

Defying Sexism in Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat"

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ABSTRACT

Zora Neale Hurston an Afro-American's most distinguished short story "Sweat" published in 1926, provides an insight on her perspective of human social behaviour during the turn of 19th Century when discrimination based on gender and race were epidemic in the United States. Hurston's sex and race have undoubtedly shaped the story, imbuing its content with a deep political statement on social inequality. However, this paper argues that the quality of Hurston's writing, which in this case takes the form of the often times marginalized short story, is exemplary and transcends both her race and gender. She developed independence and challenged the old-fashioned belief that encouraged women to remain oppressed, in terms of their economic status. This independence and defiance against social norms is highly reflected in the story through protagonist Delia. Hurston refuses to perpetuate the stereotypical roles for black women and does not reinforce sexist modes of oppression. She in-turn encourages black women to defy sexism by not allowing themselves to become victims and by showing how those who abuse women get what they deserve.

Key Words: Discrimination, Epidemic, Marginalized, Oppression and Defiance

INTRODUCTION

Women at large in recent times have been shattering stereotypes and breaking into the literary field. This stands apt for the author Zora Neale Hurston and her short Story, *Sweat* that got published in 1926. Hurston was a foremost African American Writer who was notable in a predominantly black cultural movement, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. She was born on January 7, 1891 and brought up in Florida, the place which plagued with sexism and racism during that period had by chance happened to be the themes that shaped most of her works. Her short story *Sweat* revolves around the story of Delia, who by profession is a washerwoman in a small Central Florida Village. The basic element of the story is

all about a marriage. Her husband Sykes does not work, yet he resents that Delia cleans the clothes of white folks in their home. He is unkind to Delia by abusing her both mentally and physically for fifteen years ever since they got married. Delia was remarked by the observers in the town about how beautiful she was once and how she lost her shine because of her abusive husband. Sykes scares his wife by using her fear of snakes. Sykes has an affair with another woman and spends Delia's hard earned money on his portly mistress Bertha. Tired of Delia and seeking out pleasure with Bertha, Sykes plans to poison Delia and brings a rattle snake into the house and plants it in her washing clothes. In a bit of karmic fate, the snake

ironically ends up killing Sykes. However, at the end of the story, it becomes obvious to the reader that Delia does not make any attempt to help her husband as he lay dying from the wounds inflicted by the

DISCUSSION

Writing has been classified as masculine historically and it is associated with paternalism, creation and even Godliness. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in their essay "The Madwoman in the attic" that "a pen is a metaphorical penis" (64).

The ability to write has historically been seen as derived from male sexuality and akin to all things masculine. Just as maleness is associated with all things superior and femaleness associated with things inferior as well explained in the stark binaries of logo centric thinking, females are on the opposite side of the binary when it comes to writing. (Jones 228)

Therefore, women were long excluded from writing, "If male sexuality is integrally associated with the assertive presence of literary power, female sexuality is associated with the absence of such power" (Gilbert and Gubar 67). This opinion might be seemingly confirmed with the dearth of female writings from the earlier times. However, one must feel the extreme lack of access to education afforded at that time to women, the left outs of which are felt even today. As Virginia Woolf argues in "A Room of One's Own," as "certainly, there were women in the past with great passion and creativity that were barred from writing due to societal norms" (47-48).

In the Eighteenth Century novels are developed as a low form of literature

snake, fatally, in the neck. In response, Delia sits meditatively below a chinaberry tree waiting for her husband to expire, and ignoring his pleas for aid.

which was easy to read and write as compared to other forms. Women were associated with novel as it was considered lowly in a slight variance from the binary discussed above – all superior things are tend to be associated with maleness while femaleness tends to be associated with all inferior things. At this juncture:

To think of a woman as having a special aptitude for writing novels was...something of a black-handed compliment, given the low status of a product which, as Jane Austen complained, tended to be thought of as only a novel and therefore as something to be taken no more seriously than woman themselves. (Ruthven 93)

He argued that such a negative perspective should be fought against. In present times, it seems society is coming to this more enlightened stance on the novel as more and more educated authors, both men and women, are expressing themselves in the novels and in the short stories. As an intelligent woman educated at Barnard College Hurston herself is celebrated as a talented author. In Short story genre she was able to convey a strong political message that was made all the more poignant and meaningful because of the form and style in which it was written.

Hurston makes subtle arguments as a talented author writing on the issue of female inequality in marriage in her short story *Sweat* to forward the cause of feminism. As a strong and independent woman the protagonist Delia finds herself

at the receiving end of the patriarchal society that strongly privileges men and denigrates women. There is also another important facet that the story deals specifically with race. Hurston is not only promoting feminism but specifically black feminism. The story comprises many African American characters and makes only minimal reference to whites. Like Hurston, not only is the protagonist Delia underprivileged by gender, she is underprivileged by race. "Sykes is similarly underprivileged by race but in his relationship with Delia he is dominant in the relationship because of his gender" (*Sweat* 3).

Delia is a dynamic character that rises from the domination imposed by her husband, shakes it off like ash, and frees her from him. Delia transcends from a passive female, who accepts her husband's abuse, to one who defends herself both physically and verbally. Despite her social and economical status the oppression that the protagonist Delia experienced was not from White folks instead it is from her own family. Her husband Sykes is the one who often exploits and oppresses her. Zora Neale Hurston never expressed her discontent on the fact that she was black or female. She never projects the white folks in her story in a negative light, instead her focal point is on a toxic tyrannical relationship in which woman consequently comes out top. Delia on only one instance in the story speaks about the white folks and that too she uses them as a tool to threaten Sykes as she says, "Ah'm goin'tuh de white folks 'bout you, mah young man, de very nex' time you lay yo' hands on me. Mah cup is donerun ovah" (*Sweat* 158).

Zora Neale Hurston wrote in her autobiography *How it feels to Be Colored Me*,

I am not tragically coloured. There is not great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world- I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife. (Hurston 152)

The role reversal of male and female characters is clearly noticed at the reader's attempt of close reading at the gender role assigned in the story of *Sweat*. The woman holds the position a head of being the breadwinner rather the man as one could find Delia in the story. It is the woman who stands stronger rather the man being the strong one. This minute detail throws light on Zora's own belief about women and society and how much they can be stronger and more flexible than society gives them credit for. Zora reveals this sexist mentality of the time and gives a clever twist by allowing the antagonist to die by his own folly thus stating clearly what goes around comes around.

Zora Neale Hurston as a celebrated black, female author is lumped into a category with the rest of Harlem Renaissance black writers. In her lifetime she was never paid what she deserved for her works. Indeed when she died on January 28, 1960 she was helpless and lacked enough money for her funeral. Her neighbours had planned to take up a collection to pay for Hurston's

funeral and they were unable to collect enough sums to purchase a headstone.

The protagonist Delia Jones victory in the end of Hurston's short story *Sweat* also adds Zora Neale Hurston and all African Women with her in the literary circle. Towards the end of the story Delia Jones is freed from Sykes, her oppressive husband and will be able to live an independent, happier life without him. Similarly Zora Neale Hurston was redeemed in 1973, when Alice Walker travelled to Hurston's final resting and marked her gravesite with a tombstone after thirteen years of being unmarked.

Hurston and her works perhaps of being marginalized are still read and celebrated today. While much more progress is expected in the field of literature for women, for African Americans and for African American women, Hurston stands as an exemplary figure and hers is a success story to serve as a reminder of the progress in the field of literature especially by women and black women. Though her gender and race has influenced the content of her short story *Sweat*, yet her skill as a writer transcends both gender and race. Apart from representing a strong black female voice Zora Neale Hurston's fiction also creates ultimately meaningful and beautiful literature.

CONCLUSION

Sweat alludes both to not only Delia's toil which supports her economically in a

society that provided little employment opportunities to black women but also to the physical and emotional abuse Sykes imposed on her. That way Hurston's short story *Sweat* is represented as a female empowerment text about women overcoming her abusive husband. As David Headon in his book *Beginning to see things really* admits, the story "forcefully establishes an integral part of the political agenda of black literature of this century... Hurston places at the foreground feminist questions concerning the exploitation, intimidation, and oppression inherent in so many relations" (Headon 37).

Our society expects women to generally serve men, to please men with their beauty, to be that innocent mind that depend men tremendously depend on, to be the helpmate any men would wish to have, and to be the girly woman the men dream of having. That said, when looking at *Sweat* through feminist and historical lens, Hurston explains the idea of a sexist society full of men exploiting and breaking down women until they dispose them. To conclude, Zora declines to sustain the stereotypical roles of black women and does not toughen sexist modes of oppression. Instead she inspires black women to defy sexism by not permitting themselves to become victims and by presenting how those who abuse women get what they deserve.

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