

Beyond the Mother Knot: Trauma and Intersectionality in Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood*

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Abstract—This paper examines the impact of multi-layered oppression on individuals and society, explicitly referring to Black women's marginalization in Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood*. It focuses on how race, gender, and class intersect to form the trauma of the protagonist, which ultimately leads to the unraveling of the mother knot. By such an integration of PTSD theory, intersectional feminism, and social critique, the study presents a new approach to examining racial trauma and systemic oppression. The findings indicate that Black women are subject to institutional, cultural, and individual oppression, which reinforces racial stereotypes and economic exploitation. The cyclical oppression is manifested in psychological distress, avoidance behaviors, and ultimately violent eruptions. The research points to the role of systemic racism in condoning sexual and economic abuse, leading to the tragic death of the protagonist. It calls for further research on the effects of multi-dimensional oppression on the vulnerable and urges policymakers to act in response to institutionalized discrimination. The paper proposes extending intersectional feminist analysis to study the cumulative impact of oppression on identity and agency. By exploring Parks' play, this research contributes to promoting studies within racial trauma, systemic inequality, and socio-psychological implications of long-standing oppression scholarship by emphasizing the importance of inclusive policy and literary critique capturing the voices of the marginalized.

Index Terms—intersectionality, racial trauma, aversive racism, stereotype, the mother knot

I. INTRODUCTION

The study at hand uncovers the effects of multi-levelled modes of oppression on individuals, the family, and society. More precisely, it brings black women's oppression to the surface in the hope of providing them with more care and reducing prejudice against them. The study, thus, highlights the reasons behind turning a loving mother into a murderer. Hence upon, this paper can provide clear-cut warning signs against the reasons behind criminality, which can open up new horizons in criminology studies.

Park is considered one of the most influential playwrights nowadays for her audaciously tackled themes and her idiosyncratic style. According to Larson, one of the main reasons that Suzan-Lori Parks is regarded as one of the preeminent African American voices in literature today is that she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2002 for "her play *Topdog/Underdog*" (2008, p. 2). Buckner (2011) states that the most "recurring themes in Parks' plays [are] digging history, race, sex, family, [and] identity" (p. 70). She has engendered a unique Language, challenging the theatrical norms. A case in point, many of the words are "spelt awkwardly," imitating dialects. Furthermore, she deliberately omits punctuation and uses sounds like "thuh" and "uh.". Parks sought to reinforce racial stereotypes (StudyCorgi, 2021). And yet, tackling her works via the lens of intersectional feminism and embarking on PTSD theory—the main conceptual framework of this paper/study— gives much insight to Park's idiosyncrasy as an eminent American playwright.

Intersectional feminism is historically traced and methodologically adopted as part of Third Wave Feminism. Crenshaw (1989) introduced the term 'intersectionality' whereby she attempts to prove the shortcomings of the earlier feminist studies (Alhourani, 2025), that relied on single/separate-axes analyses of black women's oppression. Unlike these approaches, she asserts, "black women's experiences are much broader than the general categories that discrimination discourse provides". Crenshaw further explores this in her article, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectional Feminism, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour" (1993), stating that race, sex, and class are interrelated factors of oppression and cannot be examined separately. As she indicates it:

Many of the experiences black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and Sexism factors into black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking separately at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences. (p. 358)

Intersectionality has three levels: institutional (Structural and political), cultural, and individual (Kirkinis et al., 2018). Structural intersectionality, according to Wilson (2013), occurs when "intersectional inequalities are directly relevant to the experiences of people in society" (p. 2). Political intersectionality, another institutional level, refers to "how inequalities and their intersections are relevant to political strategies" (Wilson, 2013, p. 2). Unlike institutional oppression, individual oppression, according to Carter, emphasizes one's own superiority over "the outgroups" (2017). Thirdly, as a consequence of the aforementioned institutional and individual oppression, women of colour are stereotypically represented as illiterate and prostitutes—the cultural level of intersectionality. Barone (1999) condemns the interactive nature of these levels: structures limit what individuals can do or decide, but individual choice and action "are at the same time determinants of structures" (Barone, 1999, p. 1). Together, these levels of oppression cause racial trauma foregrounding racism as the primary source of racial trauma black women experience. According to King (1988), black women assert that their "racial identity is more salient than either their gender or their class identity" (p. 48). Similarly, Lewis (1977) argues that racism is the principal cause of black women's subordination: "their interests as blacks have taken precedence over their interests as women" (p. 343). In the same vein, several theories examine racism's impact, including aversive racism and everyday racism—all contribute to the intersectional analysis of black women's multi-layered oppression.

On the one hand, aversive racism, as Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) define it, as prejudices based on normal cognitive, motivational, and sociocultural processes that incline someone toward the formation of "racial negative feelings" (p. 315). This form of racism allows white individuals to justify racial biases under the guise of cultural norms, causing severe emotional distress for black individuals. On the other hand, 'everyday racism,' as introduced by Essed (1991), is the process in which "racial practices are familiar and repetitive, and... race relations are actualized and reinforced through these routine practices in everyday situations" (p. 52). Thus, in this regard, racism is manifested in 'everyday routine'—the cultural practices that go repeatedly unquestioned without justification. According to Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005), 'everyday racism' can be 'overt, covert, and subtle' (p. 481). Carter (2007) states that 'subtle' and 'covert' racism is often expressed through language or symbols directed against blacks to indicate that they are inferior. These racial practices lead to ongoing emotional pain, culminating in racial trauma.

Importantly, sexual abuse of black women is rooted in cultural racism, which stereotypes them as jezebels and hoochies-mamas. Roberts (1991) defines jezebels as black women governed by her sexual desires. Collins (2000) describes the "hoochie-mama" stereotype as representing impoverished black single mothers who trade sexual favours for cash in order to meet the financial needs of their young children. These stereotypes give a rational justification for black women's sexual exploitation, causing them emotional pain, which is tackled in this study in terms of 'racial trauma'.

The term "racial trauma" was coined by Carter in "Racism and Psychological and Emotional Injury: Recognising and Assessing Race-Based Traumatic Stress" (2007). He defines it as stress caused by racism at all levels—individual, institutional, and cultural—leading to "emotional pain and results in encounters that are negative, uncontrollable, and sudden/systematic" (p. 35). Traumas can be classified into three main categories: acute, chronic, and complex. Acute trauma is a result of a single overwhelming or disturbing incident; chronic trauma arises from long-lasting distressing traumatic events over an extended period; and complex trauma stems from exposure to multiple traumatic events. Wamser-Nanney and Vandenberg (2013) state that complex trauma events are "chronic, interpersonal traumas that begin early in life" (p. 671). Herman (1992) adds that "complex trauma occurs under circumstances where the individual is unable to escape, often due to physical, psychological, developmental, "environmental, or social strains" (p. 340). Cénat (2022) classifies racial trauma as a sub-kind of complex trauma, defining it as "repetitive, pervasive, constant, inevitable, and cumulative experiences of race-based stress, racial discrimination, and microaggressions in racist systems" (p. 675). In this vein, Carter (2007) states that the encounters in racial trauma perhaps cumulative, and maybe "a last straw event may serve as the trigger for the trauma" (p. 70).

More comprehensively, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a syndrome (or a cohesive set of symptoms) that describes a multiplicity of reactions to traumatic events. Reexperiencing and avoidance are its most prominent symptoms, which manifest "cognitively, affectively, behaviourally, and physiologically" (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000, p. 11). Cognitive re-experiencing involves "intrusive thoughts, images, and gaps in awareness" (Hassija & Gray, 2007, p. 168). Flashbacks, in this context, are considered objects of psychological scrutiny: "multimode re-experiencing," involving cognitive, affective, and physiological symptoms (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000). Avoidance symptoms, following the same

pattern, either "conscious or unconscious," presumably lead to depersonalization, gaps in awareness, and dissociation (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000). Such behavioural avoidance includes avoiding places, people or talking about the traumatic event. Physiological avoidance causes a decrease in interest in activities and a sense of a foreshortened future (Hassija & Grey, 2007). While avoidance can temporarily "mitigate fear and anxiety" and provide a "sense of relief" (Hassija & Grey, 2007; Abou Adel, 2023), PTSD symptoms are "more severe" in people who "frequently use avoidance" as a coping mechanism (Whealin et al., 2008; Asif, 2025). That is to say, the link between racial trauma and intersectionality can best be highlighted by explaining the factors that influence the response to trauma. According to Carlson and Dalenberg, many factors influence the response to trauma, including biological factors, social context, severity of the risk factors, and prior and subsequent life events. Firstly, the biological differences between women and men make "women twice as likely to develop trauma-related psychopathology as men" (Helpman et al., 2017, p. 1). In addition, Mustillo et al. (2004) contend that "women report higher levels" of racial trauma, "almost five times more likely than [men]" (p. 2128). Secondly, black women's social setting exacerbates their PTSD symptoms more than that of white women. Carlson and Dalenberg (2000) state that a person's "social" circumstances can either "strengthen or weaken" their capacity to cope with a traumatic stressor. As previously discussed, structural intersectionality places black women in impoverished social contexts—poverty, residential segregation, work-related experiences, and stressful life events. These social contexts, as Carter believes, are "all examples of racial traumatic stress" (2007).

Auerbach (1986) defines motherhood as the "spiritual essence of pure womanhood" (p. 173). Ruddick (1982) believes that a mother's interests have been guided by three factors since the first child's birth: "preservation," the most constant and primary of the three; physical, emotional, and intellectual "growth"; and "acceptability"—her child becomes the sort of adult that she can appreciate, and others can accept. Elliott and Reid (2016) believe that being black mothers "presents extraordinary challenges for them as they attempt to protect their children from the dangers of racism" (p. 50).

As discussed above, there are a number of stereotypical images of black mothers, including the image of "the superstrong mother" (Collins, 2000). This image, according to Mattingly (2014), illustrates certain essential qualities that black women have had to cultivate, such as being "self-reliant and resourceful," "assertive," "self-sacrificing," and, above all, "strong" (2014). Therefore, if a black mother lacks this strength, she becomes a good-for-nothing mother who cannot protect her children and family and provide them with their needs.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The previous studies on *Susan Lori-Parks' In the Blood* include Emirsoy's "A Journey to the Terrible Enlightenment in Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*" (2013), which is a comparative analysis of sin, guilt, immoral actions, fault, and the pursuit of redemption in how these are portrayed through the three diverse female protagonists in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Suzan-Lori Parks' plays. This paper is supplemented by Abdullah et al.'s (2019) article, which examines the gender, class, and race dynamics, highlighting the plight of Afro-American women. Furthermore, Sabbar (2022) explores how violence employs both sexes and the role of gender in reinforcing men's social dominance. Hbean and Al-Abedi (2022) in "Vulnerability and Hypocrisy in *Suzan Lori Parks' In The Blood*" discuss that African American women are trapped by intersecting racial, class, and sexual identities. More recent studies, like Jabboury's "Oppression Upon Oppression: Critical Analysis of *Parks' In The Blood* Through the Intersectional Perspective" (2023), investigate how oppression shapes Hester's persecution, leading to her tragic end. In addition, Hadia (2024) reveals how Parks presents an image of a black woman who is brutally victimized by the social system.

The aforementioned studies have approached the oppression practiced against women not from a unified or holistic perspective, but rather through linear, polarized, and one-dimensional frameworks. Such theories are subsumed within Gender-based analysis (GBA) treats "women" as distinct from "men," focusing on biological distinctions. It merely challenges the notion that "everyone, regardless of gender, is affected by policies, programmes, and laws in the same manner" (Chao, 1999, p. 4). Beal (2008) introduces *double jeopardy*, to emphasize how black women face both racial and gender oppression: "Men may be cruelly exploited and subjected to all sorts of dehumanizing tactics...but they have someone who is below them—at least they're not women" (p. 114).

Further, the notion of racism (as a main cause of the traumatic experience of the protagonist in *In the Blood*) has not been investigated in the aforementioned studies. It is in this study at hand that racism is tackled as a pivotal cause of trauma. In this regard, it is worthy mentioning how racism has been argued by many scholars as a main cause of trauma, such as Loo et al. (2001), Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005), and Polanco-Roman et al. (2016) assert that racism can be experienced as traumatic. In addition, Bryant-Davis and Ocampo argue that events based on racism can exacerbate emotional suffering and trigger traumatic reactions because they are a form of victimisation and can consequently result in post-traumatic symptoms (2005). It is contended that racism is motivated by desire or the need to assert power over someone who is perceived as less powerful. Similarly, Polanco-Roman et al. (2016) suggest that "racial discrimination that causes psychological trauma, as it may elicit a response comparable to posttraumatic stress" (p. 616).

One more perspective that this paper focalizes is the mother-son relationship investigated via tackling the representation of the 'mother knot'—the very metaphor representing the unbreakable bond between a mother and her child (Rhys, 2023). The 'mother knot' throughout the analysis section is used as a means of gaining much insight into the essence of oppression practised against black women. Feminists like Jane Lazarre in *The Mother Knot* (1997) use this symbol to convey conflicted maternal emotions. Stultz, in *Unraveling the Mother Knot* (2020), explores its negative implications in her

relationship with her daughter. In this study, the metaphor illustrates the mother-son loving and caring relationship, which is enhanced as the child grows and how it is finally destroyed by unravelling the mother-knot.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present study primarily seeks to understand the multi-layered modes of oppression via investigating the traumatic experience which becomes a prism through which such modes are refracted. To fulfil this aim, the study therefore aims at formulating a conceptual framework that draws mainly upon the PTSD approach *alongside* the concept of intersectional feminism to both identify and draw the boundaries among the different factors that have shaped the mother's experience of oppression in *In the Blood*, as understood through the protagonist's traumatic experience.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. *The Consequences of Multi-Levelled Oppression*

Homelessness is the primary outcome of the intersectional factors of oppression tackled in *In the Blood*. According to Bullock et al. (2020), homelessness occurs as a result of an interlocking system of racial, class, and sexual oppression. This fact is evident in the words of Jasinski et al. (2005), who highlight the fact that the "typical" homeless family is headed by a 'low-income single mother' caring for children. Johnson and Zhu (2017) indicate that homelessness is a result of low levels of education, high unemployment rates, punitive Welfare, and a lack of public housing supports that tend to increase homelessness, mainly for women. Bullock et al. (2020) further add that the 'partner's lack of responsibilities' is a main cause of homelessness. Homeless mothers are subjugated to heightened risks of physical and sexual violence (Johnson et al., 2017). Brilliantly discussing the reasons behind this violence, Jasinski et al. (2005) state that they engage in sexual relations in exchange for money, food, or safety. This exchange was exploitive and abusive to the women; however, this was one of the most available few choices to them on the streets. While some men offer homeless women money for this sexual relationship, many of them do not give them anything; instead, they tell them, "They'll beat them up if they don't." So, being scared, they are forced to do it (Jasinski et al., 2005, pp. 55–56). They go on to assert that homeless women who "have children" may encounter more severe violence than women who are homeless and live "alone" (Jasinski et al., 2005, p. 8). Most importantly, because of their compassion for their children, homeless women "rarely report their victimisation" (Jasinski et al., 2005, p. 3). Motherhood, therefore, adds another burden to the homeless black women.

B. *Parks' In the Blood*

In the Blood is a riff of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (Vainikka, 2021). With nine scenes, *In the Blood* tells the story of Hester La Negrita, an illiterate, homeless black woman, and her five fatherless illegitimate children. Acting as a single mother, Hester tries to find assistance to help her children lead successful lives. They live under a bridge where some of troublemaking boys have written "slut" on the wall in a place that Hester calls her "practice place," as the stage directions describe (Parks, 2001). Parks begins her play with a prologue highlighting Hester's intersectional oppression. The chorus, symbolizing American society, surrounds Hester like "vultures" (Hadia, 2012). They are viewed as the oppressors who, as Ghani and Joodi (2016) claim, subject Hester to "severe assault on the political, medical, capitalistic, and religious systems that define the American ideal".

The chorus, thus, highlights the 'structural' intersectionality Hester is subjugated to, which causes her racial trauma. Effectively, Hester La Negrita endures a crude and continuing "history of oppression, which makes her subjugated to "financial and sexual exploitation" (Kolin, 2010). The chorus confirms that she "CAN'T READ CAN'T WRITE" (Parks, 2001). Facing racial segregation in education and employment, she is trapped in poverty, unable to earn money to support her children. As a result, she faces sexual exploitation, engaging in sexual relations in exchange for money, food, or safety. Hence, she is defamed as a "SLUT" and becomes the only one responsible for bearing her five fatherless children (Parks, 2001). Hester thus works as a slut because of the 'structural oppression' she undergoes.

It is crucial to note that, by giving her the surname "La Negrita", Parks emphasizes that being 'Negro' is Hester's defining characteristic and thus the main reason for her intersectional oppression. Hester's trauma is primarily racial, as race is the dominant factor in her oppression. Hester's sexual encounters, shaped by intersectional oppression, are negative, uncontrollable, and systematic. As O'Gorman (2015) condemns, these encounters connect "sexual desire, disgust, fear, and repression" in the creation of racial bodies. Hadia (2012) further notes that Huster finds no "sense of self or freedom in them". They damage her sense of self because she cannot protect herself from these haunting lethal experiences. As a homeless woman with five children and no skills to earn money, sexual transactions become her only means of survival.

Importantly, having experienced many sexually traumatic encounters, she receives a "variety of cues as threatening" (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000). Since these sexual encounters turn her into 'a' slut' who has five bastards, the word "slut," her five bastards, and the men and women with whom she practices sex—Doctor who is white, and Chilli, and The Welfare Lady, who are blacks—all serve as conditioned stimuli or cues for her traumatic stress, acting as 'intrusive memories' and 'uncontrollable thoughts' (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000).

Despite overwhelming stress, Hester attempts to be a 'superstrong' mother to maintain the mother knot. While living under the bridge where 'SLUT' scrawled on a wall", Hester plays with Baby by arranging the "soda cans" in a line to teach

him how to play (Parks, 2001). Ignoring the painful sight of the word, she prioritizes her children's happiness. Limited resources do not deter her; she polishes their shoes and presses their clothes, telling them, "You don't wanna look like you don't got nobody" (Parks, 2001, p. 30). She strives to make them appear like children with parental care, setting them apart from others in their situation. Realising the racial differences, Gringa, Hester's white friend, practices racial harassment against Hester, which causes Hester emotional stress. She believes she is superior to Hester. So, when the former advises the latter to sell her black children, she minimises, "Do you know how much money I could have from having a white child? "Grow it. Birth it. Sell it" (Parks, 2001, p. 96). She implies that people want her white children so she can sell them for a better price than the latter's children, who are worthless and pose a threat to society. Gringa's race, thus, entitles her to some "advantages" and makes her more valuable (Keene, 2012); she utters the word "white" to communicate Hester's inferior status to her. This racial minimising causes Hester racial stress. However, she rarely confronts Gringa's hostility, instead employing avoidance to protect herself. When Gringa mocks her for polishing her children's shoes, calling her "the old woman and the shoe" after observing her barely spitting on her kids' shoes to polish them, the latter intentionally neglects her satire, responding as if it were a serious matter: "I get my leg up, that's what I'm getting. New shoes for my treasures" (Parks, 2001, p. 32). Her response reflects her resilience and determination to overcome her oppression. On the institutional level, Hester faces discriminatory harassment from Doctor, a representative of the health system. Unlike Gringa, who oppresses her solely for being black, Doctor degrades her for being a low-class black woman. Instead of offering care, he treats her inhumanely: She opens her legs and squats. He slips between them like an otter on a dolly and shines a "flashlight to examine her private areas" (Parks, 2001, p. 50). Having the three supremacies, i.e., race, sex, and class superiority, he treats her as if she were an animal or a vehicle. In this vein, Hadia (2012) likens Doctor to "a mechanic who is checking an impaired vehicle" (2012, p. 112). Sirwah (2020) further argues that this invasion is metaphorically seen to represent the violation of the privacy she has lost by living under the bridge. In fact, 'political intersectionality' also plays a role in this abuse. Social institutions often view rape victims as responsible for their own victimisation, making convictions less likely and sentences lighter for those who assault black women (Collins, 2000). Being aware of the marginalisation of her sexual victimisation, Hester does not resist this sexual violence. These microaggressions are designed to demean and denigrate the powerless Hester while maintaining the appearance of being non-discriminatory. When she realizes her complaints will be futile, she remains silent, attempting to endure her suffering.

The three levels of intersectionality—institutional, cultural, and individual—interact to make Hester a sexual victim of Doctor. When she goes to him "begging" for help (Parks, 2001), in his confession, he says, "She's been one of my neediest cases for several years now... I wouldn't touch her without gloves on, but then— (Rest) we did it once" (Parks, 2001, p. 58). Instead of offering assistance, he manipulates his racial, class, and gender privileges to use Hester's body for his own gratification. As Collins condemns, black women are often used as "sex objects" for others' pleasure (1999, p. 135). Doctor shifts the blame onto Hester, claiming, "I was lonesome, and she gave herself to me in a way that I had never experienced... I couldn't help it" (Parks, 2001, p. 58). He pretends to be a victim of her seduction; nonetheless, he draws upon the "hoochie mama" stereotype to justify his shameful deed. In the way that he views her through the prism of American culture, which perpetuates the stereotype that black women have an overactive sexual appetite (Abou Adel, 2024).

Seeing Doctor, Hester retrieves her previous emotional pain, which results from his sexual exploitation of her. As previously discussed, Doctor serves as a cue for her traumatic sexual encounters, making her relive her traumatic stress as if it were happening right now, "as if time had been frozen" (Bloom, 1999, p. 119). So, before his confession, she prepares to leave: "I gotta go." Nonetheless, "she doesn't move. She stands there numbly" (Parks, 2001, p. 56). This "affective numbing", which is commonly understood as an avoidance symptom, is a retrieval of the freeze response she suffers during their sexual encounter. Empirically, in the per-traumatic stage, i.e., during their sexual encounter, she adapts a freeze response, an emotional state in which she shuts off from the usual feelings of anger and fear that would usually arise in response to a threatening or dangerous situation (Carlson & Dalenberg, 2000, p. 13). So, Doctor describes her as "was very giving very obliging very understanding" (Parks, 2001, p. 85). Having no emotional response to this traumatic experience, Hester becomes alienated from her own body; she acts as if this racial body does not belong to her. Thus, she emotionally and cognitively separates herself from the situation and adapts the freezing response to lessen her fear of losing her self-respect and to avoid the psychological pain of this willing rape.

Hester's sexual relationship with Reverend D. in the play typically speaks to the three-pronged Intersectionality: institutional (Structural and political), cultural, and individual. The black priest, Reverend D., who represents the religious institution, exploits Hester sexually, causing her traumatic stress. In a pursuit of power to escape oppression, Hester has a sexual relationship with Reverend D., who lets her down to bear the responsibility alone after giving birth to Baby. She mistakenly thinks that Reverend D., as a man of religion, will disregard the difference between their social classes and treat her humanely. Instead, she doesn't get any financial or emotional support, which causes her stress. So, following Gringa's advice, Hester goes to him with a picture of Baby in hopes that he will help her and take custody of her after two years of neglect and absence. He initially does not recognise her because she is hiding her face behind the picture of Baby. So, he pretends to be a good priest and counsels her to confront the father of her child. Perceiving this shameful, unmanly situation as negative, sudden, and uncontrollable, she feels choked and repeats everything Reverend D. says back to him:

REVEREND. You must go to him and say, "Mister, here is your child!"

HESTER. Mister here is your child!

REVEREND. "You are wrong to deny what God has made!"

HESTER. You are wrong to deny what God has made! (Parks, 2001, p. 61)

She finds it incredible that a priest in his position would behave in such a disgraceful way, neglecting his own child. Considerably, Hester's recitation of Reverend D.'s comments is essentially a "linguistic" post-traumatic reaction, resulting from her perception of him as a cue that triggers her traumatic stress.

Cultural intersectionality is used to explain Reverend D.'s position; his justification of his sexual exploitation of Hester proves a predetermined racial propensity. He describes her while appealing: "She had a look in her eye that invites liaisons eyes that say red spandex. There was a certain animal magnetism between us" (Parks, 2001, p. 107). He justifies her sexual exploitation by claiming that he has seen in her eyes an "insatiable sexual desire," which, as Collins (2000) states, helps define the boundaries of normal sexuality. In a way, Hester is conceived as a nymphomaniac; her unquenchable sexual desire makes her a subject of sexual harassment, allowing him to exploit such a homeless woman who comes to him asking for money to feed her fatherless children. Indeed, his description of her is undoubtedly based on the oppressive stereotypes of black women as the "hoochie mama" who performs sexual relations for money out of concern for her kids' financial needs. He has thus "involved himself in finding ways to profit" from Hester's body by using his sexual description of her (Collins, 2000, p. 160). Hester's racial body makes her preyed on by not only the white men but also the blacks.

Hester's multi-pronged oppressive experience discussed above precipitates the unravelling of the mother-knot. Despite exerting tireless efforts to sustain the mother knot, Hester, for the first time, fails to maintain her performance in accordance with the stereotypical model of a 'superstrong' mother after paying a second visit to Reverend D., who again refuses to help her, triggering her emotional stress. Having faced Reverend D.'s second abandonment, she returns home to play with her children like she always does, but when they huddle around her to play, she is growing irate, finally expressing her severe stress: "You think I like you bothering me all day?" (Parks, 2001, p. 110).

As previously stated, triggering her psychological pain, her children turn into a cue for her trauma. Their presence, especially after suffering such accumulated traumatic experiences, makes her frustrated and unable to control her anxiety. Indeed, she tries constantly to cope with the accumulated emotional pain and perform her role as a 'superstrong' mother, yet this stress is greater than her capacity to handle. So, she hands over, declaring that "She's tired" (Parks, 2001, p. 110). Only now does Hester—who never grumbles and always acts bravely to raise her children—uncover her traumatised status. In this scene, she declares that she has had enough traumatic experiences and is and "having a nervous breakdown" (Parks, 2001, p. 112). She, thus, starts to unravel the first filament of the mother knot, unable to perform according to the model of a superstrong mother due to subjugating to repetitive intersectional oppression.

Having experienced a cumulative series of traumatic events, Hester finally unravels the mother knot. While she is still suffering numbing after her traumatic encounter with Reverend D—who refuses to help her and threatens her: "Dont ever come back here again ... i'll crush you underfoot," calling her a "slut" (Parks, 2001, p. 143)—Jabber wakes up to admit lying to her about not being able to read the word before and that he "could read but [he] didnt wanna"; insisting on telling her it is "slut" (Parks, 2001, p. 145). Jabber's comment is Hester's 'last straw' event, the simplest and latest in a long list of violations imposed on Hester throughout the play, causing her great helplessness and fear of psychic integrity. She overreacts to this danger with agitation: "Hush up. Go to sleep, Jabber", but he insists: It reads 'Slut.' 'Slut.' (Parks, 2001, p. 146). When anger fails to control this damage to her sense of self, she adapts 'aggression' as an additional means to maintain control. So, she has brutally hit him and has fallen dead. "Having watched the scene of blood, she hysterically beats his body again and again and again" (Parks, 2001, p. 148). Her outburst symbolises a volcano that has long been suppressed. By killing her son, she is indeed voicing opposition to the intersectional oppression she has been subjected to, particularly the abusive men in her life, which leads her to unravel the mother knot.

V. FINDINGS

This paper highlights the profound effects of multi-layered oppression experienced by Black women as represented by Suzan-Lori Parks in her play *In the Blood*. By adopting an intersectional feminist approach *alongside* trauma theory, the research reveals the complex interconnectedness between race, gender, and social class in shaping the Black mother's suffering in the play. The research findings show that the oppression experienced by Black women is not merely an individual experience but rather a reflection of institutional, cultural, and personal systems of oppression that intertwine to produce chronic racial trauma that impacts their identity and behaviour. Despite her persistent attempts to maintain her role as a strong mother, the accumulated pressures and repeated violations eventually have led to the disintegration of the "mother-knot," culminating in the tragic act of violence against her son.

The importance of this research lies in its shedding light on the psychological and social effects of racial and gender discrimination, and it also provides a stark warning against the deep-rooted causes of crime within marginalized groups. From this perspective, this study can enrich discussions about social justice, study the psychological factors associated with crime, and reconsider policies that affect black women in contemporary societies. Based on these findings, researchers in literature, psychology, and sociology and criminology can continue to investigate how multidimensional

oppression affects individuals and expand the scope of studies on racial trauma and its role in shaping identities and behaviours within marginalized communities.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper at hand showcases the many factors, indications, and the multi-faceted oppressive system(s) that account for the ultimate fall of the protagonist in *In the Blood*, drawing primarily upon intersectional feminism and the PTSD theory. Racism, sexism, and classism have been discussed as the risk factors that cause Hester La Negrita's racial trauma—the matter that has ultimately driven her to kill her son, unravelling the mother knot despite her ceaseless efforts to maintain it. She has faced recurrent racial stress on the institutional, individual, and cultural levels. In terms of institutional intersectionality, the protagonist has been deprived of access to education, which has put her in a cycle of economic abuse indicated by her being deprived of access to high-class jobs with high wages. As a result of this classism, she becomes a homeless 'slut' whose racial body has been exploited by both white and black men and women alike. Beyond economic and sexual exploitation, Hester has also been a subject of intersectional discrimination and harassment not only by white and black individuals but also by social and religious institutions. Consequently, she has suffered from severe PTSD symptoms (including low self-esteem, limited friendships, hallucinations, increased startles, and a sense of a shorter future) which are used in this paper as a prism through which all the systems of oppressions and racial practices are refracted. The most obvious symptom, however, is 'avoidance', which is manifested in her silence. Despite constantly utilising avoidance and silence as a coping mechanism with this chronic, repetitive oppression so that she could maintain the mother knot from being distorted; her poverty and financial dependence on her oppressors (who are a cue of her emotional pain) perpetuate her psychological suffering by complicating her trauma which has finally forced her to commit a crime—the ultimate unravelling of the mother knot which stands for her failure in maintaining her long sought after mother-son relationship.

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