

ARTICLE

Exploring Gender Oppression in *Sweat* by Zora Neale Hurston: Feminist Literary Criticism

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ABSTRACT ENGLISH:

The research aims to analyze gender oppression in the short story *Sweat* written by Zora Neale Hurston. This study seeks to understand how gender oppression is represented through literary work. Using a qualitative method, the study relied on textual analysis by identifying and closely examining selected narrative data that highlight the main character's experiences of oppression. The analysis was conducted using the theory of oppression proposed by Iris Marion Young, which offers a framework for understanding how various forms of oppression affect marginalized individuals. The findings reveal that four forms of oppression are reflected in the story, namely exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and violence. The main character was exploited through her unrecognized and undervalued labor, which sustained her household while benefiting her abusive husband. She was marginalized through her social isolation and lack of emotional support from those around her. Her powerlessness was portrayed through her inability to make decisions or assert control over her own life, largely due to emotional and psychological manipulation. Finally, she was subjected to physical and emotional violence that further stripped away her sense of safety and autonomy. These findings highlight how *Sweat* critiques gender-based oppression in both domestic and societal contexts.

Keywords: Gender Oppression, *Sweat*, Zora Neale Hurston, Literary Criticism, Feminism

ABSTRACT INDONESIAN:

Tujuan penelitian ini adalah menganalisis penindasan gender dalam cerita pendek berjudul *Sweat* karya Zora Neale Hurston. Studi ini berupaya memahami bagaimana penindasan gender direpresentasikan melalui karya sastra. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis teks dengan cara mengidentifikasi dan mengkaji secara mendalam data naratif yang menyoroti penindasan yang dialami oleh tokoh utama dalam cerita pendek tersebut. Analisis dilakukan dengan menggunakan teori penindasan yang dikemukakan oleh Iris Marion Young. Teori ini memberikan kerangka untuk memahami bagaimana berbagai bentuk penindasan memengaruhi individu yang terpinggirkan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa terdapat empat bentuk penindasan yang tercermin dalam cerita, yaitu eksploitasi, marginalisasi, ketidakberdayaan, dan kekerasan. Tokoh utama dieksploitasi melalui kerja kerasnya yang tidak diakui dan tidak dihargai, meskipun menopang kehidupan rumah tangganya dan justru menguntungkan suaminya yang kasar. Marginalisasi tercermin melalui isolasi sosial dan kurangnya dukungan emosional dari lingkungan sekitarnya. Ketidakberdayaan tokoh utama terlihat dari ketidakmampuannya dalam mengambil keputusan atau mengendalikan hidupnya sendiri, yang sebagian besar disebabkan oleh manipulasi emosional dan psikologis. Tokoh utama juga mengalami kekerasan fisik dan emosional yang mengikis rasa aman dan otonominya sebagai individu. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa *Sweat* merupakan karya sastra yang secara kritis menggambarkan penindasan berbasis gender dalam konteks domestik maupun sosial.

Kata kunci: Penindasan Gender, *Sweat*, Zora Neale Hurston, Kritik Sasta, Feminisme

Introduction

Women oppression refers to the systemic and structural disadvantages that women face across various aspects of life—economically, socially, culturally, and politically—due to patriarchal norms that privilege men (Djohar et al., 2023; Gupta et al., 2023). It manifests in forms such as economic exploitation, restricted access to education and leadership, denial of bodily autonomy, domestic abuse, and cultural marginalization (Rahma, 2023). Feminist scholars argue that this form of oppression is not limited to isolated incidents but is deeply ingrained in everyday interactions and institutions that normalize the subjugation of women (Naufina, 2021). Although legal and social reforms have been introduced in many societies, gender-based inequality and violence remain pervasive, highlighting the enduring impact of patriarchal ideologies on women's lives (Agung, 2024).

In the realm of literature, particularly in short stories, gender oppression is often subtly yet powerfully depicted. Through the lens of fictional narratives, authors are able to explore women's lived experiences, challenge dominant social norms, and critique systems of power (Kristami et al., 2022). Short stories offer a concentrated form of storytelling that captures everyday moments of struggle, resistance, and resilience (Baruiz et al., 2023). As such, they serve not only as artistic expressions but also as cultural texts that document and resist systemic injustices. Literary works, especially those written by or about women, often reflect the psychological, social, and economic dimensions of oppression, offering valuable insights into how power and resistance are negotiated in intimate and domestic spaces (Lin, 2024).

Analyzing gender oppression in literature is essential because it enables readers and researchers to identify how language, symbolism, and narrative structure contribute to shaping our understanding of gender roles and inequalities (Azmy et al., 2024; Bashir & Mehmood, 2024; Rahman et al., 2024). Literature reflects social realities; therefore, studying literary texts through the lens of gender and oppression reveals not only how women are portrayed but also how societal norms are challenged or reinforced through storytelling (Ladzekpo et al., 2024). It also allows for a deeper understanding of how cultural products maintain or question dominant ideologies, particularly in contexts where women's voices are often marginalized or silenced (Akhter, 2020).

Previous studies have explored the theme of women's oppression in literature using various approaches. Prajnandhari (2020) analysed the television series *The Handmaid's Tale* using transitivity theory to show how linguistic choices reflect the protagonist's suppressed voice under a dystopian patriarchy. Putri & Hafsa (2023) examined the novel *Enola Holmes* through the lens of liberal feminism, focusing on how patriarchal control limits women's freedom in education and public life. Amelia & Udasmoro (2023) discussed internalized misogyny in the movie *Lady J*, highlighting how women can unknowingly reinforce patriarchal values by turning against each other. While these studies offer valuable insights, they mostly emphasize either linguistic form or women's resistance. This study extends the discussion by offering a deeper look at how structural gender injustice is reflected in narrative elements such as language, power dynamics, and symbolism within a realist short story setting.

This study examines gender oppression in the short story *Sweat* written by Zora Neale Hurston (1997) using the theory of oppression proposed by Young (2014). Young identifies five primary faces of oppression—exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence—all of which function as tools of systemic injustice. Her framework offers a multidimensional perspective that is particularly useful for analysing how literary narratives reflect the complex realities of women's oppression. By using this theoretical lens, the study seeks to uncover how structural and cultural forms of oppression are inscribed in the characters, conflicts, and narrative techniques of the story.

The aim of this study is to explore the portrayal of women's oppression in *Sweat* using Young's conceptual framework. It intends to identify the types of oppression depicted in the story and to examine how they contribute to a deeper understanding of gender inequality. The significance of the study lies in its contribution to feminist literary criticism and gender studies, particularly by demonstrating how literature can be a powerful medium for representing and critiquing systemic gender oppression. Through this analysis, the study hopes to support ongoing scholarly efforts to challenge patriarchal structures in both literature and society.

Method

This study applied a qualitative research method to interpret and analyse literary texts through close reading and contextual understanding. The data source is the short story *Sweat* by Zora Neale Hurston, originally published in 1926 and later included in various anthologies, including *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997). The story follows Delia, a Black washerwoman in the American South, who endures years of emotional and physical abuse from her husband. The short story was selected for this study due to its powerful depiction of a woman's experience under intersecting systems of power, making it a relevant and rich text for exploring gender oppression in literature.

The data were collected through close reading and note-taking, focusing on passages, dialogues, and narrative moments that reflect oppression. The theoretical framework used in this study is the theory of oppression proposed by Young (2014), which identifies five dimensions of structural oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. These categories provide a comprehensive lens for analysing the types and mechanisms of gender oppression reflected in the text. The technique of analysis involved identifying textual evidence that corresponds to the theory of oppression by Young (2014), followed by interpreting how these narrative elements function to reveal and critique gender-based oppression.

Result and Discussion

Based on the analysis conducted in this study, it was found that the short story *Sweat* by Zora Neale Hurston (1997) reflects four out of the five forms of oppression identified in Young's (2014) theoretical framework: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and violence. Delia, the main character, experiences exploitation through the unequal division of labour in her marriage, marginalization through her social isolation and lack of community support,

powerlessness in her inability to challenge or escape her husband's emotional control, and violence through both physical abuse and psychological intimidation.

Exploitation

The concept of exploitation explains how gender inequality is reinforced through the systematic use of women's labor to benefit men. In both family and workplace settings, women's contributions—whether through caregiving, household tasks, or emotionally demanding jobs—are essential to men's social and professional success but are often unrecognized and undervalued. This exploitation enables men to maintain their status and autonomy through women's labor, yet women often receive limited recognition, rewards, or advancement opportunities in return. This unequal dynamic plays a central role in upholding a social structure that privileges men while undervaluing women's essential contributions (Young, 2014).

Data 1

Delia: "Looka heah, Sykes, you done gone too fur. Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin' in washin' for fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!"

Sykes: "What's that got to do with me?" he asked brutally.

Delia: "What's it got to do with you, Sykes? Mah tub of suds is filled yo' belly with vittles more times than yo' hands is filled it. Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin' in it."

(Hurstons, 1997)

The excerpt in data 1 excerpt illustrates exploitation, where Delia's labor is consistently used to sustain the household while she receives no appreciation, protection, or support in return. Over the course of fifteen years, she has not only provided for her home but also carried the physical and emotional burden of maintaining it through her work as a washerwoman. Her repeated phrase, "*Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!*" emphasizes the exhausting cycle of labor she endures, suggesting not just physical strain but also emotional burden.

Despite this, Sykes responds with cold indifference, asking, "*What's that got to do with me?*" His question is not just cruel, it also reveals the deeply embedded dynamic of exploitation. Delia's labor feeds him and pays for the roof over their heads, yet he distances himself entirely from any responsibility or gratitude. She even highlights that her "*tub of suds has filled [his] belly with food more times than [his] hands ever have,*" which draws attention to the unequal division of labor in their marriage: she works, he consumes.

This kind of exploitation is not just about economic dependence. It is also about how one person's labor, especially a woman's, is taken for granted in a patriarchal structure (Pandey, 2024). Delia's work takes place within the domestic sphere, which historically has been devalued despite its essential contributions to survival. The fact that she must defend her

right to continue working in her own home, despite funding nearly everything in it, underlines how powerless she is in the eyes of her husband.

Her line, “*My sweat has paid for this house and I reckon I can keep on sweating in it*” is especially significant. It is a moment of resistance, a quiet assertion of ownership and dignity in the face of exploitation. Yet, the fact that she has to argue for this at all reflects the larger system that allows men like Sykes to benefit from women’s labor without accountability. The imbalance of power and labor in their relationship is not just personal, it reflects broader social norms that expect women to serve while men benefit (Howes et al., 2024).

Delia’s suffering is not only about being overworked, but it is also about the emotional exhaustion of being used by someone who refuses to recognize her worth. This is the essence of exploitation: one person is made to carry the burden while another enjoys the benefits, without ever acknowledging the injustice.

Data 2

Clarke spoke for the first time. “Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be decent if it aint in ‘im. There’s plenty men dat takes a wife lak dey do a joint uh sugar-cane. It’s round, juicy an’ sweet when dey gits it. But dey squeeze an’ grind, squeeze an’ grind an’ wring tell dey wring every drop uh pleasure dat’s in ‘em out. When dey’s satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treats ‘em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey throws em away. Dey knows whut dey is doin’ while dey is at it, an’ hates theirselves fuh it but they keeps on hangin’ after huh tell she’s empty. Den dey hates huh fuh bein’ a cane-chew an’ in de way.”

(Hurstons, 1997)

The passage in data 2 is a striking reflection of exploitation, one of the five faces of oppression. Clarke’s commentary offers a powerful metaphor that exposes how women, especially wives, are often valued only for the immediate satisfaction they bring to men, and once that usefulness fades, they are discarded. The comparison of women to a “joint of sugarcane” illustrates how men extract pleasure, labor, and emotional care from women, only to dispose of them once they are perceived to be “used up.” This metaphor does more than highlight individual mistreatment; it captures a deeply embedded structural mindset that treats women as consumable resources rather than equal human beings.

Clarke’s observation, “*They squeeze and grind, squeeze and grind and wring till they wring every drop of pleasure that’s in ‘em out,*” vividly conveys how some men exploit their partners both emotionally and physically. It shows that the issue is not just neglect or abuse, but systematic extraction—taking as much as possible from women in terms of affection, sex, labor, and loyalty, without offering care, respect, or reciprocity in return. This aligns directly with the concept of exploitation as defined by Young (2014), where the energy and effort of one group—in this case, women—are used to sustain the comfort and advantage of another, more dominant group—men.

What makes this form of oppression even more harmful is that the men involved are aware of what they are doing. Clarke admits that “*They knows what they is doin’ while they*

is at it, and hates themselves for it, but they keeps on hangin' after her till she's empty." This admission exposes the moral dissonance at the heart of exploitation. It is not rooted in ignorance, but in a system that normalizes and excuses such behavior. Men continue to depend on women emotionally and physically, even as they strip away their partners' vitality and worth and then turn that exhaustion into justification for resentment.

The final part of Clarke's statement, *"Then they hates her for bein' a cane-chew and in the way,"* illustrates how the blame is ultimately shifted back onto women. After exploiting their wives, men justify emotional detachment or even violence by pointing to the toll their own exploitation has taken. In this way, the oppressed are blamed for the very consequences of their oppression. This dynamic reflects a broader cultural pattern in which women are praised for their sacrifice but punished for showing the cost of it—whether through aging, emotional fatigue, or physical weariness (Koci, 2021).

Clarke's reflection, while blunt, serves as a critique of male entitlement and the exploitative nature of some marital relationships. It points to a larger cultural framework in which women are expected to give without limit, while men reserve the right to take, resent, and discard (Manning & Crăciun, 2024). The fact that Clarke recognizes this pattern also reveals how normalized it has become—something that men observe, name, and even critique, yet rarely challenge.

Marginalization

Despite advancements in education, career, and personal freedoms, women are often sidelined in leadership roles and policy-making discussions. This marginalization is partly due to traditional roles that still cast women as primary caregivers and supporters, positioning them in ways that make their contributions less visible or deemed secondary to those in power. Such exclusion impacts women's ability to influence decisions that shape social, economic, and political landscapes, reinforcing a cycle where their needs, perspectives, and potential remain underrepresented. For instance, in corporate and political spheres, women may be present but lack real authority, as their input can be undervalued or dismissed. This lack of representation not only limits women's growth but also affects broader societal outcomes, as diverse perspectives in decision-making are essential for inclusive progress (Young, 2014).

Data 3

"He's allus been crazy 'bout fat women," put in Merchant. "He'd a' been tied up wid one long time ago if he could a' found one tuh have him. Did Ah tell yuh 'bout him come sidlin' roun' mah wife—bringin' her a basket uh pecans outa his yard fuh a present? Yessir, mah wife! She tol' him tuh take 'em right straight back home, cause Delia works so hard ovah dat washtub she reckon everything on de place taste lak sweat an' soapsuds. Ah jus' wisht Ah'd a' caught 'im 'dere! Ah'd a' made his hips ketch on fiah down dat shell road."

"Ah know he done it, too. Ah sees 'im grinnin' at every 'oman dat passes," Walter Thomas said.

(Hurstons, 1997)

The passage in data 3 offers a compelling example of marginalization, a form of oppression in which certain individuals or groups are pushed to the edges of society, denied meaningful participation, and treated as socially invisible or irrelevant. While the men in this scene gossip about Sykes's behavior and clearly express disapproval, their remarks also reflect how Delia's suffering is visible but ultimately unaddressed by the community. She is discussed with a mix of pity and resignation, but no real action is taken to intervene or support her directly (Beyer et al., 2015).

Merchant recounts how Sykes made advances toward his own wife and remarks, "*She told him to take them right straight back home, cause Delia works so hard over that washtub she reckon everything on the place taste like sweat and soapsuds.*" This statement, while critical of Sykes and sympathetic to Delia, also highlights how Delia has been reduced to her labor in the eyes of others. She is known not for her voice, her choices, or her presence in the community, but for how hard she works and how overworked she appears. This recognition is not empowering—it reinforces the image of a woman whose life revolves around endless domestic labor, without acknowledgment, reward, or reprieve.

Walter Thomas adds, "*I know he done it too. I sees him grinnin' at every woman that passes,*" which further reflects the town's awareness of Sykes's behavior. Yet, the tone of their conversation is more observational than confrontational. They speak about Delia's hardships, but they do so among themselves, not with her, and not in any way that meaningfully challenges the conditions she endures. This dynamic reflects how marginalized individuals are seen, even pitied, but not supported or included in efforts that would restore their agency (Choudhury & Kumar, 2022).

Marginalization, in this case, operates subtly: Delia is not excluded from her community in a physical or legal sense, but she is socially isolated, left to endure abuse and exploitation while others simply watch. Her suffering becomes a topic of discussion, rather than a call to collective action. The men acknowledge the injustice, but they continue their lives unchanged, illustrating how marginalized people are often recognized only through their pain, not their personhood.

This passage shows that Delia's place in the community is not one of equality. Her work is acknowledged, her pain is noticed, but her voice is absent, and her autonomy is unsupported. That is the essence of marginalization—not being completely unseen, but being seen without being heard, known without being included, and valued only for what one endures rather than who one is.

Powerlessness

The concept of powerlessness highlights how women, despite being present in various social and professional spheres, often lack true authority in making decisions that shape their lives. Those labeled as "powerless" are subject to decisions made by others, with limited opportunity to influence policies or outcomes. Powerlessness restricts women's autonomy, limits their capacity for creativity and self-expression, and often leads to a lack of respect and

recognition in public settings. This lack of authority and respect not only inhibits the development of women's potential but also reinforces systemic inequalities (Young, 2014).

Data 4

Just then Delia drove past on her way home, as Sykes was ordering magnificently for Bertha. It pleased him for Delia to see.

"Git whutsoever yo' heart desires, Honey. Wait a minute, Joe. Give huh two bottles uh strawberry soda-water, uh quart uh parched ground-peas, an' a block uh chewin' gum."

With all this they left the store, with Sykes reminding Bertha that this was his town and she could have it if she wanted it.

(Hurstun, 1997)

The scene in data 4 illustrates powerlessness as a form of oppression, where Delia is publicly humiliated and reminded of her lack of agency in both her personal and social life. As she passes by, Sykes flaunts his affair with Bertha in broad daylight, deliberately showcasing his control and disrespect. His loud, performative generosity, "*Git whutsoever yo' heart desires, Honey*", is not only directed at Bertha, but also at Delia, as a form of emotional domination. His intent is not only to please his mistress but to wound his wife. This kind of calculated cruelty reveals how powerlessness can be enforced not only through physical or economic means but also through social humiliation (Hulley et al., 2023).

In Young's framework (2014), powerlessness involves the inability to participate in decision-making processes and the denial of autonomy over one's life. Delia's powerlessness is both symbolic and practical. She witnesses her husband publicly rewarding another woman with resources that, in all likelihood, have been earned through Delia's labor. Her inability to intervene, respond, or stop this behaviour, without risking further harm, reflects the constraints placed upon her. She is silenced not just by fear or social norms, but by an unequal power dynamic that strips her of dignity and voice.

Sykes's actions are especially demeaning because they take place within the public sphere, a space where Delia is made to feel invisible and powerless. The line "*It pleased him for Delia to see*" is central—it confirms that this is an act of intentional degradation. His performance of affection and abundance toward Bertha is designed to reinforce Delia's inferiority. She is not just excluded from the display; she is the audience for her own humiliation. This reflects a social dynamic in which some individuals are empowered to shape public narratives while others are forced to endure them in silence.

Additionally, the phrase "*this was his town and she could have it if she wanted it*" reveals how Sykes wields symbolic ownership over space and identity. He claims dominance not only over Bertha but over the town itself, positioning himself as someone with the freedom to give and take, while Delia remains stuck in a marriage where she has no such authority. This exaggerated sense of entitlement stands in stark contrast to Delia's quiet endurance, further highlighting how powerlessness works as an everyday, lived experience.

Violence

The concept of violence in the theory of oppression highlights how women, among other marginalized groups, face the constant threat of attacks, harassment, and intimidation simply because of their identity. This threat is not just the result of isolated acts but is deeply rooted in social practices that permit and even normalize such violence, affecting women's freedom, dignity, and daily well-being. The violence directed at women—whether through physical assault, sexual harassment, or intimidation—creates a climate of fear that reinforces inequality by keeping women perpetually aware of their vulnerability. This systemic nature of violence often stems from deep-seated fears or insecurities, making it a social injustice embedded in cultural attitudes rather than mere individual wrongdoing (Young, 2014).

Data 5

He stepped roughly upon the whitest pile of things, kicking them helter-skelter as he crossed the room. His wife gave a little scream of dismay, and quickly gathered them together again.

Delia: "Sykes, you quit grindin' dirt into these clothes! How can Ah git through by Sat'day if Ah don't start on Sunday?"

Sykes: "Ah don't keer if you never git through. Anyhow, Ah done promised Gawd and a couple of other men, Ah aint gointer have it in mah house. Don't gimme no lip neither, else Ah'll throw 'em out and put mah fist up side yo' head to boot."

(Hurstun, 1997)

The passage in data 5 reveals a clear example of gender-based violence as a method of control. Violence is not merely an individual act of aggression, but a systemic form of intimidation and control that keeps oppressed individuals, especially women, constantly aware of their vulnerability. In this data, the character Sykes displays physical aggression and threatening language toward Delia, his wife, as a way to assert dominance and instill fear.

In the scene, Sykes deliberately disrupts Delia's work by trampling over the clean laundry she has painstakingly sorted and threatens her with physical violence: "*Don't gimme no lip neither, else Ah'll throw 'em out and put mah fist up side yo' head to boot.*" This explicit threat shows how violence functions as a tool to silence and control. The potential for physical harm is not simply a private domestic issue. It is a form of structural oppression that reflects how some men, empowered by patriarchal norms, maintain authority over women through fear and the threat of force (Beebeejaun-Muslum, 2024).

Young (2014) explains that the violence directed at women is often normalized by social attitudes and sustained through cultural silence or acceptance. Sykes' behavior is not treated as abnormal in the story's community, and Delia, instead of reacting with outrage or defense, silently continues her work and tries to avoid confrontation. Her calmness in the face of aggression is not a sign of weakness but a survival strategy. It is a result of living in a social environment where violence has become routine and expected. The absence of institutional

intervention in her situation mirrors what Young describes as the systemic tolerance of violence against women.

Moreover, the passage shows how this violence is tied to control over labor and space. Sykes wants Delia to stop working in their home, despite the fact that her labor sustains them. By threatening her and destroying her work, he attempts to reclaim authority over both her physical movements and economic contributions. The fear of being beaten into submission becomes a way for Sykes to reassert his perceived ownership, not just of the home, but of Delia herself. This aligns with Young's argument that violence functions not only to cause harm, but to keep oppressed individuals "in their place."

In summary, this scene powerfully illustrates the oppression of violence, where Sykes uses intimidation, threats, and physical interference to assert power over Delia. This form of oppression is not isolated but embedded in the larger patriarchal structures that tolerate male aggression and devalue women's safety. Delia's experience is not just a personal struggle, it is a representation of how gendered violence operates within everyday life, reinforcing inequality through fear and silence.

Data 6

"She had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing after the flesh. Two months after the wedding, he had given her the first brutal beating. She had the memory of his numerous trips to Orlando with all of his wages when he had returned to her penniless, even before the first year had passed."

(Hurstun, 1997)

The passage in data 6 reflects oppression through violence, specifically in the form of domestic abuse and coercive control. The reference to Sykes delivering a "*brutal beating*" just two months after their wedding marks the early and immediate use of physical force as a way to assert dominance and maintain control over Delia. Violence in this context is not an isolated incident but the beginning of a recurring pattern that defines the emotional and physical landscape of their marriage. The detail that this occurred so soon after the wedding also signals how quickly Delia's expectations of love were shattered and replaced by fear, humiliation, and suffering.

The line "*She had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing after the flesh*" suggests a profound mismatch in emotional intention. Delia entered the marriage with sincerity, offering emotional commitment and stability. In contrast, Sykes is portrayed as driven by physical desire and self-interest, seeking gratification without any intention to reciprocate emotionally or materially. The betrayal is intensified by his early acts of violence, which signal that his interest in the relationship was never grounded in partnership, but in domination.

Violence, as one of the most visible and painful faces of oppression, operates here as a tool to keep Delia subjugated and afraid. Young (2014) emphasizes that systemic violence is often supported by social structures that excuse or ignore harm done to marginalized groups.

In this case, to women within the institution of marriage. Delia's suffering is further compounded by economic betrayal: Sykes not only physically abuses her, but also drains their shared financial resources by taking *"numerous trips to Orlando with all of his wages,"* returning home empty-handed. This reflects an additional layer of control and disregard, where financial dependence is used as a form of manipulation and punishment (Johnson et al., 2022).

This passage demonstrates how physical violence, when combined with emotional manipulation and financial neglect, becomes a comprehensive method of oppression (Sangeetha et al., 2022). It reinforces the power imbalance in the relationship and creates an environment in which Delia's autonomy, safety, and emotional well-being are systematically undermined. It is a lived experience of structural and personal violence that isolates and dehumanizes its victim (Mazza et al., 2021; Shahbazi et al., 2023).

Data 7

Delia: "Syke, Ah wants you tuh take dat snake 'way fum heah. You done starved me an' Ah put up widcher; you done beat me an Ah took dat, but you done kilt all mah insides bringin' dat varmint heah."

Sykes: "A whole lot Ah keer 'bout how you feels inside uh out. Dat snake aint goin' no damn wheah till Ah gits ready fuh 'im tuh go. So fur as beatin' is concerned, yuh aint took near all dat you gointer take ef yuh stay 'roun' me."

(Hurstons, 1997)

The passage in data 7 powerfully represents the face of violence as a form of systemic oppression, particularly within intimate and domestic spaces. In this moment, Delia pleads with Sykes to remove a rattlesnake he has intentionally brought into their home—fully aware of her intense fear of snakes. Her words, *"You done starved me and Ah put up with you, you done beat me and Ah took dat, but you done kilt all mah insides bringin' dat varmint heah"* express the deep emotional and psychological trauma she has accumulated over the years. The snake becomes the final symbol of her breaking point, a representation not just of physical threat, but of emotional cruelty and psychological terror.

Violence, in Young's (2014) definition, includes not only acts of physical harm but also the use of threats, intimidation, and fear to control others. Sykes's decision to keep the snake, knowing how it terrifies Delia, is a deliberate act of psychological domination. He does not only ignore her fear, but he also uses it as a weapon. This shows how violence can operate even in the absence of physical blows; the fear itself becomes a tool of control. Delia's line *"you done kilt all mah insides"* reveals how sustained fear and abuse can cause internal destruction, leaving lasting emotional damage.

Sykes's response, *"A whole lot Ah keer 'bout how you feels inside uh out"* reveals complete disregard for Delia's well-being. His open admission that he does not care about her feelings, along with the explicit threat *"you ain't took near all dat you gointer take ef yuh stay 'roun' me,"* underscores the continued use of threatened violence as a form of power. This is not just about marital cruelty; it is a reflection of how patriarchal structures allow men to use

fear and harm as legitimate methods of asserting control over women, especially when those women lack institutional or social protection (Dahal et al., 2022).

What makes this oppression even more disturbing is that it occurs in Delia's own home—a space that should offer safety and comfort. Instead, her home becomes a site of fear, transformed into a prison where violence is not only expected but normalized. The snake, as a literal and symbolic object, intrudes into Delia's most personal space, violating her sense of security. The violence is both physical (through beatings) and symbolic (through psychological torment), reinforcing Delia's lack of autonomy and the extent of her oppression.

This moment reveals how violence functions not just as an outburst of anger or punishment, but as a sustained strategy of control. It is used to break down the victim's spirit, limit their freedom, and remind them of their vulnerability (Rose et al., 2023). Delia's endurance, despite years of abuse, starvation, and now fear, reflects both her strength and the crushing weight of systemic violence that forces many women to silently endure harm in environments where they are supposed to be protected.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the short story *Sweat* by Zora Neale Hurston presents a portrayal of gender oppression through the experience of Delia, a woman who endures emotional, physical, and economic abuse within her marriage. The analysis reveals four dominant forms of oppression, namely exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and violence. These forms are shown throughout the story through character interaction, setting, and symbolic elements, highlighting how oppression operates both at the personal and structural level. Hurston's depiction not only brings attention to the struggles of women in patriarchal systems but also emphasizes the silent endurance that often accompanies long-term oppression. While this study focused on one short story and four forms of oppression, future researchers may consider exploring a broader range of literary texts or including the fifth dimension—cultural imperialism—to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how literature reflects and critiques gender-based oppression.

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