

BLACK GYNAE AGONY IN PATRIARCHAL ORDER: A STUDY OF ZORA NEALEHURSTON'S JONAH'S GOURD VINE

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The daily life of black women in America is harrowing in the patriarchal order. Black women, the most disadvantaged in the American land are economically exploited and physically assaulted by both whites and blacks. Many black women activists sparked black feminist consciousness to challenge the institutionalized oppression of black women both in the white and the black society. Besides, dynamic black women writers were committed to extricate themselves and the black women from patriarchal oppression. Their writings have the agenda of fighting for justice and equality for the black women in America, of instilling the moral strength of black women and of restoring their ethnic pride.

Zora Neale Hurston is one among the African American writers registering in her writings vociferously her voice against the male dominated racial and gender discourses. She hailed as the intellectual and spiritual foremother of black feminist literature has the credit of being a foremost writer to break the black women's centuries of silence. She has contributed commendably to African American Literature with four novels, dozen plays, numerous essays, many short stories and two collections of folklore. Cronin perceives Hurston as a feminocentric pantheist for grappling constantly with woman issues in all her writings. Hurston has positive outlook of peculiar experiences of black women as they gain priceless wisdom from their multilayered institutional oppressions.

Jonah's Gourd Vine, the maiden novel of Hurston is more autobiographical. It documents father's elevation from an illiterate labourer to an influential Baptist minister and mayor. The vital characters John Buddy Pearson and Lucy Potts are modeled after Hurston's real parents. With the authentic support and guidance of Lucy, John Buddy prospers as an influential man. But his insatiable philandering brings his down fall. His irresponsible behavior paralyses peace in the family and eventually, Lucy dies, partly of disease and partly of frustration. Jonah's Gourd Vine, explores how black women are heavily oppressed in the white as well as the black society owing to their unprivileged race and gender subjected to "double colonization" (Seldon 243). It treats the interracial and intra racial conflicts that pose a serious threat to black women's survival in America. But it stands a lesson to the black women to tackle the twin evils of racism and sexism which hinder the growth of black women.

Shane Phelan observes "The bedrock of women's oppression is hetero sexuality" (205). Hurston's women are horrendously humiliated and discriminated by men and are subjected to verbal and physical assault, hence the painful life for black women. In Jonah, Ned's treatment of Amy is painful. He ill-treats his wife Amy worse than their ex-master Alf. She is smothered by his physical and verbal abuse. Described as "an alligator in jeans" (8), he curses her and beats

her brutal violence. Ned bosses around the house and lashes her with whippings for every paltry reason. “He thrust his knee into her abdomen and exerted a merciless pressure on her throat” (8). She toils in the plantation from dawn to dusk besides shouldering the domestic responsibilities, but pathetically not to attract sympathy from Ned.

Bell Hooks’s perception of black men illustrates Ned’s violent behavior to his wife. “They [black men] are taught that they will be able to rule in the home, to control and dominate, that this is the big payoff for their acceptance of an exploitative economic social order” (121). On this line, John Buddy reduces his wife Lucy to a domestic slave. She is simply a sexual object to Buddy. His sexual oppression of her is quite apparent in her frequent pregnancy. At thirty-five, she mothers nine children. He thinks that just because he is male, he is entitled to sexual freedom. He never cares for Lucy’s health. He deserts her when she needs his presence and support most. When Lucy falls ill, he takes little interest in her recovery. Although she dies of consumption, he hastens her death by killing her emotions. Blinded by lust, he uses harsh words to the dying Lucy and mercilessly slaps her. For all her selfless service to him, he gives her only troubles. Forgetting that she is the ladder of his life, he forsakes her for Hattie Tyson. For Hurston marriage is a weapon for men to control women. Owing to her bitter marital experiences, she is constantly engaged in finding ways to extricate women from domestic imprisonment. Her women are unable to find fulfillment with their male partners, because men always dominate women and are callous to their feelings.

Lucy is ill treated not only by her husband but also by her brother, who does not show not an iota of sympathy for his pregnant sister in the period of crisis. When her brother returned for the rails and slats, Lucy was “crumpled in a little dark ball in the center of the deep mound of feathers” (91).

Thus the novel explores the exclusive sufferings of black women who simultaneously bear the dead weight of social degradation and gender discrimination both in the white society and the black society. Man-woman relationship does not comfort women in the novel. They exist merely as sex slaves for their spouses. Men are unreasonable masters for their women and never understanding partners. Hurston questions the conventional gender role of the black women. She does not want her women subdued by the male oppression. On the other hand, they turn their oppressive experience to a valuable lesson. The black women should realize their dignity as human beings by developing self-esteem for themselves. Hurston encourages the individual women to construct a meaningful life for herself despite the rigid social constraints.

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Enriched by experience, they gradually discover their enormous potential to handle their lives themselves. Despite their constant suffering, they never lose their faith in life. Their sanguine view of life inspires the women community to shape their lives themselves, hence the female autonomy in a male controlled world. With the wisdom gained, black women can resist racial, class, and gender discrimination.

Thus by fighting for the rights of black women, Hurston “a gift to both her race and the human race” (Boyd 435) has paved way for the liberation of all women who struggle against patriarchal dominance and form an autonomous society.

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