

FROM BIBLICAL MOSES TO A SAVIOUR OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FOLK AND CULTURE: A STUDY OF HURSTON'S *MOSES, MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN*

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Abstract:

*Since the time of its inception, African-American novels are based on the unifying principle of writing the African-American experience that led to the liberation of slaves of African ancestry. The urge to define and chronicle their experience as a result of the atrocities cast upon them as well as to break the prejudice that Africans have no definite past, forced the black writers to take pride of their rich culture and tradition. Owing to the denial of intrinsic rights to participate in the dominant culture, the blacks adopted their own ethnic culture to establish their individual identity. They reinterpreted the cultural resources in pursuit of identity, status and power amidst the racist, capitalist and patriarchal white society. This led to the revisiting of African roots through folklores, myths, legends, spiritualism, folk sermons, music, hoodoo, and the unique art of quilting. African American novelists presented their individual vision packed by historical and cultural context. These survival strategies provided a fertile soil for the African American literature to grow and spread. The present research paper attempts to study African American folk and culture with reference to Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain*.*

Key Words: *African-American, slaves, atrocities, culture.*

Unlike her contemporaries, Zora Neale Hurston did not write about the miseries of her race but she simply celebrated blackness and the existence of the rich culture of her ethnic race. This implies that for her Black was beautiful. Hurston in her essay "How It Feels To Be Colored Me" comments about it as "I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes.... I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal No, I do not weep ... I am too busy, sharpening my oyster knife" (O'Sullivan 120).

Hurston's perfect blending of African-American cultural traditions, like oral storytelling, music and folklore, into an artistic form was not merely done for the exotic embellishment but to fulfill the spheres of social and political arena. She creates milieu, plot, character, and vernacular in her fiction combined with traditional folklore that established a new paradigm in African American women's writing and new ways to perceive human condition. In this way, in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston gets into a new venture of reinterpreting *Old Testament* and transforms the biblical story into a fictional narrative to celebrate the heroic deeds of Moses, the savior of black folks. *The Old Testament* narrates Moses as the liberator of the Jews from the Egyptian slavery. Hurston never deviates from this biblical episode for her novel, but she creates characters to suit the cultural models of the African American folklore. Hurston does exercise a lot of execution through this novel. Her task is interpolating one, followed by interpellation of the original episode stuffed with the layers of black folklore. By adopting the elements of the aesthetics of biblical typology, Hurston polishes the narrative to present a biblical black fiction. In this manner, she completes her mission of creating a narrative of a feminine aesthetics as much as fulfilling the demands of the Harlem Renaissance. There was a need to juxtapose the conditions of her folks to that of the Israel in the

imperialistic natured America. This is spelt by Hurston in her own version in the article "Seeing the World As It Is" which is included in her *Dust Track on a Road*:

The Old Testament is devoted to what was right and just from the point of view of the Ancient Hebrews. All of their enemies were twenty-two carat evil. They, the Hebrews, were never aggressors. The Lord wanted his children to have a country full big of grapes and tall corn. Incidentally, while they were getting it, they might as well get rid of some trashy tribes that He did not think much of, anyway... If the conquest looked like a bloody rape to the Canaanites, that was because their evil ways would not let them see appoint that was right upon their nose... We, too, consider machine gun bullets good laxatives for heathen who get constipated with toxic ideas about a country of their own...there is a geographical boundary to our principles. They are not to leave the United States unless we take them ourselves. (*Dust Track on a Road* 254-60)

This is better known as the most comprehensive example of Hurston's skill in blending her knowledge of myth, folklore, and tradition with history.

Moses, Man of the Mountain is the retelling of the story of Moses in a black perspective, using black dialect, conjuring, and hoodoo practices as part of the novel so as to fit into the time frame of African slavery which is supposed to be rooted in African American culture. Prior to the publication of *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, in *Tell My Horse*, Hurston propagates the association of Moses and his folkloric sublimity of the black Caribbean: "All over Haiti it is well established that Damballah is identified as Moses, whose symbol was the serpent. This worship of Moses recalls the hard-to-explain fact that whatever the Negro is found, there are traditional tales of Moses and his supernatural powers that are not in the Bible" (*Tell My Horse* 116).

Reinterpreting biblical stories into modern narrative forms and vernacular received great acclaim, particularly during the twentieth-century. Hurston's appropriation of African cultural traditions with Moses, the biblical man gave her an opportunity to participate in the social and cultural proliferation within her own African communities in America. This instilled her pride among the Americans that African folk forms are prone to evolution and transformation.

Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* recounts the mysterious birth, rise, exile, and the epic adventure of Moses; his spiritual and magical apprenticeship with Jethro in Midian and the strange voice from the burning bush calling Moses to conduct service on Mount Sinai; the subsequent come back of Moses to Egypt, verbal confrontation with Pharaoh, and casting dreadful plagues upon the Egyptians and ultimately the exodus of Hebrews in the wilderness for forty years under his leadership. Though Hurston extracts the events from *The Old Testament* that centers on Moses as the saviour of the Jewish people who endured oppression under the Egyptian regime, the characters of *Moses, Man of the Mountain* are simulated from the cultural paradigms that the African American folklore offered. The debate over the ancestry of Moses, whether he is an Egyptian or a Levi tribe, goes on for centuries. Quite intriguingly Hurston's Moses is born to Pharaoh's daughter and an Assyrian father and hence not an Israelite. Moses is the grandson of Pharaoh. However, Moses is always a familiar and famed figure in the African American religious tradition. He is viewed as a promising star and a savior of the enslaved Africans, freeing them from the white oppressors. As a grown man, he learned a lot of spiritual strength and power to influence and redefine the destiny of his community.

For hundreds of years, Moses has been connected with African spiritual tradition to give hope to the African American slaves about communal freedom from the brutal oppressors. By doing so, Hurston takes textual freedom and goes beyond the world of *The Bible* to narrate the journey of Moses into a lifelong leadership to help his people live in emancipation; a scenario very similar to that of African Americans in the United States Post Reconstruction Era. From Hurston's exploration of African American existence in the United States, one might guess that in Hurston's perception a non-black who has not experienced slavery is ought to become a leader of black community.

The retelling of Moses titles him as one of the “finest hoodoo [men] in the world” (*Moses* 145) and promulgate his attempt to impart nationalism in Hebrews rather than any doctrinal values. Hurston broke the stereotype of using voodoo only for exotic entertainment by whites and amalgamates voodoo imageries into her novel which celebrates the heroic and rebellious elements intact in it. It is to be noted that voodoo imageries are not merely for fulfilling the aesthetic narrative but mixes completely with the narrative. *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is a comprehensive example of this, as its basic theme is rooted in the African culture and voodoo practices inherent in the biblical legend of Moses. Hurston's creative use of the voodoo imageries and motifs gives a profound meaning and richness to her narrative and not in any way disturbs the flow of narration.

Hurston makes her aesthetic appraisal of the biblical story to fit into the contemporary realities. Through the narration of Moses as the character, she promulgates a cultural message which could enhance the social ideals and racial identity of black folk. Hence, she makes the character firmly rooted in the black culture thereby, reinterpreting *The Bible* for the human experience of North America. Hurston wished to appropriate the folklore narration to that of the Exodus motif purely on her feminist vision. Thus, she makes an enlarged version of the African American culture. This, she achieves, by laying them on the sacred and spiritual basin, as a boost to perfectly convey the black feminist aesthetics. The ultimate result is the ability of an African American woman in mastering her own culture. Further, she could transmit a strong message of refined artistic narration from a traditional and religious trope. Hurston's triumph, as evolved in the characterization of Moses, lies on her skill in retaining and achieving the folk culture vernacular for this biblical episode.

The sacred story of Moses has been narrated in a metaphorical narrative voice based on the southern black vernacular appropriated by the black authors throughout the Harlem Renaissance. To develop his leadership traits, Moses a presupposed Hebrew, determines to master the black vernacular of his people: “I want to talk the dialect of your people. Its no use of talking unless people understand what you say” (92). Moses' determination to master the folk diction denotes how to Hurston, as to Frantz Fanon, “[t]o speak a language is to take a world, a culture” (Fanon 38). Moses thereby holds African American folkloric culture and vernacular aesthetics unfolding the narrative of healing and cultural pride. Hurston proved through her work that dialect could not be confined to only two roles humour and pathos but it was fully capable of being used as a literary language to write a novel. Years later Alice Walker too, through her literary oeuvre, established the vitality of the Black idiom as a powerful medium of self-expression.

Hurston's inclination towards folk values and ethnic cultures are highlighted in her ingenious use of myths and legends in her novels. Her unique amalgamation of the legendary man to voice the emotions and ideas of African American folk shows how she “reshape[s] figures from old mythologies...create new myths from old structures and how they give new meaning to particular motifs of myth...by transforming them into metaphors” (Martha 667). Hurston shows her excellence not only in blending the biblical narrative and folk myth but also in using “myth to subvert oppressive structures” (Ball 229). Hence, myths, and legends offered scope for Hurston for her folk narratives and several paradigms to work on.

As a pioneer of African American folk writing, Hurston created a convention that restored the opulence of Black folk culture. Besides glorifying Black culture it also rendered voice to the mute and suppressed African Americans. Her meticulous fusion of biblical parables, music, black vernacular, myths, legends, and voodoo into her narratives exemplifies her as the saviour of the Black cultural tradition. Hurston's earnest effort to capture the African American folk traditions in its authentic form indirectly conveyed the message that adherence to one's own cultural tradition could alone bring ultimate freedom to its race.

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