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Bachelor Thesis

***Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:
Folksy escapism or a feminist novel?***

***Their Eyes Were Watching God* Zory Neale Hurstonové:
Apolitický nebo feministický román?**

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis, titled “Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Folksy escapism or a feminist novel?” is completely my own work and I used only the sources that are listed on the works cited page.

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Abstract

This bachelor thesis deals with the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. Its aim and main concern is to establish whether the novel is more readily perceived as an example of folksy escapism or a feminist novel by exploring the novel's major topic, such as African American marriage, and additionally discovering the importance of location in the novel. Theoretical part of this thesis provides a short overview of Harlem Renaissance, deals with Hurston's biography and political views, and explores the topic of racial and gender issues within the African American community. The analysis of Hurston's biography presents an important insight to her life and her career as an anthropologist and folklorist that is essential to the in-depth analysis of the novel. The practical part of this thesis seeks to offer an analysis of the novel based on the discoveries in the theoretical part. The first central point of the analysis is the novel's main character, who is presented in the novel and often interpreted as an example of a liberated African American woman. The second central point of the analysis are two main locations and their residents, which set the atmosphere of the novel, and are presented as an insightful probe into the lives of African American people in the early 20th century. The third and the last point is the portrayal of white people in the novel, which uncovers the political undertone of the novel.

Keywords

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Black feminism, marriage, African American folklore, African American culture.

Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá románem Zory Neale Hurstonové *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Cílem a hlavním zaměřením práce je rozpoznat, zda se jedná o apolitické nebo feministické dílo. K dosažení tohoto cíle se tato práce zaměří na zkoumání hlavního tématu románu, kterým je vnímání manželského svazku v afroamerické komunitě, a následně na zjištění významu lokací v románu. Teoretická část této práce začíná stručným seznámením s uměleckým hnutím tzv. Harlemské renesance, pokračuje biografií Zory Neale Hurstonové a jejími politickými názory, a končí tématem rasové a genderové problematiky v rámci afroamerické komunity. Analýza biografie Hurstonové poskytuje důležitý vhled do jejího života a kariéry antropoložky a folkloristky. Tento kontext je nezbytný pro komplexní interpretaci díla. Praktická část této práce se zabývá analýzou samotného díla, založenou na objevech v teoretické části. Prvním zaměřením analýzy je hlavní hrdinka románu, která je představena a často interpretována jako příklad emancipované černošské ženy. Druhým zaměřením analýzy jsou dvě hlavní lokace a jejich obyvatelé, které vytváří atmosféru románu a poskytují náhled do života běžných Afroameričanů na počátku 20. století. Posledním zaměřením je znázornění bělochů v románu, které odhaluje politické inklinace díla.

Klíčová slova

Zora Neale Hurstonová, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, černošský feminismus, manželství, Afroamerický folklór, Afroamerická kultura.

Contents

Introduction	7
1. Theoretical Part	10
1.1. Harlem Renaissance.....	10
1.2. About Zora Neale Hurston.....	11
1.2.1. Early Life and Eatonville.....	11
1.2.2. A Little Coloured Girl	12
1.2.3. Education	13
1.2.4. Anthropology and most famous work	14
1.2.5. Political Views and Criticism	15
1.3. Race and Gender.....	16
1.3.1. Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female	17
1.3.2. African American Marriage.....	17
1.3.2.1. Domestic Violence and Statistics	18
1.3.3. Black Feminism and Womanism.....	20
2. Practical Part	22
2.1. <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>	22
2.1.1. Janie’s Grandmother	23
2.1.2. Janie.....	24
2.1.2.1. Childhood	24
2.1.2.2. The Blossoming Tree	24
2.1.2.3. Janie’s Marriage to Logan Killicks	25
2.1.2.4. Joe Starks and “a Bird in a Golden Cage”.....	26
2.1.2.5. Janie’s Maturity and Marriage to Tea Cake	28
2.1.3. Main Locations.....	30
2.1.3.1. Eatonville.....	31
2.1.3.2. The muck and Mrs. Turner.....	32
2.1.4. Presence and Portraying of White People in the Novel	33
Conclusion.....	36
Works Cited.....	38

Introduction

This thesis explores Zora Neale Hurston's most famous novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and its aim is to discover the novel's original meaning and the author's intentions behind it. The main objective is to analyse the novel from two radically different interpretive perspectives: as a folksy narrative that depicts the lives of African Americans in the early 20th century, one which does not take any confrontational stance and has no ideological content whatsoever, or as an early precursor of the feminist novel that focuses on the Black woman's life, struggles and her place in the society. This thesis also partially explores Zora Neale Hurston's background and the factors that influenced her style of writing, which is essential for the in depth analysis of the novel.

Hurston, as one of the main figures of Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, gained fame and acknowledgement primarily for writing African American folklore, detailed portraying of black communities in the American South and using of a vernacular language in her works. Her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is interpreted by many as an important piece of literature on the topic of Black Feminism in America. Moreover, Hurston is thought of as a role model for next generations of Black female writers, who were dealing with similar topic and explored it further in their writing, such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and others. Alice Walker is not only a writer who was inspired by Hurston, in the 1970s, she was personally involved in resurrecting the interest for Hurston's work. "*There is no book more important to me than this one*" is Walker's quote on the cover of many editions of this book (King, 11-12).

However, apart from the acknowledgement for contributing to the Black feminist literature, Hurston was also criticised for inaccurate and idealised depiction of African Americans that was appealing for the white audience. Richard Wright's review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for *New Masses* had a rather hostile tone, he found the novel insulting to the African Americans and compared it to a Black minstrel show.

Regardless of the tension between these two interpretive stances, it is hard to argue against the fact that Zora Neale Hurston's contribution to the American literature is undoubtable. However, Wright's criticism was not unfounded. It was not so much personal dislike or artistic taste that may have led Wright to write this review and raise the question of her integrity, it was his political views. With the rise of discontent within the Black community in the 1920s and 1930s, many works of African American authors had political

undertone or were overtly propagandistic (Huggins 27-31). Although, Hurston's folklore and fiction were solely about black communities, her stories were lacking the struggles and sufferings of black people due to white discrimination. The story of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is taking place in the southern states, particularly in Florida. However, there is no white antagonist that would cause the trouble for the main characters. If Hurston did decide not to include a white foe, was it an intentional decision to avoid politics? And if so, what of it? Does this discredit her as an opportunist who deliberately shies away from controversy? Perhaps her literary explorations of self-sufficient all-black communities in effect amount to a political statement.

Theoretical part of this thesis consists of three chapters. The first chapter is a general overview of 1920s Harlem Renaissance and general ideas and the background that is important for further research. The second chapter consists of five sub-chapters that explore the key points of Zora Neale Hurston's biography. The importance of her biography in this thesis is related to the fact that one the main location for *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was her hometown in Florida. Moreover, Hurston was an erudite and accomplished scholar who spent several years collecting data for her anthropological research of black culture (King, 6). Since, there is a question of absence of politics in the novel, it is also relevant to explore her political views and affinity. The third chapter of this thesis explores the importance of gender in racial issues and focuses mostly on the relationships between men and women in African American families. The relevance of that information lies in the story of the novel. The main character of the novel was a black woman, who, throughout the story, was married three times, and the relationships with husbands were a central point of the plot.

The practical part seeks to offer an analysis of the novel based on the discoveries in the theoretical part. In order to achieve the goals that are set in this thesis, there are going to be several crucial points. The first crucial point is the main heroine Janie, her impressions and contemplations, as well as her marital relationships. Janie's relationships with her three husbands represent three very different types of romantic relationships and three different types of men and their ways of treating women. The second - other women character of this novel, such as Janie's grandmother, her viewpoints and fears, and how she influenced Janie's perception of the world and relationships. The third - importance of location and minor characters, typical behaviour, habits and traditions. Eatonville and Everglades are

the two main locations that play important roles in the plot. These two towns and their residents set the atmosphere of the novel. Hurston gives careful attention in describing people of Eatonville and the Everglades, which could be useful in determining the political undertone or its absence in the story. The fourth and the last point is the presence of white people in the novel, how are they portrayed, their relationships with Black people and Black people's opinion on white people.

1. Theoretical Part

1.1. Harlem Renaissance

The Early 20th century was the time of colossal change, and the 1920s were its peak. The 1920s were the product of the end of the Victorian era and its ideals, the impact of the First World War and optimism for the progress. It was the era of new inventions, new art and new fashion, and most famously, it was the era of jazz. At that time, many political and artistic movements were coming to the spotlight, and one of them was Harlem Renaissance.

Harlem Renaissance, or The New Negro Movement, was an important part of the development of the African American culture. Historian Nathan Irvin Huggins (1927-89), in his book on Harlem Renaissance (2007), in careful detail describes the reasons behind the rising Black movement. Although, it was as long as half a century after the abolishment of slavery, the Black man still needed a declaration of freedom and independence. The rise of Harlem was a perfectly suited way of doing it. Huggins points out the importance of mass immigration to Harlem, a neighbourhood in New York City, during and after the World War I, which was a sign of urbanisation and shifting the rural lifestyle to the metropolitan (13-14). Many young African Americans saw Harlem as a promising place and place of opportunities that offered them career and a possibility to self-actualise. Also, high concentration of Black people with similar goals and ambitions were comforting and inspirational for Black intellectuals and artists (Huggins 23-25).

The purpose of Harlem Renaissance was quite diverse. It was a free platform that encouraged young and ambitious African Americans to gain a voice and make a statement. Whether it was an artistic expression or a political propaganda, it became possible in Harlem. The main concern was certainly the presence of racial stereotypes and misconceptions about Black people and Black culture, and one of Harlem Renaissance substantial goals were to free America of racial stereotypes and redefine the perception of African Americans in the society. However, the decades of living according to those stereotypes raised concerns of what was to be offered instead. African Americans were given an empty canvas that they had to fill by finding their own identity. It might appear as a perfectly appropriate challenge, however, Black people had had a history of being nothing than a workforce, typically in the feudal setting of the antebellum South. Huggins draws attention to the exclusive tragedy of the African American assimilation by

comparing them to immigrants. The immigrants were able to bring a piece of their culture with them, while it was almost impossible for African Americans to know what part of Africa their ancestors came from (137-139).

Apart from being a literary and artistic movement, Harlem Renaissance was a way of fighting for a respectable place in society, different from the one that was automatically assigned. At the age of progress, remaining second-class citizens was unacceptable and fighting for equality and civil rights was gaining popularity. The sense of fellowship and collectiveness helped Black people gain confidence to oppose the obsolete norms in the American society and express their dissatisfaction with the current political model. The beginning of 20th century was not necessarily the time when African Americans started explicitly fighting for equal rights, there were still unresolved issues and conflicts between individual Black reformers. Huggins points out that unlike child labour, racism was deeply embedded in the American psyche, and simple political reforms were incapable of changing it (50-51). Nevertheless, there was still art and literature that had the potential of reaching people's hearts. Through art and literature, the Harlem intellectuals were able to express the struggles of African Americans and bring attention to such issues as racial discrimination and race-based hate and violence.

Harlem Renaissance was the Golden Age for African American culture. With the exceptional talent of the individuals who had contributed to the movement, such as musician Louis Armstrong, poet Langston Hughes, writer Zora Neale Hurston and many others, African American culture gained an immense popularity among both Black and white population and continued to spread further to inspire future generations of African American artists.

1.2. About Zora Neale Hurston

1.2.1. Early Life and Eatonville

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) was born to parents John Hurston and Lucy Ann Potts Hurston. Although born in Notasulga, Alabama, Zora always called Eatonville, Florida her birthplace, where her family moved in 1893. Nowadays, Eatonville is strongly associated with Hurston's name and legacy, there is a museum of fine arts and a library that were founded in her name. Since 1991, it is also a site for Zora Neale Hurston Festival

of the Arts and Humanities, an annual festival that celebrates Hurston's contribution to the world literature as a person of African descent (King 1).

However, Eatonville did not gain its fame and uniqueness due to simply being a place where Zora grew up and started her artistic journey. It was one of the first all-black towns in Florida. In 1880s, the newly freed slaves started settling in the area near Maitland, Florida, and with the help of local landowners and philanthropists, they were able to start an all-black self-governed town of Eatonville ("About Eatonville"). Hurston used Eatonville as a main location for several of her stories, which also includes *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Zora was one of eight Hurston's children. Settling down in Eatonville allowed their family to prosper, mostly due to her father's influence as a Baptist preacher and his ambition as Eatonville's mayor. Zora's mother, Lucy, was a teacher, and believed that education was essential in her children's upbringing. From an early age, Zora showed talent in language, storytelling and performance, which was encouraged by her mother. However, such individuality was disapproved by her father (King 2).

1.2.2. A Little Coloured Girl

Growing up in a town, like Eatonville, Zora was unaware of the fact that she was a black girl. Hurston talks about racial issues in the essay that she wrote for *The World Tomorrow* in 1928 titled "How It Feels to Be Colored Me".

In 1904, after her mother died, Zora was sent away to school in Jacksonville. That is when a thirteen-year-old Zora had realised her "otherness". "*I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl*" (Hurston 2, 2013). However, Hurston's experience with the White American population did not seem to affect her view on the world. Zora spent most of her childhood in a self-governed black town, where the community had the privilege to detach themselves from the racial discrimination and oppression. She grew up with the perception of whites being only tourists or passers-by (Hurston 1, 2013)

Hurston did not deem her skin colour as a personal tragedy. "*But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all*" (Hurston 2, 2013). Unlike other African Americans, who were exposed to

the hate and stigma growing up, Zora was capable of distancing herself from unwanted emotions by imagining her happy younger self in Eatonville:

I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira¹. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. (Hurstun 2, 2013)

At the beginning of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie also recalls the time when she did not know that she was black. She could not recognise herself in the picture, until the others pointed at a little coloured girl. Similarly to Janie, Zora was unaware of her skin colour until someone explicitly pointed it out.

1.2.3. Education

After having been sent away to Jacksonville by Hurston's father and his new wife, Zora was soon left without financial support and was essentially abandoned by her family. The next ten years of her life she worked intermittently as a nurse and as a housekeeper for white people. However, her interest in her employers' books and inability to comply with the rules had led to her failure in many of her employments.

In 1917, a twenty-six-year-old Zora lied about her age so that she could attend Morgan Academy in Baltimore and finally complete the high school programme. Zora was a promising scholar. In 1919, she was able to enrol at Howard University, a historically black university in Washington D.C., where she had met many influential persons. Most importantly, she had met a philosophy professor, Alain Locke (1885-1954), who, in 1925, published a collection of fiction and poetry *The New Negro* that became a symbol of Harlem Renaissance (King, 3-5)

The 1925 was a life-changing year for Hurston. First, she moved to New York City. Second, she attended the literary contest awards dinner, where she won two awards and met with several influential white Americans. Two of which were Carl Van Vechten, a well-connected photographer, and a patron of Harlem Renaissance, and Annie Nathan Meyer, a founder of Barnard College. With Meyer's mentorship, Hurston was able to enrol at Barnard College, where she graduated in anthropology in 1928. There she was recruited by a famous anthropologist, Franz Boas (1858-1942) with whom she started an

¹ An emigration escape or flight.

anthropological research of the Black culture in the American South and the Caribbean (King 6). It was a start of her career as an anthropologist, which also heavily influenced her future writing.

1.2.4. Anthropology and most famous work

Following Barnard College, Hurston continued as a graduate student at Columbia University. Although she had never completed her studies, with Boas' mentorship, she was able to collect a great amount of anthropological data through the years of working in the South of the U.S.A., Haiti, Bahamas and Jamaica. Hurston is well-known for her literary work, her anthropological work is known to a lesser degree. However, even in such field, was she able to bring her individuality and creativity. Her approach was the immersion in the culture and the community that she was observing. In these studies, she was not only a scholar and a researcher, but an insider and a representative of a culture (Mikell 218-219, 1982).

The idea with immersion was not just an artsy decision. The main issue was that Hurston seemed too sophisticated to the people she was observing. What she needed was people's trust and acceptance, in order to collect the required data. This avant-garde approach was welcomed in the white intellectual community. Nevertheless, people in the black community felt unsatisfied with the way the data were presented, the ancient African culture was on their opinion "overly dignified". Hurston had to disagree with the criticism. She believed that the black culture had the needed potential and the depth to reach and impress the world (Mikell 219). In 1935, she published her first collection of folklore *Mules and Men*. Her mentor, Franz Boas, wrote the preface for the book as a sign of approval and encouragement (Salamone 217, 2014).

In her notes, Hurston mentioned that apart from her colleagues who focused their work on the Native American culture, her research encountered an additional challenge in the American South. The line where the true African roots start and the European influence ends was too vague:

You see, the Negro is not living his lore to the extent of the Indian. He is not on a reservation being kept pure. His negroeness is being rubbed off by close contact with the white culture. (qtd. in. Salamone 219)

Her work had to stretch to the Caribbean, where she noted that “*They are more African than the American South*” (qtd. in. Salamone 221). A great part of her work was collecting data such as folk songs, dances, games, stories, as well as exploring religion and spiritual customs in the Black communities. Based on the research that Hurston had carried out in Jamaica and Haiti, she wrote a book, very different to *Mules and Men*. Written and published in 1938, *Tell My Horse* was focused on spiritual and cultural life of Jamaicans and Haitians, as well as the mysterious and arguably even supernatural practices of the Haitian Voodoo. In Haiti, in only seven weeks, Hurston also wrote a fictitious novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. It was published in 1937 and remains her most famous work.

1.2.5. Political Views and Criticism

Although Hurston is known as a famous figure of Harlem Renaissance, she gained popularity for the work that was written much later, during the Great Depression in America. Her artistic and scholarly pursuits were financially assisted by Charlotte Osgood Mason (1854-1946), a white philanthropist and literary patron who also endorsed Langston Hughes (King 6-8).

Hurston’s political views were often in discrepancy with other African American authors of that era. One of the main points of conflict was Hurston belief in individualism as a way of overcoming American social issues. On the other side of the argument was African American author and civil right activist, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), who believed in collectivism in the fight against racial discrimination in America. Du Bois urged other African American authors to use their work as means of asserting their political position. He himself claimed that “all art is propaganda and his art would always be political” (King 24). Hurston’s goals in her anthropological endeavours were to bring attention to the fascinating black culture. While the white public was truly interested in such work, the black public, alongside her literary colleagues, were dissatisfied with her idealised depiction of black culture, which in their views could harm the image of Black people in the rising movement for equality (Mikell 219-220)

Although, Hurston’s talent was never rejected in the black community, and her folklore was an important documentation of black culture, the absence of political undertones in her fiction was disappointing to some of her contemporaries. In his review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Alain Locke “urged her to stop trying to distract white

readers with amusing folktales and to turn instead to "social document" fiction" (Delbanco 105, 1997). Richard Wright (1908-1960), her somewhat younger contemporary, expressed his dislike for the novel for appealing to white people, and called it a black minstrel show:

In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is "quaint," the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the "superior" race. (Wright 22-23, 1937)

Unlike Richard Wright, whose literary work was centred on struggles of African Americans in a predominantly white society, Hurston's political affinity was not coherent at that time. Her views were primarily conservative, and her opinions seemed to have changed and contradict one another. In 1943, she was supportive of the racial segregation and even stated that "the Jim Crow system works". However, a year earlier, in her biography, she expressed her dissatisfaction with racial injustice. Later in the 1940s, despite her controversial statement, her opinions on racial segregation seemed to appear negative (Delbanco 105-106).

1.3. Race and Gender

"Black women are not treated the same way as Black men". This statement can be interpreted in two ways: either they are treated better or worse. Although, it is possible and likely to assume that one gender would have the advantage and privileged treatment in particular situations, the truth is rather different. Unfortunately, the gender issues in the black communities are inseparable with race issues in America. The presumption that one gender within the black community may have enjoyed relative privilege seems quite inappropriate, since black people as a whole were under a white oppression and were discriminated regardless of their sex. However, it is essential to acknowledge the differences between men and women in their struggles. Both sexes suffered terribly, but each in a different way.

1.3.1. Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female

Frances M. Beal (born 1940), a black feminist and a political activist, published a pamphlet “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” (1970) and an essay “Slave of a Slave No More: Black Women in Struggle” (1975), in which she brought attention to the issues such as dealing with racial discrimination and exploitation and discrimination and exploitation in black families. Beal did not deny the cruelty, emasculation and oppression that Black men had had to face throughout generations. However, her goal was to draw attention to the struggles of Black women, the exploitation by the white society and the unfair treatment in their own homes (“Double Jeopardy” 168-169).

As slaves, Black women were forced to hard labour alongside Black men. Although, some were fortunate enough to work in the house, women had to deal with additional exploitation by their white masters. First of all, many were used as sexual objects and had no other choice, but to obey in order not to get physically punished. Second of all, they were thought of as means of producing new workers. Black women’s motherhood was violated in many ways. The children were regularly left without care, while their mothers were working in the fields, and were often sold off to slavery by their white owners. Unfortunately, even in modern days, the struggles of an African American woman continued. In addition to already known factors, such as working for white people and discrimination in the society, a black woman had to deal with the standards of beauty that she was incapable to fulfil. Also, as a mother, she was powerless to protect her children from the unjust world and had to watch them being swallowed by the oppressive system (“Slave of a Slave No More” 2-3).

1.3.2. African American Marriage

For a long time, women were not represented as individuals, but rather as an extension of a man. As for a black woman, she was an extension of an oppressed black man. Gender roles that were typically assigned to men and women caused more problems in non-white communities. The idea of “*black women simply caring for their homes and children like the middle-class white model*” seemed like an inaccessible dream. Simple African American families could not afford such luxury. In many cases, a black woman was the sole jobholder, which was only an addition to her already existing responsibilities (“Double Jeopardy” 166-167)

If a woman was expected to be at home with children, a man would be expected to earn money and provide for his family. The responsibility for the family finances was put solely on a man's shoulder, which included the obligation to ensure financial stability of the family. Such delegation of responsibilities was the formula for a successful marriage and a happy family. Moreover, earning a particular amount of money and being successful in work was also a way of asserting one's manliness ("Double Jeopardy" 166-168). African American men were often put in disadvantage regarding this standards. Ambitions and dedication that were usually welcomed in a white man, were oppressed and persecuted in a black man. Nevertheless, Beal notes an important factor that put Black women in less fortunate position:

Men may be cruelly exploited and subjected to all sorts of dehumanizing tactics on the part of the ruling class, but at least they can take out their frustration on someone else - their women. ("Slave of a Slave No More" 3)

The occurrence of domestic violence in African American homes was later explored in psychology. Such behaviour was typical of individuals, who felt anger and frustration, regarding the inability to be fulfilled as a man. Physical violence towards the wives and children was usually an available "alternative". In 1964, a "frustrated masculinity syndrome" was presented as a concept that described similar behaviour (Hampton et al. 539, 2003)

1.3.2.1. Domestic Violence and Statistics

Numerous surveys that were conducted separately in the 1980s and 1990s showed that occurrence of domestic violence is more likely in Black families than in White families. The data were compiled, analysed and put into an article by a professor of sociology, Robert Hampton and two of his colleagues, in 2003. The results were astonishing.

The rate of intimate partner violence:

- In African American families – 207 per 1000.
- In White families – 115 per 1000.

The rate of severe domestic violence:

- In African American families – 113 per 1000
- In White families – 30 per 1000 (Hampton et al. 536).

This rates only include reported cases of domestic violence. Another survey showed that African American women are “*more reluctant to report physical abuse to police or social service agencies than their White counterparts*” (Hampton et al. 534). It is possible that black women are unwilling to seek help and report domestic abuse due to the disapproval that they might receive from their own community. It is also likely that they take defensive position against American justice system in order to protect the abuser from the persecution.

The rate of domestic homicides also differ in regard to race.

Victims of domestic homicide in African American families:

- Husbands – 47%
- Wives – 53%

Victims of domestic homicide in White families:

- Husbands – 38%
- Wives – 62%

These results show that an African American woman is more likely to murder her spouse, than a white woman. However, it should also be taken into consideration that an African American woman is far more likely to become a victim of severe domestic abuse (Hampton et al. 536-537)

On the whole, the studies for Commonwealth Fund in 1996 showed that one in six African American women experience physical abuse by a husband or a boyfriend in the past 5 years (Hampton et al. 537). These numbers are alarming, yet are vital for spreading awareness and helping other African American women to come forward and seek help.

1.3.3. Black Feminism and Womanism

The terms of “Black feminism” and “womanism” are used to describe the Black woman’s movement. The general ideas and goals are similar and interchangeable. The black feminism was originally a new branch of feminism that also focused on the race issues.

However, the feminist movement was mainly associated with white women from upper-middle class, whose goals were basically to leave the kitchen and confront patriarchal ideals and norms. The main antagonist and oppressor of a feminist woman was the man. That is where the Black feminism and white feminism part ways. The goal of a Black feminist was not to attack a Black man, but to attack the whole system that was inherently racist and sexist. Black women had no interest in being liberated from the kitchen, most of them were not housewives to begin with (Taylor 20-22, 1998).

The term of Black feminism, however, still carried negative connotation for African American women, since the feminist movement was dominated by white women. Moreover, there was also an issue with the term “feminist”. Historically, enslaved Black women experienced violation of their womanhood. They were dehumanised and used as sexual objects, as well as their motherhood was taken away from them. Black women were denied their femininity, despite the fact that femininity was supposed to be a quality that is typical of a woman (Taylor 26-27). In 1851, an abolitionist, Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), who was born into slavery, but eventually escaped, gave a powerful speech known by the name of “Ain’t I a woman?”. The speech is still well-known nowadays and is often recited. In the speech, Sojourner Truth gives examples of not being treated as a woman, despite the fact that she is one. *“Nobody ever help me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best places...and ar'nt I a woman?”* (qtd. in. “Double Jeopardy” 168-169)

A famous writer and social activist, Alice Walker (born 1944), coined the term “womanist” in 1979 with the intended meaning of a “black feminist or a feminist of colour”. The origin came from the Southern black folk expression “to act womanish”, which was addressed to young girls, who were basically acting like grown-ups. Walker interpreted the meaning as the opposite of acting frivolous and the quality of being responsible, confident and earnest. Walker offered the new name for the movement, which she believed was more accurate in terms of definition and would be more accepted by African American women (Collins 10-11, 1996). Black women who were conflicted about

being a part of a feminist movement, were much more comfortable with being a part of a womanist movement. Moreover, many were unsatisfied with narrow focus and exclusivity of feminism. In the article “What’s in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond” (1996), Patricia Hill Collins also mentions the underrepresentation of Black lesbians in the Black feminist movement (12). According to Walker, Womanism was a broader term for feminism. For a better understanding she used the reference: “Womanist is to feminist, as purple is to lavender” (qtd. in. Taylor 26). Womanism endorsed Black women’s culture, femininity and sexuality, those same things that were denied within the feminist community. Womanists were also Universalists, their beliefs were not only confined to Black women, and their goal was to create a world where both genders of different colours “can coexist like flowers in the garden yet retain their cultural distinctiveness and integrity” (Collins 10-11).

Nowadays, these two terms are more or less synonymous. However, there still a sense of competition between both ideologies. Womanist’s goals are more general and their main concerns are helping women raise their voices, be comfortable and proud of their identity and sexuality. Black feminists, on the other hand, focus mainly on political and social issues (Collins 12-13). Black women’s tendency to associate themselves with either womanism or Black feminism is a matter social class, but mainly a personal preference. However, the African American women of lower social class would be more concerned with improving, first and foremost, their quality of life and solve poverty issues in Black families, rather than learning self-love (Collins 16). So it is really a Black woman’s choice of whether to be called a Black feminist or a womanist. Both ideologies are concerned with Black women’s welfare and self-fulfilment, so the choice of the right name seems unnecessary, especially in the modern times.

The womanist critique of domestic violence and other unsavoury signs of gender inequality in the African American community can therefore be perceived as ideological or political on two levels. It directly addresses the relative subordination or systemic underprivilege of women in many African American communities, while also indirectly attributing the mistreatment of women to the racially motivated mistreatment of African Americans in general. Our chronological analysis of Hurston’s novel subsequently uses this ideological consideration as one of the primary interpretive prisms.

2. Practical Part

2.1. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon. (Their Eyes 1)

Hurston starts her novel with this metaphor, indicating the unattainability of dreams for most of people and their incapability to control the tides. The tides only occur at Nature's will, humans' can only watch the sea helplessly. So are some people of this story. Some were fortunate to achieve their dreams and goals, and conquer the sea. Others had to swim against the current their whole life and eventually drown in the dark and unforgiving waters.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is the story of a woman named Janie Mae Crawford, a black woman, who was born and lived her life in the American South. In the novel, we start following her story, when she unexpectedly came back to her town and raised questions among the curious crowd of what had happened to her younger lover. The town gossips started speculating about all possible reasons, but Janie felt no obligation to explain herself and seemed that she had found her peace. Janie's story starts at the very beginning, with her childhood, and follows up to the point when she comes back to the town. Her story is not necessarily a coming of age story, the novel catches Janie in the moments of critical decisions and contemplating about love and life. Nevertheless, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is not just a simple love story. Hurston presents several characters who stand out in their own unique way. Janie's grandmother, who was once a slave, but managed to escape in order to protect herself and her child from a tragic outcome. Janie's second husband Joe Starks, whose ambitions came to life as a lively little town called Eatonville. Janie's third husband Tea Cake, who was Janie's third husband, who despite the age difference was Janie's true love.

2.1.1. Janie's Grandmother

Nanny, as Janie called her, is Janie's grandmother and her only family. A woman, whose tragic story is reminiscent of many Black women, who were born to slavery. Nanny's famous phrase "*De nigger woman is de mule uh de world*" (Their Eyes 14) reflects her views on the world and her attitude towards men. In her eyes men are exploiters, both white and Black men exploit Black women for their own interest. Her personal and quite negative experience shows why she believes so.

Nanny was systematically raped by her master when she was a slave. She gave birth to a daughter, Leafy, with whom she had to escape in order to protect themselves from the master's wife. As a free woman, Nanny was never married, and she had a simple reason for that, "*cause Ah didn't want nobody mistreating mah baby*" (Their Eyes 19). The fear of having her daughter experience the horrors of the world eventually came true, when Leafy went missing for the whole night. The young girl was raped by her school teacher and became pregnant. Shortly after giving birth to Janie, Leafy was incapable of dealing with a trauma, she started abusing alcohol and later disappeared from Janie's life. Having put Leafy's safety and well-being as her main priority, Nanny had to see her daughter's world crumble down, which was a mother's greatest suffering. "*She ain't dead, 'cause Ah'd know it by mah feelings, but sometimes Ah wish she was at rest.*" (Their Eyes 19).

Nanny's failure, as a mother, only strengthened her determination in protecting her granddaughter. She was a fairly successful black woman, she managed to save money and buy land. However, Nanny's older age and Janie's curiosity for love raised certain concerns for Janie's future. Nanny had found herself a replacement for Janie's protection. She arranged Janie's marriage to an older man, Logan Killicks. Although, it might appear that Nanny had sold Janie off, she had her beliefs and reasons that made sense to her. The world was full of men who could inflict damage on Janie, and the only way of protecting her from them was to find her a protector. "*Ah don't want yo' feathers always crumpled by folks throwin' up things in yo' face. And Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa you.*" (Their Eyes 20).

Nanny's views were imprinted on Janie for a long time. After losing her second husband, a thirty-five-year-old Janie admits to herself that she hated her grandmother "*who had twisted her so in the name of love*" (Their Eyes 89). Nanny's love and fear for her granddaughter were her only moving force, her well-being was her only goal. However,

focusing so much on Janie's protection, Nanny did not take into consideration that a free woman should have a choice in life, at the very least, in choosing her own husband.

2.1.2. Janie

Janie Mae Crawford is the main heroine of the novel. The reader follows her long journey from being a naïve and curious child, whose free-spirited personality became suppressed and the voice muted, to a confident and beautiful woman, who was successful in retrieving her voice, despite the oppression and unfortunate circumstances.

2.1.2.1. Childhood

Janie's grandmother worked for a white family and also lived in their house with Janie. As a child, Janie was raised alongside other white children in the house and was unaware of her being a black girl. The white family, the Washburns, seemed to treat her well, she was getting the children's old clothes that were still better looking compared to other black children. And for that and the other reason, Janie was picked at by other black children. The children heard from their parents that Janie's father, who raped her mother, was on the run after committing the crime. In order to protect Janie from being ridiculed and provide her with a happy childhood, her grandmother bought them a house, so they did not need to live with her white employers. Janie's childhood appeared as generally happy and without worries.

2.1.2.2. The Blossoming Tree

The blossoming tree is an important symbol of Janie's youth and sexual awakening. Hurston gives careful attention to the details regarding the blossoming tree, and gives the description to Janie's feelings almost in a poetic way. The blossoming pear tree had caught Janie's attention and consequential fascination and awe. She was keep coming back and contemplating about certain mystery that the tree was hiding. Along with the mysterious blossoming tree appearing in her life, Janie was getting closer to a neighbour boy Johnny Taylor, who gave Janie her first kiss. Overwhelmed by sudden and unknown emotions, she was seeking the answers to her confusion in the blossoming tree. "*How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again*" (Their Eyes 10). Janie

felt something emerge from within her, something unknown and wonderful. Buzzing bees pollinating the blossoming pear tree struck her with a sudden revelation. The revelation of love - beautiful, fresh and magical. The bees and the blossoming tree were in perfect harmony. This discovery made Janie excited about love and what it would bring:

She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made. (Their Eyes 11)

Janie's impatience to find this perfect love concerned her grandmother. Catching Janie and Johnny Taylor kissing, she quickly arranged her marriage with Logan Killicks, an older and respectable black man, who would protect Janie from other men and her own recklessness.

The symbol of a blossoming tree reappears throughout the novel as a symbol of ultimately perfect love, especially in the moments when Janie questions her love for her husbands:

"Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (Their Eyes 24) – After getting married to Logan Killicks, Janie had learnt that love and marriage did not mean the same.

"She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be" (Their Eyes 72) – After a long marriage to Joe Starks, when Janie had finally realised that she did not love him anymore.

"He could be a bee to a blossom – a pear tree blossom in the spring." (Their Eyes 106) – Shortly after meeting Tea Cake, when Janie started to fall in love with him.

2.1.2.3. Janie's Marriage to Logan Killicks

Janie's first marriage was a result of an agreement between Nanny and Logan Killicks. A sixteen-year-old Janie was repulsed by her new husband. The amount of disappointment that came after the marriage equalled the amount of anticipation Janie had had before the marriage. As innocent as Janie was, she believed that marriage and love were the same thing: *"Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what*

marriage meant. It was just so” (Their Eyes 21). However, the reality was different. Not only marriage did not mean love, her husband had no interest in it.

Logan Killicks was an older man, who was primarily interested in his own sixty acres land, as he would often mention. His views on marriage were substantially different to Janie’s. Janie was wishing for love and affection, while Logan was just wishing for spare hands. His interest in Janie as a woman quickly dissipated and all he demanded from her was hard work. He was convinced that Janie was just a spoiled with luxury child that needed straightening up. *“Mah fust wife never bothered me ‘bout chopin’ no wood nohou. She’d grab dat ax and sling chips lak uh man. You done been spoilt rotten”* (Their Eyes 26).

This marriage ended very soon it lasted for less than a year. The amount of neglect and exploitive treatment basically pushed Janie away from Logan. Eventually, Janie got the chance of eloping with very impressive and ambitious Joe Starks. But before she left, without looking back, Janie gathered her dissatisfaction and loneliness that Logan had inflicted on her and threw it back at him:

Youse mad ‘cause Ah don’t fall down and wash-up dese sixty acres uh ground yuh got. You ain’t done me no favor by marryin’ me. And if dat’s what you call yo’self doin’, Ah don’t thank you for it. (Their Eyes 31)

2.1.2.4. Joe Starks and “a Bird in a Golden Cage”

Janie’s second marriage to Joe Starks was her longest and possibly her worst. Disappointed with Logan’s coldness, Janie had met a striking Black man, whom she described as the one who “knew where he was going” (Their Eyes 27). Joe Starks, or Jody, as Janie called him, appeared as an ambitious and confident man. Janie was quickly charmed by him and his enthusiasm to build a new town, which would solely belong to black people. He assured her that she was not made for ploughing fields, but for enjoyment of the luxurious life that he would give her. It was exactly what Janie’s grandmother wished for her: *“Sittin’ on porches lak de white madam...Git up on uh high chair and sit dere”* (Their Eyes 114)

It was certainly Joe’s ambition to become a successful and wealthy man and have a beautiful wife by his side. The amount of Joe’s ambition combined with his vanity

resulted in his basically building his own kingdom. Eatonville was a small town with nothing in it really. Arriving at a town with no mayor, Joe was quick to buy the majority of property and arrange openings of a post office and a store. People of Eatonville, who had no ambitious leader before, nor any money to make it happen, entrusted Joe to be their first mayor. Joe was getting richer and more influential as Eatonville flourished.

However, the relationship between Janie and Joe were not as perfect as Janie believed, she was given everything, yet loneliness had never left her. Moreover, Joe claimed his ownership of Janie as well as of other property in Eatonville, she was moulded and fixed to his own preference. And as conscientious owner, Joe needed his property protected. Joe asserted his authority in town, including his marriage. Janie became locked in her golden cage. She was denied to participate in the gatherings on the store porch, as well as to speak her mind. Such frivolousness was unacceptable and to a point dangerous to Joe, his façade was the only thing he cherished the most. Janie's status of a trophy wife was supposed to be pristine and unattainable to others. So in addition to other restrictions, her physical appearance had to change too. Being an attractive woman with beautiful long hair, Janie was forbidden to let them down in public. Joe's possessive attitude was presented to her as a sign of protection from other men. Joe would say "*You oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you*" (Their Eyes 46), while Janie did not share the sentiment and was still feeling lonely.

Joe's attitude towards Janie and other folks was not left unnoticed. People of Eatonville, as they did, were gossiping and comparing Joe to a white person for his demeanour. "*He loves obedience out of everybody under the sound of his voice... He's de wind and we'se de grass. We bend which ever way he blows*" (Their Eyes 49). Although, he was an Eatonville's respected mayor, he had taken a domineering position in town, and was looked down upon other inhabitants. Thus his reason for Janie's not socialising with others gained more legitimacy. "*Ah can't see what uh woman uh yo' stability would want tuh be treasurin' all dat gum-grease from folks dat don't even own de house dey sleep in*" (Their Eyes 54).

At some point, Janie started questioning and doubting her marriage to Joe. Besides the non-existent romance in their marriage, there was Joe's anger with any little mistake that she made. Eventually, Janie was getting beaten for such things as scorched rice and slightly uncooked fish. "*He slapped Janie until she had a ringing sound in her ears*" (Their

Eyes 72). The beating was getting worse with Joe's losing confidence in his own authority in the town and in his marriage. Whenever Janie started to speak her mind and ridicule him in front of others, he would strike her. Joe's strength was in his unquestioned authority and his superiority to other Black people, so the more was his fear of losing it.

Laughing at him, and now putting the town up to do the same. Joe Starks didn't know the words for all this, but he knew the feeling. So he struck Janie with all his might and drove her from the store. (Their Eyes 80)

Janie was married to Joe Starks for 20 years. Throughout this time she had lost her youth, her voice and her identity. She was consumed by her husband's overblown ego and status, and existed as only a Mayor's wife, Mrs. Joe Starks. Janie and Joe's marriage deteriorated along with their age. She became less obedient and had realised that the magic of Joe Starks was withering away along with him. The moment he was gone, Janie was finally free.

2.1.2.5. Janie's Maturity and Marriage to Tea Cake

The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there. (Their Eyes 87)

Joe's death was a liberating moment for Janie. The years of oppression suddenly disappeared and a tired aging woman turned into a gorgeous mature one. A bird in a golden cage was finally free, yet she had nowhere to fly. Although, the life in Eatonville got easier and brighter to Janie, she remained Mrs. Joe Starks and Mayor's widow. Her financial situation was of no concern, as she inherited a considerable amount of money and property. And as a widowed woman of a privileged position, Janie was expected to get remarried soon, as she started to attract many men to claim this privilege. But she was unwilling to engage in another serious relationship for obvious reasons, which were her two unfortunate marriage experiences.

Vergible Woods, or Tea Cake, was a younger man who changed Janie's life and brought her the desirable blossoming tree sensation. They got together very unexpectedly to the Eatonville inhabitants, who were quick to assume that young and flamboyant Tea Cake was aiming at Janie's money. Janie had to withstand the amount of gossips in order

to become confident with her love for him and his serious intentions. Tea Cake was an example of something neither Logan nor Joe were, a free spirited man who appreciated Janie for her own self. Although older, yet inexperienced Janie was eager to try new things with Tea Cake. And unlike Joe or Logan, Tea Cake was eager to share his experience with Janie. Tea Cake's impulsivity and playfulness filled Janie with a certain feel of adventure, which resulted in many new and enjoyable activities for her, such as hunting, fishing, driving together, going to dances and movies, playing cards and checkers and so on. Their relationship in the novel was also described as full of affection and passion:

Janie awoke next morning by feeling Tea Cake almost kissing her breath away. Holding her and caressing her as if he feared she might escape his grasp and fly away. (Their Eyes 107)

Tea Cake's adventurous spirit soon led them to the muck, a place in the Everglades near the lake Okechobee, where "*dey raise all dat cane and string beans and tomatuhs*" (Their Eyes 128)

The muck was the place, where they started anew, found new friends and laughed and sang together. Nevertheless, that is where they also got to experience the crazy jealousy that accompanied their crazy passion. Janie's jealousy arose due to her uncertainty with her age and beauty. A younger girl from the muck was explicitly flirting with Tea Cake, which planted a seed of jealousy and fear that he would be unfaithful. Tea Cake's jealousy however was more of a social matter. An overbearing lady, Mrs. Turner, was offering Janie to meet her brother, whom she thought to be a more fitting choice for Janie. Although, Janie was not interested, the talk itself forced him to feel uneasy. Mrs. Turner's audacity angered him and he needed assert his claim on Janie. So he turned to whipping. "*Not because her behaviour justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession*" (Their Eyes 147). Although, to whip a woman appeared to be a common thing, Tea Cake and Janie's case seemed different and worth of envy. Men envied Janie's devotion and acceptance, comparing her to their wives who would fight back and "*would spread her lungs all over Palm Beach County*" (Their Eyes 148). Women envied Tea Cake's gentleness and his pampering Janie after the whipping.

Janie and Tea Cake's loving and caring relationship was unfortunately cut short. The hurricane that stroke Okechobee Lake forced Janie and Tea Cake out of their house

to find safety. On the way to Palm Beach, Janie had to be saved by Tea Cake from a rabid dog that had bitten him. Infected with Rabies, Tea Cake's mind started to deteriorate to madness and mania. It worth noting that in the moments of his mind being blurry, he was not the loving Tea Cake she knew. "*Janie saw a changing look come in his face. Tea Cake was gone*" (Their Eyes 181). Compared to Janie's other two husbands, whose flaws were part of their identity, a once loving Tea Cake was forced to change due to the horrible circumstances. Tea Cake's madness reached a point of no return, when he tried to shoot Janie. Incapable of reasoning with him, Janie had to shoot him dead.

A minute before she was just a scared human being fighting for its life.
Now she was her sacrificing self with Tea Cake's head in her lap...Janie held his head tightly to her breast and wept and thanked him wordlessly for giving her the chance for loving service. (Their Eyes 184)

It was never her intention to kill him and it is fair to say that she did not. What she did kill was the disease that had killed him already and took over his body. Janie's love and devotion for Tea Cake did not disappear with his death. At his funeral in contrast to Joe's funeral, Janie was actually in grief and had no concern for other people's opinion: "*No expensive veils and robes for Janie this time. She went on in her overalls. She was too busy feeling grief to dress like grief*" (Their Eyes 189).

If we are to assess Janie's progression through the three marriages from the feminist/womanist prism, we may easily discern the improving trajectory from the most subordinate status (an arranged marriage with a much older man) to a relationship of two equals. Moreover, with the time and gained experience, Janie becomes more confident and less susceptible to the criticism of others.

2.1.3. Main Locations

Hurston's use of real towns and locations in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* comes with certain convenience, since the actual description of the location and the surroundings is kept to a minimum. Eatonville, Orlando, Jacksonville, Tampa, The Everglades, Palm Beach – all of those are real places that are located in the state of Florida. However, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is not presented as a geographical guide for readers, who are unfamiliar with such places. Hurston's description of even central locations of the novel is

rather brief. What she does instead is focus on the residents of these places to create the mood and the atmosphere of the novel. Hurston's anthropological background had taught her to observe people, their traditions, customs and habits. Although, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a fictional novel, the residents of Eatonville and the muck strike the reader with their authentic and genuine emotions and behaviour.

2.1.3.1. Eatonville

As was mentioned in chapter 2.1.2.4, Eatonville was Joe Starks' big ambition - a self-governed all-black town. Incidentally, the character of Joe Starks was based on a real person, who had the ambition of shaping Eatonville into a flourishing town, Joseph E. Clarks. He managed to do so with the help of other settlers and with the additional investment from philanthropists and landowners ("About Eatonville").

Nevertheless, Hurston did not focus on the actual town building and arranging business, it was clear that her focus were the people of Eatonville and their lifestyle. There are many residents of Eatonville, who appear in the novel, although most of them were only granted a mentioning in the conversations and never contributed to the actual plot. However, there are so-called porch sitters, who would always gather on the store porch to share rumours, make jokes, just talk and have arguments. The porch sitters give the reader an impression that they have no worries and just use the porch as means of socializing and keeping up with the rumours.

Moreover, the residents of Eatonville are not really distinguished as individuals, but are rather presented as one community. The activities, in which people of Eatonville are often involved, such as rumours, making fun of each other, having arguments and quarrels over trivial things, appear as insignificant to the story. Nevertheless, Hurston described such activities in great detail. For instance, Matt Bonner's old and disobedient mule was a topic for variety of jokes and kept the town joyful. "*Everybody indulged in mule talk. He was next to the Mayor in prominence, and made a better talking*" (Their Eyes 53). And even after the mule died, the whole town could not help, but make an event out of it, and participate in a procession of dragging the mule's carcass out of town.

Apart from focusing on Janie and Joe's marital issues, Eatonville appears to be as a remote place with its own ecosystem and troubles. Its residents seem to be happy there,

although many are filled with prejudice and judgement towards outsiders and anything unusual. The problems of the big world do not really concern Eatonville, they have their own. For example, the quarrelling over seemingly petty topic, such as “*What is it that keeps a man from getting burnt on a red-hot stove – caution or nature?*” (Their Eyes 64).

2.1.3.2. The muck and Mrs. Turner

The muck and its residents are very different from those in Eatonville. First of all, the muck is a seasonal location in the Southern part of Florida, near the Lake Okeechobee. There are only few permanent residents, most of people there are migrant workers, who come with the new season and leave with its end. Unlike Eatonville, where work was not the main concern for its residents, the muck attracted people in need and in despair. Thus, the atmosphere of the place and people’s attitude is gloomier.

Day by day now, the hordes of workers poured in. Some came limping in with their shoes and sore feet from walking. It’s hard trying to follow your shoe instead of your shoe following you. They came in wagons from way up in Georgia and they came in truck loads from east, west, north and south. (Their Eyes 131)

Since Janie she did not actually need any money and appeared to others as the “too good” type, people’s first reaction was disapproving. Eventually, Janie and Tea Cake had managed to make good friends there. Similarly to Eatonville, leisure time was spent in their house, where they would talk and sing and play games, as well as drink and have arguments. Although, people on the muck would be considered of the lower class than the ones in Eatonville, and their primary goal was to make money, the amusement and being joyful was something that both places had in common. Janie as the only character, who experienced both, had the chance to make a comparison: “*The men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted too*” (Their Eyes 134).

While the other characters from both the muck and Eatonville were more or less part of a bigger community and did not get a proper description and individual traits. There is one character from the muck, who stands out as an individual, besides Janie and Tea Cake. It’s an owner of an eating place, Mrs. Turner. Mrs. Turner is a prominent character,

whose purpose is to introduce a certain issue within the African American communities, such as the feeling of hatred and repulsion by one's own race.

Mrs. Turner was openly proud of her more Caucasian features, like thinner lips or a pointier nose. Moreover, she expressed a genuine disgust with other black people, for their looks, habits and culture. She believed that the black people are the only ones responsible for racial discrimination and oppression, and sympathised with white people in this issue. Anything black, such as looks and culture was perceived as repulsive, while anything white as dignified. Her pursuit for whiteness was the reason she wanted to befriend Janie, who looked even more Caucasian to her than herself. She also offered Janie to meet with her brother and break up with Tea Cake, since he was "too black" for her. When Janie tried to push her away, she somehow felt understanding, although for the wrong reasons.

Anyone who looked more white folkish than herself was better than she was in her criteria, therefore it was right that they should be cruel to her at times, just as she was cruel to those more negroid than herself in direct ratio to their negroesness. (Their Eyes 144)

Apart from hate for her own race, Mrs. Turner is the representation of all black women who doubted their natural beauty. Due to the existing beauty standards that were not inclusive of other races, she was proud believing that there is something about her looks that would be considered beautiful.

Mrs. Turner's obsession with skin pigmentation comes across as negative and antagonistic to the main heroine, which in turn makes it easy to assume that Hurston intended Mrs. Turner as an ironic jab at pigmentocratic hierarchies and racism in general. This aspect may therefore be seen as a sign of ideological engagement or commitment on the part of Hurston, and an antidote to Richard Wright's accusations of "black minstrelsy".

2.1.4. Presence and Portraying of White People in the Novel

The presence of white people in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is minimal and almost insignificant to the story. Although, there is almost no racial conflict in the story, the white people are always mentioned in some context.

First mentioning of white people is the Washburns, the white family who employed Nanny. Janie describes them as “quality folks”, who treated her and her grandmother well. Mr. Washburn seemed to have gone into trouble with the sheriff to catch the man who raped Janie’s mother. And Mrs. Washburn was helpful with raising Janie. Little Janie was raised among Mrs. Washburn’s grandchildren and was given some of their clothes. Also, she helped Nanny and Janie move out of their house to their own.

In Eatonville, there was almost no mentioning of white people, only the disapproval towards Joe Starks for appearing like one. However, the disapproval was also accompanied with certain fear of him, as in the situation, when Joe exiled Henry Pitts for stealing his ribbon cane. People unanimously disagreed with his decision, however, since Joe was quite rich, they did not mention it to him. Nevertheless, the issue with Joe Starks and other Eatonville residents was not the race issue, but the class issue within the community and Joe’s domineering attitude.

For the most part of the novel, white people were only in the background and only received general dislike of their attitude towards black people. However, there was a real event that raised some racial concerns, which were portrayed in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The hurricane that forced Janie and Tea Cake run for their lives to Palm Beach was a 1928 Okeechobee hurricane, which “caused \$100 million in damage (\$1.49 billion including inflation) and killed at least 4,112 people” (“1928 Okeechobee Hurricane”). Tea Cake, who went looking for job, was forced by two armed white persons to bury the victims of the hurricane. Apart from Nanny’s life story, it was the first time, when racial segregation and exploitation of Black population was mentioned in the novel. Although, many bodies were disfigured and needed immediate burial, the workers were ordered to separate the black people from the white:

“Don’t dump dem bodies in de hole lak dat! Examine every las one of’em and find out if they’s white or black.”

“Us got tuh handle ‘em slow lak dat? God have mussy! In de condition they’s in got tuh examine ‘em? Whut difference do it make ‘bout de color? Dey all needs buryin’ in uh hurry”

“Got orders form headquarter. They makin’ coffins fuh all de white folks.” (Their Eyes 171)

Knowing that no black person would be able to avoid the labour, Tea Cake and Janie had to escape back to the muck.

The last mentioning of white people was on Janie's trial. The whole court consisted of white people: the juries, the prosecutor, Janie's lawyer and the judge. Although, the case at first seemed an obvious first-degree murder, Janie was found not guilty. And the only reason of that was Doctor Simmons. He was a local white doctor from the Everglades, "*who had been around so long that he was part of the muck*" (Their Eyes 175). He was the one who discovered Janie and Tea Cake on the floor. Doctor Simmons explained to the court that Tea cake was in fact infected with Rabies, which caused his aggressive behaviour and forced Janie to protect herself. Tea Cake's friends, not knowing the truth, were quick to assume that Janie had got away only due to her gender: "*Aw you know dem white mens wuzn't gointuh to do nothin' tuh woman dat look lak her...Uh white man and uh nigger woman is de freest thing on earth*" (Their Eyes 189). However, their assumptions were wrong, and Janie was simply innocent. This particular statement raises gender issues within the African American community, which were mentioned in Frances M. Beal's pamphlet "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" in 1970.

Conclusion

The main objective of this thesis was to analyse Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from two interpretive perspectives, and to discover whether the novel was a folksy narrative or a precursor of a black feminist novel. The theoretical part and the practical part have unravelled several factors that were necessary to reach this goal.

The theoretical part has presented the historical background and the main goals of Harlem Renaissance that were essential for discovering an overall atmosphere within the African American community, which preceded a further development of African American culture. Zora Neale Hurston's biography revealed her personal struggles as an African American and as a woman, who was left without family support and had to fight her way in order to achieve her scholarly and literary goals. Her undeniable talent was the reason she met her future patrons and mentors, who helped her in her literary career. Having started her career as an anthropologist, Hurston had set the goal of documenting and presenting to public the remarkability of Black culture that varied from the American South to the islands of the Caribbean. The rising importance of having a political view and being a part of a bigger system, however, was not something Hurston concurred. Believing in individuality rather than collectivism, as well as being a conservative at heart had affected Hurston's career and made her a target for criticism.

Exploring the issues such as racism and sexism in this thesis have unravelled two crucial points that were relevant for the analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The first is the oppressive and violent behaviour towards Black women in the African American families. The statistical data presented in the theoretical part have confirmed that Black women do in fact suffer from domestic violence more frequently than white women. In the novel, it was presented with Janie's experience as a wife to three different men. Janie experienced psychological and physical abuse from her husbands. Moreover, it has been revealed that for her husbands it was a certain way of claiming her as their own, as well as prove their manliness to the rest of the community. The second is the struggle of Black women as a part of the society. Although the goal of a feminist movement was to represent all women and fight for their equality, Black women were still underrepresented and had to face racism within the movement. In order to survive in the racist and sexist world, Black women had to deny their own identity, femininity and sexuality, and simply follow the rules. In the novel, such struggles were presented in several women characters. Janie's

grandmother denied her identity, femininity and sexuality in order to provide a better life for Janie. Her traumatic experience as slave, as well as her distrust for men, only strengthened her belief that women are in fact “the mules of the world”. Janie had to suppress her sexuality and her individuality in order to follow her grandmother’s advice and appeal for her husband Joe. And lastly, the curious case of Mrs. Turner: behind all the hate for the black people, there was a problem of self-acceptance and matching the beauty standards.

The analysis of the locations and the presence of white people in the novel have revealed that there are certain factors that would qualify *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a folklore narrative. The attention given by Hurston to the cultural aspects of life in the Black community, such as joyful mood in the community that is expressed through jokes, singing and dancing, as well as having close relationships with neighbours and a strong sense of togetherness. On the other hand, there is a portrayal of the real event such as 1928 Okeechobee hurricane in the novel. Although it is only a short glimpse into the broader problem of racial segregation and race-based exploitation, it convinces the reader to sympathize with the characters, as well as the whole race, where the white man is presented as an oppressor with the weapon.

In conclusion, the main objective of this thesis was to discover whether *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a feminist novel or a folksy escapism. It is fair to say that there are features of both. Although, the novel carries the message of a predominantly feministic spirit, the scrupulous analysis has revealed the features of a folklore, which is Hurston’s area of expertise. Moreover, having received criticism in 1930s for not bringing attention to racial issues, Hurston managed to achieve more by bringing attention to the gender issues in the African American communities, a subject which became particularly relevant in the 1960s and has retained its relevance until today.

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