

RACE AND RACISM IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *MOSES, MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN*

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Abstract

Moses, Man of the Mountain (1939) is a unique work of Zora Neale Hurston. She blends Afro-American folklore, religion, and humor in this novel. This novel has created one of the most intriguing works in the annals of Afro-American literature. *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is also recognized as her second best novel which is followed by *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In this novel, Hurston recreates the biblical story of Moses from the Old Testament. She develops this concept in her eloquent style with modern interpretation. The story of Moses has been dealt with his imprisoned life in Egypt from Hebrew. Moses' story is developed by various writers with different notion. This article also deals with the view point of Hurston's enlightened of using the Negro idiom through the story of Black-Americans and their continuous combating for their own identity. *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is a satire on the whole belief of race and racial transparency. Hurston deeply explores the philosophical study of the African spirit towards their self-empowerment and freedom in this novel.

Key Words: *Race, religion, culture, humanity, etc.*

Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is a novel that portrays the biblical illusions of Moses in the Old Testament. Critics have been regarded Hurston with assorted reviews of the novel. Hurston's contemporaries criticize at various levels. As in the words of Alain Locke, it is "caricature instead". The juvenile writer Ralph Ellison is harshly commented as "For Negro fiction... It is did nothing" (Boyd, 336). Robert Hemenway calls the novel as "noble failure" (270), and Lillie P. Howard condemns it as saying "the book-falls short of its mark" (132). The central character, Moses has been

criticized by various critics with different points of view. Valerie Boyd ardently states, "Brimming with multiple meanings, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* was Hurston's second master piece" (329) and Deborah G. Plant cites that "it is one of the most unexamined masterpiece extant" (124).

In *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston discusses several themes particularly Race and Racism is one of the most important themes. Through this story, she illustrates the story of the enslaved Hebrews and their racism. The early domination of racism by the white society still exists in the modern world. Hebrews are not able to reveal out their own identity. They are oppressed in race and also they suffer cruelties from white Egyptians. The white Egyptians consider themselves that they have only superiors in all qualities. Right at the beginning of the novel, Hurston approaches the gloomy position as:

Hebrews were disarmed and prevented from becoming citizens of Egypt, they found out that they were aliens, and from one new decree to the next they sank lower and lower. So they had no comfort left but to beat their breasts to crush the agony inside. Israel had learned to weep. (342)

Hebrews have been living in Egypt in a vigorous state of wild animals. They are often considered as butchered, "those brutal soldiers, Jochebed, grin with pleasure when they hunt down one of our children like hounds after rabbit" (360). For an instance, if the Hebrews were arrested alive, the Egypt king, Pharaoh sent them to a living hell for the whole day. Hebrews are told by Pharaoh as:

Well, anyway, you won't need no stones to remain your children and your great-great grand children of the punishment that Ramses put on you. You are going to work and work and work. You are going to weep and you are going to bleed and bleed until you have paid in a measure for your crimes against Egypt. I done told you now. Don't give me no troubles unless you want to make me mind" (359).

Many restrictions have been placed on Hebrews by Egyptian king Pharaoh such as Hebrews are never allowed to have children or to have any property or belongings of their own. Pharaoh merely needed the Hebrews to perish from Egypt slowly just by killing them. To owe their racial origins Hebrews lead a

torturous life in Egypt.

Hurston, through the theme of race, also attempted to question the myth of racial purity. For Hurston, the concept of race was a cultural one rather than biological. She tries to reveal that in some way or the other one is linked with each other and or not racially pure Hurston depicts that even beginning of the novel. Moreover, Hebrews have a belief that Pharaoh's grandmother too was Hebrew. They do question Pharaoh's racial origins as "There is plenty of Hebrew blood in that family already... He is scared somebody will come along and tell who his real folks are" (370).

Thus, Pharaoh is a half blood Hebrew who just passes off as an Egyptian. Hurston then tries to question the racial identity of Moses, which has been existing ever since. Though Hurston questions the race of Moses at the beginning she depicts the popular conception that Moses was probably Egyptian rather than Hebrew.

According to Hurston in the story, Amram and Jochebed have a male child and they could keep their infant safe for three months. As it would be too risky for them to keep him any more with them, they decided to part away with him. So, they kept him in a basket and made it float on the river Nile. They also instruct their eldest child Miriam to take care. Soon Miriam falls asleep and she develops a story to avoid punishment. She narrates her parents that Pharaoh's daughter picked the basket up who came to take bath in the Nile river. Zora Neale Hurston develops the whole story of Moses as Hebrew on a child's false defense by clearly observing her frenzied mother who is in search for something with which to strike, Miriam soon become conscious than flashed in her mind. Both Amram and Jochebed along with Hebrews believe the false story of Miriam. But, Hebrews felt joy within them that one of them had been adopted by the royal Egyptian family. They say, "Ho! Ho! Pharaoh hates Hebrews, does he? He passes a law to destroy all our sons and he gets a Hebrew child for a grandson. Ain't rich?" (369). Even Sigmund Freud also questioned that racial identity of Moses in his seminal work *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). He espoused the notion that the story of Exodus and Moses was an Egyptian is a true fact indeed.

Therefore, Hurston delves deep into the racial origins of Moses and tries to confound that Moses story of preexistence as a white and Hebrew. She exposes Moses as an Egyptian or in other words an African by

race. "Even as Freud mused over this troublesome question, Zora had dared already to posit the Hebrew Moses as a black leader" (Sheffey, 155).

Undoubtedly, Hurston tried to depict that the personality of Moses is revered throughout all races and ethnicity. Moreover, Moses' personality cannot be limited to any particular Ethnicity or nationality. While dealing with the theme of race and racism, even Hurston could not be detached from racism. In *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, the reader could find that the people of one group try to dominate each other by restoring to racism. Hebrews too consider the people of the other race as inferior to them while they have been regarded as a lower race. Miriam, the elder sister of Moses tries to provoke the racial disharmony in the community by criticizing Zipporah, Second wife of Moses, on the basis of her skin colour. This is because Zipporah is dark skinned. Apart from this Miriam wants her to leave the Hebrew community, since she does not mix with white Hebrews.

According to Hurston, all races are equal to each other and racial superiority is nothing but a false notion adopted by one ethnic group to suppress another for their own betterment. Hence, Hurston Mocks is at the very concept of racial superiority of any ethnic race. Another theme in this novel is class which is closely linked to the theme of racism. The Hebrews in the novel faces not only racism but also classicism. Their position in the social class is the lowest rung. Hebrews state of living is virtual impoverishment, a hand to mouth existence.

They work free for the Egyptian and in return get some food and clothes since they are not allowed to own any property, house or any other material goods. The best of everything by Hebrews are used by Egyptians. Egypt's whole economy depends on Hebrews. All the works such as planning, building up of new cities are done by Hebrews. Hurston writes:

No one except women were sent to jail. Pharaoh said it was a waste of man power and groceries to fasten up able bodied Hebrews in Jails. Every crime not punishable by death could be worked out in the brickyards, the stone quarries or on buildings. (353)

Pharaoh, the king of Egypt makes the Hebrews work for him as a measure for repayment of their deeds

instead of killing them because Pharaoh knows the importance of the labour of Hebrews and resists freeing them Pharaoh thinks.

All he had required of them was that they work and build him a few cities here and there to pay back in a small way for all the great benefits they had received in their long residence in Egypt and also to give back some of the wealth they had so ruthlessly raped from the helpless body of Egypt when she was in no position to defend herself. (357)

Even, the new king of Egypt Ta-Phar, Moses' uncle follows the policy of Pharaoh towards Hebrews without any concessions. As per the story in this novel, the upper class completely relies on the lower classes for their prosperity. Ta-Phar knows that Egyptian Economic system will collapse without the labour of Hebrews. So, as a ruler he depends on subjugating Hebrews and forcing them to work for him. This is the reason Ta-Phar does not allow Hebrews to go away from Egypt until Moses inflicts severe punishment on Ta-Phar and the Egyptian kingdom in the form of plague. Hurston writes it as:

Pharaoh dreamed of making his name and fame greater than that of his father. How could he do it and abandon the public works? And how could he carry on the public works without the Hebrews. Even his military strength rested on these slaves, for without them men would have to be taken from other things to fill their places. He had too often boasted of this advantage of holding the Hebrews for the army to forget it. They would resist him too. Nothing to do but wait until the gods favored his cause. (489)

Zora Neale Hurston might have remembered the history of plantation system of America wherein the white economic prosperity solely depended on the African American's labour. "The parallels the plantation slave economy in America or even to the tenant farm structure that simply perpetuated a form of slavery in the 1930s are obvious" (Campbell, 95). When Hurston produced this novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Germany was rising as a superpower depending on Jewish work, power and money. Hurston may have been aware of the conditions of Jews in Germany and also the Nazi slogan, *Arbeit Macht Frei* (work makes one free) which is echoed in Pharaoh's remark in *Moses*, "So he now decreed that Hebrews

must begin work one hour earlier in the morning and work one hour more in the evening" (358) in order to gain freedom. Hebrews did not aware of the plans of Pharaoh and the thought that they will be released after the work of building up of the new city of Ramses. They could not get back to their houses and lands, rather achieve their freedom. This similarity of circumstances could be seen in Jews reality in Germany.

Class distinctions in the region of Median are not so clearly evident as that of Egypt. Both the upper and lower classes in the society lived together in harmony. Jethro, the leader of Median is a wise and a kind ruler who possesses some servants but not slaves. Zipporah after marrying Moses seems to be show off her new found status though she is a class conscious woman. She often wants Noses to have rich attire and live likes a king.

Hurston trice to explore the concept of upward social mobility through the character of Moses. The story of Moses in this novel have a turning conception in which he is born in a slave family but is able to achieve a royal position which opens a new opportunities in his life. Moses is devoid of any class consciousness and envisions a nations where everybody in equal in the society.

Moses never hesitates to mix-up with the people of lower class and to help them even though he leads a comfortable royal life. It is he who demands Pharaoh that Hebrews also should be recruited in the army. He also took vows for the betterment of Hebrews. Ironically, Moses himself belongs to a slave family by his origin and he himself remains closely rooted to his background unknowingly.

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