



## **A Feminist Reading of a Regional Novel: Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine***

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### **ABSTRACT**

The novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, comprises a search for self-identity for the black man and the black woman in America, as well as a search for new roles for each of the sexes during that period of transition in the African-American history just after the Slave Emancipation. Using the sociological framework qualified by the feminist critical theory and practice, this study attempts to explore the double victimization of woman in an oppressed condition, and the novel's linguistic elements to determine how they have been put together to achieve the desired effect of communicating folkloric and gender issues in a changing African-American environment. This novel is a celebration of the ethos of rural black life in the south to authenticate the existence of a black culture. Hurston makes use of her African-American dialect as is evident both in the lexical and syntactical patterns to document her people's peculiar tongue in order to emphasize the positivism in the African-American life in spite of racial and capitalist oppression by the whites, and in order to instil confidence into all African-Americans so that they might become proud of their culture. This is with a view to liberating the African-Americans from the American social legislative system that often convicts them for their supposed deviant behaviours. This confidence-building is also intended to empower women, in particular, to assume more responsible roles other than the restrictive ones socially prescribed for them in the family and the society.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Lucy, the major female character, is created as an intelligent and unique woman who, although trapped in an oppressive marital condition, is assertive and morally strong enough to attempt to challenge her husband's sexual

## *A Feminist Reading of Jonah's Gourd Vine*

incontinence. In addition, she supports him morally and materially to get him well established. Even though John is the protagonist of the novel, Hurston appears to write with feminist consciousness by creating a very assertive, morally strong, physically and spiritually resilient and intellectually admirable female character in Lucy who serves as the *de facto* protagonist of the novel. Lucy further defines a social morality of faithfulness between husband and wife, and the roles of a wife as the think-tank and cohesive force of the family and an instrument for her husband's success. *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, therefore, constitutes a search for an identity and alternative roles for woman as she attempts to recreate the morality of a changing, formerly enslaved, African-American society, apart from a search for self-identity and new roles for the black man in America during that period of transition just after the Slave Emancipation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Since the novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* comprises a search for self-identity and new gender roles for both the black man and woman in America, after the Slave Emancipation, this study employs the sociological framework qualified by the feminist critical theory and practice. Because this novel is a literary work of art, attention is paid to its linguistic elements to explore how they have been put together to achieve the desired aesthetic effect of communicating gender and interracial folkloric issues in a changing African-American society; and to determine how they are employed to give *Jonah's Gourd Vine* the effect of a regional novel. This would authenticate the existence of an African-American culture in order to liberate the blacks from the oppression of the American legislative system which regards African-American behaviour as deviant. An attempt is also made to demonstrate how Hurston's fiction in this novel represents the processes of folkloric transmission from an oral-aural tradition to a literary high culture of written literature, emphasizing the wisdom, the ways of thinking and speaking which emanate from the folk environment.

### **Definition of Terms: "African-American," "Regional," "Feminist"**

The term "African-American" in this essay is viewed from the perspective of regional. In the words of M. H. Abrams "The regional novel emphasizes the setting, speech, social structure and customs of a particular locality, not merely as *Local Color*, but as important conditions affecting the temperament of the characters, and their ways of thinking, feeling, and interacting: ..." (122). Examples of the regional novel include: the European, the American and the African regional novels. In the European, the problem of appearance and reality is central. The American novel is noted for its divergence from the novel's classic intention of social observation in order to attain its moral and aesthetic heights as postulated by Henry James. To serve as regional, the

African novel for instance, according to Chinua Achebe, “has to be about Africa...But Africa is not only a geographical expression; it is also a metaphysical landscape. - It is in fact a view of the world and of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular position” (50).

A feminist novel is one that focuses on female characters and concerns, and highlights female positive images and roles for emulation by women in the society outside of texts. According to Anais Nin, as cited by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie:

The woman artist has to create something different from man ....  
She has to sever herself from the myth man creates, from being  
created by him. She has to struggle with her own cycles, storms,  
terrors which man does not understand (Ogundipe-Leslie 13).

The novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, comprises a search for self identity for the black man, here represented by the principal character John Pearson, and for the black woman in America, also, represented by Lucy, as well as a search for new roles for each of the sexes during that period of transition in the African-American society from slavery to the Emancipation.

Revealing some feministic tendencies, the novel also constitutes a search for an identity and alternative roles for woman, in particular, as she attempts to recreate the morality of a changing, formerly enslaved African-American society. Lucy acquires, especially through informal education from her mother, high moral standards which Hurston envisions for the emerging African-American society after the Slave Emancipation.

*Jonah's Gourd Vine* also consists of man's search for a spiritual equilibrium. Hurston illustrates the scope of her vision, according to Larry Neal in his introduction to *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, by exposing to us two distinctly different cultural attitudes towards the concept of spirituality (6, 7). The one cultural attitude springs from a non-Christian background like John's where the world of spirit is hardly distinguished from that of flesh. The other cultural attitude consists of a more rigid blend of puritanical concepts of the white evangelical tradition. The end-product is a Christianity which brings to bear the ethos of the black cultural heritage. The preacher as poet is the dominant theme in the novel. As a regional novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* celebrates the ethos of the rural African-American life in the south shortly after the Slave Emancipation to validate the existence of a black or African-American culture.

Two problems are explored in this paper. The first is that women are usually oppressed by men especially by husbands in marital situations, and women's roles are often stereotyped. Hurston would want women to develop self-confidence, and establish for themselves more positive roles other than the inhibitive ones socially prescribed for them in the family and the society.

The second problem is that the culturally different behaviours of black people in America are treated as deviant, and as failure on the part of

### *A Feminist Reading of Jonah's Gourd Vine*

individuals in the face of oppression. The American social legislative system tends to convict these blacks for frivolous reasons such as deviance from the white middle class behaviour. According to Robert Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston attempts to establish in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* that normality is a function of culture, that an African-American culture exists, and that its creators lead lives rich with ideological and aesthetic significance, a fact demonstrated by their folklore (Hemenway 332).

Hemenway adds that ... "If she [Hurston] was not a formal theorist, she possessed something the scholars lacked \_ a life-long intimacy with the communicative behavior of Eatonville, a behavior that proved that her black neighbors were not deviant, pathological, or deprived, no matter how they might look to outsiders" (Hemenway 332). Hurston's contention is that normalcy is a function of culture and that the African-American behavior is not deviant but a way of life with its own aesthetic and ideological values. Therefore, the American social legislation should not treat African-American behaviour as such but should, rather, be revised to accommodate the black life-pattern.

Zora Neale Hurston found a personal litmus test for racial politics that tested for only two things - a pathological stereotype and an individual pride. This had political implications. As long as the culturally different behaviour of black people is treated as deviant, and as failure on the part of individuals in the face of oppression, then the stereotype of black pathology becomes a grotesque monster looming behind American social legislation (Hemenway 331).

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston is determined to prove that black people do not devote their lives to a morose discussion of white injustice. She once complained about the "false picture" created by black writers dwelling on the race problem, producing writing saturated with our sorrows" (Hemenway 220). Complaining further about this distorted image of the black people, Hurston adds: "We talk about the race problem a great deal, but go on living and laughing and striving like everybody else" (ZNH in *Twentieth Century Authors*, 694-95, as quoted in Hemenway 220-21).

Hurston's emphasis in her literary works is not on the economic system that makes the African-American youth or man a pauper, but on the drama that makes him a king (Hemenway 223). From Hurston's perspective, folk art and behaviour are inseparable because she sees the creative impulse as the highest form of the black survival mechanism and she identifies drama as a "characteristic" of African-American behaviour. Hurston had grown up in a culture with an oral-aural tradition, where one's ability to entertain and hold an audience with metaphorical imagination and colourful language defined the role of the artist (Hemenway 65). She was convinced from her anthropological research that the intrinsic beauty of folk expression is by far its most important element, and that black culture manifests an independent aesthetic system that could be discussed without reference to white racist and capitalist oppression.

One of the most striking aspects of language in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is that whereas many African-American writers before the Harlem Renaissance were ashamed of their distinctive tongue, Hurston makes use of her African-American dialect to document her people's peculiar tongue in order to emphasize the positivism in the African-American way of life in spite of racial and capitalist oppression by the white-oriented system. This is with a view of authenticating the existence of an African-American culture. The highlighting of the African-American aesthetic system is also intended to instill racial pride and confidence into all African-Americans so that they might become proud of their culture. As earlier stated, this confidence-building as well as the positive projection of woman's image is intended to empower women to assume more positive and responsible roles other than the restrictive ones socially prescribed for them in the family and the society, in order to restore women's dignity and erase the continued degrading complex of inferiority to men.

Hurston chooses to write of the positive effects of black experience because she does not believe that white injustice has created any pathology in black behaviour, a position brought into sharp focus in the criticism of her career by a white radical, Harold Preece (Hemenway 221), among other black critics like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Roy Wilkins and Alain Locke who all accused her of not supporting the race struggle (333). According to Robert Hemenway, "Many a critic," including a white critic like Harold Preece "has criticized Zora Neale Hurston for her preoccupation with interracial folkloric situation rather than with interracial confrontations" (221). From this writer's perspective, Hurston exercises her right to an autonomous literary imagination both as a woman and as a member of the African-American community. A summary of the novel will put into perspective Hurston's contention that normalcy is a function of culture and that the African-American behavior is not deviant but a way of life with its own aesthetic and ideological values which should be accommodated by the American legal system.

### **Summary of the Novel**

The protagonist, John, is a mulatto born of a black mother, Amy Crittenden and a white father, probably Alf Pearson, since John was born on the latter's plantation. After the Slave Emancipation, John's family comprising his mother, step-father Ned Crittenden, his junior brother Hezekiah, and himself move over to the Creek. Rejected by his step-father, John returns to Alf Pearson's plantation.

Lucy, the principal female character is depicted as unique in various respects. She is born into an elitist African-American family which is just emerging after the Slave Emancipation. Her parents and relations - one of whom is John's teacher - are enlightened, fairly rich and educated. She is unlike the unsophisticated girls in Alf Pearson's and other plantations who

### *A Feminist Reading of Jonah's Gourd Vine*

have no control over their sexuality. Conversely, even John Pearson, the protagonist of the novel, comes from an unsophisticated and uneducated background. Like most of the youths in the plantations, John hardly has any self-control over his sexuality. It is Lucy who encourages the young John to go to school, and attempts to instill a sense of decency in him when she stops him from reciting obscene rhymes to her.

Eventually, Lucy gets married to John in spite of her mother's protest. Despite the fact that John is an assistant to Alf Pearson, a white plantation owner, he still remains so poor that he is compelled to steal a piglet from a neighbouring plantation to feed his wife on the delivery of their third baby. This is attributable to American capitalism and racism. John is caught and charged to the white man's court. Alf Pearson, suspecting that John might be his biological son - since he was born on his plantation just before the Emancipation - advises him to run away from the plantation at Notasulga to another location. He escapes to Eatonville - an all black city where the Black people live and feel free because they rule over themselves. When Lucy and the children eventually join him at Eatonville, she advises him to build a personal house for the family. She helps him to acquire wealth, and to become self-reliant through the assumption of many roles in the society as carpenter, preacher, Estate Owner, Post Master and Church Moderator. John establishes a Church which gains a large followership because of his eloquence and gift of orality - an oral-aural tradition, where one's ability to entertain and hold an audience with metaphorical imagination and colourful language defined the role of the artist (Hemenway 65). His Church and fame grow as fast as the biblical Jonah's gourd vine from which the title of the novel is derived. However, John also falls as quickly as that gourd vine, as a result of his moral laxity. Following gossips about his sexual incontinence, John Pearson decides to abandon preaching at the Zion Hope Church in Sanford, a Church he founded.

Though John loves Lucy, he continues philandering even after their marriage. He abandons her with their sick child and hibernates with one of his concubines or female Church members in another side of town until the crisis is over. He even strikes Lucy on her sick bed for reprimanding him over his sexual incontinence. After Lucy's death, John marries another wife, Hattie, who is very hostile to him. After Hattie exposes his wrong-doings, especially his moral or sexual laxity at a Church Conference, John opts to resign as Moderator from the Zion Hope Church in Sanford. At his last sermon, instead of seeking to defend himself or secure his grace, he preaches a beautiful sermon which conveys the beauty of his African-American verbal art. It is the quality of his imagination - his image-making faculty - that redeems John's human failings. Later, his second wife Hattie requests for and is granted a divorce in the White Law Court. Again, John fails to secure his grace through his oratory. Afterwards, he explains to his friend Deacon Hambo that his reason was to hide their African-American secrets from the white people. John prays for another good wife like Lucy and God gives him

one in Sally. In the end, John dies in an accident when his car collides with a moving train, as he is driving home absent-mindedly from Deacon Hambo's place, weighed down by his problems.

### **Characterization: Dressing and Undressing the Characters**

Hurston uses characterization, plot and language to repudiate or reject the stereotype images and prescribed roles, by the whites in the American society and white male authors, of the black man in America as poor, idle, lazy, delinquent and promiscuous on the one hand, and the black woman as sexual, illiterate and unsophisticated, on the other. Through Lucy, the *de facto* protagonist of the novel, the novelist Hurston humanizes woman's existence, validates her experience, individualizes her psyche and celebrates her physical, intellectual and mental capabilities.

Although John is the *de jure* protagonist of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston appears to write with feminist consciousness by creating a very assertive, morally strong, physically and spiritually resilient, and intellectually a more admirable character in Lucy. Since *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is Hurston's first novel, she attempts to maintain the Old Tradition of male literary writers who usually create a male central character. All the same, Hurston knows that she owes women like herself a duty to depict their images more authentically and positively, and to represent their sensibilities more accurately in literature. It is probably for these reasons that such an assertive, strong and unique female character as Lucy is created, so that she could be emulated by other women outside of text. Lucy can, thus, be regarded as the *de facto* protagonist of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.

Even though most of the incidents in the narrative are created around John Pearson, Lucy appears to be morally the more acceptable and favoured character. This helps to corroborate E. M. Forster's postulation that

...the reader may be moving about in worlds unrealized, but the novelist has no misgivings ... He plans his book beforehand; anyhow stands above it, his interest in cause and effect gives him an air of predetermination (Forster 95).

In like manner, it becomes obvious in the course of exploration of John's character that Lucy is created by Hurston to help to give him a sense of direction throughout the period of their marriage, and to serve as the mainstay and cohesive force of the family. Similarly, the morally reformed African-American woman in Zora Neale Hurston's novel, here represented by Lucy, has been designed to help to re-shape the African-American society after the period of slavery. In spite of some initial similarities between John and Lucy in their uniqueness, Lucy turns out to become, indeed, the more admirable character when the two are juxtaposed or placed side by side.

### *A Feminist Reading of Jonah's Gourd Vine*

While John's character constitutes that search for an identity for the black man in America after the Emancipation, Lucy's character comprises a search not only for self-identity for the African-American woman, but also for her roles, and an exploration of her psyche in the post slavery era. Both characters, though oppressed, are endowed with some form of uniqueness to enable them to operate from a position of strength, so as to win self-confidence for members of their separate groups: the one – John - for the black people in general in order to repudiate the myths of white superiority and the non-existence of an African-American culture; the other – Lucy - to win self-confidence for black women, in particular, in order to reject and transcend the myth of women's inferiority.

John is a mulatto, born of a black mother, Amy Crittenden and a white father, probably Alf Pearson, since John was born on the latter's plantation. This conclusion is based on the fact that most white slave-masters used to copulate with their black female slaves in order to propagate more slaves, just as a plant nursery is cultivated. When Alf Pearson asks John: "Er, who is your mama?" John replies, "Amy Crittenden...She say Ah borned on yo place" (88). During slavery, most of the propagated slaves were sold to other plantations so as to separate and estrange them from their mothers. This prevented the development of love by parents for and attachment to the children born into slavery. This sexual violence against women and lack of love for children are some of the aspects of dehumanization of the blacks which are attacked by Hurston in this novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.

Even though Amy Crittenden, her husband Ned, their younger son Zachariah and mulatto son John have relocated to a settlement over the Creek, following the Slave Emancipation, John returns to Alf Pearson's plantation to look for a job or a place to settle because he is rejected by his step-father, Ned Crittenden as a result of that lack of love for children.

The mulatto appears to be at an advantage over the rest of the formerly enslaved black people whose immediate concerns are food and shelter before the search for self-identity. The mulatto tends to have advantage even over poor whites. That is because the mulatto can be employed as a personal assistant to the white master, just as John initially is by Alf Pearson. In such a situation, the mulatto can eat out of the master's kitchen, whereas the black man cannot and he can get very easily convicted for minor offences. On the other hand, the poor whites have to hunt for their own food. Conversely, whenever the mulatto drives his white master past them in a carriage (24), both groups are forced to step aside. Again, owing to false indoctrination about white superiority, the mulatto generally hopes that with a few more mutations, through copulation with only white spouses or partners, his lineage can eventually cross the colour-bar, be accepted as white people and be admitted into the Aryan race. The fact that the male protagonist's or John's superiority, as a mulatto, over blacks - just as that of white Americans - is only superficial could be a literary technique by Hurston to infer that



even the acclaimed superiority of men over women is equally superficial and a farce, not a reality.

In spite of John's apparent advantages because of his complexion, he remains humble and friendly to the black people in Alf Pearson's plantation. This is confirmed by Pheemy when she asks John the following rhetoric question about himself: "Oh you ain't one uh dese uppity yaller niggers then? That means "Oh, you are not like any of these other haughty mulattoes, then?" John replies: "Oh no ma'am. Ahm po' folks jes lak you. On'y we ain't got no fine house over de Creek lak dis heah one" (40). Apart from his mulatto complexion, some other qualities which contribute to John's uniqueness are his humility, imposing stature, and his physical strength as attested to by his step father, Ned, (18), and confirmed by his younger brother, Zachariah (23). Another of John's unique qualities is his handsomeness as corroborated by his apparent biological father, Alf Pearson, (37). John is sent to school by Alf Pearson. There he meets Lucy whom he later marries.

Lucy, the *de facto* protagonist of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, is endowed with exceptional qualities of decency, chastity, and intelligence which make her unique and enable her to serve as a think-tank for her husband, John and the mainstay and cohesive force of her family, in particular, and by implication, of the African-American society, as a whole. Lucy's decency can be attested to, for instance, when she discourages the young John, while still a pupil, from saying "bottom" (64), and when she initially attempts to instill a bit of decency into him as she restrains him from reciting obscene rhymes to her during their courtship. Born into an elitist African-American family which is just emerging after the Emancipation, Lucy is depicted as unique in various respects. Her parents and relations are enlightened, fairly rich and educated, as opposed to the unsophisticated girls in Alf Pearson's and other plantations. Lucy acquires through informal moral education, especially from her mother, high moral standards which Hurston envisions for the emerging African-American society. Even John Pearson, the *de jure* protagonist of the novel, comes from an unsophisticated and uneducated background. Consequently, he too exhibits very low moral standards in his relationship with women. He copulates with most of the girls in Alf Pearson's and the neighbouring plantations like Phrony (50) and Mehaley (91-92). He continues with his moral laxity even as a preacher when he keeps many of his female Church members as concubines.

The young Lucy is renowned throughout the neighbourhood as the best speller (54), the best reciter of long passages (71-72), an excellent chorister (56), and best runner (47). In a mock race on their way home from school, John beats Lucy by only a foot or two. As John tries to gloat over his success which he struggles at all cost to achieve in order to maintain his integrity before his admired girl, he exclaims, "Lucy, Ah beat yuh (65)!" Lucy retorts, "Yeah, you beat me, but look how much mo' legs you got to run wid...Bet if Ah had dem legs nobody couldn't never outrun me" (65). This confirms this

### *A Feminist Reading of Jonah's Gourd Vine*

writer's postulation that Lucy is self-confident, assertive and aware of her great potentials. Hurston seems to be encouraging other women outside of text to be as self-confident and assertive as Lucy, and not be completely docile to the whims and caprices of men or their male lovers. Even John admits that he prefers Lucy to the other girls because of her uniqueness and her exceptional qualities. This is how John puts it in his own words: "She is full of pepper ... but ah laks dat. Anything 'thout seasonin' in it ain't no good" (70). Another of Lucy's unique qualities which Hurston would want emulated by other women is her leadership role as is evident in the young Lucy while still in school. This is what is said of her by the third-person editorial omniscient narrator: "She must have been a leader for several more came and stood back of her" (31).

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston, creates both physically and mentally a more resilient, and morally a more admirable character in the female central character, Lucy, than in the actual male protagonist, John. Hurston attacks the socially prescribed norms concerning compulsory marriage where woman is doomed to remain dependent. Owing to such inhibitive societal norms, Lucy and most of the women in the novel, especially the unsophisticated plantation girls, prefer to serve a self-chosen "god" in a husband, rather than subject themselves to the tyranny of parents or male guardians in the family. Lucy extricates herself from what she considers an oppressive mother, Emmeline Potts, and marries John Pearson, the man of her choice. In view of Lucy's patriarchal socialization to look up to marriage as woman's sole ambition and ultimate goal in life, she gets so overwhelmed with joy on her wedding night that marrying John appears to her like climbing up to glory. This is what we are told by the third-person editorial omniscient narrator: "Riding home that night beside John, she felt as if the moon was radiating sunshine" (131). She ridicules the attempts by her mother, Emmeline Potts, to choose an old, wealthy husband, Artie Mimms, for her by rejecting him thus, in these words: "Whut Ah keer 'bout ole Artie Mimms? His knees is sprung and his head is blossomin' fuh de grave. Ah don't want no ole spring-leg husband (128).

By allowing Lucy to pick a husband for herself, Hurston is celebrating woman's psyche or mental capability to reason for herself and take her own decisions. Lucy is depicted as self-assertive and revolutionary in marriage. She defines self as a rational female human being in a changing African-American emancipated society. This image of the new African-American woman repudiates or rejects and replaces the, hitherto, derogatory image of her in the male-oriented society and in white as well as black, male-authored works as sexual, illiterate, unsophisticated complacent, passive, weak, and mentally indolent. Through Lucy, the African-American woman is redefined as a socially, intellectually, psychologically and spiritually more complex being. Lucy exhibits her self-confidence and positive assertiveness when she tells John during their courtship: "Am, uh Li'l' piece of leather, but well put t'gether..." (69).

*Monique O. Ekpong*

Because Lucy is unique in various ways, she speaks from a position of authority and strength. By choosing her own husband, she is challenging the obnoxious norms of child-bride and compulsory marriage to a parent-picked husband. Lucy's confrontation with her mother, Emmeline Potts and her husband, John reveals the extent a woman must go in revolt to be able to revolutionize or change the prevalent tragic condition of woman, especially in the African-American society. She thus enlightens other women and members of the society about the retrogressive and inhibitive norms that subjugate women in most cultures, particularly in the traditional institution of marriage.

Lucy attempts to correct John and instill discipline into him when she criticizes his philandering in these words:

Youse livin' dirty and Ahm goin' tuh tell you 'bout it. Me and mah chillum got some rights. Big talk ain't changin' whut you doin'. You can't clean yo'self wid yo'tongue lak uh cat (204).

Lucy's confrontation with her husband, John, when she criticizes his philandering reveals woman's rejection of the myth of "silence" for all women, particularly in the marriage context. Her outburst to her husband represents an advocacy by the novelist Hurston for constructive criticism of husbands by wives for the correction of men's wrong-doings, in particular, and the rectification of the entire society. This is encouraged so that the obnoxious and retrogressive aspects of various cultures which condone men's immorality or sexual incontinence but condemn women, sometimes to death, for the same or similar offence may be extirpated or up-rooted and replaced with new ones that affect women positively.

Although most men oppress women, they often acknowledge the power of woman's tongue, for they fear and even cower under it, just as John confesses in these words concerning Lucy: "Dat piece uh red flannel she got hung 'tween her jaws is equal tuh all de fistes God ever made and man ever seen" (157). It must be for the sake of men's fear of the woman's tongue that they attempt to control it by enforcing the myth of "silence" on women, particularly in marriage, so as to preserve the arrogance of men's superiority or masculinity which is nothing but an empty notion. Lucy's outburst jolts John into accepting the equality of women to men in essence through the acknowledgement of the power of woman's tongue (157). The novelist Hurston rejects "silence" in marriage and advocates constructive criticism of husbands by their wives in order to change the attitude of men and the entire society towards women.

To confirm the emptiness of masculinity, Nawal El Saadawi states: "Masculinity is not real, not an essential truth, but only an external shell built up and imposed on women by societies based on class and sexual discrimination" (El Saadawi 77). The emptiness of masculinity is further corroborated by men's frequent empty promises during courtship to their

### *A Feminist Reading of Jonah's Gourd Vine*

female lovers, *fiancées* or young wives as is evident in this novel. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, John makes the following promise to Lucy shortly after their wedding: "Lucy, don't worry 'about yo' folks, hears? ... Jes' you put yo' dependence in me. Ah means tuh prop you up on ev'y leanin' side" (131). Yet in the end John can hardly afford food for his wife when she gives birth to their third baby. He is constrained to steal a piglet for food from a neighbouring plantation. He becomes unfaithful to Lucy and degenerates into a notorious philandering husband. After escaping from trouble in Notasulga, he abandons Lucy and the children without any financial assistance or material support for several months, before sending for them to join him in Eatonville. Even while a Church Moderator at Sanford, he deserts Lucy and their very sick child and hibernates in another side of town with one of his concubines or female Church members until the crisis is over. He goes to the extent of striking Lucy on her sick-bed which later turns to her death-bed for criticizing him for philandering. All these episodes expose some aspects of the subjugation of women in marriage.

Through such episodes, Hurston exposes and protests the degradation of woman. To further corroborate the denigration of woman, Hurston exposes such ludicrous images of her in another novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, where woman is expected by some members of the male-oriented society to be placed on a pedestal and worshipped like an idol, just as Jody initially proposes to treat his wife Janie (*Their Eyes* 49). Another denigrating image of woman, satirized through Jody and protested by the writer Hurston is that a woman is not supposed to have any opinion, and so should not be heard in public (*Their Eyes* 69). He also believes that a woman's place is either at home or anywhere her husband wants her to be (*Their Eyes* 52). Similar negative notions about women are further ridiculed by Hurston through Janie's first husband, Killicks. According to Logan Killicks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, women are considered incapable of reasoning for themselves; their brains are equated to those of children, chicken and cows (*Their Eyes* 110). Woman is considered too delicate to work; therefore, others should work for her (*Their Eyes* 49). A wife is sometimes used as a punch-bag, just as John in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* does to Lucy on her sick-bed (204).

These denigrating images of woman as depicted above confirm the fact that it is men who often instill the negative notion of femininity or passivity into women. No wonder Simone de Beauvoir, as quoted by Molaria Ogundipe – Leslie, defines the notion of femininity as

a fiction invented by men, assented to by women untrained in the rigours of logical thought or conscious of the advantages to be gained from compliance with masculine fantasies (Ogundipe-Leslie 9).

It is note-worthy that these derogatory images of woman which limit her physical and intellectual capabilities are accepted not only by most men but also by unenlightened women who have not acquired analytical education. Some of the women who assent to the negative notion of femininity in the novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, are Emmeline Potts Lucy's mother, Amy Crittenden John's mother, and the unsophisticated plantation girls. Mrs. Potts encourages her daughter Lucy to marry a rich man, Artie Mimms (128). Amy Crittenden, instead of bonding with her fellow women \_ her sister-in-law and mother-in-law \_ antagonizes her son, John Pearson against them, attributing to them her husband's Ned's hostility towards John, his step-son. Even the unenlightened and unsophisticated girls in Alf Pearson's and the other plantations like Phrony (50), and Mehaley (91-92) whose sole ambition and ultimate goal in life is marriage are all, like Emmeline Potts and Amy Crittenden, socio-cultural constructs of a patriarchal, male-oriented society.

Since each feminist conscious or assertive woman develops her own method of revolt for liberation, Lucy in *Jonah's Gourd vine* develops her own strategy through confrontation with her mother and husband, as earlier discussed, in order to challenge patriarchy and male chauvinism and transcend sexism, violence against women and their oppression, especially in marriage. Even though the novelist, Hurston, limits her plot in *Jonah's Gourd vine* within the traditional institution of marriage, she uses this opportunity to expose the anomalies and retrogressive norms which inhibit women's capabilities. She, thereby, reveals the reality of the African-American woman's condition and of womanhood in general. However, Hurston uses the assertive female, *de facto* protagonist, Lucy, to exploit the already indicated alternatives at woman's disposal for survival and self-realization. These alternatives include a daughter's defiance of her parents' authority to choose a husband for her, and the reprimand of a philandering husband. Hurston also individualizes the female psyche as exhibited in Lucy's foresight, intuition and rational contributions towards making her husband John Pearson independent, self-reliant and self-employed when they get to the all-black city of Eatonville.

In this novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, even though Hurston explores the subjugation of woman in the marital context, she still has faith in marriage. She, in fact, advocates the use of decent marriages for the sanitization of the African-American society and the proper up-bringing of children just as Mr. and Mrs. Potts, Lucy's parents, do. This is to curb a situation whereby children are brought into the world usually through rape or the sexual violation of their mothers, as used to be the case during slavery and immediately afterwards. Children born under such circumstances are usually maladjusted in the society and are surer of their mothers than of their fathers, just as is the case with John Pearson. Hurston posits that if children are born into wedlock and are brought up in a decent family environment, they would be better trained, more civil and better behaved like Lucy. They would not

### *A Feminist Reading of Jonah's Gourd Vine*

grow up to become promiscuous like the unsophisticated plantation girls, or John Pearson who becomes a philandering husband.

The dehumanization of African-Americans, in general, and the emasculation of the black man, in particular, by the American white-oriented society, as captured here in John Pearson's character constitute some of the areas of criticism in this novel. They also form aspects of the double victimization of the educated and assertive African-American woman because, even though she was also oppressed as a black, she could hardly find a suitable husband among her own African-American men as at that stage of development in the African-American history. John the male protagonist in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is not a suitable husband for the well-educated, morally strong and assertive Lucy.

In view of a background of slavery, John acquires neither sexual self-discipline nor any professional training. The capitalism and racism of the white American society cause him to remain poor. Owing to a lack of sexual education, John ends up a philanderer. However, with inspiration and support from his wife Lucy, he becomes a self-reliant and self-made man of many parts, in spite of his initial lack of training in any profession. This confirms Hurston's postulation in this novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, that in any situation of oppression, the woman is usually doubly or multiply victimized. To resolve these problems, Lucy the female central character and Hurston's surrogate advocates liberation through uprightness, positivism and formal education for all African-Americans. That is why she reprimands her husband John for his sexual incontinence or adultery, invites the young John, representing the African-American men, to go to school, and later on her dying bed, advises her daughter, Isie, representing women, to acquire a good formal education.

#### **Plot and Flaw of the Novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine***

*Jonah's Gourd Vine* records the passage of the *de facto* protagonist Lucy, according to Maurice Shroder, "from a state of innocence to a state of experience, from that ignorance which is bliss to a mature recognition of the actual way of the world" (Shroder, 9), or to reality. Like most patriarchally socialized girls, Lucy is so anxious to get married that she defies her parents' authority, particularly her mother's protest, and gets married to John, the man of her choice. However, she later realizes that John is not an ideal husband for an assertive, educated and morally strong girl like her. She discovers that, like her love for John which culminates in her miserable marriage to him, love, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it:

represents a curse which confines woman in the feminine universe, leaves her mutilated and insufficient unto herself, offers her sterile hell and becomes for her a source of mortal danger (de Beauvoir, 661).

Robert Hemenway reiterates this cruelty to woman especially in marriage when he attributes the title of the novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, to an incident or a special act of cruelty caused by what he refers to as the "brute-beast" in John, when he strikes Lucy on her sick bed - which shortly afterwards becomes her death-bed - for reprimanding him for philandering or his sexual incontinence. According to Hemenway, "From this moment John's descent begins. He dreams of Lucy, begs her forgiveness, and tries to forget his act. He cannot do so, and it seems likely that this scene was what Hurston had in mind when she explained the novel's title [thus] to Carl Van Vechen:

Oh yes, the title you didn't understand. (Jonah 4:6-10). You see the prophet of God sat up under a gourd vine that had grown up in one night. But cut worm came along and cut it down. Great and sudden growth. One act of malice and it is withered and gone (Hemenway 191-92).

Hurston postulates that an organic relationship between African-American men and women can only be realized when there is sacrificial love and consent as equals between the male and female partners who constitute each couple.

Unlike Lucy, John the *de jure* protagonist of the novel does not journey from innocence to a state of experience or from ignorance to a mature recognition of the actual way of the world or to reality. There is little preparation by the novelist for the horror in the scene of John's brutality. In spite of all his faults as a philandering husband, John has not been portrayed as a man likely to slap his wife Lucy on her death-bed. Although the episode is intended to haunt John, the haunting gets lost in the hypocrisy he encounters with his second wife Hattie, his friends, parishioners and the white Law Court. He becomes as much the victim of others as of himself. This, according to Robert Hemenway, is a good example why *Jonah's Gourd Vine* cannot be properly represented by a plot outline or a discussion of character development (Hemenway 192).

A certain school of thought, to which this writer belongs, believes that *Jonah's Gourd Vine* may appear plot-less because Hurston had not yet found solutions to the plethora of problems confronting blacks in America such as the emasculation of African-American men, racism and capitalism, among others. The African-American man was particularly emasculated to prevent him from revolting against the white-oriented system that originally enslaved him. That was why, to a large extent, he was not empowered through formal education, job-acquisition, better integration into the American society and the enforcement of his black culture or laws that accommodated him in the American social system.

However, Hurston proves through the folkloric content of her novel that an African-American culture exists, and that the creators of that culture

### *A Feminist Reading of Jonah's Gourd Vine*

such as John, the preacher, and the storytellers of her black community lead lives which are ideologically richer and aesthetically more significant than those of the whites. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, since Hurston tends to be more interested in the documentation of the oral verbal art of her rural African-Americans which she considers the matrix of her heritage, she fails to make John's language at crucial moments to articulate his problems. Instead language is exploited to corroborate the existence of an African-American culture. For example, when Hattie, John's second wife, sues him for divorce because of his wrong-doings such as his philandering or adultery with some female members of his congregation, John neither finds the words to secure his personal grace nor obtains the inspiration from the communal spirits to defend himself before the Church Conference or the white man's Law Court. He instead delivers a beautiful climatic sermon. John's personal crises whether to remain a preacher of the word of God, his disappointment with his formerly loyal congregation, his second wife Hattie and his friends, all fade to the background as we become captivated by his language in the Climatic Sermon. It is the quality of his imagination \_ his image-making faculty \_ that always redeems John's human failings. As earlier stated, the preacher as poet is the dominant theme in this novel.

Whereas John should be in harmony with his community at the time of his crisis just as he usually is at the time of his inspired sermons, he is rather at odds with society owing to his dehumanization and emasculation by the white American capitalist and racist society, and as a result of the lack of control over his sexuality and his own destiny. Hurston postulates that this lack of control over one's destiny among the African-Americans is an aftermath of their history of slavery. The African-American man, uprooted from his ancestral homeland in Africa during slavery and thrown into an alien white American culture, loses his dignity and human rights as he gets denied of his rights to education, a career, and fair judgment in the law courts. Even the rights to his manhood are also denied by the white American society when his African-American woman gets raped with impunity during slavery and immediately afterwards by white slave-masters or bosses, without his ability to intervene.

John's inability to use language, particularly at the Climatic Sermon, to secure his personal grace, articulate his problems, or to serve as the *denouement* or resolution of his crises constitutes the greatest flaw in this novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.

#### **Language: Use and Meaning**

Having concluded the exploration of characterization and plot, we shall now examine how the novelist Zora Neale Hurston uses language to expose the oppression of African-Americans in the American white-oriented society, convey her idea of feminist consciousness or female assertiveness and celebrate the poetic artistry of her black cultural heritage shortly after the



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Slave-Emancipation. In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, language is used as a medium for the celebration of the ethos of rural Blacks in the south for the empowerment of African-Americans in general and women, in particular. What is most striking about language in this novel is Hurston's heavy documentation of her African-American dialect which is evident both in the lexical and syntactical patterns. For instance, when John Pearson decides to abandon preaching at the Zion Hope Church in Sanford, he explains his reasons, thus, to his friend, Deacon Hambo:

Ah don't b'lieve Ahm fitted tuh preach de gospel unless de world is wrong. Yuh see dey's ready fuh uh preacher tuh be uh man uhmongst men, but dey ain't ready yet fuh 'im tuh be uh man uhmongst women (282).

The pronunciation and spelling of words like "Ah" for "I", "tuh" for "to", "dey" for "they"; the use of "ain't" for "are not"; the use of the singular form of the verb for plural subjects as in "dey's" and vice versa, the rhythmic pattern of speech as in, "tuh be uh man uhmongst men, but dey ain't ready yet fuh 'im tuh be uh man uhmongst women," are concrete instances of the peculiar lexical and syntactic patterns of the African-American dialect.

The beauty of this dialect is epitomized in Rev. John Pearson's Climatic Sermon at the Zion Hope Church. According to Robert Hemenway, "Brilliantly splashed with poetic imagery" (194), the sermon is so rich and powerful that many white critics do not believe it could come from a "nigger." Yet, this was the original message intended to be conveyed by the writer. Hurston surrounds John her principal character with a world of metaphor that makes his ability only a heightened example of a native aesthetic. Here is a good example from that Climatic Sermon, as John talks about Christ:

But with the eye of faith, I can see Him Look down from His High towers of elevation. I can Hear Him when He walks about the golden streets. I can hear 'em ring under His footsteps: Sol me-e-e, Sol do, Sol me-e-e. Sol do (275).

According to Robert Hemenway, by incorporating into her novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the dynamism of the spoken word which is an aspect of the rural African-American cultural heritage, and by originally entitling this novel as *Big Nigger*, Hurston is defiantly stating that even though the name, "nigger," assigned to the blacks by the whites, connotes everything derogatory, the black preacher possesses an extra-ordinary talent which adds something new from his cultural heritage to the originally white man's religion, Christianity. It also means that even the down-trodden "nigger" - who, from the white Americans' perspective, is an inarticulate, ignorant, uneducated, semi-human being - possesses something new from the matrix of his black heritage which

## *A Feminist Reading of Jonah's Gourd Vine*

he contributes to the “high” culture of written literature (Hemenway 194, 195). Therefore, Hurston’s fiction in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, apart from emphasizing the wisdom, ways of thinking and speaking which emanate from the folk environment, represents the processes of folkloric transmission to the “high” culture of written literature. *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is also an attempt to use African-American culture in oral literature as a basis for creating distinctive black contributions to serious “high” culture in written literature. The reification or objectification of the abstract, as is evident in the images created in John Pearson’s Climatic Sermon, symbolizes the transformation and conversion of the rich African-American oral-aural traditional verbal art into concrete black contribution to the “high” culture of written literature.

It is reiterated here that the preacher as poet is the dominant theme in the novel. The black preacher’s possession of extraordinary talents helps to celebrate the poetic artistry of the African-American cultural heritage.

The following passage corroborates the point that African-Americans were dehumanized and enslaved, and that after a long hard day’s work even after the declaration of the Slave Emancipation, the African-American men needed some relief or liberation, and an injection of racial pride through the use of their dialect. To that effect, here is what we are told by the third person omniscient editorial narrator: “These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long... But now the sun and the bossman were gone ... They became lords of sounds and lesser things” (Hurston 9-10). These lesser things, from the men’s perspective, may have included women whom they oppressed, probably as part of transferred aggression.

By leaving out “the problem” of white oppression and racism, and emphasizing the art in the folkloric phenomenon, Hurston is highlighting the positivism in African-American life-pattern and implicitly telling the whites: “Contrary to your arrogant assumptions, you have not really affected us that much; we continue to practice our own culture which as a matter of fact is more alive, more esthetically pleasing than your own; and it is not solely a product of defensive reactions to your actions” (Hemenway 221). Hurston, thus, attempts to replace the imposed stereotypical images and roles of African-Americans with more realistic and authenticated ones. In the process she identifies who the African-American man or woman really is.

### **Levels of Language**

Four levels of language can be identified in this novel. The story is generally told by a third-person editorial omniscient narrator in the formal version of African-American English. However, this is predominantly interspersed in almost every chapter with dialogue which constitutes scene, or with dramatically narrated portions by the characters themselves. This helps to classify each character according to his level of language.

The four identifiable levels of language in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* include: the formal African-American version of English which is used by the third-

person editorial omniscient narrator; the Standard American English, the version nearest to the Received Pronunciation, which is used by the whites such as Alf Pearson and the Law Courts; the fairly educated African-American dialect used by characters like the male *de jure* protagonist John, the female *de facto* protagonist Lucy, who is John's first wife, and his second and third wives, Hattie and Sally; and the most obscure which is used by the uneducated African-Americans such as Ned, Amy Crittenden, and the black people on the plantations. Since each level of language identifies the peculiarity of the characters that speak it, it is probable that Hurston ceases to use in her subsequent novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the uneducated version common in the more rural plantations depicted in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.

Here is an example of that uneducated version found in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* alone. When Amy Crittenden comments thus: "Ole Massa gwinter scrub floors tuhday" (9), it can be immediately identified that she is a rural, uneducated, African-American woman whose mentality is still greatly influenced by her immediate past slavery condition, in view of her reference to God as "Ole Massa," and her association of God with her former slave master.

On the other hand, when John puns, thus, on the word "knot" during his proposal of marriage to Lucy, it is noticed that his language is representative of the fairly educated African-American dialect which is closer to the formal English than Amy's more rural dialect. John says: "De knot Ah wants tuh tie wid you is de kind dat won't come uh loose 'till us rises in judgment" (125). Although John pronounces the definite article "the" as "de," and uses the object pronoun "us" in place of the subject pronoun "we," his language is not as obscure as Amy Crittenden's in the uneducated African-American dialect in which the utterance, "gwinter" for instance, means "going to" in formal English.

A good example of the Standard American English used by the whites and the Law Courts, which occurs very briefly in the novel is Cy Perkin's remark while complaining to Lucy about her husband's, John's crime: "Tell you the truth, Lucy, if it wasn't for you, and me knowing your papa so well, I wouldn't have parted my lips, but your husband is in a mess of trouble" (162). In spite of the fact that this language is almost identical with the universally accepted Standard English, referred to as Received Pronunciation, yet it has some American English peculiarities. For instance, although the first word of that quotation "tell" is a finite verb and not an imperative, it has no subject pronoun. The Standard English version of that conditional clause should have been, "if it weren't for you," instead of the existing American version, "if it wasn't for you." The American expression, "... If it wasn't for... me knowing your papa," should have been rendered in Standard English as "... if it weren't for... my knowing your father."

A typical example of the editorial narrator's formal African-American version of English in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is as follows: "The Lord of the

## *A Feminist Reading of Jonah's Gourd Vine*

Wheel which turns on itself slept, but the Lord kept spinning, and the troubled years sped on (221).

### CONCLUSION

*Jonah's Gourd Vine* constitutes a search for an identity and alternative roles for both the black man and black woman in America after the Slave Emancipation. Hurston attempts to transcend the black man's oppression and emasculation, through the positive effects of his behaviour as seen in John's acquisition of several jobs including that of a poetic preacher. The novel comprises man's search for spiritual equilibrium against a backdrop of woman's dilemma as she attempts to recreate the morality of a changing, formerly enslaved, African-American communal society.

Zora Neale Hurston in the novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine* celebrates rural black life in the south shortly after the Emancipation, in order to liberate the blacks from the oppression of the American social legislative system which treats African-American behaviour as deviant and abnormal. Hurston, first of all, attempts to instil a sense of racial health and racial pride in all African-Americans, including the women, through the celebration of their oral verbal art to prove that they have a culture. Then she attempts to prove through the communicative behaviour of Eatonville that her black people are not deviant, pathological, or deprived, no matter how they might look to outsiders or to the whites. Therefore, the American legislative system should stop treating black behaviour as deviant and abnormal, but should rather be revised to accommodate the black life-pattern since the African-American way of life has its own aesthetic and ideological values.

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, language is used as a medium for the celebration of the poetic artistry of the black cultural heritage in order to confirm the existence of an African-American culture for the empowerment of African-Americans in general and women, in particular. Hurston's fiction in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* represents the processes of folkloric transmission to the literary high culture of written literature. This justifies the classification of this work as an African-American regional novel.

The novelist Hurston exposes the denigrating condition of woman, particularly in her relationship with man through love or marriage, before attempting to transcend that condition through her *de facto* protagonist or central female character, Lucy. Even though John is the *de jure* protagonist of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston appears to write with feminist consciousness by creating a very assertive, morally strong, physically and spiritually resilient and intellectually admirable female character in Lucy who serves as the *de facto* protagonist of the novel. Apart from defining herself as a thinking individual, Lucy goes further to define a social morality of sex control and faithfulness between husband and wife. She defines the roles of a

wife as a think-tank for her husband and an instrument for his success. She also defines woman as the mainstay and cohesive force of the family. Hurston's depiction of a positive image of woman through the character of Lucy who is self-confident and assertive and who demonstrates the positive roles of a woman in the family and the society contributes in qualifying this literary work as a feminist novel. Therefore, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is, indeed, a feminist African-American regional novel.

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