

Spirit of Black Culture and the African Soul in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Abstract

This paper focusses on Zora Neale Hurston's consistent delight in highlighting the African soul and the depth and vibrancy of black culture in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. When African-Americans were forced to adopt white values, their African soul was stolen. They became less authentic because of the disintegration of their natural values, which nearly always led to the development of inferiority complexes. Hurston sets out to prove the authenticity of black culture in a world dominated by white people and ideals. In addition to being a mulatta who considers herself a member of the folk, Janie Crawford, the protagonist of the novel, is strong and free of the tightness and melancholy that once characterised that image. Janie not only updated the mulatta's previously sketched imagery, but her portrayal of her main characters exquisitely showcased the black woman's multifaceted nature. Through her folk dream, Janie aims to reach the horizon, which is the satisfaction of life and love. Hurston depicts Janie's quest for selfhood by taking her to a distant vista. She demonstrates how black female protagonists' identification with the black community enables them to grow and realise who they are. Hurston challenges the stereotype of the black woman by focussing on the interior lives of black women. She refrains from showing overt racial conflict.

Keywords: Black, Race, Women, Selfhood, Culture

Zora Neale Hurston is the most prominent African-American novelist in the twentieth-century African-American literary heritage. She is a black woman from the South who wrote during the Harlem Renaissance. She is one of the pioneering cohorts who helped modern African-American women authors reach an unabashedly self-centred point of view in their work and paved the road for their emerging creativity. An evaluation of her novels portrays her as a trailblazer with her insights into the depth of the connection between racism and sexism in America, and her groundbreaking works helped to create a new black womanhood. Her key importance in the African-American female tradition and her distinctive position in the American and African-American canon have not yet been sufficiently examined and presented. In all her writings, she has consistently taken pleasure in highlighting the beauty and soul of Black people. Black cultural background has served as the foundation for her artwork. Her defence of Black values and way of life in the American setting is undoubtedly a protest.

At the beginning of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the narrator gives a broad overview of the disparate lives of men and women before focussing on the life of a single woman. The reader is led by the narrator to focus on Janie through this woman. Following the burial of her third deceased spouse, she has returned to Eatonville. The story Janie entrusts to her kissing buddy Phoeby is told in her own words, in her folk vernacular, in the following chapters. The reader is invited to listen in on the conversation between Phoeby and Janie, two old friends, with tremendous trust and with Phoeby's ears. Hurston alternates between the extremely idiomatic black voice that appears in amazing stretches of free indirect talk and the third-person narrative voice of her educated narrator. More insight into the narrative technique is provided by Hurston's vocabulary, which is varied by the twin voices that converge throughout the work. One could consider the use of a divided voice and a double voice unreconciled to be her greatest accomplishment, a vocal analogy of her dual experiences as a Black person in a non-Black world and as a woman in a world dominated by men.

The central theme of the novel is Janie's quest for and achievement of self-identity. This identity does not exist as a final product that is only waiting for Janie to claim it. To achieve her desires and realise her love ideal beneath a pear tree in bloom, she had to embark on a journey into the distant horizon. When she was sixteen years old and a pretty girl, she witnessed bees fertilising pear tree blossoms and felt her body reach sexual maturity, which caused her consciousness to awaken. She discovered the mysteries of life in the romantic vision beneath the tree, which depicted the pear tree as a representation of marriage, love, and reproduction. As a significant component of her identity, she accepted sexuality as a normal part of life. Her conscious life and her attempts to understand

herself only started at this point. Her quest for her horizon led her to look for the independent sexual option that would allow her to achieve her independence and love, and hence her self-identity.

Due to her inexperience as a youngster, Janie is oblivious to the obstacles that could stifle her desires. She discovered that marriage did not equate to love throughout her first two marriages. With the third man, Tea Cake, she was able to attain her goals of selfhood, emotional fulfilment, freedom, and unrestricted love. Hurston spends the entire novel showing Janie's development as she pursues her nearly three-decade quest for heterosexual love and self-actualization. For an understanding of this black woman's struggle to define herself, it may be important to consider the tension between Janie's idea of herself and the meanings that others have forced upon her. On the contrary, Janie's grandmother Nanny firmly believes that financial possessions alone may provide a woman with security and happiness, while Janie believes that achieving emotional fulfilment through genuine love and personal freedom alone can offer constructive possibilities for prospective self-growth.

Nanny coerces Janie into marrying middle-aged, wealthy farmer Logan Killicks. Despite Nanny's efforts, the marriage does not work out because Janie does not receive the warmth and real affection that a true marriage should provide. Killicks wants Janie to be a passive victim of his male dominion and always treats her like a mule. As a result, Janie's personality and goals are destroyed by her grandma Nanny's fixation with consumerism and achievement. Janie has not been able to satisfy her inner urges since she married Joe Starks. She chose to marry Starks a second time of her own will, without coercion. Additionally, this marriage fails because Jody Starks is no better than Killicks and treats her like a piece of property rather as a human being with feelings, thoughts, and goals of her own. She is dehumanised by these two marriages. Quite rightly According to Jon Woodson, the negative elements in Janie's life are materialistic, aggressive territoriality, and male-dominated marriage norms.

Because of her experiences during the enslavement era, Nanny believes that the only haven from the perils of racial and sexual oppression is the domestic pedestal. Her past as a black slave woman is the cause of her limited vision. "Us coloured folk is branches without roots," (16) she is aware. She had served as a brood sow and a labour ox while enslaved. The grandmother's past serves as a metaphor for racial, class, and gender discrimination in America. Because she is aware of the terrible realities of Black female existence in America, she believes Janie's fantasy of love is likewise a myth, just as her own aspirations were suppressed during enslavement. The protagonist's grandmother articulates one of the novel's central themes in this way: "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see" (14). Black women bear the obligations that society and their families place on

them, much like a mule. Marriage is intended to provide financial security and protection for enslaved women like Nanny.

The middle-class beliefs that her grandmother adopted through Janie's first marriage are completely at odds with Janie's ideas on heterosexual marriage. She disagrees with the content of Nanny's narrow and incorrect worldview, which was created by the repressive sexist and racist society. Fearing that black and white males, such as Janie's mother Leafy, would ruin her, she coerces Janie into an early marriage to wealthy and unromantic middle-aged Killicks. When her seventeen-year-old daughter Leafy was raped by her white schoolteacher, her dream for her was already dashed. Hurston has a profound grasp of what conventional marriage means to women who were once enslaved, even though she is aware of the institution's basic oppressiveness. Hurston suggests that this conventional marriage does not work out. In the end, she would free Janie, her female lead, to pursue independent sexual choice.

Hurston's primary goal in writing the novel is to affirm Black identity. Her novel "is unquestionably, the prototypical Black novel of Affirmation" and a popular work of "Black love" (Jordon's "On Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston," 6). Janie's self-growth and self-discovery are fulfilled when she identifies with the Black community. Hurston's ethos of folklore and her deep faith in the dignity of the Black folk community are what "provide the basis for her definition of the self" (236). Hurston affirms Black folk custom and Black Pride by selecting Tea Cake as Janie's appropriate companion. Tea Cake, her third man, is not a stereotypical black man who represses black women. It is through her affiliation with Tea Cake that she finds her genuine freedom and self-definition.

Tea Cake is portrayed by Hurston as a product of folk culture who does not harbour any unfavourable views regarding women. According to Hurston, the folk man Tea Cake transcends the group's chauvinistic views in the folk tradition. Janie's personal development is only realised when she joins the Everglades' folk culture, "de muck," and works with Tea Cake. In contrast to many other black literary questing characters, Janie's voyage takes her further into blackness rather than away from it. The Everglades' rich black soil, wild care, and communal existence symbolise her absorption into black customs. As Janie puts it, "the men held big arguments here like they used to do the store Porch ... the crowd of people around her and a dice game on her floor" (134). According to Wainwright, who supports this theory, "Janie's growth as an individual entity is achieved only when she merges with the community" ("The Aesthetics of Community," 238).

Hurston appears to be conveying the idea that a black woman can only mould and form herself through the influence of her black community. She follows the African-American call-and-response style when she participates in storytelling sessions. “She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest” (134) describes this folk culture. Hurston creates a novel experience - a communal quest or ascent - by fusing the quest pattern with the African-American call and response pattern. Her life and writing career are significantly influenced by her conception of Black pride and her affection for Black culture. Integration into folk culture and a storytelling tradition are both necessary for Janie to develop an authoritative voice. She eventually achieves full integration with her community due to her storytelling skills, which explore the relationships between race and sex.

Hurston’s depiction of folk procedure in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a work of black fiction, revealed her admiration of folk customs. This explains the frequent appearance of Bahamian Fire Dancers, talking buzzards, a ceremonial yellow mule, huge image talkers on the porch of Joe Clarke’s Store, and lying sessions in the muck. Hurston dramatises the “lying” contest in her literature, and Joe Clarke’s store porch serves as a venue for social, political, and interpersonal engagement as well as pleasure and leisure. In Hurston’s works, the “back porch” phenomena in Eatonville are given symbolic significance because the participants are only “sitters and talkers,” (191) removed from reality. The custom of storytelling, sometimes known as lying sessions, on the front porch of Joe Clarke’s store was a continuous verbal ritual that added poetry, order, and beauty to the local way of life. Black folklore is thus shown through Hurston’s idea of the “store porch” and her depiction of shop porch activities in her fiction as “crayon enlargements of life” (51). “But then when Lige or Sam or Walter or some of the other big picture talkers were using a side of the world for a canvas, Joe would hustle her off inside the store to sell something” (54), Janie’s second husband Joe forbids her from taking part in the porch talk. However, Janie is free to take over this masculine haven when Tea Cake lets her participate in the oral tradition during the shop porch meetings. Hurston’s imaginative creativity revolves around this store porch and its storytellers. The group of storytellers who live on the front porch of Eatonville’s general store are constantly inspired by the irascible yellow mule from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The yellow mule incident, which includes the mule death ceremony, takes up fourteen pages of the novel. Sam, Lige, and Walter are the “ring leaders of the mule talkers” (51). Hurston’s depiction of such a folk procedure in her novels reveals her love of blacks.

Hurston thinks that “talking” alone, outside of experience, is useless when it comes to developing a new black woman from black oral culture. She asserts that experience only leads to one internal development. Because it is

the soil that fosters growth, the feminine characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie and Pheoby, pay more attention to their inner lives than the male characters do. Hurston has made even another change to the stereotype of a conventional black woman in this way. Hurston places a strong emphasis on a woman's inner life because she believes that only this internal development can result in a strong voice. Talking without knowledge is pointless to Janie. She thinks that "You got tuh go there tuh know there," (192). Janie is attesting to the limitations of voice and criticising the culture that values orality at the expense of inner development when she concludes her story by stating that "talking" does not amount to much if it is separated from experience.

Hurston must unavoidably alter the canon of male-chauvinism in Black society to depict a black woman's quest for inner growth. As a result, in the context of a man-woman relationship, Tea Cake, the black man of folk culture in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is shown as a singular figure who stands out. Janie can participate in storytelling sessions on the store porch, which was formerly reserved for men, due to Tea Cake. He grants her a female identity and the flexibility to engage with others. Her lying sessions on the store porch are significant because they are a representation of Black cultural traditions and an element of Black folklore. Hurston criticises Black individuals who abandoned their Black identity and into the white culture. Many African-Americans who aspired to middle-class position in the early 1900s traded their racial identity for the hollowness of social security and consumerism in the white society. Hurston sought to reveal that "there was nothing wrong with being Black" during a time when people believed that "White was right" (Howard's *Zora Neale Hurston*, 65).

None of the passing norms are present in Janie's account in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which is almost entirely situated inside the black community. Hurston's rejection of black self-hatred is exemplified by her portrayal of Mrs. Turner. Mrs. Turner is a light-skinned, Caucasian black woman on the muck in the Everglades. Although Mrs. Turner expects Janie to hate Negroid traits, she likes Janie because of her coffee-and-cream skin and her opulent hair: "She felt honoured by Janie's acquaintance" (144). Black people are Turner's least favourite subject. She has advocated for white principles and is an admirer of white culture. According to her, light-skinned Black people should first try to unite with white people, or if that is not possible, then should create a unique mulatto caste. Hurston uses Mrs. Turner as an illustration of how people of colour might mistakenly identify with white people. Janie's strong sympathy for black people astounds Turner, who denounces her black affirmation:

you'se different from me. Ah can't stand black niggers. Ah don't blame de white folks from hatin' 'em 'cause Ah can't stand 'em mahself. 'Nother thing, Ah hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid 'em. Us oughta class off. (141)

Mrs. Turner despises “de colour and de features,” or her own people (141). Turner and other Black people who embrace white principles are condemned by Janie. Hurston uses Janie’s statement, “Us can’t do it,” (141) to show that she rejects such a mindset. We mixed with other people, and we all had both black and white individuals. Janie, a mulatto woman who proudly declares her Black heritage, mocks her companion Mrs. Turner’s prejudice against those with black complexion.

Hurston criticises not just this black self-loathing but also black people like Mrs. Turner who look to white society’s ideals for their identity. She highlights how foolish these Black individuals are to despise their own people and conform to the dominant white culture. Hurston remarks on Mrs. Turner’s actions, writing:

Anyone who looked more white folkish than herself was better than she was in her criteria, and therefore it was right that they should be cruel to her at times, just as she was cruel to those more Negroid than herself in direct ratio to their negroness ... Insensate cruelty to those you can whip, and groveling submission to those you can’t. (144-45)

Hurston’s rejection of black self-hatred that is implied in passing or other harmful behaviours linked to internalising a negative black racial identity is well-exemplified in Janie’s essay. Neither Mrs. Turner nor Nanny Turner, who stand for white values, achieve notable notoriety. Nanny passes away without achieving either financial or social success. Mrs. Turner is forced to leave the neighbourhood. Hurston clearly aimed to create a female protagonist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* who might embody her conviction that “the Black is Beautiful” and that the Black World is the only place where self-realization can be achieved. She makes it possible for Janie to find herself in the “muck” of the African-American community. In the self-actualized Black community, Hurston examines what true freedom means to Black women.

Only with Tea Cake, a Black man who embraces the poverty and limited opportunities that the dominant white society provides the Black community, can Janie find freedom, love, and humanity. Hurston’s perception of the Black realm as an idealised realm makes sense. She is determined to show her race that being Black is not a bad thing. She exposes the inter-racial colour discrimination among Black people themselves through her novel. The tale describes how an inferiority complex that oppresses oneself might result from discontent with one’s hue. Janie believes that the black people are meant for cobblestones and that the light-skinned people are half-whites who receive everything.

Hurston’s purpose in writing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was to denounce the way her own people treat themselves and their colour. Hurston also illustrates how Black people discriminate based on colour by using the

labels “black niggers” and “yaller niggers.” Hurston goes beyond simply praising Blackness to show how Africanization in art may be a healing remedy for the pernicious illness that is Western culture. Hurston does, in fact, reject being a female “race man,” at least in her public personas as Ann Petry and Richard Wright. There are no racial confrontations amongst Hurston’s characters. They consciously aim to create environments in which African-Americans deal with matters of life that are not under the authority or control of white hegemonic structures. Despite their ethnicity, Hurston’s protagonists persevere by finding guidance and strength in their own communities and Black culture. As a true product of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston has looked to the Black masses for literary inspiration in her quest for a unique Black culture. She never presented racial issues or utilised her art as a tool for social propaganda. Hurston steers clear of overt racial conflict in her novels.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, racism is less significant. Only a few incidents - like the hurricane story in this novel - have overtly racist overtones. Nevertheless, the major plot does not incorporate these occurrences. Hurston quietly conveys her anguish about the racial prejudice displayed by the white soldiers who arrived to bury the victims during the hurricane. The bodies of numerous black and white persons who perished in the flood are all over the place. Tea Cake and Janie are observing the unburied bodies of Black people and the defenceless situation of their people. Only white people should be buried in the boxes, according to orders given to the white guards.

Hurston uses humour and irony to subtly address racial prejudice. She addresses these white guards through her character Tea Cake, who makes the sarcastic remark, “Look lak dey think God don’t know nothing’ ‘bout de Jim Crow Law” (171). Hurston’s racial resistance is limited to these sporadic sarcastic statements. Aside from this, Hurston’s writings hardly ever display a Black vs White mindset. Hurston no longer found any meaning in the race clichés. She claimed, “I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and coloured,” and she had never felt as “tragically coloured” (Folklore, 827). It is clear from her works that she never felt deformed by the consequences of poverty and bigotry.

Hurston’s appeal for her “racial health” and her resolve to write about Black life in the absence of Jim Crow laws, bigotry, and injustice. a perception of Black people as whole, multifaceted, and unaltered human beings - a perception that is absent from a large portion of Black literature and writing. In the ersatz black twenties, her pride in black people was so strong that it caused suspicion and possibly unease among other black people. One could argue that this racial health is in opposition to the Black protest voices of Chester Himes, Ann Petry, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes. However, Hurston’s self-empowerment is an act of resistance in and of itself. In

the American context, affirming Black beliefs and lifestyles is in fact a form of protest. Hurston's novel is immensely defiant that we require a different, safe environment.

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