

Escape Motif in Zora Neale Hurston's "Jonah's Gourd Vine"

Lilly Fernandes¹

¹ Associate Professor, Department of English, Al Jouf University, Sakaka, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Dr. Lilly Fernandes, Associate Professor, Department of English, Al Jouf University, Sakaka, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Tel: 966-538-251-852. E-mail: dr.lillyfernandes@gmail.com

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Abstract

The escape motif is especially prominent in African American literature. A pattern of escape is an integral part of American culture, as seen in the tradition of moving on to a new territory or frontier when life becomes difficult or burdensome. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is a disguised biography of the parents of Zora Neale Hurston; however, the names of the parents are hardly mentioned in the novel and are kept under a veil of ignorance by the author. John's escape from a society he viewed as materialistic and inequitable exemplified the idea of solitude and at the same time exemplified the African American spirit of independence and self-sufficiency. John's poetic faculties are part of the aesthetic matrix of black fold culture. Hurston surrounds her character with a world of metaphor and image that makes John's ability only heightened example of a native aesthetic. If it is the language making faculty that defines him that is what also defines his world. John is a man who seeks beauty, lives intensely each moment, and loves language as an end in itself. Moreover, he lives this way because his culture honours an improvisational oral art by escaping from the facets of reality.

The escape motif in Hurston's novel hides behind various themes lying in the background or as a base of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Of the many themes, the most important place is given to the issue of slavery. The setting of the novel is in the beginning of the twentieth century where those days are portrayed in which slavery had already begun and started ruling especially in the areas of South. The outlined escape motif impresses the spirit of every reader by making them realize the beast and the angel which live together in one person.

Keywords: escape motif, women, African-American society, Christianity, slavery, community

1. Introduction

In literary works, 'escape' theme has various kinds of suggestions. The term refers to an act of evading or escaping from danger. Only in narratives that are filled with suspense and adventure, this kind of escape takes place frequently. Leaving from a situation like family, job, community or a country is also another type of escape which has become in some manner oppressive or intolerable (Heilman, 1995). Escape can take the form of daydream as it can be psychological or spiritual, fantasy or any other kind of mental activity that gives relief from battle fought from within. When escaping physically is not possible, anxiety, guilt or other unpleasant external incidents will take over the mind. The importance of escape can be positive, negative, or ambiguous. In some contexts, escape is considered to be highly esteemed. It takes suggestions from evasiveness or escapism and indicates weakness, cowardice, dehumanization or failure to cope with reality. In all literary works, escape occurs frequently. It is one of the most common themes that are used in the works of African American literature (Hirshman, 1983).

The dominant mood in the life of Americans has been reflected in the presence of escape or flight. Whenever it appears in American literature, it appears in a surprising manner and appears as a kind of excessive company, which is a counterpoint or part of the story. The element of escape drives us back to early American beginnings, and beyond the history of Europe, America's huge escape which is referred as 'migration' by historians, opened on a high note and settled in the frontier; it is unconquered by humans and also called as 'Virgin Land' by Henry Nash Smith. In order to escape from older civilization, and from the land which is no longer fertile, this move in to the West was very useful. One may argue that the anxiety of Americans did not come to an end even after the frontier was closed or the optimistic strain in the life of Americans that got wasted just a few years before the start of Civil War. Though the hopes of frontiers vanished and they too got destroyed, the urge to escape continued to exist as its hopes were not abandoned and the frontier was still present. In spite of loss of hope, end

of migration and frontier's end in 1880, the impulse due to its persistence in American life and character continued. Due to desperation and hopelessness, there was an urge to escape especially during the Civil War in the 20th century so that it does not become an act of hope, optimism and need to fight against oppression.

Jonah's Gourd Vine is the first novel by Hurston. She has written four novels. Even though 'Jonah's Gourd Vine' is an autobiographical novel, it cannot be considered to communicate the complex personal life of Hurston. Her parents' marriage has been fictionalized by her. The main character of this novel is John. His wife Lucy Potts is the strongest character in the novel. While raising her family, she bears her husband's immoral nature. She acts as a pillar and the decisive force of the family. When she dies, within a short span of time, John remarries again and continues his unfaithful relation.

The escape motif in Zora Neale's novel hides behind various themes lying in the background or as a base of Jonah's Gourd Vine. Of the many themes, the most important 'slavery' is the one that has absorbed significant focus. The setting of the novel is in the beginning of the twentieth century where those days are portrayed in which slavery had already begun and started ruling especially in the areas of South.

The main character in the novel is John who leads a life of an illiterate labour. His father, Ned, is a slave with the mentality portraying complete slavery. This is evident from the following lines in the novel: "we are children of God and we are meant to be what we are today. We are supposed to work day and night and all the niggers will work along with me as slaves" (Goffman, 2001).

Black families were subject to a system of slavery which was rebelled against by the African society. The novel begins from a narration of a farm on which sharecropping is done near the river of Songahatchee in the country of Alabama, many years after emancipation was over. This particular novel is an experience which is completely tragic of a preacher who is black and is completely stuck between the values of the black culture as well as the values which were imposed strongly by the church of the white influencing the crowd.

2. Escape Motif from the Perspective of John, the Protagonist

Basically, this novel is based on the story of John. From an illiterate labourer, he becomes a moderator of a Baptist convention in central Florida. Tragedy starts early in his life. Though he is God's most powerful man, he is unable to control his senses and becomes an addict to women (Meisenhelder, 1991). Though Lucy occurs as a powerful character in the novel, she becomes the backbone of John and his family by serving both John and her family. When she starts her journey of no-return, in order to escape from loneliness, John turns lustful towards women.

According to a letter written to James Weldon Johnson, Hurston's purpose of the novel is to emphasize the quality in her characters' lives and show how John tries to escape from the harsh realities of his life. He must succeed as a Negro not only as a human being but also as a poet. The novel's controlling theme is the preacher who is also a poet and with his wild imagination creates image of power that always rekindles John's human failings. In stage, John is an inspired artist who dedicates language (Cluba, 2000). He can speak as though he is God who creates the world:

I am the teeth of time

That comprehended de dust of de earth

And weighed de hills in scales

That painted de rainbow dat marks de end of de parting storm

Measured de seas in de holler of my hand

That held de elements in an unbroken chain of controllment

The poetic faculties of John are part of the aesthetic matrix of black fold and further enhance the escapism motif. The ability of John is elevated due to Hurston's creative use of metaphor and images. If language-making faculty defines John, it defines his world too. He is a man who seeks beauty, lives strongly every moment and loves language like anything. Since his culture honours an improvised oral life, he lives in this manner (Lowe, 1996). He tells his wife Lucy not to worry about their children as he will be their father and mother and to retain her confidence in him.

Though he is unable to fulfil this promise, he does not get diverted from the poetry in its expression and when he loses Lucy, it further urges him to indulge in lust in order to escape the sadness he faces. Similarly, John's beastly character exists in him along with his ability to thank God for making him to live another night

We thank thee that out sleeping couch

Was not our cooling board

Our cover was not our winding sheet

In general, if a man full of lust offers devout prayer he will be considered as a hypocrite. But John is never a hypocrite. He considers every moment of his life to be sincere and hence his life deserves to be judged on its own terms. In creating images, John has a special gift of manifesting coexistence.

At the middle of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, a proposition directly comes out from Hurston's emphasis on the exceeding moment of language that grows first. Even though John created poetry that saw the world in attractive images, he never understood himself as he often escapes by plunging deep in to his world of illusion.

Even though he is a poet who showers his world with his language, he could not find words to protect his own personal wish. He became drained out after helping his neighbours as he was left only with natural aptitude which did not help him and he became doomed. Other than the long sermon that was preached by John on the same communion Sunday, the day when he will renounce his position as a preacher, there was no passage to demonstrate the contradiction of the book (Karanja, 1993). The linguistic tour de force, traditional metaphors and similes which are well known in the community of the black people, are improvised skilfully. Since the language is very powerful, the reader forgets that the sermon is actually the climax of the novel.

Here John's motivation to fight is demonstrated by Hurston. She suggests that John's struggle is more than a person's battle. According to Neale, though Christianity has been commonly adopted by blacks, they were still unable to conjure up a unique form of expression that reflected the things that can be regained which are the most important aspects of pre-Christian cultural memory. The Kala-Kumba and the O-go-doe explain the struggle of John by evoking Africa's past. Since John has a 'cess to a pre-Christian cultural memory', he has the capability to inspire greatly. He also has the capability to make the Christians immortal that arise from personal inadequacy (Karanja, 1993).

3. Escapism Expressed through the Role of Women

According to Bourdieu (2000), Hurston's women characters are also masculine in appearance, transparent in terms of work, time and place. These three parts differentiate the masculine and the feminine tendencies that are connected through the ritual practice, which establishes the rambling feminine production in the works of Hurston. Similarly, in the socio-cultural space of the transparent that was established by Hurston, women have been kept in the private sphere of social space as they appear in a powerless position in public places. In these works, both the places that have been enclosed portray women in an environment that was dominated by men.

'The harsh social environment of the working class written by Jonah keeps Amy who is John's mother, a nanny. This character which is restricted only with household has been conceptualized by Hurston. Amy's position is different as she is surrounded by her sons who protect her from Ned, their stepfather. For example, in a scene, when Ned slaps and beats Amy, she "wheel(s) to fight" John comes to her rescue. In male dominated place, her status is unclear. Although she lives in the place where her husband ill-treats her and her existence is sluggish, the 'local labour market' makes her to move back and forth between her house and field. In the role of a 'mother' she is given a well-established legal power, she also gives voice in protection of her sons.

The portrayal of Lucy's life in Alabama is a short episode. She is locked into the cycle of reproduction that literally ties her to bed. As she breeds more, she receives a wedding bed from Alf Pearson who is a white slave and the owner of the place. According to Park (1993), the bed is a symbol of the continuous war of slavery in the case of free black women and frameworks 'normative expectations of the gendered body'. She is always seen in bed in her marriage that took place both in Alabama and Eatonville, Florida where she enjoys the status of middle class with her husband by her side. The bed symbolises the disability and the social marginalization that becomes powerful and can be compared to John's immoral behaviour that is rarely seen at home but is described as superior power and agency. When Lucy's brother takes away her wedding bed, she becomes collapsed.

4. Biblical References

There are some biblical allusions that are made which signify the pain faced by Jonah. Jonah's vine is infiltrated by Hattie who is symbolically the wind that flows from Reverend Pearson's vine and helps redeem the pain of Lucy and John.

Hurston's style is to make the good character person do things that are right, spiritual and just even though the character has many flaws. John is seen to be refusing the Lord's call when he makes attempt to move from ministry. He comes back again and again first by Lucy and then by others. Though numerous sins have been committed by him and the weakness to which he succumbs again and again, he was seen to be struggling to

understand God's mercy. Hurston brings out these elements through the dialogues that take place between various characters. The rhythmic sequence of the characters' speech serves to strengthen the internal battle that lies at the Jonah's Gourd Vine heart like the one on class/race awareness that is conveyed by a minister and some parishioners.

One Sunday at a Baptist Convention which was John's most unforgettable religious discourse had train as a central theme. In his discourse, when he talks about betrayal and sin, he mentions that it is the cursing train that pulls out of the Eden Garden but also travels through the death of Jesus Christ where it becomes the mercy train and the redemption train. "The engine struck the car squarely and hurled it about like a toy. John was thrown out and lay perfectly still. Only his foot twitched a little." (167). In Hurston's novel, all themes have second changes. As Jonah who is a fictional character in 'Jonah and the Whale' being given a second chance, so too is John Buddy Pearson.

"And Ah say unto you, de Negro has got plenty tuh feel proud over. Ez fur back ez man kin go in his-to-ree, de black man wuz always in de lead. When Caesar stood on de Roman forum, uccordin' tuh de best authority, uh black man stood beside him. Y'all say 'Amen.' Don't let uh man preach hisself tuh death and y'all set dere lak un bump on uh log and won't he'p 'im out. Say 'Amen'!!

"And fiftly, Je-sus, Christ, wuz uh colored man hisself and Ah kin prove it! When he lived it wuz hot lak summer time, all de time, wid de sun beamin' down and scorchin' hot – how could he be uh white man in all dat hot sun? Say 'Amen'! Say it lak you mean it, and if yuh do mean it, tell me so! Don't set dere and say nothin'!"

5. Conclusion

Jonah's Gourd Vine is an epitome of literature portraying slavery and escape motif in African-American society. The literary work is exemplary in describing the intricate features of the characters. John's characterization specifically has been remarkable in the sense of bringing out the essence of irony where he is depicted as both passionate and perfect as well as imperfect in a moral sense. John's character has been subjected to much debate by various authors. It is clear from the analysis of this literary work that there are many instances portraying characters' desire to escape the ill treatment and mundane society. The same has been perceived as a desire of women as well due to intense male domination in the African-American society.

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