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RESEARCH ARTICLE

POWER REVERSAL IN “SWEAT” BY ZORA NEALE HURSTON

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Abstract

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

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Introduction:-

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

Based on these instances, many American women writers who wrote about women emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries. One of the most eminent writers among them is Zora Neale Hurston. She wrote distinctly about the struggles that women faced during the 20th century with reference to her female protagonist Delia in her short story "Sweat" (published in November, 1926). "The storyline in the work of patriarchal put the female characters end tragically and sadly while the goal is to make the reader to open their heart and mind that women are still not in good condition" (Setiawan and Widyaningrum 68).

"Sweat" is about a Black washerwoman named Delia who is portrayed as a submissive and hardworking wife. Her husband, Sykes, is a dominating and cruel man who has an illicit affair with another woman. Sykes has been mentally and physically abusing Delia for 15 years of their marriage. Whatever Delia would earn, Sykes would use her hard-earned income to spend on himself and his mistress, Bertha. Moreover, Sykes dislikes Delia so much that he even tries to poison her with the bite of a rattlesnake that he brings home. Despite Delia's multiple requests to remove the rattlesnake from their home, he makes fun of her and keeps it inside. However, ironically, towards the

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end of the story, he gets bitten by the rattlesnake and pleads for Delia's help, but she doesn't respond, and waits until he gets poisoned by the bite and dies thereafter. "Delia in the end defied the rules made by her husband against her by going to seek freedom as a strong and independent woman" (Bere and Arianto 250).

Review of Literature:-

Noviana Osinta Bere and Tomy Arianto, in their research paper "Woman Violence And Resistance in "Sweat" Short Story by Zora Neale Hurston: Feminist Approach" have stated that "Women's resistance is a form of present day emancipation that is carried out to oppose gender differences between women and men. This breakthrough has been stated by many experts that gender equality between men and women is equal and gets the same rights" (252). Many experts agree that both women and men are equal in society. Hence, a woman fighting against gender-based discrimination is the most appropriate way to achieve their basic rights, and achieve equality.

Yogi Ario Setiawan and Agnes Widyaningrum, in their research paper "Man Domination and Domestic Violence Described in Sweat by Zora Neale Hurston", have stated that "At this time, or have been since a long time ago, women have received unequal treatment by men in society. The social systems, and even a culture says that men are superior. Based on that situation, it caused protests from women, and the feminist movement had been started" (68). Back in the early 20th century, the conditions of women were pathetic. They barely had any basic rights and/or the liberty to enjoy individualism. Hence, many movements such as Feminism emerged so that women could achieve victory by defeating gender-based discrimination.

Materials and Methods:-

The main research techniques used for this research paper are content analysis and literature evaluation. A comprehensive approach is utilised to explore the sufferings of women that were prevalent in the 20th century and how the concept of New Woman was portrayed post their sufferings. Moving forward, the paper intends to discuss the themes of Zora Neale Hurston's story "Sweat", such as patriarchal structure, oppression, inferior sex, etc. Moving forward to the objectives of the research paper, it aims to explore the different types of abuse Delia underwent within the boundaries of marriage, to focus on the psychological development of Delia- her journey from submissive wife to New Woman, and to bring light to the rattlesnake as a symbol that provides poetic justice towards the end of the story. Thus, it provides a detailed research on how patriarchy dominated women and considered them to be of little or no value to society.

Results and Discussion:-

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

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

Ironically, all these instances make Delia the New Woman who uses resistance to fight against the injustices she faced as a woman. These observations align well with what Bere and Arianto have stated in their paper. They argue that Delia becomes a resistant woman after suffering from abuse within her marriage. Similarly, Setiawan and Widyaningrum believe that patriarchal domination was very prevalent in the 20th century and made a woman's life difficult. Hurston portrayed her as a strong woman towards the end of the story who, though, doesn't use revenge to go against Sykes but rather, uses resistance and lets Poetic Justice do its part when Sykes struggles with his life. "Delia who was previously represented as submissive, subordinate and even helpless was not entirely correct. Because of the oppression that kept happening to her, Delia was moved and to fight and rebel in other ways" (Bere

and Arianto 255). She strongly stands as a resistant woman who doesn't care even if her abusive husband, Sykes, dies at the end. She waits for his voice to get silent, which proves that she is no longer emotionally influenced by him.

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

Conclusion:-

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

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