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Depiction of Folklore and Voodoo in Zora Neale Hurston's Novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*

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Abstract - Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1961) devoted much of her career to present African-American folk culture. She presented readers a broad understanding of a highly metaphorical folk vernacular and introduced them to hoodoo, folktales, lying competitions, spirituals, the blues, sermons, children's games, riddles, and playing the dozens. The purpose of this research paper is to depict some aspects of folklore in Jonah's Gourd Vine. Hurston's use of southern folklore lends the novel an accurate depiction of southern culture in Florida in the early 20th century. The reader gains a deeper grasp of the persons, society, and culture through her depictions of folk belief, music, and sayings. Hurston employs four significant forms of folk culture in Jonah's Gourd Vine: folk tale, music, sayings, and belief.

Keywords - Folklore, Culture, Traditional Practices, Anthropologist.

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INTRODUCTION

The American South has long been a repository of many folk traditions, rituals, and beliefs. Folklore, a broad word describing a range of traditional practises, almost found in practically every genre of writing, although it is likely most prevalent in Southern literature. As southern culture evolved from a mix of ethnic groups, particularly African, French, and English, this mix of customs produced a strong folk culture that lasted longer in the South than in the rest of the United States. Hurston was an anthropologist and folklorist who travelled the South collecting oral traditions and data. Scholars say Hurston was one of the first African-American female folklorists. While many southern authors used folk aspects to give credibility to their work, Hurston's books rely heavily on folk custom and rituals. Zora Neale Hurston was among the most successful of the numerous southern novelists who drew inspiration and context from folklife. Zora Neale Hurston, an American anthropologist, folklorist, and writer, is widely regarded as the first Afro-American female writer to reflect possible facets of black life. Through her works she encouraged Afro-Americans to appreciate their folklore and emphasise the pastoral life ideals in order to overcome the traumatic history of enslavement to sustain their fundamental identities.

Hurston's motivations for portraying African folklore were political in nature. She wished to disprove current assertions that African Americans lack a unique culture. Her works show the African American proletariat's or folk's unconscious inventiveness. They symbolise people of the community who took part in a highly expressive communication system that taught them to withstand racial discrimination and, more importantly, to value themselves and their community. Hurston intended to foster racial pride among black people as well as combat racist ideas by demonstrating the depth and positive influence of black folk culture. Hurston needed compelling fictional frameworks for the presentation of folklore in addition to the witnessing narrator's ability to dramatise it. Hurston presented African folk culture for psychological reasons as well. She took the folklore for her novels from the rural, southern black life she experienced as a child and later documented during journeys to gather folklore in the late 1920s and 1930s. Her novels are a collection of initiatives to create such settings. She first preserved the rural southern context for black traditional practices. Eatonville and nearby Florida communities were recreated in her debut book, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Hurston also made sketchy recreations of the life of her parents using John and Lucy Pearson as the main characters.

Based on her study, Hurston also incorporates traditional folk music and folk beliefs into the novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. In the novel, the southern folklore has a significant impact on the

protagonist John Pearson. His oratory skills are the driving force behind both the development of his character and the plot. There is a conversation between John and his first wife Lucy, this conversation is based on proverbs and folklore. She frequently uses speech with a folk tinge as John's voice of reason. John Pearson's success can be ascribed to his oratory and storytelling abilities. Folklore had a significant role in southern culture, particularly among African-Americans. John's proclivity for telling stories was what led to his vocation as a preacher. Hurston claims, "Next to showing muscle-power, John loved to tell stories. Sometimes the men sat around the fire and talked and John loved that" (*Jonah* 61). His talent was acknowledged by other characters as well. A co-worker says, "Leave John tell 'em 'cause he kin act 'em out. He take de part of Brer Rabbit and Brer B'ar and Brer Fox jes' ez natche'l" (*Jonah* 61). John gains his skills for praying, singing, and preaching through his storytelling. Once more, people in the town are aware of him. Deacon Moss responds to John's prayer by saying, "Dat boy got plenty fire in 'im and he got uh good strainin' voice Les' make 'im pray uh lot" (*Jonah* 89). John begins to imitate preachers as a method to improve his skills. John's religiosity is therefore based more on the fame and power it grants him than on a genuine religion. John imitates another preacher in his opening sermon. Hurston's oral folklore collection included music, and this is seen in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Hurston sprinkles folk music throughout the novel, a party scene at Alf Pearson's plantation stands out as a particular example. She describes the music as "furious music of the little drum whose body was still in Africa, but whose soul sung around a fire in Alabama" (*Jonah*30). Although the folk songs Hurston gathered in the 1920s and 1930s had African origins, they were adapted to Southern society. Despite being based on African songs and being performed on African instruments, the songs name places like Tennessee, Florida, and Illinois as well as North American animals like cows, raccoons, and possums. Hurston would have really gathered these songs in towns like the ones described in the novel. While many authors use music or lyrics to enhance their work, Hurston's use of music is essential as she wants to accurately capture Southern culture. Hurston discusses the history of African Americans by using folk music as a medium. The celebration on the plantation is ongoing, "they called for the instrument that they had brought to America in their skins—the drum—and they played upon it. With their hands they played upon the little dance drums of Africa. The drums of kid-skin…and the voice of Kata Kumba, the great drum, lifted itself within them and they heard it…the drum with the man skin" (*Jonah* 29).Sundquist explains Hurston's phrase "drum with the man skin" in his book. The drum is not truly formed of a man's skin in this context; rather, it is a representation of the tribal drums of Africa. The drummers' bodies and souls are so ingrained with the drum's song and rhythm that it has really become a physical part of them. Hurston's nonfiction work *Tell My Horse*, from which Sundquist quotes, "the drums and the movements of the dancers draw so close together that the drums become the people and the people become the drums." Sundquist sees John's exposition of folk music and performance as a stepping stone to his ordination as a minister. Rhythm, audience reaction, and oral exposition are the foundations of both folk song and preaching in the Southern tradition.

Folk sayings and proverbs appear throughout the novel. Hurston let her characters speak in the language she had learned as a researcher in order to give them realistic speech. Hurston's characters are rendered as precisely as feasible using this manner of speaking and her orthographical depiction of an African-American vernacular. The finest illustration of proverbs in the novel is a fight between John and his father. John states, "And you, you ole battle-hammed, slew foot, box-ankled nubbin, you. You ain't nothin' and aint got nothin' but whut God give uh billy-goat, and then round tryin' tuh hell-hack folks…dat's de very corn Ah wants tuh grind" (*Jonah* 47). While most of the characters use Southern vernacular while speaking, Lucy Pearson almost exclusively uses maxims or proverbs from popular culture. Throughout the course of their relationship, Lucy has served as John's voice of reason, offering advice in the form of proverbs. Lucy still cautions John even as she lies dying, "Go 'head on, Mister, but remember—youse born but you ain't dead. 'Tain't nobody so slick but whut they kin stand uh 'nother greasin'. Ah done told yuh time and time uhgin at ignorance is de hawse dat wisdom rides. Don't get miss-put on yo' road. God don't eat okra" (*Jonah* 128). Lucy tells John to change his behaviour in her last conversation using five different folk idioms. While these proverbs are most likely true, they are also overly prevalent in the story. As Harris puts it, Hurston "allows her fascination for the speech to overtake her artistic sense" (Howard 38).

Hurston was a specialist in southern folklore as well, and this is a subject that is very briefly mentioned in the book. Three years before *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, in 1931, she released a book of folklore study titled "*Hoodoo In America*." Even if hoodoo is a sort of magic, all of the characters appear to regard it as true. It's difficult to draw a clear distinction between folk magic and folk medicine. Conjurers or "two-heads," who practise hoodoo, are known for casting spells using natural herbs and roots in a manner akin to that of administering a herbal treatment. Hurston characterised voodoo (and hoodoo) as "the old, old mysticism of the world in African terms, and its symbolism is no better understood than that of any other religion" ("Mules and Men" 137). Hurston also incorporates additional folklore, such as John and Lucy's trust in love knots to strengthen their marriage and their belief in sassafras tea to weaken the blood. Hurston uses these sorts of folk beliefs because they are accurate for society, but she does not depend on them excessively.

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine,* Voodoo is a natural force that signifies women's "strong and devouring responses" against tyranny. Hurston emphasises the

freeing effect of Voodoo practises for the female characters and connects them to the practises. The Voodoo sections in *Mules and Men* and "*Hoodoo in America*" considerably enhance Hurston's portrayal of nature and her treatment of women in the novel. Hurston reveals in these anthropological investigations how the close link between Voodoo's conjuring skills and natures disrupts the hierarchical gender relationship. Animal symbols, such as snake skin, sacrifices, and medicines, are commonly employed in voodoo initiation ceremonies and magic spells. Hurston depicts the destructive yet empowering aspect of female revenge enabled by voodoo while posing as a New Southern Pastoral black woman in heinous circumstances, and how each tactic works for them.

John's second wife, Hattie Tyson, most exemplifies the complex relationship between voodoo and women. Unquestionably, Hurston's account of Hattie employing conjure on John is based on her understanding of Voodoo, which she recently learned from her anthropological study. In "Hoodoo in America," Hattie sees An' Dangie Dewoe, whose name is identical to that of an Obeah practitioner named Aunt Dangie.Dangie then tells Hattie that she must eat some beans while standing above John's gate, and that she will use a black cat bone "so's you kin stroll out de sight of men" (*Jonah* 126). An' Dangie casts a spell after which Lucy gets very sick and dies. After Lucy dies, John marries Hattie, but after a while he starts to lose focus. According to John, “Hattie, whut am Ah doin’ married tuh you?. . Look lak Ah been sleep. Ah ain’t never meant tuh marry yuh. Ain’t got no recollection uh even tryin’ to marry yuh, but here us is married, Hattie, how comedat?” (*Jonah* 142-43). The entire procedure of leaving Lucy and marrying Hattie is now a, “uh hidden mystery” (*Jonah* 144). When John finally understands that Hattie had conjured him, he beats her, but his deterioration had already been sped up by this marriage and the divorce proceedings that followed. Hattie is perhaps the book's least appealing character. Hurston contrasts her disruptive behaviour with the passive and maternal traits of other female characters and links her to the nefarious conjuring power. In contrast to Lucy, Hattie would not tolerate John's change of heart or his aggressive demeanour. In contrast to John's third wife Sally, she never displays a forgiving yet credulous attitude in her relationship with John. Hurston depicts Hattie as a disgruntled female self who is helpless in the face of men's social and physical supremacy but secretly finds empowerment via Voodoo, even if she mostly represents the stereotypically unfavourable opinion of women. Hurston's deep grasp of Voodoo is reflected in Hattie in this way, which is both frightful and inspirational. Unlike Hattie, Lucy is shown as a sensible and caring wife who does all in her power to maintain her husband's social standing but who is terribly duped by him throughout their marriage. Although she is intelligent and John owes her a lot for his success, Lucy comes out in their relationship as weak and obedient. However, the circumstances surrounding her deathbed are far more intricate than is often believed. Notably, Lucy makes an out-of-character effort to respond to John's attacks as she approaches death. She informs him:

“Youse livin’ dirty and Ahmgoin’ tuh tell you ’bout it. Me and mahchillun got some rights. Big talk ain’t changing’ whut you doin’. You can’t clean yo’selfwidyo’ tongue lak uh cat” (*Jonah* 128-29). Also noteworthy is her mysterious instruction for her deathbed. She tells her youngest daughter Isis, who is modeled after Hurston, “when Ahmdyin’ don’t you let ’em take de pillow from under mah head, and be covering up de clock and de lookin’ glass and all sichezdat” (*Jonah* 130).

John is in the process of "leaving behind" his spiritual ties to feminised nature as he adapts to modernity, but the fact that he keeps seeing Voodoo visions of women haunting him suggests that he has a conflicted yearning to recover those ties. According to Barbara Spieceman, John is a "minister who has adopted the doctrines and essential symbols of Voodoo". A spiritualism based on African tradition is still practised and has been blended into Christianity in the Southern black community where John lives and preaches. In *Jonah Gourd Vine,* Hurston wrote men had reached into the scrub and had gone away, anxious in that great indifferent quiet; for a man was nothing, creeping ant-like amid the myrtle bushes under the pines. It was as if they had never existed before they vanished.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, all of the characters in Jonah's Gourd Vine are portrayals of folk traditions and participate as both actors and observers at different times. Hurston described these folk performances, whether song, tale, or practise, as an essential aspect of the culture. Just as Tom and Roxy's performances in Pudd'nhead Wilson serve as marks of identification, folkloric performances in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* serve as markers of culture and community. Folklore is important in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Hurston employs a variety of folk themes in her work to provide depth to individuals, correctly reflect communities and culture, and create realism. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is a highly accurate and important novel for literary or anthropological analysis because of Hurston's folk features. She combated the inevitable distortion of an oral culture by its literary documentation by establishing a narrator who observes, even participates in, the performance of traditional practices.

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