



Expanding the Black Woman's Horizon: Picking From a Higher Bush Motif in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Monique O. Ekpong

Department of Language and Linguistic Science, Cross River University of Technology, (CRUTECH), Calabar – Nigeria
Email: Mekpong2001@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Owing to discrimination, woman in most cultures is by tradition inhibited from attaining her full capabilities in life. In the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston attempts to expose how the tragic condition of the black woman in America was aggravated by slavery when she suffered multiply first as a slave, then as a black and ultimately as a woman. The novelist also proffers possible roles which the black woman could adopt after the Slave Emancipation in order to raise her social status. That is what is referred to by Nanny, the grandmother of the protagonist Janie, as “picking from the higher bush and the sweeter berry.” Since Hurston is more concerned with getting the black woman better integrated in society after the Slave Emancipation, the sociological qualified by the feminist critical theory and practice will be employed in this essay. While bringing up Janie, Nanny overprotects her and shields her from the realities of life in order to give her more comfort and raise her social status. In her quest, Janie discovers that it is not comfort or money that brings about love and peace but sacrificial love and sharing of one's life. After her two earlier loveless marriages to fairly rich older men, Janie eventually finds true love in Tea Cake, a younger, cheerful and more loving and caring husband who treats her like an equal and not like a work-ox or a mule of the world the way her two earlier husbands attempted to treat her.

INTRODUCTION

Since discrimination against woman is global, this essay attempts to demonstrate how Zora Neale Hurston, in the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, exposes the tragic condition of the black woman in America and how it is aggravated by slavery, causing her to suffer multiply first as a slave, then as a black and ultimately as a woman. The novelist then attempts

Expanding the Black Woman's Horizon

to expand the black woman's horizon by proffering to her possible or envisioned life-styles in addition to the available roles of wifehood and motherhood, which the black woman could adopt after the Slave Emancipation. This is with a view to raising her social status and getting her better integrated in the society after so many years of slavery and lack of both mental and physical freedom. It is pertinent to recall that marriage was not achievable by slaves because the slave master wanted to sever the emotional intimacy between a slave and his black woman, and between slave parents and their children. Slave couples were allowed only to copulate and produce children as a means of propagating more slaves. That made the slave woman a brood sow or the equivalent of a slave producing machine.

The novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is an exploration of a woman's right to selfhood as Hurston celebrates her African-American ethos through the authentic fictional representation of her birth-place, Eatonville - an all-black town where blacks could live and feel free while they rule over themselves. The novel is also a celebration of the ethos of rural black life in the south. Hurston makes use of her African-American dialect as is evident both in the lexical and syntactical patterns to document her people's peculiar tongue in order to attest to the existence of an African-American culture, and emphasize the positivism in the lives of African-Americans in spite of racial and capitalist oppression by the white population. This is with a view to instilling self-confidence into all African-Americans as they become proud of their culture. This confidence-building is also intended to empower women, in particular, to assume more positive roles other than the inhibitive or restrictive ones socially prescribed for them.

Theoretical Framework

Since Hurston is concerned with fashioning out a means for the integration of African-American woman into the society after slavery, the sociological framework qualified by the feminist critical theory and practice will be employed in this essay.

Definition of Terms

Expanding black woman's horizon in this context refers to proffering available and envisioned roles or life-styles for the African-American woman to adopt after the Slave Emancipation in order for her to be fully liberated. Since Nanny is Zora Neale Hurston's surrogate, her search for improved condition for the black woman after the Slave Emancipation explains the notion of taking a stand on high ground and the motif of picking from a higher bush and a sweeter berry, in order to transcend or overcome the tragic condition of the black woman in America.

Nanny does not want Janie her grand-daughter to get married off early in life. Rather, she prefers her to "pick from a higher bush and a sweeter

Monique O. Ekpong

berry.” From Nanny’s perspective, this means receiving better or higher education, getting into a profession and eventually getting married to a rich man from a higher social status with enough money to provide a better life than what she experienced during slavery. That is what Nanny means when she says to Janie:

“Ah wanted you to school out and pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry. But dat ain’t yo’ idea, Ah see” (28).

Summary of the Novel

Nanny the grandmother of the protagonist Janie, having suffered most of the indignities meted out to the black woman during slavery deliberately tries to shield her grand-daughter from the prevalent realities of life as they affect the ordinary African-American even after the Emancipation. Some of these indignities included: hard physical labour, poor rations, whippings, the threat of being separated from children and mate, coerced sexual relations with the slave-master, and vindictive treatment at the hands of the mistress, among others. Nanny does not fare any better shortly after slavery. Her daughter Leafy whom she hoped to get trained as a school teacher, is raped and impregnated by her black school teacher. -Therefore, one of the life opportunities open to African-American women, in particular, as proffered by Zora Neale Hurston is receiving formal education and being a school teacher or a member of any other profession.

Janie, the protagonist, is created as an intelligent and unique woman who, although initially trapped in two separate oppressed marriage conditions, is assertive and morally strong enough to escape from the first marriage when she discovers that she is to be reduced to a work-ox, and brave enough to challenge her second husband for being too domineering and oppressive, thus, making her life stifling. All the same, Janie helps Jody Starks her second husband to become well established as Mayor, Store Owner, Post Master, and Estate Owner. Although Jody becomes a big voice in Eatonville, the novelist Hurston seems to write with feminist consciousness by creating such an assertive, morally strong, physically and spiritually resilient and intellectually admirable female character in Janie who serves as the protagonist of the novel. Janie defines a social morality, just after the Slave Emancipation, of equality between husband and wife, and respect for a woman’s position in marriage. She defines the roles of a wife as the think-tank and cohesive force of the family and an instrument for her husband’s success. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, therefore, constitutes an exploration of a woman’s right to selfhood, a search for an identity and alternative roles and life-styles for the African-American woman as she attempts to recreate the morality of a changing, formerly enslaved, African-American society.

Even though Nanny, while bringing up Janie, overprotects her and shields her from the realities of life in order to give her more comfort and

Expanding the Black Woman's Horizon

raise her social status, Janie in her quest discovers that it is not comfort or money that brings about love and peace but sacrificial love and sharing of one's life. After her two earlier loveless marriages to fairly rich older men, Janie eventually finds true love in Tea Cake, a younger, cheerful and more loving and caring husband who treats her like an equal and not like a work-ox or a mule of the world the way her two earlier husbands attempted to treat her.

Characterizations

By allowing Johnny Taylor a young man from a lower social class to secretly kiss her at age sixteen, Janie is courting trouble. Nanny fears that she might soon get into trouble like her mother Leafy who was raped and impregnated by her black school teacher. Nanny does not want Janie to get impregnated by someone who is too poor to cater for her needs, even if he were ready to marry her. Therefore, she decides to accept an earlier offer of marriage from a fairly rich old black man, Logan Killicks, who owns about sixty acres of land, a well-furnished house with the only musical organ in the all-black town of Eatonville. Since Nanny has suffered much deprivation and poverty during slavery, she wishes Janie her grand-daughter to have a husband that can provide her with enough money for a more comfortable and better life. As far as Nanny is concerned, and based on her limited experience, she concludes that the problems of black people can be solved only by money and good white people (36).

Nanny, thus, recognizes marriage as one of the available traditional roles for women, but admits that a woman could also adopt an alternative life-style or role by remaining celibate, working and earning a wage with which she could look after her family. In an auto-biographical mode of narration, this is what she tells us about her decision to adopt an alternative life-style other than marriage after the Slave Emancipation:

Ah wouldn't marry nobody, though Ah could have uh heap uh times, cause Ah didn't want nobody mistreating mah baby. So Ah got with some good white people and come down here in West Florida to work and make de sun shine on both sides of de street for Leafy (36).

Nanny's life-style becomes a model of how a black woman could choose to live an alternative life-style other than marriage in order to earn a living and support her family.

Since marriage is a traditional life-style available to women in nearly all cultures of the world, Hurston proffers it as one of the means through which black women could get integrated into the post-slavery society in America. In her earlier novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston demonstrates how a married couple, Mr. and Mrs. Potts, brings up their daughter Lucy so well and in such

Monique O. Ekpong

a sexually disciplined manner that she is not promiscuous like the plantation boys and girls.

We shall now examine the various forms of marriage relationships presented by Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In this novel, Hurston demonstrates her best wishes for women in marital relationships. However, she highlights some of the negative impacts from husbands which should be eradicated.

Idealizations

To create a positive atmosphere where woman can excel, Hurston, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* goes to the extent of idealizing the setting so that the protagonist Janie can live above the repressive conditions endured by the ordinary African-American, especially the black woman. Janie is born and raised in the premises of fairly rich and kind white people, the Washburns, for whom Nanny her grandmother works. She socializes with only white children and does not discover that she is black until she is about six. This revelation does not devastate her. According to Sherley Anne Williams in the foreword of the novel:

The revelation of Janie's identity stands both as a symbol of Nanny's unrealistic attempts to shield the girl from life and a metaphor for Janie's lack of self-definition (xi).

Janie's lack of self-knowledge and ignorance about the realities of life are revealed when she attains puberty and hardly knows how to handle her sensual or sexual feelings. Her physical reactions of puberty are transposed unto other living things of nature around her like the pollen-bearing bee's fertilization of a flower and the mating between flies. After observing such natural situations which she refers to as the "love embrace," Janie starts searching for a male partner with whom she, too, could fulfil her emotional desires. Employing the following diction, Hurston is at her best in the narration of such romantic episodes through the third person omniscient editorial narrator:

She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes are to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creating in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid (24).

Janie experiences orgasm from observing nature. Seeking further confirmation of the voice and vision of the dust-bearing bee and the tree in bloom, she sees in the kitchen flies tumbling and singing, marrying and giving in marriage (24). All around her, Janie finds and acknowledges

Expanding the Black Woman's Horizon

response to love for all other creatures but not for herself. "She wished she were a pear tree or any tree in bloom with kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world" (25). The beginning here probably represents that of a new life which starts after such an excitement of love, copulation and fertilization, be it in a flower or a human being. This connotes Janie's quest at puberty for a male partner to make her feel like a young woman. Hurston's description and interplay of human, plant, animal or insect romantic relationships can hardly be equalled or surpassed. Janie's quest or yearning for a love embrace romanticizes Johnny Taylor. Here is how this is rendered by the third person omniscient editorial narrator who compares Janie to a blooming plant ready for fertilization:

She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? ... Through pollinated air she saw a glorious being coming up the road. In her former blindness she had known him as shiftless Johnny Taylor, tall and lean. That was before the golden dust of pollen had be-glamored his rags and her eyes (25).

According to Sherley Anne Williams:

Something of the questing quality that characterized Zora's own life informs the character of Janie _ without, of course, the forcefulness of Zora's own personality. In this and other instances, the character is more conventional than the author, for despite obvious idealization, Janie operates in a "real" world. Her actions, responses, and motivations are consistent with that reality and the growing assertiveness of her own self-definition (x).

It is most probable that Zora Neale Hurston idealizes the setting in order to create a positive atmosphere for the development of Janie's character so that African-American women could emulate her and find positive roles for themselves in the family and in the society either through marriage or celibacy, after so many years of both mental and physical denigration and outright slavery. It is note-worthy that even though marriage is supposed to be a universal traditional institution, formal marriage was not allowed among the African-American slaves during slavery. A black couple could live together, copulate and produce children, but the two were usually threatened with separation from each other and from their children so that there could be no emotional attachment between parents and children or between the black man and his woman. The white slave-master was not interested in the marriage of the slave couple; he was only interested in the multiplication of the work-force or the propagation of more slaves the way a plant nursery is reared. He could either copulate with black woman himself or get the black slave man to do so for this purpose of getting more slaves. Hurston, therefore,

proffers marriage as one of the life-styles available to the African-American women through which they could get better integrated into the society shortly after the Slave Emancipation.

One of the aspects of idealization in this novel is the fact that despite the notion that the whites were the oppressors during slavery, the Washburns are represented as good white people who treat Nanny, their black worker, so well that Janie her grand-daughter who is raised in their premises neither feels the usual racial discrimination nor realizes that she is black until age six when she notices the difference of her colour in a photograph. Mrs. Washburn passes on her children's clothes and hair ribbons to Janie, and this makes the latter look distinct from the rest of the black children at school. Nanny who is Hurston's surrogate in this situation believes that the fate of black people in America can only improve if the white privileged population get committed to providing justice for all and improving the financial and social status of the blacks. That is what Nanny means when she naively states that the solution to the black people's problem in America is money and good white people (36). If all Americans are socialized whether formally in school, or informally to accept one another as equals, black or white, male or female, irrespective of racial, religious or gender differences, it would be possible to attain parity, justice and peace in America. This is corroborated by Benjamin Franklin who states: "Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are" (quotes/49575).

The following are instances in the text to substantiate Sherley Anne Williams' claim that "despite obvious idealizations, Janie operates in a 'real' world" (x). Janie experiences deep envy at school from a black classmate like Mayrella not only of her fine clothes but also of her mulatto complexion. In reaction to Janie's privileged position, the black children at school try to ostracize her, as she narrates in an auto-biographical tone: "They'd push me 'way from de ring plays and make out they couldn't play wid nobody dat lived on premises" (22). To avoid further humiliation of Janie by her peers for living in white people's premises, Nanny buys a piece of land and with Mrs. Washburn's assistance, gets her own house built, furnished, and ready for habitation.

The availability of Nanny's personal house might be a narrative technique to make the meeting between Johnny Taylor and Janie possible and plausible. The young people's meeting and surreptitious kiss would probably not have been possible if Janie were still living on the white people's premises.

Here are further instances to confirm through Janie's actions and responses that she operates in a 'real' world. As Janie returns to Eatonville after burying her third husband, Tea Cake, she is criticized by her neighbours whose envy started shortly after Janie and Jody, her second husband, settled in the neighbourhood. It is that attitude of hostility and envy that continues towards Janie even when she becomes a widow. This is what we are told by the third person omniscient editorial narrator:

Expanding the Black Woman's Horizon

Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song (10).

Hurston is at her best here trying to represent human sentiments of envy and lack of charity for neighbour. Furthermore, after Nanny spies and sees Janie lacerated with a kiss by Johnny Taylor as if caught by a candid camera, she calls Janie into the room and says to her: "Yeah, Janie, youse a 'oman now, so _." Despite Janie's denial and protest, "Naw, Nanny, naw Ah ain't no real 'oman yet (26)," Nanny insists: "Yeah, Janie, youse got yo' womanhood on yuh. So Ah mout ez well tell yuh whut Ah been saving up for uh spell. Ah wants to see you married right away (26). Like Badua, the eponymous Anowa's mother, in Ama Ata Aidoo's play *Anowa*, Nanny cannot conceive of any other destiny or life-style for her grand-daughter Janie other than the patriarchally prescribed one of marriage. This is not unusual because at this stage of African-American historical development, shortly after the Slave Emancipation, the first life-style to come to mind is marriage because before the inquiry of gender studies, most cultures proffered marriage as the ultimate goal and sole ambition of every woman. However, Zora Neale Hurston and most feminist writers proffer marriage as only one of the optional life-styles open to woman.

When Janie protests, asking to whom she is to get married since she knows nobody, Nanny in a biblical tone, tending to echo Abraham's response during his temptation to offer his son Isaac as sacrificial lamb, replies:

"De Lawd will provide" (27). However, unlike Abraham who put his complete trust in the Lord to provide, Nanny proposes someone who has already asked her for Janie's hand in marriage, even though she had not yet given her consent.

Nanny Picks a Husband for Janie for Protection

Discovering that her proposed suitor is Logan Killicks, Janie retorts in a realistic manner: "Naw, Nanny, no ma'am! Is that whut he been hangin' round here for? He look like some ole skull-head in de grave yard" (28). Naused by that image of Logan Killicks which tends to desecrate her dream of herself as a pear tree in bloom awaiting a pollen-bearing bee or a perfect reciprocal lover, Janie, in a realistic manner, spits on the ground. Nanny gets irritated by Janie's non-verbal but realistic response; so she violently slaps Janie's face and forces her head so that their eyes meet as if in a contest. Here is one of Hurston's beautiful descriptions of emotion:

Monique O. Ekpong

With her head uplifted for the second blow, Nanny saw the huge tear that welled up from Janie's heart and stood in each eye. She saw the terrible agony and the lips tightened down to hold back the cry and desisted. Instead she brushed back the heavy hair from Janie's face and stood there suffering, loving and weeping internally for both of them (29).

As Nanny restrains herself from slapping Janie a second time, she tries to console her reassuring her that just as she does not intend to hurt even a strand of hair on her head, so also would she not want anybody else to hurt Janie, if she could help it. She does not want Janie to suffer the way black women did during slavery and soon afterwards. This is what she says to Janie in a realistic manner: "Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you tuh have, baby, it's protection" (30). Nanny then goes on to tell Janie, thus, about her point of view concerning the tragic condition of women, especially the black woman in America:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where black man is in power, but we don't know nothing' but whut 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 womanfolks. De nigger woman is the mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd Lawd Lawd (29).

This positive wish from a mother or grandmother is realistic and plausible no matter what Janie thinks of her grand-mother, Nanny. It is for the same reason that Nanny wishes that Janie, and by implication all black women and oppressed people, could fair better by "picking from a higher bush and a sweeter berry."

Protest against the Use of Black Woman as Work-Ox on the Fields, and as Brood-Sow

Nanny, Zora Neale Hurston's surrogate, does not want the black woman to be used on the fields as a work-ox, and as a brood-sow, that is, as a slave manufacturing machine or an instrument for propagating more slaves, the way most female slaves were used during slavery. "Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither ..." (31). However, Nanny herself was used in that manner during slavery because she could not help it since she was born into slavery. Nanny attempts to be protective and to avoid the same fate befalling her daughter Leafy, until a black school teacher comes along, rapes and impregnates her, shortly after the Emancipation. This confirms the vulnerability of women in any situation of oppression despite attempted

Expanding the Black Woman's Horizon

protection. Owing to the inhumanity of human beings to one another, a black man who should be in empathy with a fellow black, though a woman, owing to their shared sufferings during slavery, still rapes the young innocent black girl, Leafy. Janie, the protagonist, is born as a result of that violent and brutal coupling between Leafy and the black teacher. Nanny protects Janie her grand-daughter so that she, too, might not be victimized like her mother Leafy. The assaulted girl Leafy takes to drinking and finally runs away from home after Janie's birth, leaving the baby to be raised by its grandmother, Nanny. Even while still a slave, nobody could prevent Nanny from dreaming of what a woman ought to be or do, or what she would have liked to be as a woman. Unfortunately, slavery thwarted her dreams. Nanny sees Janie as another opportunity to live out her dream of what a woman ought to be and do.

We shall now examine how the rest of the story is a manifestation or actualization of Nanny's dream. Corroborating the notion that Nanny sees Janie as another opportunity to live out her dream of what a woman ought to be and do, here is what Nanny says to Janie:

It sho wasn't mah will for things tuh happen lak they did. Ah even hated de way you was born. But, all de same Ah said thank God, Ah got another chance. Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me ... Ah said Ah'd save de text for you. Ah been waitin' a long time, Janie, but nothin' Ah been through ain't too much if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed (31-2).

Nanny's search for improved condition for the black woman after the Slave Emancipation explains the notion of taking a stand on high ground and motif of picking from a higher bush in the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Nanny's search to fulfil her dream, through Janie, her grand-daughter, of "what a woman ought to be or do" leads to Logan Killicks. Nanny is afraid that after her death, Janie might remain lonely in this world if she does not get married. In view of the foregoing, Nanny adds:

You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots, and that makes things come round in queer ways. You, in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfil my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin'. Yo can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will (31).

The narrative technique used here is that of a flash-back. The following is a good example of how Hurston concretizes the abstract in the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, using the third-person omniscient editorial narrator: "Old Nanny sat there rocking Janie like an infant and thinking back.

Monique O. Ekpong

Mind pictures brought feelings, and feelings dragged dreams from the hollows of her heart” (32).

Again, using the flash-back technique and the auto-biographical style of narration, Nanny tells us how the slave master had coerced sexual relations with her, even while she was nursing Janie’s mother, Leafy - a week old baby whom he, most probably, must have fathered:

Ah couldn’t see nothin’ cause yo mama wasn’t but a week old, and Ah was flat uh mah back. But pretty soon he let on he forgot somethin’ and run into mah cabin and made me let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wropped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done, and was gone after de rest lak lightnin’. Ah heard ’em give one last whop for him. Then de big house and de quarters got sober and silent (32-3).

The fore-going represents how slave-masters victimized their female slaves or copulated with them. Such coerced sexual relations serve as example of the double-bind or the extra victimization suffered by women in any situation of oppression. Woman, here represented by Nanny, suffers multiply, first as a slave, secondly as a black, and then as a woman.

Nanny’s master, at least, makes an effort to get the slave woman to cooperate with him in the sexual act through some form of introductory love-play, and it appears he tends to draw some sexual satisfaction from the coerced relations, apart from procreating more slaves. That makes the narration of this novel appear more authenticated and woman’s experience more validated. The preliminaries to the coerced sexual relations which could be interpreted as love-play are represented here by making Nanny let down her hair, the slave master’s wrapping of his hand in it, and pulling of Nanny’s big toe. The phrases “for de last time” and “lak he always done” suggest that this was a regular occurrence. The coerced sexual relation itself is encapsulated in the phrase “after de rest” (33). This is a good example of how a slave master made a brood sow of his female slave by copulating with her in order to propagate more slaves which was the major reason for the coerced sexual relations.

Even though marriage is one of the life-styles proffered by Hurston through her surrogate Nanny for the black woman so that she might be better integrated into the society shortly after the Slave Emancipation, yet there are some negative impacts from most husbands which Hurston would want eliminated. Here are some of such examples.

Oppression of Janie by Logan Killicks

Janie’s marriage to Logan Killicks, unfortunately, remains loveless partly because Logan Killicks fails to make love to her in bed, probably because he is too old. On the other hand, Janie cannot get herself to love Killicks

Expanding the Black Woman's Horizon

because he is old, un-romantic, unkempt and physically ugly. Here are some of Janie's unwelcome sentiments about him:

Some folks never was meant to be loved and he's one of 'em ...
'Cause Ah hates de way his head is so long one way and so flat on
de sides and de pone uh fat back uh his neck ... (42).

When Nanny, protective of Killicks, says he did not create himself, Janie retorts: "Ah don't keer who made it, Ah don't like de job" (42). She adds:

His belly is too big too, now, and his toe nails look lak mule foots.
And 'tain't nothin' in de way of him washin' his feet every
evenin' before he comes tuh bed (42).

Janie, representing all women, complains here about the infringement on women's rights when some men go to bed without cleaning up properly and refreshing themselves so that they could be attractive to their partners and so that there could be healthy air for their wives to breathe. Yet, such men, most frequently, insist that women should be clean since the latter menstruate and have other forms of discharge from their bodies. In some known African communities, it is a taboo to say to your man that his body oozes an odour. So, most women live with such inhibitions. Either etiquette or their traditional culture prohibits them from complaining. Putting up with such a situation as Janie's, where the wife keeps trying to hold her breath because of the body odour, could lead to the development of a poor health condition like a peptic ulcer. The novelist Hurston exposes and transcends such problems of inhibition and oppression of wives by causing Janie, their representative in this context, to speak out and protest against her victimization when her husband buys a second mule with which he intends to get her to work on the fields. This might have been as punishment because she fails to reciprocate his love. In Logan Killicks absence, Janie comes upon another man Joe Starks who promises her change and distant horizon, which Janie interprets to mean alternative life-style for woman and an expansion of her horizon. That night after fore-warning her first husband Logan Killicks of the possibility of her escaping or running away with another man, a quarrel ensues, and Janie meditates on most of the denigrating things that Logan says to her about her family. The following morning, Janie abandons breakfast on the fire and elopes with Joe Starks to Eatonville.

Some aspects of violence meted out to Janie in this first marriage to Logan Killicks can be summarized as follows: an attempt to make her a work-ox by buying her a mule with which to plough the fields; failure by her husband to continue to help her with house-chores; refusal to continue to speak to her in love rhymes; inability to make love to her in bed; failure to regard her woman's rights as human rights when Killicks gets into bed beside her at night without cleaning up properly, thereby making it difficult

Monique O. Ekpong

for her to breath comfortably; misplacement of priority by her grandmother who places more premium on wealth, mistaking it for protection, among others things. For the above reasons, Janie returns one day to report the situation to her grand-mother. She complains to Nanny about the loveless marriage.

Janie's initial arrival at Killicks is rendered thus in brisk narration and terse language by the third person omniscient editorial narrator:

The house was absent of flavor, too. But anyhow Janie went on inside to wait for love to begin. The new moon had been up and down three times before she got worried in mind. Then she went to see Nanny in Mrs. Washburn's kitchen ... (39).

This corroborates the submission that Logan Killicks does not fulfil Janie's dream of a mutual loving husband whom she describes as "a pollen-bearing bee" meant for her, "a tree in bloom."

Oppression of Janie by Joe Starks

Some aspects of violence meted out to Janie in her marriage to Joe Starks could be summarized as follows: Jody's ignoring of her selfhood by refusing her any access to life except through him; Jody's refusal of Janie's self-expression in public when the master-of-ceremony, Tony Taylor, gives her an opportunity to address the people at the store-porch; assuming that the fulfilment of a husband's aspiration is synonymous with fulfilling a wife's dreams; restricting Janie to the store and ridiculing her whenever she makes a mistake while serving in-there as a clerk; refusal to allow Janie to participate in the fun of escorting the bull to the slaughter; slapping Janie after an inadvertent poorly prepared dinner; getting Janie to always cover her long beautiful hair so that it might not be admired by other men; forcing Janie to engage in role-playing like a Mayor's wife while he the Mayor himself interacts freely with the ordinary town's people; implicitly requesting Janie to imitate the former slave master's wife by asking her to sit on a high pedestal aloof from her fellow black people.

On Jody and Janie's arrival at Eatonville, Jody discovers that there is no Mayor. Hicks, one of Jody's interlocutors is more interested in making passes at Janie, than in the innovations envisioned by Jody. The characters of Hicks and Coker represent the complacent average human being or African-American man who does not expect the world around him, as he has been used to it, to change.

Joe Starks goes to Mr. Eaton to pay for two hundred acres of land. He assembles the men on the front porch of his house and discusses the need for the town to have a Mayor. Shortly afterwards, as soon as he is elected Mayor of Eatonville, he sets to work, and gets a post office from Government for the town. He also gets two roads built through communal labour; hires Tony and

Expanding the Black Woman's Horizon

Coker to build his store; pays for a street Lamp and gets the majority of the people to approve and ratify his endeavours. As a good leader, Joe Starks opts to bring a hog for the party while he requests the rest of the men to jointly contribute two, and the women to supply the food or sweets such as pies, cakes and sweet potatoes.

Such details about Eatonville justify Sherley Anne Williams' deduction that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the authentic, fictional representation of Eatonville which Hurston had been struggling for in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. The novel, according to Sherley Anne Williams, culminates the fifteen-year effort to celebrate her birthright or birth-place – a celebration which came through the exploration of a woman's right to selfhood.

Both physical and emotional oppression of a wife is exhibited through Jody, Janie's second husband, and this is made evident as follows. Whereas Jody feels very elated with his new position as Mayor, Janie feels deflated by Jody and estranged from him because he refuses her the opportunity to speak to the crowd on the store porch when invited to do so by Tony Taylor. Here is what Jody says to the master of ceremony:

Thank yuh for yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin'
'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat.
She is uh woman and her place is in de home (69).

This is the patriarchal concept of woman that Hurston means to correct and modify in this novel. Janie starts feeling left out, even though the people hold her in the same high esteem and admiration as they do the Mayor, and bear the same grudge against both of them. – This is the beginning of the envy which re-emerges when Janie returns to Eatonville after burying her third husband, Tea Cake. During gossip they accuse both Jody and Janie of acting like the former slave boss because, for instance, each of them uses a gold cup for a spittoon.

Here the novelist, Zora Neale Hurston intends to teach people that the oppressed like blacks and women cannot change or improve on their tragic condition by continuing to oppress others or by imitating the former oppressors. On-lookers at the store porch observe that even though Jody lords it over them, he tends to oppress even his wife by ridiculing her whenever she makes a mistake while serving as a clerk in the store. He even slaps her after an inadvertent bad dinner and tells her about her brains.

In addition, on the day their new store is opened, her husband Jody asks her to dress well like a Mayor's wife. This is how the third-person omniscient narrator puts it:

Everybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang (66).

Jody attempts to stifle her by not letting her realize herself but instead tries to get her to experience life through him alone.

Janie is disappointed that Jody is so preoccupied with being a Mayor that he does not have enough time for her in order to reciprocate her love, fulfil her dream and serve as the pollen-bearing bee for her bloom. Janie finally reacts to Jody's constant disparagement by publicly challenging his authority and questioning his manhood. After Janie's revolt, Jody is so shaken that he starts pining away because he remains unforgiving, and continues to bear her a grudge until his death. In view of the fore-going, the spirit of Janie's second marriage metaphorically leaves the bedroom, according to the third person omniscient narrator, and takes to living in the parlour. Jody dies a short while afterwards, bitter over the revolt and shaken by the challenge to his authority. This is Hurston's forewarning to enemies of progress or social positive change that they either accept the participation of women or the oppressed in the social polity and nation-building, or gradually pine away to death.

Tea Cake: the Reciprocal Lover or "Pollen-Bearing Bee for Janie's Bloom"

After the death of Jody her second husband, Janie becomes a wealthy widow and is beset by status-conscious suitors. She rejects her class role and falls in love with Vergible Woods, nick-named Tea Cake who is a free-spirited labourer, much younger than she. According to Janie, Tea Cake is a glance from God (161). He teaches her the maiden language of love all over again. To Tea Cake, Janie is the "key to de kingdom" (165). Unlike the role-playing in Janie's two earlier marriages, this love is so strong that it makes both parties willing to be open and giving to each other. The most remarkable aspect of their love is that Tea Cake accepts Janie as an equal. He teaches her how to play scrabbles and how to drive using a borrowed car. They go fishing together. In the muck – a rich and fertile area – they choose to go bean-picking, working together during the day because they do not want to be separated from each other. It is only with sincere mutual love such as the one between Janie and Tea Cake that woman can discover the self and experience self-fulfilment.

The act of finding one true love or the true bee for a woman's blossom is symbolic, demonstrating Janie's feminist consciousness and ability to grow into an adult awareness of self. It also symbolizes the freedom of choice for a woman to adopt any convenient life-style. Tea Cake suggests the horizon, thereby, illustrating the distance one must travel in order to distinguish between illusion and reality, dream and truth, role and self (Hemenway 238).

The dehumanization of African-Americans, in general, or the emasculation of the black men, in particular, by the American society constitutes the double victimization of the African-American woman, particularly the emancipated, because she can hardly find a suitable husband among her own African-American men at this stage of development in

Expanding the Black Woman's Horizon

America. Of all the husbands, like John Pearson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Logan Killicks, Joe Starks and Tea Cake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, none is a suitable enough husband for the liberated woman like Lucy in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* or Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Language: Use and Meaning

When Nanny expresses anxiety whether Killicks has been beating up Janie, the latter gives a positive report thus in that regard in the African-American dialect: "He says he never mean to lay de weight uh his hand on me in malice" (40). Instead Killicks chops all the wood he thinks Janie needs. "... and den he totes it inside de kitchen for me. Keeps both water buckets full" (40). Nanny who understands better men's psychology warns Janie that a man should not bend too low to show love to his woman lest that manner of expression of love would not be durable. But if he treats her as an equal, that relationship would be more enduring. Here is how that is expressed metaphorically in the African-American dialect.

Humph! Don't 'spect all dat tuh keep up. He ain't kissin' yo' mouf when he carry on over yuh lak dat. He's kissin' yo' foot and 'tain't in uh man tuh kiss foot long. Mouf kissin' is on uh equal and dat's natural but when dey got to bow down tuh love, dey soon straightens up" (40-1).

It is pertinent to note that the novelist Hurston, through her surrogate Nanny, considers it natural for a woman to be treated as an equal by a man. Janie imbibes this notion from her grand-mother as she continues her search for "a pollen-bearing bee," that is, for someone or a man whom she could love and who would reciprocate her love.

Janie says that she cannot love Logan Killicks because he is ugly, unkempt and unromantic. On the contrary, Nanny argues that "love is de very prong all us ... black women gits hung on" (41). Nanny contrasts the fairly rich Logan Killicks with other poor young men whom many black women have to put up with. She asks Janie whether she prefers "a dressed up dude" who cannot keep himself in leather shoes much less provide for his woman or someone else. This is how that is rendered:

Dat's how come de ole folks say dat bein' uh fool don't kill nobody. It just makes you sweat. Ah betcha you wants some dressed up dude dat got to look at de sole of his shoe everytime he cross de street tuh see whether he got enough leather dere tuh make it across (41-2).

This implies that such a poor man who cannot take care of himself would have his fellow black women take over his responsibilities. That has already been expressed earlier thus: "... de white man throw down de load and tell de

Monique O. Ekpong

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 womanfolks (29).

Later on, Nanny's prediction of the possibility of Janie loving a poor young man gets actualized in Vergible Woods or Tea Cake. In spite of Nanny's encouragement for Janie to endure Killicks because of the protection, property, and the respect she earns from being his wife, and the hope that she might change her mind and start to love him in future, Janie insists: "But Nanny, Ah wants to want him sometimes. Ah don't want him to do all de wantin'" (41). That illustrates Janie's assertiveness, adherence to her freewill, her claim to her human or woman's rights and rejection of socially imposed inhibitions on women.

Complaining that Killicks' wealth does not matter much to her since she does not love him, Janie continues:

Ah ain't takin' dat ole land tuh heart neither. Ah could throw ten acres of it over de fence every day and never look back to see where it fell. Ah feel de same way 'bout Mr. Killicks too (42).

It is pertinent to note that Janie finds the time to worry about romantic love and finesse because she is comfortable or has the basic necessities of life, having married a fairly rich man like Logan Killicks. The other category of poor black women on a lower social status would not find time for such niceties. They are the type from whose fate Nanny would want to protect Janie. Such women work from dawn to dusk, that is, "from can't see in de mornin' till can't see at night" (41). They work so hard that they have no time for finesse, pleasantries or niceties. Janie would like her husband to say a lot of pleasantries or romantic words to her, but we are told by the third person omniscient editorial narrator that "long before the year was up Janie noticed that her husband had stopped talking in rhymes to her" (45).

Just as Nanny had predicted that when a man bends low to express his love, he soon straightens or stands up, Killicks starts changing by getting Janie to take over some of the house-chores that he used to help her to do. Janie gets disillusioned with her marriage to Logan Killicks because he fails to represent for her "the pollen-bearing bee" or the reciprocal lover of her dream. She is also disappointed with Nanny's response that she should go and put up with Killicks until she gets used to him. Dejected, Janie returns to Killick's house to wait for any opportunity to fulfil her own dream of finding the right man for her bloom.

Here are more examples to further explore language use and meaning in the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The indignities suffered by Nanny, Janie's grandmother during slavery and even afterwards, such as her sexual violation by slave-masters, make her metaphorically "a cracked plate" which must be "put down easy" (37). Our knowledge of the extent of these indignities and humiliations makes the "cracked plate" metaphor really

Expanding the Black Woman's Horizon

pathetic. Here is an example of such melancholic depiction of sensory experience and turning of the abstract into object:

There is a basin in the mind where words float around on thought and thought on sound and sight. Then there is a depth of thought untouched by words, and deeper still a gulf of formless feelings untouched by thought (43).

Nanny entered the depth of this conscious pain while praying on her knees at night in her cubicle after Janie's complaint about her husband Logan Killicks whom she could not love because he fails to represent the mutual lover of her dream.

Other examples of the reification or objectification of the abstract include the following metaphors: "thought pictures as crayon-enlargements of life," (81), and "mind pictures that brought feelings and feelings that dragged dreams from the hollows of Nanny's heart" (32).

The artistic beauty of the language of this passage dwells in its rhythm, repetition of words, alliteration and onomatopoeic effect which all contribute in conveying its meaning. For example, as the voiced dental fricative /ð/ opens the passage and occurs four times, it jolts the reader into thinking deep in order to appreciate this fresh perception and expression of thought. Its voiceless equivalent /θ/ in the repetition of words like "thought" four times, the alliteration of the voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ and the voiceless labio-dental fricative /f/, and their onomatopoeic effects all contribute to depict the silent floating of words and thoughts in the mind. The rhythm and idea of the first sentence are broken by the voiced dental fricative /ð/ as it opens the second sentence, introduces its rhythm and contrasts its idea, "a gulf of formless feelings untouched by thought" with that contained in the first sentence: "a basin in the mind where words float around on thought and thought on sound and sight (43).

Even though Hurston reifies or turns the abstract into object in her two novels, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it is in the latter, like D. H. Lawrence, according to Robert Hemenway, that she better depicts sensory experience, especially that of women, as evident in the above passages concerning Nanny and Janie. The novelist Zora Neale Hurston, thereby, individualizes woman's psyche, personalizes and validates her experience and instils confidence in her by authenticating woman's personality. As she validates the existence of the African-American culture through the use of the rural southern dialect with most of its qualities, Hurston is instilling confidence in and empowering not only the black woman but also her male counterpart and, indeed, all African-Americans.

Language: Evidence of Black Culture in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, what is most striking about language is the fact that Hurston makes use of her African-American dialect which is evident both in the lexical and syntactical patterns. Furthermore, language is used as a medium for the celebration of the ethos of rural Blacks in America for the empowerment of African-Americans in general and women, in particular. As African-Americans develop confidence in their language or dialect, they become proud of their culture, and this enables them to transcend their tragic condition and stand on higher ground or assume a higher social status which enables them to become better integrated in the American society after the Slave Emancipation. Even though the American blacks at the time could hardly boast of material wealth, they could, at least, boast of their rich Oral Tradition or verbal art. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston extols her rural black people's ability to use language not only to manifest the values of the group in verbal behaviour, but also to represent the black cultural tradition as the characters hold their verbal sessions, lying competitions, contests in hyperboles, acted courtship ritual and story-telling sessions in the store porch or in Janie's home in the muck. According to Robert Hemenway, whenever Hurston writes of Eatonville which is her birth-place, the store porch is all-important. She refers to it as the "centre of the world," meaning the centre of the community. Its activities are often referred to as "crayon enlargements of life" (81). In her own words Hurston states:

When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see, it was nice. The fact that the thought pictures were always crayon-enlargements of life made it even nicer to listen to (81).

Hurston's fiction in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as is evident in the above passage, represents the processes of folkloric transmission to the "high" culture of written literature, emphasizing the wisdom, the ways of thinking and speaking which emanate from the folk environment. In this novel, the reification or changing of abstract into concrete images – a quality of the African-American dialect - represents the concretization in writing of the rich African-American oral verbal art, and symbolizes the transformation of the oral traditional verbal art of the rural African-Americans into their rich contribution to the "high" culture of written literature. This helps to substantiate the existence of an African-American culture.

Hurston incorporates into her novel the dynamism of the spoken word which is an aspect of the rural African-American traditional heritage, thus insinuating that even the down-trodden "nigger," – who, from the white Americans' perspective, is an inarticulate, ignorant, uneducated semi-human being - possesses something new from the matrix of his ethnic heritage which he can contribute to the "high" culture of written literature.

Expanding the Black Woman's Horizon

According to Robert Hemenway, it was so important for Hurston to create written literature because of her uncertainty about her own writing. Her embodiment of the roles of tale-tellers was acted out against a backdrop of general Renaissance interest in the folk or rural people. To an extent, she had the feeling that in these cultural roots were to be found the primary ingredients for black art (Hemenway 65).

Many a critic, including a white critic like Harold Preece and some African-Americans like Alain Locke and Richard Wright, has criticized Hurston for her preoccupation with interracial folkloric situation rather than with interracial confrontations. From this writer's perspective, Hurston is only exercising her right of expression by responding to an autonomous imagination both as a woman and as a member of the African-American community. She, first of all, attempts to instill a sense of racial health and racial pride in all African-Americans, particularly the women, through the celebration of their oral traditional art and culture. Then, she exposes the tragic and degrading condition of the black woman during slavery, and immediately after, especially in her relationship with man, through love or marriage. Thereafter, she attempts to transcend that tragic condition through its repudiation or rejection by characters like Nanny and Janie, through whom various available and envisioned roles are proffered for the African-American woman after slavery.

CONCLUSION

In the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston succeeds in expanding the black woman's horizon by proffering various roles and lifestyles for her integration into the American society after the Slave Emancipation. This essay has attempted to expose various tragic images of the black woman in the novel during slavery and immediately afterwards, starting from that of the brood-sow or a slave - manufacturing machine, an example of which is Nanny whose coerced sexual relations with her slave - master probably produced her daughter, Leafy, the mother of the protagonist Janie. Coerced sexual relations with the black woman continues even after slavery, as exemplified in Leafy's sexual violation by a fellow black, her school teacher.

Another tragic image during slavery is that of the black woman as work-ox. This image is attempted to be imposed on Janie by her first husband Logan Killicks, but she rejects it and elopes with Jody Starks. Both physical and emotional oppression of a wife is exhibited through Jody, Janie's second husband. Hurston, therefore, expounds in this novel how women's victimization could be transcended. Nanny's and Janie's repudiation or rejection of these tragic conditions for black women reveals the extent that women, and by implication all oppressed people, must go in order to

transcend their subjugation. They should neither imitate the oppressors nor remain complacent in their tragic condition the way the ordinary poor blacks in the novel do. Hurston encourages all oppressed people to take their destiny into their own hands and manipulate it into freedom.

The novelist shows a good example of manipulating her condition positively in her writing by exploiting the African-American dialect in her novels, where language is used as a medium for the celebration of the ethos of rural Blacks in America for the empowerment of African-Americans in general and women, in particular. Hurston's role as a writer or novelist, thus, proffers education or writing as one of the available life-styles for the African-American woman after the Slave Emancipation.

Nanny's wish for her daughter Leafy to become a teacher exposes us to the transcendental image of the black woman as an educated professional which is an alternative image to the traditional one of wifehood. Nanny's own choice to remain celibate in order to work and provide improved living conditions for her family acquaints us with another alternative life-style and image of woman as a skill-acquired person working to serve her family and the society. Nanny's search to fulfil her dream, through Janie, her grand-daughter, of what "a woman ought to be or do" leads to Janie's marriage to Logan Killicks, thus, making marriage one of the proffered life-styles for women after the Slave Emancipation. It is pertinent to note that to Hurston, marriage is only one of the choices open to woman, and not the sole ambition, ultimate goal or compulsory life-style of every woman.

Because Nanny could not control her destiny during slavery, she searches to fulfil her dream through Janie her grand-daughter. Janie's defiance of her grandmother Nanny's wish to continue marrying her first husband Logan Killicks, her revolt against her second husband Jody Starks' domineering attitude and challenge of his manhood, and her choice to marry Tea Cake who was below her social status encapsulate the freedom or liberation envisioned by the novelist Hurston for the Black woman after the Slave Emancipation which is here encoded as expanding the Black woman's horizon. Since Nanny is Zora Neale Hurston's surrogate, her search for improved condition for the black woman after the Slave Emancipation explains the notion of taking a stand on high ground and the motif of picking from a higher bush and a sweeter berry, in order to transcend the tragic condition of the black woman in America.

WORKS CITED

- Abrams, H. M. (1993). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 6th ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace.
Aidoo, Ama Ata (1970). *Anowa*. London: Longman.

Expanding the Black Woman's Horizon

- Bone, Robert (1998). *The Negro Novel in America*. 1958. 3rd ed. Connecticut: Yale UP.
- De Beauvoir, Simone (1976). *The Second Sex*. Trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley. 1953. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Forster, E.M. (1962). *Aspects of the Novel*. Hamondsworth Middlesex: Penguin.
- Franklin, Benjamin. *Equity, Justice, Laws* Goodreads
www.goodreads.com/quotes/49575/08:07:2014
- Hemenway, Robert (1977). *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Chicago: Illinois UP.
- Hurston, Zora Neale (1969). *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. 1934. New York: J. B. Lippincott.
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 1937. Illinois: Illinois UP, 1978.
- Locke, Alain. "Literature by and about the Negro." *Opportunity*. 1938. quoted in Hemenway, Robert. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. 241.
- Neal, Larry (1969). Introduction. *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. By Zora Neale Hurston. 1934. New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1969. 5-7.
- Ogundipe-Lesile, Molar (1987). *The Female Writer and Her Commitment*. *Women in African Literature Today* 15: 5-13.
- Preece, Harold. "The Negro Folk Cult." *Crisis* 43 (1936): 364- 374, quoted in Hemenway, Robert. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. 241.
- Shroder, Maurice Z. (1967). *The Novel as a Genre*. *The Theory of the Novel*. Ed. Philip Stevick. London: Collier Macmillan, 14-22.
- Walker, Alice (1979). *I Love Myself When I am Laughing*. Hurston, New York: Feminist Press.
- Williams, Sherley Anne (1978). Foreword. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. By Zora Neale Hurston. Illinois: Illinois UP v-xv.
- Wright, Richard (1966). *Native Son*. New York: Harper and Row.