

Mules and Women: Identify and Rebel — Janie's Identity Quest in “*Their Eyes Were Watching God*”

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Abstract—The paper explores the signification of the mule image in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and analyzes its equivalence with the role of black women in the American society. In his work, Hurston drew the pictures of a whole bunch of women, which doesn't show a solo performance. In the paper, the author discussed the vivid picture of black community Hurston offered in “*Their Eyes Were Watching God*”.

Index Terms—Afro-American tradition, mule of the world, king's mule, black women, Janie

Their Eyes Were Watching God is widely acclaimed as the best novel by Zora Neale Hurston, and a classic of Afro-American literature. And it is widely studied from many different angles, such as the feminist consciousness; the racial suppression; and the Afro-American folklore tradition; and the Black ascetics of this novel, etc. In this paper, the author intends to combine several of these approaches to offer the reader a comprehensive interpretation of this novel. Like many other Afro-American novels, this novel applies a highly signifying language, for example, it uses a lot of natural images such as the sun light, the pear tree in blossom, the bees, the mules, the mad dog, etc. These natural images play a very important role in the development of the plots and characters of the novel.

To some extent, the understanding of these animal narrations holds the key to the information contained in this novel. To justify this statement, it is necessary for the reader to dip into the Afro-American's collected experience as a slave community. Firstly, when they were sold to the United States, they had no rights at all. They were sold and purchased like animals in the market. Once purchased, they became the property of their master counted along with the master's land and livestock. Secondly, as slaves, they had to do all the work and took care of everybody, everything, including the animals. And their work brings them close nature and to all forms of life in the world. It is just natural for them to develop an intimate feeling to the animals; especially those they work with and take care of. Thirdly, the cruel ruling of the white masters makes it impossible for them to express their displeasure in a direct way. Therefore, they choose to talk about the animal world as a safe way to tell their true feelings. By creating an animal world of their own, they introduce their own rules about good and evil, redemption and punishment. It's a form of “dethrone of the official order.” (Chen Guangxing, 2005, p35) In all these animal talks they expressed their hatred of the abuses and exploitation from the white world; their despise of their white master's ignorance and viciousness; their acclamation of the black people's industriousness and intelligence; and they also expressed their hope of salvation.

During the long process of struggle for Afro-American liberation, some of these animal images has gained some special meanings. And some of them are even fixed to refer to certain kinds of people. And the mule is one such image. It is a fixed image of hardworking slaves, stupid, yet obedient. And it becomes a stereotype of the black women. Such stereotypes become so powerful in the Afro-American culture that they become a chain on the American women, preventing them from developing individuality, and from pursuing their personal happiness. In this novel, there are mainly two types of mule image; one is the mule of the world, which is introduced in Nanny's description of black women's role in the world. This image defines black women's role as to carry the burden for the black man and their white master. They are under double pressure, the racial and the sexual. The second mule image is the mule freed by Joe in Eatonville. Joe purchases the mule and put her to rest, and she finally gets herself killed by fat. This mule reminds the reader of Janie's place in her second marriage and her relation with Joe. Joe plays the role of savior for Janie and helps her escape from Logan's farm, but he is a pure egoist and expects obedience out of everybody. For him, Janie's identity is Mrs. Mayor Starks, and her only function is to extend his own ego. Everything that contains the least individuality of her own is considered absurd and unacceptable. She is like the king's mule, and the king's pleasure is everything she is there for, nothing else.

Black women who fit in this first type work even harder than the mule all through their life. Besides cooking, cleaning, and raising children, they also have to work in the field or in business to support the family income. Their health and youth are often wasted too early. Despite of their contribution to the economy and to the family, their contributions are taken for granted, and very few people really appreciate their effort. They are used and abused till they can be put to no use any more, and then they are left alone to die. Their fate is analogized in the novel by the story of Matt Banner's mule. Matt uses the mule very harshly, yet he never feeds her enough. The mule becomes so skinny from

hard work and hunger that it becomes a topic for the townspeople. Yet the men talking about the mule just want to make fun out of the mule's owner, and they don't really care about the mule's fate. They even catch the poor creature and poke her around until she exhausts herself. Nanny's experience is a living example of this type of woman. And the heroine in *Sweat* also fits in this category. The second stereotype is a borrowed concept from the middle class white community. This idea is introduced into the black community by Joe, who works for a long time with the white and is deeply influenced by their values.

Their Eyes Were Watching God draws pictures of a whole bunch of women, and it is not a solo performance. There is Nanny the former slave, who is raped by her white master and driven out of the family by his wife. She gives birth to Janie's mother and sends her to school, hoping that she might escape the same cruel fate. However, Janie's mother is raped by her black schoolteacher, who then abandons her. After Janie's birth, the mother disappears, and Nanny takes over the responsibility for little Janie, raises her and protects her. Nanny the grandma fits tightly into the stereotype of the mule. She works hard all her life, and she takes in hurts and sufferings and swallows them down her throat. She simply assumes her role as the mule of the world. And her most daring dream is to have a safe and warm home of her own, enough food, and some leisure time out on the porch of her own house.

And there are the women in Eatonville, and they are a new generation without any slave experience. They are not in much better conditions than Nanny, and most of them don't have a home of their own. Yet, to some extent, they have realized Nanny's dream at least partly, for they have a husband, a family, and some leisure talking on the front porch. They may be like many of the women on the muck where Tea Cake and Janie live together. And they don't strike the reader as individuals; instead they show up as a group of shadows without any characteristic. They may have been born free, but deep inside they are still salves to the stereotype. And if one dives into their mind, he is likely to find that their dreams go no further than that of Nanny. In fact, they are grouped by black men like Joe with cows and mules, who cannot think for themselves and who need someone to think for them. The real breakthrough for women's personal fulfillment comes in Janie. Most of the common women surrender to these stereotypes, and only few of outstanding willpower and intelligence are able to break the bonds, and fulfill their dreams. And Janie is a member of this small group of forerunners for the liberation of the black women.

Therefore, it may be worth exploring the relationship between Janie and these mule images, and how they interfere with her struggle to find her real identity. Janie's journey to self-fulfillment starts early in her girlhood, and it is a journey full of setbacks and frustrations. And there are three main stages in her identity pursuit, and each stage comes along with a marriage.

Janie starts to question her own identity since she was a little girl as a result of her virtuous orphanage and her accommodation in the backyard of a white family. She plays so well with the children of the white family where Nanny works that she identify herself with them, and that is why she couldn't recognize herself on the photo among the white kids. Besides, as she is dressed by her white patron much better than her peer blacks, they become jealous of her and isolate her from their circle. Worse than this, they continuously humiliate her by telling about her father's being hunted for the rape of her mother. Living between the white world and the black world, and not being accepted into any one of them, young Janie starts her quest about her identity long before she gets any reasoning power for such a challenging question. And this quest accompanies her all through her life.

Of course, Janie doesn't reach the maturity of her selfness upon her first try. Her first two attempts are both failures. And her adventure of self-fulfillment is full of yielding to and rebelling against the stereotypes for black women. Her first marriage is to an old black man with sixty acres of land, and it is an arranged-marriage by her grandma. It is a marriage without love, and Janie is merely the old man's mule. (Cheng Xilin, 2001) This is an obvious surrender to Nanny's concept of black women, which defines women as the mule of the world, and they are expected to serve her husband in the bed, in the kitchen and in the field. At first, Janie is treated as if she wasn't capable of any sort of work, the old husband fetches the water for her, cuts the firewood for her, and even carries the firewood into the kitchen for her. Slowly, the old man begins to reveal his real attitude about her. And he starts to expect her to work not just in the kitchen, but in the barn and in the field as well. Noticeably, all through the process, her opinion is never wanted. Her attempt to communicate with the old man never succeeds, and all he expects is her obedience and gratefulness for his taking her as a wife. He thinks has done her a great favor by marrying her, so she should kiss the dirt under his feet and treat him like a god. "You ain't got no particular place. It's what Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick." (Hurston, 1978, p52) From this quotation, the reader can see that the old man never really cares for Janie as a person. He does whatever he thinks she should need without asking her, and expects her to be grateful for everything he does. He never washes his feet even if Janie put a basin of water ready under his feet. It's obvious he regards Janie as not much different from an animal, a mule to be exact. And she is not supposed to have any feelings, nor is her opinion worth of listening. When she tries to tell her opinion or argue with him, he simply gets mad, and threatens to kill her.

Disillusioned with her first attempt of self-fulfillment, Janie elopes with Joe Starks, who becomes her second husband. Joe Starks is deeply influenced by the values of the white people, and he is eager for power and property. He promises to make Janie a lady, Mrs. Mayor Starks. Even before their elopement, Janie realizes Joe is not her bee to the blooming pear tree, yet he represents the far horizon for her, something different from her present situation with old Logan, so she puts away her dream and gets along with him. Once been there, Janie soon finds the life far from what she has desired. Joe doesn't like to see her get involved with other black women in the neighborhood, for he considers

them of a lower position. Thus she is separated from her fellow black women. Joe doesn't like seeing Janie stand on the front porch of the shop and listen to the evening leisure talks, and always order her to go into the shop and serve some customers when the talk is going on, while he himself enjoys the stories. He also deprives Janie of her right to speak in public without asking her opinion, and he forces her to tie her pretty hair up and hide it with a piece of rag. In a word, Janie has to behave herself strictly by the book written by Joe-the "I God".

"Joe assigns her the role of 'Mrs. Mayor Starks.' She must hold herself apart from the towns people, conduct herself according to the requirements of his position. Under no circumstance must she speak in public. ... Being forbidden to speak is a severe penalty in an oral culture. It short-circuits Janie's attempt to claim identity of her own, robs her of the opportunity to negotiate respect from her peers." (BLC, 1076)

Joe's failure lies in his indiscriminate absorption of the white world values. He is not much different from the white master he works for in Pennsylvania. He is obsessed with power and property, and he looks down at his fellow townspeople in Eatonville because they can't afford to buy their own house. And his forbidden of Janie's involvement in the front porch talk is a clear sign of his sense of class superiority over the others in Eatonville. And the idea from the white world that directly causes the failure of his marriage is the patriarchal discrimination which poisons both the black world and the white world. Everything he does for Janie is trying to make her into a middle class white woman, a lady in his own word. If Nanny were alive to see Janie as Mrs. Mayor Starks, she may feel satisfied. And many of the townswomen envy Janie's place very much. Yet these women are too much poisoned by the stereotype for black women, and they are blind to their own potentials. Like Janie said at the end of the novel, these women never see the dawn all their life. But Janie never values material security higher than spiritual fulfillment, and she keeps her dream alive all her life. Unfortunately, Joe's narcissism never let him see through Janie's inner feelings.

"The mule is the embedded image that haunts Janie through two marriages and becomes a metaphor for the roles she repudiates in her quest for self-fulfillment. It is the idea against which the book implicitly argues. Love, for the old ex-slave, is 'de very prong all us black women gits hung on'; that is, as Nanny goes on to explain love makes black women see substance in a "dressed up dude" who can't keep himself in shoe leather, much less provide for someone else; his women tote that burden for him. Love doesn't kill black women; it makes them 'sweat.'" (BLC, 1087)

And this is exactly the situation in which Janie finds herself in her first two marriages. Both of her two husbands cut a role for her according to their own expectations. The first husband, old Logan Hollicks wants to shape her according to the old stereotype of black women, and make her work like a mule both inside and outside of the house. Though Logan himself works just as hard, he considers Janie not of an equal position with him, but of a much lower position. Suppose he used to be a slave himself like Nanny, he never regards his wife as freed as himself, instead, he thinks he can treat her the he was treated by his white master. It's a great pity that he never realizes that Janie is an intelligent, free and romantic woman, and no wonder Janie leaves him at last.

The second husband, Joe Starks wants to shape Janie according to another stereotype, which is also haunted by the image of the mule. But Joe intends to make her wife a mule free of labor in the field. He makes her a mule in the shop. But a mule is still a mule, no matter where she is. Therefore, he would never have her speak in public; who is going to listen to a mule anyway? And the fact that he never tells how she loves Janie and is jealous of other man's beholding her, touching her hair also shows his attitude towards her; who is going to tell his mule that he loves her anyway, it would seem ridiculous? And if you do love your mule, all you have to do is to lessen her job, and feed her well, and that is exactly what he does for Janie.

If we take a closer look at the narration about Matt Bonner's yellow mule, we may get a better understanding of the equivalence between Janie's situation and that of the mules. "They had him up for conversation everyday the lord sent. Most especial if Matt was there himself to listen. Sam and Lige and Walter were the ringleaders of the mule talkers. The other threw in whatever they could chance upon..." (Hurston, 1978, p83) And the mule is the talk material for everybody on the front porch, but no one really cares for her; Janie as the pretty Mrs. Mayor is also the topic of the townspeople, but the talk never amounts to more than mere sexual interest or jealousy. The mule has no word in all the talks about her, and so is Janie denied the chance to communicate with her fellow towns people. Whenever Janie tries to join in the mule talk, she is ordered to go in the shop and sell something. She finally develops a hatred towards the inside of the shop just like the mule hate Matt Bonner and the plow. All these similarity makes her sympathize with the yellow mule. When the others torture the mule and have fun out of this event, Janie couldn't bear with it anymore.

She snatched her head away from the spectacle and began muttering to herself. "They oughta be shamed uh theyselves! Teasin' dat poor brute beast lak they is! Done been worked tuh death; done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatment, and now they got tuh finish develin' 'im tuh death. Wisht Ah had mah way wid 'em all." (Hurston, 1978, p89)

The last sentence is a open condemnation upon the cruel patriarchal world. Janie wishes she claim penalty on all the men who tortured the poor mule. And it may not be very hard for the reader to sense the anger in Janie directing at the mercilessness and dumbness of the townsman. Sensing Janie's disgust with the mule-torture, Joe decides to buy the mule from Matt Bonner and set her to rest. This is probably the only time that Joe is sensitive to what Janie feels inside and does something accordingly to make her happy. Janie takes this action as a manifestation of love for her, and responds to it very emotionally.

... When it was all done she stood in front of Joe and said, "Jody, dat wuz uh mighty fine thing fuh you tuh do. 'Tain't

everybody would have thought of it, 'cause it ain't no everyday thought. Freein' dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you. Something like George Washington and Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln he had de whole United States tuh rule so he freed de Negroes. You got uh town so you freed uh mule. You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king uh something." (Hurston, 1978, p91-92)

Janie is very grateful to Joe for this liberation, yet this liberation doesn't change the mule's condition at the very basic level, because it remains a topic to the townspeople and it still cannot defend itself. Therefore, when we think again about Janie's speech, we sense something ironic. This irony lies in Janie's interpretation of power and freedom. Joe's purchase of the mule to set her to rest is a kind action from the ruler, and the action is a demonstration of power. And the comparison between Joe and Abraham Lincoln seems to escalate Joe to the level of the great president who give freedom to all black slaves, yet from the reading we can see that Joe is just a little figure who is hunger for power. Thus, the comparison only exposes the absurdity of Joe's self-complacency. And the last sentence betrays Janie's hatred of Joe's affectedness. Janie seems to tell us that Joe set the mule to rest not because he thinks she deserves rest, but because he wants to show he has the power to free the mule and the image of the king draws people's attention further away from the democratic Lincoln, and closer to a dictator.

In fact, after this analysis, we have more reason to believe Janie is not just talking about the mule, she is talking about herself. Though Joe helps her escape the control of her first husband, she won't thank him, because she is not being respected as an equal human being. She is something purchased, a piece of property, just like the mule. The role she is assigned to presently is not out of her own choice, and it is a product of dictatorship. And the final death of the mule also affirms Janie's judge of this case. The freedom given from above is not always sweet, and sometimes the cost is even higher than if you fight for it. When the corpse of the mule is left alone, the dead-eating birds' chant sarcastically tells us the cause of her death is pure fat. In purchasing her and set her to rest, Joe saves her from dying from exhaustion, yet kills her by leisure.

Fortunately, sensing the danger of sharing the same tragic fate with the mule, Janie takes to rebel against the role assigned to her by Joe, otherwise she may end up just like the mule. Failing to find recognition of her individuality from the outside world, she withdraws from Joe and the male-dominated world he represents. And she realizes that she has kept many things from Joe, and she tries to live a double life. Silence becomes her weapon to Joe's male chauvinism. Lu Xun used to tell two possible results of silence, one is to die in silence, the other is to explode. Janie's silence belongs to the second type. Deep inside, she never really surrenders to the pressure of the male world. Instead, her silence is the declaration of a cold war, is a demonstration of protest. This is a weapon she once used against her first husband, and now she resort to it again in her fight against the abuse of her second husband. When she is slapped in the face for a burnt dinner, she doesn't say a word, nor does she try excuses or cry out of pain, for these behaviors would add to Joe's sense of triumph and betray her powerlessness against his abuse. She leads the hit inside, let it shake the shelf in her mind where she keeps Joe's picture frame, and let the frame fall to the floor, break into pieces. The silent protest gives her power to resist being hurt by Joe's physical and verbal abuse. The slap in her face, the critics against her physical appearance and against her intelligence only makes her hate Joe harder. At the same time, she accumulates strength for her counterattack. That is what she does when Joe criticizes her again in front of the townspeople in the store. She takes up Joe's words against her and uses them directly against him, that is she laughs at Joe's loss of sexual power. This attack drives right at the weakest point in Joe, and he soon gets sick and dies.

After the death of Joe, Janie resumes her freedom just like when she was the little girl under the blossoming pear tree. And she soon recovers her nature as a romantic and adventurous woman. As manifestation of her protest against the bondage placed on her by the patriarchal system, she burns all the hair rags and let her hair fall freely down to her waist. (Cheng Xilin, 2001) She also refuses the wedding proposals of some men generally viewed as accomplished. Like the narrator said at the beginning of the novel that a woman's dream is the truth for her, so Janie decides to be the blooming pear tree and waits for her bee man to show up.

Finally, Tea Cake comes into Janie's life. He is a troubadour, a travelling businessman, having no property worth of bragging about, totally free from the influence of white male values. He is ready to challenge all the conventional male and female concepts, and he is willing to invite Janie join him as a partner in his life adventure. He is the bee for Janie's blooming pear tree. (TCLC, 1077) Only with him is Janie able to fully explore her potential as a person, to freely display her physical beauty; to play chess; to shoot and to fish; and to enjoy the life among companions. Though she has to kill him after he is infected with the mad dog disease, she will never change her feelings for him and will love him just the same forever. This short-lived marriage with Tea Cake helps Janie complete her self-fulfillment. She finally escapes the fate of exhausted to death as the mule of the world, and the fate of bored to death as the mule of a king. She has been to the horizon and is back. She knows what she is capable of and knows how it feels to be oneself.

With her animal talks, Hurston offers us a vivid picture of black community. This world may not be as prosperous materially as the white world; and compared with the elite white civilization, this black culture still seem a little underdeveloped. However, we may also notice that the white civilization is at very hard period, and more and more people are losing their faith in the society drawing nutrition from this dying culture. Viewing from this aspect, the black culture is full of vitality; it is closely related with the great nature. And the black people are still full of hope and passion for the future. When one read this work, we see people enjoying life, and we see people try to make meanings out of their life because they believe there is a meaning. Maybe this is what we need most when the world is full of

desperation. And in dealing with the modern theme of identity searching, Hurston sets a model by combining black traditions with modern themes. Undeniably, Hurston's suggestion for women's salvation may seem too traditional for she seems to place too much emphasis on marriage. Later feminist writers have explored more ways for women's self-fulfillment, such as through artistic creation, through profession, and through sisterly love among women. Yet, judging from the time she lived in, her suggestion that women can have their own identity must have been no less shocking than later feminist's telling the world that lesbian love is natural. Therefore, no matter in her creative use of the Afro-American culture, in her imitation of the spoken language of the black community, or in her exploration of black women's identity, this work all deserves our full respect and attention.

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