

Nanny's Slave Narrative in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: A Black Feminist Reading

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ABSTRACT Black women's literature is of significance for Black feminist literary criticism for its focus on women's experiences of racism-sexism. The intersection of racism and sexism doubly victimizes the African-American women especially the slaves as they try to break out of this two-fold oppression. While racism decreed Black women would be enslaved, it was sexism that determined the lot of women harsher. Nanny living in the slavery era was oppressed as a worker on her white master's plantation, raped victim and then as a mammy working for a white family. These three images of Nanny stands for her racist-sexist oppression while purporting to her archetypal slave narrative. Indeed, her narrative is that of the many Black slave women in history and of their plight.

INTRODUCTION

Castle, points out that the concerns of many feminists, particularly of lesbians and women of color, were remote from those of straight, White, middle class intellectuals working in western universities. In his opinion, these feminists who emerged in the late 1970s and gained momentum in 1980s constituted the third wave of feminist critique. Black feminists, argues Castle, were concerned with the notion of the ignored woman of color or the relegated one to the status of third world woman (Castle 2007).

Tyson stated that Patriarchy operates differently in different countries. It means there are differences between patriarchy in the United States and in, say, India, Mexico, or Iran. He observes that in the United States, the experience of patriarchy for women of color is inseparable from their experience of racism; lesbian's experience of patriarchy is inseparable from their experience of heterosexism. He claims that it's easy to imagine the complex operations of oppression in the lives of women who belong to three or more of these categories (Tyson 2006).

Women of color claim that sexist oppression is the foundation of patriarchal culture and that it should be the main regard of progressive feminism. But they insist that the fight against "racism is the fundamental conflict that all feminists who desire an end to sexism must fight" (qtd. in Castle 2007). In 1989, Mary church Terrell deliv-

ered an address on the "progress of colored women" to the National American Women's Suffrage Association: "For, not only are colored women with ambition and aspiration handicapped on account of their sex, but they are everywhere baffled and mocked on account of their race. . . . Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women, are discouragement and disappointment meeting them at every turn" (Wolfenstein 2008).

As Wolfenstein (2008) admits, for Terrell two aspects of selfhood—race and gender—are existentially fused and politically disjointed. Existentially she is a colored woman, not colored and a woman and of course not colored or a woman. Delgado and Stefancic in *Critical Race Theory* elaborate on the tenets of race theory. One of these tenets states that everyone's identity is a product of intersectionality. Delgado and Stefancic accepted that no one has a simple, uncomplicated identity based on race alone. Race intersects with class, sex, political orientation, and personal history in forming each person's complex identity (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Wolfenstein (2008) further added that intersection gives the impression of separate dimensions of social life that somehow meet. He claims that race, gender, and class are parts of a whole and the very fact that they are individually named means that they do not form an identity in the sense of an indifferent unity. In his opinion, they are inside and outside of each other

METHODOLOGY

The present research is done through a content analysis type of qualitative research study, and the data are collected by a thorough study of the primary books, articles, and the theoretical discussions of Black feminism available in libraries. Living in the slavery era, Nanny has a slave narrative behind. Her narrative and that of all Black slave women, sheds light on their double plight due to their race and gender and not their race or gender alone. To support the very claim, samples from the life incidents of the character's narrative have been presented.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Howard in his article "Nanny and Janie: Will the Twain Ever Meet? (A Look at Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*)," claims that the person who wrongs Janie the most is her grandmother, Nanny Crawford. He says Nanny is dismissed as one of those desecrators of the pear tree who spit on Janie's idea of "marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (Hurston 2004) by insinuating to her ideas of materialism, security and other stifling trappings supposedly necessary to a happy marriage. Howard (1982) claims that while nanny is guilty of limiting her grand daughter by pushing her to a marriage with a middle-aged farmer, all in the name of protection, her intentions are wholly good and her actions are understandable. She wants what she sees as best for her granddaughter for she believes that "colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways," but unfortunately what she provides is exactly what she neither needs at the time nor wants. Though halfway through the novel, argues Howard, Janie hates Nanny for "limiting her to a speck while the whole horizon beckoned," Nanny's only flaw is that she wants to keep the romantic Janie from finding out about living for herself. Janie learns over the years that there are two things a person has to do: "You got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo' papa and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (Hurston 2004).

In fact, very little about Nanny Crawford is known, because early in the novel, she dies. The

little we do learn, however, is highly revealing and offers some insight into Nanny's thoughts and actions. Indeed, our knowledge of Nanny is indebted to Janie's decision to tell Pheoby of her past. Nanny had been born during slavery, "so it wasn't for [her] to fulfill [her] dreams of whut a woman outghta be and to do," since she says "dat's one of the hold-backs of slavery." She tells Janie:

Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither. It sho wasn't mah will for things to happen lak they did. Ah even hated de way you was born. But, all de same Ah said thank God, Ah got another chance. Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me. Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah'd take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her. She would expound what Ah felt. But somehow she got lost offa de highway and next thing Ah knowed here you was in de world. So whilst Ah was tendin' you of nights Ah said Ah'd save de text for you. Ah been waitin' a long time, Janie, but nothin' Ah been through ain't too much if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed. (Hurston 2004)

The essay "Black Women's Relations to White and Black Men: A Heritage of Slavery in America" explains that for more than two centuries Africans had been kidnapped from their homelands and against their will were transported across the New World, that is, The United States. It was a voyage composed of three parts. In the first part, Europeans came to Africa and exchanged their iron, cloth, firearms, gunpowder, and etc for Africans and kidnapped some of them on the West African's coast. It is stated that in the second part, these Europeans went to America and exchanged those African slaves for sugar, tobacco, and etc and in the last part they finally returned back to Europe (Kamara 2010).

hooks (1981) states that Black female slaves moving freely about the decks, were a ready target for any white male to be physically abused. Initially every slave on board the ship was branded with a hot iron. Those Africans who resisted the torture were lashed. She admits that women were lashed severely for crying and they were stripped of their clothing. As she observes, rape

was a common method of torturing sales, torture slavers used to subdue recalcitrant Black women. Many African women were pregnant prior to their capture or purchase. They were forced to endure pregnancy without any care. According to hooks (1981), the traumatic experience of African women and men aboard slave ships were only the initial stages of an indoctrinating process which would transform the African free human being into a slave. She notes that the slaver's job was to transform the African personality abroad the ships so that it would be marketable as a "docile" slave in the American colonies. hooks reminds that African females received more the brunt of this terrorization because they could be victimized via their sexuality and also because they were more likely to work intimately with the white family than the Black male. Slaver, states hooks, regarded the Black woman as a marketable cook, wet nurse, housekeeper and it was crucial that she be so thoroughly terrorized that she would submit to the will of the white master, mistress and their children. To make his product saleable, argues hooks (1981), the slaver had to ensure that no recalcitrant Black female servant would poison a family, kill children, set fire to the house, or resist in any way. The only insurance he could provide was based on his ability to tame the slave. hooks declares that as much of the work to be done in the American colonies was in the area of hoe-agriculture, it occurred to slavers that African female accustomed to performing arduous work in the fields while also performing a variety of tasks in the domestic household, would be very useful on the American plantation (1981).

Delgado and Stefancic point to the fact that slavery advocates the very idea that racism is the result of interest convergence which sometimes is referred to as material determinism (Tyson 2006). Derrick Bell uses this term to explain that racism converges, or overlaps, with the interest of a white individual or group. For this reason, interest convergence is referred to as *material determinism*. The desire to advance oneself in the material world, determines the ways in which the dominant society practices racism (Tyson 2006).

It was the time for departing into Civil War fight. Reminded of those old days, "mind pictures brought feelings, and feelings dragged out dramas from the hollows of her [Nanny's] heart."

Nanny tells Janie of the 5 days after her mother's birth when the master decided to go off for the Civil War:

Yo' mam wasn't a week old, and Ah was flat uh mah back. But pretty soon he let on he forgot somethin' and run into mah cabin and made me let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wropped his hands in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done, and was gone after de rest lak lightenin'. Ah heard 'em give one last whoop for him. Then de big house and de quarters got sober and silent. (Hurston 2004)

Collins accepted that the ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several controlling images of Black womanhood. According to the cult of true womanhood accompanying the traditional family ideal, "true" women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. As she claims, propertied white women and the emerging middle class possessed these virtues but to African-American women a different set of controlling images were attributed and that one of the controlling images applied to U.S. Black women is the image of the mammy (2002). The other image of the Black slave woman, as hooks contends, was the plantation laborer working on the field of her white master (1981) and their image as the raped victims will follow afterwards.

Hooks (1981) contends that sexism and racism magnified the sufferings of Black women in American colonies and that the area that most clearly reveals the differentiation between male slaves and female slaves is the work area. hooks (1981) further adds that on any plantation, Black women performed the same tasks as Black men, they plowed, planted, and harvested crops and on some plantations Black women worked longer hours in the fields than Black men. As she contends, it was a belief among white plantation owners that Black women were better workers than their male counterparts.

As hooks contends, the female slave lived in constant awareness of her sexual vulnerability that any male, white or Black, might assault her (1981). Blassingame claims in *The Slave Community* that "frequently they [the slave masters] purchased comely Black women for their concubines" (qtd in Weems 1989). Frederick Douglass notes in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that the "slave woman is at the mercy of the fathers, sons or brothers of her master" (qtd. in Weems 1989). hooks (1981) submits that the

Black female slave who willingly submitted to a master's sexual advance was rewarded for her acceptance of the existing social order. Those Black women who resisted sexual exploitation challenged the system and their refusal to submit to rape was a denouncement of slave owner's right to their persons. Collins (2002) says that rape is a sort of domination which is exploitative with no affection. It produces the victim, that is, the Black woman as "mule" whose labor has been exploited.

After the departure of the master to the Civil War, his wife "come[s] walkin' in [Nanny's] door. She throwed de door wide open and stood dere lookin' at [her] outa her eyes and her face. . . . She come[s] stood over [her] in de bed" and demands to see the baby for she holds the slave accountable for the master's marital infidelity: "You better git dat kivver offa dat youngun and dat quick! . . . Look lak you don't know who is Mistis on dis plantation, Madam. But Ah aims to show you" (Hurston 2004). When Nanny "managed tuh unkivver [her] baby enough for her to see de head and face," The mistress looks at the baby and says: "Nigger, whut's yo' baby doin' wid gray eyes and yaller hair?" She tries to draw a reply out of Nanny by slapping her jaws but Nanny "never felt the fust ones 'cause [she] wuz too busy gittin' de kivver back over [her] chile. But dem last lick burnt [her] lak fire." The mistress keeps on asking her that how come the baby look white. Instead of pacifying Nanny, she gets more angry and dissatisfied with Nanny's reply: "Ah don't know nothin' but what A'm told tuh do, 'cause Ah ain't nothin' but uh nigger and uh slave" (Hurston 2004). The mistress threatened Nanny: "Ah wouldn't dirty mah hands on yuh. But first thing in de morning' de overseer will take you to de whippin' post and tie you down on yo' knees and cut de hide offa yo' yaller back. one hundred lashes wid a raw-hide on yo' bare back and that as soon as dat brat is a month old Ah'm going to sell it offa dis place" (Hurston 2004).

hooks (1981) believes that enslaved Black woman could not look to any men to protect her against sexual exploitation and that in desperation, she attempted to get help from white mistresses, but these attempts usually failed. hooks (1981) further accepts that having been taught by religious teachings that women were inherently sexual temptresses, mistresses believed that enslaved Black woman was the culprit and

their husbands the innocent victims. As it is clear, when slave women had sexual intercourses with their masters, they faced the jealousy of their white mistresses. To me, white women saw slave women as their rivals and punished them for their transgressions. A slave woman often underwent a double oppression when working for a white family: one from the white master who saw her as a sexual object and the other from white mistresses who saw the relationship between the slave woman and her husband as an offence. One female abolitionist states: "*Of all who drooped and withered under the inflictions of this horrible system, the greatest sufferer was defenseless women. For the male slave, however brutally treated, there was some recourse; but for the woman slave there was neither protection nor pity*" (qtd in hooks 1981).

Nanny knows when it is time to flee, and though she wasn't yet healed, takes Leafy and heads for the river where aided by friends she survives:

In de Black dark Ah wrapped mah baby de best Ah knowed how and made it to de swamp by de river. Ah knowed de place was full uh moccasins and other bitin' snakes, but Ah was more skeered uh whut was behind me. Ah hide in dere day and night and suckled de baby everytime she start to cry, for fear somebody might hear her and Ah'd git found. . . . Ah don't see how come mah milk didn't kill mah chile, wid me so skeered and worried all de time. . . . But nothin' never hurt me 'cause de Lawd knowed how it was. (Hurston 2004)

The emancipation gives Nanny freedom to devote her life to her daughter, determined that Leafy should have a better life than she herself had had: "Ah wouldn't marry nobody, though Ah could have uh heap uh times, cause Ah didn't want nobody mistreating mah baby. So Ah got with some good white people and come down here in West Florida to work and make de sun shine on both sides of de street for Leafy" (Hurston 2004). So as it is stated, this is the second time we see Nanny working for the white people but this time working as a Mammy—a Black nursemaid for white children—in a white family later to be understood as the Washburn:

Mah grandma raised me. Mah grandma and de white folks she worked wid. She had a house out in de back-yard and dat's where Ah wuz born. They was quality white folks up dere in West Florida, Named Washburn. She had four

gran' chillun on de place and all of us played together... Nanny used to ketch us in our devilment and lick every youngun on de place and Mis' Washburn did de same. (Hurston 2004)

Here, Hurston elaborates more on the Mammy figure working in a white family and taking care of its children. According to Collins (2002), Mammy is the faithful, obedient domestic servant who by loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and family better than her own symbolizes the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power. According to Collins, mammy is typically portrayed as overweight, dark, with African features and a surrogate mother to the children she acquired not through her own sexuality (2002). As she contends, she justifies the exploitation of house slaves and Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service (2002). Collins states that Employing Black women in mummified jobs supports the racial superiority of White employers, encouraging middle-class White women to identify more closely with the racial privilege afforded their fathers, husbands and sons. As Collins concludes, in this way mammy buttresses racial hierarchies (2002).

However there couldn't be any better life for Leafy, for when she is seventeen, Leafy is raped by her school teacher. Nanny "was 'spectin' to make a school teacher outa her." But One day she didn't come home at de usual time and Ah waited and waited, but she never come all dat night. Ah took a lantern and went round askin' everybody but nobody ain't seen her. De next mornin' she come crawlin' in on her hands and knees. Ah sight to see. Dat school teacher had done hid her in de woods all night long, and he had done raped mah baby and run on off just before day (Hurston 2004).

Again Hurston focuses on the very fact that African-American women have been raped by white men as Nanny and Leafy have been. Nanny's rape is due to the time of slavery but Leafy's rape only stresses the fact that rape in general is a form of sexism happening to women and when done by a man of the opposing color is considered to be a racist-sexist oppression.

Janie is born nine months later and Leafy had "took to drinkin' likker and stayin' out nights" (Hurston 2004). From her trying experience, Nanny concludes that "de nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see," and later in helping her granddaughter to under-

stand the reason she has chosen Logan to be Janie's husband, she says: "*Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything so 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. (Hurston 2004)*

Nanny uses this story, as to make the point that both white and Black men denigrate women, although she hopes that later Logan with his wealth will not do this to her granddaughter. Unfortunately, this is just what Logan attempts and as a result Janie rejects him.

Nanny prays that things be different with Janie. When she awakens one day to find Janie exchanging a kiss with "shiftless Johnny Taylor," she is alarmed because she believes that Janie is following the footsteps of her mother, Leafy. She believes that it is already too late for Janie to take up her sermon about "colored women sittin' on high" and quickly puts her alternate plan in action.

It was spring time and Janie was spending her afternoon under a blossoming pear tree. Watching the first tiny bloom, stirred her surprisingly: "*It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again . . . This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell (Hurston 2004)*. She was lying down under a pear tree that "*she saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation.*" (Hurston 2004)

After Janie experiences ecstasy by watching a bee pollinate the blossom of a pear tree, she endeavors to seek "confirmation of the voice and vision" for "everywhere she found and acknowledged answers. There was a personal answer for all other creations except herself. She felt an answer seeking her":

Oh to be a pear tree-any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. . . . She

searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made. (Hurston 2004)

It is then that "through pollinated air she saw a glorious being coming up the road. In her former blindness she had known him as shiftless Johnny Taylor, tall and lean. That was before the golden dust of pollen had beglamored his rags and her eyes" (Hurston 2004). Nanny, on the other hand, is not looking through pollinated air and thus is able to see Taylor for what he is. She tells Janie: "Ah don't want no trashy nigger, no breath-and britches, lak Johnny Taylor usin' yo' body to wipe his foots on" (Hurston 2004). Janie must realize the accuracy of her grandmother's assessment of Taylor, for "Nanny's words made Janie's kiss across the gatepost seem like a manure pile after a rain" (Hurston 2004). According to Nanny, her sexual flirting with Taylor is considered to be inappropriate. This is what nanny as a patriarchal woman indoctrinates to Janie when she sees her kissing Taylor and that's why Nanny marries her off to Logan to protect her from a world that makes "spit cups" out of women: "Ah wanted you to look upon yo'self. Ah don't want yo' feathers always crumpled by folks throwin' up things in yo' face. And Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or Black is makin' a spit cup outa you" (Hurston 2004).

Nanny does not really want Logan to have Janie, but Janie forces her hand as she tells Janie, "Ah done de best Ah kin by you. Ah rakes and scraped and bought dis lil piece uh land so you wouldn't have to stay in de white folk's yard and tuck yo' head befo' other chillum at school" (Hurston 2004). "Dat wasn't de way Ah placed you. Ah wanted yuh to school out and pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry. But dat ain't yo' idea, Ah see" (Hurston 2004).

According to critics, it is generally believed that within the framework of the novel, Hurston includes many similarities which parallel her own life. I personally believe that we are the sum of all the moments of our lives and anybody who sits down to write, will use the clay of his own life that he can't avoid that. Zora grew up without much mothering. Her own mother died when Hurston is quite young. Nanny seems to parallel Zora's own mother, Lucy Hurston. Like Nan-

ny, Lucy wanted her children to do well in life. She held their ambition for them just as Nanny did for Janie.

Because Nanny feels her age as she says, "Ah ain't gittin' ole, honey. Ah'm done ole. . . . Mah head is ole and tilted towards de grave" and because she feels responsible for Janie as she tells her, "*You ain't got no papa, you might jus' as well say no mama . . . you ain't got nobody but me. . . . Neither can you stand alone by yo'self. De thought uh you bein' kicked around from pillar tuh post is uh hurtin' thing. . . . Ah got tuh try and do for you befo' mah head is cold*" (Hurston 2004), she does the only thing she feels she can—she provides "protection." When Janie tells Nanny that she did not mean any harm by kissing Taylor, Nanny responds: "Dat's what makes me skeered. You don't mean no harm. You don't even know where harm is at. Ah'm ole now. Ah can't be always guidin' yo' feet from harm and danger. Ah wants to see you married right away" (Hurston 2004). Nanny tells Janie that Brother Logan has asked for her and then she complains to her, "*You don't want to marry off decent like . . . you just wants to hug and kiss and feel around with first one man and then another . . . you wants to make me suck de same sorrow yo' mama did*" (Hurston 2004).

Janie resists a lot in order to dissuade her grandmother from her decision. When Nanny sees Janie hunched and pouted on the floor and not showing consent, she slaps the girl and their eyes met in struggle: "*With her hand uplifted for the second blow she saw the huge tear that welled up from Janie's heart and stood in each eye. She saw the terrible agony and the lips tightened down to hold back the cry and desisted. Instead she brushed back the heavy hair from Janie's face and stood there suffering and loving and weeping internally for both of them*" (Hurston 2004).

And when Janie implores Nanny that she will not kiss Taylor again and when she begs not to be made to marry Logan, Nanny responds:

Tain't Logan Killcks Ah wants you to have baby, it's protection. . . . One mornin' soon, now, de angel wid de sword is gointuh stop by here. De day and de hour is hid from me, but it won't be long. Ah ast de Lawd when you was uh infant in mah arms to thing she feels she can—she provides "protection." When Janie tells Nanny that she did not mean any harm by kissing Taylor, Nanny responds: "Dat's what makes me

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Nanny as the woman who has been oppressed by patriarchy but still trapped in its legacy shows sexist attitudes toward Janie and thereby defies Beauvoir's belief that not all women want to have children yet patriarchy tells them that in order to be fulfilled as women they have to (Tyson 2006).

Jennie marries Logan only to discover absurdities in Nanny's realism:

His head is so long one way and so flat on the sides and dat pone uh fat back uh his neck. . . . His belly is too big too, now, and his toenails look lak mule foots. And 'tain't nothing in de way of him washin' his feet every evenin' before he comes tuh bed. 'Tain't nothin' tuh hinder him cause Ah places de water for him.

Ah'd ruther be shot wid tacks than tuh turn over in de bed and stir up de air whilst he is in dere. He don't even never mention nothin' pretty. . . . Some folks never was meant to be loved and he's one of 'em (Hurston 2004).

But Nanny defends her own realism: "Heah you got uh prop tuh lean on all yo' bawn days, and big protection, and everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call yo Mis' Killicks . . ." (Hurston 2004).

Janie tries not to forget Nanny's advice when she told her that "husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant" but when she gets married with Logan and goes "inside to wait for love to begin," she realizes that love may not be born at all with certain people and thereby complains to Nanny: "Ah wants to want him sometimes. Ah don't want him to do all de wantin'. . . . Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (Hurston 2004).

After Nanny sees Janie's worries about love and her inability to feel kind toward Logan, she pretends that love is not important and that African-American woman shouldn't worry so much about love because it means a life of labor.

If you don't want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo' parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road and. . . Lawd have mussy! Dat's de very prong all us Black women gits hung on. Dis love! Dat's just whut's got us uh pullin' and uh haulin' and sweatin' and doin' from can't see in de morning' till can't see at night. . . . It jus' make you sweat. Ah betcha you wants some dressed up dude dat got to look at de sole of his shoe everytime he cross de street tuh see whether he got enough leather dere tuh make it across. You can buy and sell such as dem wid what you got. In fact you can buy 'em and give 'em away (Hurston 2004).

But in truth, Nanny realizes that she has erred by marrying Janie to Logan and that her plan, though it has brought "protection," has not brought happiness. That realization is enough to bring her to her knees and to hasten her death: "*Nanny sent Janie along with a stern mien, but she dwindled all the rest of the day as she worked. . . . Towards morning she muttered, 'Lawd, you know mah heart. Ah done de best Ah could do. De rest is left to you'. She scuffled up from her knees and fell heavily across the*

bed. A month later she was dead” (Hurston 2004)

Nanny dies fully aware of the fact that neither her nor Janie had been happy. Her mission had been doomed to failure, for “feeling that life cheated her by enslaving her, Nanny vows that her granddaughter will enjoy the happiness she herself had never known. But seeking to realize herself through her granddaughter, she fails to allow for Janie’s personality and aspirations.” Nanny’s true feelings, however, surface. When after marriage, Janie appears sullen, Nanny quickly reacts with, “You and Logan been fussin’? Lawd, Ah know dat grass-gut, liver-lipted nigger ain’t took and beat mah baby already! Ah’ll take a stick and salivate ‘im!” (Hurston 2004). The truth of her words is soon borne out in Logan’s behavior, for he goes to purchase “uh mule all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle ‘im” (Hurston 2004).

Years later Janie blames her life with her second husband Jody on her grandmother. At the end of her miserable relation with Joe, Janie becomes aware of her festering feeling for Nanny:

She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity. She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizon in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her. . . . Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it into such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her grandmother’s neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. (Hurston 2004)

Janie becomes aware that her horizon was her jewel taken from her: “She had found a jewel down inside herself and she had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around. But she had been set in the marketplace to sell” (Hurston 2004).

Janie seems to understand Nanny’s motives better when she tells her best friend Pheoby:

Nanny was borned in slavery time when folks, dat is Black folks, didn’t sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin’ on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat’s whut she wanted for me—don’t keer whut it cost. Git up on uh hig chair and sit dere. She didn’t have time tuh think whust tuh

do after you got up on de stool uh do nothin’. De object wuz tuh git dere. So Ah got up on de high stoll lak she told me, but Pheoby, Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere. Ah felt like de world wuz cryin’ extry and Ah ain’t read de common news yet. (Hurston 2004)

Sick of a life of “safety,” Janie determines to explore her own idea of living: “Ah done lived Grandma’s way, now Ah means tuh live mine” (Hurston 2004). And Tea Cake is the vehicle the author provides to make the realization of Janie’s dream possible. Before she meets Tea Cake, however, she languishes away much of her life with Joe, her second husband. But then with Tea Cake she finds her bee to her blossom. Even after his death, she is ready to get up on the pulpit and “preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high.” Her text will differ from the grandmother’s for she sprinkles her own scripture in her sermon and not that of Nanny. Janie struggles throughout the novel “to understand the inadequacy of Nanny’s vision” and she is able to replace it with an adequate vision of her own:

When God had made The man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing but sparks but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each one over with mud. And the lonesomeness in the sparks make them hunt for one another, but the mud is deaf and dumb. Like all the other tumbling mud-balls, Janie had tried to show her shine. (Hurston 2004)

CONCLUSION

Nanny’s story is one of the archetypal slave narratives. Living in slavery era and being a colored woman, brought her at the will of a white master, a white mistress and their children. Because of her being a Black woman she is bought by a white master to be at whatever service he commands. Her journey starts with working for him on his plantation -(cutting the seeds, chopping the woods, plowing, and many other relevant duties), getting raped by him, giving birth to a mixed-blood child, meeting his vengeful wife and then being a mammy (housekeeping, nursing their white children, cooking for all the white family).

Indeed, her narrative is the archetypal narrative of all Black slave women. Her life story shows that the interpenetration of race and gender have brought to a large extent the double oppression of these women throughout history.

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