

Zora neale hurston and women oppression, inferiority and mistreatment research pa...

[Psychology](#), [Abuse](#)



\n[toc title="Table of Contents"]\n

\n \t

1. [Introduction](#) \n \t

2. [Conclusion](#) \n \t

3. [Works Cited](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston is often rated as one of the best literature writers of the 20th Century. Hurston authored four novels and many short stories, essays and poems that were all critically acclaimed. Hurston was born near the end of the 19th Century in the Southern state of Alabama before she moved with her family to Florida as a child. She spent her early years as a student at different colleges and universities and at the same time collecting folklore from various places. She was an active participant of the Harlem Renaissance where she befriended famous authors and poets such as Langston Hughes. Hurston would later on become an acclaimed writer by her own right with her most famous work being ‘ Their Eyes Were Watching God’. Other notable works are “ Sweat” and “ The Conscience of the Court”. One persistent theme in all these works is the plight of women in the society. More specifically, Hurston depicts the inferiority, unjust treatment and oppression that women are subjected to in the society, especially in marriages. Hurston works seems to indicate that during the early 1900’s, women were subjected to huge inferiority, oppression and mistreatments including domestic violent at a time where speaking out was unheard off.

The mistreatment of women is obvious in Hurston's most famous work "Their Eyes Were Watching God". This work tells the story of Janie, who undergoes various tribulations in the hands of men. In the course of the novel, the protagonist, Janie is married three times and in all three marriages, she is subjected to emotional and physical abuse at the hands of men who view women as their property and possession (Sadoff, 15). In her first marriage, her husband Logan Killicks complains about her laziness and the fact that she does not do many domestic chores. In fact, when her husband was marrying her, he thought he was simply acquiring a domestic helper, and he becomes disillusioned after some time after he realizes the Janie is not much of a helper. Janie however is a hopeless romantic and believes that a marriage should be filled with love and when she cannot bear this loveless marriage anymore, she elopes with another man.

Janie's second husband Joe proves to be more abusive in nature. Once again, it is shown just how much mistreatment women go through. It also shows how men try to assert their dominance and power over men (Miles, 45). For example, Joe constantly abuses Janie, both physically and emotionally as a way of showing the power that he holds over her. He strikes her when she cooks him dinner that he deems to be unsatisfactory. In another incidence, Janie tries to show her defiance by verbally assaulting him in the presence of his friends and he physically assaults her.

Joe is extremely controlling, and he does not only show his power by physically abusing Janie but by also forbidding her from various things and activities. For instance, he restricts Janie's social life by a huge margin and does not allow her to interact with friends. He also goes as far as choosing

the clothes that she wears. Joe is also very critical of Janie. Janie then marries after Tea Cake and although they are quite smooth in this marriage, it is nevertheless clear that even in the most seeming perfect marriage, women are still viewed as inferior and are still oppressed (Sadoff 33).

Although Tea Cake treats her very differently than her previous husbands, it emerges that even amidst this, some masculine behavior standards are still expected, and one of them is physically striking women. Janie is struck by Tea Cake not because he is angry and needs to do it, but just because the society expects him to do it. He is expected to show his authority over the women, and he does this by whipping Janice.

A marriage is not considered complete unless it involves some few blows to the woman. In regards to Tea Cake's physical abuse of Janice, Hurston writes that "Before that week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved the awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in passion. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss" (Hurston 140).

The inferiority, oppression and mistreatment of women is further evident in Hurston's other famous work *Sweat*. *Sweat* tells the story of Delia, a hardworking black woman who earns a living by washing clothes for the white man. She loves her job as it brings food on the table. Delia is married to Sykes, an oppressive man who does not work. He constantly oppresses and ridicules Delia for working for the white man. The irony here is that it is the money that Delia earns from her work that puts the food on the table. Sykes is obviously abusive towards Delia, and he tries to antagonize her even further by playing on her fear of snakes (Sadoff 61). For instance, one

day, her husband casually lays his bullwhip that resembles snake on Delia's shoulder and this causes her to be hugely frightened. Delia is very angry and scolds her husband for this. Sykes however does not exhibit any bit of concern and goes on to yell at her admonishing her for bringing clothes to the house, something that he does not obviously like.

Delia attempts to ignore him as she is not in a mood to fight, but Sykes is determined to fight and he therefore continues provoking her, for example by kicking a neat pile of clothes that she had arranged (Davis 150). Delia reaches her breaking point, and screams at her husband about just how hard she works to support them and picks a piece of metal from the stove as if to strike him (Davies, 39).

This particular action is a depiction of the huge oppression that Delia has been subjected to and that she has bottled inside her all this time. In fact, her husband is quite taken aback because he expects to exert his dominance and power once again over his wife without her responding in any way. In fact, Hurston writes that the episode from Delia "cowed him, and he did not strike her as he usually did" (Miles 78). This quote once again reveals the physical violence that women are subjected to. Things only get worse and in an effort to antagonize his wife even further Psyche buys a pet snake. This however proves to be his main undoing as one day the snake bites him and instead of helping him, Delia simply lets him die after all the oppression that he has caused her.

The other work by Zola Hurston that further depicts the inferiority, the oppression, and the mistreatment that women in the society are subjected to is in 'The Conscience of the Court'. This story is a depiction of the inferiority

of women in the society. The main protagonist, Laura Lee Kimble is an unlearned black woman who is accused of murder. She is accused of murder although from the onset; it is clear that she is not responsible for the murder.

However, because of her gender and her lack of education, her chances of redemption seem very bleak (Croft 59). She cannot even comprehend the words and vocabulary being used during her trial, and she is offered no legal counsel. When she even goes to the stand and makes her plea, she is immediately dismissed. Her inferiority causes her to resign herself to those deciding the case saying that she does not even know if she is guilty or not and it is the deciding parties who are to tell her. The “The Conscience of the Court” just the other previous discussed work once again shows the huge inferiority that women in the society are usually held at. It shows the struggle that women go through and how they are often judged by society’s higher powers including men (Croft 80). In this case, however, Kimble is lucky because she is acquitted.

Conclusion

Zola Neale Hurston is without a doubt one of the greatest writers of the 20th Century. She might not have been appreciated much in her time, but today, her works reflect issues that plagued the society during her time. As seen, one of the things she describes is the inferiority, oppression and mistreatment of women in the society. In the discussed works, it is shown just how much women were treated as second-grade citizens at a time when they could not speak out about their experiences.

Works Cited

Croft, Robert Wayne. *A Zora Neale Hurston Companion*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002.

Davies, Kathleen. " Zora Neale Hurston's Poetics of Embalment: Articulating the Rage of Black Women and Narrative Self-Defense." *African American Review* 26. 1 (1992): 147-159.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Novel*. New York: Perennial Library, 1990. Print. King, Lovalerie.

Miles, Diana. *Women, violence & testimony in the works of Zora Neale Hurston*. P. Lang, 2003

Sadoff, Dianne F. " Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston." *Signs* (1985): 4-26.

" Zora Neale Hurston." *The Cambridge Companion to American Novelists* (2013): 146.