

Zora Neale Hurston's Sweat and The Beauvoirian Concept of Otherness

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ABSTRACT:

Zora Neale Hurston 1891-1960 was an African American novelist, folklorist, and anthropologist who was an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance. She is known for featuring African American folk culture and explored issues of race, gender, and identity. The paper approaches Hurston's *Sweat* (1926) in light of *The Second Sex* (1949) by De Beauvoir. Beauvoir argues that women are treated as "other" in society, and that this is the root of their oppression. She contends that men are seen as the norm, and women are seen as inferior and deviant from this norm. This is particularly true for women of color, who face not only racial oppression but also sexism. The paper aims at examining Hurston's work as a response to this idea of the "other" in her novel *Sweat*. The paper also addresses Hurston's work as highlighting that the cultural specificity of African American women's experiences should be recognized and celebrated, rather than being subsumed under the category of "woman" as defined by the dominant culture.

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1. Introduction:

Black women have been marginalized in society by the patriarchal hegemonic system. Socially and culturally, black women were marginalized and their relationships were restricted to the home only as nannies and maids. In her writings Hurston tried to demarcate and identify social

injustice against women. In societies that were dominated by the love of control and racism, women were the most oppressed element (Lakoff, 2004).

Hurston addresses interrelated critical issues: She argues that women, besides chauvinistically and racially marginalized as black, they are gazed at so due to being females. They are basically looked at as inferior to men in male-dominated society (Hurston, 1928). Hurston blamed the American institutions that created these social demarcations. She suggests that people are not judged by color or race, but by virtue of the inner spirit, and that to be successful relies much on achievement and not on color or gender. From this standpoint, Hurston sought to enhance the role of women in social life by conveying her voice to humanity through her novels, which dealt with women in all aspects of oppression that they were subjected to in the twentieth century. Thus, Hurston diagnoses two major challenges for women: sexism and racism (UN, 2007). Socially and conventionally, the stereotypical image of woman was associated with evil due to the reason of the expulsion of Adam from heaven (Nickel, 2009). This misconception strengthened the role of men and their irrational transgression on women's right. Accordingly, women in general have been dismissed as a source of ominousness. What made matters worse, besides biological constructions, is the burden of color. The black color was traditionally associated with evil (Ratna, 2021). Consequently, Black women were not only racially oppressed by white men, but they also suffered from the oppression of black men of the same race because of sexism (UN, 2007). De Beauvoir highlighted this when she suggested to give women their voice regardless of their race:

let blacks vote and they become worthy of the vote; give woman responsibilities and she knows how to assume them... women need only pursue their rise, and the success they obtain encourages them; it seems most certain that they will sooner or later attain perfect economic and social equality (De Beauvoir, 1949, P.860)

Beauvoir argues that men exploited women indirectly, by falsely glorifying their role as housewives, which led women to pride themselves on their position as good wives. This is what made men praise their women and convince them of these ridiculous jobs to keep their ambitions and occupations away from studying and engaging in social life and making their voices heard.

The fact is that men encounter more complicity in their woman companions than the oppressor usually finds in the oppressed; and in bad faith they use it as a pretext to declare that woman wanted the destiny they imposed on her (*The second sex*, 1949, P.852).

Hurston vehemently rejected the oppression and abuse of women at her time (Hurston, 1997). She highlighted the situation of women again in a short story entitled *Sweat*. This novel realistically reveals the nature of the lives of black people in American society and how to deal with them, and due to the writer Hurston herself was a black woman, she used her autobiography to embody the realities of the lives of this socially, physically, and sexually oppressed Africans (Burke, 2012). In this novel, Hurston tried to reflect the struggle of black married women to gain their liberation (UN, 2007). Hurston intends to demonstrate the challenges, oppressed black women suffered from and had to face in their journey to forming identification regardless of race, religion and sex. For her, love is likely the uniting force that demands no pressure, laws or limits.

2. Discussion:

In her novel *Sweat*, Hurston suggests to maximize the role of woman, to demand the love of woman without any pressures, laws or any limits, and woman must go on in order to reach her independence (Roberson, 2007). The novel begins with a woman named Delia Jones, who is trapped in a marriage involving all the meanings of failure. She is that woman who goes through difficult ways for any woman to carry in order to have a free and dignified life. Delia was colored and diligent, working in the laundry. As for Delia's husband, Sykes, he is a selfish man who is not satisfied with his married life with her, he constantly bullies her makes her a laughingstock and he does not even try to change anything in his relationship with Delia. In addition to that, he exploits her to satisfy his needs, relying only on her work, and with all the suffering that Delia experiences with her husband, Sykes has a mistress, which makes the matter worse and Delia's situation with Sykes unbearable (Deanna Torres, 2015). Delia is dutiful and accurate at doing her housework:

It was eleven o'clock of a Spring night in Florida. It was Sunday. Any other night, Delia Jones would have been in bed for two hours by this time. But she was a washwoman, and Monday morning meant a great deal to her. So she collected the soiled clothes on Saturday when she returned the clean things. Sunday night after church, she sorted and put the white things to soak... (*Sweat*, 1926, P.73)

In this and other instances, Hurston exposes the miserable life a married woman lives under the shadow of the patriarchal system and how she transcends the burden of days by her spiritual faith. Even though it was a Sabbath day when people went to worship and take vacations, she worked tirelessly to provide for her family every day. Also Hurston depicts the tragic life that a woman faces after her marriage compared to her dreams before marriage. As in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, women in the 20th century used to imagine that marriage would be her salvation and the paradise she dreams of, but once she marries, she is shocked by the tragic facts that surround her as the man keeps her for housework exclusively. This is what Beauvoir warned women against in the second volume of her book "*The Second Sex*", when she argues that after wedding, a woman finds only disappointment, also she points out various inequalities between a wife and husband, who pass the time not in love but in "conjugal love", "It is said marriage diminishes man: it is often true; but it almost always destroys woman" (*The Second Sex*, 1949, P.586). Sykes used to constantly insult, torture and belittle Delia in various ways, while Delia was practicing her role without responding to his abuse, which indicates the subordination of women to men in the 20th century and control over them.

He picked up the whip and glared at her. Delia went on with her work. She went out into the yard and returned with a galvanized tub and set it on the washbench. She saw that Sykes had kicked all of the clothes together again, and now stood in her way truculently, his whole manner hoping, *praying*, for an argument. But she walked calmly around him and commenced to re-sort the things (*Sweat*, 1926, P.74)

Hurston used the snake as a male symbol and Delia fears and cover-ups from the male sex, "Sykes, what you throw dat whip on me like dat? You know it would skeer me—looks just like a snake, an' you knows how skeered Ah is of snakes." (*Sweat*, P.73). Hurston conveys a vivid picture through which she used the snake, embodying the subordination of women to men in that era, and how she calmly responded to the insult, which indicates the surrender that

Hurston calls on women to rise up against through her novels. Delia, stepped into the room. She resumed her work and did not answer him at once. "Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks' clothes outa dis house." (*Sweat*, 1926, P.74). Here, Hurston depicts Delia accepting sarcasm by Sykes and continuing to work receptively. Sykes continues to harass Delia, not only does he hurt her physically and psychologically but he makes fun of her mentality, as in the below extract:

Course Ah knowed it! That's how come Ah done it." He slapped his leg with his hand and almost rolled on the ground in his mirth. "If you such a big fool dat you got to have a fit over a earth worm or a string, Ah don't keer how bad Ah skeer you. (*Sweat*, 1926, P.7 4)

This, moreover, shows married black women are still subjected to violence and mockery due to their inferior position as a female under the name of the patriarchal system. Hurston argues for women to move forward and to always idealize themselves and to classify themselves as superior to men. Hurston would often concern herself with matters of sexism and racism by highlighting her position as a female, and conveying her voice to all peoples and women. The role of women, which monopolized over domestic affairs, is nothing but a product of society and the dominant traditions at that time, as society restricted the role of women and prevented them from engaging in educational institutions due to its support for the role of men who control women (Bere & Arianto, 2019). Delia strives to support her husband and herself by working as a washer-woman. She fights for her life in the face of the economic stress, one of many effects of slavery. In fact, Hurston would demonstrate that Blacks who are still in slavery have no prospect of a better life and are forced to live in poverty. Despite the daily hard work, Delia is able to build her own house by collecting her salaries, "She had built it for her old days, and planted one by one the trees and flowers there. It was lovely to her, lovely." (*Sweat*, 1926, P.76)

She realizes during 15 years of her marriage, that she would not get any benefit from Sykes except abuse and disasters, hence, she decides to work hard, save money perseveres and relies on herself to overcome crises and economic obstacles. But what made it more difficult for Delia, besides sexism and misogyny was racism. Being a black woman, Delia has been denied the right to education, unlike the whites who enjoyed all the economic, political and social advantages that enabled them to live in prosperity. Consequently, it is a great thing for Delia to have a house (UN, 2007). Sykes continues to harass Delia due to his jealousy because the small house they lived in was owned by Delia. Sykes uses his malicious plans to expel Delia from this house violently through psychological and physical abuse in order to alienate her and keep the house for him and his mistress Bertha "Everything b'longs tuh me an' you sho' kin have it. Ah sho' 'bominates uh skinny 'oman. Lawdy, you sho' is got one portly shape on you! You kin git *anything* you wants. Dis is *mah* town an' you sho' kin have it". (*Sweat*, 1926, P.79)

These lines demonstrate Sykes's inner rudeness and brutality. It is indicative through Hurston's descriptive and visual devices that he hates skinny women and it always makes him arrogant about Delia's form. This is a means of silencing Delia, and in Beauvoir's terms, silencing is a way of confiscating women's right and generic role in society. Delia's self-exile is her weapon from gatherings and villager not to be subjected to insults (Setiawan & Widyaningrum, 2020). Like in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Delia has to find a way of resistance away from the

male dominance. Therefore, self-exile is her other means for self-empowerment on the pathway of future independence.

It was a hot, hot day near the end of July. The village men on Joe Clarke's porch even chewed cane listlessly. They did not hurl the cane-knots as usual. They let them dribble over the edge of the porch. Even conversation had collapsed under the heat. Heah come Delia Jones," Jim Merchant said, as the shaggy pony came round the bend of the road toward them. The rusty buck-board was heaped with baskets of crisp, clean laundry. (*Sweat*, 1926, P.76)

On the other hand, Sykes shows his strength and masculinity and strives to make his mistress happy.

Bertha had been in town three months now. Sykes was still paying her room-rent at Delia Lewis'—the only house in town that would have taken her in. Sykes took her frequently to Winter Park to 'stomps'. He still assured her that he was the swellest man in the state. (*Sweat*, 1926, P.79)

This is how Hurston succeeded to uncover the rampant hypocrisy in the twentieth century and their unfairness to women's rights in life. Consequently, through her hard and strife-torn path and this unhappy marriage, Delia considered that it was her emotional identity and inner spirit, her patience, faith and silence, that would enable her to continue and stand up to Sykes (Carazo, 2009). Delia's silence was her only weapon to confront her husband. Unlike the silent and submissive women at that time, Delia's silence was not considered submissiveness, but to get along with Sykes mentality. Noticeably, her dream was to have a small house and a peaceful garden, an epitome of her independence. Since her independence can only be achieved by leaving Sykes, this means that she will have to leave her home, which she struggled to get, and this is what her husband seeks. Accordingly, eventually, her silence was considered her victory. Nevertheless, Delia's perseverance and persistence in her work makes the story take another turn that complies with Beauvoir's assumption, which is that the involvement of women in social life refutes the power of men at that time. This is what Delia did, as the first successful step to own the house. Any success that a woman achieved at that time, no matter how simple it was, is what shakes the man's confidence in himself. This can also be viewed in Beauvoir's conception:

She can only abolish this inferiority by destroying male superiority. She does her utmost to mutilate, to dominate man, she contradicts him, she denies his truth and values. But in doing that, she is only defending herself; neither immutable essence nor flawed choice has doomed her to immanence and inferiority. (*The Second Sex*, 1949, P.849)

However, Delia's arduous path is measured not only by the white population for which she worked, but by her husband, the church and its religion, social life and society. Delia had to go along with obstacles enveloped in racism and sexism. These are the two problems that restricted women from progressing at that time. This indicates that Delia did not only struggle against males, but her attempts were a struggle against society and spirit as well (Carazo, 2009).

Hurston presents sophisticated arguments for feminism in her short story *Sweat* as a talented female novelist reflecting on the issues of female inequalities in marriage. The main character, Delia, is an independent and strong woman who encounters a patriarchal culture that strongly favors men and discredits women. Nevertheless, there is another significant aspect of the story that specifically addresses race. Hurston is not just advocating feminism in general but also black feminism. Thus, most of the characters featured in the story are African American, with few reference to whites. Delia, like Hurston, is disadvantaged not only because of her gender but also because of her ethnicity. Despite the fact that Sykes and Delia are both racially disadvantaged, Sykes nonetheless dominates the relationship due to his gender (Oates, 1986). The "conflict" between the sexes in literature is a struggle that has its historical roots in the dynamics of class, gender and race that have existed and still exist in the United States. Hurston, emphasized the significance of these issues and the need to eradicate racism and sexism, in her essay *How It Feels To Be Colored Me*, "Even in the 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" (2015, P.5).

Determination and steadfastness towards her husband's abusive actions, have become so obvious that they started to appear on Sykes reactions and behavior. In different situations in the novel, Sykes was unusually frightened by her reaction. This shows that Sykes has a cowardly and hesitant personality, due to the privileges endowed by the patriarchal system, even though he relies on Delia at home, which indicates a remarkable situational irony at the time. In one of the outstanding situations, Delia exposes a self-defense stand, "She seized the iron skillet from the stove and struck a defensive pose, which act surprised him greatly, coming from her. It cowed him and he did not strike her as he usually did". (*Sweat*, 1926)

She may be silent in times of need, but in other situations she stands up to Sykes when he behaves brutally and excessively. Nevertheless, Delia, realizing that her husband has another mistress, she does not act recklessly but uses his betrayal as a source that inspires her to develop herself and increase her perseverance in her work. Delia realizes that it is too late to reform her failed marriage. She reflects it is "Too late now to hope for love" (*Sweat*, 1926, P.76). She repels any attempt by Sykes to expel her from the house, which leaves Sykes in a confused position, as to what to do with her. After Delia fends off all Sykes insults, Sykes thinks of a new plan. He knew how afraid Delia is of snakes, and after Delia threatened the bull's whip at the beginning of the story to scare her as a snake, he uses the same real snake at the end of the story:

Delia came home one day and found Sykes there before her. She wondered, but started to go on into the house without speaking, even though he was standing in the kitchen door and she must either stoop under his arm or ask him to move. He made no room for her. She noticed a soap box beside the steps, but paid no particular attention to it, knowing that he must have brought it there. As she was stooping to pass under his outstretched arm, he suddenly pushed her backward, laughingly. (*Sweat*, 1926, P.80)

Threatening with the snake is Sykes's new means to psychologically abuse Delia after the physical one fails. Accordingly, Sykes's bringing the snake is in itself a violation of women's rights in an indescribable way. Likewise, the way to deal with her in a provocative manner, as in the lines, "As she was stooping to pass under his outstretched arm, he suddenly pushed her

backward, laughingly” (Sweat, 1926, P.80). Bending under his arm indicates that he is superior and she is inferior. Hurston denies this principle, not only hatred of sexism itself, but she also solidarizes with African women as a victim of the traditions and institutions, Hurston symbolically compares the situation of Black Americans under enslavement to patients who were now recovered. Noticeably, this is very important due to the reason that it indicates Hurston’s most popular and controversial view that the burden of slavery did not negatively influence her.

These and other lines can imply “misogyny”, which was rampant at the time. Sykes alternative manipulation and his constant laughter at Delia, reflects and embodies the hatred of men for women at the time. Delia’s silence eventually explodes into strength and courage that makes her stand up against her husband:

Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah useter love yuh. Ah done took an' took till mah belly is full up tuh mah neck. Dat's de reason Ah got mah letter fum de church an' moved mah membership tuh Woodbridge--so Ah don't haf tuh take no sacrament wid yuh. Ah don't wantuh see yuh 'roun' me atall. Lay 'roun' wid dat 'oman all yuh wants tuh, but gwan 'way fum me an' mah house. Ah hates yuh lak uh suck-egg dog. (Sweat, 1926, P.81)

Men are suggestively ignorant of the importance of women although the women encapsulate their life. By being negatively othered, they are actually positively supportive in Beauvoir’s point of view:

As his servant and companion, man expects her also to be his public and his judge, to confirm him in his being; but she opposes him with her indifference, even with her mockery and her laughter. He projects onto her what he desires and fears, what he loves and what he hates. And if it is difficult to say anything about her, it is because man seeks himself entirely in her and because she is All. But she is All in that which is inessential: she is wholly the Other (*The Second Sex*, 1949, P.251).

Consequently, Delia moreover can be viewed in Beauvoir’s following conception:

Woman is not the useless repetition of man but the enchanted space where the living alliance of man and nature occurs. If she disappeared, men would be alone, foreigners without passports in a glacial world. She is earth itself carried to life’s summit, the earth become sensitive and joyful; and without her, for man, earth is mute and dead, (*The Second Sex*, 1949, P. 251)

Some studies tend to critique that fate has turned Sykes’s situation from dominance to weakness, but in fact it is Delia who changes roles and the time comes when Sykes needs Delia’s help. Fortunately, Delia at that time was not that silent and obedient, but valiantly and courageously refused to help her husband. It was this roughness that created that solid woman from Delia.

She saw him on his hands and knees as soon as she reached the door. He crept an inch or two toward her--all that he was able, and she saw his horribly swollen neck and his

one open eye shining with hope. A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye that must, could not, fail to see the tubs. (*Sweat*, 1949, P.85)

The turning point in Delia's character development is when, instead of being a kind and patient person, she becomes a heartless, cold person after the catastrophe occurs. She does not attempt to intervene or seek assistance when the snake bites Sykes. She eludes the serpent by fleeing and finding safety. When Sykes calls for assistance, she does not respond. She abandons Sykes to die on his own. Delia is finally set free from the vicious Sykes. With her position being so grave, Delia really does not care anymore. After that, Delia decided to put an end for her marriage of fifteen years. Delia gives this as a kind of resistance against her husband in light of her Christian convictions. It can be difficult for a husband and wife to decide to end a relationship, but doing so is the correct course that must be taken in order for a woman to truly experience liberation from the oppression she has endured.

Beauvoir assures that love is not considered a woman's victory as long as it constitutes as heavy burden on her, such as being with a husband who imposes on her forms of domination, discrimination and sexism, this is what happens with Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Delia in *Sweat*. Beauvoir concludes that:

The day when it will be possible for the woman to love in her strength and not in her weakness, not to escape from herself but to find herself, not out of resignation but to affirm herself, love will become for her as for man the source of life and not a mortal danger. (*The Second Sex*, 1949, P.800)

3. Conclusion:

Hurston's work is regarded as a reaction to the concept of the "other" as presented in her novel "*Sweat*". She stresses that the social specificity of African American women's issues ought to be recognized and celebrated, instead of being subsumed beneath the category of "lady" as characterized by the overwhelming culture.

Hurston addresses interrelated basic issues, she contends that women, other than chauvinistically and racially marginalized as black, they are looked at so due to being females. They are fundamentally regarded as "second" to men in male dominated society. Hurston deconstructs the American conventions that made these socially outlined. By referring to de Beauvoir's concept, Hurston's novel *Sweat* demonstrates an overwhelming burden on the protagonist Delia being with a spouse who forces on her forms of mastery and sexism. This is often the case with Hurston's previous novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

رواية زورا نيل هرستون (العرق) ومفهوم بوفوار عن الآخر

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ملخص البحث:

كانت زورا نيل هرستون (1891-1960) روائية أمريكية من أصل أفريقي، وكاتبة فولكلورية، وعالمة أنثروبولوجيا، وكانت شخصية مهمة في نخبة هارلم. وهي معروفة بإبراز الثقافة الشعبية الأمريكية الأفريقية واستكشاف قضايا العرق والجنس والهوية. يتناول البحث رواية هرستون (العرق) (1926) في ضوء نظرية دي بوفوار (الجنس الثاني) (1949). تناقش دي بوفوار بأن النساء يعاملن على أنهن "جنس آخر" في المجتمع، وأن هذا هو أصل اضطهادهن. وتؤكد أن الرجال ينظر إليهم على أنهم (المعيار)، وينظر إلى النساء على أنهن أقل شأنًا ومنحرفين عن هذا المعيار. وهذا ينطبق بشكل خاص على النساء ذوات البشرة الملونة، اللواتي لا يواجهن الاضطهاد العنصري فحسب، بل التمييز على أساس الجنس أيضًا. يهدف البحث إلى تحليل قصة (العرق) هرستون كرد فعل على فكرة "الآخر". يتناول البحث أيضًا هذه القصة على أنها تسلط الضوء على الخصوصية الثقافية لتجارب النساء الأمريكيات من أصل أفريقي حيث يجب الاعتراف والاحتفاء بها، بدلًا من تصنيفها ضمن فئة "المرأة" على النحو الذي تحدده الثقافة السائدة.