

**"MARRIAGE DOESN'T MAKE LOVE":
ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*"**

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(Resumen)

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) fue una mujer auto-suficiente, extravertida, educada, culta, irresistible -a veces-, con una personalidad muy atractiva y que comparte con Toni Morrison la obsesión por escribir "sobre el amor y el desamor". Irónicamente, esta mujer extremadamente liberada e independiente decide escribir sobre mujeres que sufren relaciones sentimentales opresivas.

El propósito de este artículo es demostrar que en la obra de Hurston *There eyes were watching God* (1937), "marriage doesn't make love", porque en el discurso literario de Hurston el matrimonio victimiza a la mujer castrándola física y espiritualmente. El mensaje de Hurston es provocativo y revolucionario ya que es la propia autora quien libera a algunos de sus personajes femeninos de la trampa del matrimonio. Como a ella misma le ocurre en su vida personal, en su discurso narrativo Hurston prefiere ver a sus mujeres solas pero libres, antes que encadenadas y casadas.

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Critics disliked Hurston's apparent sensuality: the way she tended to marry or not marry, but enjoyed men anyway--while never missing a beat in her work. (Walker, *In Search* 88)

Zora Neale Hurston, who is now canonized as the "literary ancestor" of provocative writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor or Terry MacMillan, was "a flamboyant individualist" (Rayson 2), despite the fact of being *a woman and black*. Hurston was also very secretive about her personal life. However, we do know that Hurston married at least twice, although for brief periods of time, and remained childless. Ironically, this highly independent woman chooses marriage as an obsessive theme.

Although marriage is a constant in *all* of Hurston's fictional works, the purpose of this paper is to concentrate on Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) to show that for Hurston and her female character "marriage does not make love." In Hurston's discourse marriage oppresses women's minds and bodies, victimizes women, and prevents them from blooming to their full potentialities.

In an interview with Jane Bakerman, Toni Morrison summarizes her own rich and varied, for some shocking, and always provocative themes, in one single word--**LOVE**:

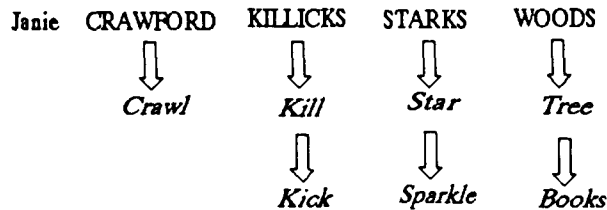
Actually, I think all the time that I write, I am writing about love or its absence ... which is how people relate to one another and miss or hang on to it ... are tenacious about love. (Bakerman 60)

Zora Neale Hurston also shares with Toni Morrison this tenacity to write "about love or its absence." Despite Hurston's obsessive treatment of fictional marriages, only two critics have approached it directly. "Marriage: Zora Neale Hurston's System of Values" (1977) is Lillie P. Howard's pioneering work. A much more recent study is Sybille Kamme-Erkel's *Happily Ever After?: Marriage and Its Rejection in Afro-American Novels* (1989), although the author just concentrates on Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In her study, Kamme-Erkel covers a great variety of works by Afro-American writers, both male and female, from slavery times to the present. We could summarize her conclusions as follows:

- 1) Afro-American novelists tend to avoid the traditional "happy ending in marriage" (Kamme 150).
- 2) Although in some literary works, marriage is a gratifying experience, "such positive portrayals of married couples are becoming increasingly rare" (Kamme 149-50).

My reading of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is close to that of Kamme-Erkel's. Furthermore, even though Kamme-Erkel defines the marriage of the female protagonist, Janie, with Tea Cake as a satisfactory one, it is hard for me to associate *marriage* with *happiness*. So does Hurston. She looks at the institution of marriage from different angles, but ends by having most of her female characters stuck in unsatisfactory and suffocating relationships.

Marriage, thus, is a major theme in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The female protagonist, Janie, marries three times. First, she is forced by her grandmother to marry Killicks, then she leaves Killicks for Starks, and after Starks' death, Janie falls madly in love with Tea Cake, twenty years her younger. By looking at these couples, we can figure out to what extent Hurston's voice on the institution of marriage is present. In my opinion, Janie's full name carries Hurston's implicit ideas on marriage:



Through Janie Crawford (*Crawl*), Hurston is denouncing marriage as a way to buy material security and social respectability for women. Crawford is both Janie's mother's and grandmother's name, since neither was legally married. Both Janie's mother and grandmother were sexually abused by men, during and after slavery times. Janie's grandmother, Nanny, was brutally raped by her master in the plantation. Thus,

Nanny, trying to avoid *the* horror of slavery--sexual exploitation-- gives Janie the wrong advice and forces her to marry:

You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes thins come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of the hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin'... 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 ... Ah even hated de way you was born. But, all the same Ah said thank God, Ah got another chance ... Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah'd take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her ... But somehow she got lost offa de highway and next thing Ah knowed here you was in the world ... 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. (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 31-32)

Robert Bone points out that, unconsciously, Nanny "puts [Janie] up on the auction block of marriage" (Bone 59). But Nanny is forcing Janie to get married because Nanny cannot forget that it was her own daughter (Janie's mother), who came home one night "crawling in on her hands and knees" after being raped by the black school teacher (*Their Eyes* 36). To Nanny's understanding, marriage has the power to raise women from that humiliating position. However, Hurston says *NO* to marriage as the only way out for women. She says *NO* to institutionalized spiritual and sexual crawling and submission for women.

Because she was so full of life before getting married, Janie Killicks (*Kill/Kick*) is a sad sight to watch when forced to marry a man she does not love:

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. 'Tain't nothin' tuh hinder him 'cause Ah places de water for him. Ah'd ruther be shot wid tacks than tuh turn over in de bed and stir up de air whilst he is in dere. He don't even never mention nothin' pretty. (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 42)

This new husband, Logan Killicks, "kicks" the beauty of sexuality out of Janie's life. Above all, Logan Killicks kills Janie's own sexuality by not understanding that "doing the wanting" (41) in bed is as important for men as for women. Through Janie Killicks, Hurston is saying that no marriage can survive without being fully desired on both sides, and without a gratifying sexual life. Also, Hurston vindicates women's active sexual participation. On women's domestic confinement, Hurston is saying that women should not take possession of the kitchen as their only space. S.J. Walker associates Janie's marriage to Killicks with what she calls "*THE KITCHEN ERA*," symbolized by the apron (Walker, "Black Novel" 523). Hurston is urging women to discard the apron

and to take a good look at the horizon. A woman's sphere should not be restricted to the kitchen, Hurston is whispering.

Once Janie is on the road after freely choosing her lover, things do brighten up for a while. Joe Starks (*Star/Sparkle*) seems to be the right lover, but he turns out to be only an hallucination. In the end he suffocates Janie's voice, and treats her as a decorative object. Joe makes a star out of Janie by sitting her on the high chair, but she is bored to death. Janie surely shines, but only through her man's speeches, money, and authority. As the years pass Janie's light fades and we can see only momentary sparkles of the woman she once was: she stops having sex with him after being humiliated; she fights him back with words; and she preserves her love for life undiminished. A puzzled Joe Stark cannot understand Janie's many frustrations:

Here he was just pouring honor all over her; building a high chair for her to sit in and overlook the world and she here pouting over it! Not that he wanted anybody else, but just too many women would be glad to be in her place. (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 98)

Hurston's message is crystal clear. There is no money in the world that can buy one self's independence and voice. Hurston herself does not buy the idea of being manipulated, exhibited, and preserved on a pedestal. It is not worth it for her fictional women to have their "minds squeezed and crowded out to make room" for their men's minds (*Their Eyes* 133). This is the reason why, at the end of what S. Jay Walker calls "THE PORCH ERA," Hurston's metaphor sends a double message to the women of the world. By burning all the head rags in the house, and letting Janie's hair shine, Hurston is not only liberating Janie's body, but also her mind. (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 135). For the first time Janie can wear what she wants, talk to whomever she wishes, and go wherever she fancies. No wonder that, after a claustrophobic marriage lasting more than two decades, Janie welcomes her sense of freedom: "This feeling freedom was fine. These men didn't represent a thing she wanted to know about" (*Their Eyes* 139-40).

Actually, Janie gives up her newly gained freedom in less than six months, but once more, she freely chooses so. Tea Cake is a playful young man who liberates Janie's mind and body and who opens up the horizon for her. The clue for this apparently ideal relationship is sharing, laughing, and making love. Janie Woods (*Tree/Books*) brings a contradictory association of ideas to my mind. On the one hand, I associate "Woods" with trees. Tea Cake is a blossom tree providing Janie with shelter and company:

She couldn't make him look just like any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women ... He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God. (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 161)

In Janie's life, Tea Cake may also represent the piece of wood one grabs onto when drowning in the sea. In a way, Tea Cake brings Janie to life. On the other hand, whips can be made out of wood. In the end, Tea Cake beats Janie with his jealousy and possessiveness, forcing Jane to put an end to a love story that might turn out differently. Janie kills Tea Cake in self-defense.

Hurston's tragic ending of the novel has been much discussed and criticized since Janie's killing of Tea Cake adds controversy to a somehow scandalous and unsettling love story. Although most critics agree that Janie's shooting was accidental, it is only recently that we hear more disturbing interpretations in which feminist critics read Janie's killing of Tea Cake as women's reaction against patriarchal domination. Claire Crabtree, for instance, turns Hurston into a feminist and explains such an apparent *weak* ending of the novel by saying that the author "did not want Janie to find fulfillment in a man, but rather in her new-found self" (Crabtree 65). Mary Jane Lupton, providing a similar interpretation, eliminates from women the victim role, and adds: "Rather than sacrificing herself at the altar of love, Janie shoots the rabid Tea Cake to save her own life" (Lupton 49). In a different train of thought Lloyd Brown not only accuses Tea Cake of being as "brutally possessive and insensitive as Killicks and Starks had been," but he also denounces Janie for willingly trying to deny that evidence (Brown 44).

Perhaps, a more interesting critical approach is Dianne Sadoff's view of the interrelation of Hurston and Janie, of the autobiographical information and the novel. Sadoff points out that Janie kills Joe Starks and Tea Cake for the same reason, that is, as a way to pay them back for suffocating her own independent self. Therefore, Sadoff justifies the novel's tragic ending in the following terms: "Hurston has motivated her narrative perhaps unconsciously, to act out her rage against male domination and to free Janie, a figure for herself, from all men" (Sadoff 22).

Although Hurston herself did not find marriage "palatable," it is fascinating to see her depiction of fictional marriages. Contrary to Victorian stereotypes, Hurston's are real women who love passionately or submissively, who cheat on their husbands or lovers, who use their sexuality to chase after men, and who openly glorify a healthy sexual life. Unfortunately, at some point--usually *too soon*--in their marital *her-stories*, these women undergo a "squeezing" and a "shrinking" of their physical and intellectual abilities. Thus, each woman is reduced to a shadow of a former more interesting self. Like Gloria Naylor's men in *Linden Hills*, Hurston's men find that

breaking in a wife is like breaking in a good pair of slippers. Once you'd gotten used to them, you'd wear them until they fall apart, rather than to go the trouble of buying a new pair. (Naylor, *Linden Hills* 67)

Ironically, once women are tamed, it is precisely this *weakness*, this brainless quality that makes them more attractive to men. Worst of all is that Hurston's married women lack not only control of their minds but their bodies are also desecrated. Women like Janie Starks shows no signs whatsoever of a gratifying sexual life.

Moreover, women suffer the double physical violence of their bodies through beatings and sexual aggression. As Trudier Harris highlights about Toni Morrison's black women, Hurston's female characters "become objects, physical manifestations of someone else's notion of what girls/women should be" (Harris, 186). It is Hurston's men who objectify women's bodies by sexually degrading them. In the midst of infidelities, beatings, and psychological violence these shattered women cannot possibly experience a healthy sexual life. For the most part, they submit to their husbands' sexual urgencies and feign a non-existent sexual pleasure. As Susan Willis points out,

in faking an orgasm, the woman negates her pleasure for the sake of her husband's satisfaction, thus defining herself as a tool of his sexual gratification. (Willis, 88)

On the other hand, in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992), the writer points out that a man's warm body would have helped Violet sleep all through the night: "Surely a body--friendly if not familiar--lying next to you. Someone whose touch is a reassurance, not an affront or a nuisance" (Morrison, *Jazz* 27). Most of Hurston's women have gone through countless nightmarish times fearing, hating, and cursing their men's clumsy sexual advances. Some of Hurston's women have waited in vain, ready and "petal-open" for their men to enter them (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 111). Only a few women, and for a short time at that, have enjoyed the "love feast" in sweet sleepless nights. On the whole, male not female sexuality gives these couples' intercourse frequency and intensity since these men use the glamour of their penises to reward or punish women.

Hurston's final message is provocative and depressing but realistic. We do not have *happily-ever-type marriages* in her works. When these marriages exist, they end violently. Since Hurston does not like how much these women are suffering, she herself liberates some of her female characters from the trap of marriage, even if they end up killing. Hurston surely whips men's egos since she would rather see her women, like herself, alone and free, rather than caged and married.

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