CHAPTER 2

Achieving Grace Under Pressure: Selected Short Stories

Hurston, as we know by now, was deeply passionate about the people of her native Eatonville whose dreams and desires, whose traumas and foibles she delineates in her main works. She does not reduce human complexity to a sociological or political point. Instead of criticizing racist/sexist discrimination directly, Hurston constructed a myth, she invented what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls “an enabling fiction”, that would depend on a reversal of roles between Blacks and whites. Instead of lamenting, she urged a pride in cultural features that were, according to her, characteristic of being a Negro. The joy of life, rhythm and singing were the key exponents of the image of ‘the Negro’, which Hurston had in mind. This rhythm and singing, however, are no ‘masks’ for white eyes to feast on, but a mode of self-fulfilment for the Negro. A recurrent theme in the short stories of Hurston is that of ‘Negro’ creativity and self-affirmation as modes of resistance. To her, those who are physically and economically humiliated are spiritually exalted. So, in story after story, she portrays the victory of the seemingly powerless over the seeming powerful.

A lot of Hurston’s short fiction has the ‘written-out’ Black female at the centre. She understood the need to talk of the loves and hates, the joys and sorrows, the pranks and foibles of the Black female-child, the labouring Black woman, or the Black lover woman. This is again no loud-mouthed overthrow of racist/sexist ideology, just the human need for space and recognition and a reflection of the Black woman as a multi-dimensional, complex persona. The promiscuity, the abusiveness, the outward show of strength of Black women may be masks for physical survival, but the real source of the Black woman’s survival lay elsewhere – it lay in her spirituality, born of her creativity and innovativeness. Lowe is of the opinion that in her short story *Drenched in*
Light, written in 1924, Hurston begins to use materials from her own experience. Lowe opines that this and her subsequent short stories are definitely responses to a call voiced in the same year by William Stanley Braithwaite in a November, 1924 issue of Crisis, when he was disturbed by the short fiction Black writers had been producing. He had said:

Most every one of these stories is written in a tone of condescension.... Many of these writers live in the South or are from the South. Presumably they are well acquainted with the Negro, but it is a remarkable fact that they almost never tell us anything vital about him, about the real human being in the Black man's skin.... Always the Negro is interpreted in the terms of the white man. White man psychology is applied and it is no wonder that the result often shows the Negro in a ludicrous light (Lowe 63).

Drenched in Light has a playful young girl, Isis Watts as the central character. One could call the story a portrait of the artist as a young girl. Isis is a free-spirited eleven-year-old Black girl, filled with imagination, energy, love and vitality. Secure in self, Isis bustles with pride, talent, and self-confidence as she searches for self-actualization. Unfortunately, she is stifled and limited by the restrictions imposed by her provincial grandmother.

The story is set in Florida, and focuses upon a day in the life of Isis. From sunup to sundown, the impish Isis romps with the dogs, turns somersaults, dances, perches upon the gatepost in front of her home, races up and down the road to Orlando, "hailing gleefully all travellers", begging rides in cars and winning her way into the hearts of "everybody in the country". Typically, she gets into all kinds of mischief, even attempting at one point to shave her grandmother's beard - "No ladies don't weah no whiskers if they kin help it. But Gran'ma gittin' ole an' she doan know how to shave like me" and she tries to do it while the old lady sleeps. When the outside world fails to amuse, Isis turns inward to her vivid imagination for entertainment. She wears "trailing robes, golden slippers with blue bottoms", rides "white horses with
flaring pink nostrils to the horizon”, pictures herself “gazing over the edge of
the world into the abyss” (19-20). She is busy making most out of life, much
to the chagrin of her grandmother.

Grandma Potts is an old, traditional parent who sanctions corporal
punishment for anything which goes against her seasoned principles. She thus
metes out punishment for such crimes as sitting with the knees separated
(“settin’ brazen” she called it), whistling, playing with boys, or crossing legs.
Obviously there is no peace for Isis when grandma is around. Inspite of her
repressive grandmother, Isis does retain her joyful and high-spirited nature,
which eventually also liberates her.

Grandma Potts seems to be the natural product of the slavery tradition.
When Helen, a white stranger who has been captivated by a gypsy dance Isis
performed at a local barbeque, her grandma’s new red table cloth draped
about her shoulder as a Spanish shawl, requests that Isis be allowed to
accompany her to her hotel to dance for her, grandma, bowing and
dissembling, happily turns her granddaughter over to the woman. Because the
grandmother really does not know who Helen is, one is almost forced to
assume that grandma allows Isis to accompany her only because the woman is
white – a member of that ruling class, whom grandma has grown accustomed
to obliging without question. However, on learning that grandmother is
secretly bursting with pride, one thinks that she understands and appreciates
Isis’s worth and only keeps up a stern front to keep the girl in line, to perhaps
break her spirit, (Zora’s father too tried to break hers) so that she will not fall
victim to a world which had little tolerance for spirited Blacks. Isis, though
ignorant of even the name of her patron only knows that someone finally
appreciates her talents, as she is happy to be rescued from a grandmother who
stifles her.

Helen is sincere in her feelings for Isis; she longs for Isis’s vitality.
Since life has gone out of her own existence, Helen is determined to snatch
excitement from other sources. She determines to absorb Isis’s light, to live
delightfully, vicariously, through Isis. When one of her male companions
sarcastically suggests that Isis had adopted her as a surrogate mother, Helen quickly replies: “Oh, I hope so, Harry.... I want a little of her sunshine to soak into my soul. I need it” (25). The final sentence spoken by the rich white lady echoes Hurston’s own sentiment of the Blacks’ ability to fill up the whites’ spiritual vacuum.

In the story, Grandma’s reprimanding of Isis clearly evidences the former’s unfortunate failure to liberate herself psychologically from the influence of whites. Hers is clearly the case of the oppressed having internalised the oppressor’s consciousness. She wants to wield power modelled on white culture. She wants to bind Isis’s self concept to her ‘biological destiny’ and eventually put her into the mould of ‘true womanhood’ where the virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity are the only means that promise female happiness. Grandmother’s fear perhaps is that by defying her ‘girlish’ behaviour and duties, Isis would make herself an undesirable ‘object’ for marriage. Grandma constantly insists on Isis’s knowing her place as a ‘Negro’ and a ‘girl’ and thus to forego ‘White’ and ‘male’ things like dreaming and yearning for full self-expression. Her text is derived from her own experiences of a slave society in which womanhood is viewed as a docile condition. As a result of this she has developed a rhetoric and a pattern of living that she deems appropriate for all African American females. She knows that her labor and her sexuality are controlled by white males and hence she preaches a text of voluntary docility to her grand daughter. At the same time however, Grandma is party to the ‘commodification of Blacks’ when she allows Isis to go with the white couple for a little bit of money.

Grandma’s psychological state is an accurate representation of the difficulties of simultaneous membership in two antithetical cultures – the much-quoted Du Boisean “double-consciousness”. Grandma is too faithful to the caste system based on racist/sexist/capitalist ideology. Grandma’s reading of the African American experience, however is a text that Hurston does not support. Grandma’s experiences as a slave have ended up severing her ties to
her culture or at least so she wishes to believe and appear, but to Hurston, she
is “tragically colored”, a position the writer clearly condemns here as
elsewhere in her writing.

Isis does not passively acquiesce to the roles (texts) imposed upon her
by white patriarchal society (through grandma). Her entire behaviour shows
her desire for autonomy, self-determination and breaking away from
conventional modes. She not only dreams, but wishes to transcend reality
through imagination. Isis, though a child, seems to exemplify the Hurston
woman for whom she says in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “The
dream is the truth. They then act and do things accordingly” (175). Hurston
believed that while the life of men is characterized by resignation to the
whims of fate, women are much more (psychologically) active in attempting
to attain their dreams. Grandma, who has been shown to have “straggling
beard” on her chin, which, Isis in impishly connivance with her brother Joel,
decides to shave, could be the prototype of the resigned male.

Isis exemplifies what Michael Awkward calls the uniquely feminine
ability to alter reality (*Inspiriting* 43). Though only a child, she follows in the
tradition of tens of millions of African-Americans who seemingly powerless
to end their servitude, nonetheless exhibited undeniable courage by
employing a kind of silent revolution. They achieved this through creativity
and self-expression of the beauty and power of their own culture, as Isis does
in this story.

Nothing pleased Isis so much as to sit atop the gate-post and to hail
passing vehicles. Almost all travellers knew ‘Isis, the joyu’ but what drew
her forth completely and put her spirits on a high were music and dance.
“Music to Isis meant motion….Isis’s feet were gifted – she could dance most
anything she saw” (21). Soon after escaping a whipping at Grandma’s hands
for trying to shave her, Isis forgets her agony immediately at the sound of
beating brass and tinkling cymbal. The image of the passing cavalcade
becomes a catalyst for her to realize her creative potential. In spite of her
grandma’s discouragement, she manages to realize her creativity, thereby
realizing her childhood joy. She attires herself ‘gorgeously’ by thrusting a stem of daisy behind her ear, perfuming herself with lemon-extract and wrapping herself in grandma’s glorious red table-cloth brought only a week back with “one whole big silvah dollar” (24). And then “Isis danced because she couldn’t help it” (24). The entire crowd of people at the carnival in the picnic grove leave all other festivities and surround this gifted brown dancer. They cheer her by clapping their hands in rhythm with her dancing.

Isis’s joy however, does not last long. Grandma, having failed to spot her at home, reaches the venue of the carnival, knowing she would be here. She gets frantic on seeing her brand new table-cloth being used as a drape. Isis knows what she is in for, and escapes and hides in the woods. She is so unhappy that she almost contemplates death by drowning herself in the creek. But amidst all her woe and weeping, as soon as she splashes in the water and begins singing, she starts “enjoying herself immensely”. It is at this point that she is rescued by a white couple in their “large, powerful car” and is brought home. The white woman saves Isis from Grandma’s anger and whipping by paying five dollars to get another table-cloth and by requesting her to allow Isis to go with her to the hotel and dance in that red table-cloth for her. “I want brightness and this Isis is joy itself, why she’s drenched in light!” (25) The latter wants a little of Isis’s ‘sunshine’ to ‘soak’ into her soul, too.

The story is replete with physical images that suggest Isis’s desire to defy constricting spaces. Isis creates imaginative havens at “land’s end”, thinks herself “a princess”, “a Hercules”, undertaking trips to the horizon in trailing gowns and golden shoes with blue bottoms. This clearly exemplifies not only a womanist landscape of escape but also an important element in self-definition and in the performance of identity. The gate-post on which Isis loves to perch, is perhaps the front-porch of Hurston’s other works, a place where women were barred from entering. Isis, too is constantly reminded by her grandma of her proper place in the back yard of the house, where she must carry out her girlish chores. She is chastised for inviting adventure by being in the front of the house. But Isis resists this constricting ‘girlish’ space and
assertively rushes to the front gate-post to attract the attention of passers-by. Hers is a struggle for self-possession. She does not mind taking risks that can lead to creation of a cultural self. The road to which Isis takes is public and outside the authority of grandma and suggests change and movement. In escape into the woods, Hurston is reversing the familiar stereotypes associating men with the abandon of the road and the woods and women with the stationary, confining domesticity of the house. The wilderness not only helps Isis escape from her prescribed marginal place, but also becomes what Melvin Dixon would call an alternative site for “refuge and cultural revitalization” (3), so very essential to her survival. Her final journey with the white couple symbolises deliverance from gender/colour prisons. She is able to achieve this by extending the parameters of cultural female expression and existence.

Self discovery, self-expression, self-pride, self-identity – these are the hallmarks of the tradition that Isis enters/wishes to enter. They lead to her empowerment and to the fulfilment of her dreams, dreamer as she is. Through Isis, Hurston has emphasized the need to preserve intrinsic folk-forms and values as a vital part of the personal identity of African Americans, not only as a source of joy and fulfilment to themselves, but also to value-starved Whites.

When Isis dances with Grandma’s new red table-cloth that she wore “in lieu of a Spanish shawl”, one is almost reminded of what Alice Walker was to say later in *Revolutionary Petunias* :

Be nobody’s darling;
Be an outcast.
Take the contradictions
Of your life
And wrap around
You like a shawl
To parry stones
To keep you warm (qtd. in Russell 120).
There is an assertion of individualized autonomy through self-pleasure in Isis’s getting wrapped in the red table-cloth and “traipsing” and “prancing” about. To Hurston, this is tantamount to a resolving of ‘double-consciousness’ into a total Black sensibility.

Again, Isis’s dancing is not rendered as a discourse on exoticism. Her dancing has not been recorded as an excuse for comic laughter at the expense of the Negro, where shins might be compared to ‘cucumber curve’, the face compared to a ‘kettle’ and the teeth compared to a shark’s in whiteness. Hurston clearly suggests that entertainment is a culturally accepted mode of Black expression, in which the integrity of the performance artist is maintained. In the figure of Isis, Hurston has celebrated Isis’s guise as entertainer as a victorious paradigm of African American expressive culture.

Dale E. Peterson has quoted Houston A. Baker Jr.’s views who had said in another context that “Afro-Americans, in their guise as entertainers, season the possum of Black expressive culture to the taste of their Anglo-American audience, maintaining, in the process, their integrity as performers” (769). To me this holds true of Isis also. Through Isis, the entertainer, Hurston has constructed a story of life’s possibilities by negativising the negative images of Black ‘quaint’ culture.

John Lowe, in his book, *Jump at the Sun* suggests that *Drenched in Light* also begins Hurston’s focus on joking relationships which were very common among African cultures and which had been defined by Radcliffe-Brown as one “between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offense” (Lowe 64). Lowe suggests that among African Americans also, joking relationships function as mechanisms whereby overt conflict is avoided. It signals a friendly attitude while maintaining the required distance. Besides joking relationships between men and between men and women, those between grandparents and grandchildren were also common in African cultures. In African American culture, a grandmother such as the one here, would ordinarily command respect and a young girl like
Isis who acted ‘bodacious’, was likely to be punished. Hurston, however, insists on Isis’s fiendish intent on establishing a casual, prank-ridden relationship with her grandmother. This could be partly because Isis wants to settle scores with her grandmother through her camaraderie. Quoting Mahadev Apte, Lowe suggests that although joking relationships between grandparents and grandchildren were very common but this was true only when grandparents were not responsible for the children’s moral upbringing (Lowe 64-65). This however, is not the case here. So Hurston was more interested in giving us a slice of African culture, irrespective of its appropriateness or otherwise.

_Drenched in Light_, written in the early years of Hurston’s career is partly autobiographical and gives a fair idea of what was to come in Hurston’s later works. Unravelling a Black girl child’s (through Isis, Zora is speaking partly for herself) innermost desires in a society where one’s own granny won’t mind bartering her granddaughter for five dollars, needs pride and courage, both of which Zora had in ample measure. Laying the seeds of themes and characters that were to flourish in her later works or repeating and revising one’s past, as later Black feminist critics called it, is also practised again and again as a device of self-affirmation by Hurston.

Isis’s village is none other than Hurston’s own Eatonville, Potts was Hurston’s mother’s maiden name and some events of the story are also found in autobiographical pieces written by Hurston. In the May 1928 article, ‘How it Feels to be Colored Me’, to which I have referred in Chapter 1 also, Hurston says that as a child:

> My favorite place was atop the gate-post. Proscenium box for a born first-nighter. Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn’t mind the actors knowing that I liked it… I’d wave at them and when they returned my salute, I would say something like this: ‘Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-goin’? (“How it Feels” 152).

Sometimes she would “go a piece of the way” with them. White travellers
liked to hear her “speak pieces” and sing and dance and would pay her for doing those things, unaware that “I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop” (Hurston, “How it Feels” 153). On the death of her mother, Zora was looked after for a time by her maternal grandmother, whose caretaking went against her grand daughter’s natural behaviour. Isis’s impropriety, her spunk, her humour and above all, her creativity shows us what Zora was then. Considered as a “limb of Satan” by her wizened grandmother, Isis’s passion for spending long hours on the gatepost is what Zora herself did as a child. She wrote in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) that, as a child, “I used to take a seat on the top of the gate-post and watch the world go by…. Often the white travellers would hail me, but more often I hailed them, and asked, ‘Don’t you want me to go a piece of the way with you?’” (589). “It never occurred to either Hurston or her fictional counterpart, Isis,” Lillie P. Howard rightly suggests, “that they were doing anything out of the ordinary. Proud and content in their blackness each wanted to improve others by bestowing themselves and their talents upon them” (Hurston 62).

Robert Hemenway suggests that the story *Drenched in Light* gives evidence of Hurston’s considerable thought about her identity as she began to function in the Harlem literary scene, and it becomes her “Manifesto of selfhood, an affirmation of her origins” (*Biography* 11). By cherishing and immortalizing her memories in fiction, Hurston made sure that the folkways of her people – an important part of the Black tradition were not lost. Isis, her father and Granny, all appear again in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and in *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). Isis’s yearning for a vital life at the age of eleven anticipates Janie’s yearning at the age of sixteen in *Their Eyes were Watching God*. Like Isis, Janie is a sensitive, poetic soul in what seems to them an unfeeling, prosaic world. The southern dialect, filled with metaphors is also repeatedly used by Hurston in her later works. Another important thematic element of *Drenched in Light* which foreshadows the coming events is the white person as deliverer/benefactor. Helen provides an accurate portrayal of Godmother Mason before the latter’s entrance into Hurston’s life. The theme is reiterated in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and in *Their Eyes...
were Watching God. Helen’s “hungry” listening of Isis’s predicament also prefigures Pheoby who responds to Isis/Janie/Zora’s ‘call’ from a vibrant, creative culture that still has its soul.

This story and Hurston’s position in general suggests the manner in which the problematic state of African American double consciousness can be resolved – by adherence to the communal principles of Black culture. Through Isis’s affirmation of her heritage in folk tradition and the white woman’s soulful acceptance of it, Hurston also asserts a basically universalistic vision.

If *Drenched in Light* is the story of a young Black girl’s achieving selfhood through a performative exercise of folk dancing, Hurston’s story *Black Death* is a story of giving power to socially powerless Black women by allowing them recourse to a different kind of resistance, a resistance based on hoodoo. Hurston’s interest in anthropology had led her to tap these alternative and elemental sources of Black power which were a vital means of identity and self-affirmation for her community.

Docia Boger, a chambermaid at the Park Hotel is in love with Beau Didely. They spend a few happy months together. When she becomes pregnant, he refuses to marry her. Beau gets angry at her for attempting to make him settle down and mentions that he is already married. When Docia confronts him with the fact that he had said he was not, he responds that he did not feel obliged to be honest to a girl like her. Docia’s heart is broken. She loses faith in the person she loved. She also pities herself for being a fallen woman.

Docia’s mother decides to take revenge for her daughter’s misery and goes to see Old man Morgan, the Hoodoo doctor. Dr Morgan does not allow her to tell her story but asks her how she wants to kill Beau Didley. Mrs Boger decides to shoot him. She looks into a mirror, waits until she sees Beau’s image, then fires at him. The mirror collapses, grows misty, and then clears.

The next day, the news spreads that Beau dropped dead while making
love to a chamber maid, while bragging about his ‘conquest’ of Docia, he suddenly clutched his heart and died. The verdict is pronounced as that of death by natural causes. Mrs Boger and Docia move to Jacksonville, where Docia marries happily.

This story once again celebrates the triumph of the powerless over evil oppressors, but success in this story depends on outside forces. The story is about the power of hoodoo, superstition and the art of conjuring. “The Negroes in Eatonville know a number of things that the hustling, bustling white man never dreams of. He is a materialist with little ears for overtones” (202). Moreover, “White folks are very stupid about some things. They can think mightily but cannot feel” (203). This stark contrast between cerebral white folks and the Black villagers who knew, suggests that whites are ignorant because they don’t believe in a knowledge that goes beyond pure reason. Blacks don’t have feeling alone, but they have another kind of knowledge, which is usually dismissed as “ignorance and superstition” (202). The story thus suggests the possibility of Black justice outside of the white man’s law.

The concern for justice beyond race, class or gender had always remained one of the major concerns of Hurston’s writing and led to her fascination with magic, myth and folklore. Hers is a recourse to magic not for its primitive-exotic value, but as a means of justice. The ‘primitive’ is not a ‘sole marker of Black authenticity’ as many whites would prefer to believe. On the other hand, Hurston’s concern is clearly to create the boundaries of a cultural world in a relation of difference to the dominant culture. The South provides to Hurston a spiritual balance and an ideological base from which to construct her themes of Black self-affirmation. In using hoodoo, Hurston chooses to trust the historical and psychological beliefs of her ancestors. Hurston’s is what Melvin Dixon calls the “... outrageous insistence on presenting the cultural richness of the South, by grounding her characters in its danger and its charm, ...for Hurston embraced the complexity of Black life” (95). Morgan’s skill is complex, “Life and death are in his hands – he
sometimes kills” (203). When Mrs. Boger reaches the swamp at the head of the lake, “…three hundred years of America passed …Africa reached out its dark hand and claimed its own” (206). Hurston has also made use of the “call-and-response” pattern as an effective means of communication within the Black community. In this case, this is a sort of silent intuitive communion between Docia’s mother and Dr. Morgan, the witch doctor. When the former opens her mouth to tell her story, Morgan silences her and simply asks her how she wants to kill Didley. Mrs. Boger is amazed that he already “knew her mind.” The ‘primitive and intuitive’ here clearly becomes a badge of pride and common identity between the Doctor and Docia’s mother. The sequence of events as set forth also establishes the logic of cause and effect that is a part of the folk experience; there is a poetic justice in what the community believes has happened to Beau Didley and it fits with their folk values of punishment being meted out to the erring.

Lillie P. Howard, in her book *Zora Neale Hurston*, says of the intervention of supernatural forces to right the wrongs of the world, that

> The townspeople clearly do not question the validity of the supernatural explanation. To do so is to question a very real part of the rituals upon which their society is built. In Eatonville, and in many other Black communities, superstitions, the supernatural and voodoo were as common as cape jasmine bushes and sweet potatoes (63-64).¹

The countervailing themes of Black female vulnerability and of African female power too, are brought to the fore in the life of the two female protagonists of the story – Docia and her mother. Docia is herself a youthful but naive and vulnerable girl who suffers physical and mental anguish in her relationship with Didley. But set in contrast to her is her mother who becomes an embodiment of female co-feeling and power. She does not allow her daughter to waste away after she has been outraged. Instead she gathers her strength, determination and resourcefulness to resist. Docia’s mother is a communally-oriented, culturally-informed African American woman. Her
power to wreak vengeance comes from Black community. The articulation of her rage at her daughter’s victimization enables the mother to construct her own way of putting Beau to trial and of sitting in judgment over him. This helps Mrs. Boger to reinvent identity for herself and her daughter. She becomes the jury herself and the doctor, her vehicle. In doing so, Hurston is developing a discourse of Black womanhood in the story in defiance of the white/Black male discourse of the institutionalized sexual oppression (read compliant sexual behaviour) of Black women during slavery, and even after emancipation. Creditably, Hurston’s is a confrontation, not a denial of this history of Black women’s sexual exploitation.

As I have already mentioned in chapter 1, the myth of the ‘bad’ Black woman which had been created during slavery and sustained during reconstruction and after, was based on the assumption that the Black woman was highly potent sexually and personified sexual abandon and freedom. According to this racist/sexist discourse, assaulting a Black woman sexually was not reprehensible and carried with it none of the normal social or legal sanctions against such male behavior. The Black male, too, internalized this white sexist ideology. Beau Didley, the sexual assaulter of Docia Boger in the story *Black Death* is the prototype of the Black male who internalized this white sexist ideology.

Beau Didley is a self-proclaimed “darling of the ladies” and thinks that any woman he associates with should consider herself blessed for getting such a great victory. He calls Docia a “piece of earth’s refuse” and recites his “conquest” of Docia to everyone at the hotel. In his narration, he subverts the story of their involvement saying how his “human” instincts had been taken advantage of by Docia’s inveigling and coercing of him. Beau Didley thus ‘constructs’ his relationship with Docia by saying that he had merely ‘fallen prey’ to the overtly sexual advances of a ‘bad’ woman. He insists that “It couldn’t have happened with the right kind of girl” (205). When Docia in her shattered state asks him, why he had lied to him about his marital status, Didley dismisses her by saying “A man will say anything at times. There are
certain kinds of women that men always lie to' (204-5). Later, in her isolation, what troubles Docia most is not so much Didley's breach of her love and trust as much the fact that he had "...tried to make me out a bad girl..." (205). It is this construction of her mythical identity and her objectification by Beau, that almost kills Docia. Hurston also makes a critique of the male capitalistic attitude when Beau threatens Docia and her mother for fighting it out with his money in case they carry their 'plot' any further.

To Hurston, the Black woman's independence and survival lay in the fullness of her ethnicity and Docia's mother has proved its truth by taking recourse to hoodoo. Hurston will not allow her female protagonist to be a 'passive object' but would rather make her an active agent in the construction of her own identity. The 'ordeal of suffering', Hurston understands, is the maternal legacy of the African American woman, but this knowledge and this experience become her source of strength and survival, as well as an effective revenge for pain. What is even more important to Hurston is that the Black women find justice by taking recourse to one of the folkloristic methods of the conjuring of their community. Docia and her mother are sensitive women, who know how to resurrect themselves. This is in striking contrast to the Black women portrayed in the plantation narratives of whom Frances Smith Foster has said that "...her ability to survive degradation was her downfall. As victim she became the assailant...her survival...seemed to connote...a less sensitive and abused spirit than that of the white heroine" (qtd. in Carby, Reconstructing 32). Also, as the story Black Death reveals, hoodoo becomes a vital source of alternate knowledge for the black women to re-invent themselves.

For Mrs. Boger and her daughter, hoodoo became their lifeline, for little Isis in Drenched in Light, an act of cultural performance saved her, for the plantation slaves, 'relocating' identity through High John the Conqueror, the mythological hope-bringer, became essential for survival. Hurston's story of slavery days, High John de Conqueror, published in 1943, is the story of this mythological figure who always helped the slaves win "with the soul of a
There had been a peculiar trend in the fiction of slavery days written in the early and mid-nineteenth century to denounce slavery as a practice of unremitting despotism or degrading submissiveness, thereby denuding the Negro of his humanity completely. Hurston, however, as exemplified in her story *High John de Conquer*, celebrates the plantation Negro as human – a diversified, multifaceted, independent, self-sufficient and spiritual being. To Hurston, he is neither a radical agitator, nor the contented slave, the entertaining child or the docile ward.

*High John de Conquer* is about the famous Black mythological figure who stands for faith and courage. He embodies joy over misery and he is the hero who shows that all that counts is in the soul and in the imagination. Those who are deprived of material wealth, find that their principal asset is spiritual wealth, rhythm and laughter. High John de Conquer thus exemplifies the power of imagination, creativity and memory.

Originally High John was not a natural person; he was a personification of the “wish to find something worthy of laughter and song” (139). He had come walking on the waves of sound from Africa. And when he became a real man, he worked on the plantations where everybody knew him for his laughter and his drumming. Whenever the work was most dreadful and cruel, High John de Conquer helped the slaves to endure. John, the personification of hope was superior to everything and everybody, including Old Massa. Moreover, he made a “way-out-of-no-way” because he was “winning with the soul of a Black man whole and free” (141). One day, John decided to leave the plantation and find a “particular piece of singing” (145). After initial reluctance, because of the slaves’ fear of being caught, they decided to join him and all mounted on the back of a big crow. They flew to several places and had many adventures. They stopped off in Hell, where John not only married the Devil’s daughter but also roasted the Devil himself, becoming the High Chief Devil. The group was delighted over John’s power, but since they were trying to find their song, they decided to move on to heaven. When they
reached that splendid place and met the Old Maker, he made them a tune without words and put it in their mouths.

All of a sudden heaven turned dark and they heard a voice shouting, “Get up from there and get on back to the field” (147). It was Old Massa calling them back to finish chopping cotton. This made them feel bad but then they heard John’s voice saying:

Don’t pay what he say no mind. You know where you got something finer than this plantation and anything it’s got on it, put away. Ain’t that funny? Us got all that, and he don’t know nothing at all about it. Don’t tell him nothing. Nobody don’t have to know where us gets our pleasure from (147).

These words were so consoling that the slaves felt neither the heat nor the burden of working. The song they had sought returned to them in their memories.

Hurston draws on this folk hero as a basis for her philosophy of life. An anti-materialist and carefree attitude helps in subverting the normative politics of race and power. The capacity to laugh and to be ironic makes the workers superior to their “upper-class, better-off” master.

“High John could beat the unbeatable” says Hurston because he was capable of “winning his war from within... winning in a permanent way, for he was winning with the soul of the Black man whole and free” (141). Whites to him were the picture of a monster who had come to power in a man-eating kind of way, after losing their souls. This power had to perish sooner rather than later as voiced by Hurston in this story. Yet to save the whites from complete annihilation, Hurston offers to share with them their own hope-bringer, High John de Conquer, the source and soul of their laughter and song. High John symbolises a hidden power – “an inside thing to live by”, which gives hope, knowledge and protection when outside things appear the worst. His power extends beyond time and space. The symbolic journey that High John makes the slaves undertake, helps them to be transported to an imaginary haven beyond the confines of the hostile plantation and reach for fine “inner
“raiment” within themselves, which has always been part of their being. This fine inner raiment is actually the fertile cultural terrain of an autonomous Negro memory, creativity and imagination which enables them a fundamental change in their self-perception and moral status. Although plantation owners used to fill the slaves with horrific details of attempted escape, but the personal valor of High John, the mythical hero of Negro folklore and imagination, gave the slaves confidence to undertake journeys successfully and return with a sense of self-fulfilment and achievement. “The crowd broke out singing as they went off to work” (147). This cultural behaviour helps them to avoid the doom represented by the re-appearance of Massa and Miss and the “work flew”. Their “gift song” which they have brought from heaven not only helps them survive but also feel superior to their masters, “‘Ain’t that funny?’ Aunt Diskie laughed and hugged herself with secret laughter. ‘Us got all the advantage, and Old Massa think he got us tied!’” (147).

Hurston’s slave characters, as I see clearly, inspite of being on enemy turf, do not ram hard against a destiny of doom. High John becomes a harbinger of affirmation for the life of the Black slave cotton-farm worker in the midst of extreme adversity. For these ‘politically incorrect’ views of hers, implying that Blacks had not succumbed to a culture of poverty, Hurston had to pay a heavy price in terms of personal vilification and complete erasure from the literary scene for over three decades. In this climate of general devaluation of the work of a (Black) woman and of the functions of (Black) affirmation, it would be pertinent to reflect on June Jordan’s views who says that affirmation, too, is a kind of protest:

...the functions of protest and affirmation are not, ultimately, distinct; that, for instance, affirmation of Black values and life style within the American context is, indeed, an act of protest. Therefore, Hurston’s affirmative work is profoundly defiant, just as Wright’s protest unmistakably asserts our need for an alternative, benign environment. We have been misled to discount the one in order to revere the other (5).
Hurston, who was born and raised in an all-Black Florida town was born into a supportive, nourishing environment. Her work reflects this all-Black universe which was her actual as well as her creative world. White America lies almost outside her personal and fictional world and therefore, her characters instead of being shown either in relationship with kindly Southern Whites or with predatory Yankees, are instead shown in relationship to themselves, as in her story, *High John de Conquer*. Instead of protesting in the narrow sense of running up on the enemy in outrage, High John helps work-tired slaves slip into a total, Black reality which the whites, neither know nor are supposed to understand because they had nothing to hear/see things like that with. This community fosters celebration and fellowship and takes away sorrow and bitterness. To me, this is an internally polemical discourse.

What Hurston has succeeded in doing in this story is to make culture the line of demarcation between self and other – between Black and white. Black culture may have been marginalized and considered an uncanonical form of articulation, but Hurston acknowledges its expressive power. Hurston upholds the mythical folk hero, High John, as a sign of cultural difference between Blacks and Whites and he signifies what Gates would call “an alternative mode of perceiving reality” (Afterword 14). The Negro world, instead of confining him, liberates him and affords Old Cuffy some laughter at Old Massa’s cost. Masters and mistresses had no knowledge of this hidden ‘well-springs of Negro self’ and of their autonomous means of cultural communication. The united action of Hurston’s folk under the angel guardianship of High John defeated white surveillance and the control of Black lives. The physical journey that the slaves undertake under directions from High John to get the song becomes a metaphor for spiritual mobility and rejuvenation.

Also, Black slaves as a rule, as already mentioned, were denied any identity of heredity, lineage etc. Hurston uses the story of this folk hero, not only as means of communal cohesion and identity but also as a source of
ethnic heritage for them. By enabling work-tied slaves to journey within
selves to uncover cultural landscape, High John helps them discover their
ancestry, “He (High John) had come from Africa. He came walking on the
waves of sound” (140). This ancestral/mythical/cultural past is not a past seen
through the golden haze of retrospect but a part of a culture which is “still in
the making”, a term used by Hurston in a 1938 then-unpublished essay
‘Folklore and Music’ (875). Blacks are not holding on to something from a
past, dead and gone, but being held by something in the past, that is very
much alive and meaningful, a living reality, the truth of Negro life and being
that helps them in the performance of ethnic identity and ancestry. This
ethnicity becomes a spiritualizing rather, the only humanising force and
therefore, provides effective revenge for pain.

In High John de Conquer, published in 1943, Hurston does moan the
fact that High John had “not walked the winds of America for seventy-five
years now” (148), that is ever since freedom came. This is so because a lot of
his people have “traded their laughter and song” to other Americans for things
they could use, like education and property and worst of all, for ‘acceptance’.
Of course thousands of ‘humble’ people who believe in him, in the subtle,
winning power of love and laughter, still ‘dress’ themselves with its perfume
and John in turn, will never forsake them. But Hurston makes a conscious dig
at the writers/aspiring Negro middle classes of her times who wished to
‘exploit’ race material. While some writers wanted to structure their work on
the myth of primitivity, hordes of urban Negroes wanted to disown anything
that smacked of ‘Negroness’ in a bid to be ‘just-like-white-folks’. When Aunt
Shady Anne Sutton is narrating the High John lore to Hurston in this story,
she asks her:

I hope you ain’t one of these here colored folks that done got so
they don’t believe nothing, and come here questionizing me so
you can have something to poke fun at. Done got shamed of the
things that brought us through. Make out tain’t no such thing no
more (142).
Robert Bone has suggested in his book *The Negro Novel in America* that in a period of racial tyranny, of bread lines and of unemployment, no such myth as that of primitivity or of advancement on white lines could have survived. He goes on to say “In such a period, realism becomes the order of the day; myth must at least approximate historical reality” (118). Hurston is doing just that. She is narrating the race’s actual experience in America, rooted in slavery and drawing sustenance from the folk culture of the rural South. Hurston’s is a serious attempt to interpret Negro group and spiritual life, not catering to the ‘vogue’ of ‘literary faddists’ of her day to ‘entertain’ white folks. If at all she appears to adopt a ‘happy darky’ stance, as her detractors insisted, it is strategic and deep, not superficial and obsequious.

One story in which Hurston offers a powerful critique of the damaging effects of the internalization of ‘just-like-white’ patriarchal/capitalist ideology is *Magnolia Flower*. One of the principal characters in the story is Bentley, a strong ex-slave who builds a big house “such as white men owned when he was in bondage” (35) and marries a Cherokee woman. They settle down and he hires many Black employees who hate and fear him because of his cruelty. He himself hates many things, all those that remind him of his oppressors but ironically he has completely internalized their oppression. Bentley however, loves his daughter Magnolia, and builds a school house so that she and the other children of Bentley’s village can learn how to read and write. The school teacher, a light-skinned young man soon falls in love with Magnolia and they have several clandestine meetings at the banks of the river Savannah, near which they live. When John proposes to Magnolia, she too, confesses her love to him. He then decides to ask Bentley for Magnolia’s hand in marriage in spite of the latter’s warning that her father would never agree to her marrying a man who was so light.

When John confronts Bentley, Bentley is enraged, but John holds his ground. Bentley has John locked up and passes orders for his hanging the next day. He locks up Magnolia in the parlor and wants her to be married to Crazy Joe, so they can have very dark children. Yelling and hammering against the
door does not help; Magnolia spends the night in desolation. A watch-guard pities her and opens the door so she can escape. Magnolia, however, refuses to leave without her lover. To free him, she has to sneak into Bentley’s bedroom and steal the key out of his trouser pocket. The couple manages to flee that night. When Bentley awakes the next morning and realizes that the two have escaped, he orders that his wife and guard be hanged for having allowed them to flee. Bentley dies from his own rage.

Hurston in her works repeatedly makes it clear that for the Blacks, racism is not the last word in oppression and if one looks at racism and overlooks sexism, one is missing at least half the picture. Black men, in the absence of real political and social privileges, had carved out a self-proclaimed substitute – their gender privilege which included rights of possession, sexual abuse and wife-beating. This was actually an unthinking internalisation of white gender patriarchal values.

Bentley, in the story Magnolia Flower is a typical cross-breed prototype of the White-Black man, a representative figure of the oppressed having internalised the oppressor’s consciousness. He is a victim of the bourgeois virtues of position and possessions and tries to class himself off by owning property and “niggers”. At the same time, with the white patriarchal text that he has internalised, he gives himself sole ownership rights over the bodies, souls, minds and hearts of the two females of his household – his wife, Swift Deer and his daughter, Magnolia Flower.

Swift Deer is the Cherokee maiden whom Bentley had made his wife only because he wanted to posses someone completely Black. But soon after marriage she no longer remains swift because “Too many kicks and blows, too many grim chokings had slowed her feet and heart” (35). Her iron-hearted, tyrannical husband’s actions, and conduct have made her a silenced, fearful object and she wants her daughter too, to be submissive and pliable, for fear of drastic consequences.

Bentley cannot see beyond a patriarchal, bourgeois, white-defined horizon, a horizon ruled by money, power and prestige and the security and
protection these can give. He is a typical product of slavery. He conflates the secureing of property with effective power. He was denied a say in his own fate because having been a slave himself for a major part of his life, he was no better than his white owner's property. He now assumes that only property enables expression. Unfortunately, on the basis of his own perception, Bentley wants to deny Magnolia a say in her own fate. In the scheme of things, which he has internalised, all good girls are 'pliable possessions'. Bentley invests Magnolia with a sense of self-worth vis-à-vis the whites by working hard to build a mansion and by wanting her to learn to read and write. But he fails to understand her humanity and individuality as a woman when it comes to the choice of a mate for her. In his ownership of her, he wants to encircle her with a love that becomes a prison house for Magnolia because it confines her from her own desires. Bentley's accoutrements of the patriarchal ideology do not prevent him from insensate cruelty towards the daughter he professes to love so much. He wants gruelling submission from his daughter to his orders that she should marry the crazy Joe, because the latter is very Black and the two "ought to have fine Black chillen" (38).

The power of patriarchal control is so deeply embedded in Magnolia's own system of values too, that initially she deems it impossible to conceive of her self outside the ramifications of the same. She dissuades her lover, John from approaching her father with a proposal of marriage for fear of his tyrannical reaction. But very soon the love she bears in her heart for John, gives her the power to defy Bentley's power. She transforms her silence and cowardliness into speech and courage. Instead of passive submission, there is first verbal negotiation: "Well, papa, you don't say that I haven't picked a man. No one else in forty miles round would stand up to you like John" (37). When this fails, Magnolia acts defiantly by eloping with her lover.

In rejecting her father, Magnolia rejects all that he stands for. To her, marriage and love are not a "business proposition and no race after property and titles" (Their Eyes 267). Magnolia's decision to choose love and partnership is a bold step towards her emotional health — a power which her
father wants to deny her. By refusing to conform to her father’s orders and by holding on to her dreams of a union based on love, Magnolia asserts her individuality and her liberation from a world that imposes artificial distinctions of class/colour, a world that presupposes male fantasies of socialization, denying women the right to autonomous decisions.

In an essay “Are You a Flying Lark or a Flying Dove”, Robert Hemenway suggests:

...negotiating for respect is not a static process dependent upon the institutions or instrumentalities offered to a woman by society – marriage, the home, the church – but a dynamic response to events growing out of a woman’s capacity for self-expression (145).

Magnolia responds to the hitherto unquestioned power of her father with the power of love. She acts her defiance through a discourse of emotion, a language she has learnt through her relationship with John, her lover. The story, while reflecting the politics of the patriarchal/ bourgeois system, is highly subversive as it makes crucial anti-patriarchal gestures at a time when the women question was hardly an issue.

By empowering Magnolia, Hurston locates the power in the margins, resting this power on the ability to form an attachment and a relationship of love. There is no particular thrust on physical attachment, but on a mental/spiritual kinship between Magnolia and her husband. Bentley stands for detachment – the loss of connection with others, which to Hurston is a sign of moral danger and hence she discounts his judgement. Going by the psychologist Carol Gilligan’s pattern of the moral development of ‘justice orientation’ and ‘care orientation’, where the former is more often the masculine and the latter the feminine perspective, Hurston definitely upholds the latter. Co-feeling, as Gilligan puts it, is the ability to participate in another’s feelings, signifying an attitude of engagement rather than an attitude of judgement or observation. The John-Magnolia relationship is one of co-feeling, whereas Bentley’s imprisonment in the patriarchal ideology devalues
Writing in the voice of an “ethic of care” (Gilligan), Hurston disrupts patriarchal assumptions and norms.

This story also upholds Hurston’s thesis that the telling and re-telling of folklore to participant-listeners in a community lends the folklore a certain amount of credibility. In this story, Nature (the River, and the brook) becomes a functioning member of the community of tradition-bearers. The River not only remembers and recounts the story of Magnolia Flower and her lover even after forty-seven years of the main events, but participates in and understands the love they bear for each other.

Through her use of personification of the brook and the river who share in Magnolia-John ‘co-feeling’, Hurston clearly hints at the abiding power of love. Bentley and all that he stands for, have come to decay but the love, courage and determination of Magnolia and John are rewarded.

Selfhood and empowerment of the Black woman is the theme of Hurston’s story, *Sweat* also. But in the case of Delia, the central character of *Sweat*, a victim of physical, emotional, verbal and financial assault at the hands of her good-for-nothing husband Sykes, this empowerment comes from within herself – by drawing strength from the power of creativity and from folk wisdom.

The society of monopoly capitalism and white racism had its effect on Black marriage also. The Black woman was put in the unnatural position of bread-winner and wife-mother, where the Black male though unemployed yet resented household chores as woman’s job. In the absence of real power, the Black husband more often than not found artificial means of power like domestic violence or womanising. Once the resentments of the Black wife accumulated, she stopped relating to her husband’s problems and remained in perpetual conflict with him. The Black man wanted to have the rights and status of being the household head while rejecting its responsibilities. These situations led to unending marital discord and forced female-headed households.

*Sweat* too, is the story of a Black marriage of fifteen years in which
nothing seems to have been right, right from the start. Delia, we are told had
...brought love to the union and he had brought a longing after
the flesh. Two months after the wedding, he had given her the
first brutal beating. She had the memory of his numerous trips to
Orlando with all of his wages when he had returned to her
penniless, even before the first year had passed (75–76).

The debris of Delia’s matrimonial trail which often stood before her mind’s
eye was full of “her tears, her sweat, her blood” (75).

Seeing her husband’s irresponsible ways, Delia had taken to the job of
a washerwoman soon after marriage. The marriage remained childless. Delia
spent her time washing white people’s clothes, tending a garden and her
earnings helped her feed herself and her husband. With her savings, she built
a small house also and kept and fed a pony-rig to carry the washing to and fro.

In the meantime, Sykes Jones’s infidelity, his abusiveness and wife-beating keep going from bad to worse. The community swears by his
womanising and feels sorry for the way he has misused and abused the once
‘pritty’ Delia. Sykes’s latest find is the buxom Bertha, whom he has lodged in
his town for three months by paying for the rent himself. He has assured her
that “he was the swellest man in the state” (79). He shamelessly brings her to
his house and makes a point of flaunting her to Delia’s face. One day as he
brings her to Joe Clarke’s store and sees Delia coming, he starts ordering
magnificently for Bertha because “it pleased him for Delia to see” (78). Sykes
insists on reminding Bertha “You kin git anything you wants. Dis is mah town
an’ you sho’ kin have it” (79). Delia, however, tries her best to be “blind and
deaf” to all this because she knew that if it wasn’t Bertha it would be someone
else. When Sykes feels all this has not been enough to frighten Delia and
chase her away from her own home, he attempts the worst. “He must get even
with her for her Goin’ ‘round’ tryin’ tuh be so damn astorperious” (80). He
catches a six-foot rattle-snake and brings and hides it in Delia’s wash-basket,
hoping that it would be her undoing. But this time Sykes miscalculates. The
snake gives him the fatal bite instead. For Hurston, this incident shows the
triumph of divine jurisprudence over human fallibility, the victory of the seemingly powerless over the seemingly powerful.

Written in 1926, Sweat clearly portrays the damage done to the once sacred institution of Black marriage because of the internalization of sexist ideology by Black males. The white planters had created the myth of the idle, dependent helpless ‘doll’ wife as being the embodiment of true womanhood. At the same time, the white man himself shamelessly and forcibly philandered with the Black woman, saying that the latter was an ‘evil temptress’. Sykes has not only internalised all this but also the success ideology of the whites, according to which success is gauged by power, money and position. But lacking in these external manifestations or being denied of these in a white world has made him frustrated and an angry and aggressive man. Added to this is what he thinks the ‘humiliation’ caused by a hardworking wife who sweats day and night to financially support him. Sykes therefore, dons a brutally sexist behaviour to relieve the fear inside him. Lillie P. Howard has rightly opined in her essay “Marriage : Zora Neale Hurston’s System of Values”, “One of the reasons that Sykes cannot bear the sight of his wife, for instance is because her work makes him feel less than a man. He resents her working for the white folks, washing their dirty laundry, but he doesn’t resent enough to remove the need for her to do so” (261).

Sykes is basically a weak and a failed man. His constantly abusive and physically violent treatment of his wife for all the fifteen years of their married life is a reflection of this inward failure. He thinks that by acting in this way he can show off his male power by projecting himself as a husband fully in control of his wife. Flaunting Bertha at Joe Clarke’s store-porch and buying liberally for her are part of his self-authenticating skills or what Michael Awkward calls “self-protective lies”.

Sykes is aware that he has lost community validation, which, as Hurston repeatedly tells us is a core tenet of African American survival that goes back to the pre-slavery days. The community of Florida is very angry with Sykes for having thrown out the once so “pritty” Delia out of his life just
like “cane-chew” and for all his wayward ways of “... grinnin’ at every ‘oman dat passes” (77). Especially ever since some white woman from up North has taught him to run an automobile, the community thinks he has become “too biggity” and they want to kill him. But Sykes tries to put the Florida men in awe of himself first by his reckless spending and then by his ‘daring’ act like catching a six-feet rattlesnake. As the story of his catch spreads, all men gather at his house and wonder at his ability. He flatters himself by calling himself a rare kind of snake-charmer and feels and acts extremely superior to all the men gathered there.

Pitted against Sykes, the typical weak male product of slavery, is the might of his seemingly powerless wife, Delia. Delia’s central role in the story makes Sweat a parable of female survival. Fifteen years of constant abusiveness, brutal beatings, unfaithfulness and financial deprivation from her husband instead of breaking Delia, have made her strong, self-reliant and self-sufficient. There is absolutely no sharing in her marriage with her husband, so it is neither an equalizing nor a physically-emotionally fulfilling relationship. Her marriage does not even offer her the economic protection that it is otherwise meant to. Delia knows that though she cannot find fulfilment in this marriage yet, she cannot detach herself from the same. She does often become unhappy at her predicament but doesn’t spend her life brooding and crying endlessly. In the true Hurston spirit, she takes control of her life and seeks a sense of selfhood, voice and eventually freedom. She ‘redefines’ her life. First of all, she becomes economically self-reliant by taking on the job of a washerwoman of the whites’ laundry. But, exercising financial autonomy is not enough. Somewhere deep within her is anger and hatred, intense enough to madden her. Delia understands the need to channelize this anger and rage into constructive avenues that will yield something tangible for her to give herself a sense of self-worth and help her retain sanity.

All of Sykes’s efforts are directed at thwarting Delia’s efforts at self-possession, but the latter has learnt to convert the ordinary sexist constraints of her life into catalysts for “womanist” position of control through her
creativity in the domestic sphere. She creates an emotional landscape for herself by building herself a home and planting a garden. “Too late for everything except her little home. She had build it for her old days, and planted one by one the trees and flowers there. It was lovely to her, lovely” (76). Delia’s garden and home thus are a construction of “womanist” space for the discovery and achievement of self. Melvin Dixon suggests that these places also become “a stage for performance” and further that “passage into the alternative space is but one step toward the recovery of wholeness” (5).

The garden also fulfils her nurturing instinct, her own womb having yielded no child. One could almost say with Alice Walker, “Whatever rocky soil she [my mother] landed on, she turned into a garden” (qtd. in Dixon 84).

Dixon rightly suggests that a garden signifies control, it means establishing boundaries of human endeavour against the onslaught of nature and harnessing beauty as an exercise of taste and will (96). Amidst the hardships of Delia’s life, which involve a series of moving to and fro between home and the Whites’ houses, the garden stabilizes Delia’s sense of space, identity and creativity. Delia’s garden also redeems her from the wilderness of Sykes’s abuses in which she is trapped. Gardening, along with sewing and quilt-making was one of the many forms of African American expressive cultural practices that allowed a self-determined space to the Black woman and became an essential ingredient in her survival recipe by insulating her against the oppressive external world.

Hurston further equates a strong positive identity with a command over words. In a culture of oral tradition where as Valerie Babb says words are existence (93), talking is also a sign of power. Robert Hemenway and Roger Abrahams, as I have discussed elaborately in Chapter 3 of my thesis, have both commented on the importance of negotiating respect through verbal skill in the Black community. In her other works, *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which I propose to discuss in the later chapters, Hurston has the porch speakers indulge in ‘lyin(g)’ sessions, as a means of identity and self-affirmation.
Hurston also insists on the personal development of her female characters through their facility with words. In *Sweat*, when Sykes threatens to throw Delia’s wash bundles out of the house and kick her too, she sheds her habitual meekness, shouts back at him and strikes a defensive pose with a burning iron-skillet. This ‘cows’ away Sykes. Hurston clearly indicates that to attempt to escape the powerful constraints of phallocentricism, Delia must use power in order to derive power. Delia speaks her defiance, at more than one place. When Sykes repeatedly abuses her, calling her a useless skinny woman and the devil’s doll-baby whom he has been hating for years, Delia’s “cup is done run ovah”. Fearlessly she tells him what she thinks of him, “Yo’ ole Black hide don’t look like nothing’ tuh me, but uh passel uh wrinkled up rubber, wid yo’ big ole yeahs flappin’ on each side lak uh paih uh buzzard wings” (82).

In an article, “God’s Weeping Eyes: Hurston and the Patriarchal Form”, Tejumola Olaniyan suggests that when speech is from the dominated to the dominating, it carries crucial liberatory meaning. Ditto for Delia, for whom words become a metaphor for self-definition and for deconstruction of Syke’s sexist text. Moreover, expressions of anger, daring and surprise come straight from the collected Black folk expression. Hurston, overwhelmed by folk culture as she was, was equally appreciative of the liberating effect of folk speech. Not only her protagonists, but even the group of folk characters assembled on Joe Clarke’s store porch who almost always form the chorus, are such characters as could easily have walked and talked the soils of Florida in Hurston’s own time.

Also important to Hurston is the wisdom and restful calm that comes from folk sayings and Black religion. When the memory of her tears, sweat and blood troubles Delia, she is able to build, a “spiritual earthworks” against her husband by recalling to mind the folk saying, “Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil’s back is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther Sykes, like everybody else is gointer reap his sowing”. This helps her build a “triumphant indifference to all that he was or did” (76) and his shells could no
longer reach her. At another time when she is feeling low, the “love feast” at night service in Woolbridge church uplifts her sagging spirits. The words are:

Jurden water, Black an’ col’
Chills de body, not de soul
An’ Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time (82).

Even after she returns home and is troubled by Sykes’s day and night absence and the presence of the rattlesnake in the house, she starts singing these lines to herself and the mood cheers her up. Hers is a heroic affirmation of spirituality and imaginative power. Michael Awkward would call it a feminine method of manipulating reality (Inspiriting 43). By focussing on Delia’s experiences, Hurston has clearly shown that as a Black woman writer, she is interested in talking not of ‘exceptional’, ‘extraordinary’ women, but of ‘ordinary’ women, whose ‘unexceptional’ day-to-day survival and strength enabled them and the whole race to survive, eventually.

Through much of her short fiction, Hurston also clearly suggests that for anyone who wishes to successfully deal with the realities of life, a ‘personal answer’ is required. Isis finds peace in folk dancing, Mrs. Boger in conjure, Magnolia in love, Delia in home and gardening and plantation slaves in the High John the Conquer myth, because it gives them an ‘inside meaning’ to live by – something that helps subvert the normative politics of race and power. They have each succeeded in creating a distinct space for themselves. In their “Introduction” to The Complete Stories, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Seigrende Limke complement Hurston for creating for herself and for her characters “an African-American cultural space” where both the storyteller and the characters luxuriate in “…the nuances of speech or the timbre of voice... (xi).

The concern for love, loyalty and justice, over and above the considerations of race, class or gender is clearly the focus of much of Hurston’s short fiction. For a nation that had long believed that the role of the Black woman is to lay her eggs and die, Hurston made a strong Black feminist
statement by studying and analysing the multi-layered existence of Black female lives. The very fact of delineating Black female characterization in writing is an act of resistance and by placing all female protagonists outside the parameters of or in defiance of conventional female behaviour, Hurston definitely jeopardised her own status as a woman writer who could have been instantly popular. This obviously must have been one of the reasons for her dismissal from the literary scene for over three decades. The representativeness of patriarchal experience disallows and dismisses as ideologically unnecessary, any indicators of a uniquely female experience. But Hurston with the indomitable spirit that she had, refuses either to break or to bend and has the tenacity to stand by her convictions, even if it meant facing the onslaught of virtual annihilation in her own lifetime.
Notes

1 Howard has said this with respect to Hurston’s story, Spunk, but the comments hold relevance here, too.

2 Charles Chestnutt in his essay “Superstitions and Folklore of the South” (1901), has also mentioned the use of this method of conjuring by the aid of a mirror to get even with the ‘other’ woman. After narrating the sequence of events, Chestnutt confesses that he was surprised to discover that some of his “original” creative ideas turned out to be folkloristic materials in disguise that he had learned in his childhood (372). Repetitiveness only authenticates these materials as an inseparable part of the African American ethos.

3 I have benefited from Ann Folwell Stanford’s discussion of Carol Gilligan in her essay “Dynamics of Change: Men and Co-Feeling in the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker”, In Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: The Common Bond, ed. by Lillie P. Howard.