SPECTRES OF THE SOUTH: RECONFIGURATION OF THE AMERICAN GOTHIC IN SELECTED WORKS OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON

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Zora Neale Hurston, a female black writer of the early twentieth century, is noticeable for depicting a side of the American nation that is most troubled and afflicted. In her works the American South acquires Gothic dimensions and becomes a site of terror and horror for its occupants. Using the Gothic for the portrayal of the South, Hurston’s endeavours towards representing the dreadfulness faced by the people of her race stand largely unrecognized and unexplored. She employs the ever-changing and fluid genre of the Gothic to put into words the lives of the rural Southern folk and in turn imparts to the genre of American Gothic a new definition. Benefitting from the tradition of slave narratives, Hurston chooses to use both realism and imagination to bring to light the perturbation associated with the troubled history that constituted the South.

Gothic literature when associated with the South assumes a different shape than its precedent - the European Gothic, as the American South is a region with a peculiar history. Owing to its atypical nature and distinctive character, the only genre of literature that can adequately and truly represent the South is the Gothic. The Gothic is a genre that is dynamic and acquires new forms with various geographical and sociological conditions. Hence we have the Canadian Gothic, South-Asian Gothic, Irish Gothic, Scottish Gothic, and the good old British Gothic (pertaining to geographical locations) and imperial Gothic, cyber Gothic, postcolonial Gothic, postfeminist Gothic (concerned with various socio-political phenomena). Something that emerges very clearly from these various categorizations is that the Gothic cannot be pinned down to a certain geographical region or few definite tenets. Hence Eric Savoy’s assertion that “the Gothic is a fluid tendency rather than a concrete literary “mode”’ is quite valid here (Martin and Savoy 7). This is in accordance with what Catherine Spooner says about the scholars in the field of Gothic being Van Helsings, i.e., everybody tries to define and present the Gothic in myriad forms and manners. A free play of ideas and narratives define the Gothic with each writer putting forth new concerns and newer techniques of dealing with those concerns. Zora Neale Hurston belongs to this tradition of presenting the South in all its reality and horror. Through her works we come across the South as a land of beauty and horror, with horror being a significant aspect of life in the region. In fact, the horror and terror of everyday existence is so inherent in her works that she can be regarded as belonging to the
category of writers like William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and Flannery O’Connor who use the Gothic mode to bring forth the dread associated with the South.

The present study seeks to establish Hurston as a literary forerunner of black female writers not only in the field of the African-American novel, but also in the African-American Gothic. Before Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) depicted the horrors of slavery and its after-effects, Hurston’s works established the Gothicism inherent in the black experience of slavery and its after-effects. The after-effects of slavery that find place in later black women writers such as Alice Walker and Gayl Jones i.e., sexual enslavement and gender violence, could find a place in Hurston’s oeuvre as well. The depiction of violence in the lives of blacks was a subject that was evaded by most black writers during the Harlem Renaissance period. For them, the portrayal of intra-racial violence would have endangered the racial concerns in black literature. Hurston ensured that the site of horror and terror revealed in her works is primarily that of the South and not of the north. Blacks writers who had forsaken the South for the north were severely criticized by Hurston. The working class population of the South provided appropriate characters for her narratives and supported her portrayal of the horrendous South. The past of the South weighs heavy on its present and hence it cannot be divorced from the ethos by which the region is characterized. Hurston narrated stories of black towns where everyday life of the blacks harrowed with shadows of the past could be told from a different perspective. Hurston showed how the blacks create history within themselves and how the seemingly distant whites and their values affected this creation of history. She studied her own people as a race and presented fictional narratives as a medium of answering back to the dominant center through the use of the Gothic. Though this side of her works finds mention in some books and some articles, it has been largely overlooked and not explored. Hurston’s relationship with the Gothic has been investigated in Eric D. Curren’s article “Should Their Eyes Have Been Watching God ? Hurston’s use of Religious Experience and Gothic Horror” and in “The Cruelty of Zora Hurston” written by Sean McCann. In the light of such ideas, the present study attempts to raise and answer various questions such as – What is Zora Neale Hurston’s position in the realm of the American Gothic? How does Hurston seeks to portray the black experience through the African-American Gothic genre? What is Hurston’s position
as a black female writer? How is the American Gothic profited by Hurston’s participation? What role does realism come to play in the fluid genre that the Gothic is? And lastly, how does Hurston subvert the dominant writings by various early Gothic writers while deploying some of their techniques?

The introductory chapter starts with delineating the theoretical framework of the American Gothic. The American Gothic is a mode that is largely malleable and several crosscurrents have enriched its nature. At first the darker issues that plague the Gothic would seem divorced from the land of equality and opportunity that America is publicized and popularized as. Hence, on the surface the idea of Gothic and the American nation appear incongruent. But this is just one central concern of the Gothic genre – appearance versus reality. In one of the foundational works on American Gothic *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Leslie Fiedler established the link between Gothic and America forever, proclaiming that, “until the Gothic had been discovered, the serious American novel could not begin; and as long as that novel lasts, the Gothic cannot die” (143). The dominant discourse of America being the land of freedom is the one that is popularized and publicized, with the bloody history of the process of the formation of the American nation being constantly hidden and masked. The Gothic results from the dark recesses of national history that are detrimental to the construction of a uniform national narrative. The central issue that constitutes the American Gothic, however, is the underside of the American Dream. The writers of the American Gothic were faced with a problem of no derelict castles, no oppressive religious institutions, no feudal lords with legacies, which could inspire narratives on the Gothic. This problem of what should constitute the subject matter of such works was to be solved by the American history of slavery and the horror and harrowing efforts of those who had newly arrived in America to ‘civilize’ those who already occupied the land – the Native Indians. The idea of the American Dream, which glorified America as the land of equal opportunities for all and the land of light and affirmation, was deflated by its own history of murder and atrocities. The writers of the American Gothic seek to interrogate and problematize this very aspect of the American Dream which the national discourse tries to veil and conceal from public view and popular discourse. In a new setting the notion of the Gothic gets revised and re-formed as new concerns, quite different from those that occupied the British Gothic fiction, are brought to the fore through this new category. This only
seeks to confirm what Maggie Kilgour writes about the Gothic form being “a Frankenstein’s monster, assembled out of bits and pieces of the past” (qtd. in Goddu 5). It is the horrors contained in the history of America that the American Gothic seeks to unravel. The first chapter dwells on the issues of the American Gothic intimately connected with concerns like miscegenation and mulattoes. It also explicates on Gothic becoming a tool of subversion the hands of black writers to comment upon and unveil the darkness that underlies the history of the American story of materialistic success. A pertinent point which is central to the thesis if that of the Gothic changing and evolving a a literary genre due to which the Gothic in linked with realism. The derivation of African-American Gothic from slave narratives is a testimony to the fact that the Gothic is not divorced from realism. Rather, in its relationship with the slave narratives, the American Gothic acquires new dimension. The setting that Hurston bases her Gothic texts is that of the American South, with its history of intense racism and violence.

Chapter two of this thesis is a detailed analysis of Hurston’s first two novels Jonah’s Gourd Vine (1933) and Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937). Jonah’s Gourd Vine, Hurston’s first novel takes inspiration from Hurston’s own personal life as she portrays through this work a dysfunctional family system, the issue of miscegenation and mulatto existence, zombification through slavery that continues even after its abolition, and the trope of the spilt self. Zombification and the trope of split self acquires prominence in this book as see the protagonist under the haunting influence of slavery. The process of making a zombie also reverses and subverts the power game as with the power of voodoo those who had power previously, could be turned into slaves losing all qualities of an independent self. These monsters are also figures of transgression as they hover on the borderlines of consciousness and unconsciousness. They neither belong to the world of the dead nor to that of the undead. Through the figure of John, the preacher and the sinner, Hurston seeks to render the effects of slavery in its long-lasting nature. His twin self- the Christian preacher and the animalistic lustful man, John’s abjected self acquires major role in this text. Both these tropes also speak of Hurston’s ethnic roots as an African-American writer. Janie’s predicament as a mulatto woman of the rural South is presented in Their Eyes Were Watching God, where the narrative highlights the horrors faced by a black woman. This part is primarily an investigation of the Gothic
tropes used by Hurston as she wrote her masterpiece that is most often seen as a novel of black affirmation and black cheerfulness. Unlike *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, this novel deals with the history of the South in relation to experiences of a black woman and hence evokes greater horror due to the twice-subjugated position of a black woman in white America. Hurston showed the horror within the black communities unashamedly and possibly she thought of such horrific plight of the blacks a result of their displacement from their home i.e., Africa. Situating her story in the rural South, Hurston gave a realistic foundation to the otherwise surreal traits of Gothic literature where, as Goddu suggests, the nightmarish world of early American Gothic writers such as Poe and Hawthorne has become “the Monday morning of the Negro author” (Goddu 133). For this I have analyzed the use of sexual transgression in the form of rapes of subjugated black women, marital Gothic, claustrophobia, miscegenation and black worship of white attitude throughout the book so that it presents the black South in all its horror.

Chapter three analyzes the later novels of Hurston i.e., *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). In *Moses*, the building of nation by the eponymous character Moses is called into question using the Gothic angle to look at the process of nation building. Not only during the times when Hurston wrote the novel, but also in the postmodern age, the violence associated with nation building does not cease to exist. Manslaughter in the process of building or reconstructing a nation has long been the case ever since nation building has existed. The Gothic, despotism and nation building – ideas not often see interrelated are analysed in this chapter. The ambivalence in the character of Moses serves as one of the chief characteristics of horror and terror. Gender oppression and tyrannical rule by Moses is something that Hurston foregrounded in the novel. As a Gothic work that is realistic, the novel displays political anxieties of the age. The novel reflects on the fear of the racial Other and the Other in terms of gender. *Seraph on the Suwanee* is a peculiar novel in itself because Hurston who was seen as a champion of the blacks wrote a novel with white characters. However, the white characters in the book belong to the class of ‘crackers’, looked down upon by the elite whites. Hurston presents in this novel the threat posed to the American nation by various Eugenics theorists who blamed the cracker class for corrupting the nation. Another issue that acquires Gothic dimensions in this work is the marital relationship of the protagonist Arvay, whose
marital life can be seen as sado-masochistic. Arvay’s mentally challenged son is another presence in the novel that needs to be examined from the perspective of the Gothic. Deformity is strongly linked with the monstrosity as a deformed body which renders a deformed body into a monstrous one. Such deformed body is also the Other as it haunts those which are normal and perfect. The novels also serves as a reflection on Gynecological Gothic as the fetus acquires an identity of its own when Arvay is expecting Earl. Apart from this a minor Gothic trope present in the novel is that of wilderness. The wilderness acquires Gothic proportions as it is seen as a reservoir of all that repressed and hidden.

Chapter four examines Hurston’s minor and early works – her short stories and a play with Gothic theme. This analysis supports the earlier chapter and corroborates that it is not only in her major works but also in her early and minor works that Hurston could not evade the Gothic nature of African-American existence. Among the stories examined in this chapter include some stories that are celebrated and famous while some others have been overlooked by scholars and critics. “Sweat”, “Gilded Six-Bits”, “Black Death”, “Muttsy” and “Uncle Monday” are the stories that display the horrendous side of the South. In the next part of this chapter I have analyzed Hurston’s play *Color-Struck* (1925) in which the evil practice of colourism infuses in the black protagonist Emma the pathological state of being a paranoid and delusional person. The analysis also focuses on the issue of racism, colourism and the Jim Crow laws that evinced that even after the abolition of slavery, the bonded nature of Blacks has not ceased to exist.

The last chapter concludes by trying to substantiate Hurston’s largely unrecognized contribution in the sphere of Gothic literature. It traces all the aspects of Hurston’s writings that consolidate her position as a black female writer, in the realm of the American Gothic. The trends that recur in Hurston’s texts when seen as Gothic are the presence of marital strife, claustrophobia, political gothic, the inside view of nation building process, the annihilation of the Other – all reflected through the mode of the Gothic. As Hurston uses the white forces as outside agencies, she could be regarded as a participant in subverting that body of Gothic fiction, which regards the black, the Indian or any person of colour as outsider and consequently, a bearer of uncivilized, raw energies, which would corrupt the civilized white world. Also an aspect that is of prime importance is that Hurston’s tales depict the intra-racial tensions more than
inter-racial struggle. The study attempts to postulate the manner in which Hurston fused various Gothic tropes and themes to reconfigure the American Gothic, and construct a brand of her own.

It is easy to look past Hurston’s use of Gothicism in the face of the scholarship that champions her as a writer of affirmation, comedy and “laughter and tears” (qtd. in Gates Jr. and Appiah 17). This was a covert aspect of her works that lay buried in most of the extant criticism or scholarship on Hurston. A closer look reveals what Sean McCann very aptly asserts about her works that issue of power cruelty, violence and human depravity and terror have not been studied exhaustively and have remained hidden. Her work actually brings to the fore those cultural anxieties that need to be resolved in order for not only the black community but also the whole American nation to progress and move past its sinful history. Hurston’s usage of the Gothic participates in the generic concern of this category where the hidden becomes visible and that which is unsightly and horrifying becomes the center. She gives vent to her own lived experiences as black, female writer of the early twentieth century, and that of the members of her community. Through her contribution and reconfiguration of the genre, Hurston clearly shows that terror and horror are woven in the fabric of the American South. Haunting in her works emerges from the quotidian rather than the fantastic. Turning the discourse of American success and triumph upside down, Hurston participates in the unraveling of the ghastly and unveiling of the gruesome.