



Quest for Identity in Zora Neale Hurston

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Hurston's works are a revelation of life. She takes up the theme of race and racism tortuously and in a subtle way because for her it was never a noteworthy issue. Hurston attempts to exhibit that there is more to life than being penitence- ridden with one's skincolour and physical lookwith a view to stress upon the issue of African American identity and nurturing a feeling of their cultural pride.

The Harlem Renaissance to which she was well attached to focussed on the distinctiveness of African American identity and harboured racial pride brought which forth many dazzling literary personalities. During the period of the Harlem Renaissance's active foray, African American literature was apprehended by black writers as a device for portraying white American racism and brutality and how these ill impacted the life and nature of Afro-Americans. However, Zora Neale Hurston, an African American novelist, charted a different path in her works.

Hurston has emphasized in her worksgenerally on splendid use of the African American dialect and folklore to examine severalproblems of her era. The early critical stress on the way she used language isconcerned with the problems that she examines in her work such as gender coercion, Jim Crow's inhuman attitude and domestic violence in literary connotation. Most of Hurston's contemporaries were engrossedwith the need to end racial discrimination and injustice; Hurston, however, pickedup different issues to be addressed that were often avoided by fellow writers. It has been surmised that Hurston's anthropological based narratives and her character sketches show Hurston to be more interested in human motivation than in the struggle for civil rights. Hurston made no contentious statements about race matters and only moved towards the subject in an indirect way due to her dependency on white people who wielded considerable control over her fieldwork, her gathering of folklore and on her work in general.

Hurston made a lifetime effort and pledge to save and represent African American culture and folklore with neither apology nor adjustment.She was as a great literary figure



who produced considerable literary texts. Recently, Hurston's work has been considered in a new light – as the work of an anthropologist who gathered folklore and produced several ethnographic texts. Her curiosity in theatrical and musical events concerning the folk recommends that she was conscious of the fact that the stage was the mode to promote and save her people's cultural heritage.

All of Hurston's novels draw upon her deep interest in folklore, mainly the folklore of the South, from her native place of Florida and her birthplace Eatonville. Hurston had seen her own culture as the black national dignity and pride. Hurston records her culture in a manner that nobody else was doing during her primetime of career as she acknowledged the rich oral culture of the rural black folk at the heart of her anthropological and fictional work. Her curiosity was in the rural southern illiterate black culture. She dedicated a great chunk of her time and career to gathering, recording, ascribing and saving that culture, displaying white America and how different black America was. In her article 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', Hurston tries to document the uniqueness of black culture. Like one of the few gatherers of black American folklore which have importance in terms of history, the bulk of Hurston's work on Southern rural communities make available important historical information about the beliefs, ethics and practices of an essential part of the African American population. While Hurston was getting matured, the significance of black culture was being talked about in black intellectual circles and the symbolism of African art was being exposed and called primitivism.

Hurston discusses Originality, Dialect, Negro Folklore and Imitation among many other features of the Negro in her critical work, *In Characteristics of Negro Expression*. She disproves the idea that black expression was imitative and says that all phases of Negro life is highly in the form of drama and everything is represented. We come to know that the Negro's explanation of the English language is in terms of its visual effect and is added in this text to this concern that with the desire to decorate, the Negro has done marvels to the English language. That for Hurston, the difference between originality and imitation is a wrong dissimilarity. Hurston reflects that originality is the modification of ideas, meaning thereby according to her is 're-interpretation':



“...the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use. He has modified the language, mode of food preparation, practice of medicine, and most certainly the religion of his new country”¹(Hurston, Characteristics of negro expression,63)

According to Robert Hemenway, *The Eatonville Anthology* is pure Zora Neale Hurston: part fiction, part folklore, part biography, all told with great economy, an eye for authentic detail, and a perfect ear for dialect.”²(Hemenway,ZoraNeale Hurston, Aliterary Biography,70). *The Eatonville Anthology* reflects all of Hurston’s future concerns and interests, combining a study of African American folklore, the preservation of its history and culture, and a study of social relations and folk characters. Written in 1926, before Hurston’s folklore research trips to the South of the United States, the Anthology was put together from her childhood memories, giving a glimpse of the potential she would have years later as a collector and recorder of folklore.

Hurston’s first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, is a fictional reconstruction of Hurston’s parents’ lives in the black community of Eatonville, Florida. It focuses on a black preacher, incorporating his sermons and prayers and reflecting on the author’s fascination with black folk speech – it is full of folk expressions and folk beliefs and an excessively metaphorical black language. To write the novel, she used her family’s history and the folklore she retained from her childhood and from her research in the South. It is a novel about black experiences that focuses on black life, uses rich black dialect and elevates black preaching to poetry. In her persistent blurring of boundaries between folklore and fiction, between art and life, Zora Neale Hurston anticipates some of the most influential trends in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century culture.

Their Eyes Were Watching God, a masterpiece of vibrant folk culture, was written under internal compulsion in seven weeks, while Hurston was researching the religious practices in Haiti. This novel also takes us to Eatonville, where the muted, deaf, visionless people sit on the porch of Joe Clarke’s store watching life around them. It is a story within a story. Janie Stark tells the story of her childhood, her life and her love to her best friend, Phoeby, and through Phoeby, to the community to which she has just returned.



The black woman, in Hurston's novel, finds her authority as storyteller both by her ability to evoke her past, and by making storytelling itself serve as a connection between bosom friends. Folk language, folkways and folk stories work symbolically in the novel toward the character's integrity and freedom. Those characters whose self-esteem and identity are based on illusion and false values are alienated from the black folk community, and, conversely, those, like Janie herself, who struggle against those self-alienating values toward a deeper sense of community, experience wholeness.

Grounded in the oral tradition of Southern blacks, from the gossip about Janie by the impertinent Eatonville community to the tales about Big John the Conqueror by the great flame-throwers in the Everglades, the plot begins nearly twenty-four years after the events, that Janie will narrate, have taken place. When Janie returns, after nearly two years, in thick overalls to the curious, gossipy community of Eatonville, the stage is set for her to tell her close friend Pheoby, with whom she has been bosom friends for a long time about the events leading to her return.

Zora Neale Hurston wanted to make a quest for the identity of African American race who immigrated to America as plantation labourers and had no identity of their own but Hurston through her ennobling belief in their distinct folklore and an exploration of the self in American society made efforts to validate her cherished claims. The following paragraph from *Their Eyes Were watching God*, "Ah was widdem white childun so much till Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till Ah was round six years old. Wouldn't have found it out then, but a man come long takin pictures and without askin' anybody ... Round a week later de man brought de pictures for Mis' Washburn to see and pay him which she did...So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor.Dat's where Ahwuzs'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, 'where is me? Ah don't see me.'"³, (Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,11) very well points to the fact that Janie encompassed herself to be a part of the larger culture at her early age but she got disillusioned with this very episode of life.

While John's character establishes search for an identity for the black man in America after the Emancipation, Lucy's character encompasses a quest not only for self-identity for



the African-American woman, but also for her roles, and an exploration of her psyche in the post slavery era. Both characters, though oppressed, are capable of some form of distinctiveness to enable them to function from a position of strength, so as to win self-confidence for members of their distinct groups: firstly, it is John standing out for the black people in common in order to renounce the myths of white superiority and the non-existence of an African-American culture; secondly, the character of Lucy refers to the conquest of self-confidence for black women, in particular, in order to reject and surpass the myth of women's inferiority.

As every woman-right conscious or assertive woman develops her own method of protest for liberation, Lucy in *Jonah's Gourd vine* advances her own strategy through conflict with her mother and husband in order to challenge patriarchy and male chauvinism and rise above sexism, violence against women and their oppression, especially in marriage. Even though the novelist limits her plot in *Jonah's Gourd vine* within the traditional institution of marriage, she uses this occasion to expose the anomalies and deteriorating norms which inhibit women's capabilities. She thereby discloses the reality of the African American woman's condition and of womanhood in general. Nevertheless, the novelist uses the assertive female, Lucy to exploit the already indicated alternatives at woman's disposal for survival and self-realization. These alternatives include a daughter's disobedience to her parents' authority to choose a husband for her, and the reproach of a philandering husband. Hurston also personalizes the female psyche as exhibited in Lucy's foresight, intuition and rational contributions towards making her husband John Pearson independent, self-confident and self-employed when they get to the all-black city of Eatonville.

In Hurston's novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountains*, while manhood and male-dominated notions lead the story of the novel, women are placed at the margin and simply exist as inferior to their male counterparts. Women have not much to do and act where males employ their power and influence. Under the Pharaoh's rule females live a life fit for animals. They have no sway over their own body. King Pharaoh possesses all the reproductive rights and can take any female he wants. Even Moses' first wife, and Ethiopian Princess is a war booty to be divided between Moses and Ta-Phar, to whom she later on conceded to. Moses behaves with his first wife as a sheer non-entity, and speculated that he would have loved her



if he had been permitted to win her like lesser men who used to win their wives. But it wasn't worth thinking about too much, and so he didn't ponder over it. Being Egyptians, Ta-Phar and Moses have the right to keep as many wives as they can and also desert them at their own will.

Hurston's feminist text, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been praised by scholars, while *Seraph on the Suwannee* has been regarded as an attack on feminist ideals because of Arvay's feebleness in her marriage. Susan Edwards Meisenhelder in *The Ways of White Folks in Seraph on the Suwannee* primarily presents Hurston's last novel in comparison to Hurston's most popular work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and explains that even though *Seraph on the Suwannee* has been perceived as a sign of Hurston's rising conservatism or inconsistency about race and gender and adds that it really is her extremely exhaustive critique of the leading culture, one that specifies the hollowness of its models of identity and affairs for black women and men. Interestingly, Hurston puts her epic feminist text, *Seraph on the Suwannee*, within the confines of marriage. Marriage, in the traditional sense, has been perpetuated by different cultures and has often been a stinging spot for feminists because the traditional aspect of marriage has normally acted as interference for women. In marriage, women have been seen as the property of their husbands and often downgraded to the role of cook, maid, mother, and sexual provider, causing marriage to be viewed as the simplest ground of inequality. It is a remarkable question as to how one can perform as a feminist when one is tangled in the historically oppressive institution of marriage. Hurston tries to forward an answer to this question in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and later in *Seraph on the Suwannee*.

Seraph on the Suwannee has largely been ignored by Hurston scholars and critics even though it reiterates some of Hurston's characteristic themes like a woman's assertiveness and maternal bond. Janet St. Clair points out that "critics of black literature are disappointed because Hurston abandons her racial heritage and her literary commitment to black folk culture in creating white protagonists"⁴ (Hurston, *Seraph on the Suwannee*, 95) But a parallel can be established between the female protagonists, Janie and Arvay, as "*Seraph on the Suwannee* is, in conclusion, the delicately covert story of a woman who fights victimization, throws off oppression, chooses the burden that she will carry, and takes it up with valour, self-respect and pleasure. Arvay achieves self-assertion only towards the end of the novel,



when by affirming her individual identity, she is finally able to demonstrate her unconditional love for her husband. Jim Meserve’s statement about women brings to mind an affirmation by Jody Starks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Jody says that none has got to think for women and children and chicken and cows.

The parallel between the two works illustrates that, after all, besides all other considerations, the plight of black and white women was similar – both had to struggle to assert their rights and to be regarded as equal to their men boldly emphasizing upon the concept of quest for identity in the American society in general and in American African milieu in particular.

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