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CONTEXTUALIZING THE PASTORAL IN AFRO-AMERICAN FOLK CULTURE: A STUDY OF  
ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

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**ABSTRACT**

Zora Neale Hurston is the first to discover and identify the wisdom and language buried in the black folklore of black culture. She shows a great regard for her Black folk culture. She uses her knowledge of her folklore not only to liberate women from racial and gender oppression but also inculcates a sense of ethnic pride in her people. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston infuses the empowering aspects, of traditional African and Afro- American's folk culture and pastoral, as these are very closely interrelated. Folk culture derives its rootedness from the pastoral. This novel reveals the priceless moral wisdom inherent in the experiences of uneducated rural southern women. A close reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* offers an insight into the dynamics of black folk communities, their spiritual and oral traditions through which the members of the community express them. Afro-American culture is the product of adaptation and combination; there is no single African heritage to be found in Afro-American folkways. The objective of this paper is to bring out the function of folk pride and pastoral as reflected in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in empowering oppressed people. One can understand from the novel that Afro- Americans, though economically poor, but have a rich folk heritage and pastoral ethics. In this novel, Hurston has demonstrated the strength of her folk culture in pastoral setting. Folklores and strong pastoral values keep the Afro-American hopes alive and help them survive and escape even slavery. Blending her anthropological training and literary power she has reiterated her belief in the pastoral life values and established the priceless value of Afro-American folk culture. She asserts that Blacks could survive independent of white society with their asset of both pastoral and folklores. The novel focuses primarily on representations of nature and treatment of pastoral. Her pastoral setting is thus an evidence of black people's survivability in America. This paper is aimed at exploring the attempts made by Hurston through (re) envisioning the pastoral in her novel by retrieving pastoral ethics and cultural heritage, which the mainstream culture has overlooked and even tried to neglect as irrelevant to the larger national experience.

**Keywords:** folklore, culture, pastoral, nature, landscape.

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Zora Neale Hurston, an American anthropologist, a great folklorist and writer, is well known as an initiator among Afro-American female writers for representing potential aspects of black life. She was not at all interested in introducing "sociological jeremiad" (Every Tub 68) in her writings. Through her writings she motivated Afro-Americans to value their folklore and foreground the pastoral life values in order to overcome the painful experience of enslavement to sustain their essential selves.

She uses pastoral elements in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (first published in 1937), for retaining cultural values and its rich heritage as well as legacy. According to Cuddon, "Pastoral" in a broad sense is a genre in the mainstream English literature characteristically representative of "nostalgia for the past," "some hypothetical state of love and peace" which is now missing. What comprises the principal theme of almost all pastoral is the quest for "simple life" which is distant from life of the court and the city, or from "corruption, war, strife, the love of gain," earning and "spending." Pastoral is also nostalgic of the innocence of man's prelapsarian life and "harmony with nature" (490). In fact in Afro-American scenario "Pastoral" is a harmonic blend of nature and culture in addition to urban and rural.

In contrast to the mainstream nature-culture divide, Afro-African literature can be read for the culture in nature as well as nature in culture. In the novel, Hurston focuses on Pastoral elements which are a combination of cultural and spiritual values of Afro-Americans by describing how they sustain their origin, roots and identity through their relatedness with nature. She celebrates wilderness which often served as a refuge to slaves for escaping from plantations or as a meeting place for relatives and families where experiences of duress could be shared and passed along. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* likewise deals with how human communities connect within the southern landscapes. Her primary landscape and countryside is the "Glades" of Florida. Hurston believes that pastoral exists, not only in the traditional locations of farms, plantations, or country estates, but in the wilderness and frontier settlements of North Florida also.

In choosing a pastoral retreat into the sparsely populated Florida scrub, Hurston undertakes a critical revision in the novel of the traditional pastoral mode itself, replacing the garden of the cultivated pastoral with a wilderness exhibiting values of interdependence, cooperation, and egalitarianism. In the Southern pastoral tradition, the land inside the boundaries of the plantation is figured as the ideal middle state, a balance between the howling wilderness and the effete city that provides a stable and static refuge from the chaos of time and the outside world. The act of fencing, particularly in the pastoral tradition, helps man to symbolically domesticate land and nature by delineating boundaries and imposing a sense of order on previously "wild" terrain. It is usually assumed that in the pastoral literary genre celebration of rural provides a structural framework for exploring further binaries. Hurston, however, repeatedly shows us the double nature of fencing: fences disrupt an existing order while signaling the creation of a new order that threatens the wildness of the scrub, as well as the communal values of its inhabitants. The fences symbolize the modern society that Hurston seeks to escape, and their encroachment into the virtually uninhabited scrub region of north central Florida entails, in her view, the threat of subjugation for nature and women alike.

Hurston born in Alabama, in the first year or two of her life, her family moved to Eatonville, Florida, a small black community near Orlando. This community shaped her life and her writing. She writes, "I've got the map of Florida on my tongue." She is so much proud of her heritage as a black Floridian, she claims she born in Eatonville. Though Hurston left Eatonville, Florida, as a teenager, she returned there again and again in her fictions.

Hurston's move to Florida was a kind of Pastoral retreat, in that it offered her a sense of liberation from their personal roles and relations she had in the North. It also provided her a chance to re-examine gender norms and conventions, among other things, through her writings on Florida. The South was arguably known for the most rigid gender norms in addition to its racial ideologies, but the liberating aspect of the Pastoral setting vis-à-vis Afro-American culture encouraged them to investigate the way to think and act outside such norms and critique them through their personal lives and their writings.

Hurston upholds Afro-American folk culture as a treasure trove of values. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is decisively rooted in the black southern pastoral and folk world. She is the only key writer of the Harlem literary movement to carry out a structured study of Afro-American folklore. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she describes her black identity as a consequent of African heritage, since her childhood in Eatonville, Hurston was nurtured by vibrant, figurative storytelling, and Hurston's folk pride is very well documented in her portrayal of Eatonville in almost all novels. She observed this little black hamlet as a haven in the race biased US. Her characters experienced tranquility and prosperity only at Eatonville.

Hurston represents the uninhabited Florida scrub country as something of an idealized pastoral realm free from many of the complications of the civilized world. She is always aware of the deceptive nature of the pastoral ideal of the middle state as an apparently harmonic balance between nature and culture. Her pastoral settings in the novel are gifted with many of the characteristics of the middle state, but Hurston seems constantly troubled by the binary formula of traditional literary pastoralism. Hurston in her pastoral setting has Janus like face through which a person can look at both the sides. The ideal of a balanced middle ground presumes a fundamental opposition of culture and nature, a range with urban civilization at one end and unpopulated wilderness at the other. As feminist and ecofeminist critics have shown, it is precisely this type of dualism that results in the suppression of women (as well as, quite often, children and people of color) through their identification with the inferior position which nature is assigned by a dominant, masculine culture in the mainstream writing. Since the dualistic philosophy originates from the culture side of the equation, culture is always the privileged term, and any attempt at mediation, rather than bridging the nature/culture gap, merely strengthens it.

Zora Neale Hurston develops the boundary setting of rural Florida in such a way that highlights clashes between opposing forces. One such clash is between urban and rural lifestyle that was more noticeable in Florida than in other Southern states during the early twentieth century, mainly due to a substantial increase in the state's urban populace. Rural West Florida, Eatonville performs a major role in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

In the novel, Janie Crawford Killicks Starks Woods is a beautiful and optimistic young loving black girl. Janie's journey begins at sixteen, when her dying grandmother marries her off to Logan Killicks, an older man with sixty acres, a mule, and a lump of fatback on his neck that Janie despises. Rebelling against Logan's attempts to turn her into a workhorse, Janie runs off with Joe Starks, a citified fellow with big dreams and a big voice. Joe marries Janie and takes her to Eatonville, where he soon becomes mayor, postmaster, and primary landowner. The kind of man with "uh throne in de seat of his pants," as one character puts it, Joe Starks is clearly modeled on Joe Clarke, the mayor of Eatonville during much of Hurston's childhood there. Cowed by Joe's chauvinism, Janie becomes "a rut in the road," as Hurston writes. But after Joe's death, the forty-year-old Janie falls in love with Tea Cake, a free-spirited laborer much younger than herself. Tea Cake is the character who introduces Janie to the "restorative power of folklore" (Paquet 499), and Tea Cake is the character who represents the timelessness of the ancestor. Through marrying Janie and allowing her to immerse herself in the rural folk culture as an independent being, he provides her with a special kind of wisdom. He is "benevolent, instructive, and protective" (Morrison 343), but he is not overprotective, overpowering, or oppressive.

The community of the muck restricts, heals and cures a person of the affects of the limiting dualisms of the dominant society with a synthetic lively system of relations where men and women dress alike, work together, and equally participate and perform in the singing, dancing, fighting and storytelling. 'Muck' represents and reflects the poor working class folk identity. Janie's third relationship is considerably set off against her former marriages. Like a true blues hero, Tea Cake is intensely rooted in traditional pastoral values and folk behavior. He not only loves Janie but also motivates her growth toward independence by teaching her skills, abilities and admiring her aptitudes. They precede a contented life not in the white dominated parts of America but in the Florida muck. Hence Hurston portrays the pastoral as a "black Eden" (Meisenhelder 70).

Through harsh domination, the Afro- American community endured because of its sturdy and strong folk culture. Proverbial expressions, story-telling, humor, music and dance, and voodoo and many other African rituals and traditions abound in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston can very well be called “a spiritual griot”. People on the muck show a strong appreciation to their rich culture. When they realize the imminent hurricane, they swiftly turn to the resources of their culture. They gather at Janie’s shack and tell stories about the tricks and pranks of Big John de Conquer. They also sing a song that comes from the dozens to the accompaniment of Tea Cake’s guitar:

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

Tea Cake performs the old courtship rituals, indulges in crap-shooting and razor fighting, and plays the dozens and the blues. Compared with Killicks and Starks, former husbands of Janie, Tea Cake prefers interaction and people to 'things': "So us goin' off somewhere and start all in Tea Cake's way. Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game" (171). In this pastoral setting, Janie regains and learns her voice to tell narratives. Janie feels free to join the notorious "lying" and tale-telling sessions whenever she wants to: "She got so, she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest" (200). Yet, even with Tea Cake, she has to face occasional crises and physical violence. S. Jay Walker has argued that Hurston betrays Janie's gradual resistance to traditional role stereotypes by confining her for a third time to the traditional pattern of the male-female relationship (519-520). Back in Eatonville, Janie does what might be regarded as the essential subtext of the whole book: she tells her story. This final emphasis on communication and community is representative not only of Hurston's positive attitude towards pastoral and Afro-American oral culture, but also of a frequently misunderstood narrative strategy: the merging of pastoral and literary-oral style.

Hurston has not only narrated the pastoral in this novel but she has also used the simple pastoral language of the South to keep her characters authentic and believable. The use of language or communication with other people especially women was a technique that Hurston implied to drag Janie out of solitude and into a deeper understanding of herself and the others. Thereby, Hurston has expressed how the culture manipulates language through which powering nation’ speech and muted spheres are constructed and country language of the nations is simple and enabling a person to voice her/herself.

The pastoral in the novel makes itself as imagery. In the novel, Hurston utilizes a pear-tree as icon for the female protagonist to recast the pastoral relation of women and nature as one of the active empowerment rather than passive subjugation. While this tree symbolically replicates the growth, energy and liveliness of Hurston’s heroine Janie, the habitat also has a content effect on the growth of energetic, dynamic and independent female identities. For Janie Starks, the oppressive limitations of man-made structures are eventually modified by the infinite opportunities of wild nature. Hurston thus adjusts qualities of independence, equality, and fluidity with the nature and suggests that these qualities are nurtured and developed by close contact with nature. Moreover, she attributes a relative racial and class harmony to these outpost communities, implying that engagement in nature can prevent artificial social divisions.

Trees, generally, are important symbols in Voodoo, often as signs of “the sexual and spiritual union of the primary male and female deities,”(Stein 64) and Hurston uses this concept of the union or consolidating of opposites in the pear tree of the novel that symbolizes Janie’s fight to the limiting racial and gender roles enforced upon her. Both unions destroy the gender oppositions normally associated with marriage, thereby providing the chance of a truly free collaboration contrary to Janie’s grandmother’s idea of marriage as a means to provide Janie with the security of property.

Like other Southern women authors of the early twentieth century, Hurston does not strongly abandon the association of women and nature, but replenishes that connection as empowering and active in contrast to the passive identification with the controlled nature of the pastoral garden. In the novel, one important way that Hurston imprints the pastoral ideal of the middle landscape is by incorporating elements of Afro-Caribbean Voodoo on which the pastoral myth depends that undermines the separation of humans and nature. Replacing the polarized groups of culture/nature, male/female, and subject/object with a more fluid, comparative, and interdependent model, Hurston envisions a more democratic society of communal values free from the belief of dominance that characterizes the masculine gaze on a feminized landscape of the male pastoral tradition. She also indicates in her best-known novel that the desirous values of white-dominated society encourages an alienating conception of nature as something distinctly "other" estranging people from a natural world regarded as little more than an amalgamation of commodities. No one can deny that Hurston creates a "working class pastoral model" that appropriates many traditional pastoral elements.

It is not surprising, that Hurston's knowledge of Voodoo creates an important impact in the novel, particularly on her perception of human relationships with nature. Hurston utilizes this Voodoo-influenced view of nature in the novel in order to challenge and modify the traditionally restricted and fixed gender and racial roles of the early twentieth-century white dominated south. Nature/woman is subordinated to culture/man in the traditional main-stream pastoral equation, and this resistance sets up males as the protectors of both the improved garden and the women of the plantation. Hurston's Voodoo-influenced perception of nature leads to her revision the male-dominated mainstream pastoral tradition in Southern literary works by placing her female protagonist within an active natural world and empowering her to protect herself.

In her characterization of Jody, Hurston pointedly adjusts him within white society and its focus on commodity, pitting him against the natural symbolism associated with Janie. Working for whites his entire life, Jody "had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de says o where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin' dis place dat colored folks was buildin' theirselves" (27). Eatonville appeals to Jody not as a place to run away from the injustices and stratification of white society, but as a place where he can finally occupy the top rung of the hierarchy himself. He swoops into town, and within six weeks he has bought five hundred acres of adjoining land to sell in parcels, organized the men to "chop out two roads" in the forest, had himself proclaimed mayor, and built a store in the middle of town. Read from the main ecological perspective, this is man's invasion on nature for acquiring the materialistic things.

Mary Helen Washington points out in her book that after seven years of marriage, Janie "wasn't petal-open anymore" (67) with her husband, showing her alienation from the empowering aspects of nature and from her own inner nature, as it were. Hurston, actually, cleverly unblends the descriptions of human nature (as in an individual's fundamental character) and Nature (as in the flora and fauna of the environment) that she joins in Janie's original pear-tree vision:

She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where petals used to be. She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them (68).

In this way, Hurston uses her folkloric voice in the novel to liberate black women from historically prejudiced stereotyping. She uses her folkloric feeling to subvert the dominant culture's belief regarding Afro-Americans. She contributes a point of gender to her politics of race by using the voice of the female folk teller to challenge negative assumptions of black women held by both black and white cultures. The Afro-American folk tradition, like any folk tradition, is by nature pastoral framing on the development and appearance of a group rather than an individual. Through their folk traditions, the blacks maintain connections with the nature and their past as they change over time. In such a way, Afro-Americans, through pastoral in addition to ancestral wisdom and folk practices available are passed on from one generation to another.

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