



The search for one's own voice in Zora Neale Hurston's Their eyes were watching god

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Abstract

African American women in the United States of America were doubly oppressed by racism and by patriarchy. Any attempt from them to raise the issue of their subordination within the home or to change the drastic situation in which they lived, was condemned by the patriarchal system as a blasphemous attempt to trespass the communal laws and destroy the sacred structure of the family. The present paper aims at showing how these women attempt to declare their subject hood in a paternalistic society that insists upon their object status through an analysis of the character of Janie in Zora Neale Hurston's novel, «*Their eyes were watching god*» (1937). As will be argued in this article, Zora Neale Hurston aims, in her novel, to deconstruct the negative vision of womanhood as framed by the male-dominated discourse and give voice to women to express their selfhood.

Keywords: African American women; oppression; patriarchy; subject hood; voice.

Résumé

Les femmes afro-américaines aux les États-Unis d'Amérique ont été doublement opprimées par le racisme et par le patriarcat. Toutes leurs tentatives d'exposer la question de leur subordination et de changer la situation radicale dans laquelle elles ont vécu, ont été condamnées par le système patriarcal comme une tentative blasphématoire de changer les lois communes et détruire la structure sacrée de la famille. Dans cet article, nous visons à démontrer comment l'écrivaine afro-américaine Zora Neale Hurston, dans son roman *Leurs Yeux Observaient Dieu* (1937) a donné voix à ces femmes soumises pendant des siècles, afin de déconstruire la vision négative de leur société qui insiste sur leur statut d'objet.

Mots Clés: afro; américaines oppression; patriarcat; statut ; voix.

ملخص

لقد عانت المرأة الزنجية في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية اضطهادا مزدوجا على أيدي العنصريين البيض وإخوانها السود على حد سواء. فقد تعرضت للاستعباد والاعتصاب من طرف الأسياد البيض كما تعرضت للعنف والاستصغار من طرف آل جلدتها السود. وقد كانت أي محاولة تقوم بها لتحسين وضعها و التعبير عن ذاتها مسألة يدينها النظام الأبوي باعتبارها محاولة مجحفة لخرق القوانين المجتمعية وتدمير الهيكل المقدس للأسرة. وتعتبر رواية الكاتبة الأفرو أمريكية زورا نيل هيرستن "أعينهم كانت تراقب الله" (1937) تحديا للتمثيل المتدهور للمرأة بصورة نمطية ومحاولة منها لتفكيك الرؤية السلبية للأنثى الزنجية ولتصحيح صورتها وإعطائها صوت للتعبير عن ذاتها وفرض نفسها في مجتمع ذكوري رفض الاعتراف بها كفرد كامل في المجتمع.

الكلمات الدالة: المرأة الزنجية؛ مجتمع ذكوري؛ صوت؛ اغتصاب؛ التعبير عن الذات.

Introduction

In *the empire writes back*, Gayatri Spivak states that many women have been marginalized and relegated to the position of 'Other'. These women, according to the Indian critic, are doomed to the same future of mute or silenced 'subalterns', and that there is no possibility of them ever coming to voice or of anyone else ever speaking for them. As 'subalterns', these women have their voice silenced since there is a lack of place from which they can speak. (Spivak, 175) On the other hand, bell hooks asserts that silence is the condition of one who has been dominated and has been made an object while talk is the mark of freeing, of making one a subject. In this sense, bell hooks suggests that oppressed women are transformed by the act of speaking. When speaking, women assume the role of subject and are able to define their identities and nominate their histories. "For women within oppressed groups...coming to voice is an act of resistance" (hooks, *Talking Back*, 2) an act that challenges patriarchy and the politics of male dominance. According to her, "moving from silence into speech is a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back', that is no mere gesture of empty words that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice." (*Talking Back*, 12) When silenced, one ceases to exist. Thus, women fight against their spiritual and emotional death by asserting their identities through their voices. Accordingly, voice becomes, as Maria Racine states so well, "more than speech; it is a state of mind—a positive sense of self. (Racine, 291)

Voice allows women to take their place within society. However, the female place in society historically presents its own unique set of issues: "For a woman, social options are often so narrow that they preclude explorations of her milieu." (Abel & all, 7) When trying to make the female voice heard, Zora Neale Hurston creates a character who seeks to learn how to speak by questioning the historically voiceless subjects. She provides the context for crafting alternatives to prevailing images of womanhood.

Many female writers' desire is to speak on their own behalf, in their own language, to resuscitate their history and to represent those who tend to be absent from narrative. As critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar reinforce, "the woman writer...searches for a female model not because she wants dutifully to comply with male definitions of her 'femininity' but because she must legitimize her own rebellious endeavours." (Gilbert & all, 49) Zora Neale Hurston is no exception. Through her novel, *«Their eyes were watching god»*, she intentionally illustrates "women's exclusion from power, particularly from the power of oral speech;" (Washington, 98) Accordingly, the present article deals with the ways Zora Neale Hurston deconstructs the one dimensional view of womanhood to which African American women have historically been submitted. By granting her female character in *«Their eyes were watching god»* voice and mobility, Hurston challenges, as we will come to see, the notion of black women as victimized others, stereotyped and silenced. Through her presentation of Janie Crawford in her novel, Zora Neale Hurston refuses to depict African American women as victims of the oppressing forces around them. Rather, Janie is depicted, as we will see in the present article, as a survivor who has succeeded in opposing her objectification as "de mule uh de world" and who has transcended the confines of intersecting oppression of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

In Eurocentric culture, Black women carried a double burden as they were devalued by being black and women. They were the most peripheral of the marginalized as they felt excluded not only from the white American mainstream but also from the black mainstream. They experienced various forms of oppression or discrimination according to the stereotypes that had been imposed on them through history. Because of these stereotypes, the black woman has not been recognized in her totality. In an interview with the literary critic Mary Helen Washington, Alice Walker states that women at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century were 'suspended' by the pressures in society. The content of their lives was pain, suffering, and oppression. Walker appropriates the term 'mules of the world' created by Zora Neale Hurston to classify women who belonged to that era. According to her,

Women were suspended in a time in history where the options for Black women were severely limited...and they either killed themselves or they are used up by the men, or by the children, or by...whatever the pressures against them. And they cannot go anywhere. I mean, you cannot, you just cannot move, until there is room for you to move into. (Washington, 6)

When these margins started looking for their own definition, they resisted and transcended the imposed racial and sexual stereotypes so that the constructions of womanhood were redefined. As a consequence, oppositional hierarchies were destabilized.

In «*Their eyes were watching god*», Hurston focuses on the life of her female character Janie, via flashbacks that reveal where she has come from and what she has gone through in her quest for voice. She makes use of her work as a way of questioning the conditions of black womanhood in an attempt to make visible the process of black women's liberation from the racist and sexist constraints of their society. The story dwells on power relations between the sexes, and on the plight of black women through whom men fulfill their expectations regarding their masculinity. Beneath its simple narrative surface, it strikes a critical note on the social mores that legitimize a code of manhood in which violence, oppression and ruthlessness are justified means by which one can prove his virility. In such a context, women are assigned a lower status, and are viewed as no more than objects of personal property and tokens of men's pride with no possibility of attaining personhood.

Accordingly, Hurston's female character, Janie is first shown as caught in the worlds of racism, patriarchy and sexism created by the people around her. In the worlds of Nanny, Logan Killicks, and Joe Starks, Janie is reduced into an unfeeling piece of property: her sexuality repressed, her labor capacity exploited, her humanity constrained and her own autonomous voice denied. In her desire to find an authentic voice free from the constraints of others, Janie has to go through many ordeals and hard times. In her process of apprenticeship, Janie learns to resist the alienation fostered by the politics of male dominance, recaptures her own will, and finally, after two marriages, enters into a relationship that breaks out of the prison of traditional sexual roles and allows for the integration of her sexuality with her potentialities as a human being. She herself conceives of her life as "a great tree in leaf with the things suffered" that contains not

only birth and growth but also decline and death. "Dawn and doom was in the branches." (Their eyes, 8)

1. The beginning of the spiritual journey

Appropriating the Bildungsroman form, Hurston presents the growth and development of Janie as an agent of female empowerment. The narrative of the novel is structured as a journey. Janie's maturity is defined as the final stage of self-consciousness. African American women writers of the early twentieth-century, in fact, appropriated the Bildungsroman to address race, gender, and class in relation to the emerging "New Woman", who struggled to negotiate her way through changing perceptions of women's roles as wives, mothers, and career women. It must be noted, nonetheless, that the novel breaks the rules of the genre as it deviates from the traditional form by presenting a female rather than a male protagonist who accomplishes maturity resulting in a new outlook on life. It remains, however, that in both the male and female forms we witness "the emergence of a powerful, vocal, and increasingly self-directed individuality." (Boesenberg, 2) As in the traditional male Bildungsroman, Janie in «*Their eyes were watching god*» has developed a unique subjectivity through a journey of self-knowledge. Moreover, Janie, in Hurston's novel, does not fall into the trap of her society's denigration and rejection. The story of her finding of voice and individuality is a far deviation from the trope of the tragic mulatto.

In *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class, and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West*, Sharon L. Jones states:

Hurston may have incorporated and fictionalized her own experience as a black female artist attempting to express her own voice in a racist, sexist, and class-conscious society. The inspiration stems from the emotional turmoil surrounding her love life and her failed attempt to negotiate a relationship with a graduate student she met in 1931 who wanted Hurston to give up her career. The depiction of Janie's three marriages and struggle for voice, empowerment, freedom, and autonomy may stem from Hurston's own attempt to negotiate her role as artist with a desire for a heterosexual relationship. (Jones, 81)

Accordingly, the novel begins with a third-person omniscient narrator documenting the community's reaction to Janie's return to Eatonville after the death of her third husband Tea Cake. Then, the novel switches to Janie's first person explanation of her life experiences to her friend Pheoby, and her growth as an individual. The third person omniscient narrator returns at the end of the novel to reveal the effect the story has on Janie and her listener. This complex narrative structure allows Hurston to more fully explore the psychological, spiritual and emotional development of the protagonist and her relationship with her community. More than just a fictional strategy, the narrative structure is the means by which Janie, via Pheoby, is reintegrated into the context of the folk community. Through Pheoby, who mediates between

the individual and the group, Janie feels she is part of a racial community. Her telling becomes a measure of her awareness of and response to the social rituals that regulate communal life.

In addition to Nanny's instructions, Janie's marriages to Logan Killicks, Jody Starks and Tea Cake are the most crucial elements in her development as a woman. Through her three marriages, Janie behaves in response to a "masculinist" tradition in which visual power often objectifies women. With each of her three marriages, Janie challenges this imposed stereotype. Janie's marriage to Logan Killicks was the first stage in her development as a woman. It was also the beginning of a long tedious journey. Janie's lack of knowledge that comes from firsthand experience makes her believe her forced marriage with Logan would end her loneliness and desire for love, but she soon discovered that she cannot find anything to love about him. Thus, Logan Killicks is the starting place in her evolution as a woman. From him, she learns that she is missing love. "She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman." (*Their eyes*, 25) In *The Voyage in Fictions of Female Development*, Elizabeth Abel explains that it is only "after conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood have been fulfilled and found insufficient" (Abel, 7) that women are able to begin their own journey. Susan Rosowski describes this new phase in a woman's development as "an inner, imaginative sense of personal value [that] conflicts with her public role." (Abel, 68)

2. Breaking of the established rules

With her next husband Joe Starks, Janie believes that the voids of loneliness and love she felt with her first husband would be filled. For weeks, Janie believes that Jody "spoke for change and chance." (*Their eyes*, 29) Not long after her marriage, Janie realizes that her new husband is not the same man she ran off with to marry. Joe Starks soon assumes his superiority and reduces his wife to an object of his power and command. Most of his visible faults lie in his domineering and abusive attitude toward her. He does not treat her as equal. He would not let her speak in front of people, teach her to play checkers, or let her participate in other community events. The psychological violence he perpetrates on her violates her autonomy, dignity, and the right to determine things for herself. She has been deprived of choices by being threatened and manipulated. She realizes that she has become a prisoner of the pretty picture of "whut a woman oughta be and to do." In the same way as Matt Bonner's tired mule, Janie is trained by her husband Joe Stark to work in dumb obedience and silence.

However, Janie, unlike this beast of burden, breaks with the rules of order established by her husband and rebels against her present situation. She refuses to remain a passive observer in the restricted space allowed to her by her husband, excluded from participating in her community's most important activities and opens up a new space for her transformation. She starts defending herself in her own way, gradually becoming stronger and able to confront her husband and the conventions to which she is expected to adhere. First, Janie realizes that she cannot be open with her husband and express her resentment and bitterness to him. "She found out that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him" (*Their eyes*, 72) Thus, Janie

starts consciously suppressing what she truly feels and behaves in the way Joe wants her to. Consequently, She starts wearing the 'mask' her husband wants her to wear by saying and acting in the way he wants. This strategy of masking is, in fact, a way of hiding untold truths and a device to protect Janie from her husband's abusive acts: "She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them." (*Their eyes*, 72). Ralph Ellison asserts in his book *Shadow and Act*, (1964, 55) that the masks are worn for the purpose of "aggression as well as defense...the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals." Janie is not permitted speech but she cannot stop feeling resentment and disgust. Silence, in this way becomes the character's mask.

In her article, "Voice and interiority in Zora Neale Hurston's '«*Their eyes were watching god*»", Maria Racine is positive in her analysis of the moment when Janie divides herself. She sees the act as "a step toward attaining her own voice and, thus, control over her life." (p. 287) Indeed, Janie has been growing for years in silence under Joe's oppressive authority, and her newly mature spirit is growing too large to contain all the oppression and humiliation he makes her endure. The most obvious account of this growth happens when Janie makes a mistake in cutting tobacco in the presence of her husband Joe. The latter starts yelling at her in front of people in the store, stripping her verbally, symbolically violating her body in public. Instead of accepting his wicked criticism in silence, Janie is not afraid to talk back. She rises up out of herself and speaks up her mind.

Janie took the middle of the floor to talk right into Jody's face, and that was something that hadn't been done before. "Stop mixin' up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through tellin' me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not. (Their eyes, 74)

Instead of suffering silently as she used to do, Janie blasts Joe with stored-up irritation. According to bell hooks 'back talk' or 'talking back' is not just the use of words without meaning. Rather, it is the expression of the movement from object to subject—the liberating voice.

During her marriage to Joe Starks, Janie has been able to hide her true identity under the clothes he has forced her to wear. Nevertheless, Joe puts an end to her using clothing as a protective shell by metaphorically undressing her in public. This action has freed Janie rather than further imprisoning her. It has allowed her to move without restrictions and to speak up her mind. She uses her unveiled power to defend her body and soul from further humiliation and oppression. In this scene, "Janie's ability to speak out in self-defense is a major step towards self-expression," (Campbell, p .66) thus, this is a landmark in Janie's quest for self-discovery. She is finally speaking up for herself. At the wake of his death, Janie confronts her husband on his deathbed and allows her suppressed emotions to surface again. Following his death, Janie's subtle changes in action and appearance anticipate the emergence of her new identity. Even if the latter is not yet fully developed, it remains that it has greatly influenced Janie's thoughts and deeds. Indeed, soon after Joe's death, Janie burns the head rags he had forced her to wear for

almost twenty years; sits on the porch and talks to her people instead of running the store, and more importantly, enjoys herself as much as she can insisting that "mourning oughtn't tuh last no longer 'n grief". (*Their eyes*, 93)

3. The healing process

Janie's marital experience with Joe Starks shows that there is no way to female self-fulfilment within a male-dominated community. Despite the material stability, security and protection Joe Starks offers Janie, he fails to complete her development as a woman through his mistreatment of her. Accordingly, he lets her expect another man to help her construct herself as a voiced subject. "she was saving up feelings for some man that she had never seen." (*Their eyes*, 72) In addition, Janie has come to awareness that Nanny, by trying to make her live like whites, had pointed her in the wrong direction. Her grandmother's best intentions have led to her divided self.

*She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her. But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after things. It was all according to the way you see things. Some people could look at a mud-puddle and see an ocean with ships. But Nanny belonged to that other kind that loved to deal in scraps. Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon - for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you - and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her. (*Their eyes*, 89)*

Nanny's well intended actions to keep Janie sheltered against material need and servitude have stood as a barrier preventing Janie from searching for an authentic place where she could express the autonomy and independence of her consciousness. Through her realization of what Nanny's choice has done to her, Janie starts her process of healing her divided self. That is the reason why Nanny has to die in the novel. Indeed, as a vestige of slavery, Nanny has to die so that Janie become stronger and more confident in her choices. Her first step in the process of finding her own united self and voice leads her to reject the material security which Nanny, Logan and Joe Starks sought to provide, and enters into a new kind of relationship with a man considered by her community as socially inferior to her. Henry Louis Gates, for example, claims that Janie discovers her own narrative power when she rhetorically "kills her husband" Joe. (*Critical Perspectives*, 192)

Janie's marriage with Tea Cake represents the third and final movement in her march toward self-definition. Tea Cake finishes her development as a woman and becomes the catalyst for the final stage of her coming to voice. Through her marriage with him, Janie undergoes a process of emotional healing and physical rejuvenation; she enters a world of unbridled expression, interaction and self-indulgence. Tea Cake helps her to discover that sexual and emotional gratification is only possible through a partnership between equals who "partake wid everything". From him, Janie learns to love and what it feels like to be loved as an equal. He

becomes the objectification of all that she has ever desired. He also becomes the embodiment of the freedom which her divided mind has long sought. This is something, she believes, very few people have experienced. Tea Cake, in fact, stands in direct opposition to the values Nanny had attempted to instill in Janie. By marrying him, Janie deliberately situates herself in that marginal area that defies conventions and where she can pursue her right to self-expression in spite of the pressures of the folk community that espouses traditional assumptions of what a woman ought to be, think and do. After his death, Janie attains a new form of cultural power, the ability to shape her own story.

Moreover, and despite her three marriages, Janie bears no children. This element of not having children differs from what is expected of a woman in a patriarchal society. This has been confirmed by Hazel Carby when she notes that the true discourses of femininity, wifehood, and motherhood are "the purpose of a woman's being" in a black context. (Reconstructing Womanhood, 26) Motherhood, in fact, reinforces the dichotomy in a patriarchal society as well as the fixed notion that a woman has to be a mother. Hurston considers that having children in a male dominated society like the one in which Janie lives would become an obstacle for her to assert her own identity and recover her voice. In Carol P. Marsh-Lockett's words, Hurston's works "[reveal] that motherhood is a presence therein but that it exists in a marginalized, politically powerless form, the mothers themselves lacking communities of women and rarely finding their own voices except to uphold a patriarchal superstructure." (Motherhood as Marginality, 100)

4. The recovery of one's voice

However, despite the great contribution of Tea Cake in fostering Janie's sense of independence, and despite his help in the creation of her identity and the assertion of her voice, Janie does not hesitate to kill him when she feels that her own life is at risk. Nellie McKay explains that "the relationship with Tea Cake help[s] to shape [Janie's] self-knowledge, but in his death she is free to discover security in herself, and the courage to speak in her own black woman's voice, no longer dependent on men." (McKay, 63)

Although Tea Cake has helped Janie forge her new identity, it is nevertheless important for her to carry on her new life as a woman firmly in control of her voice and identity, without depending on any man for her future happiness. With the shot that kills Tea Cake, Janie severs any remaining ties with the passive and submissive woman/ object she was and emerges anew as an assertive and powerful subject.

In addition to granting Janie an identity and a voice through her journey of self-discovery, Hurston re-appropriates the once negative image of the conjure woman by attributing to Janie the power to conjure. The conjure tradition was used as a tool of resistance for enslaved Africans. It helped those in bondage to resist absolute subjugation by proving that there was a limitation to the power of the master. The conjure woman, on the other hand, was often seen as the most adept agent of mobility, resistance and self-determination in the realm of African

American womanhood. By granting Janie the power to conjure, Hurston provides her heroine with a symbolic weapon that will help her fight the oppressive forces that want to subjugate her. In *Conjuring Moments and Other Such Hoodoo: African American Women & Spirit Work*, Kameelah L. Martin states that, "the conjure woman figure is often an autonomous figure disrupting ideas of gender, exercising self-determination, defying authority when she sees fit, and western ideologies of cultural supremacy, seldom forgetting her otherness is often the source of her autonomy." (p. 8) While Tea Cake, in the novel, possesses a gun that he hides under his pillow and intends to use it against his wife, Janie is bestowed with the power to conjure and uses it as a shield against any eventual evil.

Janie's return to Eatonville in soiled overalls and her hair swinging on her back like a young girl, are offensive because they are in complete defiance of that which is acceptable within her community and do not fit the standards of propriety and decorum required by her class, age and sex. Hurston here shows that choice of clothing plays a crucial role in gender politics within the black community as Janie's sight shocks the people of Eatonville. Because of her status as widow of ex-mayor Joe Starks, the community expects her to act and dress in a way befitting her class and age. Her insistence on marrying Tea Cake and ignoring the censure of the community represents rebellion and immaturity in their eyes. It is a violation to the black female parameters of womanhood. But for Janie, the construction of her identity and the recovery of her voice require the celebration of the presence of the female black body. "The visible presence of Janie's material body reflects the complex historical and cultural forces which have created her and offers her a unique individual identity." (Clarke, 613)

By the end of her story, Janie learns to be free in her thoughts and to respect what she thinks and feels. Unlike her grandmother, victimized by her master, and her own mother, raped by a school teacher, Janie can place the integrity of the self against the system that presses her to acquiesce to man's needs. Thus, she self-consciously reacts against the legacy of both a collective and a personal history of degradation. Having returned from the horizon, Janie represents the mature voice of experience and wisdom. Her maturity has been strengthened by her suffering as she has gone through a process of internal change. Through suffering, she has achieved personal wholeness. Her marriages' experience, in fact, has given her the tools to break the chains of oppression. She is finally able to grow, blossom, change, and become mentally free. She ceases to care what society and people think of her.

5. Woman as an agent of female empowerment

More importantly, Janie is able to use self-expression to overcome her confinement as an African American woman. She has become an agent of female empowerment as she retrospectively tells her story to someone less experimented than herself. She uses the voice she finally recovers to convey her experience to her friend Pheoby and empower her as an African American female. Her aim is to revise the patriarchal vision of seeing the world through a male dialectic. Elizabeth Meese states that Janie's identity "finally begins to take shape as she

throws off the false images which have been thrust upon her because she is both black and a woman in a society where neither is allowed to exist naturally and freely." (Meese, 60) Janie's empowerment process becomes positive when Pheoby, who aspires "to sit on de front porch", undergoes a transformation. She responds excitedly to Janie's call to break with hierarchies of representation and to stop seeing herself as a silent subject.

Lawd!" Pheoby breathed out heavily, "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this. Nobody better not criticize yuh in mah hearin'." (Their eyes, 192)

In reality, Janie's friendship with Pheoby helps the two women develop a feeling of self-worth. Mary Helen Washington points out that one main feature of African American women's literature are that it is about women. "Their friendships with other women-mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers—are vital to their growth and well-being." (Washington, p.XXI.) The presence of Pheoby in Janie's life, in the novel, is very important particularly when considering the importance of voice in Black women's lives. Without the presence of Pheoby to listen to Janie's story and to retell it to the community waiting outside, Janie's experience would be worthless.

By the end of the novel, Janie triumphs in her quest for freedom and wholeness. She achieves personal fulfillment but also assumes a communal role traditionally reserved for males. Her action of empowerment through storytelling represents a break from gendered silence. By choosing another black female character to whom she tells her story, Janie's decision is significant. In her analysis of black women's relationship to one another, Patricia Hill Collins contends that: "...the act of using one's voice requires a listener and thus establishes a connection. For African-American women the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women's objectification is another Black woman. This process of trusting one another can seem dangerous because only Black women know what it means to be Black women. But if we will not listen to one another, then who will?" (p.104) In addition, she appropriates tropes of creation in order to insert her voice into history. "She had given away everything in their little house except a package of garden seed that Tea Cake had bought to plant." (*Their eyes*, 192)

At another level, Janie's marriage experiences can easily fit into the Campbellian model of the hero's journey. Janie's story begins with the young woman's dream to break past the horizon for change. Her normal existence is disrupted when she sees a blossoming pear tree and her sexuality is awakened. This incident in Janie's life is important in order for the 'call to adventure' in Campbell's heroic journey to make sense. "[t]he familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand." (*The hero*, XIV) The passing of a threshold includes losing one's way innumerable times, as well as entanglements and confrontations with something of great and often frightening

magnitude. This can be explained in Janie's case through her failed experiences of marriage with both Kellicks and Joe Starks. Campbell points out that coming through such struggles causes the person to be infused with more vision, and to be strengthened by the spiritual life principle which, more than anything else, encourages one to take courage to live with effrontery and mettle. Both marriages as well as the ordeals experienced through them have shaped Janie in some way.

After he has successfully overcome these trials, the hero, in Campbell's journey enters another stage in which he meets with the goddess. "The meeting with the goddess" is the point at which the hero encounters the experience of unconditional love within the heroic journey. This meeting is often represented by the hero finding a person who is his true love. However, there are also trials associated with this stage. In the novel, Janie must kill Tea Cake despite her love for him. In the final stage of the heroic journey, the hero must return back home with the wisdom that he gained during the journey and is willing to share his experience with the other members of his community. Janie, in the novel returns to Eatonville and tells her story to her best friend Pheoby who is going to retell it to Eatonville community.

However, not all critics seem to agree that Janie attained a degree of maturity and empowerment by the end of the novel. The fact that Hurston uses a third person narrator who often speaks in free indirect speech to paraphrase Janie's thought has, according to them, stolen Janie of the very voice she has spent her life seeking. Robert Stepto, among others, argues that Janie fails to achieve identity and voice of her own since she is not able to narrate her story in its entirety, "Hurston's curious insistence on having Janie's tale...told by an omniscient third person, rather than by a first-person narrator, implies that Janie has not really won her voice and self after all." (From *Behind the Veil*, 166) Since there is a lack of a consistent first person point of view in the novel, especially during Janie's trial following Tea Cake's death, Janie fails as the protagonist of a bildungsroman. In response to the problematic use of the third person narrator, Alice Walker has defended Janie's silence, insisting that because Janie is in full control of her voice and identity, she chooses when to tell her story and to whom—an act clearly indicative, as the African American writer states, of the power and authority of the female character as a powerful vocal protagonist.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, it is worth noting that Hurston was writing about woman's oppression at a time when this issue was generally ignored and when the number-one avowal of the Renaissance was the reconstruction and the proclamation of black manhood. In her essay, "The Task of Negro Womanhood," Elise Mc Dougald states: "On the whole, the Negro woman's feminist efforts are directed chiefly toward the realization of the race, the sex struggle assuming the subordinate place." (p.381) Hurston, had been severely criticized for her choice of themes that were considered irrelevant to the lives of black people by the advocates of race uplift. Moreover, Janie's cultural assimilation shows certain obliqueness. She sits not on the front

porch where males assemble to tell stories but on the back porch, as if a woman's story, with herself as subject and object, cannot yet be considered a proper subject for traditional porch activities. It is here that Hurston has established the area of friction between black and female identities, without suggesting their compartmentalization. Part of Janie's struggle is precisely to do away with man-made conventions and discriminatory practices that create a chasm between blackness and female identity. For Hurston, this chasm can be overcome by kinship, solidarity and support. These elements may engender a new way of seeing, a new way of relating that can, ultimately, alter the social relationship between the sexes and within the group.

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