



Voice and narrative in “*their eyes were watching God*” by *Zora Neale Hurston*

الصوت والسرد في رواية "أعينهم تنظر إلى السماء" للكاتبة زورا نيل هورستن

La voix et le récit dans “*Leurs yeux regardent Dieu*” par *Zora Neale Hurston*

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Submission date: 16-07-2021 -Acceptance date:29-12-2021

Publication date: 29-05-2022

ملخص

تعد الكاتبة ذات الأصول الأفريقية زورا نيل هورستن من الروائيات الأوائل اللواتي وضعن أسس وقواعد الأدب النسوي في أمريكا. من أهم أعمالها رواية "عيونهم تنظر إلى السماء" التي قابلها آراء كثيرة ومتضاربة بين القراء والنقاد فيما يخص تحقيق الشخصية الرئيسية لذاتها وتمكنها من إسماع صوتها في مجتمعها الذكوري الذي يتميز بمجموعة من العادات والأسس التي تكرس سيطرة الرجل على المرأة في جميع المجالات. الهدف من هذا البحث هو دراسة العلاقة بين توزيع القوة بين المرأة والرجل في الرواية بالإضافة إلى الربط بين تعبير الشخصية الرئيسية عن نفسها ومدى تحقيقها لذاتها كأمراة وعضو فعال في المجتمع. سيكون من المثير للاهتمام أيضا تحليل نوع السرد المستعمل من قبل الكاتبة والمتمثل في الخطاب الحر الغير مباشر الي يميز الجزء الأكبر من العمل الأدبي. سيكون الهد فمن هذا البحث هو التطرق إلى مدى تأثير الخطاب الحر الغير مباشر على تناول الكاتبة للشخصية الأنثوية الرئيسية واكتسابها لصوتها كأول خطوة لاستقلالها كأمراة.

الكلمات الدالة: المرأة الأفريقية الأمريكية؛ القوة؛ الصورة؛ تحقيق الذات؛ السرد.

Abstract

The correlation between power, voice and narrative in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston has animated hot debates among scholars, critics and readers who were divided between those who consider the protagonist, Janie as a silent and weak heroine and others who see her as a resistant female figure who finds her voice at the end of the novel. The aim of this paper is to study power distributions in the novel especially in relation to gender considerations, in addition to the link between the protagonist's self-expression and her empowerment as a woman. It would be equally interesting to explore Zora Neale Hurston's

narrative choice in this literary work and its impact on the female character's representation

Keywords: women; African American; voice; narrative; power; gender; self-realization.

Résumé

Le lien entre la voix, le pouvoir et le récit dans *Leurs Yeux Regardent Dieu* par Zora Neale Hurston a animé de vifs débats parmi les universitaires, les lecteurs et les critiques qui étaient divisés entre ceux qui considèrent le protagoniste, Janie comme une héroïne silencieuse et faible et les autres qui la voient comme une figure féminine résistante qui trouve sa voix à la fin du roman. Le but de cet article est d'étudier les distributions du pouvoir dans le roman en particulier en relation avec les considérations de genre en plus du lien entre l'expression du soi du protagoniste et son autonomie en tant que femme. Il serait tout aussi intéressant d'explorer le choix narratif de Zora Neale Hurston dans cette œuvre littéraire et son impact sur la représentation du personnage féminin.

Mot-Clés: femme Africaine-américaine; récit; pouvoir; expression; voix.

Introduction

Commenting on the tripodal aspect of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the critic Amanda Bailey explains how the novel offers “a well-developed connection between story-telling, voice and power” which reflects Hurston's interest in “the possibilities of narrative to maintain and shift power”. (Bailey, 2016, p. 321). In fact, the novel is based on the story of Janie's life that she narrates to her best friend, Pheoby. Through this narrative, Janie recalls the misfortunes she faced in the highly patriarchal African-American society where she lived. Men/women relations, represented by the protagonist and her husbands are based on unequal distribution of power since she is dominated and completely silenced by Killicks and Starks.

In order to understand the reasons behind such power dynamics in Janie's society, we need to explore the patriarchal system in which the characters evolve. Patriarchy is defined as “the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, determine what part women shall or shall not play and in which a female is everywhere subsumed under the male” (Rich, 1995, p. 85).



Applying Rich's definition of patriarchy on the Eatonville society will provide an insight into the male/female relation in the novel and the strategies used by Janie's husbands to exercise their authority. To portray this relation, Hurston uses a set of metaphors especially “the mule” image that is associated with Janie throughout the major part of the novel. In fact, the mule-master dichotomy offers a good parallel with the male/female or dominant/dominated relation in the novel. The last part of this paper will deal with the narrative used by Hurston and to what extent it has served the theme of power and voice. Feminists such as Jennifer Jordon criticised vehemently the use of a free indirect discourse in the novel and claimed that a first-person narrative would have provided Janie “with strength and voice” (Jordon, 1988, p.113). However, it must be stated that a free indirect discourse allies both first and third person narratives and offers an intimacy between the reader, author and narrator.

1. Power Dynamics in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The novel opens with Janie sitting at night with her friend Pheoby and she starts to tell her about the death of Tea Cake. Suddenly, her voice fades away as it is replaced by a third-person narrative that reveals the ordeals she went through. Although the events are told by Hurston's voice, the two friends stand as speaker/listener in the narrative and the reader is made aware of Pheoby's presence whose “hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p.12). As a woman, Janie had to conform to the social construction of womanhood that characterized the African-American community of the early 20th century. Slavery and patriarchy were woven together as forces that contributed to the oppression of African-American women. Although racism is not the leading theme of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, we learn for example that Janie's grandmother, a former slave, was raped by her white master. In addition to the whites' supremacy, African-American women had to bear the authority of black men who exercised their power on them as a way to regain their manhood that was robbed from them by their masters. Addressing Janie, her grandmother, Nanny sums up the female condition at that time as follows:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as far as Ah been able to find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de



ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So, de white man throw de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hands it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can. see (Their Eyes Were Watching God, p.17).

This passage represents the writer's handling of power distributions in the novel where women stand at the bottom of the pyramid of authority. To dramatize the theme of women's subordination at that time, Hurston uses a recurrent animal image which is the mule. According to Julie Haurykiewicz, “the mule image... allows Hurston to comment on numerous types of relationships based on unequal distributions of power” (Haurykiewicz, 1997, p. 47). Indeed, the mule appears at several spots of the novel as a symbol of the oppression and domination of Janie by her husbands, Killicks and Starks. It is important to note that the origin of the mule image goes back to the folk collection *Mules and Men* published by Hurston in 1935. In the collection's titles, the term “Mules” stand for women which suggests their low status in patriarchal black communities.

The choice of the mule metaphor is significant at different levels: first, the mule is an animal of mixed breed exactly like Janie who is a coloured woman. Second, the mule/master dichotomy may be read as a symbol of Janie's relation to men especially her two first husbands who treated her as an object to be exploited and dominated like the animal which works hard for its master. To understand this slave-mule status of Janie, we need to explore her two first marriages by looking at power division in these relations.

Janie is forced to marry Killicks by Nanny who believed that a husband like him who is a propertied man can provide her granddaughter with protection and care as she claims. Their relation is devoid of passion and their conversations are rather centred on daily activities in his farm. He wants her to work hard in the fields and he symbolically buys two “gentle mules” to help her. Janie soon realises that her marriage with Killicks will not be a romance as she expected: “she knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie first dream was dead.” (*Their Eyes Where Watching God*, p.29).



In addition to the lack of affection, Janie is victim of her husband's power abuse as he assaulted her physically and morally. He considers her as an object in the house and he constantly reminds her of her insignificant status: “you ain't got no particular place. its wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and datquick” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p.36). In addition to all sorts of moral harassment, he physically abuses her and on one occasion, he even threatens to kill her: “Ah'll take holt uh dat ax and come in dere and kill yuh” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p. 36).

Domestic violence is one of the most common forms of power abuse that reflects gender inequity in the novel. After this incident, Janie decides to leave Killicks for her new love Joe Starks who promised a brilliant future with her. It is important to note that during her first marriage, Janie is rarely heard. She is silenced by a man who is not interested in her as an individual and a true “partner”. However, she finds in her the strength to break from his control and hopes for a better life.

When Janie meets Joe Starks for the first time, she thinks that he is “like rich white folks”. He is self-confident, funny, speaks for “change and chance” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p. 28) and promises her love, security and a better life. Janie then escapes the “mule and plow” of killicks and moves with Joe to a town called Eatonville where he becomes the mayor and opens a shop. However, soon her dreams vanish as her husband turns to be another persecutor who wants a silent wife to help him in the store exactly like Killicks. Janie is kept by her husband at the fringe of the Eatonville community and she is not allowed to communicate with them. For instance, when the town folks gather to talk about various matters on the porch of his store, she is immediately sent away by Joe: “joe would hustle her inside the store to sell something. Looks like he took pleasure in doing it” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p. 51).

In addition to isolating her from the rest of the community, Joe wants her as a commodity to be possessed for his own pleasure. Symbolically, he asks her to cover her beautiful hair which can be read as another way to impose his control over her. According to the critic Sally Ann Ferguson, Joe affirms his position of authority among his fellows through his voice that is heard at the expense of his wife: “his



attractiveness often manifested in his presence and in particular his voice, comes to depend largely on shutting up hers.” (Ferguson, 1987, p.187). Indeed, through Joe Starks, Hurston represents the idea of power and voice by portraying him as “a man who loves obedience of everybody under de sound of his voice” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p.46). In other words, Joe's authority is achieved by robbing Janie of her voice.

In one of the most salient scenes of the novel, we can see this process of silencing her as a means of power control when Joe is elected as the mayor of Eatonville and Janie is asked by one of the town fellows to make a speech. The reaction of Joe is quite symbolic as he interrupts them: “thank yuhfuhyo compliment, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech making'. Ah never married her for nothing lak dat. she's uh woman and her place is in de home” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p. 40).

The passage above casts light on the patriarchal ideology that characterized society at that time. A woman is not seen intelligent enough to express herself and she is not considered fit to be part of the public sphere. Under the authority of Joe, Janie is objectified, hushed and deprived of any sense of an independent “self”.

2. The Significance of the mule image in the Novel

To dramatize the master/slave relation of Janie and Joe that is based on an imbalanced distribution of power, the metaphor of the mule that appeared at the beginning of the novel is used to reflect the protagonist's subordination. Joe buys the mule of a local citizen after he realized that his wife wanted to rescue the poor animal that was persecuted by its owner. Janie is associated again with a mule that is a symbol of hard work, obedience and silence. Janie shows sympathy for the beast which according to Julie Haurykiewicz strengthens “the parallels between the mule, the slave, and the silenced woman” (Haurykiewicz, 1997, p. 56).

When the animal dies, Joe prevents her from going to the funeral organized by the townsmen. He decides to go and make a speech taking from her again the right to express herself although the mule was hers. According to Emily Delgarno, the death of the animal marks a turning point in the protagonist' development due to its symbolic significance: “the death of woman-as-mule prefigures the discovery of



her public voice” (Delgamo, p. 527). Before the burial of the beast, Joe made his speech standing on the belly of the mule which enhances the idea of his domination as the critic Haurykiewicz observes: “he stands on the dead mule in order to make himself heard just as those in power stand on the silenced” (Haurykiewicz, p.58).

In addition to representing Janie, the mule is used as a general symbol of dominance and oppression. According to the critic Deborah Clarke, Hurston draws a parallel between Janie's status as the slave of her husbands and the black folks who are oppressed by white masters (Clarks, 2001, p. 602). Both Janie and the community folks are voiceless and occupy a mule-slave status under the weight of some abusive authority. Indeed, the whites' supremacy over the blacks of Eatonville is highlighted through the association of its inhabitants with this animal. Describing them, Hurston states that “mules and brutes had occupied their skin” and “they have been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p. 1).

It is only at night after they finish hard work for the whites that they regain their senses and engage in conversations. Just like sexism, racism works as a form of abuse that is based on unequal distribution of power leading to a relation of slave/master that oppresses and silences the blacks it is interesting to note that the mule metaphor can be also seen as a symbol of both slavery and resistance. Indeed, Janie fled from Killicks right after he purchased the mule and her voice was triggered when Joe offered her the beast as she claimed addressing her husband: “you got uh town so you freed uh mule. You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king of something” (*Their Eyes Their Watching God*, p.55). She further shows wit when she compares him to Abraham Lincon. The critic Haurykiewicz comments on the ironic nature of Janie's words as follows: “it serves to belittle the power he has to free the mule and govern the town. Janie thereby silences Joe who never said a word” (Haurykiewicz, 1997, p. 57).

In fact, one of the characteristics of the mule in Hurston short stories “*Why They Always Use Rawhide on a Mule*” and “*The Talking Mule*” is trickery. Janie, then uses the only weapons she has which are wit and irony to reduce Joe's power by teasing and making him speechless. As stated earlier, voice is the symbol of Joe's power so



silencing him marks a reversal in power distribution for the first time which may signal the beginning of her metamorphosis.

Although Janie is silenced, her inner strength is present as she gradually learns to answer her husband's degrading remarks. One day, she uses her oral talent to “emasculate” him as she addresses him In public: “when you pull down yo' bitches, you look lak de change uh life”(*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p. 75). Joe is humiliated in front of the town folks and his reaction to her comment was violent. The critic Henry Louis Gates reads Janie's comment as “signifying” on Joe by “telling him that he not only is nothing but a man, but an impotent man”. Gates adds that “the revelation of the truth kills him. Janie, in effect, has rewritten Joe's text himself and liberated herself in the process”(Gates, 1990, p. 162). It is interesting to note the power dynamics in this male/female relation. Once Joe loses control over his wife's voice who successfully used it against him, he resorts to another form of abuse which is physical violence.

Janie is first silenced verbally by her husband's comments and he physically robbed her of her voice by beating her heavily. The scene of domestic violence confirms the correlation between voice and power. However, soon Joe loses his authority over her when he falls ill and dies after a few months. Before his death, Janie symbolically frees her hair and expresses herself: “you ain't de Joe ah run off down de road wild”(*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p. 82). This indicates a moment of self-realization in Janie's life as she understands that she was just changing masters with her marriage with Joe. The critic Maria Racine comments on Janie's rise of consciousness who comprehends that she is “no longer her husband's creation... Janie comes to understand herself as she is- strong and beautiful. And she uses her power to create the face and voice that the community wants to see and hear in the announcement of Stark's death”(Racine, 1994, p. 288). The speech she makes to announce his death alludes to her liberation and the recovery of a voice.

The last man in Janie's life is the poor and energetic Tea Cake who loves her unconditionally. In her third marriage, Janie finally experiences passion and respect which gradually strengthens her voice that started to be heard after the death of Starks. With the coming of Tea Cake in Janie's life, we can observe another distribution of power



which shifts from slave/master dichotomy to gender equality. Tea Cake accepts Janie as she is and shares with her a simple life devoid of material possessions and prestige as it was the case in her former experiences. They left for the Glades where they worked hand in hand in bean picking, went fishing, hunting, and enjoyed their time with friends.

Janie “found herself glowing inside” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p. 91) and discovered her authentic self that was buried deep inside by her two husbands, Killicks and Starks. She restores the link with the community of the muck which gradually rehabilitates her voice. We learn that she participates in different activities with the members of the community who enjoy meeting on the porch of her house to listen to music played by Tea Cake. For the first time, the mule image disappears from the text which may suggest “the recovery of Janie's voice and her right to selfhood” (Hemenway, 1977, p.232).

However, Janie's idealistic relation with Tea Cake is not to last for a long time since he died after a hurricane that hit the Muck where they lived. Tea Cake saved her from flood, but he was bitten by a mad dog that was on the point to attack her. Soon after the storm, Tea Cake's health conditions deteriorated and he started to have hallucinations. After he threatened to kill her, Janie had to shoot him dead to protect herself. Janie was acquitted by the court and she decided to leave the Glades and go back to Eatonville. The narrative comes back to the night conversation with Pheoby and the reader hears Janie's voice again. Janie's journey ends with the death of her third husband and we can conclude through her story, that she discovers her true self as a woman. She moved from a submissive, silenced and enslaved woman into a liberated individual who can speak for herself. A power reversal from domination to self-assertion occurred when Janie met Tea Cake with whom she built a relation based on equal distribution of power.

3. Female Voice and The Narrative Structure

As stated earlier, the frame-narrative structure of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* remains a thorny issue, especially in relation to the question of the main character's voice. Hurston has opted for an indirect discourse to narrate Janie's journey. The first-person narrative appears at the beginning of the novel when Janie comes back to Eatonville after the death of Tea Cake in the Muck. She meets her



friend Pheoby at night and starts talking about the experiences she went through. A third-person narrative replaces the direct discourse along the major part of the novel and this shift was criticized by some critics as William Ramsey who considers Hurston's narrative “sloppy” claiming that it is the writer and not Janie speaking throughout the novel (Ramsey, 1994, p. 45). In the same respect, Robert Stepto observes Hurston's inability to give Janie a true voice (Stepto, 1979, p.166).

In this paper, my second aim is to explain Hurston's narrative choice and show whether a free indirect discourse contributes to silencing Janie. First, we must note that although the first-person narrative fades away starting from the second chapter, Pheoby and Janie are always there at night. So, Janie is not really far away from the storytelling. In fact, we can read the use of a free indirect discourse as reflecting Janie's silence throughout the part that relates her life experience and it is only at the end of her journey that her voice is given back to her.

The coming back to the first-person narrative or direct discourse in the closing pages of the novel can be seen as a symbol of Janie's self-actualisation and acquisition of a voice of her own. According to the critic Amanda Bailey, the narrative frame serves the main theme of the voice/power dichotomy and helps Hurston to dramatize it successfully. In this respect, Janie's voice goes beyond a direct discourse that tells a personal story to melt with the writer's voice and both become one. (Du Plassis, 2016, pp. 107-108).

Du Plassis's idea corresponds to the concept of “dual voice” in which the voice of the protagonist and the writer intermingle to make one. This concept, however, ignores the omniscient aspect of the third person narrative. In fact, within the narrative of Janie's life experiences, Hurston gives details about Killicks, Starks and tea Cake's deep thoughts which Janie has no clue about. For instance, when Starks buys the mule, he wants to please his wife but only the reader is aware of his motivations while Janie considers this purchase as a way to show his authority and false philanthropic deeds. Similarly, Killicks is frightened by the idea that Janie may leave him but she has no idea about his fears: “There Janie had put words to his held in fears. She might run off sure enough the thought put a terrible ache in Logan's body, but he thought it best to put on scorn” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p, 29). It is only through the writer that we learn his fears



and emotions while Janie never hears his voice. We can then claim that Janie and Hurston have two distinct voices.

From a feminist perspective, another criticism is made concerning the indirect discourse. Feminists believe that using a first-person narrative is necessary for the affirmation of the female's individuality and independent-self. The feminist critic Jennifer Jordon comments on the importance of this type of narrative for the creation of a feminist character like Janie:

It is significant to note that the presumption that a strong voice must be expressed in first person narration remains at the center of these critical debates over black, female voice: in other words, that the narrative structure match in an individualistic and character-driven way our model for a feminist icon; i.e. Janie. (Jennifer Jordon, 1988, p. 108)

We cannot deny the relevance of feminists' call for the use of a first-person narration to voice female characters in women's writings, but this may limit the scope of narrative choice for writers. Another problem that readers may point to in the novel's narrative-frame structure is the role of Pheoby as a mediator between Janie and the community. If Janie has recovered her voice at the end of the novel, readers may question her need for a facilitator to tell her story and interrogate her ability to express herself. However, one explanation behind Janie's choice to use Pheoby as a spokesperson may lay in her fear to be judged and misunderstood by the Eatonville community.

Janie knows that she was judged irresponsible and unfaithful when she decided to leave with Tea Cake, the young unmoneyed man. She understands that they were all waiting for details about her life with him and the reasons behind her return without him as Janie states: “Ah know all dem sitters- and- talkers gointuh worry they guts into fiddle strings till dey find out what dey been talkin' 'bout. Dat's all right, Pheoby, tell'em Dey gointuh make 'miration' cause mah love didn't work lak they love” (*There Eyes Were Watching God*, p. 191). Pheoby had to transmit that knowledge that true love is possible and a different life based on passion, respect and freedom is possible. Janie and Tea Cake propose a relationship model where gender equality is possible and Janie wants to make the other women of her community aware of that. However, Hurston does not give any further explanations or



information about the way Pheoby performs her role as the mouthpiece of Janie and the way the Eatonville community receives and reacts to Janie's story since the narrative is abruptly interrupted. The open-end of the novel adds to its criticism as the reader expects that the circulation of her story can lead to a certain degree of understanding and positive transformation of the community.

A possible reading of the story would be to expect an optimistic end if we parallel the impact that Janie's story has on Pheoby. In fact, Janie's story makes her friend question her relationship with her husband as she explains: “Ah done growed ten feet higher...Ah ain't satisfied widmahself no more.” (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p.192). Like Janie, Pheoby reaches some degree of awareness and inspires a relationship with her husband based on equal distribution of power. Pheoby decides to ask her husband Sam to share more activities together especially masculine ones such as fishing and hunting as Janie used to do with Tea Cake. Under Janie's influence, we may predict a similar transformation of the community towards the possibility of a male/female relation far from domination and exploitation.

In this sense, we can claim that the narrative was effective to translate and depict Janie's shift from an oppressed and unvoiced woman to a self-fulfilled individual. We can state that the text speaks for Janie whose voice is heard in her strength and courage to take action against her two first abusive husbands and her affirmation of her position among the Everglades community with Tea Cake. Commenting on this, Gates writes: “Hurston's masterful use of the indirect discourse makes *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the speaker text.” (Gates, 1987, pp.241-242).

Conclusion

The readings of *Their Eyes Were Watching Gods* may differ from one critic to another due to its open end. Readers may imagine various scenarios of Janie's life after all the experiences she came across as the writer gives no clues of her future days and status in the Eatonville community. If we consider the literary work as a bildungsroman which is based on the principle of personal development after a journey of experiences, we can state that Janie has reached self-knowledge and discovered her true self. She has learned from her relationships with



some men like Killicks and Starks, that women hold a second-class status in her society.

The patriarchal institution of marriage that is based on males' power abuse leads to the oppression of females who are supposed to be submissive, silent and obedient. Power seems to be at the heart of all relationships, especially between man and women. The patriarchal ideology of the African-American society at that time distributed power on the basis of gender differences giving man the absolute authority over women. This disbalance of power created a slave/master dichotomy that was reflected in the novel through the animal imagery of the mule that stands for the female who is under males' control.

A strong symbol of this mule-slave state of Janie is her silence. She is robbed of her voice and is given little chance to express herself in the presence of strong male figures. The novel's narrative structure which has raised many questions and criticism about the adequacy of a third-person narrative to voice the female character was read in this paper as a strong tool that helped the writer to reflect the themes of power and silence. It has been stated that it is not used only as a literary device in the literary work, but rather as part of the theme of the novel. Janie is given a first-person narrative in the first chapters, but it fades away to leave room to an indirect discourse.

Once she reaches self-actualisation at the end of the novel, her voice is heard again as she speaks directly to the reader to give the precious knowledge she finds after she understands that the traditional institution of marriage should be revised. Love and respect between men and women are attainable and through her story, she hopes to raise the community's awareness about the possibility of a fair distribution of power and gender equality that guarantee happiness and self-fulfilment for both males and females.

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