IDENTITY AND AUTONOMY IN THE SELECT FICTION OF
ZORA NEALE HURSTON

ABSTRACT

The thesis entitled “Identity and Autonomy in the Select Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston” focuses on identity, autonomy, gender bias, racism, sexism, colour discrimination, slavery, marginalization, alienation and so on…in the African American literature. The author chosen for the study is Zora Neale Hurston, a prominent writer in the African American genre. A special attention is given to female identity and autonomy and the women’s emergence among the troubles and trouble shooters in their society. African-Americans have widely accepted that they are socio-historic products, not only bound to one another by racial and biological commonalities, but also molded by the consequences of slavery and betrayal. The writers of all races have recognized the inexhaustible literary potential of African American self-examination and self-exploration. There is a strong relationship between the environments into which the inexorable fate placed them and their own definition of the sense of female identity and self-assertion.

The term “Identity” refers to one’s rights, equality and dignity, equal opportunity in work and education and equal pay. Here the focused “Female identity” denotes a movement advocating the cause of women’s rights and legitimate demands, particularly equal rights with men by challenging blatant and rampant inequalities between the sexes in the society. And the term “Autonomy” refers to self-decision or individual thought or self-assertion which constitutes uniqueness in the society, where “Female-autonomy” denotes that female’s assertion and constitution of their individuality. The value and necessity of female autonomy is strongly felt in the African American community and emerged as one of the significant political and cultural currents of the last decade. Identity and Autonomy as a concept can be defined as the search for self-assertion and its relationship to social contexts and realities. The problems such as biological, psychological, cultural and social issues
have been treated thematically in various contexts, and brought in the writings of African-Americans.

The thesis focuses on the **Introductory part Chapter 1** which comprises of the History of African American society, Harlem Renaissance, Civil rights movement, Black feminist criticism and the societal changes that happened among black women who struggle for their identity and autonomy and the author Zora Neale Hurston, a feminist writer who asserts her self-identity and assertion through her literary works. She suffers to a great extent to assert herself in the African American society. She is radical woman who cares nobody and writes what is viewed in her mind. Her literary works examines folklore strategies and ethnography through which lights on female character’s identity and their voice. These chapters vividly show how the African American women empower themselves to reach their horizon, discovering and asserting their self-identity and autonomy. The analysis starts with **Their Eyes were Watching God**, **Seraph on the Suwanee**, **Dust Tracks on Road** and other works such as **Jonah’s Gourd Vine**, **Mules and Men** and short stories of Hurston in order to trace the development of the vibrant personalities of the African American heroines and even the author as reflected in each work in parallel with the development of African-American society.

Chapter II is titled “**Inventing herself**: Emergence of Black Female Identity** focuses on female identity in **Their Eyes Were Watching God**. It is an elaborate depiction of how the protagonist of the novel visions herself against the ruling society and time-honored beliefs that have been repressing the female identity and autonomy Janie, the protagonist, who is very strong, independent and intelligent does not meekly follow the main stream base of life but learns over time from her failures. Janie’s life is split into various parts. The first part depicts Janie’s childhood experiences from her birth to the time she becomes a young teen; the second part delineates Janie’s experience with her first husband, Logan kellicks. The third part explores Janie’s life with her second husband, Joe Starks. The fourth part examines her life-fulfillment when she marries a man named Tea Cake, who is much younger...
than herself and her tireless struggles for justice. This chapter shows the consistent
development of Janie’s inner strength by which she gains her identity as a human
being with legitimate rights to dignity and freedom. Ultimately she touches the
horizon of independence and individuality through her hard life experiences.

Chapter III – “I want to make Myself”: Search for Self gives an elaborate
expression of Arvay’s irrepressible and insatiable from the fetters of racial
oppressions and assertion of Self-Hood in the novel Seraph on the Suwanee. Arvay
resists the dominant forms of social oppression. At first, she is an economically
dependent wife and mother to Jim and her children respectively, occupying a social
space that renders her subservient to her husband. Nevertheless, freedom is needed for
her care-taking and emotional mothering activities that confer a degree of social
status. She struggles hard to balance between her husband and children. She becomes
a victim to Jim who unconscionably exploits her sexually even before their marriage,
taking advantage of her fragile social standing. Arvay finds it difficult to survive with
Jim’s oppressions. Yet she finds her identity by purifying herself by her noble
suffering, stoically withstanding on social back grounds. She is no longer enslaved by
her tortured past. She is ultimately free to do what she wants to do for her family. She
is to serve and is meant to serve. Jim is the means through which Arvay can
understand herself as worthwhile. She quits Jim, fed up with his high-handedness. It is
her sojourn at Sawley which transforms her into a confident woman. Her solitude
enlightens her mind and metamorphoses her into a mature woman who can shape her
life herself. At Sawley, she gradually evolves as an independent woman who can
handle her life individually. Her ability to prudently handle the situation at the time of
her mother’s death testifies to her potential as a woman. She independently takes
decisions which calls for autonomy and appreciation.

Chapter IV - Self Assertion in Autobiographies deals with Hurston’s
autobiographies, where she inputs her own life experiences. A woman who is
arrogant, strong and powerful, even radical creates a strong impact on the female
empowerment. She discusses her folklore expeditions, political conflicts, struggle, the
problems of her own psyche and injustice framed by patriarchy and slavery. She struggles assiduously, gained tremendous inner strength and nobly liberated herself from racial oppressions, as beautifully portrayed in her novels and works. Hurston’s autobiography vividly explains why the female characters of her novels develop the urge for self-identity and autonomy, and how they attain them with determination, empowering the whole of female society.

Chapter V Summation shows women writers have broken the silence in the mid-sixties in the Continent and raised their voice against vital issues concerning the African American females. It is also the era of political independence of many of African States. The decade that follows witnessed the rise of feministic writing by African women and advanced the African American women’s cause of recognition and relevance. It is a personal odyssey to realize the full potential of one’s complex bicultural identity as an African-American. This legendary and mythic journey of identity and autonomy derives its socio-cultural consciousness from the group experience of African Americans, and its force from the interplay of Euro-centric and Afro-centric symbolic systems. In short, as far as there is an African-American canonical story, it is the quest, frequently with apocalyptic undertones, for freedom, literacy, identity and autonomy, personal and communal — grounded in social reality and ritualized in symbolic acts of African-American speech, music, and religion. She traces the effects of these views on her female characters and depicts the characters’ struggles for liberation from such limiting discourse; Hurston portrays their resistance to the policing and control have attempted by the communities of working class or middle class ones.

African American women are suppressed in the past which is evidently proved by many female writers through their pen. Hurston presents her female characters in her works, oppressed and alienated and urge for freedom and liberation. After many trials and tribulations through race, colour, sexism, gender bias, marginalization, have emerged as empowered women like Janie, Lucy, Delia, Arvay and so on. African American though have some frustrations, may be liberated in the
future who will not be dependent on male as seen through the dreams of Female authors. Zora Neale Hurston is such great personalities who portray her female protagonists liberated after many struggles to find their identity and autonomy. Hurston is the role model for all the African American writers who give voice for women liberation through their literary works. The scope of further study of Hurston’s works may be still analyzed and carried out for research work in the terms of cultural roots and tradition of African Americans, Marginalization, Gender bias of the African American society, Man –women relationships, Hurston as a Folklorist, Hurston as eco-writer, African American slavery, Marriage as means of liberation, Black and white system of living, African American diasporic –analysis, Imagery and Myth in the works of Hurston, Style and diction in the fictions of Hurston, Language and Style in the novels of Hurston, Women Characters of Hurston’s novels and so on..Thus Hurston, a paragon of African American literature is a boon and a living legend in the hearts of all the African American writers.