



DOMESTIC CHALLENGES AND EMERGENCE OF AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN- A PERSPECTIVE VIEW IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S NOVEL "JONAH GUARD VINE"

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Abstract:

Zora Neale Hurston is a progenitor of the black female voice in the 20th century. All the female characters in her novels portray southern black life through a continuous expression voicing, out a consciousness call for women all over the world as Janie in "Their Eyes were Watching God and Arvay in "Seraph on the Suwanee" as well as Delia in her short story "sweat". Hurston's first novel "Jonah Gourd Vine" reflects the cultural characteristics of joys and sorrows. The novel depicts the consciousness of space and time of the Black Community. A black man in Hurston's novels and stories abuses the black women against nature and met with powerful consuming responses to their transgressions. Hurston's "Jonah Gourd Vine" dramatizes the social and cultural changes influencing the southern rural communities. The protagonist John Pearson epitomizes the upward social mobility of post slavery southern blacks in modernization. Who resists away as a solid foundation of the community, the self and the agency which crumbles in modern age.

Hurston provides an even nuanced view of migration, particularly in "Jonah Gourd Vine", John travels without any reason and his journey constitutes a series of escape from different situations. Hurston explores the self in his physical journey. His self is divided between a saint and sinner. Hurston certainly aimed at replicating the issues that interested Southern rural blacks and although at first glance this might not seem to be vital to the primary story, ultimately her attention to setting and local speech serves to supplement John's morality tale, making it broader and more meaningful when placed in context of the times and locale.

Introduction:

Zora Neale Hurston is a progenitor of the black female voice in the 20th century. All the female characters in her novels portray southern black life through a continuous expression voicing, out a consciousness call for women all over the world as Janie in "Their Eyes were Watching God and Arvay in "Seraph on the Suwanee" as well as Delia in her short story "sweat". In her auto biography written 1942, "Dust Tracks on a Road", Hurston has expressed about her experience of blank masculinity in north. She had also undergone frequent disappointments in her personal relationships by the worst aspects of black men's urban sophistication in the south. The successful black men in her novels are both in north and south are spiritually corrupted. The racism is the legacy of the historical period which has been the continual fog of the south.

Hurston's first novel *Jonah Gourd Vine* frequently presents white figures. Hurston's first novel "Jonah Gourd Vine" reflects the cultural characteristics of joys and sorrows. The novel depicts the consciousness of space and time of the Black Community. The author mentions the concept of novels form in her autobiography, *Dust tracks*,

While I was in the research field in 1929, the idea of *Jonah's Gourd Vine* came to me. I had written a few short stories, but the idea of attempting a book seemed so big, [I hid it away from even myself For one thing, it seemed off- key. What I wanted to tell was a story about a man, and from what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or awoman do such-and-so, regardless of his color. It seemed to me that the human beings I net re-acted pretty much the same to the same stimuli.... But I said to myself that was not what was expected of me, so I was afraid to tell a story the way I wanted, or rather the way the story told itself to me. So I went on that wayfor three years. (713)

The novel *Jonah Gourd Vine* had a great impact on Hurston because of the social criticism towards it. A black man in Hurston's novels and stories abuses the black women against nature and met with powerful consuming responses to their transgressions. The great sin of African American men is the source of their fragmentation and precocious eagerness to embrace the worst aspects of a system inherently inimical to their interests. Hurston herself might have characterized the opposition to the influence of social and economic hegemony on African American in quite in this way. The failure of African American men in Hurston's novel to embrace the cultural valuations indicates their seduction of their culture. As Hemenway describes,

“Instead of transforming her observations about the distinct culture of Black people into the idea of a distinct black political movement or a collective alternative to capitalism, Zora reacted to criticism by retreating from the brink to which her theories had led her. She found a personal litmus test for racial politics that tested for only two things—a pathological stereotype and an individual pride.... If someone did not support her effort to celebrate the folkways of black people, he was assumed to have an insufficient pride in his own culture”. (PP45- 48)

The serious offense by black men against black women is that they are passionately driven to interrogate racism and sexism in America through the development of black female voice. Hurston believes that black men should also participate in the process as well, developing their own voices along with black women. Hurston’s system enters the lives of men and women to restore order which distracts the black male body. Hurston’s women characters are also masculine in appearance, transparent in terms of work, time and place. These differentiate the masculine and the feminine tendencies that are connected through the ritual practice, which establishes the rambling feminine production in the works of Hurston. Similarly, in the socio-cultural space of established by Hurston, women have been kept in the private of social space as they appear in a powerless position in public places. Hence she portrays women in an environment that was dominated by men.

John Pearson as Saint and Sinner:

Hurston’s “Jonah Gourd Vine” dramatizes the social and cultural changes influencing the southern rural communities. The protagonist John Pearson epitomizes the upward social mobility of post slavery southern blacks in modernization. Louis Dupre in his essay “The modern idea of culture” written in 1994 states,

"the emptying of nature and the vanishing of man are directly connected with the death of God" (11).

This can be assertive in its figurative dimensions of Hurston’s Novel “Jonah Gourd Vine” which was written in 1934. The protagonist John Pearson resists away as a solid foundation of the community, the self and the agency which crumbles in modern age. Valerie Boyd writes in this context,

Jonah’s Gourd Vine—a first novel that was, for its time, remarkable in its ambition and achievement.

Even today, the novel holds up, in the words of Pulitzer Prize—winning poet Rita Dove, as —a glorious paean to the power of the word. (255)

In the course of the novel, John encounters traditional African American spirituality which mingles with African religion with his wife Lucy’s orthodox Christianity .It imposes John’s sexuality and subjectivity which empowers to “make him a man”. Luther Adams emphasizes that

“ Even though net migration rates suggest far greater numbers of out-migrants from southern cities, net migration rates also obscure the number of African Americans in-migrants to southern cities and the desire of many Africans Americans to remain within the South” (412).

The author tried to bring out the true experiences of African American hopes and aspirations and their pain, follies and agonies. Hurston also develops themes like mulberry trees as a metaphor used in “Their Eyes were watching God” and “Seraph on the Suwanee” in her later novel. Hurston provides an even nuanced view of migration, particularly in “Jonah Gourd Vine”, John travels without any reason and his journey constitutes a series of escape from different situations. His first attempts to get away from his abusive stepfather and his running from the law after killing a neighbor’s hog. Through these journeys Hurston explores the self in his physical journey. His self is divided between a saint and sinner. The predicament of mulatto is clearly evident in John’s tragic life. As Barbara Christian says

“The tragic mulatto reveals the conflict of values that blacks faced as conquered people” (3)

John at last met with an accident at the end when he is about to mend his ways which brings a change in himself. Josie P. Campbell writes in this regard,

John’s lack of self-understanding reflects his lack of knowledge concerning his origins. Hurston takes a great risk in creating a central character who appears to be so unaware of who he is. But this seems to be one of her main points concerning the character of John Buddy, and perhaps of the African - American male all too frequently. Richard Wright deals with this topic in his novel, Native Son, in the character of Bigger Thomas, who comes to have a glimmer of self-awareness only after committing violently horrendous murder. John Buddy’s awakening to the kind of man he is comes slowly and painfully. (47)

Hurston tries to explore the psychological and emotional trauma that affects the African Americans. Ironically John is hired by his biological father Alf Pearson as coachman. He is never accepted by Ned, his black stepfather and never acknowledged by his white biological father. But both black and white fathers fail to take up the responsibility as his fathers. ‘The harsh social environment of the working class written by Jonah keeps Amy who is John’s mother position is alike Nanny and Janie in “Their Eyes”. The character which is restricted only with household has been conceptualized by Hurston. Diana Miles observed that,

“race can be socially constructed to foster the violence that causes traumatic experiences, the psychic processing of trauma is a human process, not a racial one”.(7)

Jonah Gourd Vine’s central theme of the plot is damnation and salvation. After becoming a successful moderator in the church, he achieves fame and money. But he never realizes the consequences of his

promiscuous and mistakes. He becomes a preacher, but still commits sins. Lucy forgives John as a theme of salvation. John was tasked with the responsibility to change and transform. Wilson writes in his essay,

“When John reaches the far side of the creek and encounters Lucy, a crucial and ultimately tragic bifurcation begins in his understandings of his physical and spiritual selves”. (68)

She is an embodiment of womanist. She forgives despite being constantly betrayed by John. Lucy is not portrayed as an innocent poor woman who is unaware of her husband’s promiscuity. From the beginning, she is aware of John’s philandering activities but marries him with hope that he will mend his ways. But she has failed and much humiliated by him. When Lucy is informed by her brother Bud about John’s affair with other women called Delphine, Lucy replies,

“you can’t pay no tension tuh talk. Dey’s talkin’ everywhere. De folks in talkin’ in Italy, Ah don’t pay dese talkers a mind “(JGV 77)

This rejection of Lucy’s salvation made John to self-destruction. He is a black-man with pride masculinity. This self-destruction takes place when John’s marriages and friendship fall apart, when John loves Lucy as his wife. John’s damnation error is his inability and it is outsource of his insecurity to realize himself. He is a victim who fights for the way to perceive his identity outside of the master -slave, white-black, right skinned-dark skinned. John Lowe states that,

Caught initially between the legacies of slavery and freedom, body and soul, black & white, father and mother, then trying to choose between “nat” ul man and priest, Hedonistic pleasure and familiar responsibility, John’s ambiguities doom him to torment and irresolution (Lowe 101).

John’s pride blinds him to understand the complexity of his identity, because it is excruciatingly visible in his relationship with people. John’s pride also makes John imperfect and therefore capable of salvation. John feels that he must silence Lucy with the male pride. This expands an individual’s self-perception through the process of self-exploration and self-affirmation. Lucy continues to serve as John’s armor against himself and the outside world until her death. Lucy and her form of spirituality stand as a transitional point in the novel’s overarching scheme of encroaching modernity. Lucy claims that her deeds are to make John a man

“Good Lawd, John, dat’s all justice been beggin’ righteous to do –be uh man. Cover de ground you stand on” (JGV 95).

In *Jonah Gourd Vine*, Lucy is the strongest character though of small stature, she has greatest mental strength, confidence and sincerity. She becomes an epitome of goodness. Though novel’s protagonist is John, Hurston’s real interest in the novel is Lucy and not John. From beginning Lucy is bright, intelligent girl as said before,

“She’s almost uh’ fessor now. No body can’t spell her down” (JGV 26).

John is a “wife-made man” (JGV 98) and had to be pushed and shaved and there was no one to do it but Lucy” (JGV 100). Lucy in a way becomes a mother figure for John. She mothers not only his seven children but also provides motherly care and advice to John at every step of his life. This final dialogue between the two symbolically ends the marriage with Lucy maintaining her positive image as assertive woman and John losing his verbal stature as loving husband before Lucy. Her wise voice and deep penetrating eyes had the capacity to search his face and his guilt terminates their relationship as husband and wife. Lucy finally realizes that her sacrifice for John means nothing to him. She poignantly tells John before her death,

“De hidden wedge will come tuh light someday. John mark mah words youse in de majority now, but god sho don’t love ugly (109).

Anthony Wilson writes in this context,

Lucy empowers John in both spheres commenting and safeguarding his identity and masculinity while simultaneously compromising his agency.... Throughout the novel, John is characterized either with praise or sneers as a —wife-made man thus reinforcing the idea that John owes his very identity to Lucy’s intervention. Though John may have been a —yaller god through his own essential merits in his old world, he requires Lucy’s help to become a man in his new one. (71)

John Lowe claims that Lucy

“ becomes a mother figure for (john), gives him detailed instruction on how to handle his ministry and in her loving forgiveness of his sins simultaneously creates a never-ending source of guilty” (87-88).

Lucy seems submissive and vulnerable in their marital relationship. Her deathbed scene presents much more complexity than is usually considered. But John’s proximity continues even after Lucy’s death. He recognizes his mistake through the third marriage with Sally. His death was confirmed also when the Train strikes his car. Hurston certainly aimed at replicating the issues that interested Southern rural blacks and although at first glance this might not seem to be vital to the primary story, ultimately her attention to setting and local speech serves to supplement John’s morality tale, making it broader and more meaningful when placed in context of the times and locale.

Conclusion:

Strong as Lucy is in the first half of the novel; her death feels a bit too contrived, especially when considered in light of John’s latter wives and paramours. Although she appears to be the metaphorical gourd

vine that withers over the head of John's Jonah-like character, the importance of this seems stunted based on developments later in the novel. Hurston certainly aimed at replicating the issues that interested Southern rural blacks and although at first glance this might not seem to be vital to the primary story, ultimately her attention to setting and local speech serves to supplement John's morality tale, making it broader and more meaningful when placed in context of the times and locale.

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