CHAPTER 6

Envisioning Ever-Expanding Horizons:

Conclusion

Lawd! ... Ah done growed ten feet higher jus' listenin' tuh you
.... Ah ain’t satisfied wid mahself no mo’ ... (Their Eyes 332).

These words of Pheoby to Janie after listening to the story of her life,
of her journey to “de horizon” and back, echo exactly my own sentiments at
the end of ‘hearing’ Hurston talk to me through her writing.

Taking her cue from Wolfgang Iser, Maria Tai Wolff says that in the
process of reading a text, there is the possibility for a reader to re-evaluate his
or her own experiences, or to “formulate oneself” on the basis of the new set
of experiences from the text. This can eventually help a person live more fully
(M. Wolff 33). Reading Hurston’s texts has helped me expand my horizons,
too. The process of acquiring newer ways of seeing and hearing and speaking
and living has been initiated in me. Once this process is complete, only then
will I have truly learnt to live and endure, nay prevail.

One favourite image of Hurston as a child was to sit on the gatepost
and look out at the horizon – the end of the world. Though she was not
allowed to go to it at that time, she realized in later life that earthly
circumstances will often prevent the ‘trip to the horizon’, but one needs to
create one’s own horizon and travel to it imaginatively (if not physically) and
live on the basis of the experience thus gained. Hurston’s is a journey to
internal horizons. She had said in Their Eyes:

When God had made The Man, he made him out of stuff that
sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some
angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but
still he glistened and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing
but sparks but each little spark had a shine and a song (247).
Each person’s individual being is the spark of humanity within him/her and the simple function of each one is to develop one’s humanity as expansively as possible. The journey to the horizon is the necessary expansion of the spirit to its fullest potential – to its humanistic leanings. Hurston’s work clearly testifies the thesis that a person cannot/must not be limited to dealing only with things and with scraps; it is vital to interact with other human beings who have in them the same spark. This allows for the full exercise of humanity andhumaneness which fosters spiritual growth and enables survival.

Here I would like to make a brief aside and share what I observed while scanning through the “Zora Neale Hurston” section of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* Vol.30. I was especially struck by two consecutive reviews of Hurston’s work by her contemporaries. Both are speaking with reference to *Their Eyes*, but their views could be of Hurston’s work as a whole. Writing in the *New York Herald Tribune* of Sept. 26, 1937, Sheila Hibben says, “[Zora Hurston] is an author who writes with her head as well as with her heart, and at a time when there seems to be some principle of physics set dead against the appearance of novelists who give out a cheerful warmth and at the same time write with intelligence” (210).

This is followed by the October 5, 1937 *New Masses* (XXV.2) review by Richard Wright who says that Hurston’s work is cloaked in sheer sensuality. It [Their Eyes] “carries no theme, no message, no thought.” She is simply exploiting Negro ‘quaintness’, to satisfy the ‘superior’ race. Wright adds that in line with the “minstrel technique”, Hurston makes, “Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live : between laughter and tears ... ”(Wright 211).

True, we need to make allowances for individual preferences of readers/critics. But what strikes as peculiar is why Hurston should always have appeared unreadable/frivolous/sycophantic to her male critics and
reviewers? In his above statement, Wright is guilty of deliberately pejorative opinion based on sexism and a perspective that is conservative. With his limited vision, it is clear that all that Wright could think of was for a writer to be a 'specimen', and for a work of art to be a 'document' to 'right/write' the race. Going by these parameters, Hurston was definitely out of sync with her times. She is rarely ever openly anti-white. In fact, she is not even overtly pro-Black in her works. Hurston's visionary power put her much ahead of her times.

Hurston's idea was never to idolize the Negro. But as I said in the introductory chapter, what she was against was simplistic, sweeping portrayals of Black life. Sterling Brown opens his book *The Negro in American Fiction* with an interesting fable on how stereotypes are created. Many blind men gathered around an elephant. Each one felt the part of the elephant's anatomy closest to him – the trunk, tusk, eyes, ear, hoof, hide and tail. Then each became an authority on the elephant. The elephant was all trunk, or all hoof, or all hide, or all tail. So ran their separate truths. The fact is that all were blind but more importantly, it was advantageous for these blind men to believe that the elephant was all trunk or tusk (S. Brown 1). This kind of fixing Negroes "in a type" was what Zora was against. Even as late as 1944, Hemenway has quoted her as saying:

There is an oversimplification of the Negro. He is either pictured by the conservatives as happy, picking his banjo or by the so-called liberals as low, miserable and crying. The Negro's life is neither of these. Rather, it is in-between and above and below these pictures. That's what I intend to put in my new book (Biography 299).

Beatrice Sherman is right in saying that Hurston regards the Negro race much as she regards any other race – as made up of some good, some bad and a lot of medium, and the problems that the race faces are those of any other race in similar conditions (44). Hurston herself had said in an interview:
I freely admit the handicaps of race in America. But I contend that we are just like everybody else. Black skunks are just as natural as white ones. If our friends portray us as subhuman varmints, the indifferent majority can only conclude we are hopeless .... My back is broad. Let me, personally and privately, be responsible for my survival or failure.... If I am a skunk, I meant to stink up the place .... if I am a walking rosebud, I did that too. I am a conscious being, all the plaints and pleas of the pressure groups inside and outside the race to the contrary (qtd. in Hemenway, Biography 299-300).

Hurston firmly believed that “races, regardless of pigmentation, behave like human beings”, and likewise while depicting white characters too, she neither upholds them as ‘the’ race, nor does she particularly run them down. Fanny Hurst, Helen, Alf Pearson, the white man who grannied Zora at birth, are some of the living white men and women in her works, who have their normal share of virtues and fallibilities. Hurston was against the idea of blaming whites, particularly capitalist whites as being responsible for the ‘condition’ of American Blacks. Hurston would agree with the sentiments echoed by one of Alice Walker’s characters few years after her:

I know the danger of putting all the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life .... when they got you thinking that they’re to blame for everything, they have you thinking they’s some kind of gods! ...Nobody’s as powerful as we make them out to be. We got our own souls, don’t we? (qtd. in Russell 127).

For Hurston self-celebration, self-affirmation and self-survival (both of individual and of race) were meaningful, though oblique methods of resistance. She realized that the real enemy of African Americans was not hostility, it was mental inertia. She wanted her people to wake up to a recognition of what they could create through their own traditions, values,
love, capacity for joy and mutual giving. Her own life and works are a saga of negotiating respect for the Black folk culture, which, to most of her 'race' contemporaries, victims of a “fractured psyche” as they were, was an “embarrassing tradition”. For this, as I have analysed through the various chapters of my thesis, Hurston is “talking smart, then sweet, in her folklore and fiction, proclaiming its richness and complexity to all who would hear” (Wall, “Zora” 389). Hurston’s most memorable characters (dubbed as ‘ignorant yokels’ by many) are progenies of this tradition.

In this sense Hurston’s work is a covert challenge to what Werner Sollers calls the “hidden exclusivism of the old generalizations” (168). By articulating “the Afro-American experience not as a condition, but as a culture”, to use Barbara Christian’s words (Perspectives 118), Hurston has succeeded in contesting the problematic generalization of the basically complex and internally differentiated African American cultural contexts. Hurston’s is the interventionist stand of a cultural radical who considers it her moral duty not to allow her people’s experience to remain ‘a tale told by others’.

To Hurston, telling her own story and the Black woman’s story and the African American people’s story had become an act of personal and social responsibility. She wrote down what others did not care to record or preserve, hoping by their negligence to suppress all that did not conform to white ‘higher’ expectations. Hurston’s objective was never to ‘overcome’ oppression, but through her revisioning, she did wish to correct the negative image of Blacks perpetuated by others, sometimes even by themselves. She just wanted to tell stories about men and women, about love and understanding, about marriage and life, about selfhood and ultimately nationhood. The time and place in which she lived, provided Hurston with an ideological base from which to construct her theory of living. What is important, she wanted to add a woman’s voice to the all-male chorus on the Eatonville store-porch, to make women participants as well as observers, co-equals, sitting beside the men and making meaning out of the world. Women,
who had largely been expected only to be ‘seen’, are also ‘heard’ in Hurston’s works. In all this sense, Hurston has protested against Eurocentric hegemony posing as universalism.

Elizabeth Meese has said that textuality i.e. the process of producing her text through the transformation of other texts, enables Hurston and her characters to arrive at a feminist self-definition (44). I would like to substitute the word “feminist” with “humanist”. To me, Hurston’s oeuvre is a beacon that shows the path for an enduring self-defining textuality to the oppressed peoples across the globe. She was a true visionary who could envision wherein rested the power of hope and justice and of oppressed peoples anywhere, anytime. She prophesied that this power rested within oneself – in the affirmation of one’s being. This self to Hurston comprised chiefly of the subjectivity that a people gained from their cultural moorings, or to use Barbara McCassill’s term “cultural re-moorings”. To Hurston this helped shift focus from one’s victimisation to one’s achieved power and became the basis of a people’s tenacity.

Alice Walker had once outlined the difference between white and Black writers by saying that:

...for the most part white American writers tended to end their books and their characters’ lives as if there were no better existence for which to struggle. The gloom of defeat is thick.

By comparison Black writers seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom (In Search 5).

Hurston’s position was not just that of contestation, but of a passionately fierce ethnic/racial pride and that was in the nature of a commitment to her roots. It was a commitment to uphold the symbols that came from within herself.

Hurston has freed herself from constrictive strictures of sexist/racist
ideology through her creativity and anthropological/folk wisdom. She has opened the way for others too, to free themselves from the oppressor’s logic in any given life situation. This she has done by celebrating through her writing, her color, its values, its traditions, its people, its religion, its lore, its wisdom, even the ‘primitive’, psychological beliefs of its ancestors. Robert Bone had said of the Negro artist that “if his art cuts deep enough, he will find the Negro world to be liberating rather than confining” (3). This holds true for Hurston.

“Hurston seeks a uniquely African American vision, a way of seeing that both recognizes color and sees beyond it” (Clarke 602). By herself embracing what she was – her strong, ‘unadorned’ southern roots, her people and her culture, Hurston encourages all who come after her, to do the same. She teaches all of us the need to belong. Hurston’s quest to seek a “personal answer” to the question of her own survival and that which turned out to be her answer to the survival of her race ultimately, has universalistic appeal. Howard is right in saying that Hurston’s quest is not only “psychological” and “spiritual”, but also “ontological” and “cosmological” (Zora 172). Her work is both timeless and humanistic in its reach. Hurston offers the wisdom to oppressed people universally to live and laugh and to strive like everyone else, even against the circumscribed reality of their lives. She offers the way out necessary for a positive change in life for anyone who would wish to be free and to survive the challenges and paradoxes of life. And this can be ensured by the quality of being assured of one’s self-worth, one’s self-esteem and even of celebrating one’s self.

The thematic parameters of Hurston’s work open up the ever-expanding horizons of life’s possibilities for all people. She wants us to see ourselves anew, to hear ourselves all over again. She teaches us to renew our bond with ourselves, to inculcate pride and self-esteem for what we are/we have been/we can be, by just being ourselves. Hurston was very clear that nothing that comes from without, that which society confers, can be of abiding value. For that which can be given by someone, can also be taken...
away by them. In all these ways, Hurston’s work has a life-enhancing impact that can inspire nations.

John F. Callahan, an Irish-American talks of a personal experience as a sixteen-year old bank mail boy, where he along with all African Americans was lumped as “a contemptible, expendible, lower caste”. Callahan moans that at that point of his life “I had a name, but so far no voice, no form and no audience, for my unfolding story” (7-8). Hurston’s oeuvre is an actualisation of that voice and that form, which though African American in origin, gives a call to a world audience and elicits a response. The call has been given in what Callahan himself calls a “rhetoric of intimacy”, wherewith the articulation of literary discourse has become an instrument of action and change. What is more, (oral) voice has been conjured into permanence through its symbolic use in the written form, thereby ensuring that the call for change and its response is abiding. Hurston’s is not the impact of a lightning bolt, brief and bewildering, but hers is the light-rain effect, bound to touch everything and seep permanently into the soil.

Hurston has made language her means to organize experience or the means to her representation of the world. Citing James Britton, Kalb says, “we habitually use talk to go back over events and interpret them, make sense of them in a way that we were unable to while they were taking place” (174). To Hurston that language is especially vital which can express the deepest feelings of any people and reflect their thoughts, their values, their fears, their wishes and their meaning. And this is the folk language. By using this language, the ‘folks’ empower themselves through the ‘making’ of narrative from their subjective experiences, rather than remain the ‘objects’ of the ‘imposition’ of narrative from the ‘other’s’ evaluations. These new narratives emerging from within the ‘low down’ colored folks can definitely help shift traditional parameters of ‘judging’ races, sexes, classes, periods, peoples and movements. By making herself both the observer (spectator) and the observed (participant) in mapping out her ‘folksiness’, Hurston could develop a certain perspective and understanding in the former role and an immediacy and
intimacy in the latter.

In privileging the experience and knowledge that comes from the unique mode of perceiving the life of 'low-down' folks, Hurston has actually given a call for what appears to me 'a multiethnic humanism'. It is a call for the peaceful co-existence of diverse peoples and colors, and races, and nations and cultures. In her elaborate discussion on the American feminist theory, Cacoullos has referred to Anzaldua and Lugones, amongst others. Gloria Anzaldua, the Mexican American critic writing in the late twentieth century, had given a call for "tolerance of contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" and Maria Lugones, about the same time, opts for the "logic for impurity" which can sustain multiplicity and thickness without fragmentation (qtd. in Cacoullos 105-6). Hurston had envisioned the need for this worldview nearly three quarters of a century before them. Hurston’s was a clarion call to safeguard the world from the dangers of cultural xenophobia.

No writer's work can ever be an exhaustive 'recipe' and no research work can ever convey the last word. But Hurston has definitely:

Open the Doors  
And Shown the Way.
Notes

1 Earlier in my thesis, I have been using the word “feminist”. But for this fresh insight of replacing it with “humanist”, I am indebted to Dr. Pankaj Singh for her views in Nonika Singh’s “On Women, Interrupted”, Hindustan Times (Chandigarh edition, March 23, 2004) : 12.