

Review

Folk Pride as Reflected in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Zora Neale Hurston is the first to explore and define the wisdom and language buried in the black folklore of black culture. She shows a great regard for her Black folk culture. She uses her knowledge of her folklore to liberate women from racial and gender oppression and instill a sense of ethnic pride in her people. In *Their Eyes*, Hurston infuses the empowering aspects of traditional African and African American culture. This novel reveals the priceless moral wisdom inherent in the experiences of uneducated rural southern women. A keen reading of *Their Eyes* offers an insight into the dynamics of black folk communities, their spiritual and oral traditions through which the members of the community express themselves. African American culture is the product of adaptation and combination, there is no single African heritage to be found in African American folkways. The objective of this paper is to bring out the function of folk pride as reflected in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes*, in empowering oppressed people.

Keywords: black folklore, black culture, moral wisdom, folk pride, humour, lies, music and dance, voodoo, sermons, African rituals.

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INTRODUCTION

In the late nineteenth century, racist white writers tended to present in their literary works negative, stereotypic, and distorted representations of the life of African Americans. Their black characters were childish, backward, indolent and sensual in nature. The New Negro movement of the 1920s aimed to wipe away this illusion of whites. The chief goal of the movement, was the affirmation of the folk and expression of the Black folk ethos. But among the New Negroes themselves,

there were contradictory ideas about the term 'culture'. Alain Locke believed that the New Negro should be an aesthete. For W. E. B. Du Bois, the New Negro was intellectual elite. Richard Wright believed that the black writer should depict the lives of the proletariat and the middle class in the context of nationalism. As a member of the "Talented Tenth" (*Every Tub* 67), Hurston failed to conform to the expectations of the senior members of the movement like Locke, Du Bois, and Richard Wright. She

chose to present the positive side of black life. She was not interested in presenting “sociological jeremiads” (*Every Tub* 68) in her stories. She exhorted that African Americans should in spite of their painful experience of enslavement, learn to appreciate their folk arts in order to embrace their essential selves. She chose to highlight the self-reliance and moral strength of African American folk, especially women, in her writings.

Hurston showed that Blacks provided American culture with “its only genuine folk tradition” (*Plant* 63). She was “the only important writer of the Harlem literary movement to undertake a systematic study of African American folklore” (*Neale* 162). In *Their Eyes*, she defines her Black identity as derived from African heritage. In this way, she helped chart the future for Blacks in America independent of white social influence.

Since her childhood years in Eatonville Hurston was nourished by colourful, metaphoric storytelling. Hurston’s folk pride is well recognized in her depiction of Eatonville in almost all her novels. She viewed this little black hamlet as an oasis in the race biased US. Her characters experience peace and prosperity only at Eatonville. Robert Hemenway describes Hurston as the “daughter of Eatonville” (*Zora* 90) having “the map of Florida in her tongue” (90). “In the lyric descriptions of settings, the lucid and realistic dialogue, and the haunting simplicity of symbols, her knowledge of the Sunshine State [Florida] is evident.” (*Glassman* 11).

DISCUSSION

Eatonville

Eatonville plays a significant role in her novel *Their Eyes*. In this novel, Janie feels alienated with her bourgeoisie life as mayor’s wife in Eatonville. But with Tea Cake, she finds peace and joy in the muck. This is because Tea Cake negotiates with her and never restricts her interests in participating in folk rituals like storytelling, singing, dancing, playing and storytelling. They lead a contented life not in the white dominated parts of America but in the Florida muck, which according to Hurston is a “black Eden” (*Meisenhelder* 70).

Despite severe oppression, the African American community survived because of its strong folk culture. Lies, proverbial expressions, story-telling, humor, music and dance, and voodoo and many other African rituals abound in *Their Eyes*. Hurston can very well be called “a spiritual griot”. People on the muck display a strong affinity to their culture. When they realize the impending hurricane, they quickly turn to the resources of their culture. They gather at Janie’s shack and tell stories about the tricks and pranks of Big John de Conquer. They also sing a song that comes from the dozens to the accompaniment of Tea Cake’s guitar:

Yo’ mama don’t wear no *Draws*
 Ah seen her when she took ’em *Off*
 She soaked ’em in alcohol
 She sold ’em tuh de Santa *Claus*
 He told her ’twas aginst de *Law*
 To wear dem dirty *Draws*. (157)

Deborah G. Plant writes, “Where the work was hardest and the lash cut the back, High John’s pressure was most pronounced. High John would see the violated and exploited through sorrow, and he would see them to freedom” (*Zora* 94). Like the African American trickster High John, Hurston spins many *lies* [stories] in order to empower the oppressed African American women. She uses her folkloric voice to liberate black women from historically sexist stereotyping. She uses her folkloric sensibility to subvert the dominant culture’s ideology regarding African Americans; also, she adds a point of gender to her politics of race by subtly employing the voice of the *female* (emphasized in *Zora in Florida* 64) folk teller to undermine negative assumptions of black women held by both black and white cultures.

Hurston perceived African American folk culture as a treasure trove of values. Her early childhood exposure to the wit, wisdom, drama, and hidden images of Eatonville’s folktales and folk life, inspired her literary voice and defined her goals as a writer. In her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression”, she has traced Black people’s penchant toward dramatic oral expression thus: “Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case, there is sufficient poise for drama. Everything is acted out. Unconsciously for the most part of course. There is an impromptu ceremony always ready for every hour of life. No little moment passes unadorned” (*Folklore, Memoirs* 342).

Richness of Black Humour

Their Eyes is firmly rooted in the black southern folk world. Laughter and rhythm are characteristic attributes of black folk. Hurston mentions in *Mules* that the black man’s laugh has a hundred meanings. It may mean amusement, laughter, anger, anguish, bewilderment, chagrin or any other emotion. As laughter dispels fear and anger, black folk create jokes and riddles to forget their misery. Deborah G. Plant says, humour is “a vital spiritual-physical, procreative force” (88). An intrinsic part of the concept of *nommo* (word-power), humour is part and parcel of African American folk life. Hurston’s style is marked by “indirection, subtlety, and humor” (*Hemenway* 290).

A reading of *Their Eyes* shows that even at times of worst adversity, the Negro has time to laugh. In her *Characteristics*, she writes that there is no such thing as a Negro tale which lacks point. Each tale brims over with humour. The black man is determined to laugh even if he

has to laugh at his own expense. By the same token, he spares nobody else. His world is dissolved in laughter. His 'bossman,' his woman, his preacher, his jailer, his God, and himself, all must be baptized in the stream of laughter. Hurston sees humour as the balm for the agony of the oppression suffered by African Americans. She uses humour as a means to bring about harmony in her public relations with African Americans and whites and in her private relationship with her self. According to her, sense of humour is essential for the well-being of human beings.

Hurston plugs her novels with many comically flirtatious sayings and songs. The simplicity of such comic dialogues is quite deceptive. She contemplates on pressing problems of power dynamics on the basis of race and gender in the American society in such seemingly simple utterances. In *Their Eyes*, Joe Starks' porch ripples with laughter. The episode of Matt Bonner's mule. Initially, Bonner's stinginess sparks the humour of the townfolk. One of the men says, "De womenfolks got yo' mule. When Ah come round de lake 'bout noontime mah wife and some others had 'im flat on de ground usin' his sides for a washboard.'" (*Their Eyes* 52) But the casual comic assaults directed at Bonner are actually a grave dig against negative "white" qualities.

Lowe says, "The humour, however, masks a veritable palimpsest of serious meditations on the mule's symbolism in black culture (*Jump at the Sun* 169). In the story of Matt Bonner's mule, the skinny beast becomes a general symbol for all Blacks under white oppression. Bonner's treatment of the mule reminds the slaveholders' treatment of his slaves. During the days of slavery, the master squeezed work from his slaves but fed them with sparse food. Similarly, Matt Bonner is quite stingy in feeding his mule. Noticing Janie's fury at the cruel fun played upon the mute beast, Joe Starks buys the mule from Bonner. Touched by his kind gesture, Janie compliments him as "uh mighty big man" (*Their Eyes* 58) and compares him to great leaders like George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. But the irony of the context lies in the fact that although Joe Starks buys the mule, he only underfeeds it. He frees Janie from Logan; but he continues to interfere with her liberties as a human. If Logan Killicks is a tyrant, Joe Starks is a benevolent tyrant.

Next, Sam Watson's speculations about "mule heaven" (*Their Eyes* 60) parody the folk tales about Blacks flying around Heaven. He says, "Miles of green corn and cool water, a pasture of pure bran with a river of molasses ... and ... No Matt Bonner ... Mule-angels would have people to ride on" (*Their Eyes* 61). The mule image recalls folktales about the trickster rabbit conniving the fox to ride him on his back. Hurston indulges in such comic reversals of black folktales to empower oppressed black women.

Another funniest episode in *Their Eyes* is the scene

which depicts Mrs. Tony. She praises Jody sky high for a piece of meat. When Jody cuts off a smaller piece than she expects, she "leaped away from the proffered cut of meat as if it were a rattlesnake. 'Ah wouldn't tetch it! Dat lil eyeful uh bacon for me an all mah chillun!'" (*Their Eyes* 74). When he is about to place the meat in the box, "Mrs. Tony swooped like lightning and seized it, and started towards the door. 'Some folks ain't got no heart in dey bosom' She stepped from the store porch and marched off in high dudgeon!" (*Their Eyes* 74). The deceptively coming scene carries a serious meaning. Mrs. Tony glorifies Jody calling him a "king" thinking that he can afford to be generous in public. But contrary to her expectations, Jody points out that she already owes him some amount. Hurston, in this context, not only highlights Jody's business stinginess towards his customer but also his marital stinginess towards Janie.

Next, Janie's relationship with Tea Cake begins on a note of humour. Both of them enjoy playing checkers. Unlike Jody, Tea Cake is closer to the community because of his gaiety, simplicity, spontaneity, creativity, and above all, his positive attitude toward life. He and Janie are always making "a lot of laughter out of nothing" (*Their Eyes* 101-102). The phrase runs parallel to the African American expression "making a way out of no way" (qtd in Lowe 179).

The combination of comic stories and bawdy songs helps African Americans gird up their loins against the forces of Nature. In African American folklore, John is a daring figure who gambles with God and the Devil. Similarly in *Their Eyes*, the folk on the muck challenge the approaching storm with their indulgent humour. They know well that eventually, they have to leave the shack and face the inevitable storm to reach a higher ground.

Tea Cake in *Their Eyes* exemplifies the aesthetic principles set forth by Hurston in "Characteristics of Negro Expression". Everything he does is acted out. He makes a performance out of leaving a room by playing an imaginary guitar after he pawns his real one and begs Janie's forgiveness by singing her a song. Besides, his speech is dipped in blues.

Similarly, the lamp lighting ceremony in *Their Eyes* shows their jubilant attitude to life. While the women get together and prepare "pies and cakes and sweet p'tater pone" (*Their Eyes* 44), the men look after the meats. After feasting, Brother Davis chants "a traditional prayer-poem with his own variations" (*Their Eyes* 45). No sooner did Joe Starks light the lamp, than Mrs. Bogle's alto bursts out:

*We'll walk in de light, de beautiful light
Come where the dew drops of mercy shine bright
Shine all around us by day and by night
Jesus, the light of the world.* (*Their Eyes* 46)

The people gathered gladly join the song and sing it over

and over until “it was wrung dry, and no further innovations of tone and tempo were conceivable” (*Their Eyes* 46).

The African American folk tradition, like any folk tradition, is by nature communal, the creation and expression of a group rather than an individual. Through their folk traditions, the blacks maintain connections with their past as they change over time. Thus ancestral wisdom and folk practices available are passed on from one generation to another.

Hurston agrees with Bakhtin’s statement that the novel’s roots must ultimately be sought in folk culture. In her zeal to establish the authenticity of an African American folk ethos, Hurston emphasizes in her works the “African presence” in African American culture.

‘Signifying’, a major thematic element of African American folklore, permeates Hurston’s oeuvre as style, theme and a strategy of female empowerment. She recognized *signifying* as a defensive as well as an offensive rhetorical strategy. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., points out in “The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey” that she [Hurston] is “the first author of the tradition to represent signifying itself as a vehicle of liberation for an oppressed woman, and as a rhetorical strategy in the narration of fiction.” (*Their Eyes* 290)

In *Their Eyes*, Janie enriches her community with her newfound insights. This “speakerly text” privileges its own folk-centred, vernacular mode of narration over all other structural elements. In this novel, dialect finds its shape and form from folk content. Besides, Hurston shows that humour can be constructive, supportive, and joyous. Almost all the characters except Killicks are gifted with humour. Here is an example: “Ah know dat grass-gut, “liver-lipted” nigger ain’t done took and beat mah baby already! Ah’ll take a stick and salivate ’im!” (*Their Eyes* 22). In the above mentioned passage spoken by Nanny to Janie, the “liver-lipted” reference is part of black-on-black humorous tradition and “grass-gut” transforms Killicks into a cow and thus feminizes him.

Soon after her marriage with Logan Killicks, Janie comically renders her problem of sexual frustration to Nanny: “...Ah hates de way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides and dat pone uh fat back uh his neck” (*Their Eyes* 24) Nanny gravely says, “He never made his own head” (*Their Eyes* 24) Janie’s response evokes laughter: “Ah don’t keer who made it, Ah don’t like de job. His belly is too big too, now, and his toe-nails look lak mule foots. And ‘tain’t nothin’ in the way of him washin’ his feet every evenin’ before he comes tuh bed” (*Their Eyes* 24). When she is taunted by Joe Starks, Janie uses the linguistic resources of her culture. This situation is a classic example of the “baptism of laughter” (Lowe 177).

Hurston wrote that “folklore in Florida is still in the making” (*Bordelon* 69). In *Their Eyes*, Tea Cake teaches

Janie, “Ah betcha you don’t never go tuh de lookin’ glass and enjoy yo’ eyes yo’ self... You’s got de world in uh jug and make out you don’t know it. But Ah’m glad tuh be de one tuh tell yuh.” (*Their Eyes* 104). When she objects that he must tell this to all the girls, he says, “Ah’m de Apostle Paul tuh de Gentiles. Ah tells ’em and then agin Ah show ’em” (*Their Eyes* 104). Tea Cake believes that human beings are born to enjoy and never suffer, even though he is a victim of racism. He represents numerous African Americans who survived in America despite their being subjected to cruel oppression.

Sermons and stories

Sermons and storytelling are a part of Black culture. Janie is exposed to sermonic language and storytelling first by her grandmother. The figure of the mule that recurs throughout the novel is actually drawn from a folktale which Nanny uses to persuade her granddaughter to marry the man she chooses for her. Cheryl A. Wall comments, “She [Nanny] is an accomplished storyteller, skilled slave narrator, and powerful preacher whose metaphors fuse the biblical and the domestic in arresting ways” (*Their Eyes* 183). Even without a pulpit, Nanny impresses as a powerful preacher. She tells Janie, “Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me” (*Their Eyes* 16). Her half-sung, half-sobbed “chant prayer” runs on for several pages in the early part of the novel. She ends her sermon with the entreaty, “Put me down easy, Janie, Ah’m a cracked plate” (*Their Eyes* 20). Stirred by her persuasive sermon, Janie accedes to her wish immediately. “The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree, but Janie didn’t know how to tell Nanny that” (*Their Eyes* 14).

Next, Joe Starks’ talent at speech-making is made clear in the lamplighting ceremony. He buys a streetlight for the town, convenes the townspeople and delivers an impressive speech. Comparing himself to the “Sun-maker” and lighting the “first street lamp in uh colored town” (*Their Eyes* 45), he speaks: “And when Ah touch de match tuh dat lamp-wick let de light penetrate inside of yuh, and let it shine, let it shine. Brother Davis, lead us in a word uh prayer” (*Their Eyes* 45). Hurston exposes the self-deification of black men through Joe Starks. His pomposity alienates him from the townsfolk; whereas Nanny’s speech embraces black folk. His hubris maims his relationships not only with the townspeople but also his wife. After the lamplighting ceremony, Janie complains that being Mrs. Mayor is a “strain” (*Their Eyes* 46). She feels as if she is killing time while Joe is always talking and doing, and hopes it will all be over soon. For the first time, she resists her position as the “bell-cow” (*Their Eyes* 41).

Tea Cake is a “son of the folk culture” (Wall 189). He,

like Nanny, excels in delivering simple and powerful sermons. Once, he alludes to Hunter's "Down-Hearted Blues" and tells her "You've got de world in uh jug and make out you don't know it. But Ah'm glad tuh be de one tuh tell yuh"(101). "A manipulator of cultural codes and bearer of traditions"(Wall 188), he offers Janie the chance to know herself through her culture. While Joe Starks forbids Janie from participating in the rituals of her culture, Tea Cake encourages her to participate in community activities. He and Janie play checkers, fish by moonlight, and display their affection freely. He never interferes in her freedom.

But even with Tea Cake, Janie does not experience full freedom. Owing to class consciousness, Tea Cake does not take Janie to the party that he throws for his friends. But in contrast to her monotonous life as the mayor's wife, she breathes peace and joy in her nomadic life on the farmland of the Florida Everglades.

The muck buzzes with fun and games. People bear amusing names like "Sop-de-Bottom, Bootyny, Stew Beef, and Motor Boat. Their lingo emerges directly from the black folk culture. Janie's life on the muck strengthens the bond not only with Tea Cake but also with the community. Her ability to joke and laugh makes her a favourite with the muck folk. She joins Tea Cake in storytelling sessions at their shack: "The house was full of people every night.... Some were there to hear Tea Cake pick the box; some came to talk and tell stories, but most of them came to get into whatever game was going on or might go on.... Outside of the two jooks, everything on that job went on around those two" (*Their Eyes* 133). In the company of Tea Cake, Janie learns to "woof" (*Their Eyes* 134), to "boogerboo" (*Their Eyes* 134)." and to play all the games. In a nutshell, the muck transforms Janie as an accomplished liar (story teller).

Hurston shows the strong spiritual faith of Black women through Nanny. Having been unable to protect herself and her daughter from sexual exploitation, she believes that marriage is the only haven for her granddaughter. When Janie says that she does not know anyone to marry, she responds that "de Lawd will provide"(*Their Eyes* 13).The spiritual vision of Nanny is shared by Janie too. She tells Jody that sometimes God speaks through women too. The intensity of their suffering in the hands of the dominant society and the dominant sex mend them as morally strong humans. Similarly, Tea Cake asserts repeatedly that Janie has "the keys to the kingdom"(*Their Eyes* 109). The woman with keys comes from a black folktale about woman's power.

Folklore and Female Empowerment

The crux of *Their Eyes* is the transformation of Janie from a mute mule to an empowered woman. She is empowered by the rich resources of her black culture. In

the words of John Lowe, "Janie is transformed into a mule, first of work, by Logan, then of decorative leisure, like Bonner's mule, by Jody" (*Their Eyes* 196). But she succeeds in discovering her self by learning important lessons of life in her relationships with men. She fulfills her granny's dreams of preaching a sermon "from on high", and the novel's conclusion predicts many more sermons that she would preach in the years to come.

Despite terrible loss and blows that Hurston faced all through her life, she succeeded as a woman, writer, anthropologist, and folklorist. The chief reason for her formidable success is her staunch faith in her folk heritage. Relating her misfortunes and misery as an African American woman with that of her ancestors, she incessantly gained wisdom and strength from her folk who stood for courage and heroism amidst oppression.

CONCLUSION

One can understand from *Their Eyes* that African Americans, though economically poor have a rich folk heritage. In this novel, Hurston has demonstrated the vigour of her folk culture. Folklore keeps the African American hopes alive and help them escape even slavery. Blending her anthropological training and literary power she has established the priceless value of African American folk culture. She asserts that Blacks could prosper independent of White society with their asset of folk gift. Her folk based *Their Eyes* is thus an evidence of black people's survivability in America.

Their Eyes does not depict women as victims or as failures in an essentially male world. Despite male domination of one sort or another, Janie is much in control of themselves and her world. Her story affects other women characters like Pheobe. Thus, Hurston's abstract designs of folklore represent a potentiality for action, and therefore, change. Her folk pride is certainly amazing and inspiring.

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