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Emancipation and Selfhood in Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*

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Abstract

Black Feminism has fully developed to provide Black women their own experience with regards to Black Women's literature. Black women and men have started to unearth the long ignored ideal for which Zora Neale Hurston is a valid example. The feminist movement has provided a wider horizon for women to turn their thoughts into words. Women have begun to translate their experiences of being suppressed into such literary forms as drama, fiction, and expository prose. From the end of the nineteenth century to the early years of the twentieth century, most women writers have felt that they are in a period of transition. Many of them have been empowered to write about what they are against and to emphasize their request for equality and equal justice for both men and women in the society. The present paper deals with the emancipation and selfhood of Black women in Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*.

Keywords

Black Feminism, Zora Neale Hurston; *Seraph on the Suwanee;* Emancipation; Selfhood.

Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* draws on an awareness of how the traditional coupling of women and nature has been used to create and maintain their secondary social position, of being a mother. Rachel Stein argues that Hurston's work reveals an understanding "that the American foundation of nation out of nature was actually a procreative paradigm in which all that is identified with the natural subsidiary... it was the conquest of the natural continent that was to be fundamental ground of American identity" (Stein 6). Hurston uses the white woman's role of wife and mother, a role that constitutes an essential element of the traditional foundation upon which Anglo-Saxon culture rests, as a means by which to study what she increasingly came to understand as the "pathos" of that culture. Hurston's works reveals a similar idea: those dominant forms of social oppression represent a "legacy of conquest, reinforced through the continuing negative identification of certain groups of people with nature" (Stein 17).

In *Seraph on the Suwanee,* Jim emerges as the prototypical agent of conquest, narcissistically positioning himself as somehow apart from nature and that which has been culturally identified with the natural environment. In *Seraph on the Suwanee,* Hurston places the black characters in the background as a part of the nature-identified support system needed to further the male-dominated agenda of white society. To understand how whiteness came to be a social norm in America, it is necessary to look at what Malcomson refers to as the "Psychologically covert fashion" in which that occurred (Malcomson 280). Beginning in the seventeenth century, the idea of race, as indicated by a skin color, was used increasingly by whites to indicate someone different from themselves. Seeing themselves as a norm, they saw no need to give themselves a specific label. When social distinctions required a label, whites described

themselves in positive terms, those associated with nationality or religion.

As the black population increased, with blackness becoming synonymous with slavery, blacks were increasingly described in negative terms by non-blacks. Eventually, the negative description of blackness created the social necessity for a positive antonym: whiteness. Whiteness, then, was born from a negative reaction to others and not a positive sense of self-identification: whites were not so much white as they were non-black (Malcomson 281-82).

Hurston's experience of growing up in the self-governing black town of Eatonville, Florida, set her apart from most of her Harlem Renaissance colleagues whose childhoods has included "an indoctrination in inferiority" as they came of age in a culture dominated by white people who routinely passed judgment on non-whites (Boyd 144). As Barnard, where she was the first African American woman to earn a degree in Anthropology, and later as a writer navigating through the world of white publishers, she was often positioned as an outsider-within. Even so, the racial self-confidence engendered in her childhood led her to question what she knew was the myth of white superiority. Free of the internalized self-doubt that many blacks seemed to have. Hurston often threw caution to the winds with her frank comments about the notion of white specialness. In observations that were edited out of her autography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she wrote, "I just think it would be a good thing for the Anglo-Saxon to get the idea out of his head that everybody else owes him something just for being blond," a view she felt was held by two-thirds of the white population (DT 261-62).

Her close observations of white people in action, like those of the domestic workers mentioned by Collins and Hooks, together with her personal experiences of racial discrimination, led her to ponder the nature of what she referred to as the "false foundation" of Anglo- culture (Jim Crow 164). In *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston becomes the consummate "people watcher", as she seeks to understand that false foundation. Her novel describes a society where the exploitation of maternal energies in service to patriarchal economic and social

goals results in the corruption not only of the personal agency and meaning of women as mothers, but of nature as well. Her female protagonist, Arvay Henson, is the focal point for her feminist diagnosis of white culture, a culture dominated by a psychological mindset based on domination and exclusion where the conditions that confer privilege and power are very narrowly defined. Hurston not only continues the tradition of black women writers who used their writing talents to challenge the social status, but also emerges as a prescient foremother in terms of feminist sociopolitical analysis. Her subversive novel invokes a potent statement about racial inequality by focusing on the psychological dynamics of a white couple - a clear departure from African American male writers in the 1940s who tended not to make gender distinctions when writing about race.

The sense of something going on below the "white" surface has encouraged the use of psychoanalysis as a means to investigate Hurston's text. Both John Lowe and Claudia Tate use their knowledge of psychoanalytical theories to investigate and explain the text, although each has a different aim. Lowe focuses on Hurston's use of humor and the way it structures and (in Lowe's view) explains the psychological disharmony that exists between Arvay and Jim. Lowe believes that Arvay's inability to understand and appreciate "Jim's joking, cross-racial fellowship" is at the heart of their difficult relationship (Lowe 260). What Lowe seems to ignore is that a great deal of Jim's humor, presented often as affectionate teasing, is frequently revealed to be mean-spirited bullying, not only when it is aimed at Arvay, but also at others who do not possess his degree of social capital.

Arvay Henson, is not appreciated child in their house. She was disappointed because the man she thought loved, married her sister. She decided to lead a religious life. When Jim Meserve came to Sawley, he was more impressive in social works which set him apart from the citizens of Sawley, "who had always been of the poor whites who had scratched out some kind of an existence in the scrub oaks and pines, far removed from the ease of the big estates" (SS 7). Jim plans to impress Arvay by picking up an eight-foot diamond

back rattle snake. This clearly illustrate the arrogant nature of a world view that is based on male physical prowess and a sense of entitlement that validates dominion over "lesser" creatures. The irrationality of his stunt is apparent to Arvay: "…this was nothing to be fooling with. Supposing that thing got aloose" (SS 254).

St. Clair points out, "There is little reason to trust the narrative voice than insistently reiterates Arvay's responsibility for Jim's dissatisfaction: the apparent complicity serves only to reveal the insidious duplicity of the situation" (45). Jim's story represents the privileged, patriarchal status while Arvay's struggle represents an attempt to resist oppression and destruction of self. The male/female dichotomy running through her novel suggests that Hurston had found a way to use her feminist consciousness to elaborate on the flawed nature of white, patriarchal society. Betty Friedan in her book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), a study of how an imposed ideology of dependent femininity "became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture" (18) during the fifteen years after World War II, the period during which Hurston was writing *Seraph on the Suwanee*. As Friedan points out, men have no problem with the feminine mystique: "It promised them mothers for the rest of their lives, both as a reason for their being and as an excuse for their failures" (204). While not referring to it as such, Hurston's work reveals an awareness of the feminine mystique, an existing framework of beliefs that makes possible a patriarchal society where a particular group of men have license to dominate those who they understand as different from and inferior to themselves. What made the feminine mystique possible was the socially embedded idea that what women needed in order to acquire and maintain a degree of mental health different from what men required.

Hurston's intention in this novel remarks Arvay's urge for self and motherhood. At the beginning of the novel Arvay's thinks to devote her life to religion that has not been taken seriously by many of the young men in Sawley who continue to pursue her despite of "fits and spasms" like the ones her mother

had in her youth: “No one thought too much about the seizures. Fits were things that happened to some young girls, but they grew out of them sooner or later. It was usually taken as a sign of a girl being” high-strung” Marriage would straighten her out” (SS 6). These acts usually occurs when a young man insisted on seeing Arvay home after church: “After the long walk in almost complete silence on Arvay's part, the venture invariably ended in an hysterical display as soon as the young man got inside the Henson parlor” (SS 6). Although Arvay's hysteria works to discourage her unwanted suitors, it would be wrong to see her actions as some form of female power. The “female anti language of hysteria” (Showalter Female 157) or the feminist idea of madness as a “metaphor of resistance” (Carminero - Santangelo 9) describe a problem, not a solution. As Shoshanna Feldman points out, “... madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation. Far from being a form of contestation, ‘mental illness' is a request for help, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of the political castration” (Shoshanna 21-22). Thus, a circular process takes place a social ethos of oppression requires survival tactics on the part of the oppressed that are defined by those in power as dysfunctional. This has the effect of confirming the rationales for oppression in the first place. What might help to break the cycle is a shift in focus from individual behavior to social context that included” class exploitation, racial stratification and patriarchy” (Lerman 148). Jim is not so easily put off, however, and “cures” Arvay's fits by putting a drop of turpentine in her eye: “Then a hurricane struck the over-crowded parlor. Arvay gave a yell from the very bottom of her lungs and catapulted her body from the sofa” (SS 32). While Arvay rushes off to wash out her eye, “Jim and Brock Henson stood face to face and looked each dead in the eye for a moment. We'll give what aid we can in washing out her pretty eye”. With a dry grin smothering in his face, Jim led the way to the back porch” (SS 32-33). As Arvay washes her eye with water, her father comments,” Jim, you sure done worked a miracle ,” to which Jim responds, “ A women knows who her master is all right, and she answers to

his commands" (SS 33).

Though Arvay has agreed to marry him, Jim detects "a hold-back to her love" (SS 45) that bothers him. Joe Kelsey, destined to become Jim's pet, gives him" one shine of hope" by advising that " Most women folks will love you plenty if you take and see to it that they do. Make 'em knuckle under. From the very first jump, get the bridle in thy mouth and ride 'em hard and stop 'em short. They'd all alike, Boss. Take 'em and break 'em". Later that night, Jim goes to bed "thinking hard" (SS 45-46). The subsequent rape that takes place under the mulberry tree and the precipitous wedding that follows set the stage for a relationship based on the submission of rape.

Six weeks after the graphically described encounter under the mulberry tree, Arvay discovers that she is pregnant. Although Hurston does not specially link the rape with the pregnancy, subsequent events suggest that she wants the readers to assume such a connection. Significantly, it is Dessie, the black maid, who informs Arvay of the coming event.

Arvay is psychologically affected that because of the rape she has a deformed child. This feel continuously stirs her mentally almost resulting a guilty thought within herself. Jim's dream of having his "new young 'un....born on his daddy's place", instead of on "borrowed land" (SS 78) comes true two years later when he buys five acres of land and makes plans to build a house. When Arvay was two months pregnant, recoils at the proximity of their land to a swamp, describing it as "dark and haunted-looking and too big and strong to overcome," as well as a potential threat to Earl who might wander in those directions, Jim laughs "harshly": "That scary thing ain't apt to stray nowhere at all. If that's all you got to worry about, you can put your mind at rest. He's scared to death of even a baby chicken and then he ain't all that active" (SS 80). Jim's comments not only serve to dehumanize Earl but also underscore the reality of his emotional distancing from the son who was born in Sawley, Arvay's hometown. In addition, they affirm that any children born in the future will be more closly tied to him. Neither Arvay nor Jim can know that the son who was born on

"borrowed land" is also living on borrowed time. Arvay's perception that the swamp represents a danger to Earl seems prescient in view of subsequent events.

When their second child is born, Arvay "found out what Jim was like a father." Coming into the room with his baby in his arms, after my mother, too" (SS 85). In contrast to his lack of involvement with Earl, "he never played with him at all" (SS 76). Jim "was hanging over the baby's crib practically all the time that he was in the house. He had to look at the child and touch it before he could leave for work in the morning. He came bolting in from work and made for wherever the baby was". (SS 85-86). When Arvay becomes pregnant for a third time, "Dessie caught on to the signs right away, and Arvay saw them confirmed in her body" (SS 96). When that child is born, Jim "promptly" names the baby boy James Kenneth Meseve who will be known as Kenny [SS 106]. Over the years, it becomes apparent that Earl not only has physical flaws but the psychological abnormalities as well. From the beginning of his life, "Any sudden movement, any strange object introduced into his presence brought screams of terror" (SS 70). An ongoing argument arises between Jim, who believes Earl should be "put away" (SS 124) and Arvay who insists there is "nothing much wrong with Earl" (SS 125).

Left in the dark about Jim's intentions, Arvay concludes that her marginalized position is due to the class differences she imagines between herself and Jim: "The very air of the home was charged with opposition… He had never taken her for his equal. He was the same James Kenneth Meserve of the great plantations, and looked down on her as the backwoods Cracker, the piney-woods rotter…" (SS 130). Coming to the conclusion that "she could not hold up her end against what she had to contend with. The great river plantations too powerful for the piney woods," she plans a trip back to Sawley to be with "her own kind" (SS 131).

Intending to start a new life without Jim, Arvay is started by the "poor and shabby and mean" appearance of her hometown in comparison to "the bright nourishing look of Citra belle" (SS 132). Where Arvay lives with Jim. She briefly

considers a career giving music lessons or sewing. But upon reflection, both options are seen as impractical. What finally sends her back to Jim, however, is awareness couched in terms of slavery, that she is powerless to separate from her husband: "God, please have mercy on her poor soul, but she was a slave to that man! How? Why? Those were answers that were hidden away from her poor knowledge. All that she knew was that it was so" (SS 134). Arvay's lack of self - awareness mirrors the emotional state of the women studied by Freidan; "Even women themselves, who felt the misery, the helplessness of their lack of self, did not understand the feeling: it became the problem that has no name" (Freidan 203). And like those women, Arvay chooses to return to Citra belle "to live by sex alone, trading in her individuality for security" (Freidan 204).

Jim's habit of making decisions and taking action without consulting Arvay reaches a zenith of emotional cruelty when he facilitates the runaway wedding of their underage daughter without telling to Arvay. When he eventually admits. "I was there", Arvay's reaction to being excluded from such an important family event is to retreat "within herself to her temple of refuge", where she ponders the isolation she feels in her own family: "She had married a Meserve and borned Meserves, but she was not one of them" (SS 199). The marital crisis is resolved when "Jim came and carried here back across that hall by main force" (SS 200).

Arvay's feelings of inferior and guilt, tempered by a passionate nature that seeks expression, constantly conflict with and are exacerbated by Jim's narcissistic demands. Lowe claims that Hurston might be using her knowledge of psychoanalytic theory, in particular Freud's essay *Mourning and Melancholia,* to develop the psychology of Arvay (Freud 271). Her portrayal of Jim suggests she may also have been familiar with *On Narcissism: An Introduction,* Freud's only paper devoted exclusively to that subject. Indeed, Jim's behavior seems to exhibit characteristics of a Narcissistic Personality Disorder as set forth by the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM): The essential feature of Narcissistic Personality Disorder is a pervasive

pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy that begins by early adulthood and is present in a variety of contexts" (DSM 714).

Christophe Lash, in his book *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), claims that "every society reproduces - its norms, its assumptions, its modes of organizing experience – in the individual, in the form of personality" (Lash 34), a personality that is "suited to the requirement of that culture" (Lash 238). Hurston's focus on the narcissistic personality of her male protagonist and the support he seems to enjoy from the society he prospers in anticipates by thirty five years, though in a more indirect, fictional form, many of the same observations made by Lash. Further, by placing the events of her novel "in the first decade of the new century" (SS 1) like Lash, who claims the violence against Indians and nature that characterized the nineteenth-century conquest of the West "originated… in the white Anglo-Saxon superego" (Lash 10), she recognizes that American culture has a history that is marked by narcissism.

In the end Arvay transformation enables her to submit to the cultural definition of appropriate womanhood, a definition that confines her to the role of dependent wife and mother, the angel of the house, an image that echoes a comment made earlier in the book by Jim: "Look, Little -Bits, I think as much of you as God does of Gabriel, and of you know that's His pet angel" (SS 113). Thus, Jim and Arvay constitute and are constituted by the social values embedded in the social construction of whiteness which is driven by the narcissistic demands of an irrational patriarchal system. Hurston's diagnostic approach posits Arvay, the wife and mother, as a symptom of what is wrong with Anglo-Saxon culture. She may be complicit but does not possess enough power to be the root cause. As O'Reilly points out, in a patriarchal society" (M)others do not make the rules… they simply enforce them" (O'Reilly 44). Jim is the means through which Arvay can understand herself as worthwhile. Because he is so highly valued by society, as his wife, shares in and benefits from his privileged social position. Hurston's diagnosis centers on a close analysis of the stormy relationship that exists between Arvay and Jim. Jim who is seemingly privileged hero of the novel, is

revealed to be emotionally immature, often acting like an impetuous self-centered little boy who has never completely grown up - in short, he bears more than a passing resemblance to Freud and Smith's depiction of the narcissist as His Majesty, the babe.

Thus Hurston centres on a close analysis of the stormy relationship that exist between Arvay and Jim. Arvay's task is to figure out the way to survive in an aristocratic society that is dominated by white men who presume superiority but who cannot survive without the maternal resources they habitually exploit. Arvay was more dependent on Jim but still when she came to her mother's house she competed with her sister and completed her mother's funeral alone with nobody' help. There was an urge for herself and she successfully overcomes her loneliness.

Like the mythical phoenix, which rises from its own ashes, she emerges a new as a confident woman from her oppression. She grows as a self-sufficient individual in her own right. Living in the midst of oppression requires a unique strength, Arvay possesses that strength. Arvay is a self-made woman. She is not simply a brutalized beast of burden who silently endures her slavish existence. Constant oppression transforms her into a resilient woman who would not succumb to oppression. She combats domestic violence mastering her innate strength and all available resources within her to safeguard herself from unabated violence.

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