Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Little Narrative of an African American Woman

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Abstract: This paper discusses Zora Neale Huston's text Their Eyes Were Watching God as a text that is not a prototypical protest novel of an African American woman but as a novel whose woman protagonist Janie Crawford defies the all-encompassing, one-size-fits-all paradigm prescribed for a woman of her racial and cultural background and a clarion call for celebration of the narratives related to their lives. Further an attempt will be made by the author to establish that Janie Starks and Zora Neale Hurston join voices in this text to produce a personal little narrative that celebrates an individual, who defies the meta-narrative of African American female role and goes out of the search for an autonomous self.

Introduction

Their Eyes Were Watching God is one of the most engaging and captivating voice of an African American woman Janie Crawford, and her evolving selfhood through three marriages. Central to the novel is Hurston’s study of the individual struggle for self-knowledge and expression within the folk community, which both smothers and authorizes its affiliates. This story is a break from the meta-narratives of black women in literature and presents a holistic worldview through the little narrative of a woman who grew up in the American South in the early part of the twentieth century and ventured in a quest for self for herself defying the societal narratives prescribed for an African American woman in the early twentieth century.

“Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board” [1]. So begins the novel about a woman’s search for her authentic self and for real love. At first it might seem contradictory that a work whose central character is a woman Janie Crawford should start with a dictum about “the life of men”. What Hurston renders in the next few sentences is a world complete with its codes and disciplines and then placing in that world her vision of how her people play their roles, triumph and survive. So off that metaphorically distant ship comes out Janie Crawford, only to tell the story of the journey all along, her dreams “mocked to death by Time”, but never totally defeated. Since women “remember everything that they don’t want to forget”, Janie Crawford recalls all those moments of her life, from the time she first discovers that she is a “colored” little girl by searching for her face in a group photograph, to the moment she returns to Eatonville from the Everglades.

Their eyes has universal implications for women in that it protests against the restrictions and limitations imposed upon women by a male-dominated society. Hemenway asserts that, in this novel, “Zora Neale Hurston discovered one of the flaws in her early memories of the village: There had usually been only men telling lies on the front porch of Joe Clarke’s Store” [86]. It was a society which believed that someone had to think for “Women and Children and Chickens and cows” and where “men saw one thing and understood then, while women saw ten things and understood none” [110-111]. Like the women of most societies, the females in Janie’s town were expected and encouraged to marry for security and economic advancement.

Hurston’s novel is set mostly in all-Black community of Eatonville during Jim Crow era and in rural South which forms, as bell hooks terms it “space of resistance” [Landscapes of Postmodernity, 61] for Janie. The key to the novel however is Janie’s conception of marriage and resistance to marriage which curtailed her freedom. She gets her definition of marriage from nature when she is sixteen, her sexuality awakens as she watches “the mystery” of a blossoming pear tree in her backyard. After she witnesses the “marriage” between the pear tree and the bee, Janie looks for similar marriages elsewhere. She finds what she seeks inside the kitchen of the
house where she lives with her grandmother: “In the air of the room were flies tumbling and singing, marrying and giving in marriage.” The intensity of her desire would blind her to reality is made ironically and immediately apparent in the very next paragraph where Janie, looking “through pollinated air saw a glorious being coming up the road” [11].

Janie’s grandmother Nanny Crawford and Janie’s first and second husbands saw marriage as a materialistic security venture. Nanny like other women of her community believed in the metanarrative of marriage as a legitimate institution: and if Janie enters this institution it would provide a “way out” for Janie, as escape from poverty and abuse, a chance to sit on “a high place”. Her greatest wish is that Janie should find a respectable husband with property so that he can avoid the traditional fate of African American woman – “De rigger woman is de male wh de word so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayer; Fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!”[14]. “Ah Can’t die easy.” She tells, “Thinking may be demen folks white or African American is makin’ a spit cup outa you [37].” A product of slavery, Nanny understandably wants something different, and better for her granddaughter than the servile role women were forced to play, and something different, and better for her granddaughter as escape from poverty and abuse, a chance to sit on “a high place”.

A product of slavery, Nanny understands that women need something different, and better for her granddaughter than the servile role women were forced to play, and the illegitimate half-white children they were often forced to bear. So she chooses Logan Killicks as her granddaughter’s husband despite his middle-age, unloving and having looks “Like a skull-head in the graveyard”. All that matters is that he has sixty acres of land:

“Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, its protection. Ah ain’t gittik ole, honey. Ah’m done oh. . . . De day and de hour is hid from me, but it won’t be long . . . .

Mah daily prayer now is tuh let dare golden moments rolls on a few days longer till Ah see you safe in life. [15]

Nanny vows that her granddaughter will enjoy the happiness she never had. As Nanny tells Janie “Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sitting. In high, but they was n’t no pulpit for me …… Ah been waiting a long time, Janie, but nothin’ Ah been through ain’t too much if you just take a stance on high ground lak Ah dreamed” when Janie complains that she does not love Killicks and can see no way to love him, she discovers what Nanny means by ‘a stance on high ground”; “You come heah wid you’ mouf full uh foolishness on uh fusy day. Heal you got un prop tuh lean on all you’ bawn days, and big protection, and everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis’ killicks, and you come worryin; me about love” [23]. To make things ease for her grandmother, Janie does return to Logan Killicks: she is, however, only marking time.

Jody Starks is an ambitious young man on his way to make his fortune in the small, all African American community of Eatonville, Florida when she first meets him. To the romantic Janie, he is a knight-in-shining-armor for he not only rescues her from her miserable marriage with Logan, but also offers to fulfill her dreams if she will run away and marry him. However she soon realizes that Jody “did not represent sun… and pollen and blooming trees” but he “spoke far horizon” and so she gave up [29]. When Starks comes to fetch her in his hired rig, Janie unites the apron, a symbol of her servile life with Killicks, from around her waist, and takes a seat beside Starks [32].  Jody Stark becomes the Mayor of Eatonville and as the manager of the General Store the town’s wealthiest citizen too. Consumed by ambition and a longing for assets and possessions, he soon begins to treat Janie like a mere showpiece. “Jody told her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening… . She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang” [41]. Starks believes that women are to be seen and not heard. When the people of the community ask for “uh few words uh encouragement from Mrs. Mayor Starks,’ Mayor Starks is quick to reply: ‘Mah wife don’t know nothing about no speech makin’. H never married her for nothing Lak dat she’s uh woman and her place is in de home”. Janie takes silent exception to her husband’s attitude: it took “the bloom off of things”. As far as Starks believes, Janie is incapable of such a “masculine” attribute as thought. He himself is too caught up with egotism and self-elevation to think about her except as a possession.

Janie, when she is twenty-four and has been married for seven years to Jody, closes over petals; her relationship with her husband becomes purely obligatory. And that made her turn back upon the image – where it lay and she started looking further. She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be [72]. Starks, like Killicks, feels that Janie should be obliged as to what she has got because of her marriage, her elevated status [62]. Janie, though humble, is not grateful. She does not want to be dominated nor dominate but rather she wants to be equal. But her married life with...
Jody took all the fight out of Janie’s face [76]. Janie’s position, however, is only temporary until the opportunity she awaits presents itself. In the meantime, having considered flight and rejected it “To where? To what?” she becomes a stoic and things climax about sixteen years later when Janie, who has been constantly and publicly reminded of her aging body by Jody strikes back. The scene is the store and the results are a short version of the dozens with the fatal blow being levied by Janie: “... Humph! Talkin’ ‘bout me lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” [106]. Jody is shattered.

Janie has shown Jody that the security and power of the “high place” is largely an illusion and thus the attacks the African American patriarchy which considered women as inferiors, mere ‘mules’ to carry on the Burden. Shortly afterwards, Jody takes to his bed and within a few weeks dies. Although Janie does retaliate against Jody’s subjugation but she is finally free. She had run off to live [88]. The horizon is before her once again, and this time Janie does not plan to let it out of her sight. 

Having tried her grandmother’s way of life, Janie now determines to go one her. She explains to Pheoby:

_Nanny was born in Slavery when Folks, dat is African American folks, did n’t sit down anytime dev felt lak it. So sitting on porches lak de while madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat’s what she wanted for me – don’t have time tuh think what tuh do after you got up on de stool up do nothing. De object was tuh git dere. So Ah got up on de high stool lak she told me, but pheoby, Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere. Ah felt like de world .... Cravin’ extrve and Ah ain’t read de common news yet. [103-104]_

She hates her grandmother for limiting her to a speck when the whole horizon beckoned (89). As for her husbands, since Janie insisted upon being ‘petal open’ with them, it was essential that they be open and communicative with her which did not open. When Janie suggested to Killlicks that she might run off and leave him someday, Killlicks refused to reveal his real feelings and he thought it best to put on scorn. ‘Ah or getting’ sleepy, Janie” [30]. Jody on the other hand, had insisted that Janie wear a head rag, but he “Never told Janie how jealous he was [86]. While Janie had been forced to tuck herself away with her first two husbands, with Tea Cake, her third husband, “her soul crawled out from its hiding place”. Tea Cake, in contrast to Janie’s first two husbands, worries very little about money or material possessions; instead he plays the banjo, hunts, plays checkers, and gives mammoth parties. Unlike Killlicks who had “desecrated the pear tree” and Starks who did not represent ‘sun-up and pollen and blooming trees’, Tea-cake could be “a bee for her bloom.” The horizon, with all its infinite possibilities, is back. Tea cake promises happiness, and happiness it is. Janie forgets her age in her new found youth. She is a young girl again watching the bees “marry” the flower blossoms. Finding the town too confining for their ever increasing love, Janie and Tea Cake leave the town, become man and wife, and set up exciting but delightful home. Janie dons overalls and works side by side with Tea Cake picking beans in the muck of the Florida Everglades. Their bliss lasts, with the usual periods of fleeting distrust and jealously, for about two years. Then a storm hits the Everglades, and God takes his glance away. Caught in the eye of the storm, Janie and Tea Cake wait on God to make his move. When destruction seems imminent they strike out for higher ground. They make it, but not before Tea Cake as his teeth close in the flesh of her arm. Death of Tea Cake leave Janie exonerated, distraught, and bereaved. Janie buries Tea Cake in grand manner, and Starks who did not represent ‘sun-up and pollen and blooming trees’, Tea-cake could be “a bee for her bloom.” The horizon, with all its infinite possibilities, is back. Tea cake promises happiness, and happiness it is. Janie forgets her age in her new found youth. She is a young girl again watching the bees “marry” the flower blossoms. Finding the town too confining for their ever increasing love, Janie and Tea Cake leave the town, become man and wife, and set up exciting but delightful home. Janie dons overalls and works side by side with Tea Cake picking beans in the muck of the Florida Everglades. Their bliss lasts, with the usual periods of fleeting distrust and jealously, for about two years. Then a storm hits the Everglades, and God takes his glance away. Caught in the eye of the storm, Janie and Tea Cake wait on God to make his move. When destruction seems imminent they strike out for higher ground. They make it, but not before Tea Cake, in an effort to save Janie, is bitten by a mad dog. Not knowing that the dog has rabies; however, Tea Cake does not see a doctor but instead, after the storm has abated, returns to the Everglades. He gradually becomes more and more irrational and started keeping a loaded pistol under his pillow and periodically pulling it out to him at Janie. When he actually fires at Janie, she returns the shot, killing Tea Cake as his teeth close in the flesh of her arm. Death of Tea Cake left Janie exonerated, distraught, and bereaved. Janie buries Tea Cake in grand manner, continues to wear her overalls, reconciles herself to his friends, and returns to Eatonville. Tea Cake represented intensity and experience. As Janie views their relationship retrospectively she sees herself as delegate to “de big association of life [193].
The theme does loom large in the novel, there are racial overtones which suggest the social tensions, tensions felt in a fleeting, though profound way. There are three cases in point. The first is bedded in the past of Janie’s grandmother. Nanny, like many other attractive female slaves, had to succumb to the sexual whims of her white masters and was born a girl, who looked the white father. Nanny eluded the white folk’s vengeance by escaping with her child and trouncing in the swamps until Emancipation was proclaimed. Her experiences as a slave woman colored her ideas about women and the uses men made of them. So she wanted something better for Janie, some security so that Janie would not be at the whim of any man, be the white or African American. After running away with her illegitimate child, she had been taken in by a kind, white lady, Mrs. Washburn. Nanny’s daughter faced almost the same predicament: she was raped by her school teacher; bore an illegitimate child, Janie; and fled from home. Although Nanny was not responsible for her daughter’s predicament but was convinced so by her white mistress. Nanny’s entire moral code, thus, was developed in reaction to white pressure and she uses men made of them. So she wanted something better for Janie, some security so that Janie would not be at the whim of any man, be the white or African American. After running away with her illegitimate child, she had been taken in by a kind, white lady, Mrs. Washburn. Nanny’s daughter faced almost the same predicament: she was raped by her school teacher; bore an illegitimate child, Janie; and fled from home. Although Nanny was not responsible for her daughter’s predicament but was convinced so by her white mistress. Nanny’s entire moral code, thus, was developed in reaction to white pressure and she urges for that white moral respectability she never had. She sees Janie as her last chance to achieve this respectability and she uses her accordingly.

The second racial incident is manifested in the behavior of Mrs. Turner, a light–complexioned African American woman with Caucasian features and a hankering for whiteness. She idolizes Caucasian traits in others and despises African American features and color. Janie’s complexion draws her close to her acquaintance and is taken aback when she learns that Janie loves African Americans:

You’ se different from me. Ah can’t stand African American 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 .... And dev makes me tired. Always laugh in?’ Dev laughs too much and dev laugh too loud. Always sing in’ ol’ nigger songs! Always cuttin’ de monkey for white folks. If it wuzn’t for so many African American folks it would not be no race problem. . . . Look at me! Ah ain’t got no flat nose and liver lips. Ah’m uh featured woman. Ah got white folks’ features in mah face. Still and all Ah

The third racial case occurs during the upshot of the Lake Okechobee hurricane when the white leaders insisted that all white storm victims be buried in pine boxes while African American victims were simply to be heaped together and covered with quick lime. Although a kind of racial tolerance seemed to prevail during the crisis maybe because of the Jim Crow’s laws, it was now clear that whites did not want even dead African American bodies near bodies of dead whites, even though death itself knew no discrimination.

The novel’s main thrust, however, is towards life, towards affirmation rather than denial, towards celebration of the little happiness that made one feel whole. Janie’s strength gives power to the novel so that, in spite of the hard times and the death, the novel speaks for life. It speaks for the self, for equality, for the pursuit of happiness instead of possessions; it speaks for and seems to recommend, a way of life uncluttered by tradition, stereotypes, materialism, and violence.

The novel ends with Janie returning from burying her lover. Her dream of love had been deferred for a long time, but because of her determination, patience, and persistence, her dream did not explode; rather, it blossomed into a vital reality, and therein lies the undeniable power of the novel, novel that speaks about a woman with her eyes on the horizon. And when Janie returns to Eatonville, she is an older and wiser woman. She has learned that even the best things must end, but she has enjoyed herself immensely. She has no regrets; she no longer cares about the community and its gossip: “If God don’t think no mo’ ‘bout’ in than Ah, do they’s a lost ball in de high grass” [111]. She has realized her dreams and she is content to settle back and enjoy the memories. And, although she still does not value material possessions, she has come to realize their value. Because she still owns the house Jody Starks built in Eatonville, she has a home to return to. And because she has money in the bank, a more comfortable existence is possible. After the ecstatic, creative, and poetic storm, is over and a calm prevails she faces the reality and it realizes the importance of materialism and probably Nanny’s vision too. Dreams, after all, are not the sole reality. Though Janie learns bit by bit but she learns. The opening paragraph of the novel explains the problem with dreams:
With Tea cake, Janie experiences more freedom than most women of her time. And as much as she loves Tea Cake, she ultimately chooses to live not to die with him, and her final act is not to follow him to the grave, but to bury him and return alone to a community that will not embrace and welcome her without first being given an explanation as to where she has been and what she has been through.

Along with the classic divergence between an individual’s wishes and a community’s censure, there are many contemporary motifs in this novel like loveless–marriages; verbal and physical abuse; mercy killing, or a killing in self-defense, depending on how you interpret it; forbidden love; a public and passionate affair between a younger man and an older woman from different stations in life. Many of the minor characters in the novel are vibrantly multicultural and from African Americans to Native Americans to the Caribbean who live and work in the Everglades.

Janie shares a literary affiliation with Celie of Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, whose eyes not only watch God, but whose words and letters, whose voice, speak directly to God. At the end of the book, a whole new life lies ahead, uncharted for a still relatively young Janie Crawford. She will continue to live on her own uncompromising terms, for even as she has lost her beloved, she has also discovered many deeper layers of herself [191]. Racial exploitation is vivid here and what emerges is the a revelation of how the African Americans suffered, tortured from the beginning till the end but tried hard to achieve their goal unlike many other protagonists in African American women’s autobiographical narratives. Janie has no female models, no mother or female relatives from whose examples she learns to pattern her acts of rebellion against the peculiar oppressions that confront all black women. However, in the relationship between Janie and Pheoby, especially after Janie’s return from the muck – Pheoby’s act of bringing food to her friends, Janie’s narration of her story to her, the letter’s response to the story and Janie’s dependency on Pheoby with the authority to communicate the story to the women in the community – the narrative affirms the significance of female bonding in women’s search for their ‘selves’. Freed from the yoke of the title of Mrs. Mayor, and having secured in her identity as one of them, she will participate in the community rituals from which her social position had previously excluded her. Her narrative will and shapes theirs as much as theirs will continue to shape hers is what she aspires for.

Janie characterizes her journey as the trip to “de big association of life … De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin” [6]. She travelled to the horizon of her own dreams, and in this place of personal fulfillment we leave her ready to settle down to help to enrich the life of her community. In choosing love and equal partnership over financial security and materialistic concerns, she takes bold step towards the emotional health that had not previously been hers. The relationship with Tea Cake helped to shape her self-knowledge, but in his death – she is free to discover security in herself, and the courage to speak in her own African American woman’s voice, no longer dependent on men. Claiming the joys and pains of all her experiences as components of her identity, Janie finally comes to the end of the journey begun under the blossoming pear tree more than twenty years before. She had been to the horizon. Now she would begin to live through her newly found woman identified self.

Janie accepts herself fully. She rejects the soul limiting options of materialism and social safety twice in her life – once when she walks away from Logan Killick’s sixty acres, two mules, and an organ in the parlor, and a second time when, after Joe’s death, she agrees to marry Tea cake rather than one of her more affluent suitors. At the end of the novel, as she places her experiences in their proper places in her development, she has no regrets, for even her mistakes have helped to shape her. She sees “her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things – enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” [8].

The book bears a close resemblance to the traditional as-told-to slave narrative of the earlier period. The autobiographical “I” in Their eyes finds self and voice in forging a new history constructed out of the handing down of one woman’s story of liberation to another. Janie becomes a feminist protagonist with an assured place within that
community, and her life becomes an influential source in which other women will find a model for their own self-empowerment. For the first time in her life, Janie can celebrate herself through what she learns in the call and response of a relationship of shared love, intimacy and autonomy. Her voice constitutes a force for liberation within the community of women. Unlike the solitary but representative hero of male-autobiography, Janie Starks and Zora Neale Hurston join voices to produce a personal little narrative that celebrates an individual, who defies the metanarrative of African American female role and goes out of the search for an autonomous self. Although the structure of this text is different, the tradition of African American women celebrating themselves through other women like themselves began with their personal narratives of the nineteenth century. The tradition percolated into the twentieth century. For instance, much of the early portion of Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, celebrates the relationship she had with her mother and the lessons she learned, directly and indirectly, from other women in the community.

As Gates puts it the novel – “reflect a certain development of self-consciousness in a hybrid character, a character who is neither the novel’s protagonist nor the text embodies narrator, but a blend of both, as an emergent and merging moment of consciousness” [xxv-xxvi]. Thus Hurston’s structure for Janie’s story expands that already existing tradition where protagonists and the storyteller are the same and the voice we hear is to and out of the women’s community which while breaking away from the formalities of conventional autobiography makes Janie’s text an autobiography about autobiographical story telling in the tradition of African and Afro-American story telling. In a way she breaks away from the conventional story-telling of protest by African American woman and builds several little narratives which will remain a model for who want to move ahead in life, to reach the horizon. And her words to Pheoby “… you got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo’ Papa and yo mama …else can’t tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody’s got tuh find out about livin’ fuh thyselves” (258). This echoes the denial of an all-encompassing, one-size-fits all paradigm for a woman of Janie’s racial and cultural background and a clarion call for celebration of their little lives, commemorate their wholeness in the little narratives encompassing them and co-existence with the community and the environment.

**Bibliography:**