Chapter – 2

Zora Neale Hurston: Genius of the South

Part A - Early Life

I have been in Sorrow’s kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows, a harp and a sword in my hands.

- Zora Neale Hurston

This is what Zora Neale Hurston thought about herself. One remembers Hurston as an enigmatic, daring and audacious person. It is more than fifty years that she has died, but people are still trying to explore every nuance of her life. She was one of the most important literary personalities of the Harlem Renaissance. She was the most significant and prolific writer of her own times with diverse fields of interest ranging from literature and anthropology to drama. Hurston wrote four novels, two collections of folklore, a collection of short stories, many essays, articles and even dramatic productions. Unfortunately, even with such a scintillating achievement, Hurston died in obscurity and remained in oblivion for many years after her demise. Alice Walker traced her out again. Walker writes:

Zora was funny, irreverent (she was the first to call the Harlem Renaissance literate the “niggerati”) good-looking, sexy, and once sold hot dogs in Washington park just to record accurately how the black people who bought the hot dogs talked. She would go anywhere she had to go: Harlem, Jamaica, Haiti, Bermuda—to find out anything she simply had to know. She loved to give parties, loved to dance, would
wrap her head in scarves as black women in Africa, Haiti and
everywhere else have done for centuries. On the other hand, she loved
to wear hats, tilted over one eye, and pants and boots…. She would
light up a fag which wasn’t done by ladies then (and thank our saints,
as a young woman she was never a lady) on the street. (xiv – xv)

Zora Neale Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama in the year 1891 but she
spent her childhood in Eatonville in Florida. Hurston’s whole life is marred by travel
and migration. She traveled and dwelled in many places like Baltimore, Washington
DC, New York City, California, many African counties and the Caribbean. She
attended many famous institutions of her own time like Morgan Academy, Howard
University and Barnard College. She was a student of the famous anthropologist Dr.
Franz Boas and was accepted into the Ph.D. program at Columbia University.

Hurston’s works often deal with issues of race, class and gender. In her
inimitable style she has tried to show experiences of the African American people.
Hurston not merely probed these issues, but actually transcended them. This made her
a versatile writer. Her works celebrate black life and black folk culture, which is
manifested in her works. Sharon L. Jones writes in this regard:

Chief among her many contributions to American arts and letters was
her appreciation for and celebration of black oral tradition. By retelling
black folk stories, which often focus on animals and common people,
and by presenting the beauty and complexity of dialect of the black
vernacular, or African American English, Hurston was implicitly
validating a literary tradition that had long been considered secondary.
More than that, she presented a sense of voice and perspective in her
writing that made it nuanced and memorable. Many of her literary and
anthropological texts reveal her interest in promoting the oral tradition among African Americans. (x)

Zora Neale Hurston’s life overlapped with important periods in the African-American literature, one of the most significant being the Harlem Renaissance. During this movement there was a revival of black cultural expression in fields of art, literature and music. Hurston became one of the most important literary figures of this movement. Even after the end of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston produced her phenomenal works which became her manifesto to her craft. Hurston’s flamboyant and audacious life style made her grand dame of the chic Negro intellectuals.

Unfortunately, her contemporaries and her critics both failed to see her real worth. Hurston being resilient and fiercely independent, wrote only what she felt. She believed in an honest portraiture of her race no matter how her works were reviewed or criticized. Her popularity started to wane and soon she receded into her privacy and refused to come out into the lime light once again. In her last days, she lived in a welfare home in Saint Lucie County, Florida. She died in 1960, as a destitute and her funeral expenses were paid by donations.

Hurston’s personal and professional life and experiences are as interesting as her characters in the fictional works. Sharon L. Jones writes:

A master of self-representation, Hurston fashioned the narrative of her own history to present herself as the product of a rich African – American cultural heritage. The story of her life, marked by a determination to succeed as a writer despite the wide spread racial and gender discrimination of the era, continues to serve as an inspiring example. (xii-xiii)
Zora Neale Hurston has always been known for her resilient spirit, self-reliance and independence. Hurston’s formative years, moulded her personality and made her what she was for the rest of her life. While studying cultural integration, Ruth Benedict concludes that culture and the individual both affect each other. This implication can be used in assessing Zora Neale Hurston’s life and works. According to Ruth Benedict:

A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. Within each culture there come into being characteristic purposes not necessarily shared by other types of society. In obedience to these purposes, each people further and further consolidates its experience, and in proportion to the urgency of these drives the heterogeneous items of behavior take more and more congruous shape. Taken up by a well integrated culture, the most ill-assorted acts become characteristics of its peculiar goals, often by the most unlikely metamorphoses. The form that these acts take we can understand only by understanding first the emotional and intellectual mainsprings of the society. (46)

While studying the life of a complex personality like Zora Neale Hurston, it is necessary to understand, “the emotional and intellectual mainsprings” of her life.

Though Hurston claimed to be ten years younger, she was actually born on January 7, 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama. She was the fifth of eight children of John and Lucy Hurston. In 1894, Hurston’s family moved to Eatonville, Florida which became one of the most significant and influential events in Hurston’s life. Incorporated in 1886, Eatonville was a self-governing, all-black town devoid of any racist institutions of the Jim Crow South. John Hurston soon became a major figure
in the town and was elected mayor thrice. Spending her formative years in Eatonville had a profound import on Hurston. Almost everything she wrote later in her life had its roots in Eatonville. Commenting on Hurston’s Eatonville connection, Valerie Boyd writes:

For Zora Hurston, Eatonville was always home, throughout her life, she would claim Eatonville as her birthplace and refer to it as her ‘native village’. Because she was so young when her family moved to Eatonville, perhaps her parents never told her she was actually born in Notasulga, Alabama. Or perhaps she was told, but considered it an insignificant detail not worth repeating. In any case, she never mentioned Notasulga as part of her personal geography. When, as a successful writer in New York, Hurston, would speak of going “down home” for a visit, she meant Eatonville. Essentially everything that Zora Hurston would grow up to write, and to believe, had its genesis in Eatonville. The setting of her earliest childhood memories and the site of her coming of age, Eatonville was where Hurston received her first lessons in individualism and her first immersion in community. (25)

It was in Eatonville that Hurston first found out about African American folk culture and its importance in African American people’s lives. Hurston led a flourishing life, developing innate self-confidence and self-independence which ultimately became a hall-mark of her personality and also as a literary artist. She was immersed in a life, where everywhere there was black achievement around her. Black people formulating their own laws, black men and women singing choirs at Sunday church, black children going to school and black folks thronging on Joe Clark’s porch exchanging colorful stories.
Hurston’s childhood was also idyllic. Her father had a successful carpentry business and soon bought a five acre land on which he constructed an eight room house. Chinaberry trees, Cape jasmine bushes lined the walks. Hurston while reminiscing about her home writes in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

> There were plenty of orange, grape fruits in our yard. We had a five acre garden with things to eat growing in it, and so we were never hungry. We had chicken on the table often; home cured meat, and all the eggs we wanted. It was a common thing for us smaller children to fill the iron tea-kettle full of eggs and boil them, and lay around in the yard and eat them until we were full. Any leftover boiled eggs could always be used for missiles. There was plenty of fish in the lakes around the town, and so we had all that we wanted. (12)

Besides Eatonville, it was Hurston’s mother who made her fiercely independent and had the most phenomenal influence on her early life. Lucy Hurston was a highly intelligent lady with a tough mind and a large spirit. She always encouraged Hurston to explore her surroundings and develop a positive outlook for life. This positive attitude of self became an instrumental asset in Hurston’s later years to survive in the world beyond Eatonville.

In her mother, Hurston found the source of strength to remain true to herself, but John Hurston, Hurston’s father never appreciated her independent ways. He always believed that Hurston would get into trouble sooner or later due to her daunting behaviour. He tried to mend the boisterous behavior of his daughter lest unforgiving racist fervour of the South got hold of her, and he tried to teach her how to act as a black girl as expected. Hurston writes:
Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to “jump at de sun.” We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground. Papa did not feel so hopeful. Let well enough alone. It did not do for Negroes to have too much spirit. He was always threatening to break mine or kill me in the attempt. My mother was always standing between us. She conceded that I was impudent and given to talking back, but she didn’t want to “squinch my spirit” too much for fear that I would turn out to be a mealy–mouthed rag doll by the time I got grown. Papa always flew hot when Mama said that. I do not know whether he feared for my future, with the tendency I had to stand and give battle, or that he felt a personal reference in Mama’s observation. He predicted dire things for me. The white folks were not going to stand for it. I was going to be hung before I got grown. Somebody was going to blow me down for my sassy tongue. Mama was going to suck sorrow for not beating my temper out of me before it was too late.

Hurston’s mother always believed that education was a vital asset for her children. She promptly enrolled her daughter in the Hungerford School founded in 1889, to provide education for Negro children in central Florida. Right from the beginning, Hurston was keen on acquiring knowledge. She learned to read and write before her school age and she always remained a bright student in her class. Hurston’s initiation as a writer had already started. Her discovery of the world of books further propelled her to a future career as a literary artist. Soon, she became an avid reader and started reading every book she could get hold of. When Hurston was in the fifth grade, her teacher once asked her to read aloud for two white women who had come
to visit the school. They were so impressed by Hurston’s impassioned reading that they gifted her a whole box of books. Books such as *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, Dick Whittington, Norse Legends, Hans Anderson, Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson further fuelled her imagination. Hurston, recalling her fascination for books from an early age writes:

In a way, this early reading gave me great anguish throughout my childhood and adolescence. My soul was with the gods and my body in the village. People just would not act like gods. Stew beef, fried fat back and morning grits were no ambrosia from Valhalla. Raking back yards and carrying out chamber pots, were not the tasks of Hercules. I wanted to be away from drabness and to stretch my limbs in some mighty struggle. (41)

Hurston tried to know and immerse herself in everything around her. She asked questions that her mother and father could not answer. Questions such as why the things were, their beginning and their ends. She wanted to search the horizon and also wanted to know what the end of the world was like. Right from the beginning, Hurston possessed an adventurous soul and proved to be high spirited. She would ride up the road with white travelers half a mile or so, and then walk back home. At that time, when white brutality towards black people was quite common in a racist south, her parents found this behavior of Hurston as dangerous and inexplicable. This attitude of seeing white people as mere individuals or being indifferent to black people, cemented Hurston’s lifelong friendship with whites in her adulthood.

Hurston’s relation with her father was quite complex. As a child she admired and was in awe of him. Reminiscing about her father, Hurston writes in *Dust Tracks on a Road*:
He had a poetry about him that I loved. That had made him a successful preacher. He could hit ninety seven out of a hundred with a gun. He could swim Lake Maitland from Maitland to winter park, and no man in the village could put my father’s shoulders to the ground.

(32)

For Hurston, her father was invincible but she was also aware of his philandering nature. She was never the favourite child of her father and yearned for his affection. Deborah G. Plant writes about Hurston and her father’s complex relationship:

Hurston’s relationship with her father was of an oedipal nature. Though rebuffed, she longed for her father’s affection. She showed resentment of her sister and jealousy toward her stepmother. John Hurston’s relationship with his daughter was profound and far-reaching. It significantly influenced Hurston’s self perception as it colored her relationships with other men and formed her perception of and relationship to women. In spite of his rejection of her, Hurston was still drawn to her father. She longed for her father’s love and affection, however much she repressed those feelings. She loved him, identified with him, and strove to be like him. But she was a girl, and girls were not to behave like her father. However, the clash of parental ideologies created an aperture for her to be like her father. Having acquired the status of “other,” and warned against becoming like her mother, young Zora was more or less an androgynous agent—though not an entirely free one. Given the clearly demarcated and deeply entrenched lines between the women and the men and their respective roles in early
twentieth century American society, given her own nature, Hurston’s alternatives were limited. Not the ideal girl in her father’s eyes, and encouraged by her mother to be aggressive, Hurston assumed a masculinist identity. She found conventionally male patterns of behavior more comfortable, more personally gratifying, and more rewarding. (160)

One of the most unfortunate incidents in Zora Neale Hurston’s life was her mother Lucy Hurston’s death. Lucy Hurston died when Hurston was only nine years old. The scene of her mother’s death was traumatic for Hurston and remained vivid for many years to come. Hurston’s idyllic childhood was shattered with her mother’s death. Hurston was immersed in grief and anticipated her unknown future. Contemporary psychologists very well understand what it means for a young daughter to lose her mother. In the book, *Motherless Daughters*, renowned psychologist, Hope Edelman writes:

> The loss of a parent during childhood is one of the most stressful life cycle events an individual can face, but without a forum for discussing her feelings, the motherless daughter finds little validation for the magnitude of her loss. And without this recognition, she feels like a feminine pariah, apart and alone. (xxiii)

Lucy Hurston had been a stable anchor in Hurston’s life. She was not only a mother but also her guiding spirit. Lucy’s sad demise came at a time, when Hurston as a young girl needed her most. Her mother’s death proved a great blow for Hurston. For a long time Hurston could not accept her mother’s death. She poignantly recalls her emotional trauma after her mother’s death:
On one of these occasions, I had an experience that set my heart to fluttering. I saw a woman sitting on a porch who looked at a distance like Mama. Maybe it was Mama! Maybe she was not dead at all. They had made some mistake. Mama had gone off to Jacksonville and they had thought she was dead. The woman was sitting in a rocking chair just like Mama did. It must be Mama! But before I came abreast of the porch in my rigid place in line, the woman got up and went inside. I wanted to stop and go in. But I didn’t even breathe my hope to anyone. I made up my mind to run away and find the house and let Mama know where I was. But before I did the hope that the woman really was my mother passed. I accepted my bereavement. (71)

With her mother’s death, Hurston felt immensely lonely and that void could not be filled throughout her life. After her mother’s death, she unwillingly acquired emotional autonomy, which also subsequently made her a fierce independent woman throughout her life. Many years later, Hurston wrote:

No matter what the others did, my mother had put her trust in me. She had felt that I could and would carry out her wishes, and I had not. And then in that sunset time, I failed her. It seemed as she died that the sun went down on purpose to flee away from me. That hour began my wanderings. Not so much in geography, but in time. Then not so much in time as in spirit. Mama died at sundown and changed a world. That is, the world which had been built out of her body and her heart. Even the physical aspects fell apart with a suddenness that was startling.

(67)
Hurston was sent to Jacksonville to attend the school. Though Hurston was a bright student, she proved to be inept in new social surroundings, and her habit of talking back to authorities also landed her in trouble. Due to her unpaid school fees, she was sent back to her home in Eatonville only to find out that her father had remarried a young woman named Mattie Moge, who was only six years older than her. Hurston was unable to get along with her step-mother. This second marriage of her father subsequently, broke the Hurston family. Hurston was sent off to live with her older brothers, friends and relatives one after the other. Valerie Boyd writes:

During these years of “aimless wandering”, as she saw them, Zora Hurston became familiar with the blessings and burdens of solitude, intimate with every shade of loneliness, and well acquainted with the oppressive odor of poverty. “There is something about poverty that smells like death,” she would write. “Dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in a dry season and rotting around the feet, impulses smothered too long in the fetid air of underground caves. The soul lives in a sickly air. People can be slave ships in shoes.” (61)

Perhaps it was during these years that she developed her sensitivity as a writer. In the year 1915, Hurston took on an odd job as a lady’s maid to a singer working in Gilbert and Sullivan repertory company. Traveling to different places, in the South, further broadened Hurston’s horizon. In the year 1917, when Hurston was twenty six years old, she came to know that she could easily pass off as a teenager. Thus, she reinvented herself as ten years younger. Being once again sixteen year old, gave her a chance to complete her education, relive her adolescence which she never had due to her mother’s death. Telling her year of birth as 1901, in 1917 Hurston enrolled in Baltimore School posing as a sixteen year old.
In Baltimore School, Hurston for the first time lead a life that she had always wanted to, that is reading books and getting herself engulfed in literature. Once again due to her inherent intelligence and resilience, Hurston proved to be an outstanding student in her class. She read every book she could lay her hands own. It was here that Hurston decided to carve a niche for herself in the world of literature. Hurston writes in her autobiography:

Listening to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* for the first time, I saw all that the poet had meant for me to see with him, and infinite cosmic things besides. I was not of the work-a-day world for days after Mr. Holmes’s voice had ceased. This was my world, I said to myself, and I shall be in it, and surrounded by it, if it is the last thing I do on God’s green dirt-ball. (123)

She continues to write:

I acted as if the books would run away. I remember committing to memory, Gray’s *Elegy in a Country Church Yard* overnight, lest I never get a chance to read it again. Next I learned the *Ballad of Reading Goal* and started on the *Rubaiyat*. It would be dramatic in a Cinderella way if I were to say that the well-dressed students at school snubbed me and shoved me around, but that I studied hard and triumphed over them. I did study hard because I was behind schedule, and then again study has never been hard to me. Then too, I had hundreds of books under my skin already. (124-125).

Hurston believing in her worth enrolled herself in Morgan Academy in 1917. In the summer of 1918, while paying her fees, managing her studies and meeting ends, she finished school.
Part – B

Career and achievements

In 1918, Hurston moved to Washington D.C. Here she worked as a waitress and manicurist before starting her classes at Howard University. Then, Howard was America’s largest black university situated about three miles from the White House. The university’s founders while framing its curriculum aimed at educating black students in all aspects such as intellectually, morally and socially. By 1920, Hurston acquired an Associate’s degree. The Howard University proved to be a milestone in Hurston’s life in many ways. Hurston for the first time came in contact with one of the most influential black personalities of America, Alain Locke, a Howard Philosophy Professor.

The contribution of Alain Locke in nurturing Hurston’s career as a writer cannot be denied. It was Locke who detected her talent as a writer when Hurston became a member of The Stylus, which was the annual journal published by Howard University literary club. Locke was quick to notice Hurston’s innate skill as a story teller. Hurston’s early life as a short story writer proved to be an apprenticeship period for her. Her very first story, “John Redding Goes to Sea” published in the The Stylus in 1921, “Drenched in Light”, in 1925, “Spunk” and her play “Color Struck”, published in the influential magazine called Opportunity heralded her into the literary scene of African Americans. Significantly, all these stories are based on Eatonville. Her works expressed the essence of feeling and experience she had acquired while living in Eatonville. She felt that she was the daughter of not only her parents, but also the daughter of Eatonville. Somewhere deep down she had a murky feeling of “cosmic loneliness “which could often be seen in her works. After winning many
prestigious awards at various literary contests, Hurston decided to move to New York. Hurston writes:

Being out of school for lack of funds and wanting to be in New York, I decided to go there and try to get back in school in that city. So the first week of January, 1925, found me in New York with $1.50, no job, no friends, and a lot of hope. (138)

Hurston’s arrival in New York could not have been at a better time. One of the districts of New York City, Harlem was the epicenter of the New Negro Renaissance or better known as the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston soon became a part of the Harlem literary circle, though she did not align herself to any literary movement. She befriended other black writers such as Claude MacKay who was from Jamaica, Eric Walrand from Barbados, Wallace Thurman from Salt Lake, Jean Toomer from Washington D.C., Rudolph Fisher from Rhode Island and Langston Hughes from Kansas. She formed a very strong bond of friendship with Langston Hughes. Hughes and Hurston shared a special bond with each other, with Hurston often showering her affection on Hughes as her little brother. In Harlem, they both supported each other financially, socially and morally. However, their friendship came to a bitter end due to a dispute over the play called *Mule Bone*, on which they had collaborated. Hurston regretted breaking of this friendship throughout her life.

Hurston soon became a part and parcel of the Harlem circle. To quote Valerie Boyd:

Her apartment quickly became a popular downtown den for the Niggerati, and Zora welcomed them by habitually keeping a pot of something on the stove. “She was always prepared to feed people,” Richard Bruce Nugent remembered….Accordingly, Zora’s quarters were always available for friends needing a place to stay (Nugent lived
with her for a time) or a place to create (“I wrote at Zora’s because she had paper, pencils, and the space,” he noted). Her apartment was a spirited open house for artists and the site of frequent spontaneous get-togethers, as one friends recounted. Zora—“all greased curls, bangles, and slashes of red”—usually presided over the festivities with her harmonica and her head full of stories. At other times, though, she worked quietly in the bedroom while her friends partied boisterously in the living room. And occasionally, if she had an appointment, Zora would just leave, announcing that the last one out should lock the door.

(121)

Hurston also made life time friendships with a few whites such as Barnard College founder Annie Nathan Meyer, famous writer Fannie Hurst and popular socialite and novelist Carl Van Vachten. These three white friends of Hurston always vouched for her talent and became an indispensable force in the development of her literary career. Interestingly, Hurston coined a term for them—the philanthropic whites who took interest in black way of life and supported African American artists; she termed them as “Negrotarians”. Hurston soon became an important member of Harlem literary circles. She quickly made friends with leading, as well as young, upcoming literary artists and was a ‘hit’ among them. Langston Hughes wrote about Hurston:

She was full of side-splitting anecdotes, humorous tales, and tragicomic stories, remembered out of her life in the South as the daughter of a traveling minister of God. She could make you laugh at one moment and cry in the next. To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect “darkei,” in the nice meaning they give the
term—that is naïve, childlike, sweet, humorous, and highly colored Negro. (239)

Coming into Harlem and being a part of it, rooted Hurston firmly as a literary artist, but most importantly, Hurston felt that she could express her individuality freely as she did in Eatonville. What she had felt so profoundly as an individual, she could feel once again in Harlem. Hurston loved to shock people. She would revolt against the genteel lady image. She wore pants and head rags, used to tilt her cap like her father and led a boisterous life. It was also an act of defiance on the part of Hurston against a white male dominated society. Valerie Boyd narrates one interesting incident to show Hurston’s rebellious spirit:

Hurston certainly did not shy away from the unorthodox act. One sunny summer day, Nugent remembered, he and Zora were walking down Seventh Avenue when she suddenly asked him: “Will you walk on the street with me if I smoke a cigarette?” Zora, who preferred Pall Malls, knew that 1920s propriety frowned upon women smoking in public. But Nugent was game. He lit a cigarette for her in front of Lafayette Theater, then watched people’s reaction in assumed amazement. “They stared at this fallen woman, smoking a cigarette in the street in broad daylight,” he recalled soon, the pair mischievously lit another cigarette, then another. “And so here we go the fallen woman and the sissy walking down Seventh Avenue smoking cigarettes.” Only days later did Nugent realize “that this really was an act of defiance on Zora’s part. (130)

One of the important literary influences on Hurston during the Harlem Renaissance was W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois was one of the most important
intellectuals trying to propound an aesthetic dimension to the New Negro movement. Du Bois always encouraged the new generation African American artists to create a meaningful literature.

Only a year after Hurston’s had arrived at New York, she was being recognized as one of the most talented writers of the Harlem Renaissance with a bright promising career. Steadily, she was growing a unique style which exhibited her quality of using folklore that allured her throughout her life and times. Hurston on the basis of her hard work and extraordinary talent started to carve out a niche for herself. Without the support of her parents or relatives she was facing the world all on her own with self-merit as her only asset. Hurston was a steadfast individualist. She had always believed in self-merit, personal industriousness and personal worth. Her indefatigable spirit and her orientation towards individualism and achievement combined to create a third and even more compelling orientation: a power imperative, or a will to power, that expressed itself as a determination to achieve self-reliance, self-definition, and self-direction, an autonomy conceived as nothing short of a mastery of self” (Plant 33). Hurston knew that gross inequalities existed in America and though African Americans were not responsible in evolving these conditions and situations but at least they could change them for their own good. She believed that the change would begin with changing herself, proving her worth rather than trying to change her community or society. She wrote emphatically, “In other words, I know that I cannot accept responsibility for thirteen million people. Every tub must sit on its own bottom regardless” (249). Hurston’s philosophy was that of an idealistic vision. She always emphasized that a person should be judged by his individual worth and achievement and not by his race, gender or nation. Deborah G Plant writes in this context:
Nevertheless, arbitrary, though very real, factors of ethnicity, class, gender, and culture all too often are powerful variables that influence or determine individual destiny. These variables have no play in Hurston’s simplistic vision. Hurston, nonetheless, was painfully aware of the impact of these forces. Her idealistic vision, then, is less a denial of the complexities of human existence than a reactionary response to a very complex political reality in which individuals were and are circumscribed by forces outside the self. (34)

In order to achieve the ideas that Hurston had envisioned, she cultivated in herself the qualities which helped her to overcome all obstacles and adversities. Her self-confidence and her never say die attitude helped her to transcend boundaries created by social and political inequities. To quote Plant once again:

An irrepressible self-confidence and a combative spirit were at the foundation of Hurston’s individualistic philosophy. In view of the influences on her life, it is not likely that Hurston’s ardent sense of self was simply overcompensation for inferiority. It seems, rather, having learned early on that she and African Americans, generally, were quite capable of achieving whatever they envisioned, that her very strong sense of self became more ardent as she “proved” herself to others and as she struggled against negative external forces. Within the matrixes of family and community were the incipient formations of Hurston’s self-perception, her value orientations and her intellectual standpoint. (35)

Hurston was deeply influenced by Booker T. Washington. Hurston like Washington believed in individual worth and personal merit, Due to her sheer
optimism and zest for life, Hurston could sprung up from the abyss of uncertainty and poverty. Hurston perhaps, had thoroughly gone through Washington’s ideology and based her own philosophy on his. She corroborated her individualistic point of view in this philosophical context, “To call attention to herself—as an individual.” (Plant 41).

Hurston writes:

No, we will go where the internal drive carries us like everybody else.

It is up to the individual. If you haven’t got it, you can’t show it. If you have got it, you can’t hide it. That is the strongest law God ever made.

(192)

Hurston’s opinions and viewpoints on many issues such as industrial education were very much like that of Washington. Washington had always advocated hard work as one of the most important ingredients of worthy education for any individual. Hurston truly conformed to this notion and worked throughout her life as a writer, folklorist, researcher, waitress, house maid and a manicurist. For her, work was the key to success in life. She writes in *Dust Tracks on the Road*:

I don’t know any more about the future than you do. I hope that it will be full of work, because I have come to know by experience that work is the nearest thing to happiness that I have among the things that humans want, I go to pieces in a short while if I do not work. What all my work shall be, I don’t know that either, every hour being a stranger to you until you live it. (231)

Hurston also followed the philosophy of Spinoza and Nitshzhe. Persons such as Ruth Benedict also augmented her view to see things. These influences helped Hurston in creating her unique works. All these major influences in Hurston’s life
helped her create her own paradigm and unique view towards life. Deborah G. Plant observes:

Hurston’s studies in anthropology, history, and philosophy validated her beliefs in the genius and humanity of African Americans as they affirmed her own sense of self-worth and her individualist standpoint. The cultural relativist perspective she acquired while studying under Franz Boas confirmed her sense of the significance and value of Black cultural traditions. And Ruth Benedict’s analyses of the individual and society and her impatience with American conformity and intolerance of individual differences seem to have impressed upon Hurston the imperative of accepting her own difference and encouraged her individualist politics. Spinoza’s doctrine of self-preservation and self-perfection reflected wisdom Hurston found in the lore of the folk and in the teaching of Booker T. Washington. Spinoza’s belief in the divinity of humankind and the power of reasons is mirrored in Hurston’s thought. These philosophical tenants, as manifested in Hurston’s writings, undergirded her notions of individual responsibility and self-determination as they posited authority with the individual rather than with forces external to the individual. Her orientation towards individualism and achievement seems invigorated by the Nietzschean “will-to-power,” a concept that translates in Hurston’s philosophy as self-mastery and complete autonomy. Her abilities to deal with life as she found it, laugh in the face of adversity, and express her creative genius reflect the singular will of the Dionysian spirit. (176-177)
Believing in herself and her worth, Hurston decided to opt for higher education. Hurston enrolled herself at Barnard College in the fall of 1925, being the only black student in the whole college. She met Dr Franz Boas, a Columbia University professor of Anthropology, and author of groundbreaking books such as the *Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) and *Anthropology and Modern Man* (1928). Hurston was greatly influenced by Boas, who she called “the King of Kings.”

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, the majority of the anthropological research was centered on primitive cultures. The term primitive connotated those populations who were non white or non Europeans such as Africans, Native Americans, and African- Americans. This bias on the part of the white anthropologists dominated anthropological researchers and affected their research conclusions. On the contrary, Dr. Franz Boas believed that all races were equal and had the same potential (qtd in Witcover 64). Boas soon recognized Hurston’s talent and goaded her to be a cultural anthropologist. Boas told her to devote her studies in the field of African – American folklore, dances, stories, songs, jokes and folk medicines. Hurston writes of Dr. Franz Boas:

> As is well known, Dr. Franz Boas of the department of Anthropology of Columbia University, is the greatest Anthropologist alive for two reasons. The first is his insatiable hunger for knowledge and then more knowledge; and the second is his genius for pure objectivity. He has no pet wishes to prove. His instructions are to go out and find what is there. He outlines his theory, but if the facts do not agree with it, he would not warp a jot or dot of the findings to save his theory. So knowing all this, I was proud that he trusted me. (143)
Hurston’s philosophy of individualism was further elevated by her anthropological works under the guidance of Franz Boas. Through anthropological perspective she was able to delve deeper into the rich African American cultural heritage. Boa’s approach towards African American in context of cultural anthropology had a deep influence on Hurston. Boas observed in *Race, Language, and Culture*:

> The investigation of the ideas and beliefs of the American Negroes throws an interesting side light on these conditions. Unfortunately this subject has received very slight attention, and it is hardly possible to state definitely what the conditions are in various parts of the continent. It is quite clear, however, that the Negroes, owing to their segregation, have retained much of what they brought from Africa. (22)

Under the able guidance of Boas, Hurston began her cultural anthropological investigations and documented her socio linguistic data. Hurston discovered that language was a powerful medium of cultural expression. While collecting African American folklores, metaphors, similes, verbal nouns, folk songs and other mediums of expression, Hurston was enriching her own knowledge and experience. This began to show in her literary works which became unparalleled among the works of her contemporaries. Her literary works were replete with rich African American culture making them unique. When other Harlem artists were busy spending their time in the comforts of New York City, Hurston was tirelessly collecting her anthropological data on African American folklores and sometimes even risking her life. Valerie Boyd writes on this tireless pursuit of Hurston:
After about ten days in Eatonville, Zora moved on to less familiar surroundings, to towns where she did not know anyone. What she did know, though, was that a black woman travelling the back roads of the South alone needed a mighty form of protection. For this, Zora packed a chrome plated pistol. Hurston’s daring—and the potential danger of her mission—should not be underestimated. She was, of course, vulnerable to rape and the general misogynist violence that any woman travelling alone might fear at any moment in American history. But there was more: this was 1927—a time when lynchings and other forms of racial barbarity were rampant in the South. Though black men were usual targets of lynch mobs, by no means were black women safe from such savagery, and Hurston knew she had to be on constant guard… Hearing such gruesome stories, few of Zora’s Harlem compatriots—no matter how much they claimed to love the folk—would have braved the southern blackwoods, “forsaking the creature comforts of New York,” as she put it, “for these shacks that suffice in the sub-tropics.” Zora even called the bluff of one friend who pretended he might join her on her journey: “I cannot see you forsaking the classic halls of universities for the songs and tales of camp and road ….I challenge you—I dare you—to try it!” (144-145)

Such was the dedication of Hurston towards her work and her research endeavors. Hurston felt that folklores are people’s best example of spontaneous expression indicating what they really are. Hurston defined folklore as “the art people create before they find out there is such a thing as art” (qtd in Witcover 65).

Hurston proved to be the only artist who was closest to her roots and origins and her
works exhibited this knowledge. Her works manifest blues, folk tales, lies, ironic jokes, all sprung up from folk background. One thing Hurston was sure of was that African–American folklore could not originate from people who were racially subverted but on the contrary, it was an undeniable proof that blacks had a thriving culture and healthy soul and spirit. As Robert Hemenway puts it:

Of them all, however, Zora Hurston was the closest, and her person and her fiction exhibited the knowledge that the black masses had triumphed over their racist environment, not by becoming white and emulating bourgeois values, not by engaging in a sophisticated program of political propaganda, but by turning inward to create the blues, the folk tale, the spiritual, the hyperbolic lie, the ironic joke. These forms of expression revealed a uniqueness of race spirit because they were a code of communication—intraracial propaganda—that would protect the race from the psychological encroachments of racism and the physical oppression of society. Hurston knew that black folklore did not arise from a psychologically destroyed people, that in fact it was proof of psychic health. As she put it, the folk knew how to “hit a straight lick with a crooked stick,” how to devise a communicative code that could simultaneously protest the effects of racism and maintain the secrecy of that very same protest. (51)

One of the controversies regarding Hurston’s career is her getting help from a rich white patron. Hurston received financial assistance from a wealthy New York resident Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason, but Hurston was not the only one. Mrs. Mason was patron to many other black writers such as Alain Locke and Langston Hughes. Mrs. Mason granted finance to Hurston for her anthropological research on
the condition that she would give ownership of the material that she collected as well as the control of the publication. This proved to be a blessing as well as a curse for Hurston. Though Hurston was provided with enough money to carry on her research, but she was withheld from publishing her findings when she wanted. By the sixties it became common place for African American writers to receive financial assistance, grants and fellowships from whites.

Over the next few years, Hurston devoted herself to anthropological investigations while concomitantly producing literary works also. Besides, writing many essays and stories, she wrote her first novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* in 1934. The novel is more or less an autobiographical novel, loosely based on her father John Hurston and mother Lucy Hurston’s lives. The novel depicts the story of John Buddy Pearson, a minister in Eatonville who is married to Lucy but still has relations with other women. In the portrait of a man and his community in which he is residing, Hurston exhibits the conflict between the physical and the spiritual. In the novel, Hurston makes extensive use of her knowledge of folklore.

*Mules and Men*, is the first book by Hurston based on her anthropological works and folklore collections which she had collected while traveling South in the year 1927 to 1929 and 1931-1932. Franz Boas, Hurston’s mentor and professor of Anthropology, wrote the book’s introduction as, “contribution to our knowledge of the true inner life of the Negro” (Croft 107). Similarly, another great Anthropologist Melville Herskovits wrote, “I think it is not saying too much to state that Miss Hurston probably has a more intimate knowledge of Negro folk life than anyone in this country” (qtd in Boyd 285). The book is divided into two parts. The first part of the book deals with Hurston’s findings and seventy African American folktales that she had gathered in due course. The first group is from Eatonville and the rest is from
Polk County. The second part of the book tells about five different Voodoo doctors whom she had met in Louisiana. The last section of the book deals with several African American folksongs, listing of hoodoo formulae, ingredients and potions. Robert Croft observes:

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this book is the narrator, Hurston herself in a fictionalized form. This structure, which became an increasingly important element in the book the longer Hurston waited for a publisher and the more she revised it, transforms the book from a strictly non-fictional anthropological study of folklore to a genuinely narrative format. In fact, Hurston felt free to telescope the timeframe of her expeditions for the sake of narrative, even adding folktales that she had heard long before her collecting expeditions. The final result, although not as strictly scientific as an anthropologist might like, is a much more interesting and readable account of the folktales. (108)

The book *Mules and Men*, proved Hurston’s worth as an anthropologist just as her previous work *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* proved her as an accomplished literary artist. This book also proved that Hurston was interested in preserving black folk culture because it was ethnic and authentic and worth serious study. Today, *Mules and Men* has become an indispensable source of African American folk study.

The success of these two books made sure that Hurston could write stories permeated with folklores in an engaging narration for the masses. After much vacillation, Hurston made up her mind to build her career as a literary artist. As Valerie Boyd observes:

She wanted to use her expanding knowledge of black folk life in a literary way, rather than in a strictly scientific, fashion. The combined
success of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Mules and Men* had led Hurston to this definitive decision…. Nonetheless, Hurston was a writer, bonafide, and she was now turning her attention more fully to building her career as an author rather than as an anthropologist. Writing, she had finally decided, was her first and most enduring love. From now on, she would employ her secondary career interest, anthropology, to serve what she had decided was her primary purpose; telling stories that reflected the truth, as, she knew it, of black people’s lives. (285).

Hurston’s masterpiece, *Their Eyes were watching God* was published in September, 1937. The novel is a story about Janie Crawford, who returns to Eatonville to tell her story to her friend, Pheoby Watson. In her journey of life, she experiences a spectrum of emotions—love, joy, sorrow, jealousy, loneliness and at last returns to her home to be in peace. At the time, when ‘Protest Novels’ were in rage, Hurston chose to write a novel which tells about self-identity and self-independence of a woman who triumphs against all odds and adversities. After its publication, it received mixed reviews by the critics, but today *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is considered one of the most important and foremost novels of the twentieth century.

Hurston’s next book was *Tell My Horse*. It was a relatively less successful anthropological work. It was based on anthropological collections she had done on her trips to Jamaica and Haiti on a Guggenheim fellowship from September, 1936 to 1937. The book is divided into three parts. The first deals with Marrons, descendents of slaves residing in Jamaica; second part of the book deals with the history and politics of Haiti and the third part of the book deals with the voodoo practices in Haiti.
The most important thing about this work is that it deals with voodoo from an anthropological point of view and as a religion.

Though published in 1939, the novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, had long been on Hurston’s mind. In the novel, Hurston deals with many issues such as power, leadership and race. Based on the story of Exodus, Hurston combines the Moses of the Old Testament with the Moses portrayed in the black folklore. She transforms the epic legend of Moses into an allegorical satire with folklores, depicting the destiny of blacks in mid twentieth century America. Hurston also makes ample use of elements such as voodoo and magic, endowing Moses with supernatural power.

By this time, Hurston had become hugely successful and had pitched herself as an accomplished writer. On the suggestion of her publisher Lippincott, Hurston wrote her autobiography named, *Dust Tracks on a Road*. As Valerie Boyd puts it, “Zora Neale Hurston’s life story, as presented in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, is the enchanting tale of how one extraordinary black woman rose from Eatonville dreamer to Gotham achiever” (353).

Hurston tells about her rise from childhood poverty, residing in Eatonville to become a leading literary artist and intellectual of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston manifests herself as an artist, anthropologist, and vouches herself for the black cause. Today, *Dust Tracks on a Road* is viewed more as a memoir than autobiography. William Zinsser writes in this context:

> Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half—remembered events. With that feat of manipulation they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events. (6)
Hurston has omitted many details of her life in her memoir such as her date of birth and year, her second marriage (to Albert Price), her friendship with Langston Hughes. Similarly she adopts an evasive attitude on issues of race, social, political problems, and Harlem Renaissance. This book makes a delightful reading and gives readers an insight into Hurston’s mind even though partially. Most importantly, it exalted Hurston’s stature as a literary giant and proved to be her most successful book.

*Seraph on the Suwanee*, was the last novel by Hurston, published in October, 1948. This novel remains an anomaly among her other works. Specifically writing on black life and folklores, Hurston diverts herself by writing on whites. She writes about white Florida “crackers” while making a departure from being a writer of African-American culture. The story is about Arvay Henson and her marital life with her husband Jim Meserve. Themes such as marriage, love, betrayal, loneliness can be found in the novel.

Just one month before the publication of *Seraph on the Suwanee*, an unfortunate incident happened which had an extremely debilitating effect on Hurston, both professionally and personally. Hurston was falsely implicated on charges of sexual molestation of a child by the New York Police. Hurston had concrete proof that she was in Honduras at that time. Realizing that there was no proof against Hurston, and she was a mere victim of a disturbed accuser, the district attorney dropped all charges against Hurston. She came out clean of all the charges as she was innocent, but the damage had already been done. Her soul and spirit were crushed beyond repair. In a letter to her friend, Carl Van Vechten, she wrote:

> My country has failed me utterly. My race has seen fit to destroy me without reason, and with the vilest tools conceived by man so far…. I
have resolved to die. It will take a few days for me to set my affairs in order, and then I will go….No acquittal will persuade some people that I am innocent. I feel hurled down a filthy privy hole. (qtd in Boyd 397)

Hurston decided to lead a life of a recluse and quietly left the limelight. To make ends meet, she took up a job as a house maid in Miami then she worked as a librarian at Patrick, Air force base in Cocoa, Florida. While moving to Fort Pierce in 1958, she worked as a substitute teacher at Lincoln Park Academy. Simultaneously, she also kept writing for various magazines and newspapers which supplemented her income.

Hurston remained alone without the support of any relative. She did not have any children, or any husband to support her through these tough times, making it more difficult for her to pass her twilight years. Hurston’s personal life is equally erratic as her professional life. Truly, Hurston had lived her life to the fullest. She opted for independence instead of security, career instead of comfort, adventure instead of mundane existence, lived for the present instead of caring about the future. Hurston’s personal life also exhibits her skittish personality. Hurston’s ideas and approach towards marriage and marital life was too advanced for her times. Hurston in no way wanted her marriage to change the lifestyle that she was living a life of freedom and without any encumbrance. Hurston’s first marriage was to Herbert Sheen, with whom she had studied in Howard College. Though, she married Sheen on 19 May 1927, she divorced him on 7th July 1931 when she felt that settling with Sheen was impossible due to her career commitments. If she had wanted, she could have lead a life of comfort and riches, as Sheen had a bright future as a medical student. In 1932, Hurston met a graduate student at Columbia named Percival McGuire Punter with
whom she had a torrid affair. This intense love affair proved to be a bliss as well as misery for Hurston. Punter was twenty years younger than Hurston, and it resulted in fundamental conflicts between them. Hurston decided to part ways with Punter and went on a trip to Jamaica and Haiti in 1936 and 1937. While emotionally recovering from the unsuccessful torrid love affair in Haiti, Hurston wrote her masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston’s personal life continued to be disrupted. On January 27, 1939 she married once again a much younger works projects administration (WPA) playground worker, Albert Price III. Within a year, realizing that it was yet another mistake of her life, she divorced him on 9th November 1943. 

Thus, one sees the life of a woman who wanted to take her own decisions and did not want to be cowed down by her men. She believed in her own individuality and achievement leading, to her empowerment.

All alone in her twilight years, Hurston worked on her last project based on a biblical theme. She was writing an epic biography of Herod the Great of around a thousand pages. Her publisher Scribner, however, rejected it in 1955. Still, Hurston continued to work on the book.

Hurston’s age was catching up with her and her health was already deteriorating. Plagued by diseases such as obesity, high blood pressure, stomach infections and ulcers, her energy was being drained by her recurring illness. In 1959, Hurston suffered a heart stroke, debilitating her and putting her in the state of insolvency. She was forced to move into the St. Lucie County Welfare Home. On January 28, 1960, less than three months after moving into the welfare home, Zora Neale Hurston died of a heart attack, at the age of 69. Living in a state of penury and with no money to her name, she was buried with the funds collected from her acquaintances and local friends. Hurston’s resting place was an unmarked grave in the
Garden of Heavenly Rest, a grave that was soon forgotten. Hurston went into oblivion even before her death. Her books were out of print and she went into obscurity, only to be rediscovered once again by Alice Walker in 1973.

Long before, in 1942, Hurston wrote in *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

> While I am still far below the allotted span of time, and notwithstanding. I feel that I have lived. I have the joy and pain of strong friendships. I have served and been served. I have made enemies of which I’m not ashamed. I have been faithless, and then I have been faithful and steadfast until the blood ran down into my shoes. I have loved unselfishly with all the ardor of a strong heart, and I have hated with all the power of my soul. What waits for me in the future? I do not know. I cannot imagine, and I am glad for that. But already, I have touched the four corners of the horizon, for from hard searching it seems to me that tears and laughter, love and hate, make up the sum of life. (265)

Hurston lived her life to the fullest. She worked, traveled, loved and lived the way she wanted. She held her own opinions and views without being shrouded by other’s views. She gave up every comfort of life for her research and writing. Alice Walker observes:

> In my mind, Zora Neale Hurston, Billie Holiday, and Bessie Smith form a sort of unholy trinity. Zora belongs in the tradition of black women singers, rather than the “literati,” at least to me. There were the extreme highs and lows of her life, her undaunted pursuit of adventure, her passionate emotional and sexual experience, and her love of freedom. Like Billie and Bessie she followed her own road, believed in
her own gods, pursued her own dreams, and refused to separate herself from “common” people. It would have been nice if the three of them had had one another to turn to in times of need. I close my eyes and imagine them: Bessie would be in charge of all the money; Zora would keep Billie’s masochistic tendencies in check and prevent her from singing embarrassingly anything-for-a-man songs, thereby preventing Billie’s heroin addiction; in return, Billie could be, along with Bessie, the family that Zora felt she never had. (xvii-xviii)

Though, Hurston died in obscurity, she was found out by Alice Walker causing the “Hurston Revival” and a renewed interest in her life and works.

Part – C

The Resurrection

Zora Neale Hurston died in abject poverty and obscurity and was long forgotten. The credit goes to Alice Walker, for resurrecting her and causing a new fervor in her works. Alice Walker writes about her first encounter with Hurston:

The first time I heard Zora’s name, I was auditing a black literature class taught by the great poet Margaret Walter, at Jackson State College in Jackson, Mississippi. The reason this fact later slipped my mind was that Zora’s name and accomplishments came and went so fast … I did then what fear rarely fails to force me to do: I fought back. I began to fight for Zora and her works; for what I knew was good and must not be lost to us. (xi- xiv)

Walker deeply influenced by Hurston’s life and works decided to rediscover everything about Hurston. On August 15, 1973 Walker went to Fort Pierce to find Hurston’s grave and her native place Eatonville. Walker, braving weeds and snakes in
the cemetery, found Hurston’s grave, which was just a sunken rectangular patch of ground without any proper marker. Walker emphatically wrote in an essay in Ms Magazine about her Fort Pierce travel:

There are times—and finding Zora Hurston’s grave was one of them—when normal responses of grief, horror, and so on, do not make sense because they bear no relation to the depth of the emotion one feels. It was impossible for me to cry when I saw the field full of weeds where Zora is. Partly this is because I have come to know Zora through her books and she was not a teary sort of person herself; but partly, too, it is because there is no point at which even grief feels absurd. And at this point, laughter gushes up to retrieve sanity. (89)

Walker was unable to afford the marker she had thought of—a tall, magnificent black stone called “Ebony Mist”. Walker chose a plain gray headstone. Borrowing the words “A Genius of the South” from Jean Toomer’s poem, she created an epitaph for the marker:

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

“A GENIUS OF THE SOUTH”

1901—1960

NOVELIST, FOLKLORE

ANTHROPOLOGIST

Publication of Walker’s article on Zora Neale Hurston in Ms Magazine in March 1975 caused a wide spread sensation in the American literary arena. People for the first time came to know about Hurston and it caused “The Hurston Revival”. There was renewed interest in her life and works. As writers, critics and readers gradually came to know about Hurston’s works; they began to admire her and her
works more and more. They finally came to know the true worth of Hurston as a person and her works. Alice Walker writes:

> We do not love her for her lack of modesty (that tends to amuse us: an assertive black person during Hurston’s time was considered an anomaly); we do not love her for her unpredictable and occasionally weird politics (they turned to confuse us); we do not certainly applaud many of the mad things she is alleged to have said and sometimes actually did say; we do not even claim never to dislike her. In reading through the thirty-odd-years span of her writing, most of us, I imagine, find her alternately winning and appalling but rarely dull, which is worth a lot. We love Zora Neale Hurston for her work, first, and then again (as she and all Eatonville would say), we love her for herself. For the humor and courage with which she encountered a life she infrequently designed, for her absolute disinterest in becoming either white or bourgeois, and for her devoted appreciation of her own culture, which is an inspiration to us all. (1-2)

Hurston’s greatness lies in the fact that she never hesitated to exert her African American culture and heritage. At a time when her contemporaries were writing according to the set notions and stereotypes, Hurston had the courage to revolt against these preempt rules to express herself. In each of her works, prose, drama or anthropological works she asserts her black individuality. This black individuality does not arise out of self-pity, but of self-pride, even sometimes bordering on ego, to the astonishment of the few. Hurston is today counted as one of the early radical black nationalist of the twentieth century. Commenting on Hurston’s love for her race, Robert Hemenway writes:
Above all she was a sophisticated writer who was never afraid to be herself. She was flamboyant and yet vulnerable, self-centered and yet kind, a Republican conservative and yet an early black nationalist. Her personality could seem a series of opposites, and her friends were often incapable of reconciling the polarities of her personal style. Aware of this, she came to delight in the chaos she sometimes left behind. There was always, however, a central pattern to the apparent crazy quilt. Hurston remained committed to her work, and to the honest portraiture of her race, no matter how poorly that commitment paid. (56)

Hurston not only asserted her black individuality but also her black feminism. She went way beyond other African American women writers to assert her black female identity. She refused to be cowed down by belligerent societal norms; Hurston created her works with her own mind and choice much to the chagrin of both white and black male writers. In this process, she was also dubbed as a deviant and soon became an “outcast”. Hurston continued her work and her life without any hesitation. She herself faced various oppressions as a black female and as a literary artist. With sheer courage, she came out as a winner in these extremely adverse circumstances. Embodying her free spirit, she created her great character “Janie” in her master piece *Their Eyes Were Watching God* which has now become a primary source of Black feminism. This has made her one of the earliest black feminist writers. Commenting on Hurston as a black feminist writer, Lorraine Bethel writes:

Yet to see Hurston as simply black identified is not enough. Hurston wrote as a black woman about her own experiences and therefore, in some respects, spoke to the general black female experiences in America. She wrote as a black woman identified black woman,
valuing her experiences as a woman as well as a black person in a 
society where these areas of experience are generally regarded as 
valueless and insignificant and inferior to white/male culture.  (179)

Hurston’s genius is not only limited to literary works but is also seen in the 
field of anthropology. Before Hurston adopted literature as a full time career she was 
a renowned anthropologist. Her anthropological works are an invaluable source of 
African American folklores. Hurston singlehandedly preserved African American oral 
traditions, hoodoo religion, medicines, drama, music and dance which are now well 
preserved documents at the Library of Congress. These folkloric elements are 
esential elements in Hurston’s literary works. Valerie Boyd comments on Hurston’s 
love for American African folklore:

Black people could find their aesthetic, artistic, and emotional center 
only by turning within, she believed, and embracing their own culture. 
“As I see it,” Hurston offered, “unless some of the young Negroes 
return to their God, we are lost.” For Hurston, these Gods were to be 
found in the folk culture—the music, the dance, their stories- of 
ordinary black people. As Zora well knew, though many of their peers 
were embraced by these uneducated masses—people who, in some 
ways, still seemed to bound by the rusty chains of slavery. Straining to 
prove themselves equal to whites, some Negro intellectuals sought to 
distance themselves from the ignorance and squalor, the broken 
English and country ways of those they claim as their “kinfolk” but not their kinfolk. Hurston, however, perceived enormous duty in the 
artful lives of these common, uneducated people. And she had long 
ago decided to become their champion. (238)
Today not only Hurston’s works, but her life has become an infinite source of inspiration. Whether it is a writer, a critic or a reader all are fascinated by Hurston’s works. Katie Geneva Cannon observes:

As a Black woman artist subjected to the violence of whites, of male superiority, and of poverty, Zora Neale Hurston offered an especially concrete frame of reference for understanding the Black woman as moral agent….Hurston’s own being is both the subject and the object of her works. Thus, Hurston’s life and work serve as a prophetic paradigm for understanding the modes of behavior and courses of action which are passed from generation to generation by the most oppressed segments of the Black population. (39)

Hurston’s achievements are huge. She was the first African American student ever enrolled in Barnard College. Hurston had a dazzling academic career. She received Rosen Wald Foundation Fellowship (1935) and Guggenheim Fellowship (1936). She was conferred Honorary Doctorate by Morgan State College in 1939. She received Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 1943 for Dust Tracks on a Road. She further received Distinguished Alumnus Award conferred by Howard University in 1943. She also received Education and Human Relations award by Bethune – Cookman College in 1956. Owing to her remarkable folk research, she was invited to become member of three prestigious organizations in America: the American Anthropological Society, the American Folklore Society, and the American Ethnological Society.

Hurston has become an icon today; innumerable awards have been constituted in her name all over United States of America. Association of Feminist Anthropology (A.F.A.), honoring Hurston’s accomplishments as a pioneering anthropologist has constituted Zora Neale Hurston Travel Award in 2002. The Zora Neale Hurston
Award has also been constituted in 2008 which aims to honor people showing remarkable leadership in promoting African American Literature. Hurston / Wright Legacy Award is another national level award which aims to promote upcoming African American writers. Many Fellowships, and Funds have been constituted by different colleges and universities all over America.

Since 1989 Hurston’s hometown Eatonville in Florida, celebrates the Zora Neale Hurston festival of the Arts and Humanities, organized each year in the month of January. Many people interested in the work of Hurston, as well as in her life travel to Eatonville and pay their obeisance to Hurston’s grave. Hurston’s house in Fort Pierce has been declared a national Historic Landmark. Fort Pierce also celebrates a festival called Zora Fest at the end of April. There are several events like Hattitudes, birthday parties, and several day festivals commemorating Hurston. April 23 has been named as Zora Neale Hurston Day by the Mayor of Gainesville.

The ‘Hurston Revival’ has been getting stronger every day. Her masterpiece novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* has sold for more than a million copies. Not only in America, but also in other countries her works are being read and appreciated.

Today Hurston is counted among the most phenomenal writers of the twentieth century. Her works are exemplary in literary as well as popular culture. Her works have been reenacted in stage, films and televisions. Her popularity is growing day by day and her works and life have assumed a legendary status. She is read throughout the world with great relish. To quote Henry Louis Gates Jr:

The resurgence of popular and academic readership of Hurston’s works signifies her multiple canonization in the black, the American, and the feminist traditions. Within the critical establishment, scholars of every stripe have found in Hurston a text for all seasons. More
people have read Hurston’s work’s since 1975 than did between that
date and the publication of her first novel, in 1934. (292)

Hurston’s works have become literary touchstone for other writers. She is a
role model for African American male writers too. Writers such as Ishmael Reed and
Amiri Baraka openly acknowledge her role in their making. Her tropes are revised
and used by great writers like Tony Morrison and Alice Walker in their works.

Valerie Boyd writes:

Hurston has deeply influenced at least two generations of writers and
readers of all colors and cultures. For these people—Zora’s literary
children and grandchildren—her legacy is not tragic. It is, to the
contrary one of fierce independence and literary excellence. For black
women writers, specifically, Hurston has bequeathed a priceless gift.
Through her tenacious efforts, and her very real sacrifices, she made it
possible for black women to write about their interior lives and to have
such work taken seriously. Her success in her life time and
posthumously—legitimized the kinds of intimate narratives that are
now taken for granted in African-American literature. Yet if Hurston
had not created a Janie and a Phoeby, for example, it might not have
been possible for Toni Morrison to produce a Sula and Nel or for
Alice Walker to create a Celie and Shug. In other words, because
Hurston wrote what she wrote and published the books she published,
American literature was altered for the good. (438)

Hurston is today considered as literary foremother to all African American
writers. Great writers such as Alice Walker, Tony Morrison, Maya Angelou, Audre
Lorde, Gayle Jones, Mary Helen Washington and many others owe their works and literary achievement to Hurston in some way or the other. To quote Maya Angelou:

If we look out of our eyes at the immediate world around us, we see whites and males in dominant roles. We need to see our mothers, aunts, our sisters, and grandmothers. We need to see Francis Harper, Sojourner Truth, Fannie Lou Hammer, women of our heritage. We need to have these women preserved. We need them all…All of these women are important as role models. Depending on our profession, some may be even more important. Zora Neale Hurston means a great deal to me as a writer (2)

Audre Lorde, the radical feminist poet and an outspoken lesbian finds her impetus and creativity from Hurston’s audacious life and outstanding works. Lorde emphatically questions the neglect and mistreatment of Hurston by male writers and critics:

Black writers, of whatever quality who step outside the pale of what black writers are supposed to write about, or who black writers are supposed to be condemned to silences in black literary circles that are as total and as destructive as any imposed by racism. This is particularly true for black woman writers who have refused to be delineated by male-establishment models of feminity, and who have dealt with their sexuality as an accepted part of their identity. For instance where are the women writers of the Harlem Renaissance being taught? Why did it take so long for Zora Neale Hurston to be reprinted? (101)
Alice Walker, who rediscovered Hurston, is awe-struck by her immaculate works and her mighty spirit. Walker writes:

*Zora was a woman who wrote and spoke her mind - as far as one could tell, practically always.* People who knew her and were unaccustomed to this characteristics in a woman - one who was, moreover, (a) sometimes in error, and (b) successful, for the most part, in her work - attacked her as meanly as they could. *Would I also be attacked if I dared upon my mind? And if I dared upon my mouth to speak, must I always be “correct”? And by whose standard...I fought back. I began to fight for Zora and her work, for what I know, was good and must not be lost to us.* (xiv)

Today Hurston’s life has come full circle from spending her years in glory, then receding into oblivion and again being reclaimed and canonized. She has become a literary matriarch from being a ‘social and literary outcast’, she has become an early black nationalist from being a ‘segregationist’, and she has become a pioneering feminist writer from being a “minstrel writer.’ Alice Walker writes, paying glowing tribute to Hurston in *I Love My Self When I Am Laughing*:

We live in a society, as blacks, women, and artists, whose contests we do not design and with whose insistence on ranking us we are permanently at war. To know that second place, in such a society, has often required more work and innate genius than first, a longer, grimmer struggle over greater odds than first-and to be able to fling your scarf about dramatically while you demonstrate that you know - is to trust your own self-evaluation in the face of the Great White Western Commercial of white and male supremacy, which is virtually
everything we see, outside and often inside our own homes. That
Hurston held her own, literally, against the flood of whiteness and
maleness that diluted so much other black art to her genius and her
faith. As black women and as artists, we are prepared, I think, to keep
that faith. There are choices, but they are despicable. Zora Neale
Hurston, who went forth into the world with one dress to her name,
and who was permitted, at other times in her life, only a single pair of
shoes, rescued and recreated a world which she labored to hand us
whole, never understanding the value of her gift, if at times doubting
the good sense of its recipients. She appreciated us, in any case, as we
fashioned ourselves. That is something. And of all the people in the
world to be, she chose to be herself, and more and more herself. That,
too, is something. (4)

With such a magnanimous personality and astounding works Hurston has
today become an icon. Her works have become canons of literature, while her
dazzling life has become a source of inspiration for all. Hurston is like a “Glance
from God” for all of her readers, irrespective of nationality or race, as she used to say,
“My People! My People!” Hurston wrote in Dust Tracks in 1942:

Booker T. Washington said once that you must not judge a man by the
heights to which he has risen, but by the depths from which he came.
So to me these honors meant something, insignificant as they might
appear to the world. It was a long step for the waif of Eatonville.
From the depth of my inner heart I appreciated the fact that the world
had not been altogether unkind to mama’s child. (141)
Works Cited


