

1 **Power Reversal in “Sweat” by Zora Neale Hurston**

2 **Abstract:**

3 Zora Neale Hurston’s short story “Sweat”, published in 1926, is about Delia, a washerwoman
4 who belonged to the 20th century and her sufferings in her marriage. This paper, “**Power**
5 **Reversal in “Sweat” by Zora Neale Hurston**” tries to analyse the concept of power reversal
6 and female resistance in the context of patriarchy and the concept of New Woman. It aims to
7 provide an analysis of Hurston’s portrayal of Delia as a timid, oppressed, and abused
8 housewife who later emerges as the New Woman after years of marital abuse she goes
9 through as a woman.

10 **Keywords:**

11 *patriarchy, oppression, violence, inferior sex, caretakers, New Woman, etc.*

12 **Introduction:**

13 Throughout history, many women have been subjected to oppression and violence under the
14 influence of patriarchy. They were always considered the ‘inferior sex’ of society, who barely
15 had any voice of their own. Simone De Beauvoir stated that “It is hard to know any longer if
16 women still exist, if they will always exist, if there should be women at all, what place they
17 hold in this world, what place they should hold” (23). This rightly shows the experiences that
18 she had as a woman. In the past, women were merely considered as caretakers and nurturers
19 of their families. They had no right to gain education and financial freedom since patriarchy
20 thought that women and rationality don’t go hand in hand.

21 Based on these instances, many American women writers who wrote about women emerged
22 in the 19th and 20th centuries. One of the most eminent writers among them is Zora Neale
23 Hurston. She wrote distinctly about the struggles that women faced during the 20th century

24 with reference to her female protagonist Delia in her short story “Sweat” (published in
25 November, 1926). “The storyline in the work of patriarchal put the female characters end
26 tragically and sadly while the goal is to make the reader to open their heart and mind that
27 women are still not in good condition” (Setiawan and Widyaningrum 68).

28 “Sweat” is about a Black washerwoman named Delia who is portrayed as a submissive and
29 hardworking wife. Her husband, Sykes, is a dominating and cruel man who has an illicit
30 affair with another woman. Sykes has been mentally and physically abusing Delia for 15
31 years of their marriage. Whatever Delia would earn, Sykes would use her hard-earned income
32 to spend on himself and his mistress, Bertha. Moreover, Sykes dislikes Delia so much that he
33 even tries to poison her with the bite of a rattlesnake that he brings home. Despite Delia’s
34 multiple requests to remove the rattlesnake from their home, he makes fun of her and keeps it
35 inside. However, ironically, towards the end of the story, he gets bitten by the rattlesnake and
36 pleads for Delia’s help, but she doesn’t respond, and waits until he gets poisoned by the bite
37 and dies thereafter. “Delia in the end defied the rules made by her husband against her by
38 going to seek freedom as a strong and independent woman” (Bere and Arianto 250).

39 **Materials and Methods:**

40 The main research techniques used for this research paper are content analysis and literature
41 evaluation. A comprehensive approach is utilised to explore the sufferings of women that
42 were prevalent in the 20th century and how the concept of New Woman was portrayed post
43 their sufferings. Moving forward, the paper intends to discuss the themes of Zora Neale
44 Hurston’s story “Sweat”, such as patriarchal structure, oppression, inferior sex, etc. Thus, it
45 provides detailed research on how patriarchy dominated women and considered them to be of
46 little or no value to society.

47 **Results and Discussion:**

48 The analysis of Hurston's "Sweat" showcases women's oppression during the 20th century.
49 This is reflected through Delia, who undergoes an infinite level of dominance and cruelty that
50 Sykes practices upon her. Delia is portrayed as a hard-working woman who has been a
51 washerwoman for 15 years, yet she never receives any affection or kindness from Sykes. This
52 shows the inferior status of women that was prevalent in the 20th century. Hurston tried to
53 break down the culture of women not working during the 20th century by focusing on Delia
54 as the breadwinner of the family. However, she also showed that despite Delia being
55 financially capable, her earnings were vehemently snatched away by Sykes. This contrasting
56 situation draws one's attention to the mistreatment of women back in that time.

57 The next analysis lies in the fact that, though Sykes is financially dependent on Delia, he
58 doesn't hesitate to bring the rattlesnake home to scare and poison her. Despite her begging
59 him to put the snake out of the home, he doesn't listen and keeps doing things as he wants to.
60 This instance shows the heinous acts of Sykes, who doesn't care about Delia at all. His
61 perception of Delia is that of a weak, submissive wife who cannot even have a voice of her
62 own when it comes to her rights.

63 Ironically, all these instances make Delia the New Woman who uses resistance to fight
64 against the injustices she faced as a woman. Hurston portrays her as a strong woman towards
65 the end of the story who, though, doesn't use revenge to go against Sykes but rather, uses
66 resistance and lets Poetic Justice do its part when Sykes struggles with his life. "Delia who
67 was previously represented as submissive, subordinate and even helpless was not entirely
68 correct. Because of the oppression that kept happening to her, Delia was moved and to fight
69 and rebel in other ways" (Bere and Arianto 255). She strongly stands as a resistant woman
70 who doesn't care even if her abusive husband, Sykes, dies at the end. She waits for his voice
71 to get silent, which proves that she is no longer emotionally influenced by him.

72 Thus, Hurston depicted the rattlesnake as a strong symbol in the story. Though Sykes brings it
73 to show his male domination by terrorising Delia, this same snake serves as the point of
74 Poetic Justice where Sykes gets bitten by it and dies at the end. His death gives a reflection of
75 the shattering of patriarchal structure and male dominance, where the concept of New
76 Woman and individuality emerge at the end of the story.

77 **Conclusion:**

78 Zora Neale Hurston's short story "Sweat" depicts a compelling portrayal of the dominance
79 faced by women within the patriarchal structures of society and the eventual change or
80 reversal of power that challenges patriarchy and male dominance. Through Delia, Hurston
81 portrayed a woman who underwent physical, emotional, and financial abuse just because she
82 is timid in nature and has barely any rights as a woman. Though Delia has been suffering for
83 15 years of her marriage to Sykes, she continues performing her duties as a diligent wife who
84 initially doesn't seem to have a voice of her own. She continues with her suffering in the
85 hope that one day, Sykes will understand her and they can live a happy life thereafter.
86 However, things do not improve, and Sykes keeps on practicing cruelty upon her. When
87 things become unbearable for her, she decides to hold it no longer and instead waits for the
88 rattlesnake to do its job of biting Sykes, thus poisoning him to death. Hence, Delia's refusal
89 to help Sykes signifies her self-realisation, where she discards the concept of an ideal wife
90 and emerges as the New Woman of the 20th century.

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