

Southern Womanhood And Identity In Zora Neale Hurstons's *Seraph On The Suwanee*

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Abstract

Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) represents a notable shift from her previous examinations of African American existence, concentrating instead on the intricacies of white Southern femininity. This study analyses the formation of female identity via the character of Arvay Henson, whose challenges with matrimony, motherhood, and personal identity mirror wider societal concerns over gender norms in the mid-twentieth century South. The analysis places Hurston's novel within the frameworks of Southern regionalism, feminist literary critique, and the heritage of the Harlem Renaissance, emphasising her exploration of the intersections of race, class, and gender while innovating narrative voice and cultural depiction. The examination contends that *Seraph on the Suwanee* not only broadens Hurston's literary scope but also contests dominant perceptions of femininity by emphasising the conflicts between household responsibilities and individual freedom. Ultimately, the work uncovers Hurston's intricate involvement with identity politics and her readiness to challenge the confines of Southern writing.

Keywords: Womanhood, identity, gender roles, feminist criticism, regionalism, Harlem Renaissance

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I. Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston's last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), holds a multifaceted status in her body of work and in the wider context of American literature. In contrast to her previous works, such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), which emphasised African American narratives, *Seraph on the Suwanee* focuses on the struggles of white Southern womanhood as represented by Arvay Henson. This transition has frequently confounded critics, resulting in the novel's relegation within Hurston studies. The text provides fertile ground for exploring the confluence of gender, identity, and regional culture in the mid-twentieth-century Southern United States.

The narrative places Arvay's challenges in the home environment, examining her conflicting feelings about matrimony, parenthood, and personal agency. Hurston's depiction of Arvay illustrates the cultural conflicts inherent in Southern femininity, where the expectations of obedience and household responsibilities clash with aspirations for independence and self-assertion. By integrating these conflicts into the Floridian terrain and Southern cultural customs, Hurston emphasises the intrinsic connection between identity and place.

This research contends that *Seraph on the Suwanee* ought not to be regarded as an aberration but instead acknowledged as Hurston's intentional exploration of whiteness and femininity. In Arvay's story, Hurston examines the cultural narratives that shape womanhood, while also broadening her literary scope beyond the prevailing topics of the Harlem Renaissance. Placing the novel in the context of feminist critique and Southern studies facilitates a reassessment of Hurston's impact on discussions around identity, race, and gender. Ultimately, this paper aims to recontextualise *Seraph on the Suwanee* as an essential work for comprehending Hurston's expansive literary perspective. The analysis of Southern femininity and identity in the novel underscores Hurston's sophisticated interaction with cultural politics and her readiness to confront the limits of African American and Southern literary traditions.

II. Arvay Henson: A Portrait Of Southern Womanhood

In *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Arvay Henson is introduced as a lady consumed by self-doubt and religious fanaticism. Hurston refers to her as "cracker born, cracker bred" (Hurston, 1948, p. 12), emphasising her social marginalisation and internalised feelings of inferiority. Her desire for her brother-in-law Carl Middleton is marked by guilt and repression: "She felt sinful in her thoughts, yet powerless to resist them" (p. 18). This conflict between

desire and guilt characterises her early persona, placing her squarely within the cultural scripts of Southern womanhood that demanded purity and subordination.

Arvey's marriage to Jim Meserve becomes the focal point in which her fears are both reinforced and addressed. Jim's power becomes evident when he tells her: "You love as a coward" (p. 145). This scene emphasises Arvey's meek attitude toward love and life, mirroring the greater notion that Southern women should stay reliant and obedient. However, Hurston complicates this portrayal by depicting Arvey's eventual understanding of her own agency. Critics point out that her surname "Meserve" metaphorically represents slavery, but Hurston also allows Arvey to view service as a voluntary decision rather than an imposed responsibility.

Arvey's duty as a mother exacerbates her fears. The birth of her disfigured son, Earl David, symbolises her internalised guilt: "She saw in him the punishment for her hidden sins" (p. 92). Her parental identity is consequently tormented by shame, reflecting the normative expectation on women to represent moral purity. However, her latter children, Angie and Kenny, represent both continuity and hope, implying that motherhood is also a source of resilience and rebirth. Despite her subservient inclinations, Arvey does have periods of self-assertion. When confronted with Jim's expectations, she realises that service cannot fully define her identity: "She must learn Jim's way of handling things, but also her own" (p. 885). This late recognition reflects Hurston's critique of rigid gender roles, implying that Southern womanhood may evolve into a more balanced negotiation of duty and autonomy.

The mulberry tree, beneath which Arvey and Jim's union begins, becomes a recurring emblem of her victory and metamorphosis. Hurston states that the mulberry tree stood as witness to her surrender, but also to her strength. This dual symbolism captures the dichotomy of Arvey's identity: she is both limited by cultural norms and capable of altering them.

Arvey Henson personifies the contrasts of Southern womanhood: uncertainty and strength, obedience and autonomy, guilt and resilience. Hurston uses her figure to criticise the cultural scripts that limited women to domesticity, while simultaneously implying that self-realization is possible within these limits. Arvey's journey is one of complicated negotiation rather than straightforward empowerment, making her one of Hurston's most demanding and revealing characters.

III. Marriage, Power, And Patriarchy

In *Seraph on the Suwannee*, Hurston portrays Jim Meserve as a figure of masculine power, whose confidence and ambition stand in stark contrast to Arvey's fears. Early on in their relationship, Jim exercises control over Arvey's hesitations. "You love as a coward. Do take no actions at all. Just stand around and hope for things to go right" (p. 145). This remark expresses the patriarchal notion that women must be guided, chastised, and formed by men. Arvey's passivity is portrayed as weakness, whilst Jim's domination is depicted as both normal and necessary in the cultural logic of Southern marriage. Arvey's marriage often encourages her feelings of inferiority. Jim's fixation on making decisions and exercising control over property and family problems mirrors Southern society's patriarchal system. Hurston wrote: "Jim had his way of doing things, and Arvey must learn to follow it" (p. 222).

Marriage becomes a site of tyranny, with Arvey's uniqueness submerged beneath her husband's rule. The work criticises this dynamic by demonstrating the emotional toll it has on Arvey, who feels both dependent and resentful. Despite Jim's domination, Hurston twists the story by giving Arvey moments of bargaining. Hurston observes that Arvey begins to voice her point of view. She must learn Jim's way of handling things, but also her own.

This awareness marks a shift away from pure submission and toward a more complex discussion of identity within marriage. Hurston emphasises that, while marriage can be oppressive, it can also serve as a space for women to remake themselves through resistance and adaptation.

The Florida environment heightens the patriarchal dynamic. Jim's success in land and business represents masculine conquering, whereas Arvey's domestic work represents feminine servitude. Hurston, however, embeds critique in the landscape itself: the Suwannee River and the mulberry tree bear witness to Arvey's surrender and persistence. The natural world exemplifies marriage's paradox: it is a site of domination as well as renewal and transformation. Hurston's description of Arvey and Jim's marriage demonstrates patriarchy's dual nature: it imposes submission while also allowing for identity building. Hurston attacks the cultural scripts of Southern womanhood by placing Arvey's struggle within the institution of marriage, but also embracing the possibilities of self-expression within oppressive systems.

IV. Female Growth

Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwannee*, *Seraph*, as yet unacknowledged, is "a tale of defiance and personal revelation that resides not in the margins but firmly on each page" (Clair, 1989, p. 38). The central female character, Arvey, was raised in a household where her father, Brock Henson, consistently favoured her elder sister, Lorraine Henson, who was more formidable and assertive, often tormenting Arvey. Furthermore, the residents of

Sawley were enthusiastic about playing pranks on her, and the community labelled her as eccentric as well. Moreover, numerous individuals in the town believed that "he could add substantial substance to Arvay's physique" (p. 4).

As a result, all of these factors rendered Arvay feeling apprehensive, insecure, and vulnerable within. Nonetheless, Arvay's formative experiences also contributed to her progressive development. In *Seraph*, she resolved that she had devoted her entire heart and existence to the service of God (p. 4) and engaged fervently in church activities, primarily to safeguard herself until she encountered Jim Meserve, who subsequently wed her. Marriage initiated a new chapter in Arvay's life, during which she progressively endeavoured to cultivate independence, resolve, and self-assurance. Initially, Arvay resisted Jim's incivility and misogyny, maintaining his autonomy within the marital relationship. She audaciously confronted Jim to resist a life of oppression. When she could no longer tolerate his flirtations with other ladies, she shadowed him throughout the day; upon discovering he was dancing with others, she attempted to get him to depart and requested respect. Subjugated within her family, she succumbed to profound isolation and estrangement, yet she persevered. Secondly, Arvay expressed her opinions over her children's matters.

Despite being entirely marginalised and wounded by her children, who disregarded her guidance and remained self-absorbed, Arvay, as a mother, simultaneously conveyed her affection and concern for her daughter and son while struggling to conceal her yearning for respect and attentiveness. Thirdly, Arvay developed courage and determination due to Larraine and Carl's efforts to plunder her mother's inheritance. Upon her return to Sawley to tend to her ailing mother, who had belittled herself throughout her existence, Arvay resolved to advocate on her behalf. Subsequently, she managed her mother's funeral with community assistance, but her sister's family exhibited apathy toward her mother during that period.

Upon discovering that Arvay's elder sister and sister-in-law, destitute yet avaricious, endeavoured to plunder their mother's inheritance, Arvay generously bestowed gifts upon the neighbours and bequeathed the land inherited from her mother to the municipal authorities for use as a park. She consciously chose to offer rather than passively permitting others to extract from her. Firstly, Arvay emerged from her experiences to acknowledge her autonomy. Upon Arvay's return to Jim from Sawley, she exhibited a demeanour of tolerance, engagement, and amiability, which took Jim by surprise. Subsequently, she requested to accompany Jim on the excursion. Arvay donned "a pair of blue jeans typically worn by fishermen, two blue shirts, and the tall rubber sea-boots" (p. 323) as she traversed the safety zone and ventured into the open sea. She embraced Jim's neck firmly and affectionately kissed him without prompting. Arvay was not a woman reliant on her husband, but rather one who could navigate treacherous waters alongside him, offering solace, assistance, and safeguarding. Arvay endeavours to regain authority over her existence from Jim and the ostensibly indomitable societal influences that bolster him. (Clair, 1989, p. 42)

V. Regionalism And The Florida Landscape

Hurston places *Seraph on the Suwannee* squarely in Florida, a state she knew well. The Suwannee River and the surrounding landscape are more than just backdrops; they are active factors forming identity. Early in the novel, Hurston portrays the land as "rich with promise, yet stubborn in its demands" (Hurston, 1948, p. 54), illustrating the duality of Southern life: possibility and hardship. Arvay sees the terrain as a metaphor for her own personal problems, representing both limitation and possibility. Jim Meserve's success in land and business is based on manly conquest. He sees the Florida soil as something to master: "The land was waiting for a man with hands to shape it, and Jim was that man" (p. 133).

This text emphasises the patriarchal mentality of possession and control, in which the landscape becomes an extension of masculine power. Arvay, on the other hand, is confined to the home, her efforts rendered insignificant in comparison to Jim's public accomplishments. Hurston criticises this mismatch by demonstrating how gendered power dynamics play out on the land.

Hurston employs natural symbols, particularly the mulberry tree and the river, to depict Arvay's changing identity. The mulberry tree, under which Arvay and Jim began their union, is described as "a witness to surrender, but also to strength" (p. 67). This dual symbolism captures the duality of Southern womanhood: submission within marriage and tenacity within selfhood. Similarly, the Suwannee River represents continuity and change, implying that identity, like water, is fluid and influenced by its surroundings.

Hurston emphasises the inseparability of identity and place by setting Arvay's story in Florida's cultural traditions of fishing, farming, and small-town life. Arvay's concerns are both personal and geographical, stemming from her "cracker" origin and the South's social hierarchy. Hurston wrote: "She was cracker born, cracker bred, and the land knew her as its own" (p. 12). This remark places Arvay's identity in the cultural context of Florida, demonstrating how regionalism determines both her limitations and her belonging.

Hurston's portrayal of the Florida landscape exemplifies how regionalism influences gender and identity. The land is not neutral; it is imbued with patriarchal beliefs, cultural traditions, and symbolic meanings that both

support and confront Southern females. Hurston emphasises the strong entwinement of identity, place, and power in Southern literature by having the terrain actively participate in Arvey's journey.

VI. Feminist Re-Readings Of *Seraph On The Suwannee*

Hurston's novel *Seraph on the Suwannee*, despite its 1948 publication, presages subsequent feminist dialogues around women's independence and identity. Arvey's slow realisation that she needs to reconcile her husband's dominance with her own viewpoint illustrates the conflict between subservience and self-assertion. This dynamic aligns with feminist perspectives suggesting that autonomy may be negotiated inside patriarchal frameworks rather than completely outside of them.

The narrative examines the cultural narratives of home life by depicting motherhood and matrimony as realms of both satisfaction and subjugation. Arvey's job as a mother is characterised by feelings of shame and anxiety, especially about her offspring, highlighting the significant moral weight imposed on women in Southern culture. Simultaneously, domestic life transforms into a realm where she cultivates resistance, indicating that the house serves not merely as a space of restriction but also as a foundation for identity development.

Hurston challenges the conventional portrayal of the Southern woman as obedient, devout, and self-denying. Arvey exemplifies these characteristics and simultaneously challenges them during instances of introspection and development. Symbols like the mulberry tree and the river underscore this duality, embodying both capitulation and resilience. By depicting womanhood as multifaceted and paradoxical, Hurston contests oversimplified representations and emphasises the intricacy of female identity in the South.

By focusing on a white female lead, Hurston broadens the range of her feminist analysis. Arvey's uncertainties are linked not solely to gender but also to socioeconomic status and geographical affiliation, illustrating that patriarchal subjugation transcends racial divides. This examination of whiteness complicates Hurston's literary heritage, framing her as an author who aimed to expand the discourse on gender and authority beyond the limits of the African American narrative.

Feminist reinterpretations assert that *Seraph on the Suwannee* serves as a precursor to subsequent discussions around autonomy, domesticity, and identity. Hurston's intricate depiction of Arvey illustrates her readiness to confront societal norms and broaden the horizons of female identity. The novel significantly enhances Hurston's position as a writer profoundly involved with issues of gender, authority, and the confines of Southern femininity.

VII. Conclusion

Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwannee* needs additional scholarly attention precisely because it defies customary interpretations of her work. While sometimes overshadowed by her earlier works, which focus on African American perspectives, this work displays Hurston's willingness to experiment with whiteness, gender, and regional identity. By focusing on Arvey Henson, Hurston questions the cultural scripts of Southern womanhood, exposing the conflicts between subordination and autonomy, household obligation and personal desire. The novel's marginalisation in literary studies has hidden its critical worth, but it provides a unique perspective on Hurston's larger engagement with identity politics.

Hurston's investigation of marriage, motherhood, and selfhood in *Seraph on the Suwannee* foreshadows subsequent feminist discussions of autonomy and domesticity. Arvey's path demonstrates how patriarchal structures limit and create options for negotiation, transforming her into a complicated character rather than a simple victim. Hurston emphasises the inseparability of identity and place by setting these challenges in the context of the Florida landscape, placing Southern womanhood within a regional and cultural framework. This multifaceted portrayal calls into question simple views of Hurston's literary legacy, positioning her as a writer intimately committed to the tensions of gender and power.

Finally, restoring *Seraph on the Suwannee* deepens our knowledge of Hurston's art and vision. The work broadens her repertory beyond the Harlem Renaissance's major topics, exhibiting her ability to examine identity beyond racial and cultural lines. Recognising this piece as part of Hurston's canon allows scholars to comprehend the breadth of her contributions to American literature. Hurston's final novel, which complicates Southern womanhood and challenges conventional storylines, confirms her enduring relevance as a writer who refuses to be bound by literary or cultural norms.

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