

Racial and Sexual Politics of *Their Eyes are Watching God* from a Spatial Perspective

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Abstract—Critics hold quite controversial ideas concerning the racial politics and sexual politics of Hurston's *Their Eyes are Watching God*. Through analyzing Janie's stubborn ignorance of the inevitable racial spatial division, Janie's spatial movements and space images in the novel, this paper points out that Janie's black identification is ambivalent due to the damages racism does to her and her feminist consciousness very weak which shows that the systematic brainwash of patriarchy is both successful and hard to eliminate. Janie therefore becomes to be more representative and universal than those protesting heroes and heroines. The harm and control that racism and patriarchy make to African-Americans and women are exposed from a different angle, exposing the racial and sexual politics of the novel.

Index Terms—racial politics, sexual politics, space, *Their Eyes are Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston

I. INTRODUCTION

African American/women literature and literary criticism have been developing rapidly with the trend of multiculturalism beginning from the second half of the 20th century. Many of the neglected African American/women writers have been rediscovered and their works included into the canon(s). Among them is Zora Neale Hurston. The noted African American literature critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1984) claims that “Zora Neale Hurston is the first writer that our generation of black and feminist critics has brought into the canon, or perhaps I should say the canons.” (p.37) Naturally, Hurston's most important work, *Their Eyes are Watching God*, has become to be one important research hotspot and its criticism presents two features: for one thing, critics are interested in multiple research focuses of the novel: the black folklore, the mythic pattern, the black vernacular of the characters, the relation between the narrative framework and the theme, the racial politics and sexual politics etc. “The curious aspect of the widespread critical attention being shown to Hurston's texts is that so many critics embracing such a diversity of theoretical approaches seem to find something new at which to marvel in her texts.” (Gates, 1984, p.37) Hurston's accurate representation of the pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar of the black vernacular has been highly praised and Gates even calls the text “speakerly text”, “a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition ... designed to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce the illusion of oral narration.” (Gates, 1984, p.38) Hurston shows her marvelous language skills by transferring the auditory into the visual.

The second feature of the criticism of the novel is the controversy over its racial politics and sexual politics. Many critics find it lack of racial politics, among them is the leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance Richard Wright (1937) who denounces that “the sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought.....” (p.25) However, “Internalized Racism and the Construction of Subjectivity: Trauma of African Americans under Racism as Reflected in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” holds that a racial political sub-text is hidden in the internalized racism of its characters. The paper analyzes the internalized racism of the characters to show the racial politics of the novel. But it does not study the major character Janie's racial consciousness except claiming its ambivalence. This paper will focus on Janie only and to find out where her racial identification lies.

The sexual politics of the novel is also very controversial. Critics like Harold Bloom and Barbara Johnson etc. acclaim the feminist image of the heroine Janie. The former even groups Janie into the women literature tradition with Samuel Richardson and Doris Lessing. Barbara Johnson (1984) believes that Janie's self-split at the end of the novel means that she “develops an increasing ability to speak.” (p.214) On the other hand, Mary Helen Washington (2009) holds that Hurston has not created a really liberated female voice and the writer continues to subvert Janie's voice even after her self-split. She thinks “that Hurston continues to subvert Janie's voice, that in crucial places where we need to hear her speak she is curiously silent, that even when Hurston sets out to explore Janie's internal consciousness, her internal speech, what we actually hear are the voices of men.” (p.35) Joseph Urgo claims that Hurston equates submission to Tea Cake with Janie's liberation. He thinks all three of Janie's husbands want to control and possess Janie, including the third husband Tea Cake who treats Janie equally in the eyes of many critics. Todd McGowan even suggests that Tea Cake's manipulation of Janie is the strongest among the three husbands due to its imperceptibility.

It is natural that a thousand readers can see a thousand Hamlets, but so sharp a contrast of the views on one work is rare to be seen. We may wonder: How does racism affect Janie? Is Janie a traditional woman or a feminist? How does Hurston, a female African American writer in the United States, treat the inevitable issues of sex and race in her novel? From a new perspective, the spatial perspective, this paper tends to find out Hurston's racial and sexual positions in

Their Eyes Were Watching God.

Our civilization classifies human beings into races, classes and sexes and hierarchies are attached thereof based on ideologies like racism, classism and patriarchy constructed by dominant groups in the society. Materialization of these classifications and hierarchies can only be realized through the medium of space and in the space. "Race, like gender and sexuality, is a geographical project. Race is constructed in and through space, just as space is often constructed through race." (Mitchell, 2000, p.230) Space, on the other hand, represents social constructions. Space is "a materialization of 'social being'" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.102) To establish the authority of its ideology and to ascertain its power and privilege, the dominant group must separate and mark the space as either superior or inferior, privileged or controlled. Hence, the key issue of racism and sexism is to establish racial spatial order and sexual spatial order. Racial segregation, the duality of noble white space and humble black space, outdoor space of the males and indoor space of the females, all these contribute to construct dualities of the subject and the Other. Space therefore is branded social features of race and sex. White/black spatial dualities and male/female spatial dualities are therefore the dominant spatial principles in racist and patriarchal societies.

II. RACIAL POLITICS

The story sets in 1920s and 1930s in American South where its racial spatial construction principle should be white/black dual opposition due to the segregation system at that time. Based on racism ideologies, Jim Crow laws divided the social space into white/black binary oppositions: big houses against backyards, main houses against the sheds and front doors against back doors. Besides, schools, trains, hotels, buses, churches and restaurants were all segregated, establishing racial spatial order of binary opposition. Whereas in Janie's perspective, this spatial binary order is blurred or avoided. Janie's story does not mention or imply the sharp contrast between the bright and luxurious big house of the whites and the dark and shabby backyard cabin of her grandmother's, nor does she note the division or separation of the two. Although Janie grows up together with the master's children in the backyard and all the children are punished equally by the mistress or the grandmother when mischief is found, Janie and the master's children must have eaten and slept in different and contrasted places because of the strict Jim Crow laws of the American South at that time. However, Janie seems to be unaware of the separation and hierarchy at all. Even if Janie might be very lucky and her white patrons are kind and open enough to let her and her white playmates live and eat together and there is no racial spatial segregation at home, it is definitely impossible for Janie to go to school together with the white children. But the readers find that school segregation is also unspoken by both Janie and the narrator who continues to see the world from Janie's point of view after replacing Janie's storytelling voice. The novel does not mention the fact that she and her white playmates go to different schools, not to say to talk about the contrasted qualities of the buildings, teachers and other facilities between the white schools and black schools. Both Janie and the narrator pretend that school segregation does not exist and her white playmates just disappear in her story after they go to school. Which school do they go to? Why do they stop hanging out with Janie? What changes are there? What do they do? Who do they marry? How are they? No explanation of any kind is made. Janie acts like they have never existed in her life.

Both the narrator and Janie insist on blurring the racial spatial division and hierarchy all throughout the story. Told in the narrator's voice but seen from Janie's eyes, Logan's cabin seems to locate outside the social space and beyond any social spatial order: "It was a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had ever been." (Hurston, 1978, p.39) The "woods" and "where nobody had ever been" take Logan's cabin outside the racial spatial environment and locate it in a purely physical spatial environment. Lefebvre believes all human created space is social and but Janie is very stubborn in ignoring the inevitable social element in her life. No contrasted big houses of the whites and no exploitation of the whites are seen and the inevitable segregation and other racial problems are completely ignored.

There is also no racial segregation on trains and at train stations in Janie's eyes too. "The train beat on itself and danced on the shiny steel rails mile after mile. Every now and then the engineer would play on his whistle for the people in the towns he passed by. And the train shuffled on to Jacksonville, and to a whole lot of things she wanted to see and to know." (Hurston, 1978, p.174) She does not mention the inevitable "black" and "white" signs for toilets and taps and it seems that she is not required to take "black" compartment on the train. She only sees "the big old station" (Hurston, 1978, p.175), "the town", "the people", it seems that she lives and travels in a place where race is not a conscious marker of people and where there is no racial segregation.

What is more, in Jacksonville and Everglades, Janie and Teacake seem to live in a place where there are no racial difference and racial segregation as well. The hotel they stay, the restaurants they eat at and the shops they buy from seem not serve blacks exclusively and not contrast with those for the whites. It seems race and skin color and racial difference do not exist in all people's consciousness except that of Mrs. Turner who admires Janie's less dark skin color, less flat nose shape and other physical features. All the ignorance of racial spatial division, impossible in the American South during segregation period, suggests Janie might most probably be trying to avoid facing the issue. Morrison (1989) once notes: "certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose" (p. 11) We may wonder: what makes Janie so determined and consistent in avoiding the racial spatial separation?

We believe that going to segregated school and falling apart with her white playmates must have made her realize

that she is inferior to the whites and the trauma must have been so painful that it is unspeakable, like Sethe's unspeakable pain in *Beloved*. That is why she stops talking about her white playmates and why she ignores the racial spatial division completely. Unlike other characters who have accepted and internalized racism from early years, Janie and her white playmates are treated equally by her white mistress and her grandma. She must have taken for granted that she is white and hence can not recognize the black girl in the photo to be herself when she is six. She has been so far identifying herself as white that the later realization of being a black can not help her return to black identification.

The facts that she has never identified with the black community, has admired white characteristics and has been trying to approach whites suggest her denial of her black identity. She has never assimilated herself into the black talks and has even been outside the black female circle. Her simple and cold greeting to the black community at the beginning of the story suggests her alienation with the black community which reflects "Hurston's ambivalence toward racial and communal definitions of her identity." (Kubitschek, 1987, p.29) The only one black friend she has is Pheobe who takes care of her without condition. It is Joe's white-like bearing and wealth that attract the attention of the then married Janie. Although she does not see the sweetness she expects in Joe. "She was proud of what she saw. Kind of portly like rich white folks." (Hurston, 1978, p.56) For Janie, Joe's resemblance with the whites is so attractive that it can compensate her romantic expectation Joe can not provide. The blacks in her eyes are even hostile, especially when she is facing murder accusation. The first thing she does after the trial is to visit and thank those kind whites. "The white women cried and stood around her like a protecting wall and the Negroes, with heads hung down, shuffled out and away." (Hurston, 1978, p.280) This scene symbolizes Janie's isolation from the black community because of her clinging white identification which is like a wall preventing her from embracing her true identity. Janie's vague black identification suggests that racism is so horrible and destructive that it makes Janie a marginal stuck between two identities. Without Wright's protesting strategy, Hurston successfully creates a work of racial politics.

III. SEXUAL POLITICS

As for the sexual politics of the novel, some critics hold that Janie's entering into Teacake's circle and her storytelling suggest she has found her voice, has become independent and has established her subjectivity. But from the spatial images, Janie's spatial positions and spatial movements, we can see that her feminist consciousness is at the most ambiguous and just a sprout.

First of all, Janie's "horizon" dream, this ambiguous spatial image, implies that she does not have a clear and specific goal and path. What is more, she has been depending on man after man to realize her dream. She agrees to go with Joe since Joe "spoke for far horizon". And after Joe's death, she has the opportunity to become an independent shop owner, but she turns immediately to rely on Hezekiah, allowing him to replace and imitate Joe. "She wouldn't know what to do without him." (Hurston, 1978, p.142) Hezekiah naturally took up his role of a protector: "You poor little thing, give it to big brother. He'll fix it for you." (Hurston, 1978, p.142) She leaves her shop and her life when Teacake needs her at his working place. She works in the kitchen when Teacake needs her in the kitchen and goes to the fields when Teacake needs her in the fields. All these are considered by her to be realization of her horizon dream. "Ah done been tuh de horizon and back now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by compasisions." (Hurston, 1978, p.284) As is noted: "Janie's quest for excitement and pleasure in the Florida Everglades does not lead to an independent, self-fulfilled womanhood. She never learns to shape her destiny by making her own choices. S. Jay Walker (p. 526), Brown (pp. 43-45), and Jenkins (p. 65) point out or, at least, acknowledged that Janie's dependence on Tea Cake for fulfillment is contradictory to modern feminism." (Jordan, 1984, p.111) Janie herself attributes her growth to Teacake. "Ah never 'spected nothin' Tea Cake but bein' dead from the standin' still and tryin' tuh laugh. But you come 'long and made somethin' outa me." (Hurston, 1978, p.247) Her so called horizon dream is neither economic independence, nor emotional independence or intellectual independence. It is only dependence on men.

Janie's dependence on men suggests her acceptance of patriarchy which is also presented in her spatial position. She has never questioned her female spatial position, kitchen and bedroom. "In terms of activity, sex role assigns domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female, the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition to the male. The limited role allotted the female tends to arrest her at the level of biological experience. Therefore, nearly all that can be described as distinctly human rather than animal activity (in their own way animals also give birth and care for their young) is largely reserved for the male. Of course, status again follows from such an assignment." (Millett, 1970, p.26) She tells Logan her place is in the kitchen. "Youse in yo' place and Ah'm in mine." (Hurston, 1978, p.52) Facing Logan's patriarchal discourse, "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick," (Hurston, 1978, p.52) Janie emphasizes her acceptance of indoor female position in the patriarchal system: "Youse mad' cause Ah'm tellin' yuh what you already knowed." (Hurston, 1978, p.53) She can not realize that she has the right to decide and choose her own position. She "stood still in the middle of the floor without knowing it." (Hurston, 1978, p.53) The scene is symbolic in that it suggests Janie's ignorance of her being the center of her own life.

Kitchen and bedroom are constructed as female spatial signs. With Joe, Janie continues to be content with her female position in the kitchen and bedroom from the very first day. When Joe is chatting with men outside at the porch, "Janie could be seen through the bedroom window getting settled." (Hurston, 1978, p.59) The porch and bedroom are established as hierarchical spatial duality, representing the controlling and controlled relation of men and women. The passive voice "seen" here further strengthens Janie's secondary position. "Not only are Janie and the other women

barred from participation in the ceremonies and rituals of the community, but they become the objects of the sessions on the porch, included in the men's tale-telling as the butt of their jokes, or their flattery, or their scorn. The experience of having one's body become an object to be looked at is considered so demeaning that when it happens to a man, it figuratively transform him into a woman." (Washington, 2009, p.33) What is so shocking and unbearable to Joe is accepted by Janie without any question. The fact is that she does not even notice its harm and danger to her subjectivity. When Joe forbids Janie to participate the men's porch talk, the fact that Janie is disappointed but can not tell whether it is because his attitude or the content of his words suggests that, as a woman without clear subjectivity, she can not realize the patriarchal fallacy. She can not step out her female position and go to the funeral with the town when Joe does not allow. "The carcass moved off with the town, and left Janie standing in the doorway." (Hurston, 1978, p.95) Janie, obviously lack of clear feminist consciousness, can only let her position decided by Joe. As is noted by Gates: Joe is not only the creator of Eatonville, but the creator of Janie. (Menke, 2009, p.65)

Some critics read Janie's final retort against Joe as her finding her voice. But that voice is too brief to help Janie establish her subjectivity although she "robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish" (Washington, 2009, p.34) However, "Speech does not lead Janie to power, but to self division and to further acquiescence in her status as object." (Washington, 2009, p.34) She only begins to observe herself: "one day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes." (Hurston, 1978, p.119) Half of Janie's split self still succumbs to patriarchal Joe, and the other half just sits there and observes, no action of any kind. And her observation does not reach any conscious realization as well.

If Janie's throwing away her head handkerchief can be read as freedom from the patriarchal bandage, this freedom is again very brief since "she took careful stack of herself, then combed her hair and tied it back up again.....then she starched and ironed her face, forming it into just what people wanted to see."(Hurston, 1978, p.135) After the brief liberation in private, she resumes to regard herself from the perspective of the patriarchal world. She is not courageous enough to be free in public and to go down the road.

Some critics read Teacake's taking Janie out of kitchen and into the fields as Janie's escape from the female position. But what we can not ignore is that Janie's going to the fields is to satisfy Teacake's wish of being always together with her. Janie just passively follows Teacake's wishes.

The writer also does not fully develop Janie voice even when Teacake allows her to chat at the porch. The narrator neither returns the narrating power to Janie nor describes the content of Janie's talk. The reader can not hear Janie's voice here and later when she begins to recall her life, her narrating voice is soon taken over by the narrator's voice. Janie's feminist consciousness is still too vague to have the discourse power and to have herself heard.

IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Janie's determined and consistent ignorance of racial spatial division implies her weak black identification, the horrible damage done by racism. Her vague and brief feminist consciousness suggests the brainwash of patriarchy is so successful that it is very hard to eliminate. Hence the novel can be said to be a more successful work of racial and sexual politics than those with protesting blacks/females as heroes and heroines. No protesting does not mean no political position. Exposing is the first and also very important step. We need heroes and protests to show racial and sexual politics. We also need Uncle Tom, the submissive oppressed images to awaken more sleepers because the later is the more common reality of the subaltern.

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