

## THE FICTION OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON: AN ASSERTION OF BLACK WOMANHOOD\*

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Contrary to what official historical records show, recent studies convincingly prove that women have been writing for centuries, in a variety of literary modes and genres. However, an historical examination of the role of woman as writer reveals that she has suffered from the persistent cultural ideal of woman's silence, an invisibility which has rendered her works marginal to what the guardians of the great tradition call 'the serious enterprise of art.' Denied legitimacy for so long by a traditional canon which has prescribed standards of literary excellence on the basis of pre-existing social bias, women writers are just beginning to be reviewed in major literary publications, included in literary histories and university curricula as a result of the efforts geared to the body of studies in literature which has emerged as an important part of the post-60's upsurge of work in woman's studies, especially in the United States. Certain ideas, perpetuated in the theory and practice of literature, (such as the domain of the male creator through whose agency and power man acquired the Word, becoming the **sacer vates**, or the exclusively male transcendental images of creativity as opposed to earth-bound images of female nature),

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which have invested all significance in the experience, ideas and discourse of men, are now being called to question. Retrieving woman's texts and the literary expression of the female experience is a sign of basic changes in the consciousness of western art and society and a task in which we all should join as professionals concerned with the relationship between women and literature.

The fate of Zora Neale Hurston, a southern black woman writer who emerged in the limelight of black artistic circles in the mid 20's, when the Harlem Renaissance was in full swing as the turning-point in the development of Afro-American culture, is an example of what happened to many women writers. For more than three decades she remained practically unknown, not only to scholars but to the reading public in general. In addition, her reputation among black intellectuals was damaged because of the inadequate and biased critical assessment which hung upon her fiction. Her works were confined to erratic and oversimplified readings which either substituted a more thoughtful, comprehensive evaluation by a discussion of her personality and sex (the so-called biological put-down),<sup>1</sup> relegated them to the category of shallow minor fiction, representative of a woman's romantic point of view and, therefore, irrelevant to the lives of black people,<sup>2</sup> or considered them as a mere channel for Hurston's knowledge of black dialect and folkways.<sup>3</sup>

This paper has a three-fold purpose: 1. to make readers familiar with the work of this important writer; 2. to lift the misconceptions responsible for the relegation of Hurston to a subcategory status; 3. to elucidate certain aspects and, consequently, establish boundaries of new responses to her works. We understand that elements which have been denigrated or ignored on the part of Hurston's critics may appear in a different light once the prejudices that have attended their readings have been regarded as such.

#### **Hurston and the Harlem Renaissance**

In the 20's, Harlem was considered the largest Negro community in the world and the center of the cultural turmoil which sought to assert the black voice as an authentic and

participating presence in the stream of American culture. Black and white artists and scholars, united either by their common black experience or by interest in Negro life, began to raise artistic and political issues related to the images of blackness in America. They were a very heterogeneous group (which included Arna Bontemps, Carl Van Vechten, Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, W. E. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Jessie Fausset, Nella Larsen and Zora Hurston, among others), but they all shared a common goal: to find new ways of depicting and interpreting Negro experience that would, once for all, erase the image of an inferior race long crystallized in the American caste system.

The catalyst for all the activities in Harlem was the dinners sponsored by **Opportunity** (The National Urban League Magazine) and **The Crisis** (a house organ for the NAACP) whose editors promoted contests among young prospective writers and offered cash prizes for literary achievement. It was through **Opportunity** that Hurston came to Harlem. While a student at Howard University (Washington), she had joined the campus literary club and published her first short story "John Redding Goes to Sea" in the magazine **Stylus**. The story was praised and she was recommended to Charles Johnson, who was the editor of **Opportunity**. When her second story "Drenched in Light" was accepted for publication, Hurston knew it was time for her to pursue her long-cherished ambition, the literary career. She arrived in New York in January 1925, and was drawn into the vortex of the Renaissance, associating with the group of younger writers like Toomer, McKay and Hughes.

As always happens in movements that call for changes, the Renaissance was riddled with controversies and conflicting impulses. Whereas the older group, the "Talented Tenth" led by Locke and DuBois, contended that black writers had a moral responsibility to uplift the race by depicting educated, middle-class Negroes, the younger group led by Hughes insisted on the necessity of moving away from middle-class perspective and of turning to the folk for the distinctive raw material on which a viable black literature could be founded. In the clash between these two points of view, the assimilationist bourgeois

orientation and the nationalist urge to blackness, Hurston never wavered in her unflagging allegiance to the southern black folk community. For her, the folk were bearers of a cultural tradition from which blacks could evolve an authentic image of blackness, a sense of group identity and pride. They were not plagued by the sense of cultural impoverishment, rootlessness and cynicism that generally assailed poor northern blacks, as examined by Richard Wright in his article "How Bigger Was Born."

In January 1925, Hurston contributed to Locke's anthology **The New Negro**, considered the manifesto of the movement, with a short story called "Spunk." This story represents a return to black cultural roots along the lines advocated by Hughes. The action is set against the rural background of a black southern town where folklife becomes the intensely vivid expression of a separate group life; superstitions, omens, supernatural beliefs and rituals disclose a tradition which was largely unknown to the vast majority of Americans: the oral-aural tradition of communal interchange which had been partly shaped by the carry-over of native African practices, partly determined by the socio-economic conditions created by slavery. Hurston's commitment to the folk meant an attempt to transform the ethnic experience into the material of conscious art.

"Spunk" is an important early work because it intimates the development of a unique personal aesthetics within the context of the Renaissance, a fact that until recently had been overlooked by Hurston's critics. It is an aesthetic that evolves out of the relatedness between personal and collective experience, between artistic expression and racial consciousness, between Hurston's perceptions as a black woman, member of a male-dominated community and her fictional treatment of man and woman operating within such a milieu. The story dwells on marriage and adultery, on the power relations between the sexes, and on the plight of the black woman through whom men fulfill their expectations regarding their masculinity. Beneath its simple narrative surface, it strikes a critical note on the social mores that legitimize a code of manhood in which deceit, slickness and ruthlessness are justified means by which one can prove his virility. In such a context, a woman is no more than an object of personal property, a token of



man's pride and a sexual being 'par excellence' with no possibility of attaining personhood.

The story crystallizes the tensions that attend the dialectics of a double identity. This needs an explanation. Hurston's condition as a woman gave her a vantage point and a particular frame of reference from which to probe black reality. Having herself experienced what it was to grow up female in a self-contained male-oriented community, she developed a penetrating insight into the identity and role of woman held in a state of tutelage under male rule. Sensitive, thus, to the terms of what was both a personal and a collective experience, Hurston did not seek to redeem or idealize the black community. The deepseated ideological imperative to celebrate the folk, encoded in dialect and ritual, is worked upon by an overdetermination of authorial-biographical factors that unveil a degree of recalcitrance to the oppressive context of folk life. The community is the living embodiment of a folk culture that, being patriarchal, encompasses a traditional predisposition, legitimized by custom, to assign a low status to woman. Yet the way that Hurston handles the social relationships between black male and female suggests that the status of woman cannot be simply understood in terms of a universal cultural given but it is the result, too, of a sexual ideology that points to the black community's insertion into the larger context of a white patriarchal class-society. It is relevant to remark at this point that Hurston was writing about woman's oppression at a time when this issue was generally ignored and when the number-one avowal of the Renaissance was the reconstruction and the proclamation of black manhood. In one of the essays in Locke's anthology, "The Task of Negro Womanhood," Elise McDougald states: "On the whole, the Negro woman's feminist efforts are directed chiefly toward the realization of the race, the sex struggle assuming the subordinate place."<sup>5</sup>

In 1926, along with Hughes and Thurman, Hurston edited a magazine called FIRE I, which was to voice the proletarian and iconoclastic tendency of the younger group. Hurston's story called "Sweat" stands out among the other works, all dealing with social minority groups. Delving into the politics of intimacy,

Hurston portrays the passivity of a black washer-woman who is physically and emotionally abused by her husband for fifteen years and her emergent consciousness which leads her to throw off her conditioning and stand for her rights. The story derives its strength from the dramatic narrative and carefully crafted images, organic to action and meaning. The thematic concern with sexual oppression is tempered here with consciousness of the long history of white oppression which insidiously lurks in the background, shaping and feeding the tension that besets the relationship of Delia and Sykes Jones. In fact their conflict resonates with the anger and frustration of the black male's socio-economic powerlessness vis-à-vis the black woman's relative economic independence. Sykes' vulnerability in relation to Delia's role as the economic provider is compensated by physical abuse and adultery. In the end, when he is bitten by a snake with which he had plotted to kill Delia, he is left to die unassisted. Her passivity releases a visceral response against oppression as christian-ethical imperatives are replaced by the shattering experience of her awakening as a subject. The narrative's militant point of view emerges as a reaction to the chauvinist streak of the Black Renaissance.

#### **The Post-Renaissance Novels**

During the 30's, when the Renaissance was no longer considered a full-fleshed literary movement, Hurston published three novels. **Jonah's Gourd Vine** in 1934, **Their Eyes Were Watching God** in 1937, considered her masterpiece, and **Moses, Man of the Mountain** in 1939. They take up the stylistic and thematic patterns set in her short stories. The narratives deal with power-structured relationships and with the plight of the black woman in the period that ranges from the Emancipation era to the first two decades of this century. For Hurston, the material bases for the oppression of the black woman were engendered by the excruciating conditions of life under slavery. Its shadow still hangs over the black community, setting the mood for the domestic scene, where racism manifests itself in sexist terms. These novels evince the scope of Hurston's insight by provoking a series of equations between the operation of patriarchy and

other forms of control, such as race and class domination.

The plot of **Jonah's Gourd Vine** is male-centered. It tells the story of John Pearce, a bastard mulatto child, offspring of a white master and a former slave, who rises from a life of poverty as an illiterate sharecropper in Alabama to attain a prominent position as preacher and later as mayor and moderator of a Baptist convention in Sanford, Florida. As early as in the first chapter, the major flaw in his character is drawn: his lust for women. Incapable of integrating his sexuality into his married life due to his dichotomized view of women (angel/whore), and powerless to curb his passions even though he is the spiritual leader of the community, John ruthlessly drives his wife to death, bringing distress and disarray among his children. From this point on, he begins his downfall. His second marriage turns out to be a farce, a result of his former mistress' attempt to conjure him, and so ends up in a tumultuous divorce. Giving up the pulpit and moving to another town where he marries for the third time, John surrenders yet once more to his promiscuous bent. His dramatic death in a car crash under the Florida sunrise is the final authorial judgement on a man whose emotional atrophy and lack of self-awareness made him into an oppressor of women.

The novel captures the sociology of gender which, fostered by racism, has trapped black man's identity. If, during slavery, little of male dominance existed in the slave cabins, with Emancipation, masculine authority was roughly established in the black home. The very new economic relation with the white landlord in the share-cropping system, for example, underscored black man's dominant role in the family. He assumed all the responsibility for the contracts made. Hence, his material interest in the labor power of the wife, not to mention his interest in her reproductive capacity which could provide him with field help. However, victimized by both caste and class, the black man could not challenge the white man to assert his power and control in a society where these were valued and considered to be the parameters of male identity. This uncertainty about role and, consequently, his fears of emasculation made him turn to the only element he could beat on: the black woman. Thus, male oppression within the black family reveals a simple yet horrifying truth:

power and control over the black woman often became the only means by which the black man could prove himself to himself and to others and in this way attain some kind of leverage with the white man, even if only in sexual terms.<sup>6</sup>

Even though a critical reading of the novel cannot fail to acknowledge this underlying structure of oppression as a determinant of John's character, it cannot ignore the narrative's forceful point of view. By pointing out his failure to know himself, his overarching pride and acquiescence to roguery, the narrator destroys John's credibility as a character endowed with human worth. His greatness as a culture hero, the black preacher who merges within himself the pre-Christian African heritage with the religiosity of Afro-American worship, is overshadowed completely by his distance from any ethical and moral code. In the novel's denouement the train, which caused John's death, unifies private and social realities attesting to Hurston's cogency of perception and to the caliber of her craft. In a strict sense John is victimized by his own uncontrollable sexuality, of which the train is an appropriate symbol, both in form and content - the human has lost his humanness and performs like a machine. Subordinated to this primary meaning and within the larger social context of the south of the 20's, the train becomes the symbol of a new order, the mark of the New South. Within this order John believes himself to be free to exercise his manhood, but he is still circumscribed by being black, and as a man he is enslaved by his sexuality. The narrative's stance makes it very clear that this latter form of enslavement is conditioned by the circumstances that have flourished under a patriarchal system that endorses a double standard of sexual morality and fosters the division and the oppression of women as two distinct groups: the madonnas and the whores.

In opposition to the critical portrait of male characters, Hurston's empathic treatment of female characters, from Amy Crittendon (John's mother) to Lucy Potts (his wife) and Isis (his daughter), underlines the literary bond between the author, as female, and her characters, a bond that, actually, manipulates the reader's sympathy towards them and leads him/her to repudiate those values of the patriarchy that have shaped the contours of

black man's identity. Hurston's female characters are positive, tough, resilient and full of humanity. They stand for a new image of black womanhood, an image absent in other works of the Renaissance and of the period immediately after. The portrayal of the black woman as a racial being generally conformed to the myth of the exotic and sensual female, the brown girl with a halfclothed body and seductive eyes, in reality a projection of man's perception of her sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Hurston's departure from this image, which had nothing to do with the perceptions black women had of themselves, meant an attempt to redefine the black woman by showing the emergence of her self-knowledge, her frustrations with a life of abuse and hard toil, her emotional investment in her children and her sense of an identity which, drowned in needs and in being needed, finds liberation only in death. In the words of Lucy on her deathbed:

'Ah done been in sorrow's kitchen and Ah done licked on all de pots. Ah done died in grief and been buried in de bitter waters, and Ah done rose agin from de dead lak Lazarus. Nothin' kin touch mah soul no mo'. It wauz hard tuh loose de string-holt on mah li'l chillum'... 'but Ah reckon Ah done dat too.'<sup>8</sup>

**Their Eyes Were Watching God**, Hurston's most acclaimed works which Robert Bone<sup>9</sup> ranks second to Richard Wright's **Native Son** as the best novel of the period, explores the emotional context of a woman's life as she learns to resist the alienation fostered by the politics of male dominance, recaptures her own will, and finally, after two marriages, enters into a relationship that breaks out of the prison of traditional sexual roles and allows for the integration of her sexuality with her potentialities as a human being. It is a novel of apprenticeship that traces the emerging consciousness of Janie Crawford, a black woman in the rural backwoods of the post-bellum South, whose dream of womanhood clashes with the reality of the patriarchal marriage, in which the authoritarian male rule reduces her into an unfeeling piece of property: her sexuality repressed, her labor capacity exploited and her humanity constrained. Holding on to her vision of the ideal relationship with a man, a vision that is tempered by experience, she rejects the values implicit in the notion of

marriage as a prop to woman's security, protection and respectability. She deliberately situates herself in that marginal area that defies conventions and where she can pursue her right to self-expression in spite of the pressures of the folk community that espouses traditional assumptions of what a woman ought to be, think and do. At last, Janie finds the love and fulfillment that have eluded her for almost twenty years in the short-lived relationship with Vergible Woods (Tea Cake), an immigrant laborer who helps her to discover that sexual and emotional gratification is only possible through a partnership between equals who "'partake wid everything.'"<sup>10</sup> For an idyllic period their relationship abolishes the opposition between masculine and feminine, home and work, private and public.

In the characterization of Janie, Hurston engrafted the qualities that make of Delia, Amy and Lucy sketchy versions of the former. Beneath the image of these abused women there lies the psychological and physical resistance, the will to throw off servility and the potentiality for action that inspire Janie's quest for happiness. Her determination means an historical break with the heritage of black women's vulnerability to male - black or white - concupiscence and exploitation. Two generations removed from slavery, Janie faces the possibility of making choices while she matures and develops the critical ability that allows her to discern between the conventional roles she is asked to play and the woman she wants to be. Unlike her grandmother, victimized by her master, and her own mother, raped by a school-teacher during the Reconstruction, whose lives rendered choice impossible, Janie can place the integrity of the self against the system that presses her to acquiesce to man's needs. Thus, she self-consciously reacts against the legacy of both a collective and a personal history of degradation.

The action starts with Janie's return to the all-black town of Eatonville. She has just buried Tea Cake, whom she had shot in self-defense after he had tried to kill her while going through a rabies crisis. Janie returns to the place where, in the past, she had lived as the distinguished wife of the mayor Joe Stark, now also dead. She walks unabashed to her gate, aware of the folk who gather in their front porches to gossip and tell stories. For

them, Janie's soiled overalls and her hair swinging on her back like a young girl, are offensive because they do not fit into the standards of propriety and decorum required by her class, age and sex. Only Pheoby, the long-time friend, welcomes her return with warmth. Her eagerness to listen to Janie parallels Janie's longing for self-revelation. She begins the account of what happened to her in her two-year wanderings.

Whereas the main portion of the novel comprises a flashback to the central narrative, the two ends focus on the exchange between the two women who are drawn together by a sisterly kinship. On the narrative structure this kinship is reproduced in the proximity between narrator and character, for in many instances shifts from third to first-person point of view and vice-versa tend to obscure differentiation. The fact that Janie tells her story is also another important element in the ideological configuration of the novel. More than just a fictional strategy, it is the means by which Janie, via Pheoby, is reintegrated into the context of the folk community. Through Pheoby, who mediates between the individual and the group, Janie feels she is part of a racial community. Her telling becomes a measure of her awareness of and response to the social rituals that regulate communal life, rituals such as lying competitions, courtship practices, and the telling of stories and folktales that perpetuate, through verbal behavior, the black cultural tradition.

Janie's account shows she has imbibed the narrative rituals of folk community. Yet, her cultural assimilation shows a certain obliqueness. She sits not on the front porch where males assemble to tell stories but on the back porch, as if a woman's story, with herself as subject and object, cannot yet be considered a proper subject for traditional porch activities. It is here that Hurston established the area of friction between black and female identities, without suggesting their compartmentalization. Part of Janie's struggle is precisely to do away with man-made conventions and discriminatory practices that create a chasm between blackness and female identity. For Hurston, this chasm can be overcome by kinship, solidarity and support. These elements may engender a new way of seeing, a new way of relating that can,

ultimately, alter the social relationship between the sexes and within the group. Pheoby's response, after Janie's account is over, embodies the self-consciousness and the knowledge which are the basis for change:

'Lawd' Pheoby breathed out heavily, 'Ah done grewed ten feet higher from jus'listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this. Nobody not criticize yuh in mah hearin.'<sup>11</sup>

The novel makes an eloquent statement about woman's oppression by showing Janie's ordeal under the ruthless bourgeois patriarchal authority of Joe Stark, and under the evolving sexism of Tea Cake, who reveals himself to be vulnerable to peer pressures and ends up asserting his male dominance at home, a reason good enough for Hurston to eliminate him as a character since he becomes a hindrance to the narrative's design. In showing black man's vulnerability to traditional notions of manhood, Hurston does not cast him as an enemy that must be wiped out. The feminist thrust of **Their Eyes** is, in fact, informed by historical consciousness. The black woman has been historically locked up in a demeaning condition by the black man's determined efforts to organize his world after the dominant structures of patriarchal authority and economic power of the white world. Unless the black man removes himself from this value-making superstructure that warps his sense of humanity, the black woman will be encased in a power relationship that short-circuits legitimate mutuality, personal and social growth. Through her male characters, Hurston poses a harsh criticism on this urge, among black males, to attain self-validation by emulating the socio-economic dream of white manhood. The racial point of view constitutes, thus, an important element in the articulation of Hurston's sexual politics, in the core of which there is a rejection of the dominant value system and its ideological signification.<sup>12</sup>

**Moses, Man of the Mountain**, published in 1939, is a fictional recreation of the biblical account of the deliverance of the Hebrews and their struggle for emancipation under the



leadership of Moses, who also has to fight off the slave mentality that threatens to abort his mission. The novel is a racial metaphor. The Hebrews in the land of Goshem use the colorful Southern folk dialect. They live in cramped shanty towns that resemble the slave quarters of ante-bellum southern plantations, and the Pharaoh's palace calls to mind the white mansions of southern landowners. In short, the Hebrews' enslavement and their flight to freedom evoke the analogy between the Mosaic myth and the slavery and emancipation of American Negroes. However, the text is not so simple as its surface suggests. Masked behind the obvious thematic concerns of racial and class oppression, there lies a narrative dimension that makes of **Moses** a most interesting work. While telling the story of Moses, the narrative probes the opposition between male power and female dissent, unfolding therefore the story of Miriam, the Hebrew prophetess, who has to step down and relinquish her authority among her people as Moses emerges as the new leader.

The text traces the cultural devaluation of woman in the consolidation of a patriarchal monotheist society, ruled by a male god, where the female status is defined in terms of her biological function. In the rigid sexual hierarchy that determines sexual and social roles, man's access to power is legitimate, whereas woman's access to power is to be considered deviant, a threat to the community. In the characterization of Miriam, the strong-willed prophetess who struggles to maintain her leadership, and in the portrait of Zipporah, Moses' pampered upper-class wife who has internalized the male ideology of the feminine, Hurston dramatizes the two poles of female reaction to male power: dissent and conformity. Both females play background roles in a context dominated by males. Both are subjected to the mechanisms of social control that reduce them to an absence, or to silence. Because she is a prophetess, Miriam refuses to be silent by resorting to strategies to keep her identity. However, she pays very highly for her dissent. Hurston once more elicits the reader's outrage at Moses' hypocritical politics and his/her sympathy towards Miriam by capturing, with unequal inventiveness, the psychic tensions that attend Miriam's yielding to power, the trap of envy and guilt, deception and frustration that results

from the submission of her subjectivity, and the double discourse of a divided self.

**Moses** deals with cultural givens in relation to woman, and that is the reason why it is steeped in patriarchal ideology. It could not have been otherwise, since Hurston is handling a story which traditionally pictures a man's world from a male point of view, as is the case of all biblical episodes. Yet the fact that the text encapsulates some areas of tension and stress that underlie woman's uneasy relation with the power structure that renders her inarticulate, areas of tension which are absent in the biblical text, is an indication that the novel does not internalize the mythology about woman but places the 'naturalness' of her subordinate condition in historical and social terms. Consequently, **Moses** bears inscribed within its texture the presence of a particular point of view which, impinging upon a traditional story, frames its content to render woman's reality within a man's world.<sup>13</sup>

**Seraph on the Suwanee**, Hurston's last novel published in 1948, is a novel of white life, a subject matter untapped before. Leaving the context of the folk culture behind, Hurston dwells on the broader aspects of the southern experience through the fictive treatment of a fundamentalist white cracker family history in northern Florida. The delineation of the region's profile in the period between 1900 and 1930 coalesces in the economic changes, stratification and urban development that transform the backwood country into the New South. Against this picture of change, where the dialectics of the Old and the New engender complex class and race relations within a system characterized by a racist patriarchalism, Hurston portrays the psychological struggles of a white woman whose ability to redefine her identity for herself is decisively arrested by family conditioning, during her adolescence, and by the sexual politics of male dominance that structure the bourgeois marriage.

Unlike her other works, where the feminist thrust is embedded in the poignant bedroom and kitchen scenes, in the discourse of the female characters, and in the authorial management of the reader's feelings, **Seraph** represents a retreat in

point of view: its perspective is compromised by a fallible narrator whose closeness to the female character and whose validation of perceptions and experiences that actually violate the feminist aspiration mask Hurston's emotional distance from her character. Arvey Henson never attains a truly independent selfhood. Dependent, dehumanized and trapped into the role of servitude, she becomes the ministering angel to her husband's needs, the embodiment of the myth of white womanhood, eulogized in southern history and crystallized in the Seraph image.

To acknowledge this difference in treatment with respect to white and black female character, a difference which is born out of contrasting authorial attitudes and thus pertains to the writer's relationship with her texts, is to argue for the insertion of Hurston herself, as a black woman, within her works in the form of an alignment that transcends the mere literary bond between the writer and her black female characters: it is an alignment that points to a world of gender and race identifications where image and reality, personal and literary points of view cohere in a unified whole. Hurston's black female is a sex-, class- and race-linked image. As a paradigm of self-love, endurance and independent will, she catalyzes the resources necessary to break through the politics of sexual oppression. As a self-conscious member of a racial community, she rejects the white model and preserves her blackness, becoming thus the reality-principle of black survival. From this standpoint it is not a critical heresy to affirm that Hurston's black female is an extension of herself. She is the literary expression of a black feminism that bridges the gap between a female and a black identity and so becomes a matrix for collective consciousness. Essentially humanistic at its core for its implicit stand against the debasement of human dignity, Hurston's black feminism underscores the cogency of vision that buttresses the ideological configuration of her fictional practice: sexual and cultural liberation entail both a search for one's identity apart from outside definitions and a break from the system of domination that corrupts and destroys one's sense of personhood/peoplehood.

The meaning and importance of Hurston's works cannot be fully apprehended without an understanding of the plight of a

self-reliant woman who, doubly removed by race and sex from the dominant social order, had to struggle hard to pursue her autonomy and an honest self-expression as a fiction writer at a time when there was little public support and encouragement for a career woman, least of all if she were black. A passage from her autobiography, **Dust Tracks on a Road**, illuminates Hurston's commitment to writing as an act of survival and self-assertion:

What I had to swallow in the kitchen has not made me less glad to have lived, nor made me want to low-rate the human race, nor any whole sections of it. I take no refuge from myself in bitterness. To me, bitterness is the under-arm odor of wishful weakness. It is the graceless acknowledgment of defeat. I have no urge to make any concessions like that to the world as yet. I might be like that some day, but I doubt it. I am in the struggle with the sword in my hands, and I don't intend to run until you run me. So why give off the smell of something dead under the house while I am still in there tussling with my sword in my hand?<sup>14</sup>

Not only did Hurston have to face the unusual pressures stemming from white patronage and from a black elite with regard to the proper role of the black woman writer, but she also had to engage, as a woman on her own, in a distressing struggle for survival as she was often broke and was forced to rely on the kindness of strangers.<sup>15</sup> Never losing heart, she managed to keep a strong sense of self which allowed her always to speak and write her mind, something considered offensive by her contemporaries who were concerned about the proper racial image she should project. For being what she was and for writing what she did write, she deserves more critical attention. To rescue her works from the biases and the silences that have enveloped them is to restore their significance, so the name of Zora Neale Hurston will find its legitimate place in the Afro-American literary tradition and in the tradition of women writers.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See Darwin Turner's comments in **In a Minor chord** (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), pp.90-98, and Nathan Huggins' in **The Harlem Renaissance** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp.74, 130-133.
- <sup>2</sup> This point of view is held by Richard Wright in his essay "Between Laughter and Tears," **New Masses**, (October 5), 1937, 21-25, and Ralph Ellison in "Recent Negro Fiction" in **New Masses**, (August 5), 1941, 22-26.
- <sup>3</sup> See Alain Locke's essay "Jingo, Counter-Jingo and Us" in **Opportunity**, vol.XVI, 1 (Jan. 1938), 7-11, 27, and Andrew Burris' Review of **Jonah's Gourd Vine** in **The Crisis**, 41 (Jun. 1934), 166.
- <sup>4</sup> Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," **The Saturday Review of Literature**, 22 (June 1940), p.17.
- <sup>5</sup> Elise Johnson McDougald, "The Task of Negro Womanhood," in **The New Negro**, ed. Alain Locke, (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1925), p.381.
- <sup>6</sup> Shulamith Firestone examines what she calls "the war of masculinity with the white man" in the chapter called "Racism: The Sexism of the Family of Man" in her book **The Dialectic of Sex** (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1970), pp.105-125. Her argument is historically developed in Joyce Ladner's work **Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman** (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971). On page 285, she states that "the advent of the civil rights movement brought into being an assertion of Black masculinity."
- <sup>7</sup> For such an image of the black woman, see Claude McKay's poems "Harlem Shadow" and "The Harlem Dancer" in **Selected Poems of Claude McKay** (New York: Bookman Associates, 1953). Hughes' poems, "Fascination," in **The Crisis**, vol 28, n<sup>o</sup> 2, p.86; "Young Prostitute," "Three Poems of Harlem Cabaret," "Jazzonia," and "Young Singer" in **The Crisis**, vol. 26, n<sup>o</sup> 4, p.162; "Dance Africaine" in **The Crisis**, vol. 24, n<sup>o</sup> 4, p.167; "The South" in **The Crisis**, vol. 24, n<sup>o</sup> 2, p.72; and "Joy" in **The Crisis**, vol. 31, n<sup>o</sup> 4, p.173. Also in the novels, **Not Without Laughter**, by Langston Hughes, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1930), **Home to Harlem** by Claude McKay, (New York: Pocket Book Inc., 1969) and **God Sends Sunday** by Arna Bontemps, (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1931).
- <sup>8</sup> **Jonah's Gourd Vine**, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1934), p.209.
- <sup>9</sup> **The Negro Novel in America**, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958).
- <sup>10</sup> **Their Eyes Were Watching God**, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), p.186.

<sup>1</sup>**Their Eyes Were Watching God**, p.284.

<sup>2</sup>It is interesting to examine James O. Young's statements in **Black Writers of the Thirties**, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), p.220: **Their Eyes** "is one of the better novels produced by a black writer during the 1930's and despite Wright's contention that it was shallow romance, lacking in protest value, Miss Hurston skillfully wove the romantic elements into a pattern of protest; not race or class protest, but feminine and individual protest." Young actually restricts Hurston's achievement by considering it within the narrow scope of feminine and individual protest, thus overlooking the social and collective dimension of woman's oppression that the novel intimates, both at the thematic and structural levels. He also fails to perceive the interrelation of race and class in the definition of the terms of black woman's subordination, as evinced in the novel. Because Hurston articulated her stance through the point of view of a woman, the terms and scope of her fiction's protest were not acknowledged nor apprehended by the writers of her time and black scholars of today.

<sup>3</sup>**Moses** is the most neglected work in Hurston's criticism.

<sup>4</sup>**Dust Tracks on a Road**, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1942), p.288.

<sup>5</sup>According to Robert Hemenway in **Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography**, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

