Chapter – 5

*Moses, Man of the Mountain: Biblical Undercurrent*

Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) is a unique work where she beautifully blends fiction, African American folklore, religion, and humour, creating one of the most intriguing works in the annals of African American literature. It is also considered as her second best novel after *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston recreates the biblical story of Moses, but with a modern interpretation. To quote Valerie Boyd:

> At its most basic level, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is a retelling of the Old Testament story of Moses leading the enslaved Hebrews out of Egypt. As allegory, *Moses* is many things: Written in the Negro idiom that Hurston had mastered by 1939, it is a story of black America and its continuous yearning to be free. At the same time, it is a satire on the whole notion of race and racial purity and it is a deeply philosophical exploration of the very nature of freedom and self-empowerment. (329)

Hurston had already explored the idea of writing about Moses in the short story, “The Fire and Cloud” (1934). Hurston even borrowed some of her ideas from this story such as, Moses faking his death, his conversation with the lizard and vanishing into the wilderness. Hurston also discusses Moses in her anthropological book, *Mules and Men* written in 1935. However, some critics like Henry Louis Gates Jr., suggest that Hurston was perhaps inspired by the poem, “Moses, A Story of the Nile” (1869) written by nineteenth century African American writer, Frances Harper. Whichever may be the source of her inspiration, Hurston indeed created her second masterpiece by writing *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. 
Hurston has received mixed reviews by critics for her work. Hurston’s contemporaries criticized it, for Alain Locke it was “caricature instead.” The young writer Ralph Ellison was even harsher and said: “For Negro fiction …. It did nothing” (Boyd 336). Robert Hemenway called the novel as “noble failure” (270) and Lillie P. Howard criticizes it saying the book “falls short of its mark” (132).

Today as Hurston’s works are being reassessed and revalued, Moses is being reviewed with a new perspective. Valerie Boyd emphatically says, “Brimming with multiple meanings, Moses, Man of the Mountain was Hurston’s second masterpiece” (329). Deborah G. Plant also mentions that “it is one of the most unexamined masterpiece extant” (124).

Hurston has explored various themes in the novel like religion, race, freedom, class, and nature build up on a biblical narrative framework.

Race and Racism is one of the major themes of the novel. Hurston, through the story of the enslaved Hebrews shows that racism has been prevailing in white society from very early times. In the novel, Hebrews are shown as a downtrodden race who suffer brutalities from white Egyptians who consider themselves a superior race. Right at the beginning of the novel Hurston hints at the oncoming ominous situation:

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 were living in Egypt in a state fit for animals. They were often butchered, “those brutal soldiers, Jochebed, grin with pleasure when they hunt down one of our children like hounds after rabbit” (360). And if they were kept alive, the
King of Egypt Pharaoh made sure that they spent each day in a living hell. Pharaoh tells the Hebrews:

Well, anyway, you won’t need no stones to remind your children and your great-great grand children of the punishment that Rameses 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)

Pharaoh had put many restrictions on Hebrews. They are not allowed to have children, have any kind of property or money. Pharaoh wanted the Hebrews to slowly perish from Egypt, “that is why that Pharaoh wants to kill us all off.” Hebrews lead a tortuous life owing to their racial origins.

Through the theme of race, Hurston has also tried to question the myth of racial purity. For Hurston, race was not a biological concept but a cultural concept. Hurston tries to show that no one is racially pure, and in some way or the other linked with each other. At the beginning of the novel, Hurston depicts that the mighty Egyptian King, Pharaoh too has Hebrew blood in him. Hebrews often believe that Pharaoh’s grandmother was a Hebrew. Hebrews question Pharaoh’s racial origins, “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, it seems that Pharaoh is a half-blood Hebrew who merely passes off as an Egyptian.

Hurston also questions the racial identity of Moses, which has been existing ever since. Hurston clearly depicts the fact that Moses was probably Egyptian, rather than Hebrew as the popular conception is. At the very beginning of the novel, Hurston questions the race of Moses.
In Hurston’s version of the story, Amram and Jochebed have a male child. They are able to keep their infant safe for three months. Then they decide to part away with him as it would be too risky for them to keep him any more with them. Amram and Jochebed float their child keeping him in a basket on the river Nile and instruct their eldest child Miriam to keep a watch. Soon Miriam falls asleep and to avoid punishment she concocts a story. She tells her parents that the basket was picked up by Pharaoh’s daughter—who had come to take bath in the Nile River that morning. Hurston places the entire story of Moses as Hebrew on a child’s false alibi. “Seeing her frenzied mother searching for something with which to strike her made Miriam come alive inside more thoroughly than ever she had done before in her life and suddenly an explanation flashed across her brain” (366). Amram, Jochebed and Hebrews readily believe this false story. Hebrews become happy that one of them has been adopted by the royal Egyptian family unknowingly. 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 that rich?” (369). Thus Hurston, clearly questions the very racial origins of Moses as depicted in the Old Testament story. She writes:

Still and all, Goshen never gave up their belief in the Hebrew in the palace. It was something for men to dream about. Jochebed became a figure of importance—the mother of our Prince in the palace. Miriam told her story again and again to more believing. It grew with being handled until it was history of the Hebrew in the palace, no less. Men claimed to have seen signs at the birth of the child, and Miriam came to believe every detail of it as she added them and retold them time and time again. Others conceived and added details at their pleasure and the legends grew like grass. (371)
Yet, at another point when Jochebed goes to the royal palace to offer her services as a wet nurse, she is told “There was no new baby to be nursed they told her. The Princess had been summoned home from Assyria on the death of her husband and had brought her infant son with her several months ago. But what is that to you, Hebrew woman? Anyway, no Hebrew servants were being used in the palace. Begone with you!” (371). Hurston makes it clear to her readers that what they will see will be totally different from the biblical story of Moses. Valerie Boyd writes in this context:

With this set up, Hurston calls into question Moses’s racial identity. By rooting the biblical legend of the baby’s rescue in a child’s alibi, she seems to make Moses black—the son of an Egyptian princess and an Assyrian prince. By uniting these two peoples—African and Asian—in Moses’s blood, Hurston gives herself license to employ various Mosaic legends from these continents throughout her novel. In this way too, she removes Moses from the strictures of Scripture and relocates him in the black tradition. (331)

Interestingly, Freud had also questioned the racial identity of Moses in his seminal work *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). He espoused the notion that Moses was an Egyptian and the story of Exodus is a true fact indeed. Ruthe T. Sheffey writes in this regard:

Of the Hebrew leader, Moses, Freud like Hurston, had attempted to inquire whether he was a historical personage or creature of legend. They both concluded with the overwhelming majority of historians that Moses was a real person and that the Exodus from Egypt associated with him did, in fact take place. After establishing the name as simply the Egyptian name for “child”, “mose” being not uncommon on
Egyptian monument s Freud wondered that no historian had dared to draw the conclusion that Moses nationality might be like his name—Egyptian . (155)

Thus, Hurston delves deep into the racial origins of Moses and tries to debunk the preexisting notions that Moses was a white and a Hebrew, instead she depicts 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).

Clearly, Zora tried to show that the towering personality of Moses cannot be limited to any particular ethnicity or nationality, he is revered throughout all races and ethnicity. While discussing the theme of race and racism, Hurston also brings out the fact that no one is aloof from racism. In Moses, Man of the Mountain, we see that people of one group try to dominate each other by resorting to racism. While Hebrews have been stigmatized as a lowly race, in turn, Hebrews too see people of other race as inferior to them Miriam, elder sister of Moses, tries to ferment racial disharmony in the community by criticizing Zipporah, second wife of Moses, on the basis of her skin colour. Miriam says:

Oh, you know I’m talking about that dark completed woman that Moses done brought here trying to make out she’s lord god sitting on a by god. All dressed up every day like king Pharaoh’s horse…. Oh, don’t try to take me up on every little point. Even if she was born and raised in Midian her folks could still come from Ethiopia, couldn’t they? Tell me! Look how dark her skin is. We don’t want people like that among us mixing up our blood and all. That woman has got to go.
Go get up some people to protest …. It’s her color Moses. She’s too dark to be around here. (556)

Miriam thinks Zipporah to be inferior as she is dark skinned. She wants her to leave the Hebrew community and go away, as she does not mix with white Hebrews. Hurston mocks at the very concept of racial superiority of any ethnic race. In fact, she clearly shows in Moses, that all races are equal and racial superiority is nothing but a false notion adopted by one ethnic group to suppress another for their own good. Josie P. Campbell writes in this regard:

The concept remains an unattainable “ideal” established by the dominant class to maintain power and superiority and then mimicked in various forms by the subjugated classes …. Hurston suggests that no one is immune to racism. The Hebrews, stigmatized by the Egyptians, turn around and do the same thing to the Ethiopians. Later in the novel the Hebrews look down upon and crush other tribes in search of a perfect homeland, for the Hebrews perceive themselves the Chosen People, whom God singled out to give preferential treatment. Notions of race and nation seem inexorably linked in this novel. (95)

Class is another important theme occurring in the novel which is intricately linked to the theme of racism. In Moses, one sees that Hebrews not only face racism but also classicism. They occupy the lowest rung in the social class. Hebrews live in a state of virtual penury, a “hand to mouth” existence. They are not allowed to own any property, house or any other material goods. They work free for the Egyptian and in return get some food and clothes. The whole economy of Egypt depends on the Hebrews. New cities are built, planned and all the work is done by the Hebrews. Man power of Hebrews is used to the optimum by the Egyptians. 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)

The King of Egypt, Pharaoh knows the importance of the labor of Hebrews and resists freeing them. Instead of killing Hebrews, Pharaoh makes them work for him as a measure for repayment of their deeds. 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)

Moses’s uncle Ta-Phar, new king of Egypt too, follows this policy without any concessions. Clearly, the upper class completely relies on the lower classes for their prosperity. Ta-Phar’s position as a ruler depends on subjugating Hebrews and forcing them to work for him. Ta-Phar knows that without the labor of Hebrews, Egyptian economic system will collapse, that is why he does not allow Hebrews to go from Egypt until finally Moses inflicts severe punishment on Ta-Phar and the Egyptian kingdom in the form of plague. Hurston writes:

Pharaoh had 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)

While writing this part of the story, Hurston probably may have had in mind the history of plantation system of America, where the white’s economic prosperity solely depended on the African American’s labor. “The parallels to the plantation slave economy in America or even to the tenant form structure that simply perpetuated a form of slavery in the 1930s are obvious” (Campbell 95). When Hurston was writing Moses, Man of the Mountain, Germany was rising as a super power solely depending on Jewish work power and money. Hurston must be aware of the conditions of Jews over there and also the Nazi slogan, Arbeit Macht Frei (Work Makes One Free) which is echoed in Pharaoh’s dictum 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 think that after the work they will be released, “The Hebrews did not know all this about new plans. They talked together and said that when the new city of Rameses was finished, that Pharaoh would be satisfied. Some of them even thought that they might get back their houses and lands” (353). Unfortunately, Hebrews could never achieve their freedom through work in Hurston’s Moses, or in reality in Germany.

In the region of Median, class distinctions were not so clearly evident as that of Egypt. Upper or rich class, and people from lower class both lived together in the society in harmony. The leader of Median, Jethro is a kind and wise ruler though he himself possesses some servants, but no slaves. Zipporah is a class conscious woman who often seems to be flaunting her new found status after marrying Moses. She
wants Moses to adorn himself rich clothes and live like a king. She suggests to Moses:

You must let the servants look after the sheep tomorrow. You must stay home and put on your fine Egyptian linen and ornaments…. Here I am married to a Prince of the blood royal and the neighbours don’t know a thing about it” (937-439).

Zipporah also wants to go to Egypt with Moses to see his wealth and status and dreams of becoming his queen there. She tells Moses, “Don’t you want to show me our palace and all those places and people that you told us about?” (439). Tensions and conflict between Zipporah occur when Mariam feels insecure of her own position in the community due to the special status of Zipporah, being Moses’ wife and a Median Princess.

Through, the character of Moses, Hurston also explores the concept of upward social mobility. Hurston shows that though Moses is born in a slave family he is able to achieve a royal position, by accident which opens new opportunities in his life. If Moses, had been a slave, he would never have been able to achieve what he did otherwise. Moses is devoid of any class consciousness. He envisions a nation where everybody is equal in the society. Hurston writes “He was seeing visions of a nation he had never heard of where there would be more equality of opportunity and less difference between top and bottom” (407)

Though Moses leads a comfortable royal life, he does not hesitate to mix up with the people of lower strata and class and even helps them. Early in the novel, Moses demands from Pharaoh, that Hebrews too should be given jobs in the army, “As the actual chief of the army he was demanding that Hebrews be included in the forces of Egypt” (333-334). Moses also demands to “shorten their hours of work”
Moses vows to better the conditions of Hebrews. Ironically, Moses himself belongs to a slave family by his origin and remains closely rooted to his background even though unknowingly.

Nature is an important theme in *Moses, Man of the Mountains*. Hurston depicts nature as a point of confluence where both the spiritual world and human world meet. Hurston inextricably links nature in retelling the story of Moses. Hurston also uses natural imagery like animals, insects, reptiles, water, and mountain to accentuate her plot. Nature “serves as a source of spirituality, life, and death, it is where humans and God connect” (Jones 107).

The very title of the novel, *Moses Man of the Mountains* manifests the importance of the nature theme in the novel. Mountain plays an important role in the life of Moses. God talks to Moses for the first time on the mountain. God appears in the form of a burning bush on the mountain, and instructs Moses to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt to a chosen place. Hurston writes:

Moses, sat up on the mountain passing nations through his mind. Way late in the day he climbed up to a place where he had been resting every afternoon for a long time. There was the bush, and there was the rock under it. He was within a few feet of it when the bush burst into furious flame. Moses could not believe his eyes, but neither could he shut them on the sight. Because the bush was burning brightly but its leaves did not twist and crumple in the heat. (453)

Moses meets God for the first time on the mountain. Mountain becomes synonymous with God’s power. To quote Deborah G. Plant:

In *Moses*, the mountain symbolizes Moses’ strength, power and endurance. These images along with the attendant symbolic images of
lightning and thunder imply a likeness to the Old Testament God. In the Exodus 19:16 God descends upon Mount Sinai to greet the Israelites. Lightning, thunder, and fire signal his power and force.

(110)

From then on whenever, Moses needs to communicate with God, he retreats to the mountain. After leading the Hebrews from Egypt, God communicates with Moses on the mountain top. God delivers ten commandments to Moses on the mountain once again. Hurston writes, “Moses stayed up on the mountain so long because it takes a long time to learn God’s secret words that have the power in them to make and to do so. Moses learned ten words from God.” (544). God also pronounces his laws to Moses on the mountain, “Moses got up early next morning and took the stones and went up to the top of the mountain and kept company with God again” (554). Thus, mountain becomes a symbol of God and His incarnation, “The mountain functions as a symbol of God and God’s power over humanity” (Jones 107).

Mountains also provide a place of peace and solace for Moses. Right from the beginning, Moses feels akin to the mountains, “The mountain hovered over him and called him as a mother would. He must go up and embrace his mother.” (422). Moses’ communion with nature becomes more profound when he leaves Egypt and reaches Median. Jethro even calls Moses as “the son of the mountain” (436).

Whenever, Moses needs to reflect upon his life, he, “went back to herding sheep on Mount Horeb and went on asking Nature her secrets. He was at peace with himself” (451). At the end of the novel having his mission accomplished, he builds a tomb for himself at Mountain Nebo. Moses retreats to the mountain, leaving behind the Hebrews to take care of their own future. Hurston writes:
He wanted to revel in mountains. He wanted to sit on the slopes of Sinai and remember God’s glory that he had glimpsed from the cleft in the rock. An altar high on Sinai where he had heard the Voice and seen the burning bush .... Then he turned with a firm tread and descended the other side of the mountain and headed back over the years. (592-595)

Nature and Moses both share a special relationship with each other. In the very beginning of the novel, we see that Nature plays a pivotal role in the life of Moses. His mother Jochebed places new born Moses in a basket and lets him drift down the river Nile where he is rescued and adopted by Princess of Egypt. In fact, it is nature which ultimately decides the destiny of Moses. To quote Sharon L. Jones “The Nile River thus becomes a source of life for young Moses for it is here that he is rescued” (107). Later Hurston also tells how Moses parts the Red Sea and leads the Hebrews out of it to the Promised Land. Thus, water once again serves as the source of a new life. As Moses grows up, his interest in nature increases more and more and more after befriending the wise old stableman Mentu. Mentu teaches Moses about the natural world. Hurston writes:

He was always wanting to know about plants. Was frog a plant? Well, if a frog was not a plant, why was it in the garden? Who put it there? Why frogs did want to come in the garden? Why was the sky blue? Who bent it up like that? Did it ever fall down? If the sun could come up by itself and could roost on the high perch of noon, why did it fall down in the evening.... There was one old man who tended the horses. He had answers in the form of stories for nearly every question that
Moses asked and he told stories unasked because they just came to him to tell. (373)

Soon, Moses learns the secrets of nature and can harness its powers. Moses displays his power of controlling nature in dealing with the Egyptian King, Ta-Phar. Moses turns water into blood, “Nile was running blood. Fish were dying and floating on the bloody stream” (475). Later Moses brings plague on Egypt in the form of frogs, lice, flies, hail and deep darkness. Moses’ wooden rod also turns into a snake whenever he puts it into the ground. Hurston writes, “The rod of Moses came alive. It’s head darted out and seized the snake nearest it and swallowed it” (469). Moses helps the Hebrews with his unique connection with nature and God. In this way Hurston is “Espousing a philosophy of human connection with Nature rather than control over it” (Meisenhelder 120).

Gender is another important theme occurring in the novel. There is a clear demarcation of gender roles played by male and female characters in the novel. Sharon L. Jones writes in this context:

Notions of masculinity and femininity are important determiners for the character’s actions, as Hurston positions characters in relation to their acceptence or rejection of traditional gender roles. Manliness can be seen as representing strength, bravery, courage, and leadership, the roles of father, husband, and leader are the source of power. Femininity is defined less on its own terms than in relation to the men—itself a revealing fact—and even women are often seen as subservient or simply relying upon the actions and strengths of men. (104)

In the beginning of the novel, we see that Pharaoh has issued a decree that all male children of Hebrews should be killed because he feels threatened by them.
Pharaoh feels that a Hebrew man can challenge his authority and power so he tries to eradicate the next generation male population by giving orders to kill the male newborn, while female children are not included in these orders.

Hurston portrays Moses as an epitome of masculinity for she imbues in him characteristics such as strength, bravery honesty, chivalry. Hurston endows Moses both with physical and spiritual strength. Moses is a skilled fighter and an arms man. He excels in many military skills like riding, chariot-riding, swordsmanship. Hurston writes:

There was something about him, outside of being the grandson of Pharaoh that made men listen to him with respect. There was something about him that assured them he was a companion to be relied on in times of danger. They wanted to follow him into whatever escapade he thought up. He was the young men’s choice for a leader. To the old officers he was an upstart who tried to think and every statesman knew that thinking was not for soldiers. (380)

More than his physical strength, it is the spiritual power of Moses which makes him a man of virtue. With the help of his spiritual powers and his relation with God, Moses defeats Ta-Phar. Ta-Phar though rules Egypt and has economic, political and social power, but he cannot compete with Moses in spiritual strength, “This is ultimately what distinguishes the two Men: Moses leads using strength and compassion, while Pharaoh leads with terror” (Jones 105).

Hurston presents Moses’ manhood as manifold and intriguing. Moses is brave and chivalrous but he also has a feminine aspect in his personality. He takes care and nurtures the Hebrews like his own children. After freeing the Hebrews, Moses leads
them, provides them with food and support. He takes care of them till they are ready to lead an independent life.

While manhood and patriarchal notions dominate the story of Moses, females are placed at the periphery and merely exist as subordinate to their male counterparts. Women have not much to do and act where males exert their power and influence. Under the Pharaoh’s rule women live a life fit for animals. They have no control over their own body. King Pharaoh owns all the reproductive rights and can have any female he wants. Even Moses’ first wife, and Ethiopian Princess is a war booty to be divided among Moses and later on passed to Ta-Phar. Moses treats his first wife as a mere non-entity, “and wondered if he would have loved her if he had been allowed to win her as lesser men won their wives. But it wasn’t worth thinking about too much, and so he didn’t think” (393). Ta-Phar and Moses being Egyptians, have the right to possess as many wives as they can and also desert them at their own will.

Even wise old Jethro has misogynist views. Jethro laments that he has no son and is ashamed, “It is a shameful situation, Moses. I hate to talk about it, but my wife don’t have nothing but girls. Seven children and not a boy! Why. I can’t hold up my head around here. They say I am too weak to father boys” (420). Again he expresses his sexist views when Moses asks his eldest daughter Zipporah to come with him to fight the thieves. He quickly responds, “But, Moses, she is nothing but a woman. She wouldn’t be a bit of service in a fight” (424). For Jethro, just as his daughter is useless so is his wife. He looks down upon his wife as “fat right where a cow is—under her tail” (425). Hurston depicts that the position of women is only to satisfy the basic need of men. Throughout the novel they adhere to their traditional roles and subjugated position.
The characters of Jochebed, Moses mother and the Egyptian Princess, who raises Moses represent motherhood, love and kindness. While the character of Zipporah and Miriam, Moses’ elder sister are portrayed as mean and arrogant women. Miriam is a foul mouthed woman. He disparages Miriam for not marrying a man, “the trouble with you is that nobody ever married you. And when a woman ain’t got no man to look after, she takes on the world in place of the man she missed” (558). Ultimately, Moses punishes Miriam by turning her into a leper, but one cannot help but sympathize with her because she is the only female character who speaks her own mind and one feels that the punishment meted out to her is out of proportion. Josie P. Campbell writes:

We can be sure that God is He in this novel and that He envisions a male world in which women are merely subsidiary. God’s vision and the man called upon to fulfill that vision have little or no time for women. Their lives, even their deaths are turned into histories and legends fabricated by men. Still in this story a woman named Zora Neale Hurston has the last word. (96)

Like other Hurston protagonists, Moses is in quest of his identity. Moses is born in a Hebrew slave family, but adopted by the princess of Egypt, Moses leads a royal life. He grows up to be a great warrior and an intelligent man. Yet, he is dissatisfied with his life. Under the tutelage of Mentu, Moses starts learning the secrets of the natural world. “And Mentu continued to charge the imagination of the boy with his tales of creation” (378). Moses searches his identity in nature with which he feels so connected, “He would spend the rest of his life asking nature the why of her moods and measures” (907). Moses yearns to find the “Book of Thoth” hidden in the river at Koptos which becomes the primary motive of his life. Hurston writes:
They were deep in the mysteries of life and magic. Moses had decided to go to Koptos at the first opportunity. But years and wars stood between him and his journey … so always Moses was asking himself, “When will there be enough of conquests? When will I follow my own mind and read the pages of Thoth?” (391)

Later, Moses leaves Egypt in search of a new life and identity. In Midian, he spends his days as a shepherd and becomes a great hoodoo priest. He feels that he had achieved what he has always wanted in his life, “All I ever want to do is to herd your sheep, talk with you and take comfort in the arms of my wife, and bring up the sons which I hope for in abundance, to be good and gentle. I want to sit on the side of Mount Horeb and ask Nature some questions.” (435). Later, Moses is called upon by God to free the enslaved Hebrews, which finally becomes the final quest of his life. He spends the rest of his life completing this quest.

Hurston explores the theme of hoodoo in Moses. In African American oral tradition, Moses had been viewed as a source of supernatural power. Moses has often been revered in African tradition as a great Hoodoo (Voodoo) priest. In Africa, hoodoo is a spiritual religion. Josie P Campbell explains the art of conjuring and hoodoo:

Conjurers tell stories that attempt to explain the riddles of life, such story tellers often deal with origins and spiritual mysteries. Hoodoo (or voodoo as it is known in the United States) also deals with the spirit world and engages in magic, the art of transformation. Although the term conjurer (or conjure) and hoodoo are often used interchangeably, hoodoo makes use of conjure to work its “miracles” or magic. (79-80)
In her introduction to the novel, Hurston tells that Moses is a great Hoodoo priest. She writes:

In Haiti, the highest god in the Haitian pantheon is Damballa Quedo Ouedo Toean Freda Dahomey and he is identified as Moses, the serpent god. But this deity did not originate in Haiti. His home is in Dahomey and is worshipped there extensively. Moses had his rod of power, which was a living serpent. So that in every temple of Damballa there is a living snake, or the symbol…. So all across Africa, America, the West Indies, there are tales of the powers of Moses and great worship of him and his powers. (337-338)

Hurston depicts Moses as a conjurer from his childhood days. Moses learns the art of conjuring or hoodoo from his stableman Mentu. Mentu teaches him to talk with animals and soon Moses can understand their language, which is the chief characteristic of a hoodoo priest. Huston writes, “From old Mentu, Moses learned much about the ways of animals. The old man interpreted their noises and told Moses what they said” (375).

Moses also learns conjuring from the Egyptian priests when he lives as a prince in Egypt. Moses is deeply fascinated with the art of conjuring and soon learns it, “he learned to feed the sacred snakes and handle the altar fires without heart to himself. He begged to be taught the mysteries of signs and omens and the power of sayings and seals” (379).

Later after leaving Egypt, he again learns magic from Jethro for the next twenty years. “He learned the secrets of plants and animals, and the living and the giving earth. Long years had passed since he embraced the religion of Jethro. He had learned to build the altars of uncut stone or earth and make the offerings” (441).
Hurston depicts Moses as a great Hoodoo priest and a great conjurer even before meeting God on the mountains and being conferred powers by God. All the conjuring powers notably, Moses learns by himself, thus giving an extraordinary dimension to his character. Hurston writes:

Right hand became a symbol of terror and wonders. Then it quit being a sign of power to the people, it became to them a power in itself. He lifted it and they experienced the miracle of water turned to blood. It had been done in small way by the Cushite priest for a long time. But Moses lifted his hand and extended it imperiously and the rivulets and springs and wells and streams ran blood all that day. Moses lifted his hand and malicious gossip was struck with leprosy. It was Moses who learned the secret power to command the power of flame. It was Moses who could bring on or drive off the cattle disease. (445)

While delineating the character of Moses, Hurston deviates from the biblical version of Moses, where he owes his power to God. Hurston’s Moses is a greatest conjurer and hoodoo priest of the world, equal to God, “It made the voice of the unseen Moses speaking behind the altar seem like the voice of God. It seemed to the people that Moses but lifted his right hand and the cloud from Mount Horeb appeared on the altar” (445-446). Depicting Moses as a hoodoo priest has its root in Hurston’s anthropological work. Before writing *Moses*, Hurston had carried out her anthropological research work in African and Caribbean countries about the Moses legend. While carrying out her research in Haiti, Hurston found out that Moses was not only worshipped as a God but also treated as an incarnation of the supreme Haitian God, Damballah. To quote Valerie Boyd:
Hurston’s research confirmed her commitment to the novel and broadened her understanding of the monumental task she was taking on. In the legends of black America, in Africa in the Caribbean, and in Asia Hurston discovered, Moses was worshiped as a god—and as the greatest conjure man who ever lived. (330).

Hurston has already discussed and portrayed Moses as a hoodoo man in her first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* in 1934. In *Jonah*, a character named as Harris emphatically says, “Look at Moses. He’s de greatest hoodoo man dat God ever made…. De Bible is de best conjure book in de world” (124). Hurston departs from the usual Judeo-Christian tradition and imbues the figure of Moses into African oral traditions. Not only this, she completely alters the character of Moses into an African Hoodoo priest but also does not hesitate to call the Bible as a conjuring book. She describes Moses as a man with, “black cat bone and snake wisdom. He’s two headed man. He ain’t like nobody else on earth” (543).

Like her earlier novels such as *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston once again uses African American folklores in *Moses, Man of the Mountains*. Hurston depicts talking animals in the novel. The talking lizard with whom Moses often converses plays an important role in the novel. “The domain of talking animal is closely related to African mythology and African American culture.” (Ribeiro 6). Hurston also uses another African American folktale in Moses, when the Hebrews are getting ready for the battle with the Amalekites. This folk-tale of frog and rabbit already had appeared in Hurston’s earlier work *Mules and Men* in 1935. Hurston writes:

Right now these Israelites are just like a passel of rabbits. You know Joshua, one time the rabbits all met together in a convention and
decided to kill themselves because nothing looked up to them and nothing was scared of them. So they all headed for the river to drown themselves. They hopped like an army down to the river bank. But just before they got to the river there was a marsh that the rabbits had to cross and while they were crossing it they ran over some frogs and the frogs hopped up crying ‘Quit it! Quit it!’ So the rabbits said to one another, ‘those frogs are scared of us. We don’t need to kill ourselves no more because something in the world is scared of us. Let’s go on back home.’ So they went on home happy again. Now that is just what the Israelites need—a victory. (525)

Moses also hears folktales of animals from Mentu. Mentu says, “Some folks said that monkeys were old folks and that all old folks turned to monkeys, when they got old.. You might kill an old friend or two among those monkeys, Moses.” (375). These stories are taken by Hurston from African folk traditions. To quote John Lowe:

Clearly a surrogate for the old black narrator of conjure/ animal tales, such as Joel Chandler, Harris’s Uncle Remus or Charles Chesnutt’s Uncle Julius, Mentu’s tales are closer to Nigeria than to the southern plantations. The key animal in his tellings becomes the monkey rather than the rabbit giving the tales a more overtly African quality. Still, Mentu’s creation story knits together folktales and the rudiments of Genesis: “Let there be light.” (222)

Hurston also uses black folk expressions and idioms in Moses. Moses calls Mentu as, “You old monkey you!” (386) reminding us of African folk expressions. Yet at another instance, Moses chides the Hebrews in typical black expression, “What makes you think you got to holler and cry about it?” (522). Aaron complains
to Miriam about the wrong treatment meted out to them, “Ain’t no ifs and ands about it. We just done had the hog run over us, that’s all” (529). Miriam complains about Zipporah, “And she looked like somebody slapped, her in the face with a buzzard gut” (536). She also accuses Joshua as, “Is this Joshua who got his mouth stuck in everything you got to put that young rooster in his place and make him stay in it. He’s getting too biggity and sassy for any good use. His giving orders to men with whiskers just like he was some priest and prophet” (550). These lines are an excellent example of signifying as well as black folk expression. There is also another example of signifying where two camel drivers engage in verbal duel with each other. Similarly, the Hebrews accuse Joshua of conducting a “lying session.”

Animal imagery occurs throughout the novel which is also an integral part of African American oral traditions. The Hebrews speak of Egyptian soldiers killing their children just like, “Hounds after rabbits” (360). Moses thinks of his first wife as, “her nose like a fox” (393). When Moses tries to come near his Ethiopian Princess wife, she shrugs away from him, “as if he had been a crocodile” (396). In Midian, Moses calls cattle thieves and robbers as, “Those skunks up in that cave” (426). Moses challenges Ta-Phar, “I’ll be there Ta-Phar, and I’ll be exulting like a stallion” (498) to which Ta-Phar shrewdly replies, “You be there like a stallion. I shall be there, a lion in his strength” (498). Hebrews compare themselves to other tribes, “we look like grasshoppers to ourselves beside them” (567). Aaron calls Moses a “You’re a great big high cockadoo and I’ ain’t nothing (550). Similarly, Moses, refers to Aaron later as “an old goat” (551). Thus, animal imagery abounds in Moses.

The settings have their own importance in Moses. However, Hurston does not deal with them in detail as she had done in her previous novels, “For Moses is the story of a people on the move, on a journey towards becoming a free nation. Their
march toward freedom is marked by the miraculous and the mysterious, and as such, Hurston’s lack of realistic detail seems fitting” (Campbell 84).

The first setting depicted in the novel is that of Goshen. Goshen is a place where all the Hebrew slaves dwell. Hurston depicts Goshen as a ghetto like place. It is a dark cramped place marred by poverty, hunger and a daily struggle to survive. The killing of Hebrew adults as well as children by Egyptian soldiers is rampant. Hurston describes Goshen as, “The basement of heaven and the roof of hell” (341.)

The Egyptian Palace and court have a different ambience altogether. The Royal palace is decorated with silk robes, ornaments, oiled perfumes, large fans fit for the royal family of Pharaoh. The Egyptian court is full of power hungry courtesans always busy in making strategies and acting as sycophants to the Pharaoh. It is a symbol of Egyptian power and wealth, “Crown state and personal robes would take on new glory. Finer chariots and horses and many more dinners of state” (372).

Midian is another important setting in the novel. It is in Midian that Moses meets Jethro. He learns from him the art of conjuring. He also loves and marries Jethro’s daughter Zipporah. Midian is a peaceful place with natural surroundings and lacks the hustle-bustle of Egypt. Midian also has the mountain where Moses meets God. Hurston sharply contrasts the mountain with the pyramids of the Pharaoh. Mountain represents divine spiritual power while pyramids symbolize emptiness and superficiality of humans.

The Land of Canaan is the last setting in the novel. It is here Moses settles the Hebrews. Moses envisions Canaan as place of freedom and liberty. Hurston gives a magnificent description of a new nation:

Moses sat on the peak of Pisgah, looking both ways in time. He looked down first and as the tents of Israel spread out like the pattern of a
giant rug that move and shimmered in the sunlight. It was a sight such as the world had never seen before. A whole nation assembled together and under tents. Prominent in the front was the Tabernacle, the Tent of the Testimony that sheltered the Ark of Covenant and the sacred mysteries that had made Israel a nation and set it apart from other nations. Inside were the gold and silver vessels, and candle sticks and basins. The rich and jeweled vestments of the priests and attendants and the instruments of worship. Outside, the cloudy pillar of the Guiding Presence hung serenely above the entrance as a sign and a promise to Israel. The Tabernacle sat brooding in the plain and hovering over its mysteries like the sphinx. (589)

*Moses, Man of the Mountains* is also an allegory. It can be read at two levels. Firstly, it is a biblical story of the enslaved Hebrews and their Exodus from Egypt with the help of Moses who is instructed by God himself. At the second level, Hurston connects the biblical story of enslaved Hebrews to the story of enslaved African Americans in America. Deborah G. Plant comments:

As allegory, Moses expresses a multiplicity of meaning. With the various legends of Moses functioning as a centrifugal force, the novel comments on the mythohistorical evolution and transformation of the ancient Hebrews; the enslavement and manumission of African Americans; the colonization of Africans and those of the African diaspora; and oppressors and the oppressed in every spatial and temporal dimension. (125)
For African Americans, the story of enslaved Hebrews and their emancipation has always been the most important story of the Bible. Explaining the importance of the Exodus story for African American community, Orquidea Ribeiro writes:

The Exodus story in particular exerted a powerful influence over the African American imagination because the black church “stressed” the parallel with the Hebrews or children of Israel kept in bondage by the Egyptians. As argued by Raboteau, southern blacks, before and after emancipation identified with the Exodus story, giving meaning to their experience of slavery and Jim Crow. Enslaved African Americans saw their situation mirrored in the Bible with the Israelites and they maintained a strong identification with Israel and believed that they would also be collectively freed by remaining loyal as a community in their obedience to God. The stories about Moses in the African American folklore provided southern blacks with an assurance that God delivered the enslaved and punished oppressors in this world and in the next. (2)

In her allegory, Hurston turns the Hebrews to African Americans. Just as Hebrews are enslaved in Egypt so are the African Americans in America. Egyptians are equated to white Americans. Ta-Phar and other Pharaoh Kings are like white plantation owners and politicians who support and sustain the system of slavery. The Hebrew people attain their freedom just like African American people gain their emancipation after two hundred years of slavery. The Liberal and progressive white American leaders like Moses, try to empower their down trodden subjects. Moses is sympathetic towards the Hebrews just as some influential white Americans such as Carl Van Vechten were towards African Americans. Hurston takes a dig at her own
community when she shows that African American are also fighting with each other,
just like the Hebrews quarreling with each other after gaining freedom. Hurston aptly
shows that there is lack of unity among African American community like it is clearly
evident in the biblical story where the Hebrews live disjointedly. Thus Hurston also
presents Moses as a critique on African American community and the political
leadership as well as the relationship between people and their leader. Robert
Hemenway comments:

Although admittedly Moses was man, not god, his role in Judeo-
Christian tradition was remote, shrouded in biblical dignity. Once he
was demystified, however, the analogy between biblical history and
the black American past became real and immediate, an allegory
relevant to the oppressive circumstances that black people encounter in
any age. Hurston acts as a tradition bearer for as Afro-American
worldview in Moses, simulating the process of creation that had led to
the spirituals, reaffirming the act of imagination that could Moses be
African rather than Hebrew, a conjure man instead of a mere conduit
for divine power. She identifies with the creativity that could make
slaves a chosen people in the midst of a culture structured to deny them
a sense of special status. (260)

The theme of Freedom and Liberation is another chief theme occurring in
Moses, Man of the Mountain. Hebrews strive to gain their freedom and are eventually
successful in achieving it under the guidance of Moses. However, Hurston makes it
clear that freedom does not come easy. It is easy to gain freedom but it is more
difficult to maintain it. Moses says:
This freedom is a funny thing…It ain’t something permanent like rocks and hills. It’s like manna, you just got to keep on gathering it fresh everyday. If you don’t, one day you’re going to find you ain’t got none no more. (577)

Freedom can only be maintained by uniting with each other. If the people remain divided it is more probable that they will loose their freedom. The Hebrews were made slaves because they were divided among themselves. When, after gaining freedom, the Hebrews start quarrelling with each other, Moses warns them:

I love liberty and I love freedom so I started off giving everybody a loose rein. But I soon found out that it wouldn’t do. A great state is a well-blended mash of something of all of the people and all of none of the people. You understand. The liquor of statecraft is distilled from the mash you got. How can a nation speak with one voice if they are not one? (586)

Hurston reminds her readers that with freedom and liberty comes responsibility. Freedom and responsibility are both two sides of a coin. Freedom is self-empowerment. Freedom can be achieved only by the self. Freedom is not merely physical in sense, but also spiritual in nature. Hurston emphasizes that being mentally free is as important as being physically free. Hurston’s central message in Moses then appears to be that freedom comes more from internal liberation than from external liberation (Morris 327). One has to embrace new ideas and thoughts and be progressive in their outlook if they have to sustain their freedom. Freedom cannot be brought by others but has to be won by one self. Though Moses helped the Hebrews to become free, but they themselves had to break their own bondage. Hurston writes:
His dreams had in no way been completely fulfilled. He had meant to make a perfect people, free and just, noble and strong, that should be a light for all the world and for time and eternity. And he wasn’t sure he had succeeded. He had found out that no man may make another free. Freedom was something internal. The outside signs were just signs and symbols of the man inside. All you could do was to give the opportunity for freedom and the man himself must make his own emancipation. (590)

Hurston was perhaps giving a message to her African American people that they had to present a united front against white supremacy. Commenting on Hurston’s notion of freedom in *Moses*, Valerie Boyd writes:

Along the way, Hurston gently pokes fun at the Negroes who want freedom without responsibility; skewers white Americans who wonder why black folks want freedom any way and why they always seem to be complaining; attacks intraracial color prejudice; caricatures self-important “race leaders” more interested in regalia than real change, and sets forth her own provocative views on the elusive and individual natures of freedom.” (334)

Through the character of Moses, Hurston explores the theme of leadership. Hurston portrays Moses as a great leader. He is kind and sympathetic towards people without any distinction of race and class. He lives the life of an Egyptian prince, yet he is concerned about the Hebrews. Moses is a brave, courageous, fearless person, “Moses didn’t lift his hand while he talked but the command in his voice was calming. Suddenly everybody felt secure and brave” (510). Moses has a towering strength and he is a fearless warrior but he never uses his strength for his own
personal needs or benefits. He uses his spiritual powers as his strength. Jethro tells Moses, “You got leader-blood in you. Just full of that old monarch staff” (426). He leads Hebrews out of the oppressive regime of Egypt, defeats Pharaoh and settles the Hebrews on the chosen land. He is never concerned about his personal gain and comfort. All this while, he ignores his wife, and children for the others. Moses tells his wife Zipporah:

But you see, personally, my carefree days are over for a long, long time. I’m a leader now. It is a great hour for Jethro because his wish of a lifetime is fulfilled in part at least. For the people, an unsettled new life, and now they are here to meet a new God, and for the God to see them and pass on them. I don’t suppose this ever happened before in the world and it might never happen again. And as you are concerned, you have lost the husband you used to have. I’m a leader now, and you’ll have to suffer for it along with me. (533)

Thrice, Moses is offered the throne, but every time he refuses. First, he has the chance to become king of Egypt, after he defeats Ta-Phar but instead Moses leads the Hebrews to the Promised Land. Second, the Hebrews too, offer him to become their king but again Moses refuses. Hebrews offer Moses the crown:

You have done worked forty years for us for nothing. Therefore we took all the crowns that we beat off of the head of kings that we conquered and melted them all down and made them into one crown, some thing that’s fitten for your conquering head…. Moses stood up and thanked everybody very kindly. But he went on to say that he wasn’t sure that people ought to have Kings at all. It’s pretty hard to
find a man who wouldn’t weaken under the strain of power and get biggity and overbearing. (577)

Moses is an epitome of selfless devotion and love, which Hurston makes a pre-requisite for great leadership. The Hebrews tell Moses, “You brought our old folks out of slavery and you have led us from one degree of grace to another until now we are folks wherever our feet fall on dry land” (577). In Moses, Hurston imbues all the qualities of a great leader. He is a great hoodoo priest, having special relationship with God, caring and nurturing for two million Hebrews whom he leads, “there ain’t but one Moses in the world. Never was one before and never will be one again” (515). Yet, Moses is still a human being. He has his own weaknesses and follies. His greatness lies in the fact that he overcomes his drawbacks to transcend as a great leader, but Hurston also make it clear that even a great leader like Moses is not perfect. At the end of the novel, we see that Moses considers himself a failure. Hurston writes, “If he had failed in his highest dreams he had succeeded in others. Perhaps he had not failed so miserably as he sometimes felt” (591). After creating the state of Israel and leading the Hebrews, Moses gives up his leadership and command and retreats back into the wilderness forever. To quote Morris:

Moses represents beneficent leadership in the abstract, but he is a very human leader. He becomes frustrated with the grumbling, the petty power struggles, and the ingratitude. Far from perfect, he kills the over-seer in rage and kills Aaron in cold blood. He uses his powers to inflect leprosy on Miriam and to slaughter the entire Egyptian force that chases the fleeing Hebrews, rather than just killing his enemy Ta-Phar. He does not see the need to delegate authority until Jethro tells him to do so. He conveniently ignores Zipporah, and he is self-pitying.
However, his lack of desire for the trappings and titles of despotic power is obviously meant to portray him as a model, beneficent leader.

(334)

The nature of love is a sub-theme occurring in the novel. Though a great leader, Moses feels lonely and devoid of love. He is forcibly married to an Ethiopian Princess whom he does not love. In Midian, he falls in love with Jethro’s daughter, Zipporah. Moses says, “I have a consuming greed to absorb her inside of me so that I can possess her completely” (434). To this Jethro replies to Moses, “You have more greatness about you than any man I ever heard of, Moses. Don’t over pull your belly on this love business and destroy it. Love some and think some” (434). Though Moses is able to marry Zipporah, but he cannot live with her peacefully. In the end, he laments his loneliness. Despite being a great leader, Moses still feels devoid of love.

“Crossing Over” is one of the important symbols used in Moses, Man of the Mountain. The “crossing over” symbolizes a new spiritual freedom and a new life. Moses leaves Egypt and crosses over the Red Sea when the tide leaves a dry path. In search of a new life and beginning leaving behind his past. Hurston narrates in great detail this episode of “crossing over” emphasizing its importance:

Moses had crossed over. He was not in Egypt. He had crossed over and now he was not an Egyptian. He had crossed over. The short sword at his thigh had a jeweled hilt but he had crossed over and so it was no longer the sign of high birth and power. He had crossed over, so he sat down on a rock near the sea shore to rest himself. He had crossed over so he was not of the house of Pharaoh. He did not own a palace because he had crossed over. He did not have an Ethiopian Princess for a wife. He had crossed over. He did not have friends to sustain him. He
had crossed over. He did not have enemies to strain against his strength
and power. He had crossed over. He was subject to no law except the
laws of tooth and talon. He had crossed over. The sun who was his
friend and ancestor in Egypt was arrogant and bitter in Asia. He had
crossed over. He felt as empty as a post hole for he was none of the
things he once had been. He was a man sitting on a rock. He had
crossed over. (410)

Moses crossed over the Red Sea without any identity, race, class, friends, foes
or any kind of property or belongings. “Moses does not know who or what he is. Is he
Egyptian royalty? Or is he the son of Hebrew slave …. He is not black, not white, not
Hebrew, not Egyptian, he is only himself. In the repetitive cadence of a black
preacher, Hurston evokes a host of images—about race, about “passing,” about
spiritual crossings—in one magnificent paragraph” (Boyd332). Once Moses crosses
over he chooses to live life on his own terms. He lives among nature trying to unravel
its secrets. He becomes a hoodoo priest under the tutelage of Jethro becoming a self-
made Moses.

Later, Moses crosses the Red Sea a second time but this time with the
Hebrews under God’s command. Hurston depicts the second crossing of Moses with
the Hebrews in an equally dramatic tone:

The gripping east wind loosed its mighty fingers and the sea water
came rushing back to its bed. It was a moving time. There was the
outspoken voice of the wind going east, the mad grumble and shout of
the waves as they raced back to embrace each other over the clamor of
men in fright, the scream of drowning horses, the last mad struggle of
the chariots. That all made a boiling place in the sea for a space. Then
there was just the heaving Red Sea with its two shores. Egypt on one side and Moses and his mission on the other. Moses stood and looked on the sea. (512)

The “crossing over” for Hebrews is equally symbolic. It symbolizes not only their physical freedom but spiritual freedom. Unfortunately, like Moses who finds his true identity after crossing over, the Hebrews cannot. Though physically free, they are still mentally bounded in their ignorance and prejudice.

“The Rod” is another symbol used in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. The rod symbolizes authority of power and it is also a phallic symbol. Moses is given the rod of power by God himself, “The mountain that had given him his rod of God” (541). God gives Moses a magical rod which when put down on the ground turns into a snake, “Moses was amazed that the writhing serpent on the ground could have become so quickly the lifeless thing in his hands. It was a walking stick carved in imitation of a snake” (454). Moses’ rod is the source of his spiritual power. It is through this rod, that Moses defeats Ta-Phar and the huge Egyptian army and brings salvation for the enslaved Hebrews. The Hebrews say, “You’re our rod of salvation” (465). The rod is unending source of power for Moses from which he delegates his authority, “Then his strength came back in his arms and he lifted and pointed his rod and strength flowed back into Israel again” (527). Moses with the power of his right hand and rod becomes the ultimate symbol of power, “He got that right hand of his and that rod”(543). While the rod in Moses’s hand becomes a positive source of power, the rod in king Pharaoh’s hand symbolizes negative power. Pharaoh uses his rod of authority to subjugate people under him and oppress them. The rod of Pharaoh symbolizes force, “Force was his juices and force was his meat” (372). Hurston
juxtaposes two conflicting, situations in which the symbol of ‘rod’ means two different notions for two different persons.

Hurston had mainly used Biblical narrative in *Moses, Man of the Mountains*. Bible is the authoritative text on which Hurston develops her story of Moses, but Hurston presents the Old Testament story with her own interpretations. Orquidea Ribeiro writes in this context:

> Popular culture has always found ways to recast biblical narrative and the figure of Moses had been an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Attempts have been made by various writers to reinterpret the story of inspiration. Attempts have been made by various writers to reinterpret the story of Moses from the various episodes in Moses life narrated in the Bible but their meaning is never made totally clear. Through centuries legend and lore have filled in and embellished the flaws, omissions and contradiction of the biblical narrative. Resetting biblical stories into more up-to-date narrative forms and language has achieved great popularity, especially during the twentieth century. (1)

Hurston does not strictly adhere to the biblical text but she improvises the story according to her own imagination. Right from the beginning of *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston makes it clear to her readers that the story which unfolds will be different from the biblical version. Nothing much had been said about the growing up of Moses in the Bible, but Hurston has discussed it in detail in her novel. Hurston has also included two characters that of Mentu and Ta-Phar and given them a prominent role in the story. Mentu, the wise old stableman teaches Moses about magic which is absent in the biblical version. Hurston also writes in much detail about Jethro teaching magic to Moses. Hurston also gives in detail about Moses’s
years-long adventure and his journey to the Book of Thoth. In the Old Testament story, Aaron becomes spokesman for God and is often praised. In Hurston’s novel, Aaron is shown as a negative character who is ultimately punished by Moses. Hurston also omits some scenes from her novel like the scene in which God makes Moses’ hand leprous. Another scene in which Zipporah circumcises her son to save Moses from God is also omitted from the novel.

One of the major differences in Hurston’s story and the Biblical story is the rendering of power to Moses instead of God. Hurston manifests God as merely a supernatural entity who guides Moses, time and time again. God appears not as a character but in the form of natural imagery such as burning bush, mountain. It is Moses who displays his strength, power and magic and not God. In her own improvisation of the story, Hurston depicts Moses sending plagues to the people of Egypt, doing tricks to threaten Pharaoh, and the parting of Red Sea so that Hebrews can cross through. It is Moses, who provides manna bread to feed the hungry Hebrews. Explaining the role of God in Moses, Man of the Mountain, Robert J Morris writes:

In Hurston’s version Moses is left with the job of convincing the Hebrews with the power of his plagues. In fact the power-shift is the greatest difference between the two accounts in Moses, Hurston ignores God’s role in sending the plagues and the manna and in parting the sea. Moses learns all those tricks himself and performs them on his own. In Moses, only the serpent rod is a trick form God. The focus of Exodus is God’s hardening of the Pharaoh’s heart to make Egypt suffer from each successive plague. Exodus chronicles God’s role in history.
In *Moses*, God plays a very minor role while Moses becomes god-like.

(319-320)

Hurston accords this God like feature to the human character of Moses because of her African American origins. Moses has always been revered in African American traditions as a God. In the introduction to *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston explains the importance of Moses in African traditions:

But there are other concepts of Moses abroad in the world. Asia and all the Near East are sown with legends of this character. They are so numerous and so varied that some students have come to doubt if the Moses of the Christian concept is real. Then Africa has her mouth on Moses. All across the continent there are the legends of the greatness of Moses, but not because of his beard nor because he brought the laws, down from Sinai. No, he is revered because he had the power to go up the mountain and to bring them down. Many men could climb mountains. Anyone could bring down laws that had been handed to them. But who can talk with God face to face. Who has the power to command God to go to a peak of a mountain and there demand of Him laws with which to govern a nation? What other man has ever seen with his eyes even the back part of God’s glory? Who else has ever commanded the wind and the hail? The light and darkness? That calls for power, and that is what Africa sees in Moses to worship. For he is worshipped as a God. (337)

Bible has always been an important text for African Americans. Bible has been a constant source of unending support, hope and aspirations for African American people, but it was the character of Moses, which influenced the African
Americans very much. For them, Moses was not merely a tool of God through whom he frees the Hebrews. In fact, according to them it was Moses, who was instrumental in liberating the enslaved Hebrews. The character of Moses was often equated with the figure of Black preacher. Black preachers were leaders of the black community. They used to guide and motivate people and provide support during hard times, they invested the spirit in African American people to cope up with white oppression. Just as Moses delivers a sermon to the Hebrews and then, his sermons change the lives of Hebrews forever, so does the Black Preacher. Like Moses, the black preacher delivered sermons to their communities about transcending the oppression they were going through. Black preachers were also a unifying force in their community and representatives of their community. Thus it is very likely that Moses always had an important place in African American community which is aptly depicted by Hurston in *Moses*. To quote Ruthe T. Sheffey:

> These preachers were, like Moses, the natural leaders in the community, leaders who were wise and eloquent, whose phrases were epic in grandeur, in clarity of statement in earnestness of address, and in deep pathos of language. Their message often like the message of the ancient Jewish prophets, was that not their original enslavement but their continued enslavement was the result of their continued collective disunity. This emphasis on the necessary foundations of black collectivity has been echoed down through the years by legitimate black preacher authorities, heirs to that ancient African leadership model. (163)
Humour narrative permeates the novel. Humour has always played an important role for African Americans. Freud explains the importance of Humour in his essay “Humour”:

Humour has in it a liberating element. But it has also something fine and elevating, which is lacking in the other two ways of deriving pleasure from intellectual activity…. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer. It insists that it in impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasion for affording it pleasure … Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies the triumph not only of the ego, but also of the pleasure-principle, which is strong enough to assert itself here in the face of the adverse real circumstances. (1-6)

In fact, sometimes Moses is also called “a semi comic novel” (Hemenway 265). Hurston took a great risk in dealing with a serious theme such as the biblical Exodus story with humour narration. “While Hurston packs a lot of serious, soul searching issues into her narrative she peppers it with a resonant humour, deriving largely from the novel’s language. Her use of the black idiom hilariously deflates the highfaluting seriousness of the Judeo-Christian Bible.” (Boyd 334). Right from the beginning of the novel, Hurston narrates the Exodus story not in usual mundane narration but as something different, a story steeped in humour narration. In the very first pages we see Pharaoh issuing the decree for Hebrews, “Israel, you are slaves from now. Pharaoh assumes no responsibility for the fact that some of you got old before he came to power” (341). Even Hebrew babies are given a warning, “Babies take notice: Positively no more boy babies allowed among Hebrews. Infants defying this law shall be drowned in the Nile” (342). The Hebrews being whipped by the
Egyptian soldiers express their pain humorously, “Hours may be all those good things to the Egyptians, brother but that sun-god is just something to fry our backs” (343). They complain about Pharaoh’s dictates and laws, “Why, he’s got a law about everything under the sun! Next thing you know he’ll be saying cats can’t have kittens” (344). Mentu, the stableman warns Moses when Moses tries to bring food scraps’ for him from Pharaoh’s kitchen, “the scraps from the Pharaoh’s table are set aside and dedicated to the stomach of Pharaoh’s dogs. Don’t be caught in the misuse of the dog’s dishes” (377-378). The courtship of Moses and Zipporah also seems to be humorous. Zipporah says to Moses, “I don’t come running like that. Even a hen must be sought after, Mister Moses, and I won’t be less than a chicken” (431). When Moses inflicts a plague of frogs on Egypt, Pharaoh tries to tackle this situation in his own way which seems very humorous, “Tell them that we are forever striving for their good. We will pass a law: frogs must stay out of the houses of the people.” (481).

Hebrews still remember their days of slavery when they used to get Egyptian bread which seems humorous. They say “No, sir! I sure don’t want no more slavery. Though I sure would love a loaf of that good old Egyptian bread” (555). Moses explains politics to Joshua, “The liquor of statecraft is distilled form the mesh you got”(586). Commenting on Hurston’s use of humour in her works, John Lowe writes:

Humor was a basic, continuing component in her work; to her; laughter was a way to show one’s love for life; an indirect mode useful in saying the unsayable and in negotiating differences; a wonderful teaching tool and thus a way to bridge the distances between rural and urban, black and white, rich and poor, man and woman, author and reader. Consequently, humor played a crucial role in her initial reception by, and later relations with, the other members of the Harlem
renaissance; in her sense of folklore and its functions; in the anthropological definitions of culture she formulated, which grew out of her training as professional folklorist; and in her ever-changing and increasingly complex fiction, including her master works *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. (30)

Thus, humour narration runs throughout the novel. Sometimes humour seems to be misplaced and often robs away the sympathy for the enslaved Hebrew. It also seems a literary sleight of hand of Hurston’s when she deflates the seriousness of a religious text such as the Old Testament and “lack of serious tone and motivation is clearest in an inappropriate God” (Morris 335). It should be remembered that humour pervades every work of Hurston. Hurston’s humour and comic sense derives from her love of folk culture and her anthropological knowledge. Even religious themes like Moses and the story of Exodus does not deter her from using this type of narration. To quote John Lowe:

David, the King, speaks of the temple in Jerusalem, Zora High Priestess of Folklore, speaks of her own holy of holies, folk culture.

Biblical signifying became addictive for Hurston, leading to many short pieces and finally two novels, *Moses* and the unpublished “Herod the Great”; the process of appropriating, mimicking, reshaping, and parodying “sacral” utterances—those of preachers, prophets, and God himself—began on a large scale. (86)

Hurston has used a strange mixture of creative anachronisms and contemporary references in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, further bringing out the comic sense in the novel (Lowe 242). Zeppo, cousin of Jethro writes him a letter using pen, “I take my seat and take my pen in hand to write you a letter” (443).
Hebrew scolds Joshua, “listen at that long, tall young one that ain’t quite wetting his diapers yet, trying to tell us what to do with our own mouths …. Since he went and drug us off from our good homes in Egypt” (520). When Hebrews complain about not getting food, Moses says, “I didn’t know you were hunting a barbecue” (522). Hurston was using these contemporary references perhaps to bring home the story of the Old Testament to her readers. “Once again, we see parallels with the art of the translator who must take into consideration the best ways to relate another culture’s meaning using the audience frame of reference” (Lowe 243).

*Moses, Man of The Mountain* has a typical heroic narrative. Moses meets God on the mountain in Median and is guided towards his impending future. Like a true hero, Moses fights all adverse conditions, triumphs and transcend his life. Like Virgil’s Aeneas, Hurston’s Moses keeps on looking for his future. There is a difference between both: Aeneas could see his future in the past but Moses cannot. He toils for several years into the wilderness with two million Hebrews trying to find a future for them.

Hurston uses “call and response” narrative in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. According to Geneva Smitherman, call and response technique is, “spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker’s (‘calls’) are punctuated, by expressions (‘responses’) from the listener” (Awkward 96). These two voices, that of the speaker and listener “do not contend, rather they cooperate and collaborate” (Callahan 118).

In the novel, God hears the cries of the Hebrews and calls upon Moses, to free the enslaved Hebrews in Egypt, “Go ahead, like I told you, Moses I am tired of hearing the groaning in my ear. I mean to overcome Pharaoh this time. Go down there and I’ll go with you” (454). Moses in turn calls the Hebrews: “My call is higher
than that. I am commanded to lead them out of this suffering to something better. And I am going to carry them off” (467). Hebrews respond to Moses call, “The people cried when Moses told them. He had expected wild clamor, the sound of cymbals and exultant singing and dancing. But the people wept out of their eyes” (501).

Hurston also uses repetition upon repetition technique in Moses. Repetition upon repetition technique is “found in the biblical and black sermon narratives of Moses’s life.” (Campbell 97). The repetitive structure of call and narrative is present in the novel. With the use of repetitions in the narrative and situations, Hurston tries to affirm the folkloric origin of her protagonist and the story.

Hurston also repeats certain key words throughout the novel, such as, “free”, “Passes” “crossed over.” Throughout, these words have certain meanings and occur at significant moment Hurston writes:

“You will be free when you hear the thunder” Moses told them.

“Pharaoh will issue a decree and you will think that you are free. You will march out and you will think that you are free. But one day, after you have suffered many things, when the thunder is heard from the mountain, you will be free, if you have the courage.” (465)

There is also narration of ascent and immersion in Moses. Moses makes a symbolic north ward journey by leaving Egypt and crossing over the Red Sea to a new place. In Midian, Moses gains “sufficient literacy” (Stepto 167) by learning the language of people and “the secrets of plants and animals and the living and the giving earth. Long years had passed since he embraced the religion of Jethro” (441). Thus, he becomes an articulate survivor. Moses, then makes a ritualized journey into the symbolic south or Egypt. He fights the oppressive system of Pharaoh and forges a new group identity with the Hebrews. Thus, completing his immersion.
Moses, Man of the Mountain is a well-structured book. The book can be divided into four equal parts, with each part consisting of ten chapters. The first ten chapters depict Moses’s early life till he “crosses over.” The next ten chapters depict a new beginning in Moses’ life, where he meets God and achieves his greatness. The next ten chapters mark Moses’s return to Egypt and his duel with Pharaoh where he defeats him. The last ten chapters mark Moses’ march with the Hebrews in search of the Promised Land. Finally in the last chapter, Moses travels down to the other side of the mountain.

Moses, Man of the Mountain can be read as a protest novel. Jerry W. Ward in his influential article, “Everybody’s Protest Novel: The Era of Richard Wright” describes the protest novel:

In twentieth -century literary usage, “protest” word is inextricably associated with “race,” might be taken as a pure product of America. Protest was a pejorative code word for work of inferior artistic accomplishment. Unless we want to play games that ignore or blatantly revise the language of history, we initially accept that Richard Wright’s novels from Native Son (1940) to The Long Dream (1958) are instances of protest fiction. … They challenge beliefs about the human condition. They remain in dialogue with the past and the present, responding to and transcending the situational imperatives of their time. They enable us to trace us to the dynamics and thematic strategies in the tradition of African American fiction. (174)

Moses, Man of the Mountain does not fall into the genre of protest novel espoused by Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. Hurston’s protest is not direct and
hard hitting. Bleyden Jackson comments on *Moses, Man of the Mountain* as a protest novel:

Indeed, it can be argued that in the context of black culture, Moses himself is inseparable from protest … so that merely to write a novel about Moses is to initiate a double train of thought and emotion associated with the Negro’s struggles in America to be free. What appears, nevertheless, of greater remarkability about *Moses* is that it lacks virtually all the characteristics endemic to the Negro protest novel. (xviii)

In *Moses*, Hurston does not protest about racism but is more concerned about general inequalities that people face in all aspects of their life. Hurston is more concerned about the second grade treatment that people get during their subjugated position which is more concerned with the theme of class. Though Hurston does not treat her work of literature as a social documentary, she never neglected the tough reality faced by the African American. Hurston “felt that black culture manifested an independent esthetic system that could be discussed without constant reference to white oppression” (Hemenway 221).

*Moses, Man of the Mountain* is a Bildungsroman novel. It is a “novel of formation” or “novel of education.” The novel aptly traces the development of the protagonist Moses character. Hurston depicts how Moses goes through different kind of experiences and with each experience gains his maturity and finally recognizes his identity.

*Moses* is not without flaws. The main flaw of the novel is that it seems to be a queer mixture of humour, biblical tone and African American folklore which unfortunately does not present a harmonious and coherent framework. Humour
sometimes changes into farce and seems to be unplaced at times. The repetitions also seem to be unnecessary at some junctures. Perhaps, Hurston was aiming at something big while creating *Moses*, but unfortunately she could not sustain her lofty designs. There seems to be confusion in the novel and Hurston is unable to express her message to her readers. Discussing the flaws of *Moses*, Robert Hemenway writes:

Its author could not maintain the fusion of black creative style, biblical tone, ethnic humour, and legendary reference that periodically appears. *Moses* is the victim of its own aspiration, a condition that can be fairly said to characterize Zora Hurston’s own life for the next decade.

(270-271).

Hurston was dissatisfied with her own work. The high standard of creativity which she had set for herself in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, seems to be unattainable in *Moses*. In a letter to Edwin Grover to whom she dedicated the book, she confided:

I have the feeling of disappointment about it. I don’t think that I achieved all that I set out do. I thought that in this book I would achieve my ideal, but it seems that I have not yet reached it…. it still doesn’t say all that I want it to say. (qtd in Howard 132)

Despite its flaws, *Moses, Man of Mountain* is one of the most outstanding books in African American literature. It is one of the most ambitious works Hurston ever created. Though it could not achieve the perfectness and magnificence of her previous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it is yet a brilliant attempt by Hurston. To quote Valerie Boyd:

*Moses, Man of the Mountain* is a tour de force of language, humor, insights, protest and prophecy. It is not a flawless book, but its flaws
are relatively minor, which makes them all the more maddening. They set the mind to wondering what the novel could have been if Bertram Lippincott had not been so convinced (in an almost patronizing, anti-intellectual way) that Hurston was a “natural writer.” Any of the novel’s shortcomings could have been addressed with a little more time and with the input of a good editor, a Jethro-like figure to push Hurston even beyond her considerable capacity to push herself. What could Moses have been, for example if fate had put the manuscript into the hands of a masterful editor like Scribner’s Maxwell Perkins, who’d cajoled superb novels out of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolf? Would Perkins have prodded Hurston to more fully delineate Moses’s relationship with God, to smooth out some of the racial confusion, to write just one more draft? Despite these unanswered questions, Moses, Man of the Mountain remains, as Lippincott discerned, “a great book,” its flaws only slightly distracting from its sweeping brilliance. (335).

Hurston should be credited for a bold attempt as Moses, Man of The Mountain where she dares to combine religion with humour, fiction with folklore. The main merit of the novel is its objectivity and universality. Hurston beautifully transforms the Judeo Christian story of Moses into a universal story with which people of any race or nation can relate. Through her phenomenal work, Hurston answers her critics like Alain Locke and Ralph Ellison who had challenged her to write something other than Eatonville fiction and folklores. Hurston creates a magnanimous work which had never been attempted before. To end it would be apt to quote a scintillating tribute from Alice Walker who praises the novel:
*Moses, Man of the Mountain* is one of the rarest, most important books in black literature and should be required reading for all black children. It successfully blends the Biblical story of Moses’s struggle to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt and the twentieth-century black personality—post slavery but pre-liberation—obsessed with the same kind of monumental endeavors. (176)

Truly, Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain* is a monumental endeavour. Undoubtedly, she achieved a rare feat, which no other African American writer could achieve in her times.
Work Cited


