

RACIAL AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT DEPICTED IN “THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD”

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ABSTRACT

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has garnered mixed reviews for its portrayal of the African American struggle. While some of her male contemporaries viewed the novel as an oversimplification of racial issues, a closer examination of the text reveals otherwise. This abstract delves into Hurston's nuanced depiction of the despair faced not only by African Americans, but also by women. Hurston adeptly captures the complexities of race, sexuality and gender without resorting to the anger and hostility found in the works of many of her male African American peers, including Richard Wright. By portraying the female protagonist's skin color, language, and character, Hurston creates an authentic image of African American women in the early 1900s. Her use of African American vernacular gives Janie Crawford a distinct voice, despite society's efforts to silence her. Through an analysis of the context, narrative, and language, the work argues that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is not simply a tragic love story, but a masterful representation of race, gender, sexuality and class issues in America during that time period.

Key words: racial issues , sexuality , gender roles ,unsuccessful marriage ,mixed race, fatality of love , same fate of generation

The story centers around Janie Crawford and her homecoming to Eatonville. Through her conversation with Pheoby, Janie recounts her journey through life, beginning with her marriages to Logan Killicks and Jody Starks. She explains how her grandmother compelled her to marry Logan and why she fled with Joe Starks to Eatonville, where they resided for two decades until his passing. Finally, Janie concludes by relating her ill-fated romance with Vergible Woods, also known as "Tea Cake," which culminated in her shooting him.

Janie's quest for self-discovery encompasses both her racial and gender identity. Hurston's portrayal of the conventional societal expectations imposed on women, particularly those of African American descent, is fundamentally critical, yet hopeful. Hurston utilizes a traditional folkloric symbol of a mule to represent the capacity of African Americans to overcome their subjugation. In the second chapter of the novel,

Nanny explains: Honey, de white man is the ruler of everything as fur 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 down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his women folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world as fur as Ah can see. ¹ Scholar Cardel Hull affirms that the quotation is about "race, not gender," as it refers to the exploitation of Black labor worldwide. In contrast, Hurston portrays the mule as a positive feminine symbol, highlighting the ability of Black women to overcome their past servitude. By using the mule, Hurston demonstrates how Black women find alternative spaces to define themselves and escape servitude. When Logan Killick offers to buy Janie a mule to plow alongside him, she chooses to leave and find a life free from servitude. The mule also serves as a symbol of Janie's independence in other scenes. When Starks and the men in Eatonville mock Matt Bonner's yellow mule, Janie speaks up for the animal and quietly expresses her disagreement. When Starks buys the mule, Janie publicly praises him and articulates her own opinion. When the mule dies, and Eatonville holds a mock funeral, Starks excludes Janie from the community gathering. However, this exclusion only strengthens her resolve to seize more of life. In these moments, Hurston uses the mule to showcase Janie's ability to survive. Michael G. Cooke notes in *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century* that "The more she is threatened, the more resourceful she becomes. The more she is deprived, the more self-sufficient she becomes. That inner stability and outer indomitability mark her off from anything that has gone before" ². Janie's acceptance of her situation without succumbing to victimhood stands in stark contrast to Helga Crane's decision to conform to society's expectations. Hurston tackles the subjects of racial and gender roles fearlessly, a topic that was not previously discussed in literature before the Harlem Renaissance. Nanny, Janie's grandmother, serves as a significant role model for Janie, representing the mindset of the past slaves and being one of the most influential people in Janie's life. Although Nanny loves Janie deeply, she restricts her with apprehension for the future, believing that the only way to evade life's uncertainties is to marry into respectability. Nanny is convinced that Janie will marry for respectability, and based on her conviction, Janie dismisses her childhood dreams of independence and embraces romantic marriage as her salvation. At the age of sixteen, Janie spends the day under a pear tree in full blossom and watches the sensuous unfolding of nature. She concludes that life should be a marriage that is "sweet... like when you sit under a pear tree and think," ³ and yearns for the fulfillment of this dream. Her romantic dream is in sharp

¹ Hurston, Zora Neale. (1978). *There Eyes Were Watching God*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. Page 14

² Ibid 72

³ Ibid 23

contrast to Helga's analytical belief that anyone can get married if they choose to do so. Janie searches extensively for her ideal relationship, based on her grandmother's values. Janie believes that once she finds true love, she will also achieve personal fulfillment and happiness. Janie's first two marriages test her grandmother's values but provide her with significant insights. Both her marriage to Logan Killicks, arranged by her grandmother, and her marriage to Joe Starks, are based on the same value structure, differing only in the fact that one takes place in an agrarian setting and the other in an urban setting. However, both represent the materialism, security, and respectability valued by white society. These values are so crucial to Nanny that they blind her to all of Logan Killicks' shortcomings. Nanny does not consider Janie's youth, individuality, personality, or dreams because she genuinely believes that Janie will benefit from the marriage. Janie knows that she does not find Killicks attractive in any way, and she considers marrying him to be a desecration of the purity and excitement of the pear tree, but she is unable to convince Nanny. Before Janie can evaluate her true feelings, her grandmother dismisses them as insignificant. With no other known recourse, Janie reluctantly agrees to the marriage. The grandmother offers Janie her only hope, telling her that "nothing can't stop you from wishin"¹. Janie possesses an innate understanding that Killicks will not provide her with happiness, despite Nanny and the community's reassurances that sixty acres and a comfortable home will lead to love. She recognizes that Killicks views her as a possession, just like his farm and animals. Janie, however, values humans over property, which distinguishes her from Helga, who is uncertain about the value of life. Janie attempts to establish a meaningful connection with Killicks, but he is unable to share his feelings of love and fear. Consequently, Janie feels isolated, unable to communicate with Killicks on a profound level. She realizes that her dream of happiness necessitates leaving Killicks, but she is unsure how to accomplish this. When Joe Starks enters the picture and invites Janie to leave with him, she willingly abandons her life with Killicks and her servitude. Flight is the best option, as it has always been for Helga. Janie's courage to flee Killicks is only possible because of Starks. Without him, Janie would lack the strength to abandon her life, despite her evident misery. Starks appears as a knight in shining armor, rescuing her from a life of drudgery and offering the possibility of a new and better life. Janie finds Starks attractive, but she understands that he is not the solution to her dreams. Janie informs the reader that "he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees"². Janie comprehends that she does not possess free choice, only a different one. Nonetheless, for the time being, the possibility of a better life suffices. Janie dedicates herself to her

¹ Ibid 15

² Ibid 28

second marriage, and Starks rewards her with a higher standard of living. However, it soon becomes clear that Janie has merely exchanged one bad marriage for another. Starks, like Killicks, regards women as possessions. The distinction is that Killicks values Janie for her contributions to his farm, while Starks places Janie on a pedestal and desires her to contribute only through her presence. Starks wants Janie to be silent and invisible. Nevertheless, Janie recognizes that she does not want to be elevated above others. She desires the freedom to be herself. Starks responds with the telling statement, “I god, Ah ain’t even started good”¹. Starks perceives himself as a type of God and feels that Janie should feel appreciative of his accomplishments. Regarding Janie, she was seized by a sense of frigidity and trepidation. She sensed a great distance from everything and felt desolate². Janie is aware that her aspiration will never be realized in this matrimony. Similar to her initial marriage, Janie feels cut off. In her subsequent marriage, along with her seclusion, she is cognizant that her uniqueness is fading away. She is unable to breathe amidst the stifling limitations of decency imposed upon her by Starks and the citizens of Eatonville. Eatonville is a society where people have to “think for women and chillun and chickens and cows”³. Janie is devoid of the ability to think, feel, or react independently. Nevertheless, Janie is aware that her purpose is not limited to being Stark’s property. Starks has genuine concern for Janie, unlike Killicks who was insensitive to her desires. When Janie privately expresses her disapproval of Matt Bonner’s mistreatment of his mule, Starks responds by purchasing the animal and allowing it to rest. However, he refrains from disclosing that he did it for her, as they do not discuss their personal emotions. Janie attributes the mule’s salvation to Starks’ kind nature and expresses her satisfaction publicly, which appears to please him. Nevertheless, Starks remains mysteriously silent, and his silence carries significance. He evidently does not want Janie to speak unless instructed to do so, regardless of whether her comments are positive or negative. As their marriage progresses, Janie becomes more vocal in her opposition to Starks’ growing restrictions. She uses her words to fight back as much as possible, but it does not yield results. Starks desires her submission and will continue to push until he gets it. Janie realizes that she must make changes if she wants to survive. However, she is unsure if life has more to offer than what she has already experienced. She is too scared and confused to find out on her own. Flight is not an option this time since she has nowhere to go and does not know what she would find. Their marriage’s decline culminates in Starks slapping and insulting Janie over a minor matter. Janie stands there, lost in thought, until something inside her breaks. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was

¹ Ibid 43

² Ibid 44

³ Ibid 110

her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered”¹. What has shattered for Janie goes beyond her perception of Starks. Her notion of wedlock and existence has been completely shattered. She is entirely conscious that this union will never live up to what she envisioned under the pear tree. Janie comprehends that this matrimonial bond, though it seems harmless, will lead to her utter ruin unless a drastic transformation takes place. This marks a crucial juncture in her life.

In conclusion, Janie’s resolute and unwavering disregard for racial segregation signifies her lack of strong identification with her black heritage, highlighting the devastating effects of racism. Her unclear and fleeting feminist awareness underscores the pervasive influence of patriarchal indoctrination, making it exceedingly difficult to overcome. As a result, the novel can be considered a more effective exploration of racial and gender politics than those featuring vocal black and female protagonists.

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¹ Ibid 68