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Multiple Ambivalent Feminine Spaces in Zora Neale Hurston's Feminine Characters

Alali Salam

Gender in English and American Literature and Culture Program, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Cultural and Literary Studies, Eotvos Lorand University, Budapest, Hungry

E-mail: salue.ali89@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Zora Neale Hurston's exploration of feminine space and the way she viewed the African Americans in a very fragmentary way borrowing from the post- colonial theory Homi Bhabha's concept of "third space" and from Stuart Hall's concept of "becoming" and "positionality." It also explores the concept of space in selected novels by Hurston, using Edward W. Soja's and Henry Lefebvre's idea about the multiplicity and hybridity of third space in favor of negating the plurality of space, taking it at the end to apply on gender in her chosen fiction.

Abstract: *Multiple Ambivalent; Feminine Spaces; Zora Neale Hurston's*

Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), a black woman writer, folklorist and anthropologist, was best known as "the mother of black female literature" in the twentieth-century literary history in America. Born and bred in the south, Hurston was immersed in the rich and colorful black cultural traditions since her childhood. She loved her nation deeply, knew her national culture well, and was proud of her black identity. Significantly, Hurston was fully aware of the complexities of life black people in general, and black women were facing. She admits the masculine social role and space that imposes the position of the masculine. However, she moves beyond the duality of the masculine and feminine to build a female subjectivity and feminine sense of space different from the masculine social one, yet within it. It is created by woman, and it is creating identity. It is a space through which they negotiate identity for themselves in subjective practices. That is what Homi Bhabha and Edward W. Soja referred to in term of thirding. Soja characterizes this third space in his article "toward a New Consciousness of Space and Spatiality" saying:

> Third space is a space where issues of race, class, and gender can be addressed simultaneously without privileging one over the other; where one can be Marxist, materialist, and idealist and idealist, structuralist and humanist, disciplined and interdisciplinary at the same time. Third space is rooted in just such recombinational and radically open perspective. (50)

This means a reaction against the duality of First space and Second space, deriving from Henri Lefebvre notions of "perceived space" and "conceived space" respectively:

> First space includes all forms of direct spatial experiences, which can be empirically measured and presented in cartographies. Unlike First space, Second space refers to the spatial representation, cognitive processes as well as modes of construction, which gives rise to the birth of geographical imagination. Lefebvre's project . . . was to inject a third dimension to the dually privileged dynamics of historicity and sociality. (51)

Back to Hurston, these spaces stand for individual centers of meaning engulfed by the masculine social space: apart from it, against it, but depending on it for identity. We can count on the presence of the masculine in Hurston's feminine spaces, which produce not only opposition, but also cohesive interrelation. Hurston's feminine spaces were ambivalent in nature. They are relational and create spatial tactics that are characteristic of masculine hegemonic discourse. For instance, women negotiate identities for themselves through ritual praxis. Female social space makes male presence limited as it becomes conspicuous when Lucy dies in *Jonah's Gourd Vine.* John was excluded from the death ritual and was clearly marginalized. This is presented too in the character of Janie. It refers to Stuart Hall's concept of "becoming". It is also a hybrid character in her experience when she reflects development in her self-awareness. She is an emergent and emerging development of movements of consciousness. Janie's journeys show constant jumping in and out of roles revealing multi-facial identities shaped by the demand of the situation. Her behavior in particular shows this journey from the point of view of the patriarchal community, her rebellious conduct which makes her violate the norms of marriage as a patriarchal institution, her insistence on joining games which are not meant for her (shooting and playing the checkers) and her dressing overalls at the end of her story and more is her engagement in a storytelling activity show a movement between worlds and a rejection of stability. Her hybridity is built on a given African American culture and tactics of identity negotiation. The movement in and out of gender is essential and cannot eliminate gender in the new generated space; the masculine spatial traces and feminine spaces coexist and in contradiction at the same time, and gender has sense in the new space like in the previous one. The new space stands for multiplicity and heterogeneity.

This leads us to consider the feminine space and subjectivity as far from the socio-ideological constructs. It is that of what Lefebvre calls "trialectics of spatiality" (qtd. In Soja 53). This is true for Hurston's fiction too. Her female characters perform their subjectivities and print their space socially and individually, proving an always already presence of the subject as "both/ and also" (52) in spite of the social hegemonic surveillance context. It is the Foucauldian system of capillary power and Lefebvre's "spatiality- historicality" (53). In this way, Soja considers Lefebvre's spaces:

> Radically open in two ways: through the 'sociospatial dialectic' ('spatiality-sociality') and through the problematic interplay between space and time, the making of historical geographies or geohistories ('spatiality-historicality'). Lefebvre establishes the basis for trialectical thinking that considers not only the social and historical dimensions of life but also the spatial one. (53)

These female characters can maneuver. Power doesn't always function from the top to the bottom. Power functions from the bottom and up and creates its discourse. It is everywhere. That's why it is constitutive of that upon which it acts and enables the female characters as well as Hurston herself to explore complicated ways in which women's experiences, self-understanding and potentials are constructed in and by the power relation which they seek to transform. So, power cannot be viewed as a

societal ideological force exercised from above. Power becomes "capillary" and individual, situated. It springs from people's lives mire fundamentally through the interaction and interrelationship of their social and individual practices. Where there is power, there is resistance to it on the smallest level. Michel Foucault argues that the individual is the product of power. These female characters in Hurston's fiction, in addition to her, rebel against societal power and create their individual powerful space. Power comes from everywhere. That's why it is the "name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (Foucault 93). It is "exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relation" (95). It is the micro level of power, everyday practice, the individual, the situatedness of power. Power is the fluid force that is always changing hands. That is why Foucault suggests "A whole history . . . to be written of *spaces*- which would at the same time be the history of powers- from the great strategies of geopolitical to the little tactics of the habitat." (149) Hurston's female characters' dissenting interrelational spaces is created by maneuvering micro powers on the part of these characters. Her female characters move from their gendered identities to deconstructing it by relocating it. Sometimes, there may be connectedness to place which sounds imperative, but the existential creation of space is a necessity; it is a must.

Hurston's female places evolve in private and public masculine places as they are connected to the positioning of their body. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, e.g., the domestic space, the backyard and other spaces outside the first one is the places which reflect the stages of development of these women and their maturity. Sometimes the race constraints their place and space as Janie and Nanny lived "in de white folk's backyard" (9). This sense of place was determined by Washburn's place as Janie says, "Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till Ah was round six years old" (8). Her reduced self was represented by calling her "Alphabet". The stigma of the place made the black children exclude her from the ring plays.

The blossoming of the pear tree in the backyard gives Janie a sense of place and space in Nanny's place. This scene shows her maturing subjectivity, and her sexual awakening and socialization. The pear tree can stand for ambivalent space. It reflects a dominating power mechanism in a patriarchal world through the active bees, and, traditionally, female maturity, wisdom and history. It is the gendering of independent future horizon. The tree place in this scene is a storage of memories and experiences. Does the place become a woman enframed by a masculine social space? The independent self doesn't refer to sealed development of subjectivity. Coercive and contesting Janie's sense of place may appear, the bee shows active power despite the apparently ruling proportion of the tree representing Janie. The example of the pear tree shows how power functions in subtle ways according to Foucault in his article "Questions on Geography" (72). Resisting and concentrating on freedom as a sense of place and space build on previous power mechanisms that have impact on territorialization and lead to ambivalence.

The vivid description shows Janie's readiness for transformation and maturation:

> She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? Nothing on the place nor in her grandma's house answered her. She searched as much of the world as she could form the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made. (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 11)

She tries to give life to Nanny's house before her final disenchantment with her house as her alienation is accelerated by Nanny's antagonism: "[Nanny's] eyes did not bore and pierce. They diffused and melted Janie, the room and the world into one comprehension" (12). This process of transformation is endangered by the extreme mechanism of power of the Nanny, symbolized by the blossoming pear trea; this place which is denoting her subjectivity.

The tree symbol has an important role at Killicks' place, with Janie all her life. Like Lucy in *Jonah's Gourd Vine,* Janie has to identify with the gender role by "Nanny and the old folks" (20) and tries to make Killicks's house motivated for herself. She accepts in the beginning the gender divide spatially within home; the gendered space of the domestic territory such as the kitchen. It reflects her need for the construction and sense of a place and at the same time the creation of crack in hegemonic spatial strategies which make Janie use gendered space creatively for her own interest. The yard, too, has an important spatial dimension, where she used to work under a fine oak tree trying to break away from the gendered atmosphere. There she can enact her vision of the pear tree. It is spring- time of blossoming and "the noon filtered through the leaves of the fine oak tree where she sat and made lacy patterns on the ground" (26). The lacy pattern shows what is on her mind, she is waiting for the visionary to happen as she did before under the pear tree, when she hears whistling, and the future husband shows up. The scene of making lace can be compared to Lucy's preparation and decoration of her wedding bed with homemade lace, we find a common pattern is created.

Jonah's Gourd Vine presents to us Amy and Lucy, the two female characters who are captives of their domestic place. Amy lives in Alabama among sharecroppers. Her opportunities are hindered by the geographic area and the limitations of its crops. In fact, its barrenness reflects her. Her loneliness shows why she felt free and wanted to go to the house, where she could experience a sort of independence in a gendered space- a sort of ambivalence. It is in the domestic sphere Amy and Lucy can create their own places, though they mingle with the masculine one, and have to a certain extent a sort of transcendence characteristic of the subjective place. In this novel, feminine places owe their existence and nature to the juxtaposed masculine one which is culturally imposed on the feminine. The two are together but the feminine private one keeps a certain subjectivity. Amy can create her own place at home with her children that establishes a distinctive space in juxtaposition to her husband Ned.

Like Janie, Lucy can, in the beginning, find a transcendent world for herself in her parents' place because of her mother who believes in gender and class role. She has control over Lucy. Emmeline in the African American middle class is like Joe Starks in Eatonville. She wants to instill gender consciousness which is proper to her daughter in Lucy's relationship with John and it goes with the values of her class. Like Janie, Lucy lives a revelation and a new horizon in a moment when John squeezes her hand "in a flash she discovered for herself old truths" (68) which are the opposite of her mother's gender norms of masculine space. It is the birth of her definite subjectivity. The next morning of her encounter with John Lucy finds hair on her body. This makes her happy. This goes with Janie's after her vision of the pear tree: "Ahm a woman now" (68). It is not a childish reaction. It is an awakening for Lucy and an announcement of the birth of her subjectivity away from childhood, and it is a way to loosen her relation to her mother and her influence and control and keeps her away from the parental place. This emerging womanhood would rebel against the gender concepts of the black middle class which imitates white middle class ideological codes. It is establishing itself, voicing her place and space. It is her body. It is exactly like Janie. Voicing is clear when Lucy talks to her mother on her wedding day evoking the feminine tree metaphor "Ahm telling anybody, ole uh young, grizzly or gray, Ah ain't takin' no whipping tuhnight. All mah switches done growed to trees." (78) Bell Hooks explores this movement toward voicing saying:

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and growth possible. It is that act of speech of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject--the liberated voice. (47)

Voicing becomes not only a language, specific action. It is a performative action leading into a new space.

Lucy manages to redeem herself in her marriage to John in front of whom she is defenseless because of his promiscuity and violence she has to act with what she has. Her private feminine place derives from identification with the walnut bed. The metaphor for her marriage. It is her extended self. She "made it a spread and bolster of homemade lace" (81). The following paragraph shows John's permissive idea of marriage in opposition to Lucy's. This reveals how she pays attention to the details and the efforts she made to shape her home associated with a sense of hope for a place she thinks of spatially. The bed becomes an ambivalent space of overlapping functions that complement and contest each other. It is a tool of conditioning her life and gives her a space where she can enjoy some independence for a while in Alabama. It becomes Lucy's almost deprivation when she was pregnant and aware of her husband's unfaithfulness. Her brother comes to collect her debt in her poverty, and he takes the bed leaving Lucy to cry the bed becomes a vague and tormenting reminder of her intimate autonomy.

Eatonville didn't grant any transformation to Lucy's main position as she keeps in her domestic space with a husband's control, yet her role changes. It is spatially represented by the bed. It shows when she gets the bed back by sewing for a white woman. However, she defines herself with respect to and in moving her husband up in the social hierarchy to become the mayor of Eatonville and the moderator in the state. Her prestige and supporting role become clear in the aftermath of the campaign for the mayor position when her role in the winning the campaign is repeatedly emphasized. Unlike Janie, Lucy's acceptance by the community was the result of her acceptance of the space giving to her by the masculine one and the establishment of personal networks of women and men proved to be enabling and constraining at the same time. Though she pushes John up, she doesn't go beyond the assigned space of domesticity with the role of the mother and a social one tied to her husband despite its social multiplicity.

The Road is also another important metaphor which symbolizes self-fulfillment for Hurston's women. Janie thinks of the roads at Nanny's and then Killicks' place to go beyond the engendering expectations and to live a fluid experience with utmost freedom and autonomy since roads represent spaces of actions. Janie sets out on the roads twice for Starks and Tea Cake. It is for men. Hurston defines the subjectivity of her feminine characters in relation to men. Janie's autonomy and freedom are clear when she left Killicks:

> The morning road air was like a new dress. That made her feel the apron tied around her waist. She untied it and flung it on a bush beside the road and walked on, picking flowers and making a bouquet...From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom. Her old thoughts were going to come handy now, but new worlds would have to be made and said to fit them. (31)

The opposition between the refreshing morning air and the apron, a metaphor of women's domestic space, makes clear Janie's new awareness, and especially if we consider mobility is masculine. In fact, Janie reaches through transpatial movement or migration across the Southern landscape an uncrystallized condition of existence connected to many identities she reestablishes herself by finally validating self and rebuilding the past in her private place; that is the backyard. Her feminine spatiality makes her subjectivity independent; however, she moves aspects of masculine space to transpose them into the feminine, different from other Eatonville women. It is games such as checkers and shooting. It is transgressing borders. By giving the chance to Janie to reassert her autonomy and subjectivity through hybridization, Hurston keeps her feminine character from her community through border crossing from the race, gender and class codes by transgressing gender borders embedded in class codes. Hurston also gives a powerful critique of race by ironically separating Janie from masculine ideals in space. Permitting Janie to enact her vision, Hurston subverts the controlling factors of the black female and propounds an independent subjectivity yet in imbued sociocultural space.

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Author's Bio

Salam Alali is a third-year Ph.D. student at Eotvos Lorand University, Budapest, Hungary. She is working on her doctoral dissertation in the field of Gender in English and American Literature and Culture, focusing on the black women's position in Zora Neale Hurston's fiction exploring race, place and womanhood issues. She obtained her BA degree in English Language and Literature from Al-Baath university in Homs-Syria and her MA degree from the same university in American Literature/ Literary Studies. Her MA thesis was concerned with the image of black women in selected works written by African American authors. Her fields of interest include African American literature, Black studies, feminism, and post-colonialism.

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