CHAPTER 4

Subject, not Object: Janie of Their Eyes Were Watching God and Lucy of Jonah’s Gourd Vine

To Hurston, as it becomes clear from the preceding chapters, human freedom and happiness lay in the opportunity to live life within a network of community with one’s creative instinct intact. Identity and survival for the southern black communities to which Hurston belonged, and in which she travelled extensively and intensively, depended on deeply subjective experiences rooted in their unique oral traditions, memory and historical consciousness. Black women continued to occupy a central place in her work. In her two novels Jonah’s Gourd Vine (1934) and Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), Hurston further explores how black women realize their dreams and visions on the strength of their subjectivity by valuing their unique experiences.

Hurston had once said that “It is one of the blessings of this world that few people see visions and dream dreams” because of the “cosmic loneliness and the infinity of conscious pain” created for the visionary (Dust Tracks 598). Yet, she recorded black female visions and dreams of Janie in Their Eyes and Lucy in Jonah’s Gourd Vine, both of whom exemplify the potential of self realisation that life offers to the Black women. While Lucy seeks selfhood through motherhood, through nurturing a harmonious, supportive family, Janie seeks liberation through wielding her cultural identity.

Their Eyes is a delineation of the quest for self-fulfilment, self-determination and love by the female protagonist of the novel, Janie Crawford. It begins with the understanding that men and women have different perspectives. The opening lines of the novel present the perspective of men and women, which is then substantiated by the work:

Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some
they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly (Their Eyes 175).¹

For men it is the material fulfilment of dreams that decides their life as successful or otherwise. If their dreams get “mocked to death by Time” (175) in an objective kind of way, they have no improvisational/imaginative skills to realize them. They become resigned to their fate. Women on the other hand, have creative and visionary power. With their creative imagination, they give themselves a subjectivity. This fosters self-actualisation even in the face of apparent failure or the threat of physical death.

To begin with, Janie is divorced from any semblance of personal, racial or cultural identity. As a child upto six years of age, she is called “Alphabet” by the family of her Nanny’s master, in whose backyard she lives with her Nanny. As "Alphabet", Janie has no name. She recoils in disgust on being told that the black face in the photograph was hers. She is what she has been called. “...so many people had done named me different names”, she recalls later (181-82). Another perception of self that Janie is “summoned to behold” is the revelation of her sexuality to herself, in the ‘blossoming pear-tree’ scene, when she is sixteen years of age. Her consciousness awakens as she watches bees fertilizing the blossoms of a pear tree. Hearing the “inaudible voice of it all” she tells herself “So this was a marriage!” (183). At the same time, she herself feels a remorseless pain that leaves her limp and languid.

Janie is now willing to accept sexuality as a natural part of life, a major part of her identity and begins “seeking confirmation of the voice and vision” (183). When she sees Johny Taylor coming down the road, his rags look “beglamored” with the golden dust of pollen in her eyes and she finds partial realization of her lyric selfhood in being kissed by Johny at the gatepost. To
Nanny, however, who has seen the “trashy nigger” “lacerating” Janie with a kiss, her grand daughter’s sexuality is alarming. Nanny imposes on Janie her ‘horrifying’ black woman identity by telling her “youse uh ‘oman now” and explicates how the black woman is the mule of the world. Janie’s ‘black’/‘woman’ identity in these early scenes of the novel shows a kind of passivity on her part - an objectifying of her self-perception. Even at this stage, there is an uneasiness in Janie in accepting these imposed identity-markers, and she understands vaguely that it is a different, more natural self-image that she has of herself. She, however lacks power of self-assertion at this stage.

The information that Nanny has thrust on Janie is in keeping with the former’s experience of a black woman’s role and status during slavery and after, and her personal experience of her own sexual victimisation and that of her daughter. As a slave, Nanny was impregnated by her white master and ruthlessly thrown out by her mistress; her daughter, Leafy (Janie’s mother) has been the victim of rape by her black school teacher. Nanny is now firm in her resolve not to allow Janie to be a ‘spit-cup’ of every good-for-nothing man down the road. In Nanny, Hurston is confronting the historical reality of the rape of the black woman, during slavery and after. Nanny had wished to be a historical agent, but ended up being a passive recipient of her vulnerable status. “Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me,” Nanny tells Janie (187). She had hoped to make Leafy a school teacher, but that dream too turned sour.

Helpless to fulfil her dreams of what a woman should be, both with respect to herself and to her daughter may have made Nanny a “cracked plate,” yet she has not stopped dreaming. She looks upon Janie as another chance that has been given to her and dreams of a ‘pulpit’ for her. To Nanny, this ‘pulpit’ now is the social and financial security of a middle-class marriage. She selects the aged farmer Logan Killicks, owner of sixty acres and a mule as a suitable husband for her. To Nanny, the economic security and marital legitimacy that Janie will have by becoming ‘Mrs. Killicks’ are coveted prizes for any black woman. Claire Crabtree says that Nanny’s
aspirations derive from a negative attitude toward Blackness and femininity (61). Haddox too has similar views when he says:

Although Nanny evinces a full knowledge of the oppressiveness of the class structure that she describes, she urges on Janie a strategy of resignation instead of resistance and calculates the possible advantage of the marriage only in economic terms. In doing so, Nanny perpetuates the logic of the class structure, for as Killick’s wife, Janie quickly becomes a “mule of the world” (24).

Hazel Carby’s views, however, are pertinent when she says that the rape of the black woman had powerful ideological consequences for the next hundred and fifty years (Reconstructing 39).

Nanny forces Janie into this ‘protection’ of a marriage to fulfil her own dreams of “what a woman ought to be and to do.” When Nanny explains to Janie the meaning of marriage, the impact of her words is overwhelming for the latter. Janie had envisioned marriage to be as the “dust-bearing bee seeking into the sanctum of a bloom.” The vision of Logan Killicks as husband completely desecrates Janie’s vision, but she does not know how to tell this to Nanny. She tries the arrangement with Killicks only because Nanny wills it so. After marriage, Janie keeps waiting for love to begin but Killicks offers neither love, nor joy, romance, sexual desire or understanding. Janie knows from within that things need to be sweet with marriage like when one sits under a pear tree, but the real experience of marriage kills this dreams of hers. To Killicks, Janie is a workhorse. He keeps impressing upon her that she should be thankful he has lifted her out of the white folks’ backyard and put her in a house of her own.

Janie’s marriage to Logan Killicks objectifies her in two ways. To Nanny, she is still the woman on a pedestal. She brims with pride as she tells Janie, “you got yo’ lawful husband same as Mis’ Washburn or anybody else!” and “uh prop tuh lean on ... and everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis’ Killicks ...” (192). To Nanny, Janie has fulfilled the ultimate destiny
of womanhood by being married, and she rejects Janie's 'prong' about love. Janie's second objectification is at the hands of her husband. To him, she is a mule whom he has brought home to work in his fields, to chop wood, to draw water, to cook and be generally around to take orders from him. Despite being objectified in these respects, Janie does acquire a subjectivity of sorts by the time she ends this marriage. She has understood deep within herself that money and protection do not make a real marriage.

Then comes Joe Starks, who offers Janie an escape from this loveless marriage. Stylishly dressed and urbanised, he is a man of great initiative and drive. He is like no black man Janie has ever seen and she even appreciates the élan with which he courts her: "A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on the front porch and rock and fan yo'self...," he tells her (197). Tempering her reservations that "...he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees," Janie determines that "he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (197). She runs away with him and they get married.

It soon becomes evident to Janie that like Nanny, Joe too has borrowed his criteria of success from the white world. He takes her to Eatonville, where with Janie as one of his many possessions, he can be a "big voice". Janie with her "pink-white" complexion fits well into Joe's scheme of things. "Having the white woman, who is the prize of our culture, is a way of triumphing over a society that denies the Negro his basic humanity", opines Calvin Hernton (qtd. in Hooks, Ain't I 113). This becomes evident in Joe's 'triumphant ownership' over Janie in the novel.

All other ambitions of Joe are also soon realized at Eatonville. He buys property and opens a store that becomes the town's meeting-place. He decrees that roads be dug, a post-office established, a street lamp installed and town incorporation papers drawn. Already landlord, storekeeper and post-master, Joe runs for Mayor to consolidate his power. His brashness elicits equal measure of respect and admiration from the townspeople. As much as they admire his accomplishments, they also take exception to his manner. One citizen's observation is widely shared: "He loves obedience out of everybody
Under de sound of his voice" (213). "Everybody" includes Janie, too. To her, he assigns the role of "Mrs. Mayor Starks." She must set herself apart from the townspeople and conduct herself according to the requirements of his position. On the day of the inauguration of the store, he orders her to dress her best to outshine all the 'gang' and wants her to dip lemonade like a 'lady' and stand apart. Most significantly, he does not want her to open her mouth in public. He first imposes this rule during the ceremony marking the opening of the store. The ceremony has occasioned much speech-making and towards the end, Janie is invited by the townspeople to say a few words. Before she can respond, Joe takes the floor to announce, "Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (208). Joe's announcement takes Janie off-guard. Although she is not sure she even wants to speak, she resents being denied the right to decide for herself.

Jody has actually objectified the whole world of Eatonville, reducing it to his own terms, speaking in place of everything and everyone, including Janie. Janie tries to talk it out with Jody, saying that something is 'unnatural' in their marriage because it always keeps them under a kind of 'strain.' She hopes that this 'running and straining' would soon be over and then the marriage will be 'natural' and 'sweet.' Jody, however fails to understand. What more does Janie need, when he has made her the 'Queen of the Porch.' In the patriarchal principles of Jody, woman is merely an extension of male ego - a mere auxiliary and any female perspective on life is to be ideologically dismissed. Joe definitely suffers from what Knudsen calls "pathological narcissism" (221).

Joe's objectification of Janie is clearly a gendered and classed construction of her social identity on the lines of the dominant culture. He is the black bourgeoisie man who believes in the acquisition of wealth so as to be close to the 'superior' culture. Janie's values are different from Jody's. She wants a spiritual partnership in her marriage which has nothing to do with things that money can buy.
Joe’s prohibitions on Janie go on increasing. He orders her ‘NOT’ to show her hair in the store. She is forced to tie her hair with a head-rag, which she hates. What irks Janie most of all is that Joe forbids her from participating in the ‘lying’ sessions held on the store porch; she is hustled inside when they begin. Janie loves these conversations and notes that Joe himself stays around to listen and laugh. Being forbidden to speak is a severe penalty in an oral culture. It short-circuits Janie’s attempts to claim an identity of her own; it robs her of the opportunity to negotiate for respect from her peers. Janie now “felt far away from things and lonely” (211).

To Jody, maintaining his class privileges at any cost is top priority, even if it means putting his woman in ‘her’ place, by using brute force and physical power against her, if she seems too ‘uppity.’ Paradoxically, while Jody objectifies Janie to a ‘star’ status, he begins to belittle her for her essential female stupidity and her growing unattractiveness on account of her advancing age. “As the prized object in her conventional marriage, Janie is highly valued and totally devalued” (K. Jacobs 345). Bells Hooks’s views are pertinent in this respect when she says that during re-construction, devaluation of black woman was an instrument of social control to sabotage mounting self-confidence and self-respect (Ain’t I 59). Jody publicly blames Janie for her puny brains : “When Ah see one thing Ah understands ten. You see ten things and don’t understand one.” Then again, “Somebody got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows. ...they sho don’t think none theirselves.” (232) Initially Janie tries to get even with him by fighting back with her tongue: “Sometimes God gits familiar wid us women folks too and talks his inside business .... you don’t know half as much about us as you think you do”(235). But she realizes that this does not get her anywhere. Jody must have her total submission and he does not stop until he thinks he has it. It is now that Janie makes her first subversive move: “... she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush” (232). No matter what Jody did or said, she said nothing. Why I call this move subversive is that though apparently Janie yields to Joe’s requirement of total submission, yet she retains a clear perception of herself and her situation. On one occasion when Joe slaps her
(her submission has not slowed his abuse of her), she experiences the following revelation:

She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered.... She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about.... She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them (233).

Soon after this incident Janie bathes and puts on a fresh head gear and goes about her business of tending store and one surmises, “That was a bow to the outside of things” (233).

Kubitscheck believes that Janie’s failure of courage and imagination results in almost twenty years of spiritual hibernation (110). But this is not true. Facing the truth about Jody has allowed Janie to divorce him emotionally. She has succeeded in giving herself that degree of autonomy now, which cannot jeopardize her selfhood any longer. Janie is now actually resorting to the African American coping strategy of assuming a ‘lying mask.’ During slavery, as I have talked in earlier chapters, when blacks were unable to fight the atrocities of institutionalised white superiority, they assumed a grinning, lying mask. By doing so, they seemingly fitted the white man’s conception of them as stupid and happy, and escaped punishment. DuPlassis is right when she says that Janie’s is a “thinking silence” and finally it “is a source of knowledge because it helps her find out about living autonomously” (DuPlassis 107). Janie’s self-division actually empowers and integrates her. It is relevant to substantiate this argument by the following two paragraphs from the text of Their Eyes:

Then one day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the
wind blowing through her hair and clothes. Somebody near about making summertime out of lonesomeness.

This was the first time it happened, but after a while it got so common she ceased to be surprised. It was like a drug. In a way it was good because it reconciled her to things. She got so she received all things with the stolidness of the earth which soaks up urine and perfume with the same indifference (236).

Janie’s capability at being able to retreat into a privacy of her own is a creative adaptability which confers on her some measure of subjectivity. Robert Hemenway would give it the name of an “autonomous imagination,” like the one he had found in Hurston herself. In *Ride Out the Wilderness*, Melvin Dixon also suggests that the idea of an imaginative space as conferring a sense of freedom is firmly rooted in the black folk tradition, as exemplified in the fugitive slave narratives and songs, etc. from which Dixon has drawn liberally (1-7). Interestingly, Awkward points out that Janie’s successful self-division is attributable to her knowledge of the principles of lying sessions and mock courtships. These verbal rituals suggest to her that there need not be correspondence between thought and action (Inspiriting 28). Awkward also calls Janie’s self-division “amniotic” in nature (35). Janie’s movement into, what I call, ‘an autonomous cultural space’ created by her imaginatively, becomes empowering for her during the traumatizing seven years of her marriage to Jody. Thomas Kochman’s term for this is “fronting” which is the African American mechanism of consciously suppressing one’s true thoughts or feelings. To him it represents the prudence of silence when speech generates risks (qtd. in Lowe 175).

John Lowe opines that Janie’s silence is pregnant with creativity and that her acquisition of silence is actually her acquisition of “voice”, which become manifest in her later tirade against Jody (169). Jody’s public attacks on Janie’s personhood continue. He calls her an ole hen of forty’ and “You are no courting gal now.” But, one day, he crosses all limits of indecency when he begins talking under her clothes in full public view at the porch: “I
god almighty! A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can’t cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don’t stand dere rollin’ yo’ pop eyes at me wid yo’ rump hangin’ nearly to yo’ knees!” (237-38). In this speech, Jody is extremely humiliating towards Janie by converting her body into an object of gaze by all men on the porch, the “...typically male gaze, which enjoys the snatchin’ off of a woman’s clothes”, comments Christine Levecq (96). This strain become too much for Janie and naturally she cannot remain indifferent any more. She takes the center of the floor and in front of everyone “plays the dozens” on Jody, by talking under his clothes: “Humph! Talking’ bout me lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (238).

Roger Abrahams tells us that “playing the dozens” is an African American ritual of verbal insult which is mostly a male privilege (“Playing” 305). So when Janie indulges in this ritualistic humiliation of Jody, she clearly subverts Jody’s patriarchal values. By giving herself a voice, she attempts to reconstruct herself as subject and also to re-determine her position in her community. It is thus Janie’s voice, rather than her silence, that shows that the black female when pushed to the extreme can wrest control by giving herself the power of language and voice. It would be pertinent to quote Klaus Benesch here, who says: "...by supplying Janie with the specific technique of signifying at the point of her utmost resistance to banishment from the center of public communication, Hurston draws our attention to the pre-eminent role of oral speech in Afro-American culture" (629).

Other critics have offered similar opinions. John Lowe says that in the “change uh life” speech, suddenly from a ‘mute and decorative object’ Janie becomes a speaking, acting, fighting human being. She does this by using the linguistic resources of her culture (Lowe 175). Olaniyan believes that the use of signifying talk by Janie leads “...to a reconfiguration of power relations between Joe and Janie.” (37) It not only reveals the latter’s independence from her husband’s definition of who she is and what she looks like, but also helps her assert her identity as a black woman; language has thus become for
Janie a privileged site for affirming her personhood and for demystifying Jody's "phallocentric ground of determinate meaning," to use the words of Elizabeth Meese (52). From now on, Janie will lead her life according to her own text, based on her intuitive female consciousness.

Jody feels so humiliated by Janie's signifying talk that he takes to bed and dies soon after. As he lies dying, Janie confronts him with more painful truths, revealing how well she comprehends the effect of his domination, "Mah own mind had tuh make room for yours in me" (240). Janie's 'blossomy openings' have been stunted by Jody's 'dreams' and by his constant belittling of her, but she has managed to survive with apparent submission.

At the time of Jody's death also, Janie's exercising her split persona proves empowering for her. The narrator says that she "starched and ironed" her face, forming it into just what people wanted to see: "The funeral was going on outside... Enough weeping and wailing outside. Inside the expansive folds were resurrection and life.... She sent her face to Joe's funeral, and herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world" (246).

Janie now undergoes a rebirth. She re-interprets her past. She stands before the mirror and recalls that years before "she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass.... The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place" (245). Janie integrates her inside and outside selves - seeing herself whole, she reflects on her past and realizes, that her grandmother through acting out of love, had wronged her deeply. Nanny's sermon had been about things, while Janie's is a search for spiritual companionship. Hers is a truly communal spirit that searches for an integrative communion with people: "It was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her" (247). Janie realizes that in her first two marriages - in her 'mule' status, as well as in her 'star' status, she has been denied access to a vital part of her spiritual identity - communal recognition and acceptance. She rejects both the roles as dehumanising and dominated by the capitalist way of thinking. Addison Gayle suggests that,
"Janie Starks’s repudiation of the role of mistress of the big house is the most
telling symbol of the determination of black Americans to turn from facile
imitation of white cultures" (151-52). But Janie goes a step further. She also
thwarts ‘Mouth Almighty’s’ new text of ‘appropriate decorum’ for a Mayor’s
wife. Eatonville wants her to believe that “uh woman by herself is uh pitiful
thing” and they wish to rein her in by having her marry an ageing ‘well-
settled’ undertaker. But Janie is now self-reliant and wishes to take greater
control of her life. She resumes her earlier quest, one which culminates in her
marriage to Tea Cake.

Vergible Tea Cake Woods is a troubador, a travelling bluesman whose
life is dedicated to joyful pursuits. Tea Cake’s manhood does not rely on
external manifestations of power, money and position. He is at ease being
what he is. He wants a woman to talk to, not to talk at. Consequently, he
fosters the growth of Janie’s self-acceptance. They engage in small talk and
invent variations of traditional courtship rituals. They play checkers together,
fish by moonlight and display their affection freely. Janie is cautious in falling
in love with him, but from the self-knowledge and self-love that she has
gained, she tells herself that “…he could be a bee to a blossom.” Over the
protests of her neighbours, Janie marries Tea Cake, who is several years
younger than she, and whose only worldly possession is a guitar. Janie is clear
in her mind that her relationship with Tea Cake is “no business proposition,
and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game” (306).

Tea Cake encourages in Janie what Michael Awkward calls a “self-
regarding posture.” The couple embarks on a nomadic existence that takes
them to the rich farmland of the Florida Everglades. Janie joins Tea Cake in
the fields, work freely chosen and inspired by love. This work also
strengthens the bond not only between herself and her husband, but also
between her and the group. Janie has full freedom to find the people, to gain
the sense of community she craved. Like the Eatonville store, Janie and Tea
Cake’s cabin becomes the focal point of the community, a place where Janie
“could listen and laugh and …tell big stories herself - from listening to the
Immersed in the cultural traditions of her people, Janie grows into the woman she has always had the potential to be. She and Tea Cake achieve a remarkably egalitarian marriage, sharing and loving and working together.

This sweet season however, ends in the wake of a fierce hurricane, culminating in Tea Cake's death. It so happens that while saving Janie from being carried away by the rising lake waters, Tea Cake gets bitten by a rabid dog. This leads to a near-insane behaviour in him, despite Janie’s best nursing and doctoring. One day in self-defence, Janie is forced to shoot him and Tea Cake is killed. The community holds Janie to be Tea Cake’s murderer and wants her to be punished for killing the man who loved her like no black man has ever loved a black woman. They suspect her of infidelity. The white court, however, exonerates Janie. She now returns to Eatonville after giving a kingly burial to Tea Cake. She returns to her community of origin with a packet of garden seeds brought by Tea Cake and her mind full of his loving memories. It is here in the privacy of the back porch of her house that Janie narrates the story of her life to her friend, Pheoby, thus sharing with her all the wisdom she herself has gained from her life’s experiences. Pheoby, in turn will clear the air of misunderstanding of ‘Mouf Almighty’ with respect to Janie, by telling her story to them. This will help Janie’s reintegration within the community.

The relationship with Tea Cake has definitely furthered Janie’s self-actualisation, self-worth and cultural identity. But it is in the wake of Tea Cake’s death that Janie ultimately arrives at a full subjectivity, which is a celebration of self born of folkloric creativity and of her myth-making power. She does not grieve endlessly; instead she makes an imaginative analysis of her relationship with Tea Cake, which, instead of destroying her, elevates her in her own eyes. Janie does not resign morbidly to the death of her last lover/husband, but instead achieves what Ralph D. Story has called “an elevated, heightened consciousness” (28). She now discovers security within herself and acquires the means and the courage to speak in her own ‘black’ and ‘woman’ voice. She claims all the joyous and painful aspects of her
experiences as vital components of her identity, which she terms as having “been to de horizon and back.” From these she forms her own meaning of who she is and frames her own dreams of how she will live and make her dreams into reality: “She pulled in her horizon like a great fishnet. Pulled it from around the waist of her world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes. She called in her soul to come and see” (333).

At least one critic, James R. Giles has mocked at Janie saying that she wanted to live by a “hedonistic code” all her life and after Tea Cake’s death, she moves to a “reflective hedonism” (Giles 53). My answer to such views would be that meaningful, (non)reckless pleasure is harmless and Janie does nothing wrong in seeking happiness. Quoting Simone de Beauvoir, Lloyd W. Brown in his article ‘Zora Neale Hurston and the Nature of Female Perception’ says of Janie that “In a sense her whole existence is waiting, ... She awaits the homage, the approval of men, she awaits love” (44). But this is not the whole truth with respect to Janie. Janie does seek love as a humanizing force, but her ultimate triumph rests in transcending the disappointment of Tea Cake’s death with a self-fulfilling and self-affirming vision, which to Hurston is the uniquely feminine perspective on life. Essential to this perspective are the privileging of one’s experience, a selective memory and a liberatory imagination. In his article, 'From History to Communal Narrative : The Merging of Cultural Paradigms in Their Eyes Were Watching God' (2001), Jürgen C. Wolter suggests: “Selectivity is due to the human system of memory as episodic re-collection. ...The narrative voice is not at all interested in a straight plot, but rather in re-collecting and re-membering those episodes which it finds meaningful” (238).

Bell Hooks’s views too are pertinent. She says that memory need not always be a nostalgic longing, but it can also function as a retrospection, in order to gain a vision for the future. This helps in the process of self-recovery (Yearning 40). To my mind, this is true of Janie also. After Tea Cake’s death, Janie returns to Eatonville. Here she brings her dead lover/husband to life through the sheer force of memory i.e. by transcending the disappointment of
his death. Her memories of him not only transcend his death, but also his limitations (Tea Cake was brutally possessive and sexist in many ways). She, therefore, remembers only that which she does not want to forget and forgets what she does not wish to remember. This also helps Janie to transcend the ultimate disillusionment of her life - the discovery that there is really no 'beeman' and that a woman's dependency on a man is not fully consistent with complete selfhood. She understands that as long as she does not stop feeling and thinking, nothing, not even Tea Cake's absence can prevent her from living fully. Rather than living on her memories of Tea Cake, Janie is now centering on herself. Janie has imparted what Hemenway calls a "personal dimension" to the meaning of life by realising that it is her own spiritual strength that makes life meaningful and grants her the sense of subjectivity that she deserves.

Janie, however, is not a person who can lead her life in a vacuum. Isolation from her community, Janie understands, can be spiritually debilitating, as had been the case in her first two marriages. She is an intrinsic part of a community even now, though the community is a little unfriendly from being ill-informed. But perhaps 'Mouth Almighty's' judgements on Janie on her return to Eatonville, only bring forth the justice of communal debate and deliberation (Lowe 194). To my mind Janie has achieved a positive symbiotic merger with her community. Janie must reach out to the community with (her)story and also share her experiential wisdom with them. She uses language to communicate her story to Pheoby, the only understanding friend in the community that she has at this point. "Pheoby's hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story" (182). Pheoby says she has grown ten feet taller from just listening to Janie's story. Pheoby promises to correctly interpret Janie's story to the community, so that it can be lodged in their collective memory and they too can be collaborative creators of her story.

In her essay, 'Redemption Through Redemption of the Self in Their Eyes Were Watching God and The Color Purple', Emma J. Waters Dawson
has suggested that Janie redeems herself from a stifled creativity and recreates herself through story-telling (72). Molly Hite goes a step further in suggesting that creating a powerful narrative is equal to mothering (448). Mary Lupton, too, has credited Janie with confidence in facing the autumn of her womb and in attaining mother-hood through planting the packet of seeds for remembrance. Lupton further quotes anthropologist Elaine Morgan’s views who had said that only women, “had acquired a method of further species survival that had nothing to do with their wombs. They could remember; they could think; and they could communicate their memories and their thoughts.” “Through her story-telling and myth-making” concludes Lupton “Janie evolves to a higher stage of human possibility than had been previously attainable by women...”(54).

From ‘Alphabet,’ at the beginning of the novel, which John Lowe calls an “…all-purpose tabula rasa status …,” Janie at the end is ‘her own daughter.’ She is neither white-Washburn family-defined Alphabet, nor married, nor man-defined, nor a jury-defined broken woman, nor the community-defined wanton killer, nor the minstrel-figure Mrs. Taylor, but a self-assured, well-integrated being, suggests Lowe (160, 193). Elizabeth Meese, too, opines that whereas at the beginning of the novel Janie receives her sense of definition from others and is thus an object under the control of a racist, patriarchal culture: by the end of the novel she is a self-defined woman. She has arrived at this “feminist self-definition” through what Meese calls her “textuality” i.e. her power to create a text of her life through the transformation of others’ texts (44-45).

If *Their Eyes* is the story of Janie’s developing a unique feminine perspective (consciousness) on life through the multiplicity and diversity of her experiences, in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Lucy Pearson’s strength of character, resilience, mothering capability, emotionality, wifely virtues, initiative and folk sensibilities confer a distinct sense of selfhood on her, making her a complex character. Once again, deep-rooted myths about the sexuality, family life and dominating nature of black women are dispelled as Hurston unravels...
the story of Lucy’s life.

Written in a little over two months during 1933, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is an autobiographical novel, which fictionalises Hurston’s parents’ marriage, complete with her father’s philandering, her mother’s steady strength and Zora’s reaction to both of them. The novel’s main characters are John and Lucy, which were also the names of Zora’s own father and mother respectively.

The opening of the novel introduces us to John, the bastard child of Amy Crittenden, a slave on the Pearson plantation before emancipation. His father was probably the master, Alf Pearson, but John never knows it. After the civil war, Amy struggles to make a life with her cruel husband, Ned, and it is his rejection of John that causes the teenager to leave home for work at Pearson’s. John is such a strong, handsome, striking figure that he is soon sent to school and put in a position of responsibility. He also falls in love with his schoolmate, Lucy Potts, the smartest girl in the class. Even though she is barely past puberty, they become engaged. Her parents object because John is from “over the creek,” without money or status and the Potts are upwardly mobile landowning Negroes; but the lovers persevere, Lucy showing great courage in the face of familial opposition. John rises from the life of an illiterate labourer to become Moderator of a Baptist Convention in Central Florida. The seeds of his tragedy are, however, sown early in their marriage.

John cannot resist women and though he always returns to Lucy and continues to express his love to her, the fact remains that he is not faithful to her. Although he violently defends wife and family when they are endangered, and although he is a powerful man of God when in the pulpit, yet he is a philanderer when his inspiration ends. The family prospers despite John’s indiscretions, Lucy serving as both a mainstay for John and a cohesive force for the family. She all but wills him the backbone necessary to rise in the world. Lucy is the vine that provides “sheltering shade” to John (Lowe 130). Eventually, however, Lucy falls sick and John resents her illness because it makes him feel guilty about his mistress and he takes out his
frustrations on Lucy by first entering into a heated argument with her on her sick bed, for always “doggin’ me ’bout sumpin’” and then slaps her for the first and only time in their marriage. Lucy dies soon after this and John’s descent begins. He dreams of Lucy, begs her forgiveness and tries to forget his act. It is with respect to John’s hitting of Lucy, Hemenway has recorded that Hurston explained the title of the novel to Carl Van Vechten: “You see that prophet of God sat up under a gourd vine that had grown up in one night. But a cut worm came along and cut it down. Great and sudden growth. One act of malice and it is withered and gone” (Biography 192).

After Lucy’s death, John marries his mistress, to the distress of his children and parishioners. The church begins to plot his downfall and his enemies are eventually joined by his new wife, Hattie, who has now become a wife scorned. John realizes that Hattie’s attraction is only physical and he is bewildered to even find himself married. After he beats Hattie for attempting to conjure him, she seeks a divorce. John deflects the church’s attempt to remove him, with his powerful preaching. Finally, he voluntarily removes himself from the pulpit. He moves to a nearby town where he meets a good woman, Mrs. Lovelace, who becomes his third wife and helps him understand some of the forces within him. He returns to preaching, but is killed accidentally just as he approaches his moment of self-awareness.

It is in the character of Lucy Potts Pearson that Hurston arrives at a fine integrity of personhood - a reconciliation of body and spirit that ultimately lifts her from her marginal status and makes her the central character of the novel. John may objectify Lucy as a breeder and a ‘doll-baby’, but Lucy attains subjectivity through her skill of converting the negatives of her life into self-affirming principles based on her folkloric creativity. Lucy Potts Pearson is feminine, spirited, spiritual, confident, determined, strong, sturdy, moral and pushing. She is a persevering wife and a real mother. She is traditional in her folksiness but understands the need for creativity and change as the vital ingredients of progress.

We first meet Lucy as an eleven-year old “little girl with bright black
eyes”, (Jonah’s Gourd Vine 14). In fact she is “the littlest girl” in Alabama surroundings, where John is a hog-keeper on Alf Pearson’s plantation. She is one of the six Potts children, the Potts being owners of the Cox place in Pottstown. Hurston makes sure to confer a sense of identity, of place and of family on the black female protagonist of her novel. Lucy’s family comprises a frowning Mama, a placid Papa, a strapping big sister and six grown brothers. It forms a protective cocoon around Lucy. Neatness of dress and appearance, proper morals, regular school-going, etc. are habitual parts of the everyday lives of the Potts. To Hurston, these are politically subversive gestures. The familial and communal ties which Lucy is heir to, give her self-reliance and self-confidence. Lucy is an accomplished choir-singer, a good racer and also excellent in academics at school. There is a kind of instant chemistry at work when John sees Lucy for the first time. And it is definitely not physical/sexual attraction. Lucy is too little for that, way off even from puberty. It is an unexplained power about her that overwhelms John even at this stage. After seeing her for the first time, when John went home, there in the darkness, the black eyes of the little girl “burned” at him. And it is not one-sided chemistry at work. Soon when John joins school, on the first day the teacher chastises him for repeatedly replying in ‘yassuh’, and not ‘yes suh’. The whole class laughs at John’s illiterate speech behaviour, but for Lucy. John notices that Lucy’s “hands and lips were tense... She was not laughing like the rest” (25). He worries that she might be put out with him for being a fool.

Hurston gives to the child Lucy an undefinable power that makes her different from all the “grown-up” girls on the plantation – Phrony, Mehaley, Big ‘oman, Lacey, etc. These girls are all flesh. Hurston was well aware of the stereotyping of all black women as sluts or walking female animals. In portraying these womanish, sexually aggressive girls, as also the coy and protected Lucy, Hurston hints at the normal human diversity of black female characters, just as varied as for any other race/sex. John finds it very easy to handle all girls on the plantation, but he finds it almost impossible to talk alone to Lucy. He knows that all other girls are ‘sheer action’, but with Lucy
he needs words. And words fail him, even when the opportunity presents itself for him to be alone with her. Right from the outset, Hurston creates an aura about Lucy (which is definitely not class snobbery), which is a depth in her character that instinctively tells John that all the rhymes that he recites to the other girls on the plantation, which they think ‘witty,’ would drive Lucy away in disgust from him, if he ever tried one of those on her. He feels hopeless about her and makes imaginary speeches to her - speeches full of big words that would make her gasp and do him “reverence”. He also studies hard, because every time he recites, he has seen Lucy watching him.

It had been assumed for long and scientifically declared that blacks were the lowest on the scale of mental ability amongst all the races. They were neither supposed to have the power of memory, nor could they learn to read or write, howsoever hard they tried. Hurston’s is not a slogan-raising method of challenging this racist ideology of black inferiority. Hers is an oblique method. One of the students in school, Charlie says, “All dem Potts is smart. Her brother leads de choir at Macedony Baptist Church and she trebles right ‘long wid dem grown women and kin sing all de notes - de square ones, de round ones, de triangles.” John is overawed by Lucy’s “professor-like” learning of being able to “spell eve’y word in Lippincott’s Blue-back Speller” (26-27). Through spelling out these reading and learning skills of her Black characters, Hurston is putting politically subversive statements into her character’s mouths. Lucy makes a perfect speech on school-closing day, without forgetting even a single word.

Right from the start of the novel, Hurston insists on Lucy being ‘li’l bit’, not an overgrown, over-sexed girl. When John begins to court her, he even ‘totes’ her across the stream, telling her she’s not even a handful, and he could carry her any distance. At one point in the novel where Lucy is unhappy about not growing as fast as the other girls, her womanish desire only humanises her. What Hurston highlights in the maiden are her calm and self-assured nature and her multiple accomplishments as a growing child. When John continues to tease Lucy about her little size, she tells him with sheer
confidence, “Ahm Uh. li’l’ piece of leather, but well put t’gether” (34).

Lucy’s awareness of her ‘womanhood’ doesn’t make her sexually aggressive. She has been in love with John all along; yet, when he does propose to her in the folkloric tradition by asking her about birds and wants to know whether she would prefer to be a flying lark or a sitting dove, she deliberately acts dumb, putting on the mask of ignorance and dovetails the question. Perhaps, John loves her all the more for that, especially after he has seen the enticing tactics and overtly sexual behaviour of the likes of Phrony and Mehaley. By using her knowledge of this learned social behaviour between black men and women and then resorting to the masking technique, Lucy negotiates for her womanly respect and sexual self-determination. It is only after she is convinced of the sincerity of John’s proposal, that she allows herself to be kissed.

Lucy knows perfectly well what she wants from marriage. While the mother has typical white middle-class values and would want her to marry the old Artie Mimms only because he has two mules and sixty acres, Lucy rejects him outrightly. To Lucy, as to her creator Hurston, what ultimately matters are not the external manifestation of power, but something that touches a woman deep within and that is love. This, Lucy understands, only John can give her. Inspite of her mother’s calling him a “yellow bastard” from “o’er the creek”, Lucy’s mind is made up. She trusts her conviction. She marries him with her father’s blessings.

The real test of Lucy’s strength and character comes after marriage. John’s ‘brute-beast’ nature overpowers him soon after marriage. Lucy is not ignorant of all his philanderings. She checks him a few times and once even tells him to give her their children (they have seven children) and go where his love is. On one occasion, she even makes him jealous by telling him about a man waiting on the fence for her. When John rebukes her, she protects herself with the guise of stupidity “… dat’s jus’ uh by-word…. All de women say dat” (95). The home Lucy has created gives her an integrity of being and has a restorative effect on her, amidst all these betrayals from John. She
maintains a bold front socially, too. When folks come and tell her how people are talking about John’s escapades, she tells them self-assuredly, “Dey’s talkin’ everywhere. Ah don’t pay dese talkers no mind” (100).

Lucy’s faith in her husband’s folk-preaching potential, despite all his beastly behaviour, is unparalleled. It calls for immense strength and resilience from deep within, to push and shove a husband in his own self-esteem and in social status, who has wronged her so much and so long. If John’s is the legacy of finding ways of asserting his ‘unreal’ manhood, Lucy’s is surely the legacy of the suffering but strong and resilient black wife. She understands that if John would cultivate his ‘real’ manhood by being a folk preacher, he would be liberated from the prison of beastly behaviour. She encourages him to be “... uh man.” “Jump at de sun,” she tells him. John goes on rebuking her for her tongue-lashing but she continues to egg him on and tells him that she wants to uphold him in everything. It is with Lucy’s determined manoeuvring that John reaches the position of Rev. Pearson, the Moderator of the Church of Zion Hope in Eatonville. All along Lucy has complimented him for his deep, straining voice, the primitive poetry in him and for his magnificent pulpit gestures. When it came to her wifely duty of pushing her husband in the world, she put aside all her personal pain and made more than the usual share of her contribution. It is Lucy who encourages John to hone up his skill in carpentry, too. Lucy’s wisdom tells her that some kind of conspiracy is at work at the Church to remove John from his position as Pastor. She then advises John to go preach a sermon on himself. This sermon earns John the forgiveness of his congregation.

Although John resents Lucy’s counselling him when she’s alive, he misses it very much after her death. Lucy’s protectiveness of her husband finds its best manifestation in the courthouse scene where John is to be tried for hitting Bud. Barely three days out of labour, Lucy knows what is her top priority then and boldly walks to the courthouse to secure her husband’s release. John may be laughed at the porch for being a ‘wife-made man’, but not once during her entire life has Lucy gone about publicly bragging that
she’s the woman behind her husband’s rise. Hurston could perhaps not have created a better character than Lucy Pearson to critique the myth of the black matriarch. Lucy is strength, courage, dignity, perseverance, patience and love personified. But, she never craves for self-aggrandizement. She always faces life head on, on behalf of her husband and children. Hers is not a destructive assertiveness, but a nurturing one. Ironically, John realizes Lucy’s positive power only after her death.

When it comes to Lucy, the mother, she expands motherhood into a creative and personally fulfilling role by nursing and caring for her seven children. The external shield of wifely strength and tenacity is well-blended with an inner core of motherly tenderness and affection. When Isie is sick with typhoid and the doctor fears for her life, John is too weak to see his daughter dying and seeks escape in the arms of his mistress. It is Lucy who nurses her back to health. When it comes to transferring the maternal legacy of tradition to her daughter, Isie, Lucy is the true black mother in gifting her feather bed, for she understands that family objects give a sense of belonging. In giving her the bed, Lucy is telling Isie to build her life on the foundation of maternal legacy. But that is not all. The real inheritance that Isie receives from her dying mother are the values and advice that Lucy doles out to her in ample measure.

Lucy tells Isie to get all the education she can because ‘knowledge empowers’. Lucy’s dying speech to her daughter shows that she believes in gaining and keeping power through knowledge. Lucy tells Isie to love herself more than anyone else and to strain to be the bell-cow, not the bell-cat. Lucy’s most important advice to Isie is when she tells her to challenge meaningless rituals at her death, like removing the pillow from below her head, or covering the clock, etc. (110-11). Elizabeth Meese had suggested of Janie/Hurston that by extricating herself from cultural control, she creates culture. To my mind, Lucy, too, has become a cultural innovator in her dying moments. Hemenway, too, compliments Lucy for being a “cultural creator” at the time of her death. Lucy understands fully that the cultural/emotional codes she is transferring to
her daughter will help her survive the trauma of her mother’s death. Lucy passes on to her daughter Isie the importance of interpretation and improvisation of folk traditions, in order to keep them alive. Physically, Lucy may not have survived, but, spiritually, she does achieve immortality by sowing in her daughter the seeds of independence and initiative.

Lucy is a perfect replica of what motherhood means for black women, according to Mary Burgher. For black women, says Burgher in her essay ‘Images of Self and Race in the Autobiographies of Black Women’:

...motherhood is a non-individualistic, cultural force that is not based solely on procreation, breeding or providing numbers. It means a great deal more. It means being individually creative in whatever task is before one. It means ordering the universe - or whatever small part of it one can claim - in the image of one’s personal concept of beauty, and transmitting this conception along with a respect for strength to one’s heirs (115).

Lucy’s spiritual power haunts John too, after her death. Even in her dying moments, the force transmitted through Lucy’s gaze had caused John to tremble. After her death, he is completely lost. It is as though he has lost a part of himself. After being tricked into marriage by Hattie and being betrayed by his congregation, John weeps bitterly for Lucy. He imagines her dark, bright eyes following him. He remembers how Lucy always made him feel “different” by helping him stick “another and stiffer bone down his neck”. He realizes after her death “Lucy must have had good eyes. She had seen so much and told him so much....” (144).

Lucy Potts Pearson may have been a socially/economically/emotionally marginalized character by the circumstances of her sex and race, yet, she succeeds in conferring upon herself a centrality and subjectivity on the basis of her steady strength, dogged determination and persistent perseverance by using the power of her African American cultural ethos. Many critics condemn Lucy for being an undeveloped and static character. But this is not true. To me, Lucy’s entire life is a dynamic response to the
events of her life. She negotiates for dignity through her capacity for self-expression in different ways. Keeping her home fires burning and providing the warmth of a shell to her children amidst all the numerous adversities of her life is an African American gesture of creating a "womanist" space in which to assert her control and creativity. For Lucy, her domesticity is not imprisoning, but creative and liberatory.

Bell Hooks says in *Yearning* that sexist thinking about the nature of domesticity tends to undermine the politically subversive meaning of mother’s and wife’s caring and nurturing abilities and her constructing a home place. But the philosophical core of dedication to family, home and community was definitely not without political overtones in a racist society (Hooks, *Yearning* 45). This holds true of Lucy, too. Home-making and motherhood to her are never enslaving, but natural and liberating. Being the "sun of love to rise upon a gray world of hate and indifference" for her errant husband John, is a measure of the emotional bonding she is capable of providing. Making a comparative analysis of the development of transcendental relationships by Hurston and Alice Walker in their novels *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *The Color Purple*, Ayana Karanja suggests that *Jonah's Gourd Vine* brings forth in Lucy the twin countervailing themes of female vulnerability (suffering, anguish, naivette, absence of real evil and wickedness) and female power (based on ancient African cultural being). This is in keeping with historical record and tradition. There is a personal pride in Lucy, even in the lowest moments of her life, including her death (Karanja 121-22). At no point in the novel does the reader feel 'poor Lucy'. No wonder, entire Eatonville, too mourns the passing away of the "vital Lucy".

Added to Lucy’s physical sturdiness and moral courage, is the power she derives from her way with words. In Black culture, as we know by now, verbal acumen was equated with self-knowledge and self-worth. One of Lucy’s strongest attributes that had attracted John to her in the first place in their youth, was her command over words. Lucy frequently greeted John with comic folk rhymes: “Hello yuhself, want uh piece uh cawn bread, look on de
shelf’ She translated this as “Why n’t you come tuh school too?” (17). They also exchanged folk adages as humorous love notes. The courtship rhymes they used with each other also shows her skill in a co-operative communicative behaviour, which, in turn, reflects her wit and intelligence. Later too, her use of folk sayings at the right moments displays her intuitive wisdom. When John argues with Lucy on her sick-bed for taunting him about the women he lusts after, she tells him boldly, “Ah done seen de green tree ketch on fire, so you know uh dry one will burn” and also “…ignorance is de hause dat wisdom rides…. God don’t eat no okra”. She warns him, “De hidden wedge will come tuh light some day....” (102,109). Karanja’s views are pertinent in this respect when she says that, “These utterances are empowering in the sense that they reveal an authority oppositional to a life that may, at first evidence only helplessness and vulnerability” (123). Lucy’s survival is thus based on her emotional vision and folk wisdom.

Addison Gayle says in The Way of the New World that Hurston was perhaps less interested in the men of her novels, than in the women, who receive multidimensional treatment. Furthermore:

In Jonah’s Gourd Vine and Their Eyes Were Watching God she views them as modern women, patterned upon paradigms of the past, those of the courage and strength of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Far from being the images of old, the willing co-partners of white men in the castration of black men, her women are, instead, the foundations of a new order, the leavening rods of change... (Gayle 144).

Gayle is also appreciative of the fact that in moving outside their assigned definitions, Hurston’s women must travel the route of tradition and femininity. Theirs is the triumphant race spirit.

Hurston’s analysis of the lives and experiences of black women in her novels becomes a bold feminist critique on her part. By portraying black women characters as varied as Janie, Nanny, Annie Tyler, Nunkie and Mrs. Turner in Their Eyes and Lucy, Amy, Mrs. Potts and Hattie in Jonah, Hurston
has debunked the myth of a monolithic Black female experience by contextualizing and historicizing their lives. What is more, her women are neither “degraded” women, nor “sacred cow” women, terms used by Mary Helen Washington (Introduction Black-Eyed xxxi). They are normal human beings with their usual share of drives and failings. By making ordinary women’s lives the subject of her study, Hurston has dispelled the myth that a handful of prominent Black women played an important role in Black history and that the lives of the majority of Black women were inconsequential.

To Hurston all that is personal is thus political in Black female lives. Growing up Black and female in America was definitely an arena of historical confrontation to Hurston and she has brought this out in the lives of the female protagonists of both her novels. It was the fear of Black girl’s sexuality being abused, that makes Nanny in Their Eyes and Mrs. Emmeline Potts in Jonah extremely protective of their daughters. While Nanny is horrified on seeing Janie being kissed at the gate, Mrs. Potts is extremely comic in her manoeuvres of maintaining a safe distance between Lucy and John. Janie becomes a victim of Nanny’s emotional blackmailing, but Lucy is more sure of herself right from the beginning. Janie’s learning process is more prolonged, because she has to go through two bad marriages to understand what she wants. Lucy’s education, intelligence and financially secure childhood stand by her. She is confident of her choice of a life-companion and at a very young age understands her responsibilities as wife and mother. Both women want love and loyalty in their marriages. Both are upset when their dreams are thwarted. In the Killicks’ marriage, Janie stayed for a very short while, but in her twenty-year marriage to Jody, she develops powerful defense mechanisms to save herself from the hurt her husband insists on inflicting on her. The imaginative ‘inside’, remains exclusively hers and Jody’s shells cannot reach there. Lucy nurtures her home-space as a defense-mechanism to shield herself from the hurt of a philandering husband.

While Nanny and Mrs. Potts both wish to imprison their children in what John Lowe calls “reconstructed versions of slavery” (110) through
marriage, Janie and Lucy both are against such ‘prosperous’ marriages. To both of them, status and property are debilitating and imprisoning and both uphold the values and traditions of the working class southern Blacks. Both Janie and Lucy have highly-developed political consciousness because in all their actions they are seeking liberation from white bourgeoisie values. When Janie marries Tea Cake, the Eatonville community term her act as indecorous. To them it constitutes rebellion against old and accepted standards of conduct (read white standards).

For Janie however, this act of rebellion is a return to core values. By making Janie participate in the life of the proletariat and seek their values, Hurston creates/re-creates images that had been distorted through years of white/upwardly mobile propaganda and upholds them as subversive. For Janie sex, atavism, joy and pleasure do not constitute the essence of a people but their very being. It is in the ‘classroom’ of the Everglades ‘muck’, where Janie learns to “woof” and “boogerboo” and become an accomplished liar, that she forms her own definition of life which gives her an inalienable subjectivity. Ditto for Lucy in Jonah’s Gourd Vine. When she marries the ‘no-good’ John Pearson in defiance of her mother’s wishes, for her too, it is an embracing of love and folk spirit over money or status. Not once does she wish to “class off” her husband. In fact she wants him to free himself from debilitating sexism by re-entering the community through one of its most powerful institutions - religion. She castigates Johns for his moral failings and understands that her husband’s strength lies in the cultivation of his folk temperament and pushes him in the pastorate. Hurston had once told James Weldon Johnson that, “...merely being a good man is not enough to hold a Negro preacher in an important charge. He must also be an artist. He must be both a poet and an actor of a very high order, and then he must have the voice and figure” (qtd. in Hemenway, Biography 194). Lucy understands that John has all these qualities and encourages him to cultivate them.

Living in a society that is ideologically racist and sexist and one that would want the Black women to believe that the Black men are basically
worthless and lazy, Lucy’s faith in her husband’s abilities is politically subversive, too. She understands that for the Black man to be strong, the Black woman has to be strong, too. This is in contravention of the white male capitalist fostered either x or y syndrome. John’s success as poet-preacher neither brings money nor status to Lucy and the children. In fact, at one point she is deprived of the very bed she sleeps on. Even then her faith in the folk spirit remains undeterred.

A vital part of this folk tradition which both Janie and Lucy are heir to, is the mastery of oral language as a means of power and self-realization. It has been analysed at length earlier in the chapter, how both the female protagonists use the Black idiom as a mark of highly developed political consciousness. Robert Hemenway observed that the power of women and their assertive voice in Hurston’s art are largely as a result of the influence of her own personality and of her Eatonville upbringing:

> The Black woman affirms herself in Hurston’s fiction because she has the courage and the verbal techniques to establish herself in something other than a dependent relationship with a man. It is one reason both *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* present such strong women; the biographical facts of Hurston life confirm that this verbal skill was one of the dominant characteristics of her own personality (Hemenway, “Are You” 145).

For both Janie and Lucy, their gift of orality is a natural extension of their existence and survival. Both manipulate various speech patterns and narrative modes that reveal their experience. “In the talking game of storytelling, the dozens, signifying, and courting rituals, she [the Hurston woman] is to be acknowledged as an integral part of the black oral tradition” (Peters 301-2). In all their behaviour and actions, Janie and Lucy thus abide by what Bell Hooks calls an “an aesthethic of blackness-strange and oppositional” (*Yearning* 113). To them only that meaning of life is valid which is born of their own experiences and which knowledge confers.
Janie and Lucy both hint that tradition is not a fixed condition that grants inalienable rights to anyone. Lucy’s dying instruction to Isis to “git all de education you kin” and Janie’s advice to Pheoby “you got tuh go there tuh know there” are closely parallel. To both, the life of tradition depends on dangerous acts of discovery and creation. Lucy advises Isis to break free of certain meaningless patriarchal death rituals, thereby imparting to her the value of improvisation and initiation. When Janie makes “pictures of love and light against the wall” (333) from her memory of Tea Cake and thereby fulfils her dream of living peacefully on the power of her creative imagination, hers too, is an improvisational skill. She has found out about living for herself. Bell Hooks’s term for such women would be “catalysts of change.”

In *Their Eyes*, Pheoby and Sam will be Janie’s ambassadors to the worlds of male and female discourse within the community. In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Isis will become the cultural carrier of her dead mother’s values. Both novels thus also voice Hurston’s thrust on the importance of female bonding through generations. Both female protagonists bequeath tradition and core values, even if the means are different. Both the novels affirm life, because despite the hard times and the deaths, the strength of the female protagonists of both the novels makes the books forceful in the assertion of their basic premise. Lucy lives on through planting meaningful tradition in Isis’s memory and Janie, through planting her story in the communal memory via Pheoby.

In *Their Eyes*, Janie is the griot - the teller of her own story. This retelling of Janie’s story by herself is extremely vital. It “…underscores the point of many ethnic Literatures that people are the repositories of histories, a point which was at the center of Hurston’s anthropological fieldwork” (Wolter 237). This is empowering for Janie. In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, at least in the telling of John Pearson’s story, Hurston herself becomes the griot - the chronicler of a culture, so to say. Chronicling John Pearson’s story was for Hurston also a personal odyssey into her own patriarchal origins and a coming to terms with her father’s life, with whom her relation had always been problematic, details of which appear in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a*
*Road.* By telling her father’s story, she empowers herself as a writer of fiction, permitting herself to employ some of the ‘sacrosanct’ (male) traditions of black oral tradition.

Here, I would also like to mention the debate among critics about Janie’s not having achieved a voice at the end of the novel. Darwin Turner has blamed the novel for being weak on account of a careless shift in point of view. Robert Hemenway says that the narration shifts awkwardly from first to third person. Robert Stepto says that Hurston has created the illusion of Janie’s voice, but actually she has neither really won her voice, nor her self. But, to me, the views of Michael Awkward are pertinent, who says that the “cultural imperatives” of Janie’s narration refrain her from “individual textual control” (Inspiriting 13). Awkward, alongwith Deborah McDowell, advocates a contextual approach to the narration of the novel in relation to other systems of Black expression, particularly call-and-response interaction between speaker and audience. In this process, the black audience not only listens, but also helps create the text.8

Hurston’s narrative strategy rests on the application of this African American verbal behaviour modified to the genre of the novel. So, two voices are combined into a single voice to communicate a single text and a shared perspective. Awkward also suggests that Hurston’s refusal to allow Janie as exclusive first person narrator demonstrates the “protagonist’s profound self-control and her knowledge of the impotence of solitary voice” (Inspiriting 55). Hurston’s case thus becomes an example of “collective interaction rather than individual dictation” by which she confirms Janie’s status as a “communally informed, culturally oriented Afro-American woman” (Inspiriting 55, 52). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests that in her narrative stance Hurston has “privileged a black oral tradition” and the African American cultural impulses of the novel, both in content and form, give it an aesthetic unity.9 Callahan calls Hurston, the composer and Janie, the performer of the same story. He rejects the idea that the two voices of *Their Eyes* are contentious. On the other hand, Callahan opines “Author and
character work together, each shares authorship and authority - collaboratively" (Callahan 118-19).

Hurston’s stance in both the novels is thus revolutionary. She foregrounds the power of the female vision in both the novels and makes the triumphs of her female protagonists subjective. Janie survives physically/morally/spiritually on the vision of her experiential and folk wisdom and Lucy survives morally/spiritually on the vision of her emotional and folk wisdom. An inseparable aspect of their identities and survival is Janie’s narrative authority in *Their Eyes* and Hurston’s own novelistic voice in *Jonah*.

Marginality of race, sex and class in the case of both Janie and Lucy has thus become a space of radical possibility and resistance for them. When Bell Hooks suggests that this is a marginality one would not wish to lose because it permits one to see, to create and to imagine new alternative worlds (*Yearning* 149), I am sure Hurston’s Lucy and Janie would stand by her.
Notes

1 All references to Their Eyes are hereafter given with parenthetical page number only.

2 I have made reference to this term by Hemenway towards the end of my Chapter 3 also. To me these two words - “autonomous imagination” - convey the very core of the vital liberatory potential of the black folklife, which was their strength in the racist/classist/sexist society they found themselves in in America.

3 Dixon has talked of the wilderness, the underground and the mountaintop as broad geographical metaphors for the search, discovery and achievement of self. He also quotes Dominique Zahan who has observed that among the Bantu of southwestern Africa “the mastery of the self goes together with the conquest of space”.

4 This discussion is based on my reading of Lloyd W. Brown’s aforementioned article.

5 All textual quotations from Jonah’s Gourd Vine mentioned hereafter are given parenthetically with page number only.

6 Slave narratives bear testimony to the fact that slaves felt very unhappy on account of their ignorance with respect to their date and place of birth and of their family name. This led to deprivation of identity among the slaves. Conferring a definite lineage on her characters, therefore, is a subversive gesture on Hurston’s part.

7 In his Biography, Hemenway suggests that John proposes in a traditional courtship ritual handed down from slavery which is to him a behavioural manifestation of a unique aspect of Afro-American subculture. It forms one of the poetic ceremonies that adorned life under an oppressive system. John Lowe too has testified that this is a ritualistic opening to a courting formula that existed among slaves in the nineteenth century.

8 Geneva Smitherman, the Afro-American linguist has testified that there is no sharp line between performers or communications and the audience, for virtually everyone is performing and everyone is listening. She relates this to the traditional African world view where the idea is to achieve a unified harmony.

9 The views of various critics with respect to Hurston’s narrative strategy in Their Eyes in this paragraph and in the previous one, are quoted by Michael Awkward, “The Inaudible Voice of It All” Inspiriting Influences 15-56.