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# Cultural Conflict in Nora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*

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**Introduction:**

*Jonah's Gourd Vine* is stuffed with so many themes that are often interconnected and sometimes difficult to sort out. Hurston's treatment of her themes varies from the comic to the tragic, from realistic to surrealistic, and from ironic to symbolic.

*Jonah's Gourd Vine* is set in the early years of the twentieth century. In the very opening pages of the novel, Hurston examines the life of African Americans in the post-slavery Southern part of America. She depicts the unfortunate legacy of slavery that continues to affect the lives of African Americans. Through the characters of Ned Crittenden, Amy Crittenden and Pheemy, all former slaves, Hurston tries to explore the psychological and emotional trauma that affects the African American even after so many years. Ned Crittenden, step-father of John Pearson warns John to stay far away from the Whites. He tells John,

> ***Come out dat do' way and shet it tight, fool! Stand dare gazin 'dem white folks right in de face! Yo' brazen ways wid dese white folks is gwinter git you lynched one uh dese days" (4).***

In fact, Ned is so scared of whites, that he warns his wife Amy also,

> ***—Amy, you better quit talkin' bout de buckra. Some of 'em be outside and hear you and turn over tuh de patter roller, and dey'll take you outa heah and put uh hun'ed lashes uh raw hide on yo' back. Ah done tole yuh but yuh won't hear (9).***

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Amy Crittenden, mother of John Pearson was herself a former slave. Through the character of Amy, Hurston portrays African American women being treated as sexual chattel on slave plantations. Amy was abused by her slave owner Mr. Alf Pearson, a white. He rapes her and the result is the birth of John, a mulatto. Though born a slave, Amy after leading a slave's life attains freedom. She poignantly tells Ned that blacks should treasure and value their children unlike in slavery times when they were most liable to be taken away. Amy says:

**Course dey don't, but we ain't got tuh let de white folks love our chillun fuh us, is us? Dass jest de pint. We black folks don't love our chillun. We couldn't do it when wuz in slavery. We borned 'em but dat didn't make 'em ourn. Dey b'longed tuh old, Massa. 'Twan't no use in treasurin' other folkses property. It wuz liable tuh be took uhway any day. But we's free folks now. De big bell done rung! Us chillun is burn. Ah doan know, mebbe hit'll take some of us generations, but us got tuh 'gin practice on treasurin' our younguns. Ah loves dese heah already uh whole heap. Ah don't wont 'em knocked and 'bucked. (6-7)**

Slavery worked in a systematic way to break African Americans families and used each and every individual of the African American family as a commodity. It efficiently worked against any effort to bring cohesiveness in black family, disrupting relationship between man and woman, parent and children. Ned wants to send John to Cap'n Mimms a cruel white plantation owner,

***—dat everybody knowed wuz de wust in southern Alabama. He done whipped niggers nigh tuh death (8).***

This replicates the situation where slave owners used to sell their own children. The slave's loyalty belonged only to their masters. Hurston shows that little has changed in the post war South. Hurston through the Crittenden family shows the ill – effects of slavery faced by African Americans, but she also shows putrid aspect of slavery through Alf Pearson, a white slave owner. Alf had abused Amy during slavery days and never acknowledges John as his son. He rules over not only his slaves but his town and community. When Alf meets John for the first time, he says,

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***—What a fine stud! Why boy, you would have brought five thousand dollars on the block in slavery time! Your face looks familiar but I can't place you. What's your name? (17).***

Alf Pearson's treatment of his son is ironic yet reminds readers of the days of slavery. John Lowe rightly asserts,

***—We laugh at the joke on Pearson, but wince as well at the equally ironic and immediate translation of a human being, his own son, into financial and breeding terms, which seems to be a post bellum hangover of slave owning (104).***

Concomitant with the theme of slavery, class is also an important thematic concern in the novel. The novel is set in small towns of Alabama and Florida centered on the lives of African Americans in rural setting. During this time period i.e. late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, a large number of African Americans worked as labourers on plantations owned by rich whites in a system called share cropping. African Americans were allotted a plot of land by whites to cultivate in exchange of a big share of profit. Usually this transaction proved to be a loss for the blacks resulting in heavy debt as they had to pay rent for housing, farming supplies apart from surrendering huge share of profit. Though blacks became free but their economic slavery continued. In the novel, Hurston shows blacks and whites living in two worlds apart, one living in a state of poverty and other in affluence. Sharon L. Jones writes,

***—Hurston probes into the complex dynamics of race and class relationships by chronicling the lives of former slaves and slave owners (77).***

Alf Pearson symbolizes upper class white society. He is an influential person in his town as well as a judge. Other whites portrayed in the novel such as Mr. Shelby, Mr. Mimms too are shown rich. Ned, Amy Crittenden and their sons live in poverty. They try to make a living by picking cotton but they fail miserably. They work for Mr. Beasley who is a rich but cruel white plantation owner who often exploits them. Hurston demonstrates the area ―over de Big Creek‖ to manifest the difference between people from varied social and economic classes. When John arrives across the creek for the first time he is surprised to see people from different classes and African Americans living a more prosperous life than he had ever seen. Hurston writes:

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***Negro children going to learn how to read and write like white folks. See! All this going on over there…. and the younguns over the Creek chopping cotton! It must be very nice, but may be it wasn't for over the creek niggers. (14)***

There is a stark contrast in the economic conditions of John and Lucy Potts also. Potts family represents the rising black middle class. John throughout his life had been living in a shack in utter poverty. On the contrary, Lucy's parents had enough money to buy their own land and house. When John goes to Lucy's house for the first time, he is greatly influenced. Hurston writes:

***John noted the prosperous look of the Potts place. It was different from every other Negro's place that he had ever seen. Flowers in the yard among white washed rocks, tobacco hanging up to dry. Peanuts drying on white cloth in the sun. A smoke house, spring house, a swing under a china-berry tree, bucket flowers on the porch. (60)***

Emmeline Potts and Richard Potts, Lucy's parents do not want their daughter to marry John as they consider John to be below their class. They deeply resent John and Lucy's, relationship and want Lucy to marry another man named Artie Mimms. Emmeline warns Lucy against marrying John:

***Here Artie Mimms is wid sixty acres under plow and two mules and done ast me fuh yuh ever since yuh wuz ten years ole and Ah done tole 'im he could have, yuh and here you is jumpin' up, goin' over mah head, and marryin'n is uh nigger dat ain't hardly got changin' clothes. (66)***

The protagonist John, as he learns to read and write, slowly but steadily changes his economic status. Later when he settles in Eatonville, he becomes a successful moderator in the Church and ultimately becomes a mayor. He rises above his humble and modest beginnings and achieves fame and money which remains unparalleled in his immediate family. Alan Brown asserts,

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***he —is a metaphor of all black men living in rural Florida in the early decades of the twentieth century (79).***

Thus, Hurston shows that class differentiation exists not only between blacks and whites but also among blacks themselves. Fighting against financial instability throughout her life, perhaps Hurston herself knew very well about the importance of economic stability in a person‘s life.

John Buddy Pearson is the protagonist of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine.* The whole story revolves around him. Through the character of John, Hurston deals with the theme of search for self-awareness and self-knowledge. Throughout the novel John is unable to understand himself and is in constant search for his identity. Josie P. Campbell writes in this regard:

***John‘s lack of self-understanding reflects his lack of knowledge concerning his origins. Hurston takes a great risk in creating a central character who appears to be so unaware of who he is. But this seems to be one of her main points concerning the character of John Buddy, and perhaps of the African -American male all too frequently. Richard Wright deals with this topic in his novel, Native Son, in the character of Bigger Thomas, who comes to have a glimmer of self-awareness only after committing violently horrendous murder. John Buddy‘s awakening to the kind of man he is comes slowly and painfully. (47)***

While creating the character of John Pearson, Hurston endowed him with certain qualities as well as vices. She knew that the character she is creating is unique yet admirable. She wanted to create a simple character who acts and thinks like any common man. Valerie Boyd writes about Hurston‘s intention in creating this character:

***I have tried to present a Negro preacher,‖ Hurston explained to James Weldon Johnson, —who is neither funny nor an imitation Puritan ram-rod in pants. Just the human being and poet that he must be to succeed in a Negro pulpit.‖ She then added a clarifying note, which accounts for her emphasis throughout novel on the poetics of black language: —I do not speak of those among us who have been tampered with and consequently have gone Presbyterian or Episcopal. I mean the common run of***

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***us who love magnificence, beauty, poetry and color so much that there can be never be too much of it. (256)***

John is torn between the clarion call of his flesh and soul. His self is divided dichotomously between worldly and spiritual desires. On one hand he preaches on Sunday and comes close to God, but from Monday to Saturday he indulges in sensual pleasures. This seems unacceptable to the readers, yet they cannot help but pity John over his tragic fate as he symbolizes cultural difference between ―formerly enslaved non-Christian communal society' and ―white Puritan Christian society‖ (Howard 76). Hurston shows this with dexterity. In the words of Larry Neal:

***Two distinctly different cultural attitudes toward the concept of spirituality. The one springs from a formerly enslaved communal society, non-Christian in background where there is really no clean-cut dichotomy between the world of spirit and the world of flesh. The other attitude is clearly rigid, being a blend of Puritan concepts and the fire- and- brimstone imagery of the white evangelical tradition. (6-7)***

The theme of the predicament of the mulatto is clearly evident in John's tragic life. As Barbara Christian says,

***―The tragic mulatta theme reveals the conflict of values that blacks faced as conquered people (3).***

Ned Crittenden, step-father of John hates him because John as a mulatto reminded him of his powerlessness. He often calls him

***―Yaller nigger‖ and ―punkin-colored bastard (10).***

The life of the mulatto was tragic indeed since they became outcastes in their own black community and were unaccepted in white society. In the words of Ned,

***― Yaller niggers ain't no good nohow‖ and ― dese half white niggers got de worst part uh bofe de white and de black folks (10).***

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Since mulattos were of light skinned color, they were employed in house hold works while black slaves were employed in rigorous plantation and agrarian works. Ned says,

***—John is de house house-nigger. Ole Marsa always kep' de yaller niggers in de house and give 'em uh job totin' silver dishes goblets tuh de table. Us black niggers is de ones 'posed tu ketch de wind and de weather (6).***

Ironically John is hired by Alf Pearson as a coachman. John drives Alf's ―cream colored‖ buggy symbolizing his mulatto status. As John is a mulatto, the result of the unfortunate union between a slave and a slave master, his tragic fate is decided before he is born. He is never accepted by Ned his black step father, and never acknowledged by Alf Pearson, his biological white father. Both Alf Pearson and Ned Crittenden fail to take responsibility as a father. This leaves John without any role model for his manhood. While Ned beats his wife Amy and exploits his children, Alf takes a perverse interest in his son's sexual engagements and is reminded of his own promiscuity. Alf says to John,

***—You're a walking orgasm. A living exultation (45).***

Alf knows every detail about his son's affairs and takes great interest in his son's sexual activities, such that he even suggests which woman he should sleep with or leave. Alf suggest John,

***—You damn rascal! That girl you married is as smart as a whip and as pretty as a speckled pup. She's making a man of you. Don't let her git away (72)***

and then again suggests,

***—Well John, you'd better keep Big Oman out of that Commissary after dark. Aha! You didn't think I knew did you? Well, I know a lot of things that would surprise folks. You better clean***

***yourself up (72).***

He suggestively gifts John and Lucy a walnut bed as their wedding present. Devoid of any positive father image in his life, it colours John's character and especially his relation with women, which forms the main crux of the novel.