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Interrelationship of Nature and Women: Zora Neale Hurston Jonah Gourd Vine

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Abstract - The most acclaimed Afro American writer of 20th Century Zora Neale Hurston had contributed significantly to voice out the atrocities inflicted on the weaker sex who led a life of absolute invisibility. These black women were helpless and adopted Voodoo as a magical craft to cast a spell on men to turn them to grant their wishes. These females were nothing but a vulnerable victim at the hands of men who were often indulged in all kinds of immoral activities, including extramarital affairs. The paper highlights the immoral activities of John the protagonist who gets trapped to evil fate on account of his own immoral activities.

Keywords - Afro American, Invisibility, Voodoo, immoral , vulnerable victim

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INTRODUCTION

The most profound writer of the 20th century Zora Neale Hurston had a profound influence on the history of American literature. Hurston's most acclaimed novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, has been the subject of most critical examination. Hurston's early work as an anthropologist laid the groundwork for her subsequent interest in folklore. Hurston's tremendous involvement with Harlem Renaissance contributed significantly to all her writing as a folklorist, scientist, and author.

As a member of the American modernist movement, her writings reflected a complex and distinctive style. The most complete and accurate comprehension of the works of Hurston's successful career can be identified by looking at her tri-partite identity. Despite the fact that her writing has not been fully included in the canon of literature, it has started to slowly advance in academic and critical communities. Hurston's entrance into traditional literary study has been mostly delayed because of the eclectic and somewhat disorienting nature of her work. Hurston's career as a trained anthropologist had a number of extreme diversions in her quest to understand and engage with African-American culture and to communicate the same through her writing. Hurston's unconventional and bold character is reflected in her art and works. Her works resist categorization to a particular genre or field Hurston spent years assembling collections of folktales concerning African-Americans living in Southeast America during the early 20th century. She was also an active participant of Harlem Renaissance a way that most of her Modernist contemporaries disapproved. Hurston's career are interconnected and helped to create her enormous, productive, and perplexing collection. Hurston's writing style is generally based on her shared interests in anthropology, folklore, and African American Modernism. The culmination of these enables her to provide a broad and vivid description of African American culture.

Most criticism of Hurston's writing concentrates on her most acclaimed novel Their *Eyes Were Watching God published in the year* 1937. Although this book is a shining example of Hurston's writing and connection to Eatonville, Florida, there is no direct relation to her work as an anthropologist and folklorist.

Moreover, unlike her earlier novels or compilations of folklore, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is not something that uses unification with trends prevalent in contemporary literature, rather, this paper will throw light on the early works of Hurston and her background as an anthropologist, folklorist, and writer. Hurston's education and experience as a scientist will be covered first, serving as a foundation to comprehend her use of modernist literature and the Harlem Renaissance, which led to her contribution which was rich with folklore. Her life was a subject of studies although there hasn't much research that is done with her works. To accurately reflect both, the totality of these experiences must be taken into account. Hurston, and her significant corpus of work in both science and literature.

Hurston first novel Jonah Gourd Vine is a story of her family with John playing the role of her father.Jonah's Gourd Vine by Hurston also

dramatizes the social and cultural shifts affecting rural Southern communities. John Pearson, the protagonist of the book, is a prime example of post-slavery Southerners' upward social mobility.Blacks who embrace modernity. The backdrop of the novel's introduction, which shows sharecroppers like John's family living in rural Alabama, is unmistakably pastoral.From there, he travels through more developed and metropolitan Southern areas to the New Southern Pastoral Notasulga and to Eatonville, the solely African American community in then-developing central Florida, where he eventually finds ordination. The entirety of John's path attests to his capacity to adapt to a modern way of life: extremely mobile and invested in an entrepreneurial attitude, he effectively adapts to each new setting. like John “Dis ain’t no slavery time and Ah got two good footses hung onto me” (8).

Hurston does not often emphasise the detrimental effects of modernization on rural areas the South. Nevertheless, Jonah’s Gourd Vine employs symbolism to offer a subtly critical take on modernity. Hurston makes frequent use of the train as a key image to convey John's movement away from nature and toward technology.

> . . . that great eye beneath the cloud-breathing smoke-stack glared and threatened. The engine’s very sides seemed to expand and contract like a fiery-lunged monster. The engineer leaning out of his window saw the fright in John’s face and blew a sharp blast on his whistle and John started violently in spite of himself.(16)

This sudden appearance of the machine in the garden is a classic example of the pastoral “middle landscape.”It portrays the considerable modernization that was taking place in the South around the turn of the century in dramatic detail. Hurston powerfully demonstrates the modern man's ambivalence regarding technical development and industrialisation through John's conflicted response.

Her use of anthropomorphism is also crucial. John gives the train human (but monstrous) traits in an effort to comprehend or at least become familiar with the strange presence in front of him. The train also symbolizes John’s inner sexual desire which is considered natural and uncontrollable. As Anthony Wilson points out, the train “plays a double role in the novel’s symbology: it signifies both sexuality and phallic power and the encroachment of technological and its attendant threats to community and self”

The connection is made clear in a scene where John mentally changes the mechanical sound of the train into the rhythmic repetition of the words, "Wolf coming! Wolf coming! wolf approaching Opelika is nasty and black, "Opelika is unclean and black!"

The huge force of the train is here compared to the rapacious beast ("Wolf approaching!"), and the frequent shouting of the place name Opelika foreshadows John's future sexual prowess because Opelika is the location of a woman with whom he would have an adulterous affair.

When John works at a Florida railroad camp, the train's sexual imagery reappears.

John loses himself in the rhythm of the music as camp workers chant about their girlfriends while spiking on rails: He loves spiking.

He enjoyed striking the spike home with a single blow while swinging the large snub-nosed hammer above his head.

> “Oh Lulu!” “Hanh!” A spike gone home under John’s sledge. “Oh, oh, gal!” “Hanh!” “Want to see you!” “Hanh!” “So bad!” “Hanh!” (106)

Once again, it suggests that there is a close relationship between the nurturing of nature and the penetration of the female body through the mechanical movement of striking spikes with a hammer.Hurston emphasises the connection between modernity and masculinity with these images. More particularly, she examines the issue of modernism in the South and how it impacts the lives of Southern Blacks by illustrating John's profoundly dysfunctional masculinity. John is a timeless illustration of a contemporary man who is torn between nature and civilization and who is seeking a harmonious middle ground. He repeatedly engages in illegal relationships with numerous women, ruining his partnership.With each town he joins and puts his relationship with his wife Lucy in danger.

His terrible death in a train-automobile collision at the books conclusion which takes place right after he engages in yet another extramarital affair, is a powerful allegory for his fruitless attempts to master nature.

Nathan Grant observes “Black men in Hurston’snovels and stories, when guilty of abuses against black women—which is to sayas well that they are also guilty of abuses against nature—are met withpowerful and consuming responses to their transgressions” (117).

Nature and Gender

In Jonah’s Gourd Vine, Voodoo represents the force of nature that is women’s “powerful and consuming responses” against oppression. Hurston stresses the Voodoo practises' liberating nature for the female characters and links them to the practises.

One of the fundamental ideas of Hurston studies has been voodoo itself.

Hurston's depiction of Haitian Vodou in Tell My Horse (1938) and its impact on her book Their Eyes

Were Watching God have been extensively analysed in a number of studies (1937).

One of the prominent academics in this field, Rachel Stein, talks on how Vodou offer "an alternative spiritual model that reframes the binary hierarchies acting within the denigration of black women as nature incarnate"

While these elements may be found in both Jonah's Gourd Vine and Mules and Men, as well as its earlier and more academically focused form "Hoodoo in America," few works specifically address the novel's gender dilemma in relation to Hurston's investigation of Voodoo in the American South (1931).

Hurston's depiction of nature and her characterisation of women in the book benefit greatly from the Voodoo portion in Mules and Men and "Hoodoo in America."

Hurston demonstrates in these anthropological studies how the hierarchical gender relationship is upset by the strong connection between Voodoo's conjuring techniquesand natures. Animal symbols, such as snake skin, sacrifices, and herbs, are frequently used in voodoo initiation rites and magic deeds. Rattlesnake and how it always accompanied her until she passed away (183-85).

The snake skin is adopted by Luke Turner, who claims to be Laveau's nephew, and he wears it while performing the rites (185). As opposed to the context of Christianity, Voodoo does not associate nature, particularly snakes, with women. It rather represents the strength that Voodoo practitioners gain from their interactions with nature. At rituals and conjure sessions, the "two-headed doctors" of voodoo also sacrifice a variety of animals, including chickens, lambs, and black cats. Additionally, they use herbs, roots, and organic cooking items to create folk remedies and enchantment potions.

The idea of Voodoo as a mode of transformation lays behind such a strong reliance on nature; it uses nature and converts it into spiritual (and occasionally destructive) force. Voodoo practises alter the natural order, whether they are used to bring back a lover or bring about a fatality. There are no formal gender norms or hierarchy among voodoo practitioners and worshipers. Laveau is one of four female Voodoo practitioners introduced in "Hoodoo in America," which demonstrates that both sexes are capable of becoming "twoheaded physicians" without any discernible hierarchy.

The practitioners frequently consult with women as well. Mules and Men is an episode where Zora practises voodoo under Father Joe Watson's supervision. This scene demonstrates how voodoo helps the condition of women. The woman explains to Zora how a man shot her husband but is likely to walk free without facing any consequences: "But, honey, they say ain't a thing going to be done with him.

They claim that he has the support of good white people and that if the matter is resolved, he will be released. I desire his punishment causing a scene with my husband in order to have the opportunity to shoot him.We require aid. Someone who has the ability to hit a straight shot with a crooked stick

The woman's story particularly demonstrates how black women are at the bottom of the social power hierarchy in the South where whites govern blacks and black men continue the unequal power relationships over women within the black community while black women's voices are silenced.

Hurston would so eloquently describe this state of black women today as "the mule of the world" in Their Eyes Were Watching God. These marginalised women, who are adversely associated with nature, are in dire need of revenge.

When a Voodoo practitioner, in this case the narrator Zora, exploits that very nature on their behalf, that is when and “hit[s] a straight lick with a crooked stick.”

Hurston depicts the destructive yet empowering component of female vengeance made possible by Voodoo under the guise of New Southern Pastoral black women in horrible situations and how each technique works for them.

The delicate relationship between women and voodoo is most prominently shown by John's second wife, Hattie Tyson. Hurston's description of Hattie using conjure on John is unquestionably based on her knowledge of Voodoo acquired via her recent anthropological research.

Hattie visits An' Dangie Dewoe in "Hoodoo in America," whose name is eerily similar to that of an Obeah (the Bahamian variant of Voodoo) practitioner named Aunt Dangie Deveaux / Andangie (Jonah's Gourd Vina 125; "Hoodoo" 321, 404-05).

Dangie then instructs Hattie to eat some beans while standing above John's gate, adding that she will use a black cat bone "so's you kin stroll out de sight of men" (126).

A similar scene may be found in Mules and Men, where Zora participates in a sacrifice rite in order to obtain a bone for secret conjuring:

“Sometimes you have to be able to walk invisible. Some things must be done in deep secret, so you have to walk out of the sight of man” (207).

Following An' Dangie's conjuring, Lucy becomes gravely ill and passes away.

After Lucy passes away, John marries Hattie, but after a while he loses track of his motivation.

John tells her, “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?” (142-43).

The whole process of turning away from Lucy and marrying Hattie is now “uh hidden mystery” (144)

John is said to have been unknowingly under the spell of An' Dangie's conjuring, according to the evidence.However, John gets aggressive when he learns something is wrong, which prompts Hattie to inform Harris, one of the church officers, of the problem.Harris advises her to use the conjure power and saying “Some folks kin hit uh straight lick wid uh crooked stick. They’ssich uh thing ez two-headed men” (147), which echoes the accusation of the woman in Mules and Men mentioned earlier (205).

When John eventually realises that Hattie had conjured him, he beats her, but his decline had already been precipitated by this marriage and the accompanying divorce proceedings.Perhaps the least likeable character in the book is Hattie.

Hurston contrasts her disruptive attitude with the passivity and maternal characteristics of other female characters while also connecting her to the destructive power of conjuring.Genevieve West is right to point out that t “her stubborn refusal ofcultural definition of appropriate or respectable womanhood is unique in thenovel. . . . While readers may not respect the choices she makes, herpersistence in making choices for herself, not for her husband, sets her apartfrom other women in the novel” (508).

Hattie, in contrast to Lucy, would not put up with John's reversal of heart or his violent demeanour. She also never exhibits a forgiving yet credulous mentality in her connection with John, unlike John's third wife Sally. Although Hattie mostly embodies the stereotypically unfavourable perception of women, Hurston also portrays her as a resentful female self who is powerless in the face of men's social and physical dominance but secretly finds empowerment via Voodoo. In this way, Hattie reflects Hurston's nuanced understanding of Voodoo, which is both terrifying and inspiring.

Unlike Hattie, Lucy is depicted as a wise and loving wife who supports her husband's social status in every way possible, but who is grievously deceived by him throughout their marriage. Despite her intelligence and the fact that John owes her a lot for his success, Lucy comes out as weak and submissive in their marriage. But the situation on her deathbed is far more complicated than is typically thought.Notably, as she draws closer to passing away, Lucy makes an uncharacteristic effort to retaliate against John's abuse.

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” (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” (130).

Isis tries to follow her mother's instructions, but John and the bystanders gathered by the dying woman's bedside immediately stop her by taking away the pillow and concealing the mirror. Although Hurston added a glossary to the book, it states that "the cushion is withdrawn from beneath the head of the dying because it is said that if it is left in place, it will prolong the death battle." The reason Lucy asked Isis to take care of these things is never made apparent. The belief is that the departing spirit will halt to look in mirrors and frequently all glass surfaces, and if it does, they will become permanently clouded. Hurston writes elsewhere that even among people who have given up hoodoo, "the ability of the dead to help or damage is prevalent tenet among the Negroes of North American continent" ("Hoodoo" 319). She continues by outlining the typical practises performed at the deathbed: "The spirit recently expelled from the body is prone to be destructive. "In the death chamber, a clock's face is covered with a Jonah's Gourd vine and a South Moon under as New Southern Pastoral. In Mules and Men; "Hoodoo"

Lucy, a devoted Christian, is scornful of the fanciful notion. She might have been trying to utilise that notion to delay her own torturous death and leave a permanent reminder of her passing to the living by insisting on maintaining the pillow and the mirror in their original locations. She is aware that John doesn't want revenge, it might be her plan to exact it on him. Even though he believed "the dead serpent was behind him," the unsettling memory of Lucy and the snake—which now represents both biblical evil and the deadly force of Voodoo—continually returns to his consciousness after Lucy's passing.

He is ultimately murdered by a train, a representation of modernity that also horrifyingly resembles a snake.Meisenhelder contends regarding Lucy's enigmatic wishes made on her deathbed that Hurston is able to "smuggle a female act of retribution into her work under the cover of what might have been merely quaint superstition" by giving a "limited explanation" for the requests .Hurston does in fact incorporate a story of female revenge into the folk belief that appears to be superstitious and is based on Voodoo. Additionally, by selecting Isis, her fictional alter ego, to fulfil Lucy's

last wish, she highlights the link between the two women, who are not only a mother and a daughter but also the mutually trusted partners in this act of retribution.

In order to criticise the masculine urge for modernisation, which dismisses the sort of spiritualism distinguished by the conflating of women, nature, and the power of the dead, Hurston covertly encloses the story of the feminine relationshipforged in the setting of Voodoo.

In the course of modernization, John is in the process of "leaving behind" his spiritual connection to feminised nature, but the fact that images of women from Voodoo continue to haunt him indicates that he has an ambivalent desire to reclaim his connection to the natural. According to Barbara Spieceman, John is "a minister who has accepted the beliefs and fundamental symbols of Voodoo".

John lives and preaches in a Southern black community where spiritualism based on African tradition is still practised and has been incorporated into Christianity, despite his apparent disdain for Voodoo on a conscious level. A crucial component of the religious systems of the Caribbean and Southern blacks who were converted to Christianity during enslavement is the critical rereading of the Old Testament, which Hurston would further address in Moses, Man of the Mountain (1939).

John exemplifies this blending of cultures as a minister who, unknowingly, becomes entangled in the Voodoo realm. In the end, John's conflict between Voodoo and christianity focuses around the nature vs culture opposition, which serves as the backdrop for the entire book. Hemenway claims that Hurston virtually verbatim copied the Reverend C.C. Lovelace of Eau Gallie, Florida, in his farewell sermon, delivered on May 3, 1929. This is a prime example (Hemenway 197). John inserts the image of the train, a machine in the garden that, as I previously mentioned, epitomises the pastoral middle ground, into the traditional Christian framework in the sermon's last section.

I heard de whistle of de damnation train Dat pulled out from Garden of Eden loaded wid cargo goin' to hell Ran at break-neck speed all de way thru de law All de way thru de prophetic age All de way thru de reign of kings and judges—(88)

Hemenway points out that the imageries used in this passage "were familiar to most black congregation in the South, and many of them can still be heard in black churches. The train motif is well known".

However, Hurston has incorporated nature/culture symbolism into these well-known images as well. The "damnation train's" dominant image unmistakably alludes to modernization's incursion, but it also invokes the snake's shape, which in the context of voodoo denotes the might of nature. The dual-.imaged train thus depicts the plight of modern men who have gradually lost touch with their deeply rooted roots in nature while still being gripped by its unstoppable strength

John, who considers himself to be quite modern, urges his listeners to get off the train and consider whether it is possible to achieve a balance between nature and culture.Hurston brilliantly captures the mindset of modern Southern blacks by highlighting on John's struggle.

Hurston examine the link between people and nature with a focus on how gender affects that relationship. However, it should be recognised that Hurston have very different perspectives of nature. Hurston considers how to meld the Southern black community's history with modern life by portraying John as the personification of such cultural fusion rather than necessarily describing modernization as destructive to them. Hurston considers whether there might be a harmonious middle ground between nature and civilisation, whereas Hurston contemporaries were more interested in wilderness. When illustrating the beauty of the scrub, they sometimes totally erase human presence in order to highlight the marks of modernization as unwelcome interventions against nature.

Hurston has written in Jonah Gourd Vine, "Men had reached into the scrub and had gone away, uneasy in that vast indifferent peace; for a man was nothing, crawling ant-like among the myrtle bushes under the pines. Now they were gone, it was as though they had never been".

Hurston, who was raised in Eatonville at the turn of the century, was familiar with nature, but as a Harlem Renaissance author, she frequently noticed how blackness was closely associated with nature in the current literary discourse. The majority of the Harlem Renaissance authors made use of this association for their own literary goals.

One excellent example is the imagistic usage of the nature-woman relationship in Jean Toomer's Cane (1923).

Hurston, a black female author, was mindful of the risk that such an association may be exploited against women, making it necessary for her to transform that connotation from something demeaning to something powerful in a way that would be believable to her diverse readership. Meisenhelder contends that Hurston's pastoral settings may be used to conceal the "models of black manhood and of female resistance to male tyranny" from black readers by using quaint imagery and language that is more popular with white readers (36). Ironically, though, contemporary reviewers of her writing, particularly male Black writers like Richard Wright and Sterling Brown, frequently failed to comprehend Hurston's intentions

and berated the narratives' locations and vocabulary for looking overly archaic.

In order to adequately explore how Hurston, as a Southern female black writer, developed interventionist narratives through her re-visioning of pastoral tradition, it is crucial to read her work again from a pastoral setting.

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