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Sommaire

1. “Sisterhood in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” 1
Mame Mbayang Touré
2. “Socio-Political Upheaval And Its Immorality In Okey Ndibe’s *Arrows Of Rain*” 15
Yelian Constant Aguessy
3. “Shortcuts are Wrong Cuts: A Critical Study of Nana Grey-Johnson’s *The Magic Calabash*” 37
Abdul-Karim Kamara
4. “Between the Hammer and the Anvil: The Predicament of US Big Tech Giants in the US and Abroad” 57
Babacar Dieng
5. « Les trois formes d’ « amour » selon la philosophie de Martin Luther King, Jr » 75
Mouhamed Diop
6. « Impacto de la Revolución Cubana en la Descolonización de África » 95
Djibril Mbaye
7. « Le Kôfandé à Nigui-Saff : un art musical traditionnel au service d’une esthétique sociale » 119
Gnagny Pedro Kennedy, Kouassi Koffi Géorges
8. « Aperçu de la pratique de l’interprétation dans les centres de santé au Burkina Faso : Etude de cas » 161
F. E. G. Sanon-Ouattara, Aristide Yodal, Kathryn Batchelor
9. « Construction de syllabus de cours et apprentissage des étudiants : une exploration en département d’histoire » 191
Dègnon Bagan

10.« Le dispositif de pédagogie de projet et la construction de l'interculturel ».....211

Assane Diakhaté

11.“Mandinka Loanwords in Vélingara Fulakunda Variety: A Study of Some Morpho-phonological Features”233

Vieux Demba Cissoko

“Sisterhood in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*”

Mame Mbayang Touré

Abstract

This essay deals with the theme of sisterhood as it is manifested in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Its textualization, which continues a tradition in African and African American feminist novels, is clearly illustrated in the treatment of the friendship between Janie Crawford, the main protagonist and her bosom friend, Pheoby Watson. The relationship between both women, based on a loyal friendship and a mutual understanding, is a pretext that the novelist seizes to entitle Pheoby to narrate Janie’s life to the women of Eatonville town where she comes back after the death of her husband. The trust between the two friends who have spent nearly twenty years of companionship, allows the returnee to tell the whole truth about her conjugal life with Tea Cake and to pass it on to other women through Pheoby. In this sense, the latter acts as a mediator between Janie, the real storyteller, and the female community, her audience. In the process of their indirect dialogue, sisterhood is a thematic pretext used by Zora Neale Hurston to distance the main protagonist in *Their Eyes* from her story. It is such a narrative device legitimized by sisterhood which instills the dose of orality that the novel requires to claim its folkloristic classification.

Key words: sisterhood, friendship, narration, orality, literature.

Résumé

Cet article parle du thème de la sororité tel qu’il se manifeste dans *Their Eyes Were Watching God* de Zora Neale Hurston. Ce concept, longtemps développé dans les romans féministes africains et américains, s’illustre dans l’amitié entre Janie Crawford, le personnage principal, et Pheoby Watson, son amie intime. La relation entre ces deux femmes, basée sur une amitié sincère et une compréhension mutuelle, est un prétexte que l’auteur exploite pour permettre à Pheoby de raconter la vie de Janie aux femmes d’Eatonville d’où elle retourne après la mort de son mari Tea Cake. La confiance entre ces deux amies ayant passé presque une vingtaine d’années de compagnonnage, permet à Janie de raconter toute la vérité sur sa vie conjugale et à faire passer son message à travers Pheoby. Dans ce sens, cette dernière agit comme un intermédiaire entre Janie, le vrai narrateur et sa communauté, son auditoire. Dans le processus de ce dialogue

indirect, la sororité est un prétexte qu'utilise Zora Neale Hurston dans *Their Eyes* pour éloigner le personnage principal de sa propre histoire. Un tel procédé narratif, légitimé par le thème de la sororité, insuffle au roman, la dose d'oralité qu'il requiert pour revendiquer sa classification folklorique.

Mots-clefs: sororité, amitié, narration, oralité, littérature.

Introduction

One of the most important themes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*¹ is the staunch friendship expressed through the relationship between Janie Crawford, the main character and Pheoby Watson, the only woman she trusts. The novel opens when Janie, a beautiful woman in her forties, dressed in overalls and who has just buried her husband, Tea Cake,² returns to Eatonville after a long absence. The fact that Janie dares to walk past the townspeople sitting on their porches, arouses much curiosity about her life after she left Eatonville, with much money, and a spouse, ten years her junior. Thus, faced with Janie's spiteful silence, the other women content themselves with negative judgements based on her casual manners rather than confronting her with questions about her conjugal episode with a young musician.

In writing *Their Eyes*, the main purpose of Zora Neale Hurston is to shed light on Janie's mysterious existence in order to satisfy the curiosity of such an inquisitive minded audience. That is the reason why she presents the narrative about her main protagonist as a model of black female development or *bildungsroman*. Indeed, the novel "begins and ends with Janie and Pheoby sitting together on Janie's back porch. It spans nearly four decades of Janie's life, but is framed by a single evening's visit between two friends."³ The story

¹ Zora Neale Hurston. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Chicago-London: University of Illinois Press, 1978. All page numbers will refer to this edition.

² Tea Cake is Janie's third and last husband after Logan Killicks and Jody Starks. He died when trying to save Janie from drowning during a storm. He was bitten by a rabid dog; was infected and eventually Janie was forced to shoot him.

³ Laura Baskes Litwin. *A Reader's Guide to Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*. USA: Lake Book Manufacturing, Inc., 2010, p. 16.

is told through the voice of her bosom friend, Pheoby Watson to whom she tells about herself when she was away from Eatonville, starting from her first conscious memory of infancy concerning her discovery of being colored.

The objective of this work is to explain the meaning of sisterhood between Janie and Pheoby who confide to, and advise each other, for reciprocal empowerment. It will also show that their relationship is used as a pretext for Zora Neale Hurston to imprint through Pheoby's voice, the marks of objectivity and orality to her story about Janie Crawford.

1-Strengthening friendship into sisterhood

In general, friendship which unites Janie with Pheoby is defined as a relationship of mutual affection between two or more people. Although it is manifested in many forms, friendship includes reciprocal attitudes and feelings between two persons, but also certain personality features such as confidence, sympathy, honesty, advice, support, mutual understanding and the ability to express one's impressions and make mistakes without fear of judgment. That is the reason why a saying goes that "a friend in need is a friend in deed." In addition, it is a popular belief that there may be many friends in times of prosperity but most of them desert in times of adversity. So, the sincerity of a friend is appreciated during the time of hardship and trouble.

In the light of *Their Eyes*, the friendship between Janie and Pheoby is so strong, so sincere that the reader may see them as two sisters. Indeed, by the way both characters relate through mutual love and trust, Hurston weaves sisterhood ties that allow these women to empower each other in front of patriarchal obstacles. Generally, sisterhood is defined as "a strong feeling of friendship and support among women who are involved in action to improve

women's rights"⁴ or "the close loyal relationship between women who share ideas and aims"⁵

Even if there are other manifestations of friendship⁶ in *Their Eyes*, the one expressed between Janie and Pheoby is the most noticeable. The choice of Pheoby as Janie's bosom friend is significant to a large extent. The strong ties between both women allow the former to be a transmitter of the story of the main character to Eatonville folks curious to know the truth about Janie who has been away for two years. Thus, Pheoby plays an important role in the recounting of Janie's life because if she hadn't told her story, nobody in the town of Eatonville would have known.

Their Eyes begins with Janie's return to Eatonville after a long absence. Surprised by her arrival in the community without her husband, all the townspeople stare at her and start wondering why she has come back in informal overalls instead of a proper dress. But despite the disapproval she reads in the eyes of the people, she walks straight in the streets of the town, and does not let anyone bother her. The reader can notice that Janie's defensive attitude makes the other women angry because they want her to stop by, and give them information about her life. That is the reason why they gossip about her without restraint by asking too many questions to themselves. Here is an illustration:

What she doin' coming back here in dem overalls? Can't she find no dress to put on? – Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in? – Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her? – What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal? – Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid? – Thought she was going to marry? – Where he left her? – What he done wid all her money? – Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain't even got no hairs – why she don't stay in her class? (*Their Eyes*, p.10)

The inquisitive mind manifested about Janie's mysterious life shows the people's thirst for information concerning the enigma she has become. Diane

⁴ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sisterhood>

⁵ <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/sisterhood>

⁶ For example the relation among other women in Eatonville.

Matza thinks that their attitude is an illustration of their jealousy towards Janie when she states: “Clearly jealous of Janie’s good looks, pride, and defiance, the townspeople hide their feelings behind criticism of her manners.”⁷ It is only Pheoby who protectively tries to justify her friend’s attitude by saying that they should not meddle in Janie’s affairs, since she has nothing to tell them about her life: “Well, nobody don’t know if it’s anything to tell or not. Me, Ah’m her best friend, and Ah don’t know.” [...] “You mean, you mad ‘cause she didn’t stop and tell us all her business” (*Their Eyes*, p.12)

Right at the beginning of the novel, one realizes that Janie has distanced herself from the other women. Through her attitude, she expresses her individuality, thus veiling her life with mystery. Clearly, Janie, as a returnee, is cut from her community which adopts a marginalizing attitude. Bernard Bell writes that Hurston “empowers Janie Crawford to liberate herself and her friend Pheoby through storytelling.”⁸ Thanks to the introduction of Pheoby, Hurston succeeds in reconnecting her character with the women gossiping on her back through an indirect dialogue.

In fact, Pheoby’s close relation with Janie is a pretext used by Eatonville women to assign her a mission. They request from Pheoby to go and ask for information to her friend Janie about her existence with her late husband, Tea Cake. In this regard, it is important to note that while the front porches of the store from where they watch Janie are open spaces for the public eye, the back porch remains a private niche. So, it is not a surprise if Pheoby, who is also curious about what has happened to Janie, enters the intimate space of her friend’s back yard using their sisterly friendship as a legitimate pretext. Her intrusion into Janie’s loneliness symbolizes re-appropriation of the latter’s personal narrative.

⁷ Diane Matza. “Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison’s *Sula*: A Comparison”, *MELUS*, vol. 12, n° 3 (Autumn, 1985), p. 49. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/467120> Accessed: 22/06/2014

⁸ Bernard Bell quoted by Cathy Brigham. “The Talking Frame of Zora Neale Hurston’s Talking Book: Storytelling as Dialectic in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*”, *Analysis and Assessment*, 1980-1994, edited by Cary D. Wintz. New York, 1996, p. 405.

By retreating to the back porch, the two women, in communion, escape public curiosity to have an intimate conversation. One notices that they laugh and enjoy themselves. This means that they are happy to meet again after two years of separation. In those favorable conditions, Pheoby who re-asserts herself as Janie's only confidant in Eatonville, allows her interlocutor to break her silence and isolation. Whereas the other townsfolks criticize and gossip about Janie, Pheoby trusts her and carefully listens to her.

To a large extent, the close contact between the two women, which means familiarity, makes Janie feel at ease to reveal her inner secrets. Thus, she liberates herself from the burden of false accusations and erroneous judgment she is victim of. By sharing her marital experiences and feelings with Pheoby, Janie also communicates with the community through the voice of her friend who serves as a go-between. She confesses:

They don't need to worry about me and my overalls long as Ah still got nine hundred dollars in de bank. Tea Cake got me into wearing 'them – following behind him. Tea Cake ain't wasted up no money of mine, and he ain't left me for no young gal, neither. He give me every consolation in de world. He'd tell 'em so too, if he was here. If he wasn't gone. (*Their Eyes*, p.19)

In this case, sisterly friendship helps Janie to release frustrations and other bitter feelings, as a kind of psychological remedy or catharsis. In fact, Eatonville women have a false interpretation of Janie's life. They see her through prejudices and stereotypes, as a mature woman who allows herself too much freedom. Most of them think that Janie is of loose morality because she married a man younger than her, with whom she goes fishing, hunting. A woman says with bitter irony: "She's way past forty to my knowledge, Pheoby. No more'n forty at de outside. She's 'way too old for a boy like Tea Cake. Tea Cake ain't been no boy for some time. He's round thirty his ownself." (*Their Eyes*, p.12)

It is obvious that Janie has all women folks against her, except Pheoby. What constitutes the emotional ties that relate both friends is the assistance the latter provides the former with, in times of need. In this respect, the bowl of rice she generously brings to Janie is symbolic of her concern for a friend who must be hungry. Janie appreciates Pheoby's sincere friendship in these words:

“Ah takes dat flattery offa you, Pheoby, ‘cause Ah know it’s from de heart.”
(*Their Eyes*, p.14)

By giving her friend some food, Pheoby plays the role of a mother figure for Janie. Her concern and care manifested through such an act of generosity is quite understandable since they have been friends for 20 years as Janie informs us: “Pheoby, we been kissin’-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought.” (*Their Eyes*, p.19)

By the “good thought” Janie expects from her friend, she means the right information that Pheoby will give other women about her life with Tea Cake, with the expectation that it will correct the bad image they have of her. Thus, Janie hopes that Pheoby will bridge the gap that separates her from the rest of her community. That is the reason why she relies on Pheoby to make her voice heard, and to rebuild her reputation through the rehabilitation of Tea Cake. In an act of strong bonding that she celebrates, Janie, “full of that oldest human longing-self revelation”⁹, confides on Pheoby that she seeks a talking cure rather than a larger audience.

As one can notice, the manifestation of the two women’s relation shows that the true meaning of sisterhood is love, support, and the knowledge that there will always be someone with whom Janie can talk in order to share her story. In this regard, sisterhood helps encourage mutually in good as well as hard times.

Thanks to her true friendship with Pheoby, Janie is in contact with her community, which inspires her, a sense of social belonging. Pheoby gives and takes useful information or advice from her. Whenever she senses a danger looming, she feels it necessary to caution Janie. That is the case when Janie first fell in love with Tea Cake, the dandy, Pheoby warned her in these words: “Janie, everybody’s talkin’ ’bout how dat Tea Cake is draggin’ you round tuh places you ain’t used to. Baseball games and huntin’ and fishin.” (*Their Eyes*, p.169)

⁹ Cathy Brigham. *Op.cit.*

At that time, Pheoby's fear of Tea Cake was understandable in the sense that she wanted to protect her friend from an eventual robbery. She saw in the young man, someone who could profit from Janie's money. With honesty, Pheoby said: "But Janie, ain't you skeered he's [Tea Cake] jes after yo' money – him bein' younger than you?" (*Their Eyes*, p.169)

What shows the strength of the friendship between both black women is that each of them manifests deep concern for the other. An illustration of Janie's care for Pheoby is found in the remarks she makes during their conversation to help her improve her condition as an oppressed woman. In fact, Janie suggests Pheoby to travel in order to have new discoveries, like her. With frankness, she makes it clear for Pheoby that neither her father nor her mother can give her the experiences she needs to mature. In this regard, Janie advises her: "Pheoby, 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." (*Their Eyes*, p. 285)

One can realize that, to a large extent, Janie's story will inspire Pheoby to take decisive actions to change her living conditions. From the numerous adventures that make up the life of her friend, Pheoby can learn inspiring lessons to morally and spiritually strengthen herself. After listening to her friend's story, Pheoby understands that there can be enriching experiences in the remaining years of her own marriage. Thus, she takes the decision to open up her conjugal life by undertaking new things together with Sam, her husband. At the end of the novel, Pheoby confesses: "Lawd! [...] Ah done growed ten feet higher jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him." (*Their Eyes*, p. 284)

This confession of Pheoby is meaningful in many ways. It proves that Janie has helped her open her eyes, and cast a new look at her own existence. She acknowledges her dissatisfaction with her present life through Janie's instructive story as she realizes that she needs changes in her existence. Thus, Pheoby becomes aware of the oppressive conditions in which she lives with her husband. This image of female empowerment is favoured by the sisterly relationships between Janie and Pheoby. The mutual support, through sharing

of experiences, provides Pheoby with an opportunity to learn, grow, and take advantage of the exchange made possible during their conversation.

In this sense, Obioma Nnaemeka states: “Women appropriate and refashion oppressive spaces through friendship, sisterhood, and solidarity and in the process reinvent themselves.”¹⁰ This quotation shows that sisterhood is based on giving and receiving emotional and moral support, sharing stories and experiences, caring and nurturing each other. Clenora Hudson-Weems defines such a bonding: “This particular kind of sisterhood refers specifically to an asexual relationship between women who confide in each other and willingly share their true feelings, their fears, their hopes, and their dreams. Enjoying, understanding, and supporting each other, women friends of this sort are invaluable to each other.”¹¹

Clenora Hudson-Weems considers sisterhood to be one of the characteristics of Africana womanism.¹² She sees *So Long a Letter* as an embodiment of her theory on Africana womanism mainly because of the novel’s focus on female friendship. Hudson-Weems considers the relation between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to be a prototype of female solidarity and an example for African women. In fact, like these two characters in *So Long a Letter*, Janie and Pheoby in *Their Eyes*, cultivate and nurture sisterhood, which allows them to care for each other as well as provide moral and material support. Because they go through similar experiences, they join forces for mutual comfort in hard times to face the challenges of patriarchy in general. In their undertaking to liberate themselves, sisterhood is generally a valid pretext to confide the secrets of their lives to each other.

¹⁰ Obioma Nnaemeka. “Introduction: Imag(in)ing Knowledge, Power, and Subversion in the Margins”, *The Politics of (M)othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*. Ed. Obioma Nnaemeka. London: Routledge, 1997, p. 19.

¹¹ Clenora Hudson-Weems. *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. Troy: Bedford, 1998, pp. 65-66.

¹² A term Clenora Hudson-Weems theorizes and prefers to feminism because of its focus on realities concerning women of African descent.

2- Sisterhood as a narrative pretext

Right in the opening of the novel, one realizes that Janie Crawford, the main protagonist, refuses to directly tell her marital story with Tea Cake to Eatonville women. Her defiant position means that she assumes her choice of marriage with a younger man whose informal manners are rejected by the community. Hazel Carby argues that Janie's definite refusal to tell her story directly, as in a folktale, distinguishes not only her story from other stories that are communally shared, but also her position from that of the folk as community. In this sense, Hurston establishes an antagonistic relationship between Janie and the folk.¹³

In Carby's remark, Janie distances herself from Eatonville gossiping females to mark her individuality, thus preventing herself any contact with them. Then, one may wonder how the true story of Janie's conjugal life could be objectively passed onto the other women extrapolating on her morality. In this regard, Zora Neale Hurston uses the sisterly relations between Janie and Pheoby.

In fact, on the basis of sisterhood, Pheoby acts as a mandate of the group of women who ask her to gather information about Janie's life. With welcoming food in hand, Pheoby's real aim is to find explanations about her friend's return to Eatonville without her husband. One has to note that Janie chooses to recall her story to Pheoby with the tacit understanding that she can be trusted when repeating it to others. As an illustration, she gives Pheoby the right to talk in her name. Talking to her friend, Janie says: "You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf." (*Their Eyes*, p.17)

This statement shows that the confidence that Janie has on Pheoby is materialized by the permission given to the latter as the patented narrator of her life with Tea Cake. The close relationship between the two women guarantees that Pheoby will faithfully re-tell Janie's story in the way she

¹³ Hazel V. Carby. "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston" in *Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Casebook*, edited by Cheryl A. Wall. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2000, p. 128.

would do it herself. Although we do not hear Janie's courtroom story in the first-person voice, the entire novel is, in effect, the story that she tells in court, the story that goes way back to let people know how she and Tea Cake had been with one another. We do not hear Janie's voice until she is back in Eatonville, providing closure in her tale to Pheoby and giving instructions for the tale's retelling.

To a large extent, Pheoby represents the audience in *Their Eyes*. Just as Janie tells her story to her, Hurston tells the story to the reader. In the process of transmitting Janie's story, the novelist requires an intermediary between her protagonist and Eatonville folks, and it is Janie's friend, Pheoby, who becomes the mediator. This is made possible thanks to sisterly friendship which allows both women to intimately and generously share experiences. In this sense, Thadious Davis aptly comments: "while Janie is the teller of the tale, Pheoby is the bearer of the tale."¹⁴ In fact, "Pheoby, standing within the traditional role of women, as a friend of Janie, is the one most suited to take the message back to the community."¹⁵

Another point worth mentioning is that Hurston profits from the familiarity favored by the close connection between the two women to detach herself from the formality of style and language and textualize vernacular English. The use of Black Southern English that characterizes the novel is local colorism which celebrates orality and black culture. Thus, after Tea Cake's death, with all the experience she has accumulated and with her newly-acquired voice, Janie returns home as a survivor. She assumes the role of African storyteller, to pass her own story on to the community thanks to her intimate relations with Pheoby. In this sense, their sisterly friendship functions as a narrative pretext in *Their Eyes*.

¹⁴ Mary Helen Washington. "Foreword", *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. New York: Harper & Row, 1990, p. xii.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

The theme of sisterhood developed between Janie and Pheoby is recurrent in African and African American woman literature. Apart from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, other feminist novels such as Toni Morrison's *Sula*¹⁶, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*¹⁷, and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*¹⁸ are illustrations of the strong bonding that unites black women under the yoke of patriarchy. These novels describe the mutual attachment and commitment between oppressed females who, as victims of race, sex, and class divisions, join their strengths for survival, and give out their own voices through a type of friendship coalition magnified into sisterhood.

The study of African American woman literature shows that sisterhood is used as a means of solidarity and empowerment between women. In *Their Eyes*, through staunch bonding turned into sisterly relation, Janie and Pheoby instruct each other on the basis of their own experiences as narrator and narratee. This empowering dialogic situation means that Zora Neale Hurston uses sisterhood as a pretext which favors and justifies a rehabilitating story about Janie's marital life with Tea Cake, a man younger than her.

The construction of sisterhood in *Their Eyes* allows Zora Neale Hurston to assert her feminist commitment as it guarantees the survival and triumph of subjugated women. In this regard, sisterhood is the appropriate opportunity that Janie profits from to tell her experiences of the world and re-construct the identity of rural black Southerners as well as her personal history.

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¹⁶ Toni Morrison. *Sula*. New York: Knopf, 1973.

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