

Hermeneutics of Complexity of Religion, Race and Economy in Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*

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Abstract

This paper examines how Hurston presents various themes such as religion, marriage, jealousy, sin and salvation, slavery, racism, and economy in Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. The novel sets in rural Florida. This novel is deeply rooted in the rich mythology and culture of African Americans. Her parents' lives served as the inspiration for this tale. Hurston's novel effectively conveys her passion for African-American customs, rituals, and culture. Hurston's story centres on the character development of other characters as well as the social, physical, psychological, and emotional growth of the protagonist, John Pearson. Hurston captured the true experience of African-American culture in this story, encompassing its aspirations and failings, as well as its pain and sorrow. She skilfully illustrates the complexity of her subjects and narrative by utilising imagery, metaphor, symbolism, and motifs. She uses African American folklore and customs to promote African American culture and lifestyles. She depicts the manner of life of African Americans in the American South, which has been freed, in the novel. Here, the author illustrates how the tragic history of slavery continues to affect the lives of African Americans. Hurston uses the Crittendens family members - all of whom were formerly slaves - to explore the mental health and suffering of these individuals. Due to their long-standing dominance, white people made black people fearful. Hurston criticises the patriarchal society and depicts the struggle between Black men and Black women in her novel.

Keywords: Black, Religion, Slavery, Racism, Economy

Zora Neale Hurston is a black American novelist, anthropologist, folklorist, short-story writer, dramatist, essayist, and autobiographer. In all her works, she has consistently delighted in highlighting the beauty and soul of Black people. Black cultural background has served as the foundation for her artwork. The Harlem Renaissance, which promoted an increasing sense of racial confidence, assertiveness, and dissent, is reflected in Hurston's writing. Her black novels, which articulated a distinct and partly non-Western way of life, have a Harlemaesque character. Because she depicts the cultural past of the Southern blacks of the town of Eatonville, in all her works, she was acknowledged as the Eatonville aesthetic representative of the Harlem Renaissance. She became aware of her personal dedication to preserving her people's

cultural legacy and her goal of preserving this rich Black folk history for the next generation. She consistently claims that Black culture and its ideals are superior.

Hurston shared the ambition of all great writers to have their stories, whether directly or indirectly, reach the world. Hurston's goal with *Jonah's Gourd Vine* was to share her and her parents' story with the world. Her parents are essentially the subject of her autobiography or biography. She tries to hide their identities in a few subtle ways, but it is obvious that this is her parents' narrative. It is about the ascent of a man named John Pearson, whose persona is modelled after Hurston's father. There are both positive and depressing aspects to Pearson's experience. He ascends from extreme poverty to a position of wealth and influence before plummeting once more. He was formerly a farm labourer in Alabama, and at the height of his influence, he was the moderator of the Florida Baptist Convention. However, he ultimately fails as a social man when the fall occurs once more.

From the beginning, John's life is filled with violence and want, primarily material. He is one of Amy Crittenden and her husband's three sons. John was born out of wedlock, making him an illegitimate child. This results in a stressful relationship at home since the father and son generally dislike and oppose each other. The family is constantly in debt, and their fates are also paved with the violence that comes with that kind of poverty. Based on actual events, the novel tells a fascinating story.

The father and son continue to argue and even use physical force against one another. As a result, there is a lot of physical stress in the home. Another bone of contention between John and his mother is the father's abuse of her. As a result, they end up fighting one day after a lot of abuse, and John is forced to leave home because he frequently hits his father. Then, John Pearson marries a girl whose traits make him think she is incredibly lovely. One individual to contend with in the native society is Lucy Potts, who has a highly lively personality. After being attracted to her, John Pearson marries her, but like his father, John is an experienced lecher who continues to have sex with other women after marriage, making it a habit for him. Clearly, it is a topic of contention between the husband and wife. Many of these relationships spiral out of control, and John ends himself living with the other women for weeks or even months at a time. Even though Lucy Potts is a devoted wife who works to keep the marriage going, the woman is expected to care for herself and her kids alone currently. When reading about these issues, one gets the impression that Hurston is discussing universal issues and characteristics, and that this is the story of any culture.

Though ethnocentric criticism of her work obscures this reality, Hurston, who grew up in an all-black, self-governing town, frequently looks beyond black/white binaries in her fiction to examine the common denominators of human psychodynamics. An example of this is her depiction of the problematic Crittendon, Potts, and Pearson marriages in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Hurston draws attention to "the connection between sexual oppression and racial insecurity in the lives of Black people..." (Kanthak's "Legacy of Dysfunction: Family Systems in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* by Zora Neale Hurston," 114). Hurston must rely on her brother and other individuals to assist her get by during these difficult times. Because he helps the family, his brother Bud, who is not a very good person, wants to keep his toll on them. He intends to steal old family antiques from Lucy to profit from his sister's inability to repay her debt. When Bud tries to defraud the family by removing their family antique furniture, the husband John, incidentally, returns home.

After John steps in and beats Bud severely, Bud immediately gets grave and close to passing away. This charge forces him to leave town once more, and Lucy Potts experiences hardships once more. Following this experience, John gradually regains his composure and stabilises his life by first succeeding as a carpenter. John then grows his wealth since he is a good worker and a talented artisan. He then begins

buying and selling real estate, which makes him a man of some means. When he begins serving as a pastor at the local church, things truly begin to mature for their family life. Many people are persuaded that he would be a great preacher by his voice, intelligence, and ability to speak with ease.

John is well-known in the neighbourhood for his sermons that have the power to soothe and collect people. He is expected to become a well-respected member of the community as a result. However, like with everything else in life, John's hard-won success is not permanent. His rapid demise is a direct result of his achievement at Zion Hope Baptist Church. As a smooth-talking pastor, he attracts many local women. His weakness has always been women. He has easy access to a variety of women who attend the church to hear his sermons because of this. He yields to his frailty.

The novel demonstrates that both his language prowess and his sexual energy are a part of the same cultural tradition, even though his verbal abilities help him succeed while his promiscuity destroys him. Both his sexual behaviour and his teachings are pagan. The narrator claims that as he prayed, he invoked his Congo Gods by Christian names and rolled his African drum up to the altar. Through him, both facets of his cultural background are expressed. They do, in fact, communicate through every African American, but most strongly through John. John crosses Big Creek at a pivotal point early in the novel, symbolising the start of his life and demonstrating the dual cultural background he carries.

John stomps the beats and sings a new tune as he makes his way down to the Creek. He invents a few sentences to accompany the hound dog's cry, the creek's drums, and the sounds of the animals in the forest. He starts to consider the females who live across Big Creek: "John nearly trumpeted joyfully at the new sun" (99). He exhaled passionately. "He undressed, carried his clothes across, then recrossed and plunged into the swift water and breasted strongly over," (Mambrol's "Analysis of Zora Neale Hurston's Novels," web). Most of the women that attend the church to hear him are quite vulnerable in their lives, which is why they are there to escape boredom and find answers to their issues. John takes advantage of their predicament and engages in sexual activity with several women. As things get out of control, the town's residents quickly remove him from his position as pastor.

Lucy Potts strives to keep the family afloat by becoming her husband's constant support system, but in the end, nothing can be done. Because of her poor health and the surroundings, she is in, she gets sick and gets tuberculosis and other chronic ailments. Rapid and continuous childbirth also causes her body to become malnourished. John is having affairs with women at the church and elsewhere while she is at home giving birth to his children. John and her family are left behind when she passes away soon after.

John weeps a little, but he is a fly and quickly marries someone else. But compared to Lucy, this woman is a very different person. Hattie Tyson is the name of this woman, who is a very sly and independent individual. John's death turns out to be his downfall because he soon weds the egotistical, self-centred Hattie Tyson, who obliterates almost everything that he and Lucy have created together. In addition to losing his congregation, wife, and kids, John also loses his authority, respect, and self-respect. Ultimately, John decides that distance is the best treatment for his social disease and that he is largely misunderstood, so he leaves Eatonville and the ministry.

Hurston wanted to illustrate the struggles that families face, especially those faced by women, these marital life struggles are a natural aspect of any of her novels. Her intention was to illustrate the struggle a woman faces in attempting to make a marriage and, consequently, society function. Hurston used her personal, honed understanding of marital turmoil to inform her work. A few months after her mother's passing, her father remarried when she was nine years old. Hurston's new stepmother, who she based after the

egotistical, gold-digging Hattie Tyson, viewed her stepchildren as rivals for her husband's love in the version of events that was published.

Hurston directed her husband to beat his firstborn daughter with a buggy whip for making a remark about the marriage taking place so soon after her mother's passing, and she also ordered Hurston's older sister to leave the house. Hurston's father watched helplessly and wept as Hurston and her stepmother later battled it out in a brutal fistfight. Similarly, at the urging of his second wife, a bereaved and remarried father in the novel pulls a knife on his oldest child. As the novel demonstrates, the recurring family disputes and imbalances that cause these crises are not unique; rather, they are the result of abnormal behavioural and interpretive family systems that are passed down and perpetuated. Readers are drawn into more general psychological interactions with Hurston's literature at the intersections of all human experience, transcending the boundaries of race and class.

John's life is fluctuating wildly. Hattie is too much for him, so he also leaves her. Because she is likewise quite independent, their personalities do not mesh, making it impossible for them to be married. Rather, John begins searching elsewhere once more. He makes another attempt to take control of his life, and this time he decides to rebuild it in Plant City, Florida. Despite being a philanderer in many respects, John Pearson is fortunate when it comes to women. Even while he was out having affairs with other men, he had Lucy Potts take care of his life and his kids earlier. He finds another one of these women, Sally Lovelace, this time around. She is devoted to him and is willing to spend her entire life with him and his family.

Because of Sally's excellent homemaking skills, John Pearson's life begins to fall into order once more. His former profession saves him once more, and he is now a pastor at the Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church. His career as a preacher resumes at this church, which is far larger than the last one in Sanford where he was employed. John Pearson's sexual misdeeds reflect his character. He once again begins to take advantage of the church by disregarding another wonderful wife, Sally Lovelace, and attracting beautiful women who are fragile in their lives to hear his sermons. However, this time is different, and he starts to feel guilty, something that did not bother him much previously. John Pearson is consumed by guilt about his wrongdoings and the condition of goodness he has destroyed. John Pearson's life ends when he gets knocked over by a passing train while crossing a railway track while in a daze brought on by his remorse. He is ultimately remembered for his glib speech and his kindness more than the negative things he accomplished during his lifetime.

When Hurston was writing, the idea of a black man who is a man of God was a popular one among readers. Black people's faith in Christianity was as strong as white people, and this novel and John Pearson's character demonstrated it. However, he is also shown to be a very nuanced individual. In contrast to other very religious depictions of pastors, who are portrayed as one-dimensional, straightforward characters with a straightforward disposition that is quite pious and devoid of vices that are associated with ordinary men, this representation is entirely different. However, certain depictions of Black people were like those of Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Black people were portrayed as little more than scoundrels in this one-dimensional racist caricature. In that instance, John Pearson's portrayal is extremely nuanced as, although he treats women cruelly when it comes to fidelity, he is also very religiously sympathetic and a huge source of comfort for many women who are struggling with their life. John's character is therefore quite complex. In his personality, John Pearson possesses both extremes. On the one hand, he is an excellent propagandist for the Christian faith and a terrific preacher. He successfully captures the interest of a wide range of individuals and contributes

significantly to society. However, he does not have a faithful attitude towards women, and he destroys the lives and hearts of many women, but especially two of his faithful spouses who treated him well. Spending time with good women like Lucy Potts or Sally Lovelace does not teach John Pearson anything. John Pearson grows wealthy while living with these women, and he builds a successful and prosperous family life with his family. On the other side, his fortunes in this world drastically worsen when he is with women like Hattie. John Pearson's life takes a significant turn for the worst when he starts seeing other women. When he interacts with Hattie and other women of that type, he begins to drink excessively, and his social standing also suffers. Additionally, while he is with these women, his financial situation also worsens. This is a persistent issue with Hurston's character, John Pearson, who is modelled after her father. John Pearson is modelled after the biblical figure Jonah. Despite being fortunate enough to receive the grace of the Christian God, Jonah attempts to flee from God and his obligations in the Bible. However, John Pearson also has the good fortune to become a pastor twice in his life, but he loses both chances and becomes disenfranchised. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is the title of the novel because it is something that John created and grew around his own life before destroying it with his own hands. Even though her father was well-known in his neighbourhood, Hurston perceived him in this light. Hurston sought to portray John as a complicated and difficult-to-understand character because he was insensitive to women and their struggles.

During that time of change in African-American history immediately following the Slave Emancipation, the novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine* explores the search for new roles for both sexes as well as the desire for self-identity for the Black man and Black woman in America. This study aims to investigate the double victimisation of women in oppressed conditions and the novel's linguistic elements to ascertain how they have been assembled to achieve the desired effect of communicating gender issues and folklore in a changing African-American environment, using the sociological framework qualified by feminist critical theory and practice. This novel authenticates the existence of a Black culture by celebrating the ethos of rural Black life in the South. Hurston uses her African-American dialect, which is visible in both lexical and syntactical patterns, to document her people's unique language. This is done to highlight the positivism of African-American life despite white oppression based on race and capitalism, as well as to give all African-Americans the confidence they need to be proud of their culture. The goal is to free African-Americans from the American social justice system, which frequently finds them guilty of alleged deviant activity. The goal of this confidence-building is also to enable women to take on more responsible duties outside of the constrictive positions that society and the family have traditionally assigned them.

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