
Beyond the Tragic Mulatta: The Case of a New Negro Woman

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Received: 29/12/2024

Accepted: 26/03/2025

Published: 01/05/2025

Volume: 6 Issue: 3

How to cite this paper: Houshmand, M. (2025). Beyond the Tragic Mulatta: The Case of a New Negro Woman. *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, 6(3), 23-28

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46809/jcsll.v6i3.351>

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Abstract

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* presents a radical departure from the tragic mulatta trope in African American literature by centering a black feminist protagonist, Janie Crawford, who is neither defined by racial ambiguity nor constrained by the moral expectations imposed on middle-class black women of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Unlike her literary predecessors, Janie speaks in black vernacular, embraces her sexuality, and ultimately finds agency outside of marriage, despite the novel's exploration of love and relationships. This paper argues that Hurston's portrayal of Janie's three marriages illustrates a pessimistic view of black women's status within love and marriage, revealing that even true love cannot fully liberate them from patriarchal constraints. Through an analysis of Janie's relationships, this paper demonstrates how *Their Eyes Were Watching God* challenges intra-community sexism and critiques the internalization of white patriarchal values by black men. Additionally, it explores Hurston's literary innovations, particularly her use of black dialect and folklore, as an intervention against white literary standards and a foundation for later black feminist narratives. Hurston's use of black dialect and folklore functions not merely as a literary gesture, but as a deliberate political and aesthetic intervention. The black vernacular, often seen as non-literary or even "primitive" in dominant white and even black literary standards, becomes in Hurston's hands a medium of authenticity, resistance, and empowerment. By embedding Janie's voice within this dialect—particularly through her dialogues with other women and her defiance of male authority—Hurston decentralizes white linguistic norms and reclaims black southern oral traditions as legitimate literary forms. By foregrounding the singularity of Janie's experience, Hurston's novel marks a turning point in the representation of black women in literature, paving the way for subsequent authors like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison to further explore Black female autonomy and agency.

Keywords: Black Feminism, Black Female Experience, Intra-Community Sexism, Gynocentric Enclave, Black Women in Love and in Marriage

1. Introduction

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston crafted a black feminist character in Janie Crawford who was drastically different from her other black feminist predecessors such as Frances E. W. Harper's eponymous character, Iola Leroy, William Well Brown's eponymous protagonist, Clotel, Jessie Fauset's Laurentine Strange portrayed in *Chinaberry Tree*, and Nella Larsen's Helga Crane in *Quicksand*. While her predecessors and her feminist contemporaries tried to uplift the race through presenting beautiful upper-middle-class women who emulated white values such as virtue, status and education, Hurston's Janie was a lower middle-class black woman who spoke the black vernacular and who engaged in liberal, according to the norms of the time, sexual practices. And unlike the tragic mulatta image of her predecessors such as Iola Leroy, Janie was

a black woman with no mixed blood although she had light complexion like her predecessors. The novel paved the way for future bold portrayals of black feminist expression and activism such as Alice Walker's Celie in *The Color Purple* and more notably, Toni Morrison's *Sula* and even Sethe in *The Beloved*.

Hurston's feminist overtones can be analyzed through her protagonist's three relationships and marriages. This paper argues that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* presents a pessimistic account of black women in love and in marriage. It foregrounds black women's struggle to assert themselves in marriage. More importantly, it suggests an equally pessimistic account of black women's experience even when they find true love and fulfill it. Janie's romantic relationship with Tea Cake materialized love in the true sense for Janie, but even her relationship with Tea Cake limited her freedom and agency. The novel however ends in a positive overtone, with Janie achieving full agency despite her townspeople's gossip about the death of Tea Cake. Ironically, Hurston suggests that despite Janie finding true love, black women's mobility, freedom and expression only materializes without men. The paper will discuss each of Janie's three marriages and shows how black women's mobility and agency materializes in a non-male vacuum and in a gynocentric enclave although it encourages black women to experience an amorous relationship. The novel's departure from standard English for a literary expression also indirectly suggests that black feminist experience cannot achieve fulfillment following white feminist activism.

2. Literature Review

Intra-community sexism is one of the themes that this paper tries to delve into as it accounts for Janie's failure to find agency and self-expression in any of her marriages. Intra-community sexism is significant as it illustrates that men of color have very much the capability to buy into white patriarchal ideology, one of which is the view of women as chattel. Hooti and Mahmoudi's study on identity discordianism is relevant here since it accounts for behaviors and assumptions that make Tea Cake succumb to white patriarchal values. Egocentrism, as they put it, is a trait that has been institutionalized into men of color as a result of living under a white patriarchal system. Hooti and Mahmoudi posit, "20th and 21st Centuries have been the Ages of domination of egocentrism and flourishing insatiable enthusiasm of the authorities, latent under the counterfeit mask of sham realism, threatening the spiritually destroyed human essence" (2013). It is "the domination of egocentrism and flourishing insatiable enthusiasm of the authorities" that make men like Tea Cake have fears and aspirations to dominate. Despite Tea Cake's genuine and enduring love for Janie, he occasionally whips and beats Janie because of the egocentric values imposed on him as a result of 20th century politics which increasingly asks men to seek domination. Hooti and Mahmoudi's argument helps illuminate how Tea Cake's internalization of patriarchal egocentrism not only damages his relationship with Janie but also serves as a commentary on how systemic domination mutates within communities of color. Hurston does not excuse Tea Cake's violence; rather, she exposes the psychological toll that white patriarchy takes on black male identity.

Not only is this desire apparent in the characters of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but the actual life of Hurston herself shows that her literary career was underestimated and berated for the same desire in some of her contemporaries. For instance, Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez (2024) shed light on some of the motives that Hurston's literary critiques had in criticizing the use of folklore and black dialect in Hurston's work. By tying the backlash Hurston received to broader anxieties about authenticity and gender in black literary circles, their study underscores how Hurston's stylistic choices threatened established notions of respectability and intellectual authority. This paper also argues that Hurston used language as a means of unsettling literary and cultural hierarchies, especially those imposed on black women. Other scholars such as Larkin (2015) have also reflected on some of these views on Hurston such as her seeming indifference about systemic racism.

These views of Hurston's works can also be sought in male writers' view of women writers and readers as not being intellectually capable of writing complex and note-worthy works of literature. Anoosheh Ghaderi's scholarship notes how women have been associated with "libidinous sensibility" preventing them from doing complex intellectual thinking and intellectual production (2021). Andisheh Ghaderi and Anoosheh Ghaderi (2021) also explain that such portrayals of women "aim to control, shape, and discipline women". This domination is predominantly expressed through language (Ullah, 2021, p.62). Women do not want to be silent, but they are forced to do so because in the words of Ullah, "They are intentionally unheard and technically marginalized" (Ullah, 2019, p.66). This systemic silencing is directly confronted by Hurston's use of black vernacular, which asserts the presence and complexity of black female voices that have historically been denied narrative space. Ullah's concept of technical marginalization is thus answered by Hurston's speakerly text, where oral traditions and community speech patterns become vehicles of resistance and self-expression. In the case of black women, because they have been institutionalized to model themselves after white values and white norms, they sometimes engage in a process of self-denial (Houshmand, 2025). One of Hurston's qualities was that she was prolific about the condition of black women, not just black people in general. In other words, gender issues were as important to her as race issues. Therefore, she was never silent about how black women had to forget about their own problems to only focus on black men's problems. Scholars such as Amir Barati (2021) have pointed to the possibility for these subjugated female bodies to revolt and to assert their voice. For Barati, "the introduction of a gynocentric linguistic intervention" is crucial for women to reassert themselves. Hurston is one of the authors who has done a great deal towards creating "a gynocentric linguistic intervention".

One must note here that the desire to put women of color and women in their place was not an outcome of the past two centuries as the above paragraphs might suggest. Hamidizadeh et al (2018), trace modernity's quest for domination and suppressing women in the Renaissance. As an example, they show that in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the author equates Eve with

Satan (p.33). Shahin Ghazaei et al (2023) also point to the female body as “the center of devising horror, eroticism, and pain” (p.362).

Their Eyes Were Watching God is an attempt by Hurston to emphatically show to the black male writers of the Harlem Renaissance that feminist concerns were as fundamental to black survival as racism. In the context of the Harlem Renaissance, all male black writers of the day tried to highlight the New Negro issues in their fiction and the New Negro was certainly a New Negro man, not a woman. Therefore, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston focused on the New Negro woman by showing that the New Negro woman, like the Old Negro woman and the Ancient Negro woman, suffered from a patriarchal bondage. Like Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is “a narrative of the enslavement of the female body and soul in a wasteland of patriarchal dominance” (Poorghorban and Ghaderi, 2022).

While previous scholarship has extensively examined Hurston’s linguistic and feminist innovations, few have interrogated the novel’s underlying pessimism about love and marriage. This paper contributes to the field by highlighting how Hurston uniquely positions black women’s agency within a world where even true love cannot guarantee freedom. This paper also endeavors to illustrate that there is a before and after following the publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* regarding the depiction of black female condition in literature. I will argue that the 19th-century black novelists and early 20th-century contemporaries of Hurston equated the experience of black women with white women to their detriment. Hurston was the first to singularize the experience of the black woman.

3. Black Women’s “de Mule uh de World” Status in Marriage

Their Eyes Were Watching God presents the black female experience as totally different from white women although their property status in marriage might overlap. When Nanny decides to force Janie into marrying Logan Killicks, she muses:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin’ fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd! (Hurston, 1937, p.17)

From the onset of the novel, Hurston recalls her readers how the black female experience is radically different from the white female experience. Both Nanny and Leafy, Janie’s mother, are raped without any impunity for the white perpetrators. Nanny was raped by her master when she was a slave and Leafy was raped by the Schoolteacher, who is also a character in Morrison’s *Beloved*. Etedali Rezapoorian (2024) points to the contradictory image of blacks as both the brute savages and as docile Toms resulting from white racial amnesia and cognitive dissonance. Etedali Rezapoorian calls for “A critical reassessment of racial representations in media and literature” (2024, p.130). His plea is significant because these damaging representations have affected educational curricula. It is important that these representations be highlighted and seriously reconfigured in order to achieve “an equitable society” (ibid). Hurston reminds the white audience that the image of the savage blacks is not true in so far as it is the black people who are the actual victims of raping and lynching. In *Beloved* too, the schoolteacher is the sadistic master who rapes and tortures Sethe. The black woman is forced into marriage despite black men’s failure to “tote it”. The black women’s contradictory image as the mule of the world having to bear the burden of black men and the sham protection that marriage with a black man provides is central to the novel.

The image of the black woman in marriage takes three distinct shapes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but all three distinct shapes have a similar ending for the black woman: bondage. Janie’s marriage to Logan Killicks transfers Janie from the sexual freedom that she temporarily experienced under the pear tree into a “de mule uh de world” status that her Nanny very much thought she could avoid through marriage. He only wants her to work like a mule and he expects her to worship her. Her status as “de mule uh de world” parallels Delia Jones’s situation in *Sweat*, a short story that is a precursor to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* since it portrays a relationship that resembles Janie’s first two marriages. Just the very first lines of the story begin with the mule image in marriage:

It was eleven o’clock of a Spring night in Florida. It was Sunday. Any other night, Delia Jones would have been in bed for two hours by this time. But she was a wash-woman, and Monday morning meant a great deal to her. So she collected the soiled clothes on Saturday when she returned the clean things. Sunday night after church, she sorted them and put the white things to soak. It saved her almost a half day’s start. A great hamper in the bedroom held the clothes that she brought home. It was so much neater than a number of bundles lying around. (Hurston, 1926, p.1)

Both Delia’s marriage to Sykes and Janie’s marriage to Logan transform them from moments, though transient, of freedom and agency that the pear tree scene in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* provides.

Throughout the novel, the image of horizon fascinates Janie as it symbolizes freedom and endless possibility. For example, when Janie meets Jody, she likes him because “He spoke for far horizon” (Hurston, 1937, p.35). Throughout the novel, the horizon stands for Janie’s desire for freedom and finding her voice. Her voice was quashed by Logan, but Jody offers her the horizon although he fails to fulfil his promise. But he also offers her power and status and Janie, deprived of both, gives in to temptation. Therefore, the marriage with Jody is fulfillment of love although it ends tragically. Jody is between Logan and Tea Cake. He has the wealth and status of Logan, but also has the charm of Tea Cake. This symbolic role of the horizon helps chart

Janie's emotional and ideological journey as she learns that freedom cannot be bestowed externally but must be claimed on her own terms.

Janie must take this journey to understand that the power offered through a vessel, Jody, cannot be relied on because it would turn out to be another version of bondage. Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez (2024) talk about sexism among the blacks, arguing that the black's status as marginalized does not signify that black men cannot be oppressors. This insight into racialized patriarchy deepens the understanding of Janie's struggle, as her voice and agency are systematically stifled not only by white structures but within her own community. Jody's hunger for power and her willingness to transform Janie into an apparatus for his ends, although he gives her expensive clothes to wear, indicate that men of color can indeed internalize white patriarchy:

Jody is an exemplar of a man of color that can easily metamorphose into a sexist and authoritative figure whose norms have been imposed by white supremacy. He gives life to the misogynist values defined by the white western ideology and shows that any man, no matter how marginalized, colored, or oppressed, can equal and even surpass white supremacist notions of male superiority. (Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez, 2024, p.114)

Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez argue that Morrison's mission was to "rehumanize the African-American community, since it shows the bright and dark sides of a community subjected to a Black and white epistemology imposed by white supremacy" (ibid). Hurston's literary dexterity manifests itself, according to Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez, through indicating a human version of blacks, both capable of good and bad, just like the rest of humans.

Initially, Janie gives in to Jody's pursuance of power; for example, she remains silent when Jody prevents her from making a speech for the townspeople. At this point, Janie accepts the passive role of a woman who acquiesces to her husband's orders even though he sometimes beats her. Although from the onset, Janie's quest for a voice is a predominant theme, she accepts to quash her voice in her relationship with Jody because she thinks that the suppression will ultimately bring her power and status: things that she, Leafy and Nanny never had. Ultimately, she realizes that being a vassal to power and status will never bring her actual power.

Even in Jody's final moments before his death, he asks her to "shut up" (Hurston, 1937, p.103). He wants to die with Janie not finding her voice, but Janie realizes that her dream of power and status with Jody was fake and she rebels and yells. After Jody's death, Janie unties her rag which prevented her long beautiful hair from flowing smoothly. In the African American literary tradition, a black woman's hair always symbolizes beauty, youth and vibrancy. She also finds for the first time her voice which had been quashed under Jody's domineering authority. She yells to the townspeople to announce her husband's death.

In Logan, one can see an unconsummated love; in Jody, the reader can find a love consummated, but not lasting; a love, consummated but sullied and besmirched. In Tea Cake, readers can see a love consummated and enduring; Although the relationship is full of peaks and troughs, the love remains intact and Janie for the first time finds her voice. However, even though Tea Cake loves her, he occasionally beats her because "it relieved that awful fear inside him" (Hurston, 1937, p.172). That awful fear was his fear of losing control over her; this is the fear that will ultimately make Janie realize that she can never find the blossoming freedom she found under the pear tree.

4. The Singularity of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The Black feminist experience depicted in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is distinct from previous attempts because in Janie Crawford we have a black woman who although light-skinned belongs to the working poor. She does not represent traditional feminine values such as virtue and other values of higher society. Barbara Christian (1980) explains that Hurston's 19th-century predecessors and her 20th-century contemporaries portray middle-class mulattas who urge their female communities to emulate white moral values such as virtue and obedience to their husband. In the description of Harper's *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, Christian states:

Iola Leroy, *Shadows Uplifted* describes the rise of a black middle class headed by mulattoes who feel the grave responsibility of defining for the black race what is best for it, who work within the context of moral Christian ethics, and whose faith in the country and its culture enables them to be conservative in all matters except race. Harper, then, responded to charges that the Negro is and always will be a degenerate by idealizing this segment of the black community. At the center of this upward striving class is the mulatta, no longer tragic or melancholy but a source of light for those below and around her. (Christian, 1980, p.29)

In other words, Harper and Brown portray individuals who are the true manifestation of W.E.B. Du Bois' talented ten. The primary task of these novels is to uplift the race through portraying blacks as the equal of whites in matters important to high society such as literature, education, religion, ethics, etc. Christian notes how almost all of these protagonists, Janie Crawford included, are light-complexioned with long beautiful hair (Christian, 1980, p.40), but what sets Janie apart is that she is not an upper-middle-class black woman "with taste and refinement" (ibid), unlike the rest of her predecessors and contemporaries. Christian points to Jessi Fauset as a good example of a black female writer who herself came from an upper-middle-class background with excellent education at the best universities of the country, and her protagonists very much inherit this quality from her, but what is lacking in Fauset's novels is the inclusion of marginalized black female voices who could never afford such an education:

Fauset, however, seldom mentions the depressing conditions under which most turn-of-the-century blacks lived in her novels. Her fiction is peopled by characters who are "trying for a life of reason and culture," culture in this case being Western refinement. Her novels insist that the upper-middle-class Negro has the same values as the upper-

class white. This indeed may be true, and a presentation of upper-class Negro life is certainly interesting material for fiction. The problem with Fauset's novels is that she gives us this particular Negro exclusively and as the representative of what the race is capable of doing. "She records a class in order to praise a race." Her Negroes become apologists for the race, indicators of the heights of refinement blacks might attain, give the opportunity. (Christian, 1980, p.41-42)

The same is more or less true of Nella Larsen's novels, another notable figure in the context of the Harlem Renaissance. Brown's *Clotel*, Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree* are works primarily written for the white audience. Although we can say the same thing about *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—not a lot of black people were able to read at the time—Hurston's masterpiece has the potential to be read for large audiences of black people. Hurston was the precursor to Morrison and Walker in that all three wrote for a black audience. If the white audience enjoyed their work, they would not object, but they were primarily written for a black audience. This holds true despite the fact that Hurston received white patronage and had to adjust her fiction according to her patrons' whims.

Another thing that sets Hurston and her novel apart from other black feminist works is her use of language. Brown, Harper, Fauset and Larsen did not use the black vernacular because in keeping with the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, they eschewed using the black vernacular since it was reminiscent of primitive overtones that blacks were associated with. It was also reminiscent of the black minstrel shows which portrayed blacks as infantile and not intelligent enough (Etedali Rezapoorian and Sanchez, 2024, p.102). However, Hurston, primarily writing for a black audience, did not care much about what the white audience thought; Moreover, being an anthropologist and folklorist, she had a fascination with southern folklore which made her bear the brunt of her critics' sharp criticism. Had it not been for Alice Walker's activist and scholarly endeavors, she had been completely assigned to oblivion.

Zora Neale Hurston's life itself is testimony to her quest for finding her voice. Like her protagonist Janie who finally asserted her, Hurston never refrained from hiding her thoughts although it irked other literary personalities' sensibilities. She was continually criticized for her political conservatism and impropriety, but she did not try to sugarcoat her feelings, much in the same way as her protagonist, Janie, who shouted to Jody, "Ah ain't goin' outa here and Ah ain't gointuh hush" (Hurston, 1937, p.102).

5. Conclusion

Through Janie Crawford, Hurston for the first time in the history of African American literature crafted a protagonist who did not come from a high-culture background. Moreover, her use of black dialect and folklore set a trend for future attempts to cherish blackness and black language and defied norms calling for writing in Standard English. Her subject matters, set in rural south emboldened future authors to avoid writing for a white gaze. Janie's liberated sexuality and quest for agency and voice distinguished her, although not in her lifetime, as one of the first black feminist activists who chose black lives as the subject of her fiction. Black feminist experience takes a totally different shape in Hurston's work since it calls for an independence for black women not rooted in marriage. Janie's marriages tell the coming-of-age of a woman who realizes that even true love does not prevent her from being subordinate and being put in her place. Although pessimistic about the nature of marriage, the novel has a positive ending as it portrays a newly-emerged black woman whose voice cannot be quelled by a male intervention.

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