PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S SERAPH ON THE SWANEE

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ABSTRACT

In the late 1970s, White-dominated feminist theory has found its focus on gender issues. The African Americans often imagined freedom as an act of fleeing to the North, frantically seeking refuge. Women of color pointed out that it is necessary to understand how race and class interconnected with gender in order to comprehend the reality of their lives. This extended focus is battled by many white and class privileged feminists who thought that a shift in focus would weaken the movement. Black women were faced with the complicated task of dealing with racial oppression at the same time; they dealt with gender conflicts in the black community. In Seraph, the main characters are white, while African American characters are minor and occurring on the periphery of the plot, but thematic issues are more or less the same. The major themes such as marriage, religion, search for self-identity, love, psychological repression all are undoubtedly, present in this novel. The paper focuses on the protagonist’s struggle and psychological trauma within her and at last how she overcomes the problem and let herself in peace.

Key words: Love, Gender, Psychological trauma, Identity, Struggle, Oppression.

Introduction:

Zora Neale Hurston’s Seraph on the Suwanee (1948) has long been focus on white marriage and its mulatto form of merging white characters with black words, or what scholars would call African American Vernacular English (AAVE), have greatly perplexed Hurston scholars. In the novel, Hurston tells the story of a man and a woman who happen to be white. The main character, Arvay, is a self-consumed, not very bright, poor white woman of “cracker” lineage who is married to Jim, a white man. Sadly, Hurston’s decision to frame her text in such a way has sparked the dismissal of one of her finest works. Seraph on the Suwanee is not brimming with folktales or endeavours at anthropology like many of Hurston’s other works; instead, the novel is her

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successful attempt at writing about people and the problems that they face in love and marriage. In *Black Fiction*, Roger Rosenblatt writes, “In every instance black is synonymous with rejection, defeat, impossibility, or some aspect of predetermined life. Black is both the color the hero bears and the force against which he pits his strength” (9).

Arvay is from the small town of Sawley in West Florida, on the banks of the Suwanee River. Sawley is a sawmill town full of poor, white, religious individuals. Arvay grows up in the shadow of her older sister, Larraine (also called ‘Raine’). ’Raine is attractive in the thick way Sawley women are supposed to be and is able to catch the eye of the new minister in town. Hurston writes, “[Arvay’s parents] did not suspect that the general preference for Larraine, Arvay’s more robust and aggressive sister, had done something to Arvay’s soul across the years” (9). The townspeople’s constant preference for ‘Raine mentally affects Arvay. After witnessing the marriage of her sister to Reverend Carl Middleton at the Day Spring Baptist Church, Arvay “turn[s] from the world” (3). She becomes religiously obsessed and refuses all suitors until Jim Meserve arrives. Jim is not from Sawley—he comes from “good stock.” Jim’s family owned plantations before the Civil War, so this pedigree distances him from the poor white families of Sawley. Meisenhel-der explains that even though *Seraph on the Suwanee* has been “read as evidence of Hurston’s growing conservatism or ambivalence about race and gender,” it really is her “most thorough critique of the dominant culture, one that details the emptiness of its models of identity and relationships for black women and men” (92). The protagonist Arvay Henson has an intriguing relationship with nature. Arvay’s father works in a turpentine camp. It is in this turpentine farm, that Jim Meserve, Arvay’s prospective husband comes to work. Turpentine becomes a natural remedy for Arvay’s hysterical fits. The Mulberry tree is one of the most important symbols in the novel. Morris observes that: “The mulberry tree is an intrinsic part of Arvay’s character just as the blossoming pear tree is to Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Arvay’s —image of herself centres around a tree, in this case a mulberry tree, that grows behind her home is Sawley ( 9)”. For Arvay, the mulberry tree in her backyard is her “—sacred place and —a cool green temple of peace (Seraph, 632)”. It is a place where Arvay secretly fantasizes about her brother-in-law Carl Middleton. She brings Jim to the tree as a gesture of atonement and to purge herself of all the fantasies about Carl Middleton. Hurston writes:

She wanted Carl and all her thoughts about him to be gone from under that mulberry tree. She wanted to feel that the temple was cleansed, and that she herself was clean and worthy of what she was about to receive”. (632)

Ironically, Hurston culminates in her epic feminist text within the confines of marriage. Marriage, at least in the traditional sense that has been perpetuated by different cultures, has often been a sore spot for feminists because the traditional aspect of marriage has frequently acted as a hindrance for women. In marriage, women have been viewed as the subject or property of their spouses and often relegated to the role of cook, maid, mother, and sexual provider, leading marriage to be viewed as the simplest arena of inequality. Arvay and Jim’s relationship begins on shaky ground. Jim purpose-fully gets turpentine in Arvay’s eye during one of her fits. Jim then rapes Arvay right before their wedding. In the midst of this, they still seem to fall in love. Jim loves Arvay, but he also holds on to his misogynistic view of women:
Love and marry me and sleep with me. That is all I need you for. Your brains are not sufficient to help me with my work; you can’t think with me. Let’s get this thing straight in the beginning. Putting your head on the same pillow with mine is not the same thing as mingling your brains with mine anymore than crying when I cry is giving you the power to feel my sorrow. (35)

Arvay would have endured additional struggles if her skin had been black. The story of her struggle with inferiority might have been lost in the larger tale of her race. By avoiding race, Hurston is able to avoid portraying rac-ism that has a tendency to infect and affect everything around it. In the essay “The Social Geography of Race in Hurston’s Seraph on the Sewanee,” Laura Dubek writes, “Hurston’s last novel is considered more than a disappointment; it is an apparent betrayal of the writer’s com-mitment to foreground black culture and individual black experience”(344). that Hurston, the champion and supporter of Negro folk life, also desired to write about people who just happened to be black or white and not those who were “tragically of their race”(1) is alarming. In her autobiography, Hurston writes, “From what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. “I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color” (171).

Psychological Trauma of Arvay’s Self:

In Seraph on the Suwanee, she follows her interest. Even though scholars of critical race theory or whiteness studies argue that a text that features white characters can still address race, Hurston clearly demonstrates that the race of the characters in Seraph on the Suwanee is irrelevant to her discussion of communal human issues. Arvay’s marriage partnership is stilted from its creation due to Jim’s belief in the inferiority of women, and even in his name, Jim personifies his desire to be served, hence “Meserve,” or “Serve Me.” However, Jim is not the only individual in the marriage who believes in inferiority. Arvay also suffers from her own feelings of inferiority that have lingered since her childhood and experiences in Sawley. Arvay never feels that she is fit for Jim: “There was bound to come a time when he was going to feel outdone in not finding those other things in her. . . . She might be able to hold onto Jim, and keep him from quitting her some way or another” (36). Jim’s vocalization of her inferiority as a woman only heightens her ever-present inferiority as a human. Arvay infuriates the reader over and over again, but it is hard not to care for her as a person. She is flawed, yet in a sadly realistic way. In a letter to Editor Burroughs Mitchell, Hurston discusses her own disgust with Arvay and her issues with inadequacy (Kaplan 557). She goes on to discuss how a reader of Seraph on the Suwanee could not believe that anyone could suffer from such a great feeling of inferiority. She writes:

Have you ever been tied in close contact with a person who had a strong sense of inferiority? I have, and it is hell. They carry it like a raw sore on the end of the index finger. . . . It is a very common ailment. That is why I decided to write about it. The sufferers do not seem to realize that all that is needed is a change of point of view from fear into self-confidence and then there is no problem. (Kaplan 558)

Hurston wrote Arvay from her own experiences of dealing with men who felt intimidated by her success and accomplishments. Arvay must move beyond her feelings of inferiority to find happiness. Arvay suffers from a
sense of inferiority which will haunt her for a long time. She does not resist it, but rather lets this inferiority take over her fate, thus making her passive. Jim ascribes Arvay a separate sphere, where she is to be kept throughout the marriage. Jim tells Arvay what he expects of her: subservience, male progeny, and happiness. He claims control over her well-being, but also over what gender their children will be, thus beginning to assert control over Arvay.

Showalter in her essay states that: The “female anti-language of hysteria” (157), or the feminist idea of madness as a “metaphor of resistance” (Caminero-Santangelo 9) describes a problem, not a solution. As Shoshanna Felman points out:

.... madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation. ‘Mental illness' is a request for help, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of the political castration (21-22).

Thus, a circular process takes place, a social ethos of oppression requires survival tactics on the part of the oppressed that are defined by those in power as dysfunctional. This has the effect of confirming the rationales for oppression in the first place. This hysterical madness or a metaphor of resistance can be best described as a problem, not a solution. While explaining female hysteria, Carminero-Santangelo comments:

Madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation. Far from being a form of contestation ‘mental illness‘ is a request for help, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration. (21-22)

However, a determined Jim is not put off by Arvay’s hysterical act. He cures Arvay of her self-induced madness by putting a drop of turpentine in her eyes. Being in relationship with Jim, does not help Arvay either. She is unable to love him completely. Despite being with Jim, Arvay remains melancholic throughout her life. While describing the characteristics of melancholia, Freud explains:

The object has not perhaps actually died but has been lost as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted ....The distinguishing mental features of melancholia a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity of love.... and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. (244-45).

It is interesting that Hurston creates a happy ending for Jim and Arvay. Biographer Robert E. Hemenway argues that the ending is in-conclusive; however, he misses Arvay’s realization of self at the end of the novel (310). The ending is far from inconclusive as Arvay comes to an understanding of herself and her role in the world. Hurston writes, “And just like she had not known Jim, she had known her own self even less. What she had considered her cross, she now saw as her glo-ry. . . . Her job was mothering. . . . She was serving and meant to serve” (351–52). Arvay discovers this role for herself along her path to self-actualization. Hemenway discusses Hurston’s portrayal of self-awareness and gives it a failing grade. He writes, “Zora is talking, perhaps a bit defensively, about selfhood, about autonomous personality; the plot of Seraph on the Suwanee, interestingly,
is about Arvay’s doomed search for selfhood while married to a man who believes that ‘women folks don’t have no mind to make up nohow’” (310).

Arvay is any painfully self-conscious woman who must learn to love herself so that she can receive the love of others. Hemenway questions Arvay’s progression to self-awareness and labels it as flawed because her sense of self is based on her relationship to others. Arvay is psychologically so much affected that she thinks that she has a deformed child because of the rape. This feel continuously stirs her mentally almost resulting in a guilty thought within herself.

Hemenway faults the tale, because Arvay’s sense of self-worth is tied to her role as a wife and a mother, and he goes on to argue that “just as Arvay begins to become interesting, she is lost again to domestic ser-vice” (313–14). Arvay is not forced into her roles; she gladly chooses the roles that fulfill her desires—the ultimate goal of sexual equality.

Hemenway does not write favorably on marriage and argues that “the novel has little plot; basically, it is the story of Arvay’s marriage to Jim Meserve and the problems that afflict it because of her uncertain sense of self and her husband’s lusty, unthinking chauvinism” (309). Marriage in and of itself is a plot, a winding story with many twists and turns—just ask any person who has been married, whether happily or not. A great deal of plot, action, and change can happen within the confines of marriage.

Barbara Smith also discusses Hurston’s affinity for writing about marriage in her essay “Sexual Politics and the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston.” In opposition to Hemenway, she discusses Hurston’s subject choice in a positive light. She writes, “Hurston is often criticized for being apolitical because she does not write traditional protest or por-tray interracial conflict. Yet one can only consider her apolitical if the political ramifications of relationships between the sexes are complete-ly ignored” (27). Hurston wrote about marriage and female-male relationships within the frame of a novel about white characters in order to argue the universality of life, love, and marriage. As a black woman, Hurston was not given the luxury of simply dealing with a relationship and marriage, while white women such as Jane Austen were able to build their careers upon the idea. Hurston’s race appears to have pre-vented her from writing a novel solely about marriage or relationships. Claudia Roth Pierpont shares Hemenway’s view of Arvay’s choice in marriage. In Passionate Minds: Women Rewriting the World, she brief-ly references Hurston’s last novel. She writes, “The book is a choking mixture of cynicism and compulsion. Hurston was desperate for a suc-cess, and hoped for a movie sale—hence, no doubt, the formulaic rape and the book’s mawkish ending, in which Arvay learns to sing happily in her marital chains” (149–50). Pierpont disparages Arvay’s choice to take joy in her marriage while also belittling Hurston’s choice to write her that way.

Arvay, on the other hand, fights and struggles hard to cope with Jim. The more she is oppressed the more she tries to get strength to withstand Jim. When she was raped, she immediately yielded to Jim as she wanted to recognize herself as Arvay Meserve. While she gives birth to Earl, she pacifies herself that after all, Earl is her loving son. Her fear for Earl was the greatest challenge she deals in her life. She have suffered a lot by handling Earl in the society. But at the same time her prayers were for Earl’s health and his mental recovery. Arvay has
failed in Earl’s matter as he died in the swamp. Arvay could not bear the grief as she is mentally affected by Earl’s death. Meanwhile she asserts herself in her mother’s place where her mother is ailing and dying. Arvay is more dependent on Jim but still when she has come to her mother’s house, she competed with her sister and completes her mother’s funeral alone with nobody’s help. There was an urge for herself and she successfully overcame her loneliness. Though Jim is separated from her, Arvay’s motherly nature could not stop her love for Jim. A day has come when she sees Jim after a long separation. Hurston reveals Arvay as a dependent white mother in many ways, as an outsider within, caught in an emotional tug of war between her own lives experiences of a mother. Though she is dependent, she urges and tries to develop herself by empowering herself as a mother and a wife. Notably Hurston wants to emphasize this aspect of woman that is their feminine authority and maternal power. Commenting on Arvay’s decision to return to her husband, Lille P. Howard writes:

By contrast, Zora Hurston was never able to put love, mothering or serving before her own career. Though she was married at least twice and involved in a number of love affairs she always returned sometimes even escaped, to her career. (146)

Conclusion:

As the story unravels, it is seen that Hurston still writes about these oppressions only changing the colour of the skin of her characters. Hurston wants to show that oppression exists not only in African American race but also among whites. Hurston aptly shows that “oppression and its subversion has neither gender nor color. And Seraph on the Suwanee is finally the thinly veiled story of a woman who resists victimization, throws off oppression, chooses the burden that she will carry, and takes it up with courage, dignity and delight (Clair 199). Hurston in her true trickster manners, mocks at white people and shows their hollowness. To quote Rita C. Butler:

In Seraph, Hurston becomes the consummate —people watcher,— as she seeks to understand that false foundation. Her novel describes a society where the exploitation of maternal energies I service to patriarchal economic and social goal results in the corruption not only of the personal agency and meaning of women as mothers, but of Mother Nature as well. Her female protagonist Arvay Henson, is the focal point for her diagnosis of Anglo-Saxon culture dominated by a psychologist mindset based on domination and exclusion where the conditions that confer privilege and power are very narrowly defined. With Seraph, Hurston not only continues the tradition of black women writers who used their writing talents to challenge the social status quo, she also emerges as a prescient foremother in terms of feminist sociopolitical analyst. Her subversive novel makes a potent statement about racial inequality by focusing on the psychological dynamics of a white couple—a clear departure from African American male writers in the 1940s who tended not to make gender distinctions when writing about race (41- 42)

Endurance that helplessly accepts violence ignores the abuser's sinfulness and denies him a chance for repentance and redemption, which may come from stringently holding him accountable for his act. Endurance, in order to
keep the family together, is a shame because the family is already broken apart by the abuse. Hence, in abject endurance, there is no virtue to be gained. In the midst of profound suffering, God is present and a new life is possible. This “retrospective realization” (Adams 90) transforms one's character and presents the possibility of a new life coming forth from the pain of suffering. In Seraph on the Suwannee, in the face of formidable oppressions, Arvay's “quiet grace” and “courage” deserves attention and appreciation. She is able to hold on to life against major threats and conflicts. Her constant rumination of her oppression makes women vigilant. Like the mythical phoenix which rises from its own ashes, she emerges a new as a confident woman from her oppressions. She grows as a self-sufficient individual in her own right. Living in the midst of oppressions requires a unique strength, Arvay possesses that strength. Arvay is a self-made woman. She is not simply a brutalized beast of burden who silently endures her slavish existence. Constant oppression transforms her into a resilient woman who would not succumb to oppressions. She combats domestic violence, mustering her innate strength and all available resources within her to safeguard herself from unabated violence.

References: