



JUST ROAMING- A DECONSTRUCTION: AN APPRAISAL OF ZORA NEALEHURTON'S NOVEL *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

BY

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Abstract

Several literary theories from Feminism to deconstruction are what can be used to read Zora Neal Hurston's novel, *their Eyes Were Watching God*. This research aims at using the theory and practice of deconstruction for the readings and the understanding of the novel, however, it is necessary to attempt a definition of deconstruction. This is only an attempt because definitions according to Kenneth Burke in his, The Grammar of Motives, informs us that definitions always fail to carry us to the thing-ness of things. This is because definitions usually end up teasing us with similes, metaphors, allegories and even catachresis. But despite this dubious nature of definition, it is ideal to still attempt it for lack of a better option. Catherine Belsey in her book, Critical Practice, defines deconstruction as: The object of deconstructing a text to examine the process of its production, is not the private experience of the individual author, but the mode of production, the materials and their arrangements in the work.

Keywords:

LITERARY, PSYCHOLOGY, MEANING, ANALYSIS, DECONSTRUCTION.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of deconstructing is to locate the point of contraction within the text-composed of contradiction; the text is no longer restricted to a single, harmonious and authoritative reading, instead it becomes plural, open to re-reading, no longer an object of passive consumption, but an object of work by the reader to produce meaning. 10

A careful reading of Belsey's definition reveals interesting implications. The first thing that the deconstruction eliminates is the biographical flavourings of the author. This is what Roland Barthes refers to in his essay: the death of the author, but as soon as we eliminate the influence of the author in our readings, language takes up in the meaning of the text. But the problem with language is that it has limitless significations and deferment that can go on forever. The second implication of eliminating the influence of the author is that every reader with a language (with various signifiers) brings his reading to bear on a text. This really means that every reader creates a text out of a text. It was based on this brand of reading that Stanley Fish wrote his famous essay: is there a Text in this class? The answer of course is "no" because every reader writes his own text out of a text. Simply, a poem has as many meanings as the people who read it. Deconstruction therefore goes with reader response theory.

But to fully understand deconstruction we must attempt comparing it with the readings of a classic realist text. This kind of text, Belsey claims: moves inevitably, irreversible to an end, to a conclusion of an ordered series of events to the disclosure of what has been concealed. The realist text is really authoritarian, rigid, firm, with meaning suspended until it is disclosed at the end of the text. Since the events are fixed, until it is disclosed at the end of the text. Since the events are fixed, meaning, which is suspended, is also fixed and only revealed at the end of the text. The major difference between deconstruction and the realist reading is that the classic realist is closed while deconstruction is open. But it will be deconstruction that will be our mode of operation in understanding the novel: their eyes were watching God. THE THEMATIZATION OF THE DECONSTRUCTION THEORY IN *THEIRS EYES ARE WATCHING GOD*

DECONSTRUCTING THE TITLE OF THE NOVEL

The novel takes its title from a horrifying scene where the hurricane seemed to be tearing everything apart and the people in a room rather than running away for shelter were petrified and paralyzed with fear. The title: their eyes were watching God seems to be a misnomer since it presupposes that these people were deep in their prayers to God. They were not really praying. They were simply paralyzed with fear. The kind of fear that seems to intoxicate. So the question is: why does the writer bring God into the action, when in fact the thrust of the action seems to point elsewhere. The answer lays in what Paul de Mann calls "the grammatization of Rhetoric and vice versa". Grammar being a straight line is easily subverted by Rhetoric with its polymorphous perversities of voices. The plurality of voices is the voices of deconstruction that has been used to read the critical contention of this text as it deals with the theme of: "A woman's struggle to exert an identity and exert her voice through her

marriages. "The text interrogates Janie Crawford's marriage and to her first, second and third husbands and then attempt to answer the question: "Was she ever able to establish her identity and so find her own voice?"

DECONSTRUCTING THE CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

Janie Crawford was born in hard times. Times when a woman's security and satisfactory well-being depended on marrying a good man. Good, in the sense that he could provide food on the table. This is why all women with marriageable daughters depend on arranged marriages to store up their daughters' safety.

Taint logan Kellicks at wants you to have, baby, its proctect ion ah ain't gitting ole, honey. Ah'm done ole. One morning soon, now, de angle wid the swords is goin tuh stop by here. De day and hour is hid from me. At ast de lawd whom you was uh infant in mah arms let me stay here till you got grown. He spared me to see the day. Mah daily prayer now is tu let dese goden moments roll on a few days longer till ah see you safe in life(15).

The persuasive solemnity of Nanny's sermon to her granddaughter brittles with sympathy, religious faith and contradiction. In her opening sentence, she is asking her to marry a man for protection. So, really, she is not asking her to marry him, but marry protection. This is the double nature of irony when an answer to a question is buried deep in the dark Labyrinth of the question and the question itself maybe the answer. In her sermon, Nanny does not mention love, one of the vital elements for a successful marriage. So, even though the silent movement of the narrative is towards protection, yet there seems to be some naturally built in mechanism in this progression that is poised to subvert the craved protection. God had left her live to see her granddaughter grow up, but this same God did not command her to give the girl out to bondage. It is easy to see that the very intentions she had to get her married, will be the same reasons that will subvert her marriage, happiness or the longevity of that marriage. Also, something really serious is lacking in her request. Janie's voice, the voice of acceptance, the voice of consent is blatantly lacking. So even though she discovered her identity in the picture with a white family, her voice was represented with the white family, just as it was with her grandmother. And because she was not consulted, because love was not so important in the world view of her grandmother. That was one contributing factor to the easy collapse of her first marriage. This is why she took off with a stranger, Joe starks, without even the courtesy of a divorce.

But this action, deliberate as it was, seems to be the first sign of Janie exerting her identity and even her voice. This is the first time she takes her life into her own hands and doing it her own way. That was why:

Janie hurried out of the front gate and turned south. Even if Joe was not there waiting for her, the change was bound to do her good. (6)

In a third person narrative, Hurston tells the story of a strong willed woman who was ready to go her own to change her circumstances. This was a beautiful change from a life of

compound, obedience, servitude and subservience to freedom. This was her declaration of independence from the control not only by her husband, but from the community and societal grips as seen from the fact that she did not get a divorce and the decision to leave was quick and really decisive. Maybe she was so decisive because Logan Killicks was different from Joe Starks, her second husband.

If the life with Logan Killicks was that of drudgery, frustration, mental mutilation, doubt, hope and even desire, Joe Starks offered hope in flamboyance and wealth but it was with Joe Starks however, that the institution of marriage would receive its severe test. The test was to prove the equation that: "Man, wealth and an independent woman would equal a happy marriage." In this relationship, would Janie trade her freedom for wealth? Or was freedom more important than wealth? The second test was: "would Joe Starks be able to keep his wife because of the sheer weight of his influence as a mayor and his wealth? Somebody or something must give up.

Janie's life with Joe was that of sporadic happiness as well as frustration because she intended to protect her identity and freedom very precariously. It was a life of repressed anger which she carefully unleashed with method and calculation. Most critics of this novel, from Robert Stepto, to Alice Walker, entertain a funny speculation about Janie's inability to achieve her voice. The question of voice to one seems irrelevant to the contention of the novel which are the maintenance of an identity and the freedom to keep that identity unblemished.

Janie always had her voice and knew when it was most effective to use it. And she used it very effectively if we trail her life with Joe Starks. In their husband and wife feuds that seemed to unveil their mutual anger, frustration, doubt, hope and even desire, we can listen to Janie's voice very clearly. The question that most critics failed to ask is "Can an independent free spirited woman be married?" The question is critical because marriage implies a surrender of divided loyalties for the good of the family. A woman who feels that she can be an island has no need for a man. Marriage implies a surrendering certain freedoms for the sake of the greater good. Excessive individualism is simply antithetical to marriage. It is like the individual who refuse to pay tax and turns around to complain if he/she is denied public communal privileges. If we trail Janie's life as a shopkeeper and mayor's wife, the incident with the sick mule, the age furry, to her unholy war with her husband, even on his death bed, we realized that her eternal worries and contentions were on how to protect her identity and not about finding her voice.

As a mayor's wife and a shopkeeper of (the only shop in the city), she enjoyed a certain privilege that most women envied. She was a world of her own. She was also a class of her own. But these privileges come with a certain price. Since she was uneducated, she had to take instruction from her rich husband. This would have been an easy trade for an ordinary woman who would thank God for his amazing grace. But not with Janie. Janie could not take instruction particularly when they were not polite and somehow, sublimely sensitive. And Joe Starks on the other hand, saw no reason to apologize to a woman he has given everything. He

knew more about business than his nagging wife. The world of business is brutal and only the strong succeed. And so, he pounded commands and reprimands when necessary. But, rather than learning from these instructions, Janie developed an anger that boiled and festered. Maybe some of her anger was directed at her lack of freedom to make decisions in a business she really did not fully understand. Fused with this anger, she immediately personalized the incident of the sick mule that was tied to a tree, teased and about to be killed. In her mind, she immediately saw the restriction and the mule as a symbol of her life restrictions, obedience, servitude and a haunting helplessness:

A little war of defense for helpless things was going on inside her. People ought to have some regard for helpless things. But ah hates disagreement and confusion, so ah better not talk. It makes it hard to get along. She wanted to fight about it.

In this piece, we hear the voice of the omniscient writer reading the mind of her hero. A hero who has compassion for a poorly treated mule. The kind of treatment that would seem synonymous with the treatment Janie got at the hands of her husband. In a veiled defense of Janie, as seen from her remarks about the brutality to the mule, the writer also indicts the society, the community and even the world for our callousness towards the defenseless. But there is something native to language that seems to instigate a contradiction between the omniscient writer's intentions and the contradictions of language. The main contradiction stems from the fact that the war cries of the author seem to be in direct conflict with that of her hero. The writer in this piece, shows the rebellious posture of Janie's mind, while in her own voice Janie seems only concerned with reconciliation, harmony and peace. It is at this point in the novel that it would appear the writer lost control of her hero because the writer and hero seem to be dancing to the tunes of two different drummers.

It is of importance to note that while the writer in this piece seems obsessed with the problems of freedom and restrictions, Janie seems more inclined to compromise and harmony. It would seem like while the writer is more concerned with the problems of power and restrictions, Janie in her own voice appreciates the benefits of compromise which leads to peace and harmony. But this inclination towards compromise was tested when this husband and wife, engage each other in a family feud before a crowd with their bragging rights on age.

The sensitivity of age to both people had been carefully relayed by the author. She narrates the awkward nature of Joe's physical appearance and the fact that even Janie was past forty. All the writer needed was an occasion that would explode this feud. The explosion occurred one day when Joe remarked that Janie was an old woman that nobody, no man would care for. The dialogue that ensued was sober but biting and debilitating, particularly when it happened in front of Joe's friends:

Nobody in heah ain't looking for no wife outa yah old as you is.

Jemie; "Naw, ah ain't no young gal no, mo but den ah ain't no old women neither Ah reckon ah looks mah age too. But I am a woman every inch of me, and ah know it. Dats a uh whole

lot more'n you kin say. You bit-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but, 'taint nothing to it but you big voice. Humph. Talking about me looking old. When you pull down yo britches you look lak de change yu life'. (79)

This dialogue reveals the smouldering anatomy of her anger and frustration of the marriage and the disturbing vermin that unleashed to break the love and marriage. The author, narrator had prepared the reader through her narrative of her anger. The scene is clear cut. Joe would start by attacking Janie at her most vulnerable and sensitive spot: "Her marriageable worth and her age. The author relays Joe's attack as an effort to control by mentally tarnishing Janie's physical image, her mental composure and even tolerance. The idea is that every woman in Janie's position: rich, well placed and comfortable, would tolerate these attacks. But Janie was a different woman who fought back without tact, sensitivity or restraint. Any woman in Janie's position at this time in history would have withdrawn to the back and cried. Then confront her husband later in bed about his verbal cruelty. But Janie was not that kind of a woman. This was why her (Janie's) respond was a calculated, well organized attack that shows no respect for her husband, nor his friends who sat with him. And so she braced for an onslaught.

First, she defends her self-image in contradicting terms, claiming that she may not be a young girl, but she was certainly not an old woman. The contradiction is that you cannot have it both ways. You are either old or young. And she attempts to reinforce her age by claiming that she looks her age. What age. Is this the young age or the old? She then unleashes her most destructive weapon when she claimed that she is every inch a woman unlike Joe. Here, the implication is that perhaps Joe's virile sexual organ was dead. He maybe impotent because he shows all signs of diabetes and overweight. For the sake of socially accepted decorum, Janie could have stopped her onslaught here. But she over killed when she started pointing at her husband's disgusting anatomy. To make it more cruel and even bizarre, she was attacking Joe's power and his helplessness in the hands of his own wife. A situation that every man usually dreads. At this point in the narrative, the question of Janie's voice would look ridiculously irrelevant. It was to protect her feminine identity that she fought so furiously. It was not to find her voice. She already had one. A voice with a sharp edge like a razor. It was with this voice that she unleashed her severest attacks on her husband even on his death bed when all he needed was love and compassion. But Janie saw her husband's illness as an opportunity to lash him with his own vermin;

Janie: 'Naw, Jody, it was'st because ah don't have no sympathy. Ah had uh lavish uh dat. Ah just didn't never git no chance tuh use none of it. You wouldn't let me (85).

Jody: Dat's right, blame everything on me. Ah wouldn't let you show no feelings. When Janie dats all ah ever wanted or desired. Now, you come blaming me. ()

This last speech, an intrusion into the life of a man dying was, I think, the most savage blow that Janie ever landed her husband. The poignant and revolting part of it was that she brutalized him verbally at a time he needed her love and compassion and when he was

weakest. Her excuse was that she never had any opportunity when the opportunity was right there, at Jody's deathbed and she was too selfish to see it. Perhaps the cruellest thing she did was to tease him with the inevitability of his death. This was awful because even death does not want to know of itself.

The author's sympathy at this point seems to swing to Jody. This is because she shows Janie's true personality as uncaring, selfish, self absorbed hound who seemed more concerned about her remaining scrappy beauty. It may seem cruel or extreme to suggest that Janie drove her husband to a quick death after that bitter speech and then turned around to rejoice after his death. At this point, it would look ridiculous to even suggest that Janie did not have her voice, nor that she was struggling to have her voice. She had it. But then used it sparingly and even savagely. It was her identity, her femininity buried in her appearance that she fought to protect and she had no trouble flaunting it when she found the opportunity.

There is a universal axiom that sometimes people love three times before they meet real love. Janie had this opportunity for self-realization with her third husband, Tea Cake. With tea cake, the economic dynamics changed hands. This is because in her previous marriage, she was hooked to a man because of his wealth. But with tea cake, the woman and not the man had the money. Tea Cake, the writer tells us so warmly was the best of Janie's husband because he respected her as a woman and a good human being. Tea Cake was also spontaneous, active, saw and wanted all the joys of life for him and his wife. She rewards his kindness very warmly in:

Once upon uh time, ah never expected nothing, tea Cake, but being dead from standing still and trying tuh laugh. But now you come along and made something outa me. So ah'm thankful fuh anything we come through together. (p 88)

This piece shows a warm satisfaction in marriage. Something her former husband could not provide. Her former husband created nothing but boredom and unhappiness. Tea cake brought out her real self. He made her reach herself actualization. This is because he created a life of mutual respect, trust and love. A perfect match. But this marriage made from heaven was tested at a critical point: "The point was to choose whose life should be sacrificed to live or die." Janie selected her own life. She shot and killed her own husband. Tea Cake, even though under very auspicious circumstances. And in killing Tea Cake, she fulfilled her own prophesy that there are two things that are unavoidable; one is to go to God and the other is to find out how to live for oneself. By killing Tea Cake, Janie had consolidated her life and identity. She had nothing left to defend and that was why she was her own defender in her trial. She ran a good race. A race she knew she would win.

The theory of deconstruction focuses on contradiction in a text and the plurality of voices. The contradiction of the Grammar of the text by Rhetoric, language. The Grammar of this theme was the brutality of black men at this point in history to their wives. But language (Rhetoric) subverts this theme because at the end of the text is in the muted site of pleasure and bliss in the rhetoric because: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes that is bliss. (Barthes. The pleasure of the text). (p 16)

CONCLUSION

It is an incontrovertible fact that Zora Nearle Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel that is quite exceptional and a work of Art with a difference. Deconstruction theory is a theory that has been used to look critically at this novel, with the realisation that this theory can help a reader to subject the novel into different interpretations. Though the writer has written the novel in his own way, but every reader will have to subject it into varieties of interpretations. This research has shown that though writers write, but the interpretation of what they write is left within the perception of the readers.

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