

SPOUSAL VIOLENCE IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *SERAPH ON THE SUWANEE*

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Forms of violence against women are numerous and span a wide range. In spite of the attention that has been paid to violence against women in recent years, much of it remains unknown to many. Spousal violence is a complex issue that crosses cultural, economic, and political boundaries. This paper exposes spousal violence against in a white family in the American South and highlights the high-handedness of men in the domestic sphere. It shall illustrate how women are forced to endure verbal abuse and humiliation from their intimate partners in their everyday life. Besides, alerting women against varied forms of violence, it also speculates upon some remedial measures to check drastic violence against women within the confines of home. In a nutshell, this paper aims to enable women to realize their full potential and to use it to the maximum for their own welfare as well as for the health of the humanity.

Spousal violence is widespread and universal. It is deep rooted in patriarchal culture. It is a deadly crime and a social menace. It is an escalating pattern of coercive behaviour that includes physical, sexual, and psychological assaults against an intimate partner. It takes the form of threats, verbal abuse, battering, rape, and murder.

Abuse inflicted on women mostly occurs within the private sphere—the home or familial or intimate relationships. The traumatic impact of domestic violence is vividly portrayed in Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). In this novel, Arvay Henson is a victim of domestic violence. Most of her life, she lives in fear of pain and death.

In *Seraph*, Jim Meserve and Arvay Henson are a loving couple. They differ vastly in their class. While Jim belongs to a family of plantation owners, Arvay hails from a poor Crackers family in the American South. Jim falls in love with Arvay at first sight and intends to marry her. But Arvay hesitates to marry him for various reasons. However, he succeeds in marrying her.

Jim Meserve is a very dominating and demanding man. Right from the beginning, his domineering nature is vividly presented in the novel. He specifies his needs to Arvay and fixes her role just before he

marries her. He says, "Love and marry me and sleep with me. That is all I need you for" (*Seraph* 32). He wants her to be a meek and obedient wife. He subjects Arvay to all kinds of abuse, though he says that he loves her passionately. First, he inflicts physical violence on Arvay by raping her. He rapes her first and marries her next. Besides, he uses threat to force her to marry him. He says to Arvay, "Sure you was raped, and that ain't all. You're going to keep on getting raped" (*Seraph* 57).

"Physically violent acts can have psychological consequences and psychological acts can have physical consequences" (*Crowell*15). Jim's bestiality and Arvay's vulnerability is made apparent when he exploits her sexually: "She was terribly afraid. She had been taken for a fool, and now her condition was worse than before. It was more than she could bear... What was to become of her now? Where would she turn for refuge? Not to her folks certainly" (*Seraph* 51-52). The above lines reveal the predicament of sexually exploited women. At home and in the world outside, Arvay is quite aware of the fact that she will be stigmatized. Further, having been physically and emotionally destroyed, she can never live in peace. Jim's words that he would rape her everyday leave a permanent fear in Arvay's mind. Her life with Jim is filled with fears and tears more than cheers.

Sexual abuse includes any conduct of a sexual nature that abuses, degrades, humiliates, or violates the dignity of woman. Women avoid exposing their sexual experience that meet the legal definition of rape or sexual assault if the perpetrator is their intimate partner. In *Seraph*, Arvay is a "glorified spit cup" (*Meisenhelder* 102) for Jim. The football match anecdote testifies to the harassment and humiliation that Arvay experiences from Jim. She feels ill-at-ease amidst the affluent gathering and wants Jim to go home with her. Jim finds Arvay's behaviour particularly irritating, yet, he drives her home in their car. No sooner he steps in the house, than he vents his anger at her. He orders Arvay to strip her clothes and commands, "Don't you move! You're my damn property, and I want you right where you are, and I want you naked. Stand right there in your tracks until I tell you that you can move" (*Seraph* 216). He, thus, humiliates, dehumanizes, and objectifies Arvay under the guise of romantic passion.

Jim's attitude to women demands notice. He views women as brainless, thoughtless, inferior, and helpless creatures. Hazel Carby writes in her Foreword to *Seraph*, "To Jim Meserve, all women are incapable of taking care of themselves, and, as they have no brains, a man, in order to become a true man, has to think for all women in his care" (*Seraph* xv). Early in the novel, Jim brags:

Women folks don't have no mind to make up nohow. They wasn't made for that. Lady folks were just made to laugh and act loving and kind and have a good man to do for them all he's able, and have him as many boy-children as he figgers he'd like to have, and make him so happy that he's willing to work and fetch in every dad-tamed thing that his wife thinks she would like to have. That's what women are made for. (*Seraph* 25)

At another point, Jim says, "men see one thing and understand ten while women see ten things and can't even understand one" (*Seraph* 129). His disparaging remarks about the female sex dot throughout the novel. He is of the view that marrying and bearing children are the prime duties of a woman. His name "Me-serve" befits his character and emphasizes his chauvinistic nature. Besides, Arvay's deep sense of inferiority is an added advantage to him.

Arvay is not only physically abused but emotionally too. In fact, he never strikes her at all; instead he controls and abuses her psychologically. With Jim, Arvay feels like "a mouse under the paw of a cat" (*Seraph* 215). Jim often undermines Arvay's sense of self-worth. He diminishes her abilities, and calls her by names. That he views his wife as a worthless creature is quite obvious when he says, "Your brains are not sufficient to help me with my work; you can't think with me. Putting your head on the same pillow with mine is not the same thing as mingling your brains with mine ..." (*Seraph* 32-33). Another time, Jim accuses her thus, "Unthankful and unknowing like a hog under a [an] acorn tree. Eating and grunting with your eyes, and never even looking up to see where the acorns are coming from" (*Seraph* 262). Once he calls Arvay, "'you, good-for-nothing nag" (*Seraph* 57).

Jim always makes Arvay a scapegoat for various mishaps in the family. When Arvay begets a mentally retarded child, he blames Arvay's ancestors for the mishap. He says to her, "I don't hold *you* responsible for his [Earl's] condition. It come through your father's folks, but you don't have nothing to do with that" (*Seraph* 125).

One day, when Arvay finds Jim grappling with a rattlesnake, she falls into a coma and stands petrified gaping at the horrible scene. But Jim expects her to run about and extend a helping hand to him. When Arvay fails to act according to his expectations, he accuses her for her inactivity. He blames her for all unpleasant happenings in the family and speaks as if the entire situation is her fault. As a result, Arvay estranges from Jim.

Like Jim, his black servant Joe Kelsey has no regards for the female sex. In fact, when Jim seeks his suggestion for winning Arvay's heart, he suggests that his master rape her. He further says,

Most women folks will love you plenty if you take and see to it that they do. Make 'em knuckle under. From the very first jump. Get the bridle in they' [Their] mouth and ride 'em hard and stop 'em short. They's all alike, Boss. Take 'em and break 'em". (*Seraph* 46)

The above passage suggests that men, both white and black, regard women as inferior to them and think that they have the right to dominate them. Thus, gender discrimination is an immutable fact in women's existence.

Jim is of the view that by offering Arvay a bourgeoisie status, he has fulfilled all her needs. Further, he expects her to understand his needs and please him; but he never takes any effort to understand her or satisfy her. For all her devoted service to him, Arvay puts up with his hurting words and observes tolerance.

Thus, one can perceive spousal violence in the Meserve household. Jim's callous behaviour has adverse impact on Arvay. Despite the material comfort that Jim provides her, she is far from being happy in her life. Spousal violence has the worst impact on the health and well-being of Arvay Henson. The psychological consequences of violence are as serious as the physical effects. Constant exposure to violence affects her health very much. She develops a range of health problems. Anxiety and depression loom large in her life. She lives in "an agony of uncertainty" (*Seraph* 84). Jim craves for power and orgasm in his relationship with Arvay, she seeks reciprocity and intimacy. She ruminates her turbulent life with Jim and at the height of depression, she even speculates suicide as the solution for all troubles. Sick of life, she becomes hysterical. Many times, having none to confide her inner feelings, she develops the habit of talking to herself loudly. At one point, she explodes, "I can't stand this bondage you [Jim] got me in. I can't endure any more. . . I can't see never no peace of mind" (*Seraph* 218). She continues to scream and cry and say to Jim, "No, I can't see no way out of my binding bondage but death, Jim. I aim to kill myself tomorrow" (*Seraph* 219).

Arvay consistently views herself as an outsider in her own family. She feels severely class conscious in her own house. She looks upon her children as Jim's children. Alienating from her family members, she lives in an oppressive silence. Hailing from a poor family, she feels that she is only a servant

to Jim and her children. Often, she shuts her off in loneliness and leads a cocoon-like existence.

One primary cause of violence in the Meserve family is the dysfunctional relationship between Jim and Arvay. Both of them lack communication skills. Jim takes Arvay for granted and belittles her often. Further, he treats her more like his pet than as his life partner. He fails to understand his extremely sensitive wife, and begins to feel that Arvay is his boring companion. In the case of Arvay, she underemphasizes her accomplishments and maintains as Goldberg states, “an attitude of frail dependence on men” (*The New Male* 23). Her frail dependence on Jim stunts her growth fatally. She is unsure of herself and she avoids making decisions. In many pages of the novel, she feels that she is not given importance and that she is not taken seriously in her family. She is of the opinion that while she dotes on her husband and children, they throw a cold shoulder to her needs. Because of this dysfunctional relationship between Jim and Arvay, the rhythm of their life goes awry. As a result, verbal fights are followed by sentimental, short-lived reconciliations. Further, Arvay’s “smothered aggression” (*Goldberg* 24) causes her to be excessively cautious in social situations.

Hurston’s novel suggests an “ethic of co-operation and a political order of equality” (*Adams* 94). One can observe the reversal of voices in *Seraph*. When the novel begins, Arvay is a weakling. Jim tells her that she needs his protection. He says, “I have to stay with you and stand by you and give my good protection to keep you from hurting your ownself too much. No, I can’t leave you be, not until you and me both can see further” (*Seraph* 17). But in the later part of their marital life, Arvay matures from her experience, and realizes that Jim is not as over-powering as she thought him to be. She realizes that inside he is nothing but a little boy. Besides, she understands that just as she needs his protection, Jim needs her protection too. Thus, she perceives the complementarity of the husband and wife for a peaceful living. She gains control of her life and her hard-gained wisdom enables her to use her linguistic resources to prevent her oppression. As she begins to talk, the loud and proud voice of Jim wanes.

The intensity of Jim’s chauvinism makes Arvay resist his authority on a few occasions. She resists Jim’s domination now and then. Once, when Jim snubs her saying, “I see one thing and understand ten. You see ten things and can’t even understand one” (*Seraph* 264), she replies, “I maybe ain’t got all the brains you carries, but I’m here to tell you that I’m not half as dumb as you all make me out to be” (*Seraph* 264). On another occasion, tired of Jim’s egotism, she sulks and bursts out, “All I’m good for is to lay up in the bed with you and satisfy your feelings and do around here for you” (*Seraph* 126).

At one stage, she quits Jim fed up with his high-handedness. It is her sojourn at Sawley which transforms her into a confident woman. Solitude enlightens her mind and metamorphoses her into a mature woman who can shape her life herself. At Sawley, she gradually evolves as an independent woman who can handle her life herself. Her agility at the time of her mother's death testifies to her potential as woman. She arranges her mother's funeral herself and takes decisions on her own.

An observation of human sufferings show that there are two kinds of sufferings—voluntary suffering and involuntary suffering. Voluntary suffering is a painful experience which a person chooses in order to do a greater good. It is optional. Spousal violence is a form of informal suffering. Unlike voluntary suffering, it does not serve any meaningful purpose. Besides, it is not chosen by the victim. However, suffering, both voluntary and involuntary, affects a large number of women.

Endurance that merely accepts the violence ignores the abuser's sinfulness and denies him a chance for repentance and redemption, which may come from holding him accountable for his act. Endurance in order to keep the family together is a sham because the family is already broken apart by the abuse. Hence, in abject endurance, there is no virtue that is to be gained. In the midst of profound suffering, God is present and new life is possible. This "retrospective realization" (Adams 90) transforms one's character and presents the possibility of new life coming forth from the pain of suffering. In *Seraph*, in the face of formidable oppression, Arvay's "quiet grace" and "unshouted courage" (Cannon 135, 144) deserves attention. She is able to hold on to life against major threats and conflicts. Her constant rumination of her oppression makes women vigilant. Like the mythical phoenix which rises from its own ashes, she emerges anew as a confident woman from her oppression. She grows as a self-sufficient individual in her own right. Living amidst oppression requires a unique strength and Arvay possesses that strength.

Arvay is a self-made woman. She is not simply a brutalized beast of burden who silently endures her slavish existence. Constant oppression transforms her into a resilient woman who would not succumb to oppression. She combats domestic violence mustering her innate strength and all available resources within her to safeguard herself from unabated violence.

Marriage is the highest of all relationships. Besides, it is a life-long commitment. A marriage relationship must meet the needs of both the man and the woman. It is not just a civil union between two people but an emotional, physical and spiritual union between a man and a woman. It is the cornerstone

of a moral and social order. Spousal violence disrupts many marriages and estranges intimate partners. It should be boldly and tactfully approached by women to lead a satisfactory life. Arvay Henson's survival amidst oppression and her metamorphosis from a meek woman to a confident woman is a worthy lesson for the women community.

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