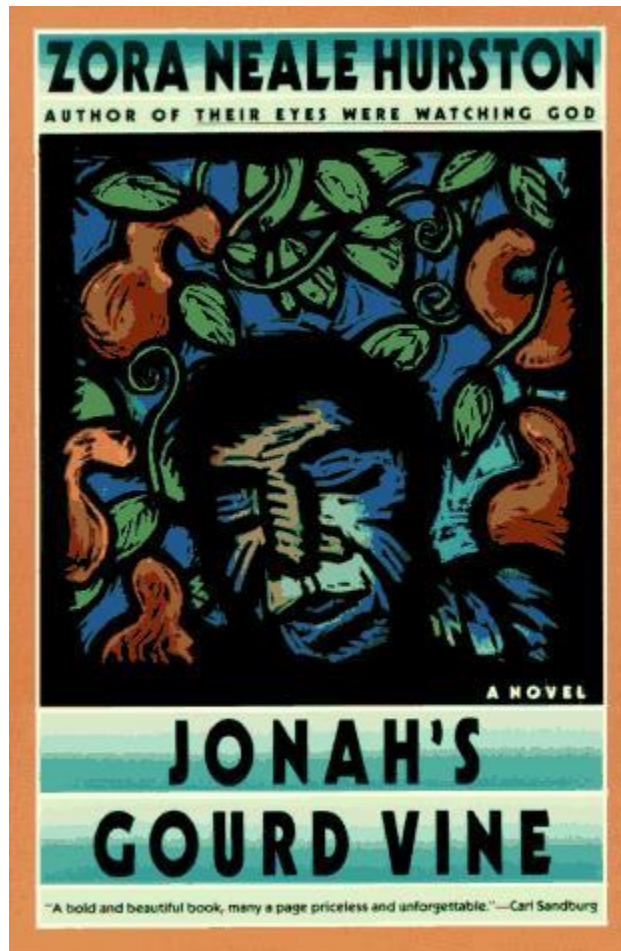


**The Scourge of Slavery in Zora Neale Hurston's
*Jonah's Gourd Vine***

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Abstract

Slavery is an age-old evil practised by human beings all around the world. Slavery is not only a problem of the past, but a present-day scourge too. Unlike other criminal activities, it is

difficult to quantify slavery because it is part of an underground economy that takes place behind closed doors and is hidden from investigators and law. Also, victims are reluctant to seek help or cooperate with law enforcement due to fear of reprisals to themselves or their families. There is no country in the world where slavery is legal today. Nonetheless, slavery and slavery-like conditions continue. There must be systemic change to curb and then eradicate such shocking inhumanity.

Focus of This Paper

This paper entitled “The Scourge of Slavery in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*” the horrors of slavery that exist in black families in the US. It analyses the the Crittendon and the Pearson families and illustrates the myriad forms of oppression that men and women in black society are forced to endure all through their life. The paper ends on the note that slavery can be abolished only by individual enlightenment and efforts.

Keywords: Slavery, oppression, enlightenment

Introduction

Vestiges of slavery is visible in the Crittendon family. Through Ned, Pheemy, Amy and John, Hurston traces “the traumatic legacy of slavery” (*Miles* 31). The Crittendons are bound to Alf Pearson for three generations. The two sides of the creek in Notasulga shows distinct difference in the nature of slavery. On one side of the creek, where Ned-Amy family lives, cruel slavery system prevails. On the other side of the creek, where Lucy Potts resides, one finds “benign remnants of slavery” (*Campbell* 51). In this side of the creek, black children are treated a little better than beasts; they are provided basic education. But here too, the rottenness of the American slavery system can be smelled.

Even after the abolition of slavery, whites continue to have a strong hold over blacks. For example, Alf not only owns his large plantation but also a large black community. His race-consciousness is best revealed in his treatment of his illegal son John. While he dotes on his white son Alfred he rejects his black son. While he takes best care of Alfred and sends him to Europe for higher studies, he offers only minimum education to John. Further, he treats him only as a menial and offers him used clothes. He is only a benevolent master to John, never a father.

Female Slave – Pheemy

Hurston shows the desperate burden of female slaves through Pheemy and Amy. Both the mother and daughter were slaves in Alf’s plantation. In addition, they were treated as sex-slaves by their master. While Amy leaves the plantation after manumission, Pheemy continues to work for Alf.

Although not much is mentioned about Pheemy, Hurston recounts the racial and sexual violence against Amy in the early pages of the novel. She was sexually exploited by her master at eleven. At twelve, she mothered her first mulatto son, John Buddy.

Hurston's Novels - *Jonah*

Beggarly treatment of blacks by whites is always highlighted in almost all the novels of Hurston. Whites never care for the feelings of blacks. Often, they are found lending a helping hand to their black servants by lending them their used clothes. In *Jonah*, John is given used clothes by Alf.

While *Jonah* highlights racism practised by whites against blacks, it also draws attention to racial politics within the black society. In fact, this novel is more preoccupied with the problems among blacks than the problem between whites and blacks—blacks hating blacks on the basis of skin colour. In black society, fair-skinned blacks are always envied by dark-skinned blacks. In *Jonah*, John Buddy is so fair that he passes off as a white. Hence, Ned despises John Buddy. Envyng his fair skin, he takes pleasure in taunting him. When the novel opens, Ned is found controlling not only his wife but also John. His hatred for John is made visible in his shower of abusive words: “You jes’ do lak Ah say do and keep yo’ mouf shet or or Ah’ll take uh trace chain tuh yuh. Yo’ mommy mought think youse uh lump uh gold ‘cause you got uh li’l’ white folks color in yo’ face, but Ah’ll stomp yo’ guts out and dat quick! Shet dat door!”(2). Calling John as a “good fuh nothin’ trashy yaller rascal” (46), Ned intimidates him almost always.

Black Men Treating Their Black Wives

Ned’s bestial treatment of his wife is similar to whites’ treatment of slaves. His life long experience as slave reflects in his behaviour to Amy. His psychological dejection as a powerless man renders him impotent and results in his rejection of familial duty. As he was bought and sold into slavery, so he binds his stepson to Mimms. The sight of his mulatto step-son reminds him of his slave history and his impotence to protect his wife from rape. Hence, he treats his wife and children with brutal violence. Miles observes, “His[Ned] ambiguity regarding his identity as a free man combines with his definition of Negro as mule to psychologically maintain his slave status even in a free state” (*Women* 16).

Cannon states, “While freedom brought new opportunities for black men, for most it augmented old problems” (44). Cannon’s words best suit *Jonah*. They are not only ill-treated by whites but also by black men. Thus, they are more oppressed than black men. For example, Amy is treated as a slave by her husband Ned just as she was treated by Alf. While she bears a child for her master, she bears six children for Ned. With Ned, Amy labours in the plantation from morning till evening and discharges her domestic chores. In her view, living as a black man’s wife is better than being a slave for whites. As a slave she would be vulnerable for sexual tortures from not only her master but other men as well. But by marrying a black man she can guard herself from sexual slavery. Hence, she marries Ned who is nothing but “an alligator in jeans” (8) and puts up with his curses and beatings. While she can assert her rights with a black man, it is not possible with her white master. When she tells John, “Ah kin strain wid Ned. Ah jes’ been worried ’bout you and him” (11) it is quite clear that she is not only interested in the welfare of her son but also her husband, however oppressive he might be.

On another occasion, Amy points out to Ned about his biased treatment of John thus: “He[Ned] is jes’ ez obedient tuh you and jes’ ez humble under yuh, ez he kin be. Yet and still you always washin’ his face wid his color and tellin’ ’im he’s uh bastard”(3). She wants Ned to treat John on par with his other sons just as she showers her affection and offers protection to all her seven children, irrespective of their skin colour.

Forced to Support Themselves

Black women are forced to support themselves since they never get the helping hand of black men. Even in the face of formidable oppression, they show “unshouted courage” (*Cannon* 133). In *Jonah*, one can understand the weak-mindedness of men and the enormous strength of women. John never understands his worth till he is noticed and encouraged by Lucy. He feels inferior as a black. His sense of inferiority is quite apparent when he responds to Lucy’s idea of buying a plot thus: “Dat’s uh bigger job than Ah wants tuh tackle, Lucy... *Wese colored folks*. “Don’t be so much-knowin’(109)(words italicized my emphasis). But she persuades the diffident John to try his expertise in carpentry and buy a five acre plot too. Soon he flourishes as a successful man.

Eatonville and John

Hurston favours Eatonville as a safe place for blacks in America. In *Jonah*, John prospers in quick strides only in the black town Eatonville. When he arrives first at Eatonville, he is taken aback by the black surroundings. The black town is like an oasis in the race-prejudiced US. The moment he surveys the town he resolves, “Ahm comin’ back tuh dis place. Uh man kin be sumpin’ heah ‘thout folks tramplin’ all over yuh. Ah wants mah wife and chillum heah” (107). His words reveal the intensity of oppression he had endured under Alf Pearson as well as his step father Ned.

From an illiterate servant, John gradually rises to become an independent minister of Zion Hope Church and influential Mayor of Sanford only when he settles down in the black town. His remarkable achievement is made possible only because of his black wife and his black surrounding. While he is encouraged and supported at Eatonville, he is cunningly suppressed by Alf Pearson, who knows the enormous potentials of John. Only when John leaves Alf’s plantation, one can notice a silver lining in his life. Through John, Hurston conveys the idea that so long as blacks live in the white dominated areas of US, they can never breathe freedom and progress. On the other hand, when they live amidst their own folk, they can witness their growth in all spheres of life.

Lucy

Likewise, Lucy is never comfortable at Notasulga. She longs to lead a peaceful life free from racial oppression. When she arrives at Eatonville, a sense of *déjà vu* fills her heart. Hurston describes her feelings thus:

Lucy sniffed sweet air laden with night-blooming jasmine and wished that she had been born in this climate. She seemed to herself to be coming home. This was where she was meant to be. The warmth, the foliage, the fruits all seemed right

and as God meant her to be surrounded. The smell of ripe guavas was new and alluring but somehow did not seem strange.(*Jonah* 109).

The comfort and the sense of security that Lucy enjoys at Eatonville makes her weave lofty plans for the betterment of her family. Both John and Lucy favour self-employment; while John gropes for ways to implement his dreams, Lucy readily gives him ideas and goads him into action.

Like John, Lucy believes that Eatonville is the best place to guard her children from oppression. She says to John, “Dey[Her children] won’t be seein’ no other kind uh folks actin’ top-superior over ’em and dat’ll give ’em spunk tuh be bell cows theyselves, and you git somethin’ tuh do ’sides takin’ orders offa other folks. Ah ’bominates dat(109). Her words show the intensity of racial oppression she had experienced at Notasulga. She wants to provide the best possible environment, devoid of racism, for her children. She is keen on protecting them from the rampant racism. Also she wants her husband to work and earn independently. She says to John, “And now less don’t pay Joe Clarke no mo’ rent. Less buy dis place,...” (109). She is convinced that human beings should never stoop to another for survival. According to her, one should be one’s own boss.

Portrayal of Race

In *Jonah*, the portrayal of race issues in the US is undoubtedly complex. While the highlights racist attitude of whites, it also does not fail to portray their humanitarian nature. In *Jonah*, Alf Pearson is kind to John and Lucy. He even presents a feather bed to the couple on their wedding. He treats John and Lucy better than his other servants.

Hurston’s profound love for her race flashes in *Jonah*. Her black pride gleams in many pages of *Jonah*. She fearlessly exposes the inventiveness of blacks and foxiness of whites in the passage, “...niggers think up eve’ything good and de white folks steal it from us...Nigger invented de train. White man seen it and run right off and made him one jes’ lak it and told eve’ybody he thought it up. Same way wid ’lectwicity. Nigger thought dat up too” (148).

Hurston views both blacks and whites as bundles of complexity. She asserts her black pride without hurting the feelings of white folk. Her depiction of whites is mostly good and compassionate.

In *Jonah*, Alf Pearson is a tolerably good master. His soft corner to John and Lucy cannot go unnoticed. When John arrives in his farm looking for job, Alf immediately takes him up as his servant. He never inflicts physical torture on his servants. He gives promotion to John and acts in the interest of Lucy and advises the philandering John to mend his ways. Once when John is arrested for stealing a pig, he magnanimously pays for the hog and releases him. Giving five dollars to John, he advises him to go to a far-off place in order to avoid further troubles. By portraying the good side of whites and the seamy side of black, Hurston conveys the fact that no race is pure. She considers race consciousness to be the scourge of humanity; it is the preoccupation of little minds. In *Jonah*, the black women Lucy and Amy enjoy “psychic

freedom” (*Meisenhelder* 23) even in dire oppression. By depicting the bright side of black life in the all black town of Eatonville Hurston shows that freedom is possible for blacks even in the face of racism.

Thus, *Jonah* portrays the scourge of slavery and its consequences on blacks in the US. The uniqueness of the novel lies in its effort to ignite the dormant race pride in blacks. Further, *Jonah* asserts “the inaudible stout heartedness” (*Cannon* 11) of black women amidst rigid racial inequalities. Hurston points to blacks the affirmative side of life amidst brutalizing oppression. Hurston’s analysis of power relations between black and white involves not just the presentation of a grim oppression but also their enthusiastic resistance to it. Thus, *Jonah* makes a clarion call for human equality. By portraying blacks as inferior to none in their ability and in their accomplishments in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, *Jonah* affirms the black race as one of the great human races in the world.

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