Zora Neale Hurston’s Works On Female Issues

Posted on October 30, 2019

View this essay online:
https://academic-master.com/zora-neale-hurstons-works-on-female-issues/

“Sweat, Sweat, Sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!”.

–Zora Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston is an author of an era that is the most crucial time period in the evolution of current modern society. The 1920s were witnessing marvelous technological and scientific advances, and society was about to take turns. Reading “Sweat” by Zora Neale Hurston provides the reader with an image of the happenings in the lives of Black women during the 1920s and their struggle for identity and success. The most important aspect of the story is its revelation of discrimination that Black subculture women were facing in the pre-modernism era. Their struggles and problems were manifold; they had to face color discrimination outside and gender discrimination inside their homes (Miller, 2024).

The era is known as the Harlem Renaissance period by historians because of the famous historic racial movement, “New Negro Movement,” which was centered in New York’s area of Harlem, thus called the Harlem Renaissance. Though the movement was based in New York, it spread its effects through the states of America. Zora was an African-American Black anthropologist and author who wrote a number of famous novels, short stories and folklore. Her works are recognized for the themes of discrimination against Blacks in American society and women’s issues. “Sweat” is a story written by Zora in 1926 when the use of alcohol was just outlawed and Black and white segregation prevailed in society. The works by Zora played an inspirational and influential role for readers and other creative writers. The 1920s and 1930s saw significant changes in the racial, cultural and social spheres; the Blacks and other minorities then were initially able to develop their norms, morals, customs and ideals of their own through creative arts.

Many of the social issues were unspoken in the literature at the time when Zora wrote “Sweat.” Even the whites did not write about the social issues of violence, mental torture and adultery in short stories. Hurston belonged to a completely Black town, Eatonville, in Florida. The townspeople used to walk across a railroad to go to their jobs in the houses of the whites as maids, chauffeurs and similar domestic workers. In “Sweat,” Zora represents her own town and, being a Black woman, her own

story. “Sweat” reveals the story of a woman struggling for her family and herself through the course of her life; the woman has a dream of having a house where she could spend her last days in peace (Jordan, 2022).

The women in that period were conventionally expected to do domestic work and take care of their husbands and kids. Social movements and unions for the rights of women were emerging, and such factors, being a Black female author, really affected the works of Zora Neale Hurston. The changes in the position and status of women in the family institution were also taking place in society, and this is demonstrated in “Sweat” to an extent, as Delia, the lead character of the story, was the sole breadwinner of the family. She works in the houses of white people, washing their clothes on a regular basis.

However, she still has to face the yelling and beating of her husband, Sykes. Sykes hates her for washing the clothes of white people and belittles her despite her efforts for the family. Men at that time felt they should be appreciated and regarded highly in the family. The story portrays Sykes as a violent man who frequently gets upset and annoyed with his wife, Delia, the main character of the story. Delia faces discrimination and violence from her husband, yet she goes to wash the clothes of people to earn bread for her family, including her husband. The husband cheats on her, abuses her physically and verbally and frightens her with snakes deliberately, as he knows that Delia’s biggest fear is snakes (Charles, 2021).

The behavior of the husband is quite illustrated, but no reasons behind the development of such an attitude are given by Zora in the story. That is perhaps because the author wanted to highlight the aspect of discrimination and violence that Black women of that era had to face from male members of the family. The reader is set free to think about the reasons for such behavior of Sykes. The general perception might occur in the minds of the readers that Delia was earning bread for the family, and the male ego of Sykes couldn’t simply accept it and wanted to affirm his “manly” power by not only abusing his wife physically but also by not recognizing her efforts to feed the family.

Similarly, it might be that he did not want to let his wife remind him that he failed to provide for the family and take care of it. In his analysis of “Sweat,” Betty Nosam writes that Sykes, the husband of Delia in the story, faced repetitive failures in providing for his family, and for this, he is angry and takes his anger out on his wife by taunting her physical appearance, such as pony, carriage, and other items (Nosam). The reason behind the development of such evil behavior of a Black husband toward his wife may be caused by the maltreatment that they faced by white men out there. Black men frustrated with respect and power would adopt such behavior in their families, especially toward their wives.

The author also beats the general perception about the effects of a husband’s abuse and torture on the wife that the wife will back down as most of the women of the 1920s used to do. Delia not only keeps on struggling with earning money; rather, she retaliates against him by saying, “*Mah tub of suds is filled yo’ belly with vittles more than yo’ hands is filled it. Mah sweat is done paid for this*

house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin' in it". (Hurston 408).

Delia is portrayed to be a hard worker who never misses her work and wouldn't listen to the taunts of her husband abusing her for washing the clothes of white people. *"You sho is one aggravatin' nigger woman!" he declared and stepped into the room.".* She resumed her work and did not answer him at once.". She has a strong work ethic; ".*But she was a wash-woman, and Monday morning meant a great deal to her".* It symbolizes the Black women of the 1920s who built their strong professional characters and eventually achieved enormous successes in various fields.

Sykes, after the retaliation from Delia, leaves her alone to make her live an unhappy life and cheats on her with another woman, Bertha; he would shower Bertha with gifts and everything on the money earned by Delia. Delia bears all of this but carries on struggling; what gives her strength is going to the church and her small well-maintained house. She knows that her troubled married life with her husband will ultimately ask for a resolution. She thinks about it and figures out, "Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back has got to come under his belly.".

Delia receives sympathies from the townsfolk; they dislike Sykes for his bad behavior toward Delia: "There oughter be a law about him… He ain't fit to carry guts to a bear." On Delia's return from work, Sykes talks to Bertha, telling her that he will get her whatever she wants to buy; he does it deliberately to show Delia and annoy her. Bertha remains in the town for up to three months and leaves. Sykes finds another way to tease Delia by bringing a snake into the house. Delia is terribly frightened, but the husband won't listen. One day, she finds a chance to set the snake loose and wait quietly for the husband to come home. A lot of noise comes from the kitchen, and Sykes gets bitten by the snake; instead of helping him, Delia stands watching him die. The author has tried to portray the mental tiredness of a woman caused by her husband, and she ultimately decides to get him killed. Suppression results in retaliation.

The main character of the story is a representation of a true Black woman during the time of the Harlem Renaissance. She is beaten, scolded, frightened, and discriminated against, but she does not lose heart. She is loving towards her family and husband, but when the husband tortures her to death, she loses all her feelings for him and watches him die in front of her eyes (Fatah, 2024).

Although "Sweat" is considered to be a piece of typical feminist literature, it has a great deal of importance because of the time period in which it was written, the personal experiences of the author, and her affiliation with the character of a Black woman in society. The woman is shown to possess tolerance, forbearance, love, strength and professional ethics. Delia is portrayed as a strong woman who knows when to be patient and when to decide that something is unbearable; Delia gives many chances to her husband. Even after his extra-marital relationship, she attempted friendliness, which was brutally refused. The ultimate "let go" by a woman is shown in the climax scene when the husband is bitten by the snake and Delia does not approach him to help; the text clearly demonstrates the reason behind this. She had had enough, and that was the moment to get rid of the biggest problem of her life. Besides, it shows that she was independent enough to decide to live

without her husband easily.

Interestingly, Zora, in her works on female issues, has expressed a certain sense of humor, and a similar way of expression from an African-American female author was necessary in an era that followed reconstruction. Most of the creative art produced during this era of social instability and change spoke to the issues of female identity. The domestic dynamic of the African-American subculture was changing as well in the 1920s and 1930s. During the slavery period, African American family institutions were matriarchal as female members used to lead them. Emancipation from slavery and the reconstruction period observed changes in the family system of African American culture; men went to paid jobs, and women left home to take care of domestic affairs. The discrimination faced by African American women were twofold; they were discriminated against on the basis of race differences, especially for the color of their skin, and on the other hand, they were facing domestic discrimination by males in the family.

"*Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me."*

—Zora Neale Hurston

References

Jordan, J. (2022). Sexual abuse of Black women in the works of Zora Neale Hurston. *The Journal of American Culture, 45*(3), 298–308. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jacc.13399

Charles, J. S. (2021). Fraternal fractures: Marriage, masculinity, and malicious menfolk in Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat" and "Magnolia Flower." *Women's Studies, 50*(1), 48–60. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00497878.2021.1874802

Miller, C. P. (2024). "I have been in sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots": The lived and literary labors of Zora Neale Hurston. *MELUS, 49*(4), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlae058

Fatah, S. M. (2024). The dual burden: Gender and racial inequality in Hurston's "Sweat." *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Gender Studies and Sexuality*. https://www.dpublication.com/abstract-of-5th-icgss/2828/