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Cookie and Grace in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*: A Critical Character Sketch

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ABSTRACT

Most of the critical reviews of Suzan Lori-Parks' *Topdog/Underdog* fail to give Cookie and Grace the same treatment they give to Lincoln and Booth, or the parents. They treat Cookie and Grace as merely the work of Booth and Lincoln's imagination because of their absence on stage. On the other hand, Lincoln and Booth's parents, who do not show up on stage as well, receive a fair amount of analysis and recognition. The parents have a major impact on the makeup of the brother's psychological and social side. They serve to reveal different layers of meanings in reading Lincoln and Booth's characters. Thus, it is a valid attempt to try and give Cookie and Grace the same treatment; to dig deep into the meaning of their existence and what they reveal about the protagonists. In this respect, this paper mainly focuses on how the female characters are used to overcompensate their lack of masculinity as defined by modern American society and to create a homosocial bond between them.

Keywords: *Africa-American Literature, Suburbia, Sex Studies, Homosocial bond, Erotic triangle, Feminism.*

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1. Introduction

Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog* revolves around two African American characters, Lincoln and Booth, who struggle to advance themselves socially and financially, under the effect of a traumatic event that is their parents' desertion. Critics analyze Lincoln and Booth's characters and study every aspect of their lives. They speculate over their relationship with each other. They draw connections and associations between Lincoln and Booth and their parents. Moreover, they discuss the traumatic effect the mother and father has left on their children. However, there is no emphasis on Cookie and Grace's roles. If it is due to their absence on stage, then how come the mother's role is important when she does not appear on stage herself? It is better to create a balance in the analysis of Parks' play by studying Cookie and Grace's characters and the significance of their existence. They are the significant other of Lincoln and Booth and they exist for a reason. In the critical reviews, Cookie and Grace's role is underestimated. However, re-reading the play and focusing on the

two ladies' relationship with Lincoln and Booth reveals mind-opening conclusions. Cookie and Grace are used as mediums to create a homosocial bond between the brothers and to overcompensate their lack of masculinity as it is defined by American society.

2. Suzan Lori-Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*: A Critical Introduction

The Pulitzer Prize winning play *Topdog/Underdog* is centered around two African American brothers Lincoln and Booth who live together in a one-bedroom apartment and struggle to make a living in an embodiment of everyday life challenges that black Americans face in capitalist modern America. They come from a shattered family where both parents have decided to abandon the kids in order to start a new life. As a consequence, the youngsters live by themselves facing poverty. When they grow up, Lincoln becomes the provider in the family who barely makes enough money to pay rent while Booth is trapped in unemployment and is so desperate that he tries gambling and shoplifting. The play tragically ends with the death of Lincoln in the hands of

his brother Booth in a sad reenactment of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth. The play is heavily loaded with political, social, racial and psychological contextual significance that has kept critics occupied in examining the implications of these elements. In her article- *Trayvon Martin, Topdog/Underdog, and the Tragedy Trap*, Patricia Stuelke (2017) discusses the fantasy of 'good life' that is created by white America that Lincoln and Booth fail to be part of (p.761). Then, she attempts to link the plot to two recent incidents that are: Kendrick Lamar's Grammys' performance of the song "The Blacker the Berry" and the murder of Trayvon Martin (17-years-old boy shot by the white supremacist George Zimmerman). She, as well, touches on Lincoln and Booth's failure in manifesting the "White suburban dream" (Stuelke, 2017, p.765). Similarly, Myka Tucker-Abramson (2007) sees that the play deals with 'the issues of racism and classism in modern America' (p.78) and how the brothers do not fit the ideals of white masculinity that are mainly connected to economics (p. 88). Hence, their failure in attaining a well-paid job and their failure in securing a steady relationship with a significant other work together as signifiers of their breakaway from the system they live in. Following, Laura Dawkins (2009) believes that "Parks' hopeful view of the African American family...appears to shift in *Topdog/Underdog* to a bleak, disturbing vision of familial disruption and devastation in black urban America" (p.90). Michael LeMahieu (2012) views Lincoln and Booth's life as a performance where "identity is a role one performs publicly for an audience rather than a private essence one contains inside".

Critics of *Topdog/underdog* seem to capitalize on the brothers' struggle to fit in; their struggle to find a respectable identity as defined by the society around them. However, critical reviews come short in addressing the roles of the female characters, expect the mother, in portraying the struggle. They do not provide a thorough analysis of Cookie and Grace, who despite their absence on stage have a great presence and impact on Lincoln and Booth.

3. The Dynamic in The Family: Why Do Cookie and Grace Exist?

Right from the beginning, the characters' description and the play's title

create a binary in the relationship between the two brothers. Booth is placed as "the underdog" while Lincoln is "the topdog". Consequently, one of the main tensions in the play is Booth's attempts to top his older brother "As several critics of the play contend, Booth's fatal encounter with Lincoln represents an Oedipal struggle for authority, with elder brother Lincoln standing in for the siblings' absent father" (Dawkins, 2009, p.91). Lincoln represents the father figure in the house because he is the bread winner "You dont got no money. All the money you got I bring in here" (p.17). Lincoln's employment, thus his economic advantage, brings him closer to scoring the capitalist ideal of masculinity in modern America and becomes an embodiment of this ideal in the eyes of Booth. He is more of a man than Booth who stays home and takes care of the house and Booth knows that very well. This tension creates a rivalry between the brothers. They both wish to fulfill the masculinity criterion.

Significantly, when Lincoln has inherited a small sum of money from his father, Booth has inherited 500 dollars from his mother in a very feminine object (her stockings). The parents do not only pass down their money, they pass down a psychological tie to each one of them. It is logical then to see how that Lincoln presumes the role of "Pa" while Booth is the "Ma" in the house (p.26). This interesting combination of brotherhood and domesticity dynamic is what Eve Sedgwick calls a "homosocial bond" in her book *Between Men*. Sedgwick says:

"In any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire... this special relationship may take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structured combination of the two" (Sedgwick, 1985, p.25).

Studying the brothers' characteristics expose this bond. For instance, Booth appears to be the one in touch with his sensitive side in the play. He shows a tender side when it comes to family and familial ties. He is the one keeping the old family photo album. Just like his mother, he pays great attention to setting up the dinner table "Youd sit there, I'd sit on the edge of the bed. Gathered around the dinner table. Like old times" (p.13). In scene one, Booth creates a versatile piece



of furniture made of milk crates. His idea is: “Im making a sorta modular unit you put the books in the bottom and the table top on top. We can eat and store our books. We could put the photo album in there” (p.13). He tries to recreate what Lincoln recalls in scene five “the food on the table every night and listen to her voice [the mother] when she’d read to us sometimes” (p.68). He wants to re-live the “nice family dinner” experience and the reading of the books by their mother, when in fact they do not even have books. Setting up the dinner table is a reoccurring theme in which Booth unconsciously demonstrates his association with his mother. Expecting Grace to come for a visit, he takes great care in preparing it “the whole apartment in fact takes its cue from the table. It’s been cleaned up considerably. New curtains on the windows, a doily like object on the recliner. Booth sits at the table darting his eyes around, making sure everything is looking good” (p.59). Also, he knows very well what is romantic from a feminine perspective. He covers the table with “a lovely tablecloth” he sets “nice plates, silverware, champagne glasses and candles. All the makings of a very romantic dinner of two” (p.59). All these scenes evoke a feminine aura around him that slim his chances of being the Topdog in the family. To efface any identification with his mother, or his feminine side, he amplifies his manhood throughout the play by fabricating sexual encounters with Grace and Cookie.

In an attempt to assert his manhood in the house, Booth diverts the attention to another definition of manhood fostered by the African American culture that is: virility. Bell hooks’ book *Black Looks*, which Tucker-Abramson mentions in her article “The Money Shot: Economics of Sex, Guns, and Language in Topdog/Underdog”, provides a rationale behind Booth’s obsession over sexual power. She states that after the emancipation of African Americans, they had to adapt to the “white masculine ideal” that emphasizes of the man being the provider for the family. However, the lack of job opportunities resulted into making a shift in the prospective of masculine power. The masculine power shifted from the economic power to sexual power “phallogentric”. It is an attempt to strip the masculine power and place it among African Americans “[The black man’s]

ability to use that penis in the arena of sexual conquest could bring him as much status as being a wage earner and provider” (Tucker-Abramson, 2007, 88). And Booth’s over-sexuality is his attempt to strip down his brother of his role as the Topdog in the house. His sexual adventures that he boasts about are there to redeem his lack of masculinity in comparison to his brother.

Throughout the play, Booth is inclined to declare his phallogentric power. He would do questionable things such as leaving a trace of his masturbation on his “girlie magazines” for his brother to see, or asking about the type of condom Lincoln was using. He would try on a condom, for larger men, in front of Lincoln in an attempt to prove that he is the bigger man. He deliberately brings down the competition to the size of the phallic. Moreover, Booth brings forth another phallogentric category to challenge his brother that is potency “I’m a hot man I aint apologizing for it,” (p.45). Booth assures that the more sexually active one is the more masculine he is “As goes the man so goes the mans dick. Thats what I say” (p.45). And to ridicule Lincoln’s manhood, he contrasts their sexual encounters “Not like you, Link. When you don’t got a woman you just sit there” (p.45). Booth’s attitude is merely a “desperate assertion of his manhood” (Tucker-Abramson, 2007, p.90) and here comes the role of Grace and Cookie. He needs more than his masturbation to reinforce his potency.

Booth proceeds to create another form of rivalry to tear down his brother’s superiority. He claims that Cookie, Lincoln’s wife, goes to him for sexual satisfaction “You a limp dick jealous whiteface motherfucker whose wife dumped him cause he couldnt get it up and she told me so. Came crawling to me cause she needed a man” (p.45). Regardless of the unreliability of Booth as a narrator, he is weaving this intricate relationship not because there is anything special about Cookie. The only significance she holds is her connection to Lincoln. Eve Sedgwick’s “erotic triangle” theory that she discussed in detail in her book *Between Men* chapter one “Gender Asymmetry and Erotic Triangles” reaches the same conclusion: in triangle relationship, it is always about the male rivals not the female. The “erotic triangle” theory suggests that in a male-female-male

love triangle the choice of the beloved is not determined by the woman's qualities, but "by the beloved's already being the choice of the person who has been chosen as a rival" (Sedgwick, 1985, p.21). In Lincoln-Cookie-Booth triangle, Cookie serves as a weapon to disarm Lincoln. Also, his attachment to Grace even when she keeps rejecting him can be a result of homophobia. She is the one needed to disguise his homosocial bond with Lincoln "Booth is trying to assert his manliness through sex... if we consider the doubling of Grace, as "Grace", The person Booth desires and "grace," the synonym of salvation" (Tucker-Abramson, 2007, p.90). Grace is the salvation of Booth's manhood. The absence of Grace (and Cookie) on stage is but a powerful gesture "The absence of Grace from this play, then, signifies Booth's sexual failure...all Booth's stories about Grace are a lie... to cover up... his failed masculinity" (Tucker-Abramson, 2007, p.90). For all these reasons, Grace's existence in the play is far more important than anyone thinks.

Lincoln on the other side appears indifferent towards Booth's provocative attempts and Booth's sexual contest. The tales of Cookie's alleged affair with his brother, or rape (after Booth's confession" elicit no reaction at all "Yr wife Cookie... Could be in my bed you wouldnt notice" (p.27). In addition, Lincoln is careless towards dating, masturbating like his brother, or even having any relationship after his separation from Cookie. In Booth's African American definition of manhood "as goes thuh man so goes the mans dick" (p.45) Lincoln is impotent. Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* mentions that gender is always a doing "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990, p.33). Sexual performance is indeed a decisive attribute in expressing one's gender. Thus, Lincoln needs Cookie in his world, even with no physical contact with her, to preserve his manhood.

Also, as mentioned before, Lincoln strongly identifies with his father. He has witnessed his father's profanity as a youngster and even joined him "sometimes he'd let me watch" (p.89), "one of his ladies liked me, so I would do her after he'd done her" (p.90). However, after the father's departure, Lincoln burned his father's clothes and spent the money he

has left as inheritance in a symbolic ritual of getting rid of the connection he has with him. During the play, Lincoln does not hide his disgust over his father's deeds "He made it seem like it was this big deal this great thing he was letting me witness but it wasnt like nothing "(p.90). Ironically, Lincoln's actions contradict what he has said. Witnessing his father's debauchery was a big deal because it has affected his intimate life. He does not put any emphasis over being sexually active. His sexual indifference towards his wife, his refusal to date, his idleness, his hate of "mushy" topics and his sexual fantasy over his brother " **Lincoln:** too bad you aint a woman. **Booth:** what?" (p.43) all lead to one conclusion: Lincoln is an imposter of a man and this is why he needs Cookie in his life. Cookie, whose name is very symbolic to her function in Lincoln's life, is his trophy; the testimony of his absent manhood. Tragically, Lincoln is not an imposter in his job only; he is an imposter everywhere.

4. Conclusion

As mentioned before, Cookie and Grace's characters encourage a second reading of Lincoln and Booth's characters. They are necessary to develop a comprehensive understanding of their relationship to each other and their relationship to the system they live in. The status of their relationship with the females is connected strongly to their personalities. As the events in the play unfold, it becomes apparent that their disconnection from their significant others is a reflection of their disconnection from reality.

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