Chapter V
Conclusion

Zora Neale Hurston belongs to the genre of the African-American Gothic and she can be regarded as a writer of cultural anxieties that specifically pertain to the lives of the blacks in the rural South. Slavery and its after-effects plagued the American South in diverse ways and affected the minds and the bodies of the black people for long time to come. The Gothic is engaged in giving voice to the silent and the marginalized by giving accounts of history that are obliterated. Hurston as a black female writer of the South deploys the Gothic to fulfill precisely this function of lending voice to the black, the woman and the geographical region of the South. Hurston’s stories voice the anxieties of black rural families and also represent the anxieties of the American nation by rupturing the discourse of the American Dream. Many black writers interpreted the effects of slavery in the Reconstruction era in myriad forms. While many of them chose to dissociate themselves from the strife inside the black community, Hurston focused predominantly on intra-racial hostility and animosity. For her this aspect of black life was essential and political as well because these dissensions among the blacks, as shown by Hurston, were largely a result of white supremacy. Thus, Gothicism in Hurston’s literature is largely historical and political where the past of slavery troubles the present of protagonists for as Faulkner opines, “[t]he past is never dead. It’s not even the past” (qtd. in Matthews 153).

The Gothic is appropriately regarded as “a carceral sublime of representation, of the body, and potentially of politics and history as well”(Coherence vi). In fact, Hurston’s works are largely progressive because she also brings the postmodern elements of privileging the marginalized voice in her fiction. This trend is largely a part of postmodern aesthetics where the dominant culture and figures are rendered monstrous and those on the peripheries occupy the center. In this regard, Hurston certainly proves to be the literary forerunner of Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones in the realm of the African-American Gothic. The alienation and fragmentation of most of the characters in her works is largely due to the impact of white dominance and the cruelties inflicted upon the blacks in the name of civilization. The function that Hurston’s use of the Gothic serves, is to designate the white man as the Other. In fact, her use of the Gothic is largely subversive for she lays the onus of most of the fear and anxiety among the blacks on the whites. Barbara Christian observes in this context that “Black experience in America of course originates in slavery, which is to say that it begins with the behaviour of white people”(qtd. in
The trope of the uncanny is a recurring one in Hurston’s works. The uncanny is inevitably associated with the Gothic as both deal with the repressed past. In the case of the African-American Gothic, this repressed past happens to be the sinful practice of slavery that has crippled the minds, bodies and emotions of the blacks for a long time. The writers of the Black Gothic seek to problematize and interrogate the condition of institutions that relegated coloured people to a subhuman state of existence. The thesis aims at delineating the horror generated in Hurston’s works through the use of various Gothic tropes.

A distinguishing feature of Hurston’s fiction is that instead of focusing more on interracial relationships, Hurston chose to write about intra-racial conflicts in a Gothic manner. For her the relationships among the members of the black race are controlled and affected by the politics of antagonism between the whites and the blacks. In Hurston’s works horror emerges from the fact that the influence of slavery has so permeated the lives of blacks that even after the abolition of slavery, it blights their lives. Unlike the protest novels of other black writers such as Richard Wright, Hurston’s characters engage in a horrific relationship between the past and the present, generated by their history of enslavement. Though their struggles and everyday lives are separated from the whites, yet they are also connected to them in the most alarming manner. This uncanniness is reflective of a Gothic existence. For the blacks the past does not stop to cast its effect on human relationships within the same race. This repression is the basis of many Gothic narratives as it threatened the stability of the dominant culture. The blacks belong to a temporal dimension where the past is a part of their present. The most notable way in which the values of the whites influence the blacks and turn their stories into a tale of horror is through American consumerism. The formation of the American nation, its image and the practice of slavery are driven by the force of economics. Most of the characters in Hurston’s works such as Joe Starks, Tea Cake (in the later part of the novel), Slemmons, Muttsy and Jim Henson, who show mercenary characteristics and are corrupted by it in turn, are guided by the philosophy of materialism. As Hurston suggests, monetary aims that imitate the ethos of white Americans lie at the root of a dreadful existence for the Blacks. This creed of corruption stems from unscrupulous commercial ambitions in the American nation. As narrated by Frederick Douglass in his slave narrative, slavery corrupts both, those who enslave and those who are enslaved. This precisely is the case in the South presented by Hurston.
The uncanniness of Hurston’s works stems from the sexual sins in the land of the South that come to the fore in the form of miscegenated characters - the mulattoes. Janie and John, the protagonists in the novels *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* are mulattoes who are subject to identity crisis. Janie is born out of rape of her mother by a schoolteacher while John’s mother is also raped by a landowner. Richard Wright explicates in his essay “Twelve Million Black Voices” how after slavery was abolished, the whites made sure that the farm hands stay on the plantations by another malpractice of share cropping. After the Emancipation Proclamation was passed, this was a system of neo-slavery that made the stay of the farm hands on the plantation mandatory. John’s mother is a victim of this neo-slavery and John is its product. Hurston avoids the description of rapes and sexual assaults since the presence of a mulatta evinces sexual atrocities in itself. This uncanniness of the sexual sins committed by the white masters can be seen in the haunting presence of characters like John and Janie. Such hybrid characters are the specters that haunt both the white and the black world as neither accepts them fully. As Wester suggests, the presence of miscegenated characters also performs the function of hitting upon the mythology of black women as lewd, promiscuous and sexually available and indicates towards the heinous acts of the white slave masters. This existence of hovering on the boundaries of ethnicities in the wake of sexual assaults is one of the most troubled aspects of the South. While such an existence is looked down upon by the whites; among the blacks it lies at the root of practices like colourism where a lighter African-American is preferred over a dark one. Hence, the sexual sins of the white landowners and slave masters create dissensions within the black community itself. It might lead to a superiority complex among those who possess a yellow skin (such as Joe Starks). An extremely negative consequence of this can be psychological problems like depression and paranoia, as in the case of Emma in *Color Struck*. Thus, Hurston shows the diverse ramifications of sexual sins that lie at the root of dissensions among the rural community of the American South. Edwards explicates that writers of Black Gothic “identify the positive effects of darkness set against the demonic effects of whiteness associated with the perpetuation of slavery…situating whiteness…as the inspiration of fear and a more appropriate shade of Gothic” (90).

Through the presence of such uncanniness in the American South, Hurston hits hard at the discourse of American Enlightenment and American Dream. By showing that another bunch of experiences mar the history of America, she pulls out the glittering carpet of progression and fulfillment from under the feet of those who perpetuate this
discourse of success, equality and freedom in America. Through an effective assertion of the Other, Hurston indeed participates in the creation of the African-American Gothic. On the contrary, she depicts through the mode of the Gothic, how the lives of rural Southerners run opposite to those who sit in the center of material glory. This counter discursiveness comes into her works primarily through the inclusion of tropes such as zombification - the mental enslavement of people. Though this happens through the process of voodoo by various bokors, it nevertheless is a depiction of a people whose mind is lead into total submission and such a practice is nothing but slavery. A slave is devoid of any capacity to think for him/herself and this position is one that defines him as a slave most aptly. She uses this trope of zombification to counter American rationalism. The formation of zombies is also a source of terror for the whites as it manifests how a culture that is subjugated (the blacks) can have otherworldly powers over those who are the masters (the whites). The unknown nature of voodoo and hoodoo is a strategy employed by Hurston to counter American empiricism. This empowerment of the blacks that attacks the power of the dominant through means that are incomprehensible to them, is a source of terror, horror and anxiety for the whites. As shown in stories like “Black Death”, “Uncle Monday” and in anthropological accounts (Tell My Horse), voodoo and hoodoo participate in the act of assailing the white understanding of events. This act also participates in supporting the discourse generated by events such as Haitian slave revolution. The presence of such practices hints at the other side of creating an empire where the whites did control their bondage but not their culture. Whether the creators of the American empire wanted or not such cultural practices became an integral part of slave existence and continued to trouble the whites. The Gothic is a genre that voices the anxieties of the dominant culture and the Gothic literature written by the black writers fuel such anxieties, through the inclusion of threat to the American existence in the form of ancient black culture.

The trope that is recurrent in Hurston’s major and minor works is that of problematic heterosexual relationships in the American South. Three out of four of her novels revolve around marriage and love as the center of the narrative. Marriage and love, as analyzed in Hurston’s works, are far from fulfilling, and heterosexual relationships are threatening rather than nurturing. They occupy the realm of ‘marital Gothic,’ where the female presence is forever smothered in a marriage. Be it John’s dysfunctional marriage with his wife Lucy, Janie three failed marriages, Arvay’s sado-masochistic alliance with her husband Jim, Beau Diddley’s betrayal of Docia
Boger, Missie May’s adulterous episode with Slemmons, Spunk’s first victory and subsequent death under suspicious circumstances, or Pinkie’s suggested betrayal by her husband Muttsy – most tales by Hurston dwell on the failure of heterosexual relationships in the rural South. The trauma of this experience lies in the fact that from a dream world, the heroine is huddled back into a real world and made to live this trauma again and again, as the source of trauma never alters. The element that induces horror in a tale of the marital Gothic is not a visit to a far-fetched castle, where a monster captures the maiden, but the real world. The denial of a voice and the fetters of exquisite garments limit her mobility and tie her to the tomb-like house. As I see it, the marital Gothic is a form of female Gothic tale only, due to the horrors faced by a woman from the figures of authority. This pattern is traced in Michelle Masse’s *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic* who reads “masochism and the Gothic as mutually illuminative explications of women’s pain” (qtd. in Heiland 184). Even at the end, as the husband and wife seem to unite, Arvay’s act of being a puppet-wife is hardly any reassurance. Along with the corruption brought by American materialism, slavery also emerges as a cause of failed marriages. John’s lustful liaisons with innumerable women hint at the effect that the migrant nature of slaves cast on their marriages even after slavery. As Richard Wright opines in his “Twelve Million Black Voices”, slaves always moved from one place to another on account of their sale from one master to the other. As a result marriages were not stable and long lasting. Hence, the black man became a nomad in his sexual desires and this is precisely the behavior that John shows in the text. Thus, even while portraying marital relationships Hurston’s depicts that “sexual and racial politics and black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women’s writing” (Smith 163). To add to this relationship, the Gothic infuses the requisite pungency.

The notion of female suffering in marriages is inextricably related to the female Gothic in Hurston’s works. Representing silenced women is an important function of the Gothic and this makes the genre a threat to the normative principles associated with gender. Cooper observes “The Gothic confounds traditionally gendered binaries like subject/object, active/passive, and man/woman, threatening patriarchal control and the forms of sexual relations that support it” (Cooper 43). The female Gothic is a strong presence in Hurston’s texts. Her varying perspectives on this issue are notable. This subcategory is manifested in her works in two ways. The first category of female characters is comprised of those women who do not retaliate against the wrongs done to them and so meet a pathetic end. This suffering is seen primarily in marital relationships. In this category falls John’s wife Lucy who dies after being repeatedly
subjected to ill treatment at the hands of adulterous John. Though he loves her but his lack of fidelity threatens their marriage and eventually murders it. The only way in which she tries to breakthrough this pattern is by telling her daughter to educate herself. This passing of wisdom from one generation to another might strengthen her daughter, if not herself. Arvay Henson in *Seraph on the Suwanee* also emerges as a protagonist who is not able to resist the social norms of female conformity. As soon as she leaves her husband for some time, she realizes that it is he who largely determines her lifestyle and her status. Hence, towards the end she adopts the role of a stereotypical wife, a role that she resisted throughout the narrative. Another character subjected to gendered violence is Miriam in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. Through Moses, Hurston displayed how female leadership and political participation is opposed and punished by the male leaders. Moses curses her with leprosy and smothers her voice forever. Silencing of a woman’s voice is due to the threat that is represented by a woman who is not controlled by the patriarchal culture. Such women who are not silenced by the patriarchal culture are labeled as ghosts and monsters. In fact the ideology imposed upon the women to be the ‘angels’ of the house put forth an ideal before the women that required them to be subservient and mute in order to play their roles effectively. In the Victorian age the presence of the ‘New Woman’ who was economically and socially independent gave rise to fears among the upholders of patriarchy regarding her free sexuality. Many Gothic works display this New Woman and the anxieties of the society that accompanied her rise. Those women who empower themselves and are somewhere able to retaliate against the wrong done to them constitute the second category of female protagonists. These women belong to the modern and postmodern category of the female Gothic. Through whatsoever means of empowering themselves – moral, economic or supernatural (through practices such as voodoo), such women occupy a larger space in Hurston’s fiction. In Hurston’s masterpiece *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie’s character is also constructed as one who demands freedom and passion in relationships. In “Black Death” it is seen that realism, occult and the Gothic mingle together to suggest that women can also engage in the male task of extracting revenge. Seen in relation to women meeting terrible suffering at home, Hurston also displays the extension of the uncanny to the house. The domestic space that is meant to provide succor, identity and power to women becomes their burial ground – sometimes metaphorically and sometimes literally. The domestic space thus becomes a tomb that paralyses the woman. Quite appropriately Sean McCann asserts that “Hurston doesn’t merely imply that marriage is deadly, she consistently emphasizes that violence and power are the passion of core itself” (McCann 14). Subverting the texts that make the black woman the center of evil and overtly sexual, Hurston presents the white man in the black
body as the intruder and the predator who is countered in his boastfulness about money, power and manhood by black women.

A trend that is subtle but important about Hurston’s fiction is that in the short stories she has created more women characters who choose to go against male supremacy. However, in Hurston’s novels such as *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, *Moses* and *Seraph*, female protagonists suffer and relent rather than revolt. Out of four novels, only *Their Eyes* comes across as a work where the protagonist chooses to go against the values of dominant culture. On the other hand, various short stories such as “Black Death”, “Spunk”, “Sweat”, “Mother Catherine”, she portrays female characters with more free mindset as compared to the novels. Probably this hints at the lesser choice available to female writers as they wrote a novel under white patronage and the pressure of publishers. Hurston’s individualism takes fiercer shape in her shorter tales of female Gothicism. Hence, taking more creative freedom in short stories than in her novels, Hurston voices her idea of female Gothic and female existence more freely.

A significant and powerful function performed by Hurston through her presentation of the Gothic is the incorporation of realistic elements in the Gothic, thus revising and revisiting the genre in her own way. She reconfigures the definition of the American Gothic by not limiting the usage of genre only to terrified heroines, subterranean passages, dungeons and supernatural beings and events. Cooper is right when he says “Gothic writing does not necessarily oppose realism but instead functions within it, expanding the boundaries of realistic representation to include elements called supernatural only by those limited by the narrowness of mainstream science” (Cooper 121). Her rendition of the Gothic privileges the real over the fantastic by portraying everyday lives of black rural Southerners in the Gothic mode. Gothicism in her works is generated by routine happenings or it can be said that the routine of Blacks in the South is filled with Gothic horror. The Black men were perpetually confronted with the threat of being lynched any time, being tried in courts full of injustice, being denied any right in the property of their white fathers (in case of being a mulatta) and being denied of any chances of progress. On the other hand, the black women lived forever in the fear of being raped by the slave masters; they bore illegitimate children and were triply at disadvantage for being black, women and poor. They were tormented not only by their white masters but black husbands as well. In the face of dreadful situations like these, it was only suitable that for delineating a true picture of the South Hurston chose the vehicle of the Gothic. Also for any use of supernatural element, she does not depend on ghosts in white sheets or over-the-top sensationalism. She brings the supernatural through the mystery of voodoo that bespeaks of African solidarity and empowerment of the subjugated in the foreign land. Though voodoo in
Hurston’s works is often used for petty jealousies, husband snatching or fights among voodoo doctors themselves, it also acts as a metaphor of empowerment against whites (for the whole black community) and men (white and black men alike). This usage of voodoo also alarms the whites who could not foresee that the slaves were also carriers of their African culture that terrified and threatened them in its mysterious nature. Hurston’s use of realism can also be seen in novels such as Moses, Man of the Mountain where she evokes the Biblical story and presents Moses as a dictatorial ruler who wishes to create a totalitarian state. This is much in accordance with what Fred Botting regards as the Gothic’s function saying that the “Gothic” resonates as much with anxieties and fears concerning the crises and changes in the present as with any errors of the past” (qtd. in Punter 14). This novel is quite noticeable in its depiction of the cultural anxieties prevailing in the 1930s – that of dictatorship among the people of the world and the fear of the hybrid in those who fanatically endorsed purity of race. Hurston’s work is a direct reference to Nazism and Fascism where she depicts contemporary political situation through a Biblical tale. Hurston in this novel portrays the anxieties pertaining to nation building and posits the dangers of authoritarian exercise of power. The inability of Moses to allow any other voice to speak except his own and the obliteration of any dissenting individuals is a pertinent political theme that Moses has also been analyzed from the angle of Hurston’s views about black leadership. Moreover, Hurston situates her most of her tales not in a dreamland or in a far-off Transylvanian castle as the land of South itself provided to her the dark, abject and troubled part of American nation. In fact the use of realism is a quality that situates her in the oeuvre of American Gothic and also is used in a unique manner by her. Thus, it can be said that Hurston use of the Gothic is not escapist and rather it faces various issues about African-American people and their lives in a realistic manner.

The Gothic mode in Hurston’s works also performs the function of unveiling her political inclinations. This is because the Gothic and specifically the American Gothic, is intimately related with the fears of the rulers and the ruled. Since early American Gothic fiction, its political affiliations made it clear that the Gothic in America was not an escapist genre. The political affiliations of Hurston are contradictory to views of her being politically ambivalent or uncommitted. Hurston was not interested in creating protest literature like many other black writers, hence many critics exaggerated her seeming political apathy. However, through the use of the Gothic, she was able to voice her support for her own race. Hurston in her works places the blame on human corruption, greed, overriding ambition and lack of empathy towards human suffering. For Hurston, these characteristics, whether present in whites or blacks,
leads to horrendous consequences. The Gothic works of African-American writers could not be divorced from the real-life slave narratives. Thus, it was inevitable to deny the role of politics in creating a dreadful South. For the rulers, slavery and its horrors were undeniably linked with the desire for freedom and the endeavours of the slaves to lead a revolution and attain freedom. The American empire, so carefully constructed in order to avoid any voice of dissension, found rebellion among the slaves and this idea was at the root of American anxieties about slavery. The Gothic literature that portrayed non-whites as villains was based on such anxieties. Non-whites were to be subjugated totally for the white empire to flourish. For those who were ruled, fears were obviously related to the inhumane and callous treatment of the blacks by the whites. Hurston’s was a voice of subversion that participated in the discourse where the white were the villains and blacks the victimized. Herein lies Hurston’s political alignment that she chose to locate the blacks in the zone of the subject, not the object. As blacks, the slaves and even the later generations suffered countless atrocities in the name of slavery and Hurston’s task was to establish a connection between slavery, life after slavery and the Gothic. Thus, her works were potent means of carrying her racial politics that was different from her contemporaries in kind (expressed through the Gothic) but not in force.

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