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Their Eyes Are Watching God: A Feminist Critical Theory Review

Zora Neale Hurston was a prominent African American writer in the early 20th century. Her writing style was a fusion of folklore, anthropological facts, and factual accounts of black heritage (Crabtree). As a young, Black female her writing was considered unprecedented. In the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the story is centered around a young lady, named Janie, who learns to live life on her own terms despite the restrictions that society tries to impose on her. Hurston also added many elements of racism, sexism, and elitism. Janie spends a lifetime of going from one relationship to the next in an effort to find freedom of expression, ultimate acceptance, and her true self. Along the way, there are elements of feminism, or the advocacy for gender equality, that touch her journey as she learns to make her own decisions and speak her mind. In this lesson, we will learn more about the examples of feminism in this novel. For this analysis, feminist theory will be used to showcase the limits on the protagonist from patriarchy. All of Western civilization is rooted in patriarchy ideals and systemic racism. Using this theory will reveal how women, and particularly women of color, are being repressed by racism and patriarchy to maintain cultural hegemony.

Over the course of the book, Hurston ties in three major ideas that can be explained through a feminist lens. They are the act of speaking, seeking horizons, and confidence to deviate from traditional roles (Hayes). The novel takes the reader through a sequence of events that flow in the chronological order of Janine's life. First, the reader is presented an older Janine that has been altered and seasoned through her life experiences. As traditional in African American literary tradition, Janine is reciting the story of her life orally to a friend, named Pheoby, in order for her truth to be exposed.

Janine begins her story with an account of her childhood. Janine, and Janine's mother, are both products of rape from white men. They are born out of strife and hardship. Due the cruelty of her conception, Janine's mother lives the picture and does not ever return to Janine's life. This leaves Janine's grandmother to be the sole provider and caretaker of Janine. Nanny, Janine's grandmother, had a decent relationship with the white landowners she lived with and worked for. Nanny worked so hard that she was able to buy her own plot of land for herself and Janine. This already exemplifies that Janine was raised in an environment where she was not exposed to "traditional gender roles" that are valued so highly in American society. Nanny was characterized as rational, strong, dependable, protective, and decisive. These traits are typically culturally associated with men.

Janie grew up with her grandmother in a house filled with white children who were her friends and she never thought of herself as any different from anyone else. Nanny knows the cruelty of the world, and tries her best to shield Janine from her own naivety. When Janine turns 16, it is obvious that she is coming into her own womanhood.

Out of fear for Janine, Nanny explains to Janie everything she needs to know: “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 womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (Hurston 14). From Nanny's perspective, any attempt to make life any better is futile, so in her opinion, Janie is best off marrying an old man with land so she can have some security. A man is the only means of true security within their society, and even then the pigment of their skin threatened the promise of security.

Nanny tried to confine Janie's sense of value to only material objects or "things" while Janie has always really loved being natural. Nanny imposed her narrow sense of the world onto the more broadminded Janie. This concept is illustrated in Janie's metaphor of the horizon: “Nanny took the "biggest thing God ever made" and twisted it into a choking noose that would not let Janie breathe, much less live, in the way she wanted to” (Hurston 25).

Janine went on to live life as a married woman. Despite all of her efforts to forge the life she truly wanted to see, she was confined to the lifestyle predetermined for her by her husbands. In Janine's first marriage with Logan Killicks, he consistently ridiculed her for being entitled, spoiled, and being “born and raised in de white folks back-yard” (Hurston 30). As a darker skinned male, Killicks resented Janine's privilege though her married her for her looks, and he was threatened by her mixed heritage. Killicks could not move past her ability to voice her emotions, opinions, and observations, which ultimately led Janine to leave Logan Killicks and marry Joe Stark.

Janie was in search of emotions that were absent with her first husband, so she married the charismatic politician, Joe Starks, who has dreams that Janie hopes will lead her to happiness. Joe Stark is casted as a man of high status within the African American community only. Within the normal social parameters of America, Stark would be nothing more than a regular “negro male”: “He had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else, expectin’ dis place dat colored folks was buildin’ theirselves” (Hurston 28). He could only make his fortunes through the white man, and that plagued Starks.

Her mistake is expecting someone else's dream to make her happy. Joe treats Janie like a piece of property like everything else he owns (Ruliffson). At times, Janie can't keep from speaking up for herself: “Time came when she fought back with her tongue as best she could, but it didn't do her any good. It just made Joe do more. He wanted her submission and he'd keep on fighting until he felt he had it” (Hurston 71). Janie's literal voice and ability to speak represent her freedom and empowerment as a woman. With Logan Killicks and especially with Joe Stark, her voice is suppressed. Her voice was suppressed in order to make the male figures in her life seem larger due to the fact that they felt diminished within American society.

Janie tried marrying the "right" man to the right man for her, but instead of happiness she gains the confidence to deviate from a southern woman's traditional role. From the death of Joe Starks, Janie has obtained the confidence to ignore tradition, regardless of people's opinions or other consequences. For example, she lets her hair down very soon after Joe's death, showing that she doesn't have to abide by his rules

anymore. Furthermore, Janie refers to Jody as simply "Joe" which shows on a deeper level, her unwillingness to go along with his wishes. She pretends to look for suitors, but Janie has no intention of remarrying another "proper" man. Janie despises the custom that a widow must be in mourning for a certain amount of time because in her mind, she doesn't miss Joe so there is no need to pretend. She wants to be natural and free, and although she is not yet ready to completely leave behind Granny's ideals, she walks into the unknown of the natural world (Hayes).

When Janine was finally searching for happiness within herself, true love presents itself through the character Tea Cake. Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is different from the others because for the first time, Janie is doing what she wants to do rather than conforming to what others are telling her to do. Although this is a big step towards Janie's empowerment, their relationship still falls short when compared with the current definition of feminism. It is difficult to comprehend why this is considered a great relationship especially when Tea Cake beats Janie so he can show who is boss (Ruliffson).

Despite the negative aspects of Janine's relationship with Tea Cake, she considers him a great love, and at the end of the novel Janine was alone after burying Tea Cake. When Janie comes back to her hometown after burying Tea Cake, she does not act like a traditional woman should, and she doesn't care to. While judging what Janie has done and what she is currently wearing, the women on the porch are horrified and aghast by her explicit dereliction of their ideals (Rubin). Janie, however, is confident and knows that she is who she wants to be; a natural woman. With her long and swinging hair, Janie

refuses to abide with society's expectations and will not even pretend to go along with it by dressing the part. She is utterly and completely at one with herself and does not care what society thinks, which gives her the confidence to deviate from her traditional role as a southern woman.

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