her time. The Rich Bitch” (119). Therefore, money determines not only an individual’s social class but also the very nature of human relationships in this play.

Canary also is not free from the power of money. In fact, it is revealed that she does not really love Mayor. What Canary wants from Mayor is not true love at all but money. This suggests that Canary’s relationship with Mayor is solely based on the power of money. When Hester asks Canary if she loves him, she answers, “No. But he

buys me anything I want" (124). This becomes clear in Scene 7, when Canary asks Mayor to marry her. Mayor answers her request: "'Wife,' 'Mistress,' what does it matter? Take the gold. Buy something nice" (153). Of course, she is satisfied with Mayor's several gold coins rather than marriage. This scene shows that their relationship is based on the power of money in this society. Canary's song, "Gilded Cage," symbolically reveals how she is a captive of the power of money:

> Her gilded cage was solid gold
>
> The bars shone like sunshine
>
> She'd gone in there all on her own
>
> No one had forced her
>
> This time.
>
> "Freedom," she said, "aint free at all.
>
> Its price: a heavy wage
>
> And when you find how much your freedom costs
>
> You just may give it up
>
> For a gorgeous gilded cage. (153)

Parks shows that social class is determined by an individual's access to money, and the relationship between people also is determined by the power of money in Fucking A.

Another example of the power of money influencing an individual's social class formation can be found in Boy Smith's transformation into Monster. As Hester repeatedly says in the text, her son's name is Boy Smith, not Monster. She says to Freedom Fund Lady that her son is a good boy, not a monster: "My sons an angel. [. . .] Hes a good boy, maam. A very good boy" (134-35). She insists on her view of Boy to whomever she meets in the play. Even at the moment when she finally meets her son Monster, who is being hunted by hunters as an injured runaway in the last scene, she continues to insist on his good nature: "You used to be so good. What happened?" (218). However, contrary to her expectation, Boy Smith is no longer an angel. He has evolved into an abominable social monster. Society transformed her good son from Boy Smith to a Monster. As Monster says in his song, "The Making of a Monster" in Scene 19, it is easy for a society to make a horrible social monster:

Monster

Youd think itd be hard

To make something horrid

Its easy.

Youd think it would take

So much work to create

The Devil Incarnate

Its easy.

The smallest seed grows to a tree

A grain of sand pearls in an oyster

A small bit of hate in a heart will inflate

And that's more so much more than enough

To make you a Monster. (218)

According to Parks's point of view here, money has the power to determine an individual as a mayor or a monster, as the first lady or an abominable abortionist in this society. Unlike Mayor, Boy becomes Monster since he does not have the power to access money. Because of his lack of access to wealth, Boy Smith becomes the Monster, – that is, the social monster who is a threat to be removed by Hunters. Society seemingly does not care about an individual's circumstances or his quality of character. Who he/she is in this society is determined by whether he/she is rich or not. Elizabeth Victoria Ann Helman has the same view regarding the power of money to determine an individual's social class in Fucking A:

The character names in Fucking A demonstrate how individuals are cast in their social roles based on their position in the hierarchy. The

> social elite targeted Hester Smith's son, Monster, (formerly known as Boy) as something frightening that they would be better off without. Even though poverty may justify Boy Smith's transgression of stealing from the Rich family, society labels him as "monster" and so he becomes a monster. (34)

Labeling individuals according to their economic ability is inevitable in this capitalist society. Furthermore, the persons who are labeled as "vagabonds" are supposed to be removed by the "tourists," who are the mainstream of the society. The removal of Monster from society is desirable and acceptable no matter how cruel/violent his punishment is, since the vagabond is considered as a latent social threat to the tourists and since "a world without vagabonds is the utopia of the society of tourists" (Bauman 97). This is the view that Parks takes as her social critique of capitalist American society in this play.

Social justice is quite questionable in Fucking A. The social justice in this world also is solely based on the power of money, not morality. It is arbitrary and hypocritical. Whereas young Boy's stealing some food from the rich family for which Hester works constitutes a severe crime punishable by many years in prison, the Hunters' horrible violence against a convict is accepted by mainstream society as legitimate punishment. In fact, the Hunters' punishment is brutal rather than

legitimate. When pursuing Hunters are near with their barking dogs in the last scene, Monster asks Hester to kill him with Hester's gun in order to avoid the crueler violence of being tortured by Hunters:

> When they catch me theyll hurt me. Run me through and plant me in yr front yard so you can hear me scream [. . .] I heard once how they cut one guys balls off and let him watch the dogs eat them and then they cut his fingers off and the dogs ate those and he had to watch. His fingers and then his toes then his feet then his hands. (218-19)

Even if the convict is a criminal, cutting his body and making him see dogs eating his body parts are too cruel as a punishment. The Hunters talk about another horrible punishment that they inflict in Scene 11. It is about a "runthrough" (172) that they did to a convict last time: "You get a hot iron rod and run it up his bottom and out his throat," [. . .] "Then you stick the rod in the ground and let him wiggle on the stick" (173). This is an unimaginably horrible judicial violence which the mainstream inflicts on the marginalized. It is a brutal adulteration of legitimate laws – a case in which the punishment far exceeds the simple crime of stealing food to prevent starvation. Besides, it is a more abominable act of brutality than Hester's performing of abortions.

The Hunters' legal brutality can be read/viewed as Parks's severe political

critique of legal violence in American society. The issue of abortion has been controversial in American society. Many conservative Americans oppose abortion since they think it means killing a life, which is against human morality. However, in this play, Parks insinuates that sometimes legitimate violence of the law can be more brutal, violent, and immoral than even abortion. According to Parks's view here, any form of violence upon anyone who is labeled as a social "monster" can be justified as lawful and legitimate, no matter how violent, cruel, and inhumane it is. In the name of law, sometimes, violence can be neglected. Under the strict policy of "War on Crime," anyone who is labeled as a social enemy can be incarcerated for many years or eliminated forever from society since he/she is an enemy of mainstream society. However, Parks demonstrates that this policy is dangerous because such blind, harsh punishment can create victims like Monster. The enforcement of the law, in short, can be arbitrary, biased, and, in the long run, counter-productive.

This is why some Christian criminologists, like Frank P. Williams and Marilyn D. McShane, insist "the focus should be on relieving suffering[;] as a product of that, crime can be reduced" (296-97). These peacemaking criminologists wants to shift crime control "emphasis from the way in which offenders behave and methods of punishment to the way in which people's motives interact" (Williams and McShane 297). Boy Smith does not need to become Monster in Fucking A. If "Rich Girl" had

not reported him to the authority and paid more attention to the welfare of “the others,” Boy Smith might exist as an angel just as Hester insists. M. J. McDermott also suggests a new paradigm of peacemaking criminology in which love, care, forgiveness, harmony, and cooperation are more valued than harsh punishment by the government (21-44). As he indicates, the term “war” makes people feel more isolated from each other and makes society more dehumanized like the dystopia portrayed in this play. Hester sees First Lady as her enemy to avenge as it is seen in her song of “My Vengeance”:

> The low on the ladder
>
> The barrels rock bottom
>
> Will reach up and strangle
>
> The Rich the God rot them.
>
> She’ll mourn the day
>
> She crushed us underfoot.
>
> Her Rich Girl wealth
>
> Will not stop me from put-
>
> ting my mark on her
>
> And it will equal what we’ve paid.
>
> My vengeance will show her

How a true mother is made. (184)

When Hester hears that her Boy is dead even though it is misreported, her will to avenge is fiercely inflamed. Because of this, Parks opposes the rigidity of blind punishment, which is enforced without considering the welfare of “the others” in society. As it is seen in the play, this makes people more estranged and creates an antipathy that, in turn, produces enemies.

The morality is arbitrary and equivocal in Fucking A. While Hester and Monster are punished severely for their petty trespassing of the law, Mayor’s hypocritical adultery does not constitute any moral problem in this play. Although Mayor keeps Canary as his mistress, First Lady accepts the presence of Canary in this fashion. Mayor and Canary boldly engage in sexual activity while First Lady is watching:

> The Mayor and me is making so much noise that neither of us hear her. And she [First Lady] is standing right beside the bed and [. . .] he turns his head and looks at her. Just stares at her and keeps on screwing me. And they looked at each other like that. It was some kind of standoff. Him screwing me and staring at her and her staring at him and me looking back and forth from his face to her face. (123-24).

In the world of Parks's play, Mayor and Canary, in a real sense, cannot be considered sexually moral. First Lady cannot be considered as sexually moral, either. As revealed in Scene 13, she is impregnated by Monster: "If yr knocked up its mine. Keep it, ok? Something to remember me by" (185-86). As noted before, Canary maintains her sexual relationship with Mayor without truly loving him. Whereas Hawthorne's puritanical society is extremely strict and judgmental against adultery in The Scarlet Letter, Parks's society as represented in Fucking A is quite liberal regarding sexual morality. Jailbait's rape of Hester does not cause any societal problem, either. Since their picnic is allowed under the guidance of Guide, Jailbait's rape is not unknown to the authorities. Thus, sexual morality is not a problem in this world since the standards of morality are vague and ambiguous. Therefore, through this moral ambiguity, Parks challenges the traditional mainstream's standards of social morality and deconstructs them. Through Canary's speech to Hester – "Like me, you perform one of those disrespectable but most necessary services. [. . .] Yr an abortionist Im a whore" (121) – Parks implicitly challenges American mainstream's standards of morality, which disapproves of abortion and prostitution.

The fact that Hester has to buy her son's freedom by paying money to Freedom Fund Lady also can be read/viewed as Parks's cynical social imprecation. As Bauman says, it is true that, symbolically in a sense, people can buy their freedom

with money in a capitalist consumer society. Without money, individuals cannot be economically free like “tourists” because they cannot consume. “Vagabonds” cannot go wherever they want like “tourists,” either. They have limits in their access to whatever benefits the society offers. In that sense, the motto “Freedom Aint Free” (131) befits this society. Freedom Fund Lady’s speech to Hester adds to the cynical intensity of this play: “a prisoner can sense when his family is making steady payments. It gives them hope. How much ya paying today? A gold coin! Hand it here! Gold!” (133). Inmates can know the difference if their family pays money steadily. This is interpreted as their hope for freedom. Parks’s sarcastic intensity culminates in Freedom Fund Lady’s increase of the picnic price. Whenever Hester goes to Freedom Fund Lady to pay for money to have a picnic with her son, she raises the price: “Picnic. Picnic. Picnic. Yr son wont be up for a picnic any time soon. His picnic price has doubled” (134). Even if this play is an exaggerated dark fable, the sensitive readers/audience can feel Parks’s insinuated social critique here: money is the supreme value which leads to freedom in a capitalist contemporary society.

However, Hester Smith resists and challenges these arbitrary and hypocritical rules of the society in Fucking A. Even though she is in a less privileged underclass which is oppressed by the mainstream privileged, Hester seeks to articulate her subjectivity in life. First of all, Hester’s challenge can be found in the fact that,

although she is illiterate, she has a language system, TALK, with which she can communicate with her friend Canary. TALK is a language that dominant Hunters do not understand in the play. Parks says TALK is “the foreign language,” and “the production should present a nonaudible simultaneous English translation” (115). Hester and Canary use this TALK when they discuss not only private female affairs, such as women’s genitals and sexuality, but also their confidential secrets or strategies. In the sense that Hester has a language system that oppressing Hunters cannot decode, Hester’s TALK can be understood as her subversive challenge against the mainstream. Besides, Hester has another sign of which oppressors do not know the meaning: she makes marks both on her body and Boy’s body.

> When they comed to take him away, just before they took him, I bit him. Hard. Right on the arm just here. I bit hard. Deep into his skin. His blood in my mouth. He screamed but then he was screaming anyway. After theyd tooked him away I went and bit myself. Just as hard and in the same place exactly. See the mark I got? My Boys got one too. Identical. (166)

By marking their bodies, she has her unique sign to recognize her Boy. Even though Hester’s biting might be a primitive method of marking, this is her way of resisting the dominant mainstream. Although society will make Boy into just another nameless,

faceless monster, she insures his individuality.

Hester has a subjective point of view of her son throughout the play. She sees her son Boy as a good boy and “an angel” (134), regardless of mainstream’s point of view toward him. No matter how the world sees him or calls him, Hester views him as a good boy and refers to him as Boy, not Monster. This is Hester Smith’s autonomous view of her child, just as Hester La Negrita sees her children as “My treasure. My joy” (7) in In the Blood. Even when Hunters insult her by saying, “Wait for him outside. Yr stinking up the place” (145), and “shes a babykiller. Thats what she is” (146), she directly confronts them by answering back: “Yr daughters been a customer of mine. More than once” (146). Although they despise Hester as a “stinking” baby killer, in fact, Hester’s house is crowded with veiled women who need Hester’s service only at night. In this scene, she squarely rebukes the hypocrisy of the mainstream. Whereas Hester reveals her scarlet letter A openly and does her job faithfully even when socially despised, in reality, these people are clandestine customers of Hester. They need Hester’s service desperately even though they shun her. Besides, Hester is angry against First Lady for sending her son to prison throughout the play. She feels it is unfair: “they [Rich Family] came down extra extra hard on me” (132). She does not accept what they did to her and Boy as social justice. In other words, she refuses the norms of the society based on her autonomy. The irony

of Parks's play is very rich: the people who represent altruistic institutions like the church and social services should be helping downtrodden people like Hester to ameliorate her lot in life, but instead, in an utterly perverse reversal, she helps them with their sexual dysfunction.

Hester's subjective resistance can be found in her use of violence against First Lady and Monster. When Hester overhears that First Lady is expecting a baby from Mayor's chatting with Butcher in Scene 17, she plans to take revenge against First Lady by aborting her baby: "Rip her child from her like she ripped mine from me" (205). With the help of Canary and Butcher, Hester succeeds in kidnapping First Lady and aborting her baby as vengeance for taking her son away from her. However, Hester does not realize that the baby she killed is, in fact, her grandson. Hester's use of violence for revenge and resistance can be problematic since it constitutes an act of immoral violence. However, Franz Fanon in his book, The Wretched of the Earth, advocates the use of violence to resist more violent oppression, saying, "What is the real nature of this violence? We have seen that it is the intuition of the colonized masses that their liberation must, and can only, be achieved by force" (73).[2] Likewise, Parks allows Hester to use this violence as an expression of her resistance. If Hester and Monster are colonized by First Lady and Hunters who are the colonizers, a Fanonian reading of Fucking A is possible.[3]

Hester's most subjective resistance against oppression is expressed in her killing Monster by herself with his knife in the last scene. As aforementioned, Hunters' punishment for a convict is extremely horrible and violent because they cut the convict's body and make him witness the dogs eating his body parts alive. To avoid this brutal punishment and to save him from his pain of being tortured alive, Hester kills Monster on her lap by cutting his throat quickly without causing any pain to him. She learned this skill from Butcher in the previous scene. Ironically, however, she has to use this skill on his son as soon as she meets him 30 years later. Drenched with her son's blood, Hester becomes a picture of a pathetic Pieta holding her son on her lap on the bloody stage. Again, Parks's angry irony is unmistakable: Hester is likened to the ultimate life-giver, Mary the Mother of Jesus Christ, instead of the destroyer. In other words, society sees her as killer/destroyer; Parks sees her as healer/savior.

Hester's killing her child herself can be interpreted as an expression of indomitable resistance against the dominant class. She chooses to kill Monster painlessly herself rather than hand him over to Hunters to suffer enormous pain. This kind of resistance appears frequently in African American slave narratives, such as in Tony Morrison's famous novel Beloved. In Beloved, Sethe, a female runaway former slave, kills her children herself when slave owners come to claim them. Rather than

allowing their slavery to be perpetuated by submitting to slave owners' claim, she resists them by killing her children herself. Likewise, in Parks's Fucking A, Hester Smith indomitably resists the Hunters' violent oppression: she kills her son Monster by herself and saves him the pain of being tortured alive. This can be interpreted as Hester's subjective resistance against mainstream oppression.

Rabkin comments that the world of Fucking A is "bleakly dystopian, a world of naked power, arbitrary imprisonment, sadistic bloodiness" ("Fucking A"). This play is rife with images of blood, broken flesh, and brutal violence. Hester and Butcher always appear on the stage wearing their bloody aprons and with their bloody tools for their violent jobs. The Hunters' talk, moreover, is full of violent tortures and punishment, which they seem to enjoy. This bloody imagery of Fucking A is similar to Parks's other red letter play, In the Blood. What Parks intends to convey to the readers/audience with this graphic image is a picture of the world which the audience currently inhabits. Parks said in an interview with Kathy Sova in March 2000: "In Fucking A, Hester Smith and her world are foreign to us, but when we meet her, she draws us like a magnet, and we learn a lot about our own world" (32). Surely, there is relevance between Hester's world and the real world. Parks symbolically insinuates the cruelty, violence, and relentlessness of contemporary capitalist society where the "tourists" dominate the "vagabonds." The Red Letter Plays tells the sad stories of the

oppressed, and their stories are written with blood on their bodies. Unlike Hester Prynne's "A" in Nathanial Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, Suzan-Lori Parks's Hesters' "A" in The Red Letter Plays represents their "otherness" in socio-economic class in the contemporary capitalist American society. Class stratification in these plays is so distinctive that people are not melted in the melting pot.

Notes

1. “The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) These were the three sons of Noah, and from them came the people who were scattered over the earth. Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father’s nakedness and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father’s nakedness. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father’s nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, he said, ‘Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.’ He also said, ‘Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem. May God extend the territory of Japheth; may Japheth live in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be his slave’” (The Holy Bible, Genesis 9: 18-27).
2. Frantz Fanon has had an influential impact on postcolonial liberation movements around the world. According to Fanon’s ideology, the postcolonial liberation of the colonized from colonial oppression inevitably necessitates the use of violence: “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon” (35). His revolutionary political

theory has inspired many violent struggles against colonial domination to gain the liberation of the oppressed in 3rd world countries, including Palestine in the 20th century. Emmanuel Hansen elucidates Fanon's advocacy of violent resistance in his book, Frantz Fanon: Social and Political Thought, saying, "to destroy colonialism effectively, violence was indispensable. Violence destroys not only the formal structures of colonial rule but also the alienated consciousness that colonial rule has planted in the mind of the native" (50). Hansen expounds on Fanon's idea of the use of violence for liberation: "Why does Fanon argue that it is only through revolutionary violence that the colonized can be liberated? Here we have to remember that for him freedom implies the liberation of consciousness as well as a fundamental change in the socioeconomic environment. Revolutionary violence frees man's consciousness, creates a new man, and at the same time destroys the social and political institutions that act as the mechanisms of his oppression and enslavement, and builds new institutions that allow man to maintain and express his freedom. Fanon argues that violence is a cleansing force. It frees the colonized from his feeling of inferiority and humiliation and restores him to the fullness of himself as a man" (121).

3. A Fanonian reading of Fucking A is possible because Hester Smith, Boy Smith, and Canary Mary can be seen as the colonized by Mayor, First Lady, and The Hunters,

who are colonizers in this play. Especially, Hester Smith and Canary Mary cooperate with each other and build solidarity to resist their oppressors. According to Fanon's perspective, not only the use of violence, but also the building of solidarity among the colonized is important for their liberation. Emmanuel Hansen expatiates upon the importance of using violence and building solidarity: "According to Fanon, it is not enough for the colonized to gain liberation of consciousness. The social and political institutions of the colonial regime ought to be completely destroyed, and new ones created. In order to destroy these structures effectively, it is necessary to build solidarity among the colonized, and he sees violence as playing an important role in the building of this solidarity. Violence, he says, represents absolute praxis. It is an act of commitment" (129).

CHAPTER THREE: GENDER

Feminism and Wendy Wasserstein's Plays

One of the most radical changes in drama studies since the early 1980s has been the reorientation of dramatic literary canons to include works by hitherto excluded women (Bennett 46). A feminist approach to contemporary American drama necessitates a foregrounding of female characters in the plays and their perspective on the human condition. Sometimes, this means making oppressive, invisible mechanisms clearly visible and "taking nothing for granted because the things we take for granted are usually those that were constructed from the most powerful point of view in the culture and that is not the point of view of women" (Austin, Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism 2). When one of Wendy Wasserstein's acclaimed feminist plays, The Heidi Chronicles, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, Gayle Austin made the following comments: "The Heidi Chronicles is a rare play for Broadway. Written by a woman, its central character is an unmarried professional woman. [. . .] Ostensibly a triumph for women, [. . .] (Theatre Journal 107). As Austin points out, Wasserstein's plays can be considered, at least in part, "a triumph of women" since her plays pay attention to women's lives, which at one point were dominated by the oppressive mechanisms of male-dominated American society,

formerly invisible, but now visible. By centering on women's points of view within her plays, Wasserstein questions and challenges the traditional views of women that society has taken for granted.

Although she prefers being called a humanist, Wendy Wasserstein is "a feminist hero, a significant spokeswoman for the social good, and a major role model for women in the arts" (Feingold). She uses much political feminist rhetoric in her plays and mainly deals with feminist themes. Wasserstein, though not married, has a child of her own, though she refuses to reveal the father's name. She remains a true believer of the feminist cause both in her oeuvre of plays and in her life too: many female characters of Wasserstein's plays, viewed as her alter-egos, stand against social forces or burdens that oppress women's lives. Some examples of her alter-egos include Heidi Holland in The Heidi Chronicles, Wasserstein's Pulitzer Prize winning play in 1989, Janie Blumberg in Isn't It Romantic?, Sara Goode in The Sisters Rosensweig, and Lyssa Dent Hughes in An American Daughter. These women protagonists share a common goal: they zealously seek their independent autonomy and feminist subjectivity.

Unlike Wasserstein's new feminists, many women characters in the traditional feminist plays of Marsha Norman, Maria Irene Fornes, and even Suzan-Lori Parks are the victims of physical violence and abuse in patriarchal society. Their

oppressions are overt and directed at their physical bodies. Thus, they are often sexually abused or exploited by dominant male characters in these plays, physically confined, or exploited in labor by oppressive males in a male-dominated society. For instance, Arlene in Marsha Norman's feminist play Getting Out is physically oppressed by patriarchal forces represented by Carl and Bennie. Even her dysfunctional family, including her father, oppresses her. Many of Maria Irene Fornes's women characters are similarly the victims of physical abuse which is imposed on them by patriarchal society in her feminist plays. Nena, a destitute girl of twelve years old in The Conduct of Life, is a good example. Locked in a basement, she is sexually exploited by Orlando, an army lieutenant in the play. In the end, his wife Leticia kills him with a pistol, but at the end of the play she blameshifts the killing to Nena, a helpless girl, by placing the pistol in Nena's hand. Nena, in short, is victimized by not only a male Orlando but also a female Leticia in this play. Mae in Fornes' Mud is another typical example of a female victim at the hands of male domination. Even though Mae supports two incompetent males in her house by working hard, she wants to become literate and to live a literacy-based, independent life. Finally, when she decides to leave them for independence, Lloyd, a male character, shoots her with a gun, bringing her quest for a subjective life to an abrupt and tragic end.

Suzan-Lori Parks's women characters are also the obvious victims of oppressive patriarchal society. Hester La Negrita in In the Blood, as noted in Chapter 2, is sexually exploited by selfish males, who shun her as a slut. As discussed in the previous chapter, she is an impoverished, illiterate, and physically abused woman. Hester Smith, not an exception in Parks's Fucking A, is an illiterate abortionist who is sexually abused by Jailbait. She wears the infamous scarlet letter "A" on her breast – a form of branding by the hypocritical, oppressive, and patriarchal society. Miss Saartje Baartman the Venus Hottentot, an African girl who is brought to Europe and physically abused by colonial/patriarchal European society in the 19th century in Parks's Venus, is another of these victims. Her body is sexually exploited, displayed in a public freak show in England, and finally dissected for scientific study by a man whom she loved. All these women are physically abused and oppressed by males and male-dominated patriarchal society in these traditional feminist plays.

As Simone de Beauvoir says in her famous book, The Second Sex, these women characters – sexually oppressed by males in these feminist plays – are merely "sexual being[s]" to man:

> She [Woman] is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and

> differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (16)

When women do not possess autonomy of life, then these oppressed women function only as sexual beings to men in these feminist plays. Whereas males are "the Subject and the Absolute," regardless of their immorality or social injustice, female characters are oppressed and marginalized as "the other" in the world of these plays. Oppressed female characters struggle to cast off the label of "sexual beings," which males or patriarchal society impose on them, and their heroic struggle for freedom and feminist subjectivity remains the main focus of traditional feminist drama.

However, Wasserstein's feminist point of view differs from that of previous feminist dramatists. Even though Wasserstein's female characters experience oppression and are treated as "the other" in her plays, the suffering of her female characters is strikingly different from that evident in the drama of earlier feminist playwrights. Wasserstein's female protagonists are not physically abused by males, nor is there remarkable physical violence in the plays. Whereas Fornes and Parks's women are illiterate and uneducated, moreover, Wasserstein's are highly educated professionals – for example a college-educated doctor, a journalist, a writer, and a professor. Janie Blumberg has a master's degree and Harriet Cornwall has a Harvard

MBA in Isn't It Romantic?. Sara Goode, who has appeared on the cover of Fortune magazine twice, is a successful banker in charge of a Hong Kong/Shanghai bank in The Sisters Rosensweig. Lyssa Dent Hughes in An American Daughter is a female professor who is nominated as the Surgeon General of the United States by the President of the United States. These women, clearly not representing the impoverished underclass in society, are economically rich, professional career women, who typically enjoy the amenities of upscale living. Wasserstein herself corroborates this viewpoint:

> I think the thing is the women I write about are kind of middle class, upper middle class people, who have good jobs and they're good looking, and there's no problem. [. . .] They're not sort of working class. (Cohen 261)

As Wasserstein says in this interview, her women characters comfortably inhabit upper-middle class society and are not the impoverished dregs as seen in Parks's plays. Wasserstein, of course, does not speak for all ordinary common women. In other words, "Wasserstein's main characters are not every woman, but college-educated and career-driven 'uncommon women' determined to 'fulfill their potential' even when they have not reached certainty about the direction of that potential" (Ciociola 3-4).

Gail Ciociola coins the term "fem-en(act)ment" to describe Wasserstein's

plays in light of Wasserstein's feminist criticism in her book, Wendy Wasserstein: Dramatizing Women, Their Choices and Their Boundaries:

> "Fem-en(act)ment" as word and concept provides a functional means by which Wasserstein's plays can be best understood as philosophy and as literary genre and style. It reflects what Mary Daly calls gynomorphic language, a reworking of linguistic systems to create new words and produce meanings vital to women's ends (*Gyn/Ecology* xi). Constructed as such, its fragmented components yield the principal contexts: "fem," for female perspective and feminist intent; "(act)," for stage drama; and "en(act)ment," for the revelation and successful execution of one's overall motifs and motives. As a whole, then, fem-en(act)ment is textual or performance drama that, guided by a feminist disposition, thematically and stylistically enacts situations of interest to women, the psychologically and social effects of which form the core of that drama. (1-2)

Ciociola's word "fem-en(act)ment," in my opinion, offers a useful perspective on Wasserstein's plays since her plays present a new view of women's oppression in contemporary American society from a woman's vantage point. As the term indicates,

through the enactment of women's struggle for independent autonomy and feminist subjectivity on the stage, Wasserstein effectively conveys her feminist messages to the readers/audience.

Wasserstein's feminist point of view starts from the assumption that women's lives are more important than "making you and your children tuna-fish sandwiches" (The Heidi Chronicles 173). As Heidi Holland insists in The Heidi Chronicles, women, like all people, "deserve to fulfill their potential" (173) in their lives. According to Wasserstein, women cannot be satisfied with a life which is merely free of physical abuse or male-imposed violence. In addition, women's lives need to be free from invisible socio-sexual oppressions in life – in other words, the burdens of too many gender-defined roles. Women are expected to perform many gender roles, at the same time performing perfectly as daughter, wife, and mother. Furthermore, since contemporary women in Wasserstein's plays are highly educated, they are expected to be successful, competent, and professional career women. In short, male-dominated society expects a woman to be a "superwoman" who can simultaneously accomplish multiple socio-sexual duties at high levels of excellence. In many cases, like Lyssa Dent Hughes's case in An American Daughter, women are also expected to be morally circumspect and dutiful to their numerous social responsibilities. Petty mistakes are not tolerated by the harsh societal gaze and the mass media. As a

feminist dramatist, Wasserstein sees these burdens as new and invisible forms of social/patriarchal oppression.

According to her feminist point of view, many women, in accordance with parental desires, wish to marry a man of good social and financial status to insure socio-economic security. To accomplish this quixotic ideal, women are expected to be thin, beautiful, and attractive, taking great care about their dietary and exercise regimens. When they marry, they also should create extraordinary home environments and raise lovely children. At the same time, women are expected to pursue their professional career effortlessly and gracefully in order to achieve a successful working career, handling the vagaries of fierce competition with élan. Because these silent but insidious social expectations cause great oppression in women, it is extraordinarily difficult for women to "be married or live with a man, have a good relationship and children that you share equal responsibility for, build a career, and still read novels, play the piano, have women friends, and swim twice a week" (Isn't It Romantic? 133) – desires which are simply and blithely referred to as women's "fantasy" (Isn't It Romantic? 133). Most women are expected to "have it all," however, no matter the angst or dilemma which this expectation causes in their lives. Contradictorily, most women themselves want to "have it all" despite the rigors of such a life; Wasserstein dramatizes the "elusive prospect of having it all or of having

that successful balance of career and family that is 'feminist mystique'" (Ciociola 6). In short, Wasserstein's plays center on women's struggle for equality between the sexes and on the harmony between women's private lives and their professional lives. In the world of Wendy Wasserstein, women deserve to fulfill their potential rather than make tuna-fish sandwiches for their children. An exploration of this topic offers further enlightenment on women's quest for autonomy and feminist subjectivity.

"Having It All": Women's Dilemma and Feminist Subjectivity in Wendy Wasserstein's Isn't It Romantic?

Wendy Wasserstein's Isn't It Romantic? is not a Jewish drama per se, even though the main characters are Jewish and frequently talk about Jewish phenomena in the play. This play addresses women's desire of getting married, "having it all," achieving flawless relationships between men and women, and most importantly, maintaining their autonomy and feminist subjectivity in the process. This play chronicles a woman's growth from "dependency" (Isn't It Romantic? 82) to the state of female "I am" (151) independence. Wasserstein develops this theme in the play – namely, how contemporary educated young women are stuck with the quest of "having it all," (133) since they want to marry an upstanding man, have a model family, and pursue a successful, professional career at the same time.

Unlike Suzan-Lori Parks's female characters, Wasserstein's female characters want to have it all, and indeed they are expected to "have it all" by society. Owing to these inflated desires and unrealistic social expectations, they struggle much. According to Wasserstein's feminist point of view, however, life does not always allow women to have it all since a patriarchally-slanted society expects women to be more dutiful to their traditional gender roles – good daughters, good wives, and good mothers – than to their professional career aspirations. Because of this, as Lillian Cornwall says to her daughter Harriet Cornwall, women need to learn to negotiate since "life is a negotiation" (134). However, as a feminist playwright, Wasserstein opposes this "negotiation," preferring instead that young female characters overcome their dilemma of "having it all" and recover their autonomy and feminist subjectivity of life. Through the example of Janie Blumberg, she holds up an exemplary case of female independence and feminist subjectivity to the readers/audience in Isn't It Romantic?. An analysis of this play in light of Janie Blumberg's growth and quest for her autonomous subjectivity reveals many fine insights about Wasserstein's development of this theme.

Considered together as a unit, Isn't It Romantic?, Uncommon Women and Others, and The Heidi Chronicles "form a quasi-trilogy, although not intentionally written as such, tracing the myriad changes that women have had to assimilate and

reconcile themselves with during the last twenty years" (Kachur 31). Young female students at Holyoke College in Uncommon Women and Others seem to reappear as the mature young women Janie Blumberg and Harriet Cornwall in Isn't It Romantic?. Janie and Harriet hail from upper-middle class families in New York City. College-educated girls, they now have Master's degrees. In particular, Harriet Cornwall, a Harvard MBA holder, looks like "the cover girl on the best working women's magazine" since she is "attractive, very bright, charming" (81) when she first appears on stage. However, although they are socio-economically upper-middle class, educated women, they feel oppressed in the play since they share the common problem of getting married to a nice man and becoming a successful professional career woman. These desires do not stem solely from personal aspirations: their mothers strongly urge and even insist upon such high-performance. According to Wasserstein's feminist point of view, therefore, the quest of being considered "successful" women – that is, being married to the ideal man, raising the ideal family, and excelling in the ideal job – is the result of both patriarchy and, ironically, coercive mothers. This gives the feminist theme a new twist.

In the beginning of the play, Janie, a freelance writer who wants to work for Sesame Street, is a dependent young woman who lacks self-confidence. From her dialogue with Harriet, the readers/audience can deduce that Janie is a common girl

who wants to be dependent on a good man for security. She resents societally-ordered expectations: “having to pay the phone bill, be nice to the super, find meaningful work, fall in love, get hurt” (82). Because of the angst which this induces in her and her own innate sense of inadequacy, she prefers “dependency” on a good man through marriage rather than independence. She says to Harriet, “I am far too lazy and self-involved. I have very fat thighs, and I want very badly to be someone else without going through the effort of actually changing myself into someone else” (98). Janie feels a complex about her fat thighs and about the pressure to be an attractive girl. Rather than remaining independent and subjective in life, Janie settles for being a “common” woman who has feminine desires like other ordinary women:

> When I’m twenty-eight, I’m going to get married and be very much in love with someone who is poor and fascinating until he’s thirty and then fabulously wealthy and very secure after that. And we’re going to have children who wear overalls and flannel shirts and are kind and independent, with curly blond hair. And we’ll have great sex and still hold hands when we travel to China when we’re sixty. (104)

These are common if somewhat challenging dreams that many ordinary women desire for their lives. Janie wants to get married to the perfect man, have babies, and settle into the good wife and good mother routines so that she can enjoy a comfortable life,

easily depending on a man's love. However, according to Wasserstein's point of view, to achieve this "uncommon" woman status is not easy.

Marty Sterling, who is a kidney doctor at Mount Sinai Hospital, seems like the perfect solution to Janie's wishes in this play: he can provide her with secure social status as the proverbially rich husband. Marty is Harriet's fellow Harvard alumnus and a friend of hers. His family is rich, his father owns a nationwide restaurant chain, Ye Olde Sterling Tavernes, and the family is reputable too. In short, Marty Sterling is "Janie's mother's dream come true: a prince" (82). Impressed by Marty at their first meeting, Janie expresses her wish to marry him to Harriet: "Marty Sterling could make a girl a nice husband." [. . .] "If you don't marry Marty Sterling, I'll marry him" (84-85). Janie likes him and wants to marry him, but such a marriage, while ensuring grand comfort and even luxury, would also ensure the loss of subjectivity.

In spite of this latent danger, Tasha Blumberg, Janie's mother, also eagerly wants Janie to marry Marty. Like many mothers in Wasserstein's plays, Tasha is a pushy mother, who does not respect Janie's privacy and independence and always considers Janie her "little girl" (86). When Tasha visits Janie's new apartment early in the morning without prior notice, she urges Janie to get married: "I hope next year you live in another apartment and your father and I have to bring up four coffees" (89).

This is strong pressure for Janie to marry since, according to Tasha's notion, women cannot be "successful" outside of marriage. She even brings a strange Russian taxi driver to Janie's new apartment as a potential extra man for her to marry, in case Janie's relationship with Marty does not pan out. Thus, what Tasha really wants to hear from Janie is: "Hello, Mother. This morning I got married, lost twenty pounds, and became a lawyer" (120) – a burdensome and oppressive undercurrent for Janie. Even though Tasha is a female character in this play, she functions as the embodiment of society's invisible socio-sexual oppression. Although Tasha is her mother, Janie needs to overcome Tasha's unrealistic expectations to recover her subjectivity. In Wasserstein's plays, the mother-daughter relationship is not harmoniously cooperative but oppressive, since the mother obfuscates and impedes the daughter's quest for feminist subjectivity.

Like Tasha, Marty Sterling represents another oppressive obstacle to Janie's independence and feminist subjectivity. Although Marty seems like the perfect solution for Janie's problems, in fact, he is not. While he is an economically good husband and a wealthy doctor, he nevertheless constitutes a fatal obstruction for Janie's subjective life. A selfish and self-centered man, Marty is not considerate of Janie's needs and situation, nor does he respect her independence and autonomy. Without consulting with Janie, he unilaterally "decide[s] [that] we should live in

Flatbush or Brighton Beach, where people have real values" and "put a deposit down on an apartment for us in Brooklyn today" (110). He decides everything by himself and he has "all the answers before [Janie] ask[s] the questions" (137). Marty's self-contained decision-making represents present and future dominance over Janie, which, in turn, proves lethal to Janie's subjectivity. He calls Janie "monkey" and wants her to be just "sweet" to him: "Let's go, Monkey. You'll be all right. I'll help you. Be sweet. I need attention. A great deal of attention" (99). In fact, from the scene of their first meeting, Marty sees Janie as a more attainable and sweeter girl than Harriet: "You always looked more attainable. Frightened to death, but attainable" (83). Wasserstein's women recall Beauvoir's pronouncement: "for [Marty] [Janie] is sex – absolute sex, no less" (16) in this play, just as Harriet is also just a sex partner to Paul Stuart, who is "the sadist vice president at Colgate-Palmolive" (129). Paul Stuart, the boss of Harriet's boss in her workplace, also sees Harriet as just a sweet young mistress with whom he enjoys a sexual relationship while married to Cathy. Consequently, like Paul, Marty considers Janie as just a sweet girl who can give him "a great deal of attention," rather than an autonomous wife and a woman.

Worse than that, Marty does not like women to pursue professional careers as Janie and Harriet do, preferring traditional women's gender roles to women's professional careers. Talking about Harriet, Marty reveals this aversion to professional

working woman: “[Harriet]’s not sweet, like you. She’s like those medical-school girls. They’re nice but they’d bite your balls off. You think Israelis have no sense of humor? Believe me, women medical students are worse” (97-98). Furthermore, when Janie refuses to have dinner with Marty’s family because she needs to prepare for the job interview with Sesame Street, he warns Janie against pursuing a professional career: “don’t let it take over your life. And don’t let it take over our life. That’s a real trap” (129). Objecting to Janie’s pursuit of a professional career, Marty is, however, the real trap for Janie’s life. The readers/audience of this play can see in Marty’s seemingly innocent comments future discord in their marriage. He indirectly opposes Janie’s employment by saying his friends’ children are brought up by “strangers from the Caribbean” (129). Wasserstein subtly reminds her readers/audience that many working women need to hire babysitters to take care of children while they work, a reality which Marty does not admit. Even though he says, “I have nothing against your working. I just want to make sure we have a life” (130), he asks Janie, in fact, to raise their children by herself, meaning she cannot pursue her professional career autonomously. Consequently, her married life to Marty would create an obstacle for her subjective life. From Wasserstein’s point of view, this represents a new species of oppression for contemporary women and takes the feminist theme in a startlingly new direction.

Marty, meanwhile, thinks that he is offering love and affection to Janie. However, this attitude runs counter to the spirit of real mutual love and negates a reciprocal relationship between Marty and Janie. He urges her to move into his new apartment:

> I'm offering you love, I'm offering you affection, I'm offering you attention. All you have to do is put your crates that you never unpacked on that truck and get on the Belt Parkway. You just move forward. (137)

Wasserstein implies that love cannot consist of a unilateral relationship between man and woman or husband and wife. Such a patriarchal attitude can ruin the equivalent "partnership" (130) that Janie wants in her relationship with Marty. She desires an equal and reciprocally respectful relationship between the two. However, Marty's perception of love and his relationship with Janie is clearly patriarchal, and his impatient demand for Janie to decide whether she moves in or not is his forceful requisition. Unilaterally and oppressively, he impatiently asks her to choose between the two: "You make the decision right now. Either you move in with me tonight or we stop and I'll make alternate arrangements" (138). Marty's way of talking to Janie and his demeanor reveal his dominance. Although Marty may delude himself that he is offering love for Janie, in fact, his inconsiderateness destroys her independent

feminist subjectivity as well as their relationship and smothers her chance for autonomy.

As Benedict Nightingale points out, Marty is “a parent camouflaged as a lover, a symptom of [Janie’s] real problem, which is an umbilical cord as thick and strongly-shackled as a ship’s cable” (H2). We, the readers/audience, see his selfishness and, like Tasha, his oppression to Janie. Because of this, Janie refuses Marty’s demand in the end to move into his new apartment and remains a single woman: “Marty, you’re not right for me. I can’t move in with you now” (138-39). She refuses his demand because if she moves in, she would always be just “a monkey, a sweet little girl” (139) for Marty. She repels this relationship with Marty because it would not secure the equal “partnership” that she wants. Janie’s decision can be interpreted as her choice of independence and autonomy rather than subservience to a man. According to Wasserstein’s point of view, the latter would stultify Janie’s growth as a subjective woman.

However, Janie’s decision to end the relationship with Marty is not easy. Even Harriet, who has strong feminist notions, also succumbs and negotiates with the reality of life. In fact, Harriet is the woman who gives strong feminist advice to Janie when Janie begins to doubt her feminist, independent life of the past:

> I’ve always hated women who sit around talking about how there are

> no man in New York. Or everyone is gay or married. [. . .] These women would tell you, “Marry him. He’s straight, he’ll make a nice living, he’ll be a good father.” Janie, what women like Cynthia Peterson don’t understand is, no matter how lonely you get or how many birth announcements you receive, the trick is not to get frightened. There’s nothing wrong with being alone. (104)

In spite of her strong feminist notions above, however, Harriet cannot remain a single woman. In the end, she “announces with pride: I’m going to marry Joe Stine” (142), whom she “[had] been dating for two weeks” (145). She cannot overcome the loneliness when Paul Stuart leaves to go home: “I didn’t know what it would be like when Paul Stuart would leave at ten and go home to Cathy and I would have to pretend I wasn’t hurt” (143). Albeit a strong feminist, Harriet gives up her feminist ethos, negotiates with immediate realities, and finally chooses to “have it all.” Consequently, all the feminist remarks that Harriet has made to Janie are, as Janie says, “just rhetorical” (104).

Another woman, Cynthia Peterson, offers a conspicuous contrast to Janie’s feminist growth, even though, invisible on the stage, she is merely a recorded voice on Janie’s telephone answering machine. Unlike Janie, Cynthia is the woman who continues to seek a “proper” man to marry from the beginning until the end of the play.

She complains that “there are no men” (80), that “there are 1000 men for every 1123 New York hubby hunters” (153), at the end of the play. As “a cyborg of unsatisfied desire” (Gross 51), she is not an independent woman and tries to look for her shelter in marriage with a good man. Therefore, as Beauvoir says, Cynthia can be understood as another “wanting” woman who needs a man so badly because “she cannot think of herself without [a] man” (16).

Unlike Harriet and Cynthia, Janie clearly declares her independent subjectivity not only to Harriet and Marty but also to her parents in the final scene. When Tasha and Simon come to her apartment with a mink coat as a present for her without the normal prior notice, Janie does not open the door for them to enter unless they repeat what Janie says to them.

> Janie: Mother, you can’t come in until you repeat after me: My daughter is a grown woman.
>
> Tasha: Simon, she’s crazy.
>
> Janie: My daughter is a grown woman.
>
> Tasha: My daughter is a grown woman.
>
> Janie: This is her apartment.
>
> Tasha: Of course, it’s your apartment.
>
> Simon: For Christ’s sake, just tell her . . .

Tasha: This is her apartment.

Janie: I am to call before I arrive here. (147)

Janie has already changed the lock of her apartment so that no one can enter. Janie, making it clear to Tasha and Simon that she is a grown, independent woman and not a sweet little girl anymore, struggles to show her spiritual progression from a little girl to an autonomous, subjective, adult woman. When Tasha asks Janie who will take care of her if they are not around anymore, Janie confidently answers, “I will” (151). Just as Tasha frequently uses this phrase as an expression of her confidence in life, Janie is now able to say confidently, “I am” (151) – clear evidence of Janie’s change and growth as an autonomous woman. By the end of the play, she recovers the feminist subjectivity of her life.

The mink coat metaphor also indicates her growth quite appropriately. Although her parents give this beautiful mink coat as a present to her and want her to wear it, it does not fit Janie since it is “very small, a size 4” (148). No matter how beautiful this mink coat is, it is useless. As Janie says, this mink coat would be perfect for her “if I was thirty-six and married to a doctor and a size three” (148). However, she is not. Likewise, no matter how wealthy and promising Marty is as a husband, he does not fit Janie and is useless for her unless he guarantees her subjectivity in life. Therefore, just as she refuses Marty’s offer to move into his apartment, Janie also

refuses her parents' offer of a mink coat, the latter as destructive as the former to her well-being.

Isn't It Romantic? is about Janie's dilemma of having it all and her choice between feminist subjectivity or dependency on man and marriage. Janie shows "the image of a modern, independent, 'uncommon woman,' who expects to fulfill career ambitions that prefeminist women twenty years her senior rarely imagined" (Ciociola 41). Janie's feminism, which is also Wasserstein's, can be viewed as new and different from that of its predecessors, in that women's oppression is not just portrayed as mere physical abuse. Janie's choice to be independent and subjective in her life mirrors Wasserstein's choice, too, since this play is quite autobiographical:

> Like Janie, Miss Wasserstein, grew up in a 'nice middle-class Jewish family' in New York. Like Janie, she is an old-fashioned romantic, given to covering over her shyness with wit and girlish banter. And like Janie, she found herself pursuing the precarious vocation of writing, instead of the more mainstream professions favored by the family. (Kakutani)

Like Janie, Wasserstein herself is a self-asserting Jewish woman and a self-empowered feminist who has become a successful single career woman. Wasserstein honestly confesses that this play is "about me and my mother [Lora] basically" (Bryer

272), who liked “go-go” (Wasserstein, Bachelor Girls 16) as an energetic dancer and asked her to get married like Tasha. However, like Janie, Wasserstein “persistently maintains her belief that a woman is entitled to pursue both her professional goals and private desires without sacrificing one for the other and in particular without sacrificing the former for the latter” (Ciociola 7).

The last scene of this play is quite beautiful and symbolic of Wasserstein’s feminist theme. After Tasha and Simon depart with the mink coat, Janie dances “beautifully, alone” (153) to the music while Cynthia’s complaint about the difficulty of finding a good man to marry in New York City continues on the answering machine. Wasserstein, as a feminist playwright, purposefully gives her assent to Janie’s good choice by depicting Janie’s dancing alone so beautifully. Therefore, as Wasserstein’s dramatic tactic for her feminist ethos, Janie’s dancing alone in the last scene symbolically shows that Janie’s choice is quite right for acquiring and maintaining women’s autonomy and feminist subjectivity – that is, one can dance rhythmically alone and be fulfilled alone.

"Who Are You? My Knight in Shining Armor?" Negotiating Women's Life without Men with Sisterhood in Wendy Wasserstein's The Sisters Rosensweig

Wendy Wasserstein's The Sisters Rosensweig involves the story of three middle-aged "uncommon" sisters who gather at the eldest Sara Goode's house to celebrate her fifty-fourth birthday. While the sisters celebrate Sara's birthday with some men who are involved with them, they revisit their past and finally find their independent selfhood, which they come to realize does not have to do with their relationships with men. This play is comic but not hilarious, critical but not bitter. "But underlying the comedy is an empathetic concern for the characters and for the prospects of women today" (Gussow C3). Wasserstein describes this play in the preface:

> This is neither a serious nor a comic play. It is hopefully both. The trick in writing it, playing it, or even reading it, is to find the balance between the bright colors of humor and the serious issues of identity, self-loathing, and the possibility for intimacy and love when it seems no longer possible or, sadder yet, no longer necessary. (The Sisters Rosensweig x)

Although she denies that this play is a simple comic play, some critics prefer to see the play as comic. Kevin Kelly, for instance, finds a similarity between this play and

Anton Chekhov's The Three Sisters and argues that: "On one side of the ballroom Wendy Wasserstein is seen waltzing with Anton Chekhov, on the other with Neil Simon. [. . .] She chooses to laugh in the dark rather than light the way" (61). Ben Brantley also sees this play as "a melancholy-tinged comedy in the Chekhovian mold" (C3). Although critics' responses to this play are diverse, one thing is clear: the play is redolent of Wasserstein's feminist perspective.

The three sisters – Sara Goode, Pfeni Rosensweig, and Gorgeous Teitelbaum – were raised, like Wasserstein, in a traditional Jewish family. Mel Gussow says, "with its Jewish themes and reference to a mother's strong influence on her adult daughters, [The Sisters Rosensweig] looks back to Isn't It Romantic?"(C3). It seems that Janie and Harriet of Isn't It Romantic? also reappear as middle-aged career women in The Sisters Rosensweig. Since this play is so "steeped in Jewish culture and humor" (Gussow C3) with many Jewish characters and Jewish cultural references on the surface level, the sisters' recovering Jewishness seems to be the keynote theme of this play. However, in my interpretation of The Sisters Rosensweig, the play does not intrinsically focus on the Jewishness of the sisters, but on their womanhood, sisterhood, and feminist subjectivity. As a feminist playwright, Wendy Wasserstein mainly focuses on these three sisters' independent self-determination and subjectivity through "the personal disintegration and renewal of Sara, Gorgeous, and Pfeni"

(Ciociola 85), which explicitly expresses Wasserstein's strong feminist point of view more than her treatment of Jewish culture.

From Wasserstein's feminist point of view, Pfeni, Gorgeous and especially Sara in The Sisters Rosensweig grow into more independent women, as does Janie Blumberg in Isn't It Romantic?. Whereas Janie Blumberg and Harriet Cornwall are in their late twenties, these three sisters are in their forties and fifties. However, "Despite their maturity, most of the characters in the play are struggling with who they are" (The Sisters Rosensweig xi). Rather than being dependent on men for their happiness in life, they come to learn how to negotiate their lives through their sisterhood without male involvement. A husband or a boyfriend can hurt women's lives and happiness since a husband or a boyfriend can come and go anytime they want. Children also can leave their mothers and homes anytime they want. However, according to Wasserstein's notion, sisters remain life-long companions throughout their lives. The sisters of the play, realizing this fact, finally learn how to live subjectively even though they do not have "proper" men in their lives, thereby modeling Wasserstein's way of establishing feminist subjectivity in her plays. Since "seeing women in relation to one another, as well as to the men in their lives, is Wasserstein's trademark strategy" (Mandl 8), an in-depth reading of The Sisters Rosensweig from the angle of the sister relationship elucidates Wasserstein's emergent feminism.

As aforementioned, Wasserstein's female characters belong to the upper-middle class in American society: They are highly educated, professional career women who hail from good family backgrounds. Likewise, Sara Goode, who is 54 years old and the main protagonist of the play, is "an American Jewish woman living in London, working for a Chinese Hong Kong bank, and taking weekends at a Polish resort with a daughter who's running off to Lithuania!" (81). A successful banker, she is in charge of Hong Kong/Shanghai bank in Europe and has appeared on the cover of Fortune magazine twice. Gorgeous Teitelbaum, 46 years old, is married to a lawyer and has her own radio advice talk show as "Dr. Gorgeous" in Newton, Massachusetts. She is the mother of four wonderful children and now is leading a group of women from Temple on a tour of London. Pfeni, who is 40 and the youngest sister, trots the globe as a travel journalist, studying and writing about women and culture. Her book, Life in the Afghan Village, has been chosen as an English textbook by Tess Goode's English teacher at her Westminster school. In short, the three Rosensweig sisters are successful, professional career women.

However, in spite of their successful careers, according to Wasserstein's feminist point of view, these Rosensweig sisters lack something in their lives and are not completely happy despite their success. As the play proceeds, it is revealed that inwardly these sisters have unique problems and real dissatisfactions. The

commonality of their dissatisfaction is that they lack “proper” and supportive men in their lives. Whatever professional works they perform, the absence of “proper” men constitutes their frustration and discontent. Outwardly they may look happy and perfect, but, in fact, they are inwardly frustrated. As Gorgeous says, they sometimes need “warmth and cuddles and kisses” (72). They need a “knight in shining armor,” (81) so to speak, to save them from their frustration and discontentment. This is the basis of Wasserstein’s controversial exploration of feminism in this play.

First of all, Sara Goode is not a completely satisfied woman. She does not “maintain” (10) her Jewish family background and now lives as an “expatriate” (10) in Queen Anne’s Gate, London. As a Jewish woman, she experiences not only the burden of keeping her Jewish identity but also the burden of expectation to get married, which is “a recurrent theme in Wasserstein’s work” (Whitfield 230). Tess Goode, her daughter, criticizes Sara as “an atheist” (10) because of Sara’s abandonment of her Jewish identity, and she rebukes her mother because she “never managed to maintain” (10) the good family tradition. Even though Sara is the eldest sister, she does not join in Gorgeous’s Sabbath sundown prayer in her house. On the contrary, Sara asks Tess to blow out the candles which Gorgeous lights to follow Jewish rituals for prayer: “Stop being the good little sister and blow out the god-damned candles!” (38). Sara speaks of her disconnection with her family, religion,

and country to Merv in Act 2 Scene 1: “I’m a cold, bitter woman who’s turned her back on her family, her religion, and her country! And I held so much in. I harbored so much guilt that it all made me ill and capsized in my ovaries” (81). Like an expatriate, she alienates herself from her family tradition, her past and her real identity as a Jewish American woman.

Sara does not have satisfactory relationships with men in her life. Divorced twice because her former husbands had many affairs with other women, she jokes, “We could form the Wives of Kenneth Goode Club, with branches in Chicago, New York, London, and Tokyo” (12). Unfortunately, however, Sara’s present boyfriend Nick Pym is not an exception: he is not committed to her, either. He is criticized by both Gorgeous and Tess as “racist, sexist, and more than likely anti-Semitic” (10) and also as “a philanderer and a Nazi” (34). According to Tess, Nick also has indecent affairs with many girls:

> Mother, he’s dating the best friend of a girl in my class. He’s one of those weirdo English bankers who takes sixteen-year-old models to dinner at Annabel’s and then goes home alone and puts panty hose over his head and dances to *Parsifal*. (51)

Despite the fact that Nick is Sara’s boyfriend, Nick leaves early during her birthday party on the pretense of meeting his niece, which is disappointing to Sara: “Darling,

you're too kind. But I'm meeting my niece early in the morning" (51). Thus, Nick cannot be regarded as a "proper" or supportive man for Sara, for he is just like Sara's former husbands.

Mervyn Kant, an American furrier and a friend of Geoffrey's, visits Sara's house uninvited and happens to participate in Sara's birthday dinner party. As a rich, sexy American Jewish widower, he is interested in Sara and wants to marry her. Sara is also bold enough to engage in one night sex with Merv, who is a stranger to her: "But Merv, just for one night I could be Sonia Kirschenblatt at the Brighton Beach Baths and you a Columbia sophomore" (58). However, although Merv is a nice gentleman and she spends a night with him, Sara refuses to love him and marry him, saying, "you're not my type" (54). Since Gorgeous thinks Sara "needs a man to make [her] soft again" (34) and she wants Sara to be "settled" (74), Gorgeous expects Sara to further this relationship. Of course, Merv wants to further the romantic relationship with Sara, too. Sara also admits that she is lonely and she misses sex: "I miss sex. I always liked sex" (58). She admits this loneliness to Merv: "Merv, there's nothing I look forward to more on Saturday nights than getting into bed early with a mystery novel and licking all the chocolate from my favorite wheat-meal biscuits" (104). Nevertheless, Sara, refusing to go further in her relationship with Merv, sends him away from her house in the morning because she does not think that Merv is her

"knight in shining armor" (81). Even though she is a lonely "licking wheat-meal biscuits in bed grownup" (104), she cannot accept an unsatisfactory and unsupportive man who is not "proper" for her. As Sara says, "a good man is hard to find" (80). Therefore, even if she is "the managing director of the Hong Kong/Shanghai Bank Europe" (22) and "the first woman to run a Hong Kong bank" (23), Sara still lacks something in her life: a "proper" man and a supportive partnership with him. Thus, we see again how Wasserstein's exploration of feminism, markedly different from Parks and other practitioners of this theme, is provocative and even controversial.

Sara does not have a good relationship with her daughter Tess, either. Tess Goode, who is a seventeen year old student, does not agree with her mother Sara on everything. Sara does not like Tess's relationship with her boyfriend, Tom Valiunus, whom she is seeing: "I just don't know what you have in common with someone who dreams of selling radio parts" (10). Furthermore, against her mother's will, Tess has a plan to go to Lithuania to support "Lithuanian resistance" (10) with her boyfriend Tom, "a freedom fighter" (11). Sara opposes her daughter's participation in an extremely dangerous political resistance in a foreign country. However, Tess is not willing to accept Sara's advice and views on life and is determined to "make her life the opposite of [Sara's]" (11). Tess revolts against Sara's views: "I'm not a nice Jewish girl from Connecticut. I'm an expatriate American who's lived in London for

five years and the daughter of an atheist" (10). Tess also opposes Sara's perspective, even criticizing Sara's boyfriend Nicholas Pym as a "racist, sexist, and more than likely anti-Semitic" man (10). As a teenage girl, Tess, in short, goes against her mother's wishes in most everything.

Surprisingly, however, Tess has different thoughts from her mother Sara, just as Sara herself did with her mother Rita in the past. As Pfeni indicates to Sara, Tess's disagreement with Sara and her independence are "exactly what [Sara and Pfeni] set out to do because of [their] mother" (11) in the past. Like Tess, Sara and Pfeni disagree with their mother's opinions. Sara does not agree with her mother's views, either:

> GORGEOUS: That feels so good. Remember when Mother stroked our hair?
>
> SARA: I remember coming home with a 99 and her shrieking at me, "Where's the other point?"
>
> GORGEOUS: Mother really missed saying good-bye to you.
>
> SARA: Mother and I had a Female Trouble conflict.
>
> GORGEOUS: She wanted to see us all happy.
>
> SARA: We are happy, Gorgeous. It's just not our mother's kind of happiness. (36)

Sara still does not agree with her mother and does not remember her mother kindly. Thinking that her mother's notion of happiness was different from hers, Sara continuously tries to disconnect herself from her family tradition back in America: "Merv, the home you're talking about is the Bronx, the Brooklyn, the America of forty years ago. It doesn't even exist anymore" (82). She tries to erase her Jewish family background and the memory of her mother.

Pfeni also is a daughter who revolts against her mother's notions. When Tess asks Pfeni why she does not have any suitcases while she is traveling, Pfeni answers, "because your grandmother Rita told me that only crazy people travel with shopping bags. So I've made it my personal signature ever since" (7). Like an eccentric, Pfeni also goes against her mother's opinion by carrying shopping bags when she travels. As noted before, Janie Blumberg does not agree with her mother's philosophy in Isn't It Romantic?, either. Therefore, like Wasserstein, the daughters of Wasserstein's plays tend to refuse their mothers' points of view on a woman's life. The mother-daughter relationship in Wasserstein's plays is not harmonious; daughters tend to revolt against their mothers' notions and indulge in passive-aggressive behavior. Their resistance, ironically, mainly stems from their feminist point of view concerning other women.

Gorgeous Teitelbaum, who is a "very pretty but overdone woman of around forty-six" (27), also looks like a successful, professional career woman. She arrives at

Sara's house wearing "a fake Chanel suit with too many accessories, and carries imitation Louis Vuitton suitcases" (27). Her husband, Henry, is said to be a very prominent attorney, and she has four model children. As noted earlier, Gorgeous has her own radio advice talk show as "Dr. Gorgeous" and she lives in the suburb of Newton, Massachusetts. She maintains her Jewish family traditions and observes a Jewish Sabbath sundown prayer by lighting candles even at Sara's house. Apparently, as Merv says, she is "the sister who did everything right" since she "married the attorney, [she] had the children, [she] moved to the suburbs" (30). In other words, "Gorgeous represents everything Sara has rejected" (Ciociola 83). She boasts about herself and considers herself a woman who is "what they call a real middle-aged success story" (31).

Despite her appearance, however, Gorgeous also is a woman who lacks something in her life. First of all, the clothing she wears is just a fake Chanel suit, and she carries imitation Louis Vuitton suitcases as well. Although she looks "absolutely smashing" to the participants of the party and although Tom says, "she should change her name to Smashing!," in fact, she is just wearing fake "Ungaro cocktail wear" (43). Like her fake clothing, her life is phony and very different from what she outwardly projects. Although she, like a psychiatrist, helps other needy women solve their life problems with consultations on her radio talk show – "Hello, I'm Dr. Gorgeous, how

can I help you?" (28) – she in fact needs a psychiatrist herself for her own problems. She conceals her problems with brilliant accessories, disguises her real needs, and deceives herself as well as others.

As a matter of fact, Gorgeous's husband, Henry, who has been known as a promising attorney to her sisters, is now a lumpen. Gorgeous comes home frustrated because one of her new shoes which she bought for two hundred pounds was broken and ripped at the Kensington Station tube stop. When Sara comforts her by saying that Henry will buy Gorgeous another pair of shoes, Gorgeous finally reveals the truth:

> GORGEOUS: Henry can't buy me or anyone else in his family a pair of shoes. My dear husband Henry hasn't worked in two years. [. . .] Henry isn't even looking for a job. He's writing mysteries in the basement. [. . .] He says he could have been Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett if only he hadn't been brought up in Scarsdale. So now every night at ten he dresses in a trench coat and goes out to prowl around the bars of South End. He comes home at five in the morning and begins typing in the basement until he falls asleep at noon. We pass each other in the hall and he tells me how much it means to him that I am still here. And you know the funniest part of it all? He doesn't even drink. He's out all night having diet Cokes. (92-

3)

Since Henry's lifestyle here is not considered normal and satisfactory to Gorgeous, she is frustrated with him. Thus, all the appearances that Gorgeous maintains are fake, just as her famous brand clothing is fraudulent. The master of appearance management, she is not rich enough to wear "a genuine Chanel suit" (102), which Mrs. Hershkovitz sends her as a present in the last scene. After trying on the real Chanel suit quickly, Gorgeous wants to return it "to pay for tuition this fall" (103). She hurries to return this genuine suit lest she should lose her will power: "Pfeni, we'd better hurry or I'll lose my will power. It's very hard for me to postpone gratification. If I have something in my hand for more than two minutes, I want to keep it or at least eat it" (103). Although Gorgeous says to Pfeni, "Henry and I had the most delicious sex" (71), this also can be seen as a lie: Henry's abnormal lifestyle does not make the most delicious sex possible. Despite the appearances she assumes, Gorgeous, like Sara, is a needy woman who lacks something – namely, a "proper" man. In that neediness, Wasserstein takes the feminist crusade into whole new areas.

Just like Sara and Gorgeous, Pfeni Rosensweig, the traveling journalist, also looks like a successful, professional career woman. A globe-trotting columnist, she lives her life as if she were on "an extended junior year abroad" (Gussow C3). She visits every corner of the world and writes about women's oppressed life and culture.

Although her book, Life in the Afghan Village, is assigned as an English textbook by Tess's English teacher at Westminster, Sara complains that it did not win the Overseas Press Award that year (6). In spite of Pfeni's professionalism, she is a frustrated woman who, like her sisters, lacks something in her life – a "proper" man.

Pfeni has a relationship with her boyfriend, Geoffrey, who is "an attractive forty-year-old man in a hip leather jacket and a Sunset in Penang T-shirt" (14). He is an internationally renowned director who possesses a humorous and cheerful character. He put "f" in the middle of Pfeni. Living in the basement of Sara's house, he "asked [Pfeni] to be the mother of his children" (22) when Pfeni sat next to him at *Giselle*. He calls Pfeni "my angel" and says to Pfeni: "Pfeni, my angel, I wish you knew what a gorgeous person you are" (19). Because of this, Pfeni loves Geoffrey and wants to marry him: "The only place I am at home, or even close, is when I'm with you" (87). However, Geoffrey disappoints Pfeni in Act 2, Scene 2 when he says, "Pfeni, I love you. I will always love you. But the truth is, I miss men" (86). The fact that Geoffrey is a bisexual is disappointing to Pfeni. Pfeni's frustration is enormous because Geoffrey was "the one who said [they] should get married that very first night," and he was "the one who said, what beautiful children [they]'d have just this morning" (87). Nevertheless, Geoffrey leaves Pfeni in the end because he misses men; he says, "Today this is who I am. I have no other choice. I miss men" (88). Thus,

Gorgeous is right when she tells Pfeni that she has been “at the wrong library altogether” even though “Pfeni could not judge a book by its cover” (72). In other words, as Gorgeous says, Pfeni did not see clearly who Geoffrey was. Although she is a successful, professional career woman like her sisters, Pfeni also needs and pines for a supportive man in her life.

Although Ciociola sees the main issues of this play as “about being American, Jewish, and woman” (82), my interpretation of this play focuses on these “uncommon” sisters’ recovery of independence and feminist subjectivity. In spite of disappointment and discontent about men in their lives, the sisters find some solace from their sisterhood. Unlike men, sisters can be supportive and encouraging of each other. After all the unhelpful men are gone in Act 2, Scene 2, which is the only scene where only the sisters appear together. In this scene, the sisters drink wine together, toasting “To Rita! And her stunningly brilliant daughters” (95). They regain their self-esteem as Rita’s daughters and also recover the bond of their forgotten sisterhood. Sara, as the eldest sister, resumes the role of *shtarker* for the sisters, which means “a person who takes charge” (95). She undertakes the role of taking care of her sisters like their mother. At this moment and among themselves, they experience sisterly “pure, unadulterated happiness” (96) without men:

GORGEOUS: You know what I wish with all my heart?

SARA: What?

PFENI: What?

GORGEOUS: I wish that on one of our birthdays, when all the children and men have gone upstairs to sleep …

SARA: What men?

GORGEOUS: And we finally sit together, just us three sisters …

PFENI: Around the samovar.

GORGEOUS: And we talk about life!

PFENI: And art.

SARA: Pfeni!

GORGEOUS: Thank you, Sara. *Kisses SARA's hand*. That each of us can say at some point that we had a moment of pure, unadulterated happiness! Do you think that's possible, Sara?

SARA: Brief. But a moment or two.

PFENI: I like that.

GORGEOUS: Me too. (96)

Even though it might be a brief moment, they feel a strong bond as Rosensweig sisters and the daughters of Rita, not as wives or girlfriends. According to Wasserstein's feminist point of view, men and boyfriends betray women and leave them, as

Geoffrey does. Even daughters have different lifestyles and disappoint them, as Tess does. But sisters remain beside each other as life-long friends.

Male characters in this play are not patriarchal like Marty Sterling in Isn't It Romantic? or in other feminist playwrights' plays, nor do they try to dominate female characters or force what they believe on women. Not pushy like Marty, Merv and Geoffrey, for instance, are kind gentlemen to their women partners. Merv sings songs for Sara, while Geoffrey dances for Pfeni. They are, in a sense, romantic and pleasant men for their women, and they respect women's opinions and their decisions. Even after Merv spends the night with Sara, he is not domineering over Sara; on the contrary, Merv complains about Sara's being too clear and cold: "Isn't it usually the reverse? Aren't most women warm and cozy the morning after and the men reasonably clear?" (79). Nevertheless, these sisters do not depend on these gentlemen because, in the end, these men do not give them the supportive partnership that these "uncommon" women want. Therefore, as the sisters say several times, "a good man is hard to find" (73) since these gentlemen do not exactly fit these sisters' needs.

Paul Hodgins says, "what makes these characters even more remarkable is that American theater has seldom paid attention to this type of female before" (F33). These Rosensweig sisters, like Janie Blumberg, are a new type of female character, who independently seek their feminist subjectivity rather than depending on

relationships with men. Whereas Janie chooses to pursue her independent career life without a man, the Rosensweig sisters find their strength and solace from the strong bond of their sisterhood rather than from their relationships with men. Of course, the sisters sometimes quarrel with each other and hurt each other's feelings, as in Act 2, Scene 1:

> GORGEOUS: Let me tell you something, Sara. Rabbi Pearlstein says you're very troubled because you never grew up to be the woman our mother expected us to be.
>
> SARA: I beg your pardon?
>
> GORGEOUS: Well, I'm sorry things have not worked out as you had hoped. But I can no longer allow you to hurt my feelings because you are so threatened by my pride in my husband, my family, and my accomplishments!
>
> SARA: This is actually quite absurd! (75)

Despite these small quarrels, they share loving comfort, advice, and encouragement with each other when they are frustrated in life. Pfeni encourages Sara, "You're not old and bitter. You're anticipating an era of hope and rebirth" (13). Sara also encourages Pfeni when Geoffrey leaves her: "Pfeni, you're a beautiful and brilliant woman. Next time just don't agree to marry the man you're sitting next to at *Giselle*"

(89). Gorgeous gives loving advice and encouragement to Pfeni, too. On the basis of this bond of sisterhood, then, the Rosensweig sisters have hope for the future and they can be revived, no matter the circumstances they face in their lives. Whatever frustration men cause them in their relationships, the sisters can stand up again and bravely pursue their professional careers. In other words, the sisters maintain their autonomous subjectivity of life without depending on relationships with men. In the last scene, when Sara says, “My name is Sara Rosensweig. I am the oldest daughter of Rita and Maury Rosensweig. I was born in Brooklyn” (107), she recovers both her original Jewish family identity as Rita’s daughter, which she earlier disavowed, and more importantly, her feminist subjectivity as an independent woman without a man.

A statue of Shiva, which Pfeni gives to Tess as a present, becomes an appropriate symbol of the Rosensweig sisters’ recovery of hope and rebirth in life. Shiva, one of the principal Hindu deities, is the destroyer and restorer of worlds in numerous forms. Shiva is also a member of the Hindu pantheon, which includes Brahma and Vishnu. As Pfeni says to Tess, Shiva the destroyer gives the sisters hope and rebirth: “this god will destroy all evil and bring you hope, rebirth, and a life-time guarantee that under no circumstances will you grow up to be like me” (7). The symbolic power of Shiva is not just for Tess: Tess is right when she wants to give it to her mother since Sara is also “in desperate need of hope and rebirth” (7). But the other

sisters in the play are also able to have hope and to revive themselves as independent women, thanks to Shiva's "mysterious power," which is actually their sisterhood. This is plausible since, although none of the sisters can be completely happy with their relationships with men in their lives, "with effort, the women arrive at a new understanding. Bonding as siblings, they can anticipate a more promising future" (Gussow C3).

The Sisters Rosensweig is often understood as a play about "Jewishness and assimilation, roots and rootlessness, work and love" (Hoban 34). However, in my reading, the three sisters' becoming independent from their relationships with men through sisterhood is an even more dominant theme. These women learn "how to negotiate life's tortuous road map without a man" (Hodgins F33), or they are in the painful process of learning this truth, because their complete satisfaction or happiness cannot yet be guaranteed. Paul Hodgins describes Wasserstein's creation of the sisters in light of this truth: "Wasserstein has created an unlikely trio of gladiators who attain heroic status simply by surviving on their own, with some help from their sometimes-misguided but loving siblings" (F33). As Hodgins comments, the sisters' surviving power, as a "trio of gladiators," does not come from relationships with men but from the women's sisterhood. Of course, as a single woman, Sara may be lonely and have a one-night stand with a man. However, as Sara expresses to Merv: "I didn't have a

‘you’ in my life at sixteen. I’m certainly not going to have a ‘you’ in my life now” (82); she clearly refuses to be committed to marriage in order to be happy. She does not think a man is her “knight in shining armor” (81), since being committed to marriage can be an obstacle for woman’s independence and feminist subjectivity. She can be romantic for a moment, but she cannot be lastingly committed to a man, preferring constant sisterhood to ephemeral romance.

In the last scene, Sara and Tess reconcile with each other as mother and daughter. Like Sara, Tess also lets her boyfriend go away without her: “I told Tom to go without me” (106). By disconnecting herself from the relationship with Tom, Tess grows into a more independent woman. Sara teaches her woman’s independence as well: “‘Sadie, that Tessie of yours is just like Rita.’ So, if Rita could make the Cossacks run away, you are smart enough, and brave enough, and certainly beautiful enough to find your place in the world” (106). Thus, the spirit of woman’s independence and subjectivity progresses through generations – from Rita and Sara to Tess in this last scene. The readers/audience note that not only Sara but also Tess becomes a more subjective woman at this point. Furthermore, The Sisters Rosensweig can be read/viewed as a feminist play, since this play shows that “uncommon women cannot ‘have it all’ and, in particular, cannot simultaneously sustain a meaningful career and a successful, intimate relationship with a man” (Ciociola 19), which is

Wasserstein's unique feminist point of view.

"Our Task Is to Rise and Continue": Professional Women's Vulnerability, Victimization, and the Restoration of Feminist Subjectivity in Wendy Wasserstein's An American Daughter

In the preface of An American Daughter, Wendy Wasserstein confides that "Anne Cattaneo, the dramaturg of Lincoln Center Theater, always pipes in with 'When will you show us your dark side?'" (An American Daughter viii). Since some critics think that Wasserstein writes just light comedies, they ask Wasserstein when she will "show [her] anger and serious side" (An American Daughter viii) in her plays. However, Wasserstein, I allege, has been showing her anger and serious side already in her previous feminist plays, such as Isn't It Romantic? and The Sisters Rosensweig, since these plays show women's sensitive anger and their critique of the invisible male-dominating society from the feminist point of view. For instance, challenging society's traditional expectation for a woman to marry and have a family shows a woman's serious self-determination and feminist subjectivity. Pursuing professional careers, even if women have to sacrifice their personal desires of "having it all," expresses women's serious approach to life. Therefore, Anne Cattaneo's question above makes little sense to me since Wasserstein has been showing her dark side to

American readers/audience throughout the entire canon of her plays. In this regard, I contend that Wasserstein's plays have been misread.

However, with An American Daughter, her sixth play and third to come to Broadway, Wendy Wasserstein attains a higher level of seriousness and profundity since this play is "the most overtly political work of her career" (Marks H5). Wasserstein speaks to the political intention of this play in the preface: "My intention with An American Daughter was not to overhaul but to widen the range of my work: to create a fractured fairy tale depicting both a social and a political dilemma for contemporary professional women" (An American Daughter viii). As she says, this play centers on "the aspiration, sadness, defeats, and accomplishments of 'really smart people'" (An American Daughter x) who are successful, professional career women. Whereas Janie Blumberg in Isn't It Romantic? sacrifices only her personal romance with Marty Starling for her quest for a professional career, Lyssa Dent Hughes in An American Daughter faces the danger of serious damage to both her public career and her private family life at the hands of a fickle society. That is, Lyssa Dent Hughes, a successful, professional career woman, not only loses her nomination as the Surgeon General of the United States, but also faces a potential breakup with her husband because of misplacing a jury summons slip.

Lyssa's downfall, from Wasserstein's feminist point of view, is viewed as

unfair and oppressive to professional career women in the contemporary American landscape. Ciociola speaks to this point: “whereas [Wasserstein’s] other heroines won political victories at the expense of personal happiness, Lyssa Dent Hughes becomes the first whose feminist complexion, as perceived by others, exacts a professional and public price, as well as a private one” (100). In that vein, An American Daughter is not an “accommodating and entertaining” play but a “sort of angry play” (Cohen 259), which shows a competent professional woman’s vulnerability to political maelstroms, frustration, and downfall by the insurmountable forces of society, which is biased, hostile, and unfair to women. An explication of Lyssa’s vulnerability as a career woman – her victimization and her restoration of feminist subjectivity as represented in An American Daughter – offers a further deepening of our understanding of Wasserstein’s feminist point of view.

Like Wasserstein’s other female characters, Lyssa Dent Hughes, the main protagonist of this play, belongs to upper-middle class American society. A well-educated doctor and college professor, she owns an upper class home complete with a garden in Georgetown. Furthermore, unlike Wasserstein’s other heroines, Lyssa in An American Daughter seems to be a woman who “has it all” – a successful, professional career, a nice family with a husband and children, and a beautiful slim body to boot. Besides, Lyssa has a great family background: she is the daughter of Republican

Senator Alan Hughes of Indiana and “Ulysses S. Grant’s fifth-generation granddaughter” (42). In addition to that, the First Lady of the United States is one of her former college classmates. Thus, in a word, Lyssa is “the epitome of good breeding” (45). With her royal family, marriage, and successful professional career, Lyssa embodies the ideal professional career woman whom Wasserstein wants to achieve in real life as well as in her world of plays. Lyssa has attained what Wasserstein’s former heroines – Janine Blumberg and the Rosensweig sisters – could only wish for in their lives.

Unfortunately, however, Lyssa does not remain the ideal, professional career woman who “has it all” since she has to withdraw her name as the nominee of the Surgeon General of the United States because of “jurygate” (73). Lyssa’s political downfall as the nominee of the Surgeon General of the United States parallels Zoe Baird’s unsuccessful nomination for Attorney General during the Bill Clinton administration in 1993 because it was revealed that Baird had hired illegal aliens to serve her as a chauffer and a nanny. Even though Ms. Baird was considered a competent female corporate lawyer, she became the focus of complicated imbroglios and criticism by both political opponents and the mass media. Finally, she was ignominiously forced to withdraw from the nomination for that position. However, as a feminist, Wasserstein saw Baird’s withdrawal from the nomination as an insult to

professional career women and opposed it:

> To Ms. Wasserstein, this excuse for a denial of high office was an insult to all women of ambition, a reminder that ingrained prejudices about women's roles die hard. And while Ms. Baird's opponents argued that her nomination as the nation's top law enforcement official had been irretrievably tainted, Ms. Wasserstein believes that the greater offense was against Ms. Baird. (Marks H5)

Although Baird trespassed the law of immigration, Wasserstein did not think that this justified the refusal of a competent female career woman for high office; after all, it was a petty trespass of which many other people are guilty. Wasserstein suspected biased sexual discrimination and unfair victimization of professional career women through the "search and destroy" politics by male-dominated conservative mainstream society. In her political critique of the society which is hostile to professional career women, Wasserstein creates a professional career woman, Lyssa Dent Hughes, who is, like Baird, victimized by the hostile mass media in a similar context. This explains Wasserstein's remark to her friend, Michael Kinsley, the former editor of The New Republican: "I thought I would write something that would make some people uncomfortable" (Marks H5).

In fact, Lyssa is an impeccable woman: she is faithful as a daughter, a wife,

and a mother, and she succeeds well as a professional career woman. From Senator Alan Hughes's point of view, the readers/audience knows what kind of person Lyssa has been as a daughter since she was a young girl:

> My daughter was always a do-gooder. When she was around eight, she'd go to a birthday party and make me drop her off a block away because she didn't want anyone to feel bad because we had a nicer car. She was a candy striper in the hospital, she was on the Indian reservation for her college vacations, she was always busy starting rape centers, birthing centers, and let's-get-together-and-help-women centers. My daughter Lyssa believes that every day it's time to smile on your sister. I hope that reporter realizes how lucky this administration is to get her. (33)

As the consummate "do-gooder," Lyssa is committed to her traditional gender roles as well as her professional career, and she is also faithful as a mother to her children: "I'm going upstairs. I promised the kids I would play Space Invaders with them" (21), a plan which sharply contrasts with the intent of her somewhat selfish husband, Walter Abrahmson, who says, "I don't want to go upstairs. There are Space Invaders and nannies and grown-up things up there" (21). Moreover, Lyssa picks up her kids from soccer practice and makes her own scones for her children. As Quince Quincy

observes in her compliment, “I love that Dr. Lyssa Hughes does her own cleaning on the day of her nomination. I love that!” (5), Lyssa, indeed, is a committed mother and housewife as well as a professional woman.

In addition to this, Lyssa is a faithful and sweet wife to her husband, Walter Abrahmson, who is a sociology professor at Georgetown University. Walter, who is forty-seven years old and is undergoing a middle-age peril, is sexually attracted to a young, sexy girl, Quincy, one of his former students. He complains about Lyssa: “You’re not even curious anymore. You want to know why I’m so taken with Quincy and Morrow? They’re looking directly at the future. You’re as rooted as any ardent right-winger” (21). Even when Walter regrets not having sex with his high school girlfriend, Joanie Tenzer, at that time, Lyssa is quite considerate and sweet enough to be willing to play the role of Joanie Tenzer:

> Lyssa: I’m sorry, honey. I’m sorry. *She unbuttons her shirt*. Hi, I don’t know if you remember me. My name is Joanie Tenzer. Lyssa had to leave suddenly on sabbatical. Whatever that means.
>
> WALTER: Hi Joanie. Nice to see you. It’s been a long time.
>
> LYSSA: I hear you’ve got a Big Head Todd. Can we go to your car and listen to it?
>
> WALTER: Joanie, what do you want to listen to that junk for? Have I

> ever told you that according to my college roommate, Dr. Martin Brody, Professor of Harmony at Wellesley College, the Beach Boys are the most sophisticated American composers since Gershwin? (22)

Besides, Lyssa sees Walter kissing Quincy when Quincy joins brunch at his house: "*He puts on the music and begins dancing with* Quincy. *He kisses her as* Lyssa *walks into the room*" (43). After Lyssa lets Walter drive Quincy back home, she knows that "Right now, my husband probably has his hand up Quincy's Quince" (53). Nevertheless, Lyssa tries to be dutiful to her gender role as a wife by being considerate and sweet to Walter. She tries to maintain a good relationship with her husband. Walter, as a husband and because of Lyssa's rectitude and chaste example, does not engage in sex with Quincy, either. Therefore, in addition to being a professional career woman, Lyssa is faithful as a wife as well as a mother for her family. This, in short, is one Wasserstein's protagonist who does indeed seem to have it all.

In spite of these good qualities of Lyssa, however, Lyssa becomes the target of heated political crossfire because of her petty mistake of neglecting jury duty at one point in her past. Although she could not fulfill her jury duty because she "misplaced" (48) the jury-duty notification slip, not deliberately ignoring it, Lyssa comes "under

the grotesque media scrutiny" (Brantley C16). Morrow McCarthy, though a friend of Lyssa and Walter, as a symbol of the critical social voice, accuses Lyssa of not fulfilling her jury duty: "Your daughter and my best friend, Dr. Lyssa Dent Hughes, Surgeon General nominee, a woman of impeccable commitment, at the forefront of women's health issues, pro-choice, pro-gay, has never served on a jury" (47). Responding to this accusation, a reporter, Timber Tucker, who reported about the women in Sarajevo, calls Lyssa "An American Snob" (53) and "seizes on this information to embarrass the President's second nominee" (48). Acting out of selfish interests, Timber sensationalizes this petty information and takes advantage of Lyssa's mistake as "an opportunity to aim a few satiric darts at our scandal-hungry press and public" (qtd. in Ciociola 111). Timber defines Lyssa's small mistake as "a crime" – "your daughter committed a crime" – even though Alan says that it is just an "oversight" (86). Many television vans swarm over to Lyssa's house, and mass media reporters obfuscate what she says about her mother during the chat after brunch with her friends. Because of the mass media brouhaha, Lyssa all of a sudden becomes the target of hostile public opinion:

> USA Today says the housewives of Indiana are picketing the radio stations. The 'icebox cakes and cheese pimento canapé' moms are apparently furious with you for 'minimizing their lives.' The boys

even found a fuckin' 'Ladies Chat Room' about you on the NET. (62)

She is "sabotaged by a bunch of angry Indiana homemakers who think she's a condescending, over-educated, unwomanly, power-hungry witch who can't cook" (Rose D1). In short, as Walter says, Lyssa has gone "from being a compromise candidate to the fucking soccer moms' anti-Christ" (62) in a week.

From Wasserstein's point of view, Timber and Morrow's mass media-based attack on Lyssa constitutes a sexist and unfair victimization of a competent professional career woman. Their criticism can be viewed as an attack against a woman, rather than an attack on a public nominee for the high office, because "If Dr. Hughes were a man, this wouldn't beat road runner cartoons. It'd be a non-issue, an oversight. They'd blame it on the maid or a wife" (72-3). Wasserstein argues that society is much harsher on Lyssa's minor mistake just because she is a female professional career woman. In the interview with Lyssa's family in Act 2, Scene 3, Timber asks first: "Walter, is your wife one of those remarkable young women who does everything right?" (86). The question itself embodies sexist and discriminative oppression against women since it embodies society's high expectation for women to do everything perfectly. Women, especially professional career women, cannot do everything right as Timber expects because it is not humanly possible. In other words, to quote Quincy, as a representative of professional career women, "Dr. Hughes is a

prisoner of her gender. She took on so many obligations that the basic necessities of life, like responding to a summons for jury duty, became overwhelming. The best intentions in females often become the seeds of their own destruction" (49). Through Lyssa's speech in the interview with Timber, Wasserstein expresses her stinging, cynical diatribe: "There's nothing quite so satisfying as erasing the professional competency of a woman, is there? Especially when there's such an attractive personal little hook to hang it on" (92). Lyssa insists that it is unfair of society to criticize a woman of good family and educational background who manages a professional career so successfully to be excoriated so unjustly. Wasserstein sees their accusation as sexist discrimination because, as Judith says to Timber, Wasserstein believes "by denying Lyssa Hughes this post we will be denying the country the talents of a remarkably concerned and inventive public servant, but also denying the girls of America someone they could, with pride, imagine themselves growing up to be" (76-7). In other words, Wasserstein thinks that society "must honor all our talented American women" (88).

Timber, as a TV reporter, delves into Lyssa's sore spot, jury duty, and pinpoints it as the problem of Lyssa's family, her character, and her qualification. The focus of the controversy is not Lyssa's professional ability to perform the job of the Surgeon General of the United States but her private life. In the interview with Lyssa's

family, Timber asks about her relationship with her mother and father, which again irrelevantly pertains to her private life. Although he says, “Many women in America feel your attitude towards your mother is your attitude towards them” (91), in fact, her relationship with her mother is only a small part of Lyssa’s private family life. No matter whether Lyssa was in a good relationship with her mother or not, this matter of a woman’s private life should not disqualify her for an official, professional position, nor, indeed, should it even be considered. Timber nevertheless attacks Lyssa’s relationship with her mother and makes this issue a national sensation not because the Surgeon General is “an important humanitarian position” (91), but because this special report can benefit his career as a reporter. His exaggerated report on Lyssa in Time Zone regarding “Jurygate” (85) with the commentator Quincy makes Lyssa come across as a woman who is a “prissy, privileged ungrateful-to-her-mother, conniving bitch” (64) through the power of mass media. The focus of Lyssa’s nomination erratically shifts to her condescending elitism, which in no way relates to the essence and responsibilities of the office of the Surgeon General. Therefore, Lyssa’s debacle is, in the long run, “not by the jury fiasco, but by damaging opinion polls showing that women have reacted against her and have exaggerated what she said” (Ciociola 112). Lyssa, in brief, should be viewed as a victim of sexist, political oppression, but, ironically, at the hands of women as well as men.

Although male characters, such as Morrow and Timber, are at the forefront of attacking Lyssa regarding jury duty, Quincy Quince, who is “a very pretty woman of about twenty-seven in a miniskirt and leather bomber jacket” (4), is another catalyst for Lyssa’s downfall. Entering Lyssa’s house through an unlocked garden gate, Quincy, an immigrant daughter, symbolically is “an interloper into Lyssa’s private world, heralding the media invasion” (Frank 165). Quincy wrote a book, The Prisoner of Gender, and she is Walter’s celebrity student and is called “the rebirth of feminism” (5). She also wants to become a successful, professional career woman like Lyssa, who “has it all”: “I have two more books to write and I want to start my family before I focus on my public life. My generation wants to do it all, but we want to have some fun too” (35). Ironically, however, in spite of being a feminist, she becomes a destroyer of Lyssa’s dream of “having it all” by joining and fueling the flames of criticism against Lyssa with Timber and the mass media. Far from establishing a feminist sisterhood with Lyssa, Quincy fashions herself as the arch enemy of female and feminism in this play. In a TV show program, Quincy ambiguously takes the side of angry moms: “Women are always reduced into categories, and in this case, the ‘icebox cakes and cheese pimento canapé’ moms are justifiably furious at having their life choices minimized” (73). Although she may be considered as “the next generation of feminists” (6), she is not a real feminist. Rather, she also may be a prisoner of

gender like Lyssa and victimized by other jealous women or the society, which is jealous of career women's professional competency in the future. Rather than advocating feminism and sisterhood, she seems to seek her reflexive, selfish profits through sensationalizing Lyssa's case. Lyssa takes note of this: "I saw [Quincy] on Nightline, Equal Time, Crossfire, and weekend Good Morning America. My nomination is going to sell Quincy a hell of a lot of books. They'll be taking prisoners of gender across America" (63). Quincy's taking advantage of Lyssa's mistake becomes profitable for her selfish career, which becomes evident when she reveals that she was offered a job by Time Zone:

> QUINCY: *Time Zone* has expressed an interest in me for a permanent position.
>
> TIMBER: Really? Women's issues? Personal profiles? It helps to get started by spending time in the field.
>
> QUINCY: Actually, they offered me an exclusive on that fanatic at Legal Seafood.
>
> TIMBER: Really? When did they do that?
>
> QUINCY: Today. But what are, like, the chances for your show to survive? The buzz is, before Lyssa Hughes, *Time Zone* wasn't long for this world.

TIMBER: Don't go into television, Quincy. Stay pure.

QUINCY: No, I'm into it. I'm totally psyched. (84)

Ben Brantley says that "serious acts of betrayal occur in this play, but since no persuasive motivation for them is established, they have no dramatic clout" (C16). But I think that there is a motivation for their betrayal in this play: the desire to seek their own selfish profits in their careers. Because of this motivation, not only Timber but also Quincy preys on Lyssa. Although Morrow says, "Lyssa and Walter are my best friends" (80), he is not their true friend. Timber is more honest because he candidly acknowledges: "but what I saw here last week didn't look like friendship to me" (80). In a real sense, they are not Lyssa's friends at all. Above all, it is most ironic that, although Quincy is called a feminist, subsequently, she becomes the symbol of "the worst betrayal of sisterhood" (Ciociola 118). Again, we see Wasserstein taking the feminist theme in new directions.

USA Today reports that the housewives of Indiana are picketing the radio station, and the "icebox cakes and cheese pimento canapé" moms angrily protest against Lyssa since they think Lyssa is "minimizing their lives" (62). Even Timber puts pressure for Lyssa to resign her nomination: "there is mounting pressure from your colleagues in the Senate and from women's groups, on both the left and the right, for the President to withdraw her name from nomination" (86). Lyssa's misplaced jury

summons slip evolves into the issue of “the women of America who are furious with [Lyssa]” (64). I think, as Walter indicates, this is due to women’s jealousy against a successful career woman, like Lyssa, who has it all, since “[she is] pretty, [she has] two great kids, [she’s] successful, [she’s] admired, [she’s] thin, and [she has] a great soul” (64). This is why “Female public opinion is running against [Lyssa] four to one” (88). Wasserstein’s point is that women, like Quincy, can be more hostile to other women since they are jealous or they interiorize man’s biased perspectives of women. Charlotte, who is Lyssa’s third stepmother, also points out these people’s jealousy: “There are plenty of not-nice people in the world, Lyssa. They’ll tear you apart just because they’re jealous or disappointed or, even worse, because they have nothing better to do” (68). Thus, those women’s responses to Lyssa’s petty foible seems to result from jealousy, which is ironic since “Most of [Lyssa’s] work in medicine has been in increasing awareness of women’s health issues” (88). Therefore, unlike the Rosensweig sisters in The Sisters Rosensweig, the women in An American Daughter show “the deterioration of sisterhood” or “the inability of some women to embrace not only feminism but one another” (Ciociola 116). Just like her husband Walter, who “should have protected Lyssa and not mentioned it to begin with” (49), these women are not helpful or supportive of Lyssa.

Finally, Lyssa surrenders to public opinion: “At 4:26 Eastern Standard Time, I

called the President and withdrew" (98). However, even if Lyssa has to face the debacle of her dream of "having it all," she does not lose her self-esteem; rather, she stands up again to restore her feminist subjectivity. Although she feels that public opinion is unfair and "unacceptable" (64), she shows her mature, responsible attitude by apologizing: "I made a mistake. I should have answered the notice. It was an oversight. [. . .] It was simply bad juggling by a working mother" (87). Lyssa does not try to evade her political crucible of this by following Billy Robbins' crafty and deceitful strategy. Billy Robbins, whom Alan brings to Lyssa's house to support her, is known as "the best spin-control man in the Senate" (65). But his strategy for Lyssa is to make an appeal to people's sympathy: "Basically, Americans will forgive a wife who, with the help of her loving family, overcomes a personal deficiency" (66). Thus, he advises Lyssa to do her television interview with Timber in the kitchen in order to look more feminine and to invoke more sympathy from women: "I'd suggest you wear feminine attire tomorrow. Maybe a bow or headband in your hair. Talk about your mother. How much you miss her. You've had a tough time but you're a survivor. Women respond to that" (70). However, this is not the way she wants to solve this problem and, furthermore, this is not what she thinks about herself. Lyssa does not think that she is a deficient or a pitiful woman who seeks sympathy from other women. She sees herself as "one of the leading professional women of [her]

generation, a pioneer in health care reform, truly an American daughter of the highest caliber" (88). Thus, she refuses Robbin's advice because she cannot "pretend to be someone [she's] not" (66). She is a self-determined and a subjective career woman who says, "I'm going to fight it, in my own way" (68).

Rather than being weakened by Timber's attack on her, Lyssa confidently counters his criticism, thereby attaining higher levels of fortitude and selfhood. She underscores that American women need to be concerned about women's rights rather than being concerned about her private family life:

> The women of America should concern themselves with the possibility of their reproductive rights being taken away from them. The women of America should concern themselves with the fact that breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and uterine cancer research is grossly underfunded compared with prostate cancer. The women of America should concern themselves that their children are increasingly smoking, falling prey to drug addiction and to the rapid growth of teenage pregnancy. The women of America should not concern themselves with my father's wives, my cooking, or my mother. (91-2)

Lyssa defends herself and expresses her subjective opinions about the problems which

contemporary American women face. She points out that women's medical issues are relatively underfunded by the male-dominated society. She even criticizes the male-dominated society, which erases the "professional competency of a woman" (92). Of course, when Walter worries about their children's disappointment after the interview with Timber, Lyssa also confides her frustration: "Oh, I'll just say life's unfair. The good guy doesn't always win" (96). However, after she reads the letter which Ulysses S. Grant sent to his daughter, Ellen Wrenshell Grant, Lyssa becomes a stronger and more courageous woman with the image of a strong woman on horseback in an advertisement: "Ulysses S. Grant's fifth-generation granddaughter charges into battle with a Doone & Burkey purse" (100). Like a woman warrior, Lyssa stands up again, ready to go forward. When her child says in the last scene, "Mom. Mom. There's a person in Portland who says that you're honorable and there's a person in Pittsburgh who says that you're not. What should we do?" (103), she is able finally to say with confidence that "Our task is to rise and continue. Prepare, gentlemen, for toppling Pittsburgh like a house of cards!" (105). She becomes a strong, subjective, professional, career woman again despite the heat of her fiery furnace.

The danger for a dramatist whose specialty is to write cynical social commentaries is the possibility of being read/viewed as a political agitprop. Despite this peril, however, Wasserstein's An American Daughter can be read/viewed as a

"part political satire and part morality tale" (Marks H5). This is because the play is about "a woman who has been the goodest of good girls and done everything right – education, professional achievement, public service – yet still ends up sacrificed to political pettiness" (Rose D1). An American Daughter shows us the readers/audience that, as Judith says, "a woman's life is all about boundaries" (8). In her book, Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism, Gayle Austin opposes paying attention to strictly a male character, Willy Loman, in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman and raises a question why the entire play or the readers/audience should pay attention to only Willy and his troubles: "So attention must be paid" (1). From feminist points of view, Austin's question makes sense and can be plausible since Linda Loman's life and her troubles also need to be addressed.

Thus, a feminist reading/viewing of plays focuses on women's angles rather than men's angles. Likewise, Lyssa Dent Hughes's victimization in An American Daughter needs to be viewed from the feminist point of view. Wasserstein sees that Lyssa unfairly becomes a prisoner of gender and a "disempowered victim" (77) because of the "wiseacre family members and friends, representing an ideological cross-section of the American political, professional and media elite" (Marks H5). From Wasserstein's feminist point of view, it is difficult for women to have a family and, simultaneously, a successful, professional career in contemporary America.

Society expects women to be “superwomen” who can accomplish everything completely and successfully. Furthermore, as is seen in this play, society demands more perfect morality from women, no matter if it is private or public. Society is harsher and stricter toward women’s small mistakes than they are toward men’s. This social unfairness can be considered a new type of oppression which contemporary, male-dominated American society imposes on women of today’s generation. Of course, as Wendy Wasserstein’s plays show, contemporary women, especially uncommon women “with a sense of their own destinies and value” (Frank 162), challenge this oppression and search for their autonomy and feminist subjectivity. Therefore, from this perspective, women are not still completely melted in the great melting pot of America since the complete equality between the genders in society has not yet been achieved.

CHAPTER FOUR: HOMOSEXUALITY

AIDS, Homophobia, and Gay Plays in the Late Twentieth Century America

Historically, when a society or an individual faces a difficult problem, it is often interpreted as an expression of God's displeasure and punishment for individual or corporate sin or perhaps a lapse of morality. Looking for the reason for God's judgment toward moral transgression has been a trend of many societies. In Old Testament history, for instance, the Jews' long history of exile or domination by foreign powers was attributed to their own sinfulness; their subjugation or wandering owed to God's punishment (Schindler 58). Likewise, incurable diseases – cancer and AIDS are good examples – have been interpreted in a similar way: disease is not perceived in a medical sense but as an outcome of immorality or misdemeanors of the individuals who contract that disease. For instance, although numerous medical reasons exist for liver cancer, some people tend to hypothesize that the liver cancer patient is an alcoholic who, lacking the power of self-control, has received his just reward. In short, contracting a fatal disease is sometimes perceived as one's own fault for indulging in something bad, unsafe, or immoral, rather than perceived from an objective medical perspective.

In her book, AIDS and Its Metaphors, Susan Sontag explains how epidemics,

especially AIDS, have been socially interpreted. She indicates that "'plague' is the principal metaphor by which the AIDS epidemic is understood" (44), and society considers its most terrifying illnesses "not just as lethal but as dehumanizing" (38). According to her point of view, a plague, almost always associated with social immorality, is understood to be a judgment on society for their corporate immorality rather than a judgment on the victims of the disease. Because mainstream society defines particular disease contractors as evil and immoral, the society blames the diseased for their own predicament. Thus, a PWA (person with AIDS) is viewed as being punished since he/she has undertaken "not just promiscuity but a specific sexual 'practice' regarded as unnatural," perverse, and unacceptable to the mainstream (Sontag 26). Therefore, the AIDS epidemic in America has been accepted by the mainstream as a plague – God's punishment for sexual/social immorality.

The moral judgment against the PWAs in America comes from the mainstream's long-standing homophobia. The history of homophobia goes back to the Judaeo-Christian tradition of characterizing sodomy as evil: "the cause of social downfall finds its earliest known expression in the biblical curses upon Sodom and Gomorrah" (Jongh 6). According to Alan Bray, in Renaissance England, no matter whether practiced between males, between a male and a female, or with animals, sodomy was considered a crime against nature and a form of debauchery (31).

Furthermore, the act of buggery was perceived not only as wicked and evil, but also as the cause of divine retribution to the world. Supernatural phenomena, such as famine, plague, flood, or fire, were considered acts of God's retribution, which were provoked by the immorality of those upon whom they fell. As everyman was regarded as a microcosm of the universe, one man's sodomitical deviance could threaten the welfare of the whole community (Bray 28-32). From the gay rights activists' point of view, many Americans still have this kind of anti-homosexuality tradition, since "settlers in the North America of the seventeenth and eighteenth century imported the same theories" (Jongh 6).

Homosexuality has frequently been understood as a sign of the end of times in many apocalyptic writings, since it is abominated and forbidden in Christianity as explained in Leviticus 18:22: "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable" (The Holy Bible 88). Thus, since AIDS was perceived as a homosexuality-related disease by conservative mainstream society in America, especially during the 1980s, AIDS was often viewed as a means by which God would bring about the end of the corrupt world. For this reason, many people show their negative attitudes toward PWAs, ascribing their illnesses to their sinful homosexuality:

> In 1997, Gregory Herek and John Capitanio found that 28.8% of surveyed respondents felt that people with AIDS have gotten what

> they deserved, and that 55.1 % of respondents agreed that most people with AIDS are responsible for having their illness. In some circles, according to Richard Goldstein, AIDS had been renamed "WOG," for "Wrath of God." (qtd. in Schindler 57)

In other words, "Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, persons with AIDS were often stigmatized because they were perceived to be 'morally suspect'" (Devine, Plant and Harrison 1217) and deserved the "Wrath of God" for their faults. Because of this notion, "in January of 1982, the term 'GRID' (gay-related immune deficiency) became a popular, albeit unofficial, name for the syndrome" (Kistenberg 7). The terms GRID, WOG, or Gay Plague (Troy 199) suggest that PWAs were believed to be punished by God for their sexual immorality and debauchery – that is, their suffering was a punishment from God. Therefore, as Schindler says, many people feel that "AIDS is contracted through morally wrong behavior, so those with this fatal disease brought it upon themselves and deserve it as punishment" (58).

As a result of this kind of moral judgment on AIDS and PWAs, homosexuals, especially gays with AIDS, are inevitably shunned and marginalized by society. Cut off from religion, they are often stigmatized as sexually immoral and deficient. Because of their perceived sexual perversity, they are hated and isolated by the homophobic mainstream. The AIDS epidemic crisis in the 1980s, furthermore, was

viewed by some radical conservatives as an opportunity to cleanse corrupt minorities – gays, drug users, and immigrants – from certain areas. “While in Africa and Asia, AIDS is most prevalent among heterosexuals, in the United States, AIDS is most prevalent among marginalized groups including homosexuals and bisexual men, injecting drug users, Haitian immigrants, Blacks, and Hispanics” (Devine, Plant and Harrison 1). Some gay rights activists, including Tony Kushner, believe that this was the reason why the Reagan administration did not promptly take proper measures to stop the epidemic and to help PWAs.

President Reagan “referred to AIDS for the first time in public in 1987 after 25,000 people had already succumbed and scores of others were infected with HIV” (Fujita 114). Some gay rights activists believe that the American government was deliberately slow in funding the medical research for AIDS and helping AIDS patients. Not only the government but also the mass media at that time was suspected of deliberate passivity and reluctance in reporting the AIDS crisis to the public, and consequently in boosting positive public opinion to solve the crisis. Larry Kramer, a gay playwright, protests the New York Times’ inactive reporting about the AIDS epidemic through Ned Weeks, his alter-ego, in his play, The Normal Heart:

> The Normal Heart (1985) views AIDS through the eyes of Ned Weeks, a gay activist modeled after Kramer. Weeks directs this rage

> at the press, especially the New York Times, for writing about the epidemic only seven times (never on the front page) in the nineteen months in which 958 cases of AIDS were reported. In contrast, the Times wrote fifty-four articles about the three-month Tylenol scare, in which seven total cases existed." (Hilton 7-8)

From Ned Weeks' point of view, the New York Times ignored the AIDS epidemic since it reported more about the Tylenol scare, which was much less socially threatening, than it did the AIDS epidemic. This fact explains gay rights activists' anger and protest against the conservative, discriminative social prejudice of American mainstream society. Tony Kushner also criticizes this intentional ignorance and discrimination through his gay characters, Louis Ironson and Prior Walter, in Angels in America.

Before Kushner, other American playwrights treated the issue of homosexuality, but, in my opinion, William M. Hoffman and Larry Kramer are the most outstanding. Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart (1985) and William Hoffman's As Is (1985) played an especially important role in "promoting education on AIDS and concern for the afflicted" (Shewey xxiii), while television, the press, and the government were not paying attention to it. These plays introduced the AIDS epidemic not only on American stages but also to the American public. They urged

society to take an interest in AIDS and its victims. According to Sorrells, these two plays "work together to initiate the tone of AIDS plays to come: both works feature a central character with AIDS, and both works delve into the relationships of all of the characters with AIDS, although the emphasis differs for each of the plays" (67-8).

In Hoffman's As Is, the readers/audience can learn much information about the AIDS virus, its symptoms, and its treatments, as well as the gay culture, including vulgar slang regarding homosexuality. This play also shows how mainstream society sees and treats gays and PWAs as misfits, who are deviant from the mores of the society. This play centers on the relationship between Rich, who has been diagnosed with AIDS, and Saul, his former lover:

> SAUL: Maybe I'm being selfish, but I want you here. I need you.
>
> RICH: My future isn't exactly promising.
>
> SAUL: I'll take you as is.
>
> RICH: But what happens when it gets worse? It's gonna get worse.
>
> SAUL: I'll be here for you no matter what happens.
>
> RICH: Will you?
>
> SAUL: I promise. (Hoffman, As Is 548)

Although they are near to breaking up like a normal couple at the beginning of the play, Saul decides in the last scene to stay with Rich, who needs him. Besides, despite

the perils of the AIDS contagion, Saul and Rich in the final scene have sex on the stage for their love and happiness; this gives the readers/audience a feeling of humanity rather than repulsion. Thus, Hoffman deals with the AIDS epidemic through a "personal approach to the AIDS issue by focusing primarily on the relationship between Rich and Saul" (Kistenberg 52). Hoffman wants the audience to see and accept their lifestyle and love as literally as it is. The main focus of Hoffman's As Is is individual private love and individual AIDS suffering; however, Kushner's Angels in America raises the issue to the level of national themes and a problem in the national community. This constitutes the biggest difference between Kushner and Hoffman. Tony Kushner has taken American gay drama beyond the level of individual phenomenon and quests for sexual subjectivity. For Kushner, the crisis of the AIDS epidemic is not just the problem of suffering individuals; rather, it is "the fate of the country" (Cadden 84).

"We Won't Die Secret Deaths Anymore": Wrestling with the Angel and the Quest for Sexual Subjectivity in Tony Kushner's Angels in America

Gay drama of the 1990s "focuses on how gay people see the society which denies them an equal space rather than on how that society sees and polices them" (Clum, Still Acting Gay 222). Whereas the two gays' – Rich and Saul – love and

sexual life are viewed from social perspectives in William Hoffman's As Is, homosexuals in the American drama of the1990s struggled to secure their rights, their unique culture, and their autonomous sexual subjectivity. Tony Kushner was one of the forefront playwrights of this time. Kushner's most acclaimed Pulitzer Prize winning play, Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes Part One: Millennium Approaches (1992), was joined with the second part, Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes Part Two: Perestroika (1993). Critics hailed Kushner's Angels in America as "the broadest, deepest, most searching American play of our time" (Kroll 83), and a famous theater critic, David Savran, also acclaims that "Angels in America is far more than just a successful play; it is the marker of a decisive historical shift in American theatre" (Approaching the Millennium 16).

According to Savran, "not within memory has a new American play been canonized by the press as rapidly as Angels in America," since this play "has almost singlehandedly resuscitated a category of play that has become almost extinct: the serious Broadway drama that is neither a British import nor a revival" (15). John Lahr also declares that "not since Williams has a playwright announced his poetic vision with such authority on the Broadway stage" (133). In addition to those critics' encomia, John Clum's comment that the play is "a turning point for gay drama and American drama" (Acting Gay, 313) seems appropriate and plausible. While most

prominent former gay playwrights – William Hoffman and Larry Kramer come to mind – mainly introduce the issues of the AIDS pandemic and homosexuality in American theater and educate the audience on the theme of gay rights, Kushner's Angels in America emphasizes the theme of interconnectedness between people, forgiveness, and community as a whole rather than mere anger or protest against social discrimination.

Reasons for the extreme popularity of Kushner's Angels in America include its Brechtian epic dramatic style, the grand scale of the play running more than 7 hours, and a sensational theatrical effect of an angel on the stage. Above all of these, however, in my opinion, the timing of the play – the appearance of the AIDS pandemic and homophobia during the 1980s – is the most persuasive reason for the groundbreaking success of the play. In 1993, this play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, which coincidentally was the year that Bill Clinton was elected President of the United States. As a Democrat, Bill Clinton was hailed by some people as a new hope and new era for the United States, since he was expected to bring changes from the previous conservative Republican administration. As noted before, the Reagan administration was criticized by gay rights activists for its conservatism and late response to the AIDS pandemic:

> During his first term, Reagan avoided discussing the AIDS problem,

> opposed spending much federal money on research, and exercised no leadership. The president's attitude began to change after October 1985 when actor and matinee idol Rock Hudson died of the disease. He was a friend of the Reagan's and his death humanized AIDS for the first family and many ordinary Americans. (Schaller 94)

Frustrated gay rights activists suspected that the Reagan administration's deliberate ignorance about AIDS constituted an intentional "gay genocide" (Troy 203). Therefore, Bill Clinton's election as the President of the United States was interpreted as a new hope for the new era: likewise, Tony Kushner's Angels in America was viewed as a message of new hope for the marginalized homosexuals and PWAs in America.

Through Angels in America, Tony Kushner, a Jewish gay playwright, dramatizes his vision of hope, love, and interconnectedness as a community, at the same time offering his cynical diatribe against the American mainstream's conservatism and homophobia during the late twentieth century. The play addresses the issues of the AIDS pandemic and homophobic American conservatism, which marginalizes as "others" these individuals with a different sexual orientation. Prior Walter, the main protagonist in the play, is a victim of double oppression – physically through AIDS and socially through abandonment; taken together, the two create real

social ostracism. Because of AIDS, he is abandoned by his lover, Louis Ironson, and is isolated first in his apartment and later at the hospital. However, as the play proceeds, Prior, as Kushner's alter-ego, overcomes his social marginalization, gains sexual autonomy and subjectivity in his life, and morphs into a prophet of hope, change, and progress for social equality in the future. In other words, unlike Roy Cohn, a closeted AIDS victim, Prior shows the readers/audience his transformation from a helpless AIDS victim to a powerful challenger of the biased social mores of the time. As a result of his own spiritual growth, Prior not only survives AIDS but also insists on America's changing and embracing sexual "others" as members of the community.

Prior Walter and Roy Cohn, although they have a commonality as gay men with AIDS, provide a striking contrast to each other in many aspects in this play. First, a clear disparity exists in the power relationship between these two gays with AIDS at the beginning of the play. However, as the play proceeds, their power relationship reverses: whereas Roy deteriorates and loses his power both physically and politically, Prior survives and becomes stronger and stronger as an autonomous and subjective individual. While Prior spiritually grows and challenges the mainstream's mores, Roy remains a closeted gay man to the last moment of his life. Discussing Kushner's Angels in America, in light of Prior's spiritual growth and transformation to recover

autonomy and sexual subjectivity in contrast to Roy, offers valuable insight into our investigation of the melting pot and politics of subjectivity and will provide the focus of this chapter. Prior and Roy symbolize the two opposite sides of the socio-political American phenomenon regarding the issues of homosexuality and AIDS phobia during the 1980s. Because a full understanding of this difference is crucial to an in-depth interpretation of this play, I will elucidate how they differ from each other, how they offer socio-political commentary, and how they relate to each other in this play. Lastly, in order to understand the meaning of Prior's wrestling with the angel, it is imperative for the readers/audience to comprehend clearly the nature of the angel. For convenience sake, I in the following discussion refer to part one as Millennium, part two as Perestroika, and the two together as Angels in America.

First of all, unlike Roy Cohn, Prior Walter is a gay man who is terrified by his AIDS infection at the beginning of the play. Prior's response is natural since the acronym AIDS elicits "multifaceted feelings including fear, revulsion, anger, contempt, self-righteousness, sympathy, pity, and shame" (Devine, Plant and Harrison 1). Although a main protagonist in the play, Prior appears as a piteous and weak victim of AIDS like most PWAs. At first, he dreads AIDS and the subsequent death caused by "The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death" (Millennium 21). Since AIDS, like the Black Death in the Medieval Age, is considered a fatal plague which brings

imminent death to anyone who has it, Prior is stricken with the terror of death. His AIDS phobia and horror of subsequent death are metaphorically symbolized in the story of his ancestor who died during his voyage to America:

> One of my ancestors was a ship's captain who made money bringing whale oil to Europe and returning with immigrants – Irish mostly, packed in tight, so many dollars per head. The last ship he captained foundered off the coast on Nova Scotia in a winter tempest and sank to the bottom. He went down with the ship – la Grande Geste – but his crew took seventy women and kids in the ship's only longboat, this big, open rowboat, and when the weather got too rough, and they thought the boat was overcrowded, the crew started lifting people up and hurling them into the sea. Until they got the ballast right. They walked up and down the longboat, eyes to the waterline, and when the boat rode low in the water they'd grab the nearest passenger and throw them into the sea. The boat was leaky, see; seventy people; they arrived in Halifax with nine people on board. [. . .] People in a boat, waiting, terrified, while implacable, unsmiling men, irresistibly strong, seize … maybe the person next to you, maybe you, and with no warning at all, with time only for a quick intake of air you are

pitched into freezing, turbulent water and salt and darkness to drown. (Millennium 41-2)

Just as the ruthless, implacable seamen pick up anyone on the boat and throw them into the turbulent water, the AIDS epidemic preys on anyone, without warning that they are scapegoats of God's retribution against human sinfulness and injustice during the 1980s in America, which is especially intimidating to homosexuals like Prior. Rather than defying AIDS and death like Roy, Prior is appalled at the "The Foreign Lesion"; in fact, he has a premonition that "[he's] going to die" (Millennium 21). Afraid of being abandoned by his lover, Louis, Prior confides that he could not tell his AIDS infection status to Louis earlier because he was scared that "[Louis]'ll leave [him]" (Millennium 22).

Because of AIDS, Prior does not have any self-esteem, loses his human dignity, and feels guilt about his infected body: "I don't think there's any uninfected part of me. My heart is pumping polluted blood. I feel dirty" (Millennium 34). What this suggests is that Prior does not see himself as a man of dignity, but as a guilty, polluted, and morally corrupt individual. Abandoned by his lover and isolated in his room, he is the quintessential social outcast in homophobic American society, which results from the mainstream's judgmental prejudices against PWAs during the 1980s. Prior does not even want Louis to call an ambulance: "*No! NO!* Don't call, you'll

send me there and I won't come back, please, please Louis I'm begging, baby, please …" (Millennium 48). Even though he suffers the pain of the disease and needs to be treated at a hospital, he is not willing to go because he is so intensely aware of the biased social prejudice against PWAs and afraid of being shunned as a deficient sexual "other" by the straight mainstream.

Kushner opposes this otherization of Prior because of his homosexuality and AIDS. Instead, he thinks society should provide a more comfortable environment for PWAs to take proper medical treatments which they need without worrying about social condemnation. Kushner wants society to see Prior as a patient with a normal disease just like other patients. According to him, AIDS need not evoke imagery of sexual immorality, debauchery, or human deficiency. Although Prior is abandoned by his lover because of AIDS, Prior does not have to treat himself as a social reject and "a corpse" (Millennium 31). On the contrary, Kushner, viewing hope, sees only the pure soul of a man in him, just as Harper, who is Joe Pitt's Valium-addicted wife, says to Prior: "Deep inside you, there's a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease. I can see that" (Millennium 34). Even though Prior's body is infected and destroyed by AIDS, his soul remains pure, which Harper knows by "Threshold of revelation" (Millennium 34). Jeff Johnson also interprets Harper's comment as "a clear allusion to [Prior's] calling, [Prior's] being chosen, like a martyr, to exemplify

redemption through suffering" (33). There is no moral blemish or corruption in him – merely a different sexual orientation and a physical disease. To Kushner, therefore, what is worse than Prior's infected body is American society, where "things are collapsing, lies [are] surfacing, systems of defense [are] giving away" (Millennium 17). What is really worse to Kushner is the conservative Reagan administration, in which there are "No connections," "No responsibilities," (Millennium 71) and "No justice" (Perestroika 72). In short, to Kushner, "THIS AGE OF ANOMIE" (Perestroika 56), which is exclusive to "others," is worse than Prior's infected body.

Unlike the frightened Prior, Roy, another gay man diagnosed with AIDS, is not intimidated by death from AIDS. Far from being intimidated by it, Roy refuses to be diagnosed with AIDS by threatening his doctor, Henry. From the first, Roy is not afraid of death: "I'm not afraid of death. What can death bring that I haven't faced?" (Millennium 58). Far from being intimidated by the devastating news of his AIDS infection, Roy valiantly defies Henry's diagnosis and refuses it by using his influential political power: "I will proceed, systematically, to destroy your reputation and your practice and your career in New York State, Henry. Which you know I can do" (Millennium 44). According to Roy, homosexuals are not just men who sleep with other men, but men who have no clout at all:

> Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals

> are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a puissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. (Millennium 45)

Although Roy is a gay man with AIDS, he has political clout which most homosexuals do not have. Hence, Roy refuses to be diagnosed as just another AIDS patient because having AIDS means membership in the disempowered homosexual group. Therefore, Roy, who is a closeted gay lawyer with AIDS, "is defined by [his] power, not [his] sexuality" (Clum, Still Acting Gay 250), because his political power and gay identity remain incompatible and operate in different spheres.

Kushner's Roy Cohn is the epiphany of the historical Roy M. Cohn who was a Jew, a powerful lawyer, and a closeted gay man in New York City during the late twentieth century. In the preface of the play, Kushner explains that his character Roy is based on the real Roy M. Cohn, who died of AIDS in 1986:

> Roy M. Cohn, the character, is based on the late Roy M. Cohn (1927-1986), who was all too real; for the most part the acts attributed to the character Roy, such as his illegal conferences with Judge Kaufmann during the trial of Ethel Rosenberg, are to be found in the historical record. (Millennium 5)

Thus, Kushner's characterization of Roy is real and based for the most part on the historical fact. Like the historical Roy Cohn, Kushner's Roy Cohn is represented as an evil and influential power broker during the Reagan administration. According to Louis, Roy is "the polestar of human evil" (Perestroika 95), since he is "constructed as the embodiment of and guarantor of dystopia" (Savran, Approaching the Millennium 20). In the beginning of the play, the readers/audience notice his socio-political power in this busy office scene:

> *Roy at an impressive desk, bare except for a very elaborate phone system, rows and rows of flashing buttons which bleep and beep and whistle incessantly, making chaotic music underneath Roy's conversations. Joe is sitting, waiting. Roy conducts business with great energy, impatience and sensual abandon: gesticulating, shouting, cajoling, crooning, playing the phone, receiver and hold button with virtuosity and love.* (Millennium 11)

Whereas Prior is abandoned by his lover and socially marginalized, Roy has strong socio-political power as a busy lawyer in New York City. He wishes he were "an octopus, a fucking octopus. Eight loving arms and all those suckers" (11). Because of Roy's comment about the octopus, Jonathan Freedman understands Roy as a "hyperphallic monster" – the symbol of "stereotypical Jewish lasciviousness and

greed" (110-11). However, my focus is Roy's political immorality, hypocrisy, and self-contradiction, since he represents the American political landscape during the conservative 1980s.

According to Kushner's point of view, Roy Cohn, who is "the heart of modern [American] conservatism" (Perestroika 81), embodies political injustice, hypocrisy, and the irony of self-contradiction. Kushner describes Roy as a symbol of political corruption and hypocrisy in America during the 1980s: "Selfish and greedy and loveless and blind. Reagan's children" (Millennium 74). Roy wants to send Joe Pitt, a closeted Mormon gay man, to the Justice Department in Washington to make him a "Royboy" (Millennium 64) as "eyes in Justice" (Millennium 68) for his protection. Roy is about to be tried by the disbarment committee because "he borrowed half a million from one of his clients. *And* he forgot to *return* it" (Millennium 66). However, Roy shows his immorality by denying this act because "She's got no paperwork. Can't prove a fucking thing" (Millennium 66). Despite his immorality, Roy wields his political power: "All I gotta do is pick up the phone, talk to Ed, and you're in" (Millennium 15) since "Martin's Ed's man. And Ed's Reagan's man. So Martin's Reagan's man" (Millennium 68). Roy even has political influence over Ed Meese, the Attorney General of the United States, and can give Joe a job as "Associate Assistant Something Big. Internal Affairs, heart of the woods, something

nice with clout" (Millennium 15) at the Justice Department in Washington, D.C. by just a phone call.

Roy's political immorality and greed are evident in his use of political power to secure the medicine, AZT, which is known as an experimental treatment for AIDS patients and is hard to obtain. Although this medicine has "a two-year waiting list that not even [Henry] can get [Roy] onto" (Millennium 46), Roy can have it in his own private stash in his room by threatening Martin:

> So send me my pills with a get-well bouquet, PRONTO, or I'll ring up CBS and sing Mike Wallace a song: the ballad of adorable Ollie North and his secret contra slush fund. Oh you only *think* you know all I know. *I* don't even know what all I know. Half the time I just make it up, and it *still* turns out to be true! We learned that trick in the fifties. Tomorrow, you two-bit scumsucking shitheel fly-paper insignificant dried-out little turd. A nice big box of drugs for Uncle Roy. Or there'll be seven different kinds of hell to pay. (Perestroika 31)

Although Roy has many boxes of AZT in his stash, he greedily refuses to share it with Belize, who wants ten bottles for his friends: "I have friends who need them" (Perestroika 60). Thus, as seen in Roy's evil character, his political power does not

necessarily constitute socio-political justice and morality. Kushner tries to connect Roy's immorality and injustice to the American mainstream during the Reagan era, in which he believes there is no political justice.

Roy is also responsible for Julius and Ethel Rosenberg's trial and their illegitimate execution in the electric chair when they were alleged to be guilty of conspiracy to commit espionage with the communist Soviet Union during the 1950s. As a notorious henchman for McCarthy during the political maelstrom of anti-communist McCarthyism, he illegally became involved in the trial of Ethel Rosenberg and sent her to the electric chair:

> If it wasn't for me, Joe, Ethel Rosenberg would be alive today, writing some personal-advice column for *Ms*. Magazine. She isn't. Because during the trial, Joe, I was on the phone every day, talking with the judge. [. . .] I pleaded till I wept to put her in the chair. Me. I did that. (Millennium 107-08)

Ethel Rosenberg, a Jew like Roy, is seen as an innocent victim of political McCarthyism, similar to the victims of the witch hunts by the hypocritical puritans in the 17th century in America. Since Roy illegally intervened in the trial of Rosenberg and her execution, he embodies the irony of self-negation, political immorality, and social injustice.

In addition to Roy's political immorality and injustice, it is quite significant for the readers/audience to understand Roy's self-contradictory hypocrisy to fully appreciate Angels of America. Roy is a gay man with AIDS like Prior, and he is a Jew like Ethel Rosenberg, but he hates them. Roy represents the heart of American conservatism or "White Straight Male America" (Millennium 90). Like Joe Pitt, "a Gay Mormon Republican Lawyer" (Perestroika 88), Roy has irreconcilable identities because he is a gay man as well as a conservative Republican lawyer. Roy's self-contradicting irony culminates in his evasion of moral judgment against the gays and PWAs, which he himself imposes as a representative of the American conservative mainstream. According to Kushner's political vision, Roy symbolizes "the sum total of the Reagan era" (Izzo 91), since Roy's self-contradiction and hypocrisy parallel those of the Reagan administration: "This is reality. I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I'm screwing to the White House and President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand" (Millennium 46).

Kushner constantly wants to draw the readers/audience's attention to the similarity between Roy and the Reagan administration. Just as Roy is selfish, immoral, and irresponsible, so too is the Reagan administration, and this embodies Kushner's social critique in this play. Larry Kramer said on CNN's Larry King show in February

1989: “The irony is Nancy’s best friends are gay and their son Ron Reagan is gay. [. . .] Ron’s wife was a lesbian” (Wockner). Although Ron Reagan denies this as a rumor, it nevertheless undermines the political face of Ronald Reagan. Michael Schaller also points out that President Reagan was criticized as a hypocrite by his children:

> Ronald and Nancy Reagan attempted to alter the sexual behavior of many Americans and their attitudes toward abortion and the rights of women. [. . .] President Reagan, who condemned abortion as murder, urged pre-marital chastity and championed the “traditional” family of husband as breadwinner, wife as mother and homemaker.
>
> Conservatives predicted that the decade would assure the “end of the sexual revolution.” The president’s words, critics charged, rang false. Reagan was the first divorced man elected president and had married two career women. He had a distant relationship with his children, two of whom, Patti and Michael, had written books that criticized their parents as hypocrites. (92-3)

Roy’s connection to the Reagan administration goes further: Kushner parallels Roy to the angel and even to God as the play proceeds. From Kushner’s point of view, Roy Cohn, the angel, and God symbolize the irresponsibility and selfishness of the Reagan

administration. This perspective gives Prior a solid justification for his challenging the angel, returning the Book, and even criticizing God as "the bastard" (Perestroika 133) in Heaven.

At first, Prior is not willing to become a prophet when the angel proclaims him as such because spiritually he is not yet mature. Just as he expels the ghost of his ancestors with horror and repulsion – "Look. Garlic. A mirror. Holy water. A crucifix. FUCK OFF! Get the fuck out of my room! GO!" (Millennium 113) – he also tries to refuse the angel's visitation: "Oh, shoo! You're scaring the shit out me, get the fuck out of my room. Please, oh please…" (Perestroika 44). Although Prior refuses to be a prophet, the angel proclaims that he is the American Prophet:

ANGEL: I unfold my leave, Bright Steel,
In salutation open sharp before you:
PRIOR WALTER
Long-descended, well-prepared …
American Prophet tonight you become,
American Eye that pierceth Dark,
American Heart all Hot for Truth,
The True Great Vocalist, the Knowing Mind,
Tongue-of-the-Land, Seer-Head! (Perestroika 44)

However, as Prior says to the angel, he is not yet "prepared" (Perestroika 44) for the role of the American Prophet until this point, because he is not spiritually mature enough to assume the true voice of the new hope for the new millennium. He worries about his physical disease, misses his boyfriend, and is upset with Louis who left him because of his AIDS. His personal problems remain his dominant focus, rather than the looming national themes as the title of this play suggests – the issues of homosexuality, AIDS, gay rights, and interconnectedness as a community.

Prior's passivity changes after he meets Hannah, who leads him to confront the angel more actively. Hannah, who is Joe's mother, comes to New York City to help her son and Harper after Joe confesses his homosexuality to her. Along with Belize, an African American nurse, Hannah plays the role of the true neighbor who helps people in need. She takes care of Harper, "a mentally deranged sex-starved pill-popping housewife" (Millennium 36), because of her barren married life with her homosexual husband Joe. Hannah works as a volunteer at the Mormon Visitor's Center and is kind enough to take Prior to the hospital and stays there overnight, watching him as his sickness worsens. She is considerate enough to be able to embrace "others," even homosexuals, and believes Prior's preposterous "vision" of an angel (Perestroika 103).

Hannah seriously listens to Prior's story about the angel and encourages him

not to be afraid of it: “It’s naught to be afraid of. If it lets you down, reject it. Seek for something new” (Perestroika 105). Like the spiritual Beatrice, she urges him to wrestle with the angel: “It’s an angel, you … just … grab hold and say … oh what was it, wait, wait, umm … OH! Grab her, say ‘I will not let thee go except thou bless me!’ Then wrestle with her till she gives in” (Perestroika 118). Thus, Hannah plays the catalyst for Prior’s spiritual growth and transformation from an intimidated AIDS victim to a challenger who matures into a real prophet. Following Hannah’s advice, Prior transforms into a challenger and wrestles with the angel like Jacob in the Old Testament account (See Genesis 32: 24-26).[1] He recovers his autonomy and subjectivity: “Take it back. The Book, whatever you left in me, I won’t be its repository, I reject it” (Perestroika 118). Furthermore, he wrestles with the angel for his blessing like Jacob: “I … will not let thee go except thou bless me. Take back your Book. Anti-Migration, that’s so feeble, I can’t believe you couldn’t do better than that, free me, unfetter me, bless me or whatever but I will be let go” (Perestroika 119). And in the end Prior prevails against the angel.

Prior’s wresting with the angel takes on deep symbolism in this play. Jeff Johnson understands Prior’s wrestling with the angel as “a struggle against transcendence, a resistance to relinquishing passion, expressing his desire for an earthly life, robust and committed” (35). However, I argue that Prior’s struggle with

the angel symbolizes his heroic opposition to the conservative social mores of the American mainstream during the 1980s, since the angel represents the authoritative, stagnant, and oppressive ethos of the Reagan administration. The angel herself embodies the powerful authority as the “CONTINENTAL PRINCIPALITY OF AMERICA” (Perestroika 119), which is similar to the powerful, authoritative Reagan administration and Roy. The angel asks Prior to stop “human progress,” “migration,” and “forward motion” (Perestroika 50), which means stop moving and progressing: “*YOU HAVE DRIVEN HIM AWAY!* YOU MUST STOP MOVING!” (Perestroika 52). According to the angel, God abandoned the angels and left Heaven because of human movement:

ANGEL: He began to leave us!

Bored with His Angels, Bewitched by Humanity,

In Mortifying Imitation of You, his least creation,

He would sail off on Voyages, no knowing where.

Quake follows quake,

Absence follows Absence:

Nasty Chastity and Disorganization:

Loss of Libido, Protomatter Shortfall:

We are his Functionaries; It is

BEYOND US:

Then:

April 18, 1906.

In That Day:

PRIOR: The Great San Francisco Earthquake. And also . . .

ANGEL: *In that day:* [. . .]

The King of the Universe:

HE Left

PRIOR: Abandoned.

ANGEL: *And did not return*.

We do not know where HE has gone. HE may

never …

And bitter, cast-off, We wait, bewildered;

Our finest houses, our sweetest vineyards,

Made drear and barren, missing Him. (Perestroika 50-1)

The angel demands that Prior be the prophet of the end of human progress since she[2] wants Prior to be "Exemplum Paralyticum: On you in you in your blood we write have written: STASIS!" (Perestroika 54), which is the angel's "A NEW LAW" (Perestroika 56). Allen J. Frantzen argues that "The tradition and stasis that constitute

Prior's Anglo-Saxon heritage draw her; she believes that Prior will be a worthy prophet precisely because he is a worthy WASP" (139). However, the angel's request that human beings should stop moving to bring God back to heaven is too selfish for Prior to accept because it is just for angels in heaven. Prior challenges the angels' request and returns the Book to them in heaven because human beings cannot stop progress: "We can't just stop. We're not rocks – progress, migration, motion is … modernity. It's *animate*, it's what living things do. We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it's still desire *for*. Even if we go faster than we should" (Perestroika 132). According to Kushner, the angel is an "irresponsible angel" (Perestroika 53) who obfuscates human autonomy and subjectivity. Prior, who bravely refuses her demand, is a hero like Prometheus.

In a sense, Tony Kushner describes the angel of this play as a non-biblical demonic image, which brings the false gospel to the world and human beings. Even though Kushner uses many biblical images in regard to the angel's visitation – calling Prior a prophet and Jonah, citing Prior's wresting with the angel like Jacob, and referring to the ladder to heaven – this angel is false, not a biblical, celestial angel. This angel, the symbol of Roy and American conservatism of the Reagan administration, appears with thunder and devil images: "*Thunder. Then all over the walls, Hebrew letters appear, writhing in flames. The Angel is there, suddenly. She is*

dressed in black and looks terrifying. Hannah screams and buries her face in her hands" (Perestroika 117). The word "writhe" can insinuate the image of the serpent in the Bible, just as the color black archetypically symbolizes the devil, as evident in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "Young Goodman Brown." In that short story, the devil appears in black with a writhing stick in hand.[3] Therefore, the angel of this play is not the biblical one from God, but a devil like Roy. She herself says that she did not return to Prior according to God's plan: "not according to Plan" (Perestroika 118). Whereas the biblical angel is strong enough to break Jacob's hip bone while wresting with him, this angel is hurt with ease by Prior: "Now release me. I have torn a muscle in my thigh" (Perestroika 120). Besides, the angel is sensual like humans: "She fucked me. She has … well, she has eight vaginas" (Perestroika 48), and she has sex both with Prior and Hannah: the angel "kisses [Hannah] on the forehead and then the lips – a long, hot kiss" (Perestroika 120), and "Hannah has an enormous orgasm" (Perestroika 120). The sensuality of this angel supports the angel's non-biblical images: she is in this view a demonic succubus.

From Kushner's point of view, the angels' opposition to human progress parallels American conservatism of the 1980s. In that vein, the selfish, authoritative, and demonic angel is like Republican Roy, who is "Fascist hypocrite lying filthy …" (Perestroika 111). She tries to make human beings stay put in the status quo, as did the

conservative mores of the Reagan administration, which represented a reversion to the past and its traditions. However, Prior, along with Kushner, thinks that society needs to change and progress for gay rights and the social equality of the PWA, which means, at least for them, social justice. In Kushner's view, as represented by Harper, America is "a Promised Land, but what a disappointing promise!" (Perestroika 66). Roy himself admits that America is not for the infirm:

> The worst thing about being sick in America, Ethel, is you are booted out of the parade. Americans have no use for sick. Look at Reagan: He's so healthy he's hardly human, he's a hundred if he's a day, he takes a slug in his chest and two days later he's out west riding ponies in his PJ's. I mean who does that? That's America. It's just no country for the infirm. (Perestroika 62)

Although Roy himself embodies American conservatism, America is a disappointing "Promised Land" to him since he is also a PWA victim like other PWAs. Thus, as Prior insists, social change and progress are indispensable for embracing different sexual preferences and establishing an individual's sexual subjectivity as a component of social justice. In that sense, the angel's request to stop is interpreted as oppression to human beings and thus cannot be accepted.

Therefore, Prior defiantly challenges the angels' demand and, just as Moses

rescues the Jewish people from Egyptian oppression, he rescues human beings from the angels' oppression. Kushner intentionally makes Prior look like the biblical Moses in the film The Ten Commandments: "*Prior Walter is in Heaven. He is dressed in prophet robes reminiscent of Charlton Heston's Moses drag in* The Ten Commandments. *He is carrying the Book of the Anti-Migratory Epistle*" (Perestroika 120). In that vein, Prior's challenge against the angel symbolizes Kushner's political challenge against the oppressive Reagan administration. Furthermore, Prior spiritually grows and acquires the authority to criticize even God, who irresponsibly has deserted Heaven and human beings:

> If He ever did come back, if He ever *dared* to show His face, or his Glyph or whatever in the Garden again. . . if after all this destruction, if after all the terrible days of this terrible century He returned to see. . . how much suffering His abandonment had created, if He did come back you should *sue* the bastard. That's my only contribution to all this Theology. Sue the bastard for walking out. How dare He. [. . .] I want to be healthy again. And this plague, it should stop. In me and everywhere. Make it go away. (Perestroika 133)

Kushner dauntlessly denunciates the irresponsible Reagan administration, the angels, and even God in this explosive invective. Kushner also criticizes the absence of

justice in America along with his disbelief in God through Louis's speech: "I don't believe in God. [. . .] If there was a God He would've clobbered me by now. I'm the incontrovertible argument against the existence of a just God, or at least against His competence or attentiveness or…" (Perestroika 33).

Kimberly Lynn Dyer sees Prior's challenge as Kushner's "comments on the battle between America's spiritually misled government officials and the spiritually starved American people" (9). If the angel is the symbol of Roy and President Reagan, then Heaven symbolizes America, a dystopia, which is barren, deserted, and messy like San Francisco after the great earthquake in 1906: "*It has a deserted, derelict feel to it, rubble is strewn everywhere*" (Perestroika 120-21). Heaven, where the angels gather "*in the Council Room of the Continental Principalities*" (Perestroika 128), looks like chaos, and the angels are arguing with each other in a disordered way. This is not the real biblical picture of Heaven, where God reigns. This is a false Heaven because, as the angels say, God deserted Heaven and left. David Savran understands this Heaven as "a kind of museum, not the insignia of the Now, but of *before*, of an antique past, of the obsolete" (Approaching the Millennium 20). Thus, "Heaven commemorates disaster, despair, and stasis" (Savran, Approaching the Millennium 20). Therefore, this is Kushner's satirical version of Heaven as his acidic critique of conservative, chaotic America, where there is no justice, no order, and no love.

Ironically, whereas “the real San Francisco, on earth, is unspeakably beautiful,” this “Heaven is depressing, full of dead people and all, but life” (Perestroika 122). Kushner implicitly advocates homosexuality and pro-gay rights by insinuating that Heaven looks like San Francisco, which is a well-known gay-friendly city; furthermore, the real San Francisco is more beautiful than Heaven. As seen in Harper’s question to Prior: “Can you imagine spending eternity here?” (Perestroika 122), Harper does not want to spend her eternity in Heaven since this Heaven is false, just as America is a false “Promised Land” to her.

Kushner’s satirical analogy of the dystopian Heaven-as-America is metaphorically expressed by the Hall of Justice building, which is also empty and barren. This Hall of Justice building symbolizes America and Heaven, where there is no justice, only the feeling of emptiness. Joe says:

> Yesterday was Sunday but I’ve been a little unfocused recently and I thought it was Monday. So I came here like I was going to work. And the whole place was empty. And at first I couldn’t figure out why, and I had this moment of incredible … fear and also. … It just flashed through my mind: The whole Hall of Justice, it’s empty, it’s deserted, it’s gone out of business. Forever, The people that make it run have up and abandon it. (Millennium 72)

The Hall of Justice should be full of animation, vitality, and the feeling of justice. Although this is a picture of the Hall of Justice on Sunday morning, Louis and Joe feel “creepy” (Millennium 72) here. Joe feels “the emptiness” and “heartless terror” and wants to “scream” since “everything [he] owes anything to, justice, or love, had really gone away” (Millennium 72). This is Kushner’s vision of America, in which there is no God, no love, and no human connections, like the deserted Heaven.

Paradoxically, Kushner does not describe America unilaterally as dismal and pessimistic, but hopeful, optimistic, and forgiving in Angels in America. He underscores the need for America to change and progress toward a more hopeful new millennium with real angels of America in order to make a real Heaven and a real Promised Land of America. Surprisingly, Kushner finds the new hope neither in the powerful Roy, nor in the angels in Heaven, but in the socially-marginalized “others” like Prior, Belize, and Hannah. From Kushner’s point of view, these are real neighbors and the real angels of America like the biblical Good Samaritan, who helps people in need (See Luke 10: 29-37).[4] As an atrocious racist, Roy demands a WASP nurse when he is hospitalized at New York Hospital: “I want a white nurse. My constitutional right” (Perestroika 26). Although Roy insults Belize with abusive racist words: “Move your nigger cunt spade faggot lackey ass out of my room. [. . .] Mongrel. Dinge. Slave. Ape” (Perestroika 61), Belize, an African American former drag queen nurse, takes

care of him and gives him heartfelt advice out of “solidarity, One faggot to another” (Perestroika 30) like “a Christian martyr” (Millennium 61).

Belize is Roy’s “negation” (Perestroika 76), but, ironically, Roy is cared for and companioned by his negation until his last moment of life. Even though Belize has no “clout” at all as an African American homosexual, he has love and compassion for other human beings. As Belize says, “Justice is simple. Democracy is simple. Those things are unambivalent. But love is very hard” (Perestroika 100), which he demonstrates. Belize shows his companionship to people in need: “Whatever happens, baby, I will be here for you” (Millennium 61); he tries to secure some AZT for his friends from Roy’s private stash, and most importantly, he asks Louis to pray Kaddish for Roy:

> He died a hard death. So maybe …. A queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn’t easy, it doesn’t count if it’s easy, it’s the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace, at least. Isn’t that what the Kaddish asks for? (Perestroika 124)

Roy is not only given companionship by Belize but also he is forgiven and blessed with Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, by Louis and Ethel, whom he hated most. Even Ethel Rosenberg, who was illegally and unfairly executed by Roy in the

past, comes to “forgive” (Perestroika 114) him, and she sings a song for him when he asks her to do it like his mother. Ethel calls 911 for the ambulance when Roy falls with great pain, and when Louis stutters for Kaddish, she joins and helps him to finish the prayer for Roy. Their benediction can be understood as “an act of forgiveness which breaks down the most obvious wall” (Clum, Still Acting Gay 257) between the mainstream and the others. In that sense, Kushner insinuates that, on the contrary, these socio-politically marginalized people are the real angels of America, who can change dystopian America into the real “Promised Land.”

While Roy dies as a closeted gay man, Prior, Kushner’s alter-ego, spiritually grows and transforms into a challenger and becomes the prophet of the new “Hope” (Perestroika 24) of America. Although Louis wants to come back to him, Prior refuses him: “I really do. But you can’t come back. Not ever” (Perestroika 143). Prior, not dependent on Louis anymore, recovers his autonomy and sexual subjectivity. Just as Louis abandons Prior in need, God abandons Heaven, the angels, and the human beings who remain in desperate need. The angel wants Prior to stop movement, human progress, and modernism to bring God back to Heaven. However, according to Kushner’s vision, the angel’s demands are too selfish because they suppress Prior’s autonomy and subjectivity, plus, the angel is an “irresponsible” (Perestroika 53) angel, and God is a “bastard” (Perestroika 133). Therefore, Prior quixotically wrestles with

the angel, prevails against her,[4] and returns "*the Book of the Anti-Migratory Epistle*" (Perestroika 120) to Heaven. Prior's wrestling with the angel can be interpreted as his symbolic challenge of American conservatism, judgmental public opinions, and social discrimination against homosexuals and PWAs because the angel declares herself as "the Bird of America, the Bald Eagle, Continental Principality" (Perestroika 44). Just as Jacob wrestles with the Angel and God for blessing, Prior wrestles with American conservatism for his liberalism and sexual subjectivity.

Tony Kushner's Angels in America centers on "the AIDS plague as the central defining metaphor for a national spiritual decline during the 1980s and as a starting point of a social order for the next century" (Weber SM29). Robert Brustein also acclaims Angels in America as "the authoritative achievement of a radical dramatic artist with a fresh, clear voice" (29). I concur with this assessment: Kushner's voice in this play is clear. What America needs on the face of the AIDS epidemic is real neighbors like Belize and Hannah and "interconnectedness" (Perestroika 146) between people as a community, just as Harper says on her plane ride to San Francisco in the final scene. Kushner poignantly dramatizes that homosexuals or people with AIDS need to be embraced as our neighbors and "citizens" (Perestroika 148) by the American community. People who have different sexual preferences should not be shunned and discriminated against as social outcasts

by the mainstream, nor should they be viewed as deviant, corrupt, and deficient ingredients in the great melting pot of America. Kushner believes that “The fountain of Bethesda, [which heals every human sickness, isolation, and marginalization,] will flow again” (Perestroika 147) in America when the Millennium comes. On that day, just as “The Berlin Wall has fallen” (Perestroika 145), the invisible, exclusive wall between people will also fall. Through Angels in America, Tony Kushner addresses to America his belief that the day will come soon when no homosexuals will “die secret deaths anymore” (Perestroika 148), nor will they be treated as sexual “others” in America.

Notes

1. “So, Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, ‘Let me go, for it is daybreak.’ But Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me’” (The Holy Bible, Genesis 32: 24-26).
2. Gender distinction of the angel in this play is vague since the angel calls her/himself “Hermaphroditically Equipped as well with a Bouquet of Phalli” (Perestroika 48). However, I consider the angel as a female and use “her” because Prior himself refers to the angel as a female using the word “she” (Perestroika 48).
3. “His head being turned back, he passed a crook of the road, and, looking forward again, beheld the figure of a man, in grave and decent attire, seated at the foot of an old tree. [. . .] But the only thing about him that could be fixed upon as remarkable was his staff, which bore the likeness of a great black snake, so curiously wrought that it might almost be seen to twist and wriggle itself like a living serpent. [. . .] ‘Then Goody Cloyse knows her old friend?’ observed the traveler, confronting her and leaning on his writhing stick” (Hawthorne 11-3).
4. “But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ In reply Jesus said: ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell

into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him, he said, and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have. Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.' Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise'" (The Holy Bible, Luke 10: 29-37).

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

I have discussed four major issues of contemporary American drama – race, class, gender, and homosexuality – all of which are important components of contemporary American society and all of which, in turn, are reflected in American drama. These four issues are the main sources of social inequality and marginalization in the plays of Suzan-Lori Parks, Wendy Wasserstein, and Tony Kushner – three superlative contemporary American playwrights. As discussed in this dissertation, white, economically privileged, upper-middle class males and heterosexuals have by and large constituted the American mainstream: their ideologies determine baseline normality; their thinking is codified into the very mores and values of American society. When individuals deviate from this baseline norm – evident in African Americans, the economically less-privileged underclass, females, and homosexuals – they are regarded, at least in part, as inferior, deficient, or inadequate by the mainstream. As a result, they have often been marginalized, shunned, and discriminated by the mainstream as "others."

Suzan-Lori Parks, Wendy Wasserstein, and Tony Kushner challenge these biased social mores and protest against the marginalization and social othering in their plays. These playwrights argue that differences in race, class, gender, and sexual

orientation are not to be equated with inferiority or deficiency but merely reflect uniqueness of personality and lifestyle types. According to these dramatists, these differences have resulted in (in)visible social discriminations and marginalization in American society. Many people have accepted the mainstream's biased views on these differences as right, legitimate, and natural since the mainstream's justification of their discriminative views, based on traditional patriarchy, stereotypes, and religion, have been insidious and ubiquitous. Because the oppressive ideologies are subtle and often imperceptible, many social prejudices and discriminations have been invisible to people. These three playwrights make these social inequalities and marginalization strategies visible to people through their plays. Unlike previous American playwrights who indirectly dealt with these issues, Parks, Wasserstein, and Kushner, in their overt challenge of American mainstream's views, reveal hidden oppression through their unique dramatic leitmotifs, thereby distinguishing their drama as singular. All the protagonists of their plays, somehow locked in conflict with the mainstream, strive for their own independence, autonomy, and subjectivity. Attaining self-awareness in life, although at great cost, they come to see themselves not from mainstream's perspectives but from their own. In short, the leitmotif of these three playwrights' plays is the quest for selfhood, which is subsumed as the overarching premise of this dissertation and, in turn, comprises the politics of subjectivity.

Suzan-Lori Parks's plays can be read/viewed from the political perspective of race and class since her plays are rife with political innuendoes and critiques. According to Parks's point of view, African Americans, unlike Europeans, came to America through the dishonorable way of the "Middle Passage." Despite their constitutional right of equality and freedom, African Americans have been unfairly orphaned by European Americans in America, and their oppressed life stories – poignant and stirring – have been forgotten and erased in the annals of American history. Like a digger, Parks in her history plays "locate[s] the ancestral burial ground, dig[s] for bones, find[s] bones, hear[s] the bones sing, [and] write[s] it down" ("Possession" 4), since, to her, "a play is a blueprint of an event, a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature" ("Possession" 4). She uses American history as a site to foreground racial resistance and reclaim African Americans' racial subjectivity as Americans.

Parks accomplishes this enterprising and ennobling goal by using the theme of "remember me" in The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World, which celebrates African Americans' racial and historical subjectivity. According to Parks, the African Americans' racial subjectivity is reclaimed when African American history is fairly remembered. Black Man With Watermelon's oppressed life and his sorrowful stories are finally written on the rock and remembered by his wife, Black

Woman With Fried Drumstick, so that his oppression can be chronicled and remembered forever in American history. When this “unfinished business” (Rayner and Elam 451) is accomplished, Black Man With Water Melon, who is the last black man in the whole entire world, can finally die and rest in peace. By using African Americans’ stereotypes instead of names in this play, Parks exposes both the mainstream’s biased stereotyping of African Americans and the biblical account of cursed Ham, which (in)visibly functioned as a powerful apparatus of racial oppression in society, especially in the 19th century.

At an exact replica of the Great Hole of History, Parks dramatizes the excavation of African American racial and historical subjectivity on the stage in The America Play. As her character’s names – both The Foundling Father and The Lesser Known – signify, Parks satirizes African Americans’ historical orphanage and invisibility in American history. Although The Foundling Father is a physical dead ringer for Abraham Lincoln and loves him ardently, The Foundling Father just fakes the Great Man’s life and is completely erased and forgotten in history as “the other.” When The Foundling Father’s historical presence in American history has been excavated from the Great Hole of History by his son Brazil, his racial and historical subjectivity as an American is recovered, and he is remembered by the American readers/audience. Brazil’s last speech, “Note the death wound: thuh great black hole

[. . .] how thuh nation mourns" (The America Play 199), is not only a cynical paradox but also Parks's chilling invective against the American mainstream's effacement of black history, since nobody remembered or mourned The Foundling Father's great black hole in his head.

Parks's The Red Letter Plays, which contains both In the Blood and Fucking A, are contemporary American urban versions of Nathaniel Hawthorne's canonized novel, The Scarlet Letter. Whereas Hawthorne uses the white female Hester Prynne to critique the hypocrisy of 17th century puritanical American society, which was the mainstream at that time, Parks contrives black Hesters to satirize contemporary American mainstream culture in The Red Letter Plays, through which Parks reclaims class subjectivity. Since white and black demarcations in these plays are not clear and since the shaping of conflicts obscures the clear-cut racial confrontations as a binary dichotomy of black and white, Zygmunt Bauman's class theory, which deploys the metaphor of "tourists" and "vagabonds," is plausible and applicable to these plays. According to Bauman, in modern capitalist consumer society, the tourists are the economically privileged group of people who can buy and consume any products they want and are welcomed wherever they go, whereas the vagabonds on the other hand are the economically less privileged group of people who, unable to buy and consume products, are denied access to most comforts or services that modern society can offer.

In terms of this Baumanian nomenclature, Parks's characters in The Red Letter Plays can be categorized as "the tourists" and "the vagabonds."

From Bauman's point of view, Hester La Negrita, a downtrodden underclass African American woman with five fatherless children in In the Blood, is a vagabond in the capitalist American consumer society. Unlike white Hester's scarlet letter A on her bosom in Hawthorne's novel, black Hester's infamous scarlet letter is written on the wall of her house as "SLUT" (In the Blood 9). The chorus, representative of mainstream culture, shuns, marginalizes, and criticizes her as a "BURDEN TO SOCIETY" (In the Blood 7). According to Parks's point of view, however, the hypocritical judging mainstream, emblematized in various social organizations – religion, medical services, and welfare – is indeed responsible for Hester's promiscuity: they take advantage of Hester sexually by using their superior socio-economic status and positions. The mainstream draws an invisible class line between themselves and Hester which is based on Hester's economic status and not on her sexual promiscuity. Nevertheless, Hester La Negrita challenges the mainstream's view of her life, refuses hypocritical judgment by the social norms, and tries to maintain her autonomous subjectivity, even if she has to kill her son, Jabber, to do so. When Jabber sees her from the mainstream's point of view and repeatedly calls her "slut," she kills him to defend her subjectivity as a "Princess" (In the Blood 19) of her land. Although

Hester is the less privileged, downtrodden black woman, very much unlike Aristotle's classical tragic heroes, she evokes the feelings of horror and pity in this tragedy. In that sense, Hester is a contemporary American tragic hero, and In the Blood is a modern American tragedy.

Because Parks's Fucking A, as a dark fable, centers on social class stratification, which is based on the economic power of money and the oppression of the lower class, it can be read/viewed as Parks's acidic social critique of contemporary capitalist America along with In the Blood. Hester Smith, an illiterate impoverished single mother and an abortionist, deposits her money with Freedom Fund Lady to buy the freedom of her son, Boy, who has been incarcerated in prison for stealing some meat from a rich family. The power of money determines an individual's status as a mayor or monster, as the first lady or an abortionist, and as a wife or a mistress. Because of the power of money, Boy becomes Monster, Mayor maintains his relationship with the First Lady, and Canary has a relationship with Mayor. Furthermore, social justice is quite vague, arbitrary, and hypocritical in this dystopian society. While stealing meat constitutes a severe crime punishable by years in prison, the Hunters' horrible violence against a convict is acceptable as legitimate punishment. Although the Hunters shun Hester as a baby killer, their wives and daughters need Hester's service and have been her customers secretly at night more than once. Hester

resists the oppressive mainstream by choosing to painlessly kill Monster herself rather than hand him over to Hunters to suffer the egregious pain of being tortured alive. Drenched with her son's blood and statuesquely holding him on her lap, she is the Pieta of the new era, representing subjective resistance against mainstream oppression on the bloody stage and holding her sacrificed child. Although Parks's The Red Letter Plays are a bizarre and dismal dystopian world to the readers/audience, there is a relevance between Hester's world and the real world: contemporary capitalist society, where "tourists" dominate "vagabonds," is rife with similar cruelty, violence, and relentlessness.

Wendy Wasserstein focuses on feminist themes with forthright and acrimonious political rhetoric. However, Wasserstein's feminism differs from previous feminist playwrights in that she deals with a generation of women who are oppressed by new and invisible social burdens or forces in contemporary American society. Unlike Maria Irene Fornes and Suzan-Lori Parks's female characters, Wasserstein's female protagonists are neither illiterate, uneducated, or impoverished, nor are they physically abused by males; rather, they are highly educated professional career women, including a doctor, a professor, and a journalist who belong to the rich, upper-middle class in American society. Thus, Wasserstein speaks for college-educated, professional, "uncommon" women who are determined to seek their

successful careers as well as personal happiness: in short, she deals with the contemporary women's dilemma of "having it all." According to Wasserstein's feminist point of view, contemporary American women are oppressed because they are expected to perfectly perform many gender roles as daughter, wife and mother like a superwoman as well as to pursue their successful careers. Therefore, Wasserstein's feminist plays center on women's struggles and the quest for harmony between their private lives and their professional careers – in other words, in the vocabulary of this dissertation, women's autonomous feminist subjectivity.

Wasserstein's Isn't It Romantic? deals with women's dilemma of "having it all" – that is, marrying an ideal husband and achieving a successful career. As professional career women, Janie Blumberg and Harriet Cornwall share a common problem of getting married to a "nice man" as their mothers expect and becoming successful career women. Whereas Harriet finally succumbs to dependency on marriage with a man, Janie refuses Marty Sterling's proposal to move in to his apartment even though he looks like a promising husband. Although Marty is a wealthy doctor from a rich family, he constitutes a fatal obstruction for Janie's autonomy and feminist subjectivity because he is selfish and patriarchal. Janie's evolution into an autonomous woman is also demonstrated through reestablishing her relationship with Tasha and Simon as "a grown woman" (Isn't It Romantic? 147). Just

as Janie refuses Marty's offer to move into his apartment, she also refuses her parents' offer of a mink coat, the latter as destructive as the former to her well-being. Janie's dancing alone in the last scene symbolically shows that Janie's choice is quite right for her autonomy and feminist subjectivity: she does alone what normally it takes two to do, she is moving and not static, and she is happy and fulfilled, not sad and depressed.

In The Sisters Rosensweig, Wasserstein addresses women's recovering feminist subjectivity through sisterhood without being dependent on men or male involvement for their happiness in life. In spite of their successful careers, the three sisters – Sara Goode, Pfeni Rosensweig, and Gorgeous Teitelbaum – lack something in their lives and are not completely happy because they do not have "proper" and supportive men. However, they finally learn to live subjectively, even though they do not have "proper" men, and thereby they establish feminist subjectivity through sisterhood. According to Wasserstein's point of view, a husband or a boyfriend can hurt women's lives and happiness since they come and go anytime they want. Children also leave their mothers and homes anytime they want. But sisters remain life-long companions throughout their lives. In that sense, a man cannot play the role of "knight in shining armor" (The Sisters Rosensweig 81) to professional career women since it is difficult for uncommon women to achieve the dream of having it all

in life.

Wasserstein shows a higher level of seriousness and profundity of her feminist political plays in An American Daughter. With her high-class family, flawless marriage, and a successful professional career, Lyssa Dent Hughes seems like the ideal professional career woman who has it all. Unfortunately, however, she loses her nomination as the Surgeon General of the United States because of the small mistake of misplacing a jury summons slip, which shows a professional woman's vulnerability to political maelstroms in the American political landscape. From Wasserstein's feminist point of view, Timber and Morrow's mass media-based attack on Lyssa constitutes a sexist victimization of a competent professional career woman, since society is so harsh on Lyssa's minor mistake. Wasserstein sees their accusation as sexist discrimination because they problematize Lyssa's private family life with her parents rather than scrutinize her professional ability to undertake higher public office. Ironically, Quincy Quince, who is called "the rebirth of feminism" (An American Daughter 5), becomes another catalyst for Lyssa's downfall for her own selfish profit in career. Far from establishing a feminist sisterhood with Lyssa, thereby helping her through a tight place, Quincy fashions herself as the arch enemy of females and feminism by destroying Lyssa's dream of "having it all." Although Lyssa withdraws her nomination in the end, she rises again and, like a woman warrior, confidently

continues to quest for her selfhood and feminist subjectivity. Wasserstein clearly dramatizes feminist themes, but the treatment is innovative and often gut-wrenching.

Homosexuality has been abominated for a long time, and homophobia stems from Judaeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, which characterize sodomy as evil. The AIDS epidemic, as a consequence of this thinking, was accepted as a plague in America in the late 20th century and has been interpreted by the mainstream as God's scourge against sexual/social immorality and debauchery. PWAs have suffered not only at the hands of the fatal disease but also by the stigmatizing social prejudice against them. Since AIDS has been identified as the "Wrath of God" against their "sexual deviance," PWAs are seen as being punished by God for their debauchery. As a result, the conservative American mainstream did not promptly take proper steps to deal with the epidemic and to help PWAs during the 1980s. Many gay rights activists, including Tony Kushner, oppose this judgmental view of homosexuality, AIDS, and PWAs. William M. Hoffman and Larry Kramer helped to educate the American public about AIDS through their early gay dramas, such as As Is and The Normal Heart, in the 1980s. Whereas these plays merely introduce the issue of homosexuality on the American stage and deal with the AIDS epidemic at the personal level, Tony Kushner makes the AIDS topic an important part of the national discourse at the political level, thereby treating the theme of questing for sexual subjectivity in a new light.

Tony Kushner's Angels in America challenges homophobic American conservatism, which stigmatizes and marginalizes homosexuals and PWAs as sexual "others." Unlike the closeted gay lawyer Roy Cohn, Prior Walter, a gay man with AIDS, spiritually matures and transforms into a challenger and becomes a prophet of the new hope for America. According to Kushner's political vision, Roy's political immorality, selfishness, and self-contradiction parallel the angel's and God's selfishness, since God has seemingly abandoned Heaven, angels, and human beings, who are in desperate need. A dilapidated and chaotic Heaven symbolizes the contemporary barren America, where there is no justice and love. The demonic angel is depicted as irresponsible and selfish like Roy and the Reagan administration; thus, Prior quixotically wrestles with the angel, challenges the angel's demand to stop moving, and finally, Moses-style, delivers Americans from oppression. Prior cannot stop moving because moving means modernism and human progress, which is beneficial for human beings. Prior's wrestling with the angel symbolizes Kushner's struggle against American conservatism for liberalism, equal gay rights, and sexual subjectivity. In spite of its depiction of the negative aspects of American society, Angels in America is a hopeful play, focusing on healing, forgiveness, and interconnectedness between people who form whole communities, since socio-politically marginalized people – like Belize, Hannah, and Louis – show the

possibility of loving, forgiving, and embracing “others” as citizens.

Therefore, in my opinion, the great melting pot as a metaphor of American society, at least as represented in these plays, is nothing but a myth. In these plays by three outstanding contemporary American playwrights, individuals are not completely melted into the melting pot; rather, they still strive to recover their own individualities and unique personalities in every area of American society. The mainstream’s traditional views and social mores are challenged and refuted by the various minorities of race, class, gender, and homosexuality, refusing to completely assimilate to the mainstream’s views; on the contrary, they demand that the mainstream see their difference not as deficiency but as diversity. Like the princess in Hester La Negrita’s story, they challenge the rules of social mores and seek for their own autonomy and subjectivity as subjects of life – that is, racial, class, feminist, and sexual subjectivity.

Therefore, rather than the great melting pot, I argue that a quilt is a better metaphor of American society: a quilt conserves all individual properties and personalities in it, but at the same time it is still harmonious and beautiful when pieced together. Whereas the melting pot destroys all individual personalities and diversity by blending them into a monotonous oneness, a quilt, like a mosaic, is a more wholesome and fitting metaphor to describe the multi-cultural American society. Furthermore, the diversity of American society is the source of America’s genuine

power and beauty, which no other nation in the world can emulate. Thus, it is only right that a more apt metaphor be popularized to describe this pluralistic culture. Important pieces of that quilt are the focus of the plays of Suzan-Lori Parks, Wendy Wasserstein, and Tony Kushner who brilliantly dramatize the theme of the politics of subjectivity.

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