

THE “UNHOMED” IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S “THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD”

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Abstract. Many critics argue that Zora Neale Hurston overlooks racism in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This paper, however, discloses racial discrimination in this novel. Indeed, creating “unhomed” characters, Hurston dramatises African American agony. Dispossessed of her own body, Mrs Turner flounders in a dark skin that she endeavours to shed. Helplessly, Janie vacillates in-between two conflicting affinities. Starks is a prisoner within the confines of whites’ premises. Moreover, racial biases ostracise blacks on the muck. Voices of hostility break the silence of death and ruthlessly uproot the “unboxed” black corpses. From a postcolonial vantage point, this article explores racialism. Mainly, it relies on Homi Bhabha’s concept of homelessness or “cultural estrangement.” Where Bhabha differentiates between “unhomed and homeless”, this study delineates their overlap in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston deliberately links cultural alienation with spatial “deprivation” in order to better articulate Blacks’ torments.

Keywords: racism, homelessness, unhomely, unhomed, homeless, alienation

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston depicts the hardships of Janie Crawford’s life. Compelled to marry Logan Killicks, and unable to cope with him, she elopes with Joe Starks (Jody). The latter, promises to “treat her like a lady” “Ah'm uh man wid principles. You ain't never knowed what it was to be treated lak a lady and Ah wants to be de one tuh show yuh” (Hurston 1998, 29). But he would not after their marriage. Despite his material prosperity, the founder of Eatonville, its mayor, the owner of the store, he also illtreats Janie. Because of his jealousy, he obliges her to tie her hair and to veil it. Moreover, he isolates his wife from the

community in which she lives and utterly silences her voice. This self-centered behaviour pervades their conjugal relationship. Thus, the wealthy husband harshly objectifies Janie who merely becomes another possession that he (the owner) acquisitively manipulates. The death of Jody eventually liberates Janie. Hopefully, she finds her true love, Tea Cake, the third husband. However, the latter “is driven mad by rabies after being bitten by a dog during a hurricane, and Janie shoots him in self-defense” (Bloom 2009, 18). Tragic is the end and lamentable becomes Janie’s situation. The black society ruthlessly judges her as a culpable wife and finally the White court acquits her of murder.

Briefly, this novel dramatises Janie Crawford’s vain search for love. Many critics have approached it from a feminist perspective. They argue that Hurston maps Janie’s journey of “self-exploration” as a woman subordinated to gender biases. Two main strands inform these explanations. For instance, Mary Helen Washington in her article “Hurston’s Failure to Create a Genuinely Liberated Female Voice” argues:

And while feminists have been eager to seize upon this text as an expression of female power, I think it is a novel that represents women’s exclusion from power, particularly from the power of oral speech...Janie at least resists her first husband, Logan, but once Jody takes her to Eatonville, he controls her life as well as the narrative. He buys the land, builds the town, makes Janie tie up her hair, and prescribes her relationship with the rest of the town. We know that Hurston means for Janie to free herself from male domination, but Hurston’s language, as much as Jody’s behavior, signifies Janie’s status as an object. (Washington 2009, 33)

Barbara Johnson, equally, observes that Hurston creates a conflictive female character. She asserts: “She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (as cited in Washington 2009, 36). A lot of feminists, however, think that Hurston deftly delineates the metamorphosis of Janie from “an object to a subject.” She refuses to be the “field-hand” of Killicks, restores her voice and challenges Jody after many years of surrender

to his authority. Victorious is Janie when she unties her hair and breaks free from the shackles of her second husband after his death. Childless, she challenges her very biological nature and subverts gender stereotypes.

Other critics claim that Hurston chiefly underlines the intra-racial black conflict. For instance, the three marriages of Janie display gender clashes in the same ethnic group. Equally, Mrs. Turner's vehement distrust of blacks, Jody's condescendence in Eatonville, "the coloured town," and his envious neighbours illustrate antagonisms within the same African American community. Furthermore, Zora Neale Hurston was severely criticized for overlooking the tension between Whites and Blacks. Paul Rosenblatt argues: "One novel that says almost nothing about racism is Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*...In the dialogue of the characters, racism is a minor irritant concern...white people are almost absent from the novel, and racism is scarcely mentioned" (Rosenblatt 2016, 14). He also contends: "When *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published, some African American reviewers criticized it 'for ignoring the harmful effects of racism'" (Rosenblatt 2016, 14). Besides, Richard King pinpoints to Richard Wright's "hostility to the work of Zora Neale Hurston" (King R. 2004, 233) and explains: "By allegedly imparting to her readers a stage version of black vitality and sensuality, Wright suggested, Hurston was traducing the pain of black life" (King R. 2004, 233).

Janie, the protagonist is a "mulatto" the fruit of her mother's rape by a white teacher. The mother herself was the offspring of Nanny's (Janie's grandmother) violation when she was a slave. Hurston intentionally duplicates and stresses whites' perpetrated assaults. By no means thus does she disregard racial discrimination. Presumably she articulates blacks' agony differently. Based on Homi Bhabha's concept of unhomeliness, "or cultural displacement" this paper deals with racism in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Bhabha argues that to be unhomed is not to be homeless (Bhabha 1994, 9). He expounds this idea: "In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, the private and

the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (Bhabha 1994, 9). However, the “unhomed” and the homeless intersect in this study that spatially scrutinises Hurston’s characters, Mrs. Turner, Janie, Joe Starks and blacks on the muck.

Mrs. Turner expresses:

Tain't de poorness, it's de color and de features...Who wants to be mixed up wid uh rusty black man... Don't bring me no nigger doctor tali hang over mah sick-bed. Ah done had six chillun—wuzn't lucky enough tuh raise but dat one—and ain't never had uh nigger tuh even feel mah pulse. White doctors always gits mah money. Ah don't go in no nigger store rah buy nothin' neither. Colored folks don't know nothin' 'bout no business. Deliver me! (Hurston 1998, 141)

Mrs. Turner totally dissociates herself from her ethnic group. Even when she is ill, she refuses to be treated by a black doctor. She links sickness and rustiness, suggestive of decay to blacks but equates whites “the white doctor” with healing. Obviously, the black body diseases Mrs. Turner. In fact, she identifies with the whites and rejects the very corporeal entity that binds her to the black community: “Look at me! Ah ain't got no flat nose and liver lips. Ah'm uh featured woman. Ah got white folks' features in mah face.” (Hurston 1998, 142) She envisions herself in terms of white physical traits. But, she cannot “penetrate” the white race and contests: “Still and all Ah got tuh be lumped in wid all de rest It ain't fair. Even if dey don't take us in wid de whites, dey oughta make us uh class tuh ourselves.” (Hurston 1998, 142). Thus “Mrs. Turner symbolizes racial self-hatred, as she holds great contempt for darker skinned blacks” (Jones 2009, 191). This reaction, undoubtedly, reflects a serious crisis of identity emanating chiefly from the “hybrid” body trapped in between the black race and the white gaze. This experience exemplifies the concept of twoness that W.E.B Du Bois explains as follows:

...the Negro is ...born with a veil...It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of

others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body... (as cited in Watson 2013)

Likewise, Mrs. Turner sees herself from the whites' standpoint, and repugnantly rejects her own body, the first threshold that underpins her existence in the world, in space. As a result, she would not belong to any place per se, vacillating between two polarities and reaching neither. Dispossessed of her own body, she is "unhomely." As maintained by Homi Bhabha, unhomeliness "is not a question of being "homeless," Bhabha makes clear, "but a question of being outside of 'home' of being forced to negotiate one's place in the world."

Furthermore, according to John Lowe, Janie Crawford echoes Janus. He argues: "Hurston provides obvious references to Janus throughout *Their Eyes*. Janie repeatedly gets associated with doors, thresholds, gates, and gateposts..." (Lowe 2008, 76). He adds: "And Janie begins her story by deciding 'her conscious life had commenced at Nanny's gate'" (Lowe 2008, 76). Lowe also explains:

She must have seen the intersection of the actual road and the cosmic horizon and related it to her internal dreams. Tea Cake several times tells Janie she has "the keys to the kingdom," reminding us of the black woman's role as gatekeeper (...) (Lowe 2008, 76)

One shall add that this mythological connection discloses also Janie's Janus-faced nature. The latter invokes the imagery of the two opposed faces: White Janie and Black Janie. This experience better materialises with Janie the child who cannot figure out that she is coloured until she is six years old:

So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with longhair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, 'where is me? Ah don't see me.' (Hurston 1998, 9)

The ambivalent situation Janie confronts seems to be the natural sequel of hybridity thus elucidated by Homi Bhabha:

Homi Bhabha defined hybridity as the condition of identity of persons who live between colonial pasts and postcolonial presents. Bhabha identifies three spaces along which a postcolonial identity may be understood. The first space is identification with the colonizer. The second space is identification with the colonized. The third space is where a postcolonial identity resides because the postcolonial identifies with yet feels outside of first and second space identifications, thereby residing in an in-between or liminal third space. (Jackson and Hogg 2010, 845)

Similarly, Janie cannot disentangle herself from the third space of in-betweenness. Throughout the novel she keeps moving around gates: “went on down to the front gate”, (Hurston 1998, 11), “she began to stand around the gate and expect things,” (Hurston 1998, 25) “Janie hurried out of the front gate” (Hurston 1998, 32). The gate exemplifies the state of indeterminacy being inside/outside at the same time. A mulatto, she bounces between two races, the black and white but cannot identify with a particular ethnic group. Pertinently, the gate relates to the periphery and foregrounds Janie’s marginalisation. Her childhood reminiscence discussed previously better illustrates her plight or crisis of identity. Thus the gate, the liminal space shows Janie’s unhomeliness “feeling that one has no cultural ‘home,’ or sense of cultural belonging.” (Tyson 2006, 427)

In addition, Joe Starks keeps amassing material possessions. He is the prosperous entrepreneur, the establisher of Eatonville, its mayor, and more importantly the owner of the “big house” envied by the black community. Despite his accumulated properties, he remains “culturally bankrupt” and unhomely. Hurston transcribes the dilemma of Jody spatially. The triad of Eatonville, the big house and the bed entangles him and reflects his displacement.

Thus, Starks envisions Eatonville:

But when he heard all about 'em makin' a town all outa colored folks, he knowed dat was de place he wanted to be. He had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere

else, exceptin' displace dat colored folks was buildin' theirselves. Dat was right too. De man dat built things oughta boss it. Let colored folks build things too if dey wants to crow over somethin'. He was glad he had his money all saved up. He meant to git dere whilst de town wuz yet a baby. He meant to buy in big. It had always been his Wish and desire to be a big voice and he had to live nearly thirty years to find a chance. (Hurston 1998, 28)

Affectionately, he relates to his town. For him, the “baby town” connotes rebirth. Redolent of parturition, the baby picture evokes maternal ties and departs from patriarchal rigidity. Likewise, Eatonville detaches itself from the patronising white dominion. Homogeneous, it embraces only the black community without the interference of white rules and restraints. Purely black, it totally breaks with the colonial past, its financial control and symbolises emancipation. Equally, it illustrates territorialisation. This black spatial expansion according to Starks is inseparable from the big or loud voice. The new town as a result undoes a history of “silenced” blackness and inaugurates a new era of black liberation. But the freed territory and the autonomous present rapidly fade and Jody remains “unhomely.” Bhabha asserts that “Unhomeliness is when you feel estranged, you do not belong...at home but you are not home.” In fact, the black newly founded “fortification” does not reassure Jody. Destabilised, he keeps looking for White pillars that sustain his edifice. Alienated, he builds a house that loosens the ties with the black present and replicates the White manners.

Zora Neale Hurston depicts the big house of Starks:

Take for instance that new house of his. It had two stories with porches, with bannisters and such things. The rest of the town looked like servants' quarters surrounding the "big house." And different from everybody else in the town he put off moving in until it had been painted, in and out. And look at the way he painted it—a gloaty, sparkly white. The kind of promenading white that the houses of Bishop Whipple, W. B. Jackson and the Vanderpool's wore. It made the village feel funny talking to him— just like he was anybody else. Then there was the matter of the spittoons. No sooner was he all set as the Mayor—post master landlord—storekeeper, than he bought a desk like Mr. Hill or Mr. Galloway over in Maitland with one of those swing-around chairs to it. What with him biting down on cigars and saving his breath on talk and

swinging round in that chair, it weakened people. And then he spit in that gold-looking vase that anybody else would have been glad to put on their front-room table. Said it was a spit toon just like his used-to-be bossman used to have in his bank up there in Atlanta. Didn't have to get up and go to the door every time he had to spit. (Hurston 1998, 47)

A white mould underpins the building, displayed in the white paint coating it. Jody fails to be really the master of house. The latter is haunted by his bosses whose names reverberate in this extract: “Bishop Whipple, W.B Jackson...Mr. Galloway.” Starks cannot cut off from the past and yieldingly reproduces the habits of his white masters: “the cigar, the spittoon, the swing-around chair.” Using postcolonial terms, this demeanour reveals the phenomenon of mimicry which “involves not only the laborious attempt to be accepted by a culture different from the one into which one was born but a simultaneous attempt to rid oneself of everything one has identified as other than that culture.” (Tyson 2006, 440) Suggestively the rocking chair that Jody owns indicates his destabilised position. Rocking back and forth, he oscillates between the colonial past and the black present. This unsteadiness bespeaks the psychological conundrum that he lives: the founder of the colored free town but simultaneously the imitator of the white master and the dweller of the white abode.

Eatonville and Joe's big house epitomise spatial expansion. Deliberately, Hurston entwines the large place with alienation “not belonging.” In this manner, she concretises the idea of unhomeliness. Accentuating the bitterness of this feeling “estrangement,” Hurston associates Joe's death throes with his “unhomed” situation condensed spatially in the image of the “bed.” She writes: “A sort of changing look on his face. Weak-looking but sharp-pointed about the eyes. Through the thin counterpane she could see what was left of his belly huddled before him on the bed like some helpless thing seeking shelter” (Hurston 1998, 85). The weakened state of Joe underlies this passage. The simile “like some helpless thing seeking shelter” shatters the amplified image of the mayor. Hurston yokes the regress of Joe Starks to the thinness of

the counterpane, so much connotative of Jody as a “lightweight.” Moreover, the adjective “huddled” suggests contraction. Joe is shrinking, and this condition starkly opposes the “extending” owner of the “big house.” The transfiguration of Joe seems to be inextricable from the tiny and flattened space. In spatial terms, Hurston depicts the downfall of Joe, lying in bed; the posture itself expresses prostration. She compares him to a “shelterless” thing. Despite, the vastness of his buildings, he is unsheltered, “unhomely.”

Briefly, Starks is trapped in a dilemma. The duality of the black present and the white past cripples his free movement. He founds Eatonville, supposedly initiating a black present and culture. But he behaves as a “white inhabitant” within the premises of the colored town.

This feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither rather than to both, of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the cultural displacement within which one lives, is referred to by Homi Bhabha and others as unhomeliness. (Tyson 2006, 421)

Relevantly, John Lowe claims: “Janie and Tea Cake in their scenes on the muck, surrounded by their people and enjoying and creating black folk culture, best express what Alice Walker has called “racial health; a sense of black people as complete...undiminished human beings” (as cited in Lowe 2008, 97). Not only does the muck reflect the healthy communion of blacks but it exposes their displacement as well. This passage from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is worth noticing:

Day by day now, the hordes of workers poured in. Some came limping in with their shoes and sore feet from walking. It's hard trying to follow your shoe instead of your shoe following you. They came in wagons from way up in Georgia and they came in truck loads from east, west, north and south. Permanent transients with no attachments and tired looking men with their families and dogs in fevers. All night, all day, hurrying in to pick beans. Skillets, beds, patched up spare inner tubes all hanging and dangling from the ancient

cars on the outside and hopeful humanity, herded and hovered on the inside, chugging on to the muck. People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor. All night now the jooks clanged and clamored...The rich black earth clinging to bodies and biting the skin like ants....

Finally, no more sleeping places. Men made big fires and fifty or sixty men slept around each fire. But they had to pay the man whose land they slept on.

Thus, Hurston depicts the life of blacks on the muck. Importantly, the verb “hover” reflects their suspended state “dangling, with no attachments.” This very idea crystallises with the oxymoron “Permanent transients” that points out their enduring dislocation. Like nomads they keep wandering from one place to another. Unsheltered, they sleep around fires. Commonly, the fire connotes the warmth of abode but in this excerpt, it betokens the exposure to the outside threats. The bitten skin “biting the skin like ants” accentuates their vulnerability. Hence the transitory way of life alongside with the unroofed and unprotected space underscore mainly the homelessness of blacks. This condition itself associated with the herd, “the mass” implies disorientation and resembles the asylum seekers’ circumstances. Inextricable from poverty and ignorance, it equally symbolises cultural ostracization. Relevantly, Richard Wright contends: “Negroes have never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it ” (as cited in Ellison 2003, 59). Outcasts in their society, blacks are unhomed. According to Homi Bhabha: “To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak.” (Tyson 2006, 421)

Discrimination culminates in this scene.

Hey, dere, y'all! Don't dump dem bodies in de hole lak dat! Examine every last one of 'em and find out if they's white or black.

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

Got orders from headquarters. They makin' coffins fuh all de white folks. 'Tain't nothin' but cheap pine, but dat's better'n nothin'. Don't dump no white folks in de hole jus' so.

"Whut tuh do 'bout de colored folks? Got boxes fuh dem too?"

Nope. They cain't find enough of 'em tuh go 'round. Jus' sprinkle plenty quicklime over 'em and cover 'em up. (Hurston 1998, 170-171)

Blacks are doubly "victimised." The hurricane claims their lives. And their society ruthlessly "dislodges" their corpses. Strikingly, boxes are spared for white bodies only. "The white men have the workers separate the bodies according to color and save the white bodies for burial in a box, whereas the black bodies will be covered in a mass grave." (King S. 2008, 67) Indeed, the box however unsophisticated, made up of cheap pine wood synecdochically relates to funeral rituals and echoes the ceremonies of the civilized human society. On the contrary, the ditch in which corpses are collectively "dumped" figuratively evokes uncultured manners and seems to link blacks with a sense of primitivism. Indeed, the plosive sounds "b" and "p" in the verb "dump" imitate blacks' frenzy and agitation. Metaphorically, the "dumping ground" dissociates blacks from the solemn cemetery and disparages them again. The dichotomy of the barbarous Black and the refined White materialises.

Thus, Homi Bhabha explains this polarity of the enlightened colonizer and the backward colonized immanent to Western thought: "the black presence runs the representative narrative of Western personhood: its past tethered to treacherous stereotypes of primitivism and degeneracy will not produce a history of civil progress, a space for the *Socius*; its present, dismembered and dislocated...the white man's eyes break up the black man's body." (Bhabha 1994, 42) More accurately here, the white guards splinter the black corpse when they segregate it. The quicklime sprinkled over the dead bodies, the white layer, hints at the white discriminatory colonial ideology that grounds cultural and spatial division or separatism. It is worth adding that Homi Bhabha links unhomeliness to colonisation "the unhomely is a paradigmatic

colonial and postcolonial condition” (Bhabha 1994, 9). The coffin in short stands for the impenetrable white area. Unhomely are alienated blacks overdrawn in the “evicted” corpses that are not allowed to encroach upon the white territory. “Homi Bhabha terms those moments where the foreign is recognized as intruding into the domestic as ‘unhomely.’” (Lydon 2020, 101)

To conclude, Mrs. Turner is dispossessed of her own body, the first mediator of spatial experience. Around gates, in between the inside and outside, Janie keeps moving. This positioning reflects the hybrid affinities engulfing her. The white legacy fetters Starks and his edifice “the big house” however expansive flounders. Unroofed, the laborers on the muck suffer from marginalisation. Astoundingly, black corpses are not immune to racial segregation. Heartlessly, the guards “evict” them from the white space. Homeless, divested of the warm abode, Hurston’s characters are equally “unhomed” or unhomely, they face the cruelty of racial discrimination and “cultural alienation.” But eventually, the gloomy mood of racism climaxing in the burial scene seems to change. A watershed in the novel the following excerpt undoes the spatial configuration of unhomeliness, the dispossessed body, liminality, displacement and disorientation. Visionary, it foreshadows a new space for blacks, and restores their undeniable place. Hurston expresses:

She had given away everything in their little house except a package of garden seed that Tea Cake had bought to plant. The planting never got done because he had been waiting for the right time of the moon when his sickness overtook him. The seeds reminded Janie of Tea Cake more than anything else because he was always planting things. She had noticed them on the kitchen shelf when she came home from the funeral and had put them in her breast pocket. Now that she was home, she meant to plant them for remembrance. (Hurston 1998, 191)

This passage exposes the obverse of the burial scene where black victims are dumped into the ground. A new box unfolds, not the coffin reserved for white corpses only, but Tea Cake’s seeds package. The amalgamation “seeds and planting” initiates new

affinities that starkly differ from the biased dichotomy of White and Black. So, the fertilised soil supersedes the dumping ground. Images of hostility and enmity recede. Tea Cake and Janie are not “the unhomed” in a culture that ousts them. They would create an alternative abode. Deeply rooted in the loam, and reincarnated in the blossoming seeds, they would develop new ties with Mother Earth that will never segregate them. Indeed, Janie’s breast pocket evokes the imagery of wet-nursing and symbolises maternal warmth and affection. The shift from “the funeral” to the “breast pocket” is by no means arbitrary. The expression “the sodden and the bloated” associated with Tea Cake’s death and mentioned at the beginning of the novel alters and acquires new meanings within this frame. Inseparable from germination, the watery picture elicits the intrauterine milieu and foregrounds motherly links. Again, this situation is redolent of Tellus. Mother Earth would nourish and embrace Janie and Tea Cake. They sprout from it, belong to it, and nothing would deracinate them.

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