“De Nigger Woman Is de Mule uh de World”: Constructing and Deconstructing Myths and Controlling Images of African American Womanhood in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*

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Käsittelen tutkielmassani kulttuuristen myyttien ja stereotypioiden kautta mustaa amerikkalaista naiskuvaa Zora Neale Hurstonin kahdessa romaanissa, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) ja *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934). Tarkastelen siinä, edustavatko Hurstonin naishahmot stereotyyppistä käsitystä mustasta naiseudesta, joka on rakentunut lähinnä valkoisten jo orjuuden aikakaudella keksimien ja ylläpitämien hallitsevien mielikuvien ja myyttien perusteella. Tutkielmani teoreettisena kehyksenä käytän afrikkalaisamerikkalaista (mustaa) feminismiä.

Teoriakappaleissa tutkin mustan feminismin tärkeimpiä teemoja, kuten mustien feministien ainutkertaista asemaa samanaikaisesti sekä naisina että afrikkalaisamerikkalaisina. Tämä on johtanut siihen, että he monesti kokevat itsensä kaksin verroin sorrettuina. Lisäksi tarkastelen miten tämä asema on usein johtanut mustien naisten (ja feministien) tasapainoilemiseen heidän sukupuolensa ja rotunsa välillä. Käsittelen myös heidän historiallisesti vaikeaa suhdettansa "valkoisiin" femininisteihin, sekä hahmotan usein unohdetun luokka-aspektin asemaa mustassa feminismissä. Viimeisenä käyn läpi afrikkalaisamerikkalaista feminististä kirjallisuuskritisismiä, ja pohdin erityisesti monitahoista kysymystä siitä, "keillä on 'oikeus' tutkia ja hyödyntää mustien naiskirjailijoiden tuotoksia?"

Analyysiosiossani tarkastelen jo edellä mainittuja myyttejä ja stereotypioita mustasta naiseudesta. Niitä ovat "Jezebel", "Mammy", "matriarkka", "Sapphire", "muuli" ja "Superstrong Black Woman". "Jezebel" on moraalisesti ja seksuaalisesti löyhä nainen. Tämä on ollut historiallisesti ehkä kaikista vallitsevin ja samalla paikkansapitämättömin mielikuva mustista naisista. "Mammy" taas oli valkoisten tukema stereotyyppi, lähinnä koska hänet kuvattiin yleensä vanhana ja ei-seksuaalisena naisena, jonka elämäntehtävänä oli tyytyväisenä palvella valkoisia. Täten häntä ei siis koettu uhkana valkoiselle hegemonialle. "Sapphire" ja "matriarkka" ovat aggressiivisia ja suutaansoittavia, miehiä "kuohitsevia" hahmoja. "Muuli" kuvastaa taas sitä, miten mustat naiset on usein nähty kantavan raskasta (työ)taakkaa amerikkalaisessa yhteiskunnassa. "Superstrong Black Woman" on yhä ehkä kaikista vallitsevin hahmo, erityisesti mustien omissa yhteisöissä ja perinteissä. "SBW" on näennäisesti positiivinen stereotyyppi, sillä hän selviytyy aina elämän vastoinkäymisistä henkisen vahvuutensa avulla. Hänellä ei yksinkertaisesti ole varaa olla heikko

Selvitän miten nämä hallitsevat (mieli)kuvat ilmentyvät Hurstonin romaanien naiskuvauksissa ja pohdin pystyvätkö jotkut naishahmoista vastustamaan tai ylittämään niitä.
Lisäksi viimeisessä analyysikappaleessa pohdin vielä tarkemmin Janien (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*) naiseutta, koska hän on yksi tärkeimmistä kirjallisuuden mustista naishahmoista kautta aikojen.

Avainsanat: musta naiseus, musta feminismi, stereotypiat, myytit, Hurston

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1. Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston was an African American "novelist, folklorist and anthropologist, "a genius of the south,""[1] whose main time of writing and activism was in the 1920s and 1930s, decades which were characterized by deep segregation and oppression of African Americans in the USA. Furthermore, she was also an independent thinker who did not subject herself to the prevailing conventions and conditions in black literature. That is, in her essay "Art and Such" (1938) she criticised her black peers for too often concentrating only on the "Race" (problem) and the suffering of Blacks, which ". . . is the line of least resistance and least originality."[2] Moreover, earlier she had already declared that ". . . I am not tragically colored . . . I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. . . .,"[3] and this indicates that Hurston did not care about pleasing either Whites or Blacks. Further, she did not construct her main female characters, though suffering, to belong to that "sobbing school" of blacks either.

In this thesis, my aim is to examine if and how Hurston is constructing and deconstructing the myths and controlling images[4] about black womanhood in two of her novels, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934).[5] In my view this is important, for Hurston is the most celebrated and elevated African American woman writer of her time, and

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[1] This is what is engraved on her gravestone, and the obituary is by Alice Walker, who "found" Hurston's grave in 1973. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1984) 107.

[2] Zora Neale Hurston, "Art and Such" (1938), *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (New York: Meridian, 1990) 24.

[3] Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928), *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Volume 2*, 3rd ed., eds. Nina Baym et alii, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989) 1436.

[4] I will use the term controlling image throughout this thesis, but it must be mentioned that it is borrowed from Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Rouledge, 1990), and thus it is not my own idea.

[5] Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990); Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), (London: Virago Press, 1986; reprint, 2004).

she is known for her empowered, vivid and real black female characters. For example, Barbara Christian has argued that Hurston ". . . moved the image of the black woman beyond stereotype . . . She grafted . . . a new way of looking at . . . the southern black woman," and further, Henry Louis Gates Jr. sees Hurston as the first to use feminist critique in black tradition against "the authority of the male voice and its sexism."[6] Thus, I will try to study whether her female characters succeed or fail in escaping the strong stereotypes and controlling images of African American womanhood. In order to be able to do this, I will rely on black feminist critics' notions of what these controlling images are and how they have affected the life and literature of black women for centuries. As Collins (1990) has argued, ". . . the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African-American women has been fundamental to black woman's oppression" (p. 7).

In the second part of the analysis I will concentrate on if and how black women have been constructed and deconstructed as victims of oppression, and how Janie, the main female character in *Their Eyes*, although challenging the negative controlling images of black womanhood, is nevertheless constructed as a victim. I have chosen the study questions, for although Hurston's works (especially *Their Eyes*) have been widely researched on almost every possible angle, I have not come across with sufficient criticism/analysis about the general construction of black womanhood in her works. That is, the majority of the research I have encountered has concentrated on Janie and her quest for voice/self-representation/love and so on, while ignoring her and the other women in *Their Eyes* and the women in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* as representatives of black womanhood in the continuity of African American tradition. Hence, I am trying to examine how and if Hurston succeeded in deconstructing the controlling (negative) images of Black womanhood, as well as the positioning of black

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[6] Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985) 11; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 207.

women as perpetual victims, or whether her works actually maintain some of the myths. Moreover, the history of African American women is a history too often ignored, a valid example of which is Hurston's obscurity until she was newly "found" in the 1970s. Hence, it could be contended that the unconventional life of Hurston is one important part of the history of the black female experience in the USA and her observations and experiences about black womanhood and the historical status of black women are reflected in the two novels of hers.

As the theoretical frame for the coming analysis I will mainly use Black feminist criticism. To mention only a few, the ideas of black feminists such as bell hooks, Barbara Christian and Patricia Hill Collins will be important in my study. An extract that enlightens well the quests of black feminism and the theoretical frame in this thesis is uttered by bell hooks, who writes about the extraordinary position of black women and their struggle as follows:

> we [black women] did not all share a common understanding of being black and female, even though some of our experiences were similar. We did share the understanding . . . that our struggle to be "subject," though similar, also differs from that of black men, and that the politics of gender create that difference.[7]

Thus, Black feminism emphasizes black women's unique position as different from both white men and white women because of race, as well as their difference from black men because of gender. Moreover, the collective experiences of black women as a group seem to be very important to Black feminism. As Collins (1990) argues, although there are of course differences in sexual orientation, age, social class and ethnicity, "the legacy of struggle against racism and sexism is a common thread binding African-American women" (p. 22).

Further, although the strong emergence of Black feminist criticism is situated in the 1970s, it should be noted that its origins date back to the early 19th century. Collins (1990) mentions a black woman, Maria Stewart, who as early as in the 1830s demanded that black women have to become independent and "reject the negative images of Black womanhood . . . pointing out that racial and sexual oppression were the fundamental causes of Black women's

poverty" (p. 3). Thus, early African-American women intellectuals were not silent victims and Hurston certainly was not the first to urge self-reliance among black women. However, it is true that the Black feminist movement really surfaced in the 1970s to cater to the needs of African American women, for they felt they were being excluded or diminished in the universal women's movement, which actually was more or less "white women's movement."

In *Their Eyes* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the female characters are represented as individuals who nevertheless share a common heritage of being oppressed both racially and sexually. Their individual status can be said to be burdened by the negative myths and controlling images of black womanhood initiated by white men during slavery and accepted by black men in the course of time. Further, because of the negative stereotypes attached to Blacks, and especially to black women, that were mostly created by whites during the era of slavery, it was considered important during the Harlem Renaissance[8] that "Negroes" would be represented in a positive and civilized light. This meant that fictional characters should be "whitewashed" in order to show the main (white) population that the Black race is as worthy and good as the White race. For example, many novels written during the Harlem Renaissance dealt with urban tragic mulatta/o characters of better social class who could pass for white. Hurston, however, digressed completely from these subject matters and instead dealt with southern rural Blacks whose lives could be described as harder but less tragic. Moreover, Hurston was not afraid to show also the negative qualities of her characters and thus the women in her books are by no means flawless. She also felt it was important to write about representatives from African American (working and) middle class and she expressed this in her essay "What White Publishers Won't Print" (1950):

> For various reasons, the average, struggling, nonmorbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America. . . . The realization that Negroes are no better nor no worse, and at times just as boring as everybody else, will hardly kill off the population of the nation. . . . With

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[7] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992) 46.

[8] Harlem Renaissance was a Black literary and art movement that took place in Harlem, New York from the late 1910s to the 1930s.

> only the fractional "exceptional" and the "quaint" portrayed, a true picture of Negro life in America cannot be.[9]

Thus, Hurston, it could be claimed, set out on depicting the experiences of "true Negro life" which can be seen her in her portrayal of the rural southern surroundings and the black community there as well as also in the language, that is, the use of the black idiom, which the characters use. First, the concept of "community" is a central one in the black experience, and it entails several important aspects. In other words, it does not simply denote a group of people living in the proximity of each other, but all the external factors that are comprised in and define the everyday life and familiarity of the particular community. In the case of African Americans the things that are most often associated with their "world," are for example the church (and also religion), food and music, just to mention a handful. Although I do not concentrate on these features in my analysis of Hurston's *Their Eyes* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, it should be mentioned that they all are present in the works. The Black church and religion, for instance, which have always been very essential to African Americans throughout their turbulent history in the USA, do play a role in the black experiences that Hurston weaves. That is, in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the protagonist John becomes a great Preacher and the leader of the congregation, and further, many of the scenes are set in the church milieu. However, it should also be noted that in the connection with the black female characters, religion and church play only the role of defining the community life and colouring the speech. Thus the black women in Hurston's works are not religious in a vocational sense, but the church as a defining part of the community is nevertheless always present in their lives.

Another important element in Hurston's works - and in the black experience - is the language/dialect of African Americans, nowadays often called as "the Black idiom" or

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[9] Zora Neale Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print" (1950), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, eds. Vincent B. Leitch at alii. (New York & London: Norton, 2001) 1162.

"Ebonics" which, although I will not be delving into its intricacies in my analysis, I still want to briefly mention here, for it is quite a significant feature in her works. That is, Hurston was one of the first black writers whose characters exclusively used the Black dialect when speaking. Of course the Black dialect had been employed before, also by Whites, but then it was usually denoting a social or class difference between the Whites and Blacks or between "better-off" people and lower class people, and thus it was more of a deprecating mark than an authentic record of the natural way of speaking for African Americans. It could be reasoned that because Hurston was also an anthropologist by education, and hence she conducted a lot of field work in the American South (as well as in the West Indies, it should be noted), she was familiar with the "real" speech of the majority of African Americans and thus wanted also to incorporate it in her works, not as a curiosity, but as a given part of the black experience in the USA.

As a final thought I would like to reflect my own stance as a white Nordic woman studying an African American woman's texts and using the theories and ideas of black feminists. That is, it has become almost compulsory if one is a white woman, to defend one's decision to analyse the works of black women writers, for there is on the background many times feelings of guilt and confusion, for many black feminists have been vocal in criticising (usually rightfully so) white women critics' oftentimes sudden interest in what has been held as the "territory" of black women. However, for the innocent reader it can sometimes be quite uncomfortable to read guilt-ridden and frank confessions by white women about their justifications or aims in analysing black women's literature, and thus I will spare the potential readers from that. Let it just be mentioned that the reason for choosing this topic was not a calculated one, that is, I choose Hurston and her works on the basis of purely enjoying her writings, both fiction and fact, as well as always having had a keen interest in the history and experiences of African American women. As to my position as a "white Nordic woman," let

me just say that in a sense I feel it to be a positive thing, and certainly different from being "just" a white American woman, for I do not have the burden of the sensitive and oftentimes strained history and relations that African American and White American women have shared. I have simply aimed at studying a theme that has been close to my heart for a long time, and hopefully have done justice to Hurston's works as well as to African American womanhood, without compromising my position as an academic student doing an academic study.

2. Black Feminist Theory - General Thoughts and Observations

In this section for my Pro Gradu thesis, I will chart the themes and ideas of Black feminist criticism that are the most important and relevant to this study. To begin with, when I write about Black feminism, I mean the specific feminism advocated by African American women in the USA. This clarification is simply to separate black feminism from for instance third world feminism advocated by "Black" women all around the world. That is, although both these feminisms deal in particular with issues addressing women from ethnic minorities, the black feminism of African American women naturally caters especially to their history, experiences, traditions, culture and needs. Moreover, Black feminism is not a "sub-category" of mainstream white feminism, but it is quite clearly its own independent theory, or, as Audre Lorde has aptly stated, "Black feminism is not white feminism in blackface."[10] Hence, it is important for me to emphasize that my choice of theory to the analysis of Hurston's works is deeply connected to the distinct African American women's experience that they portray, and, as I am analysing texts about African American women written by an African American woman that handle African American (women's) experience, Black feminism suits these purposes the best. Later I will discuss Black feminist literary criticism, but it should already be noted at this point that both Black feminism and Black feminist literary criticism are theories that are interwoven and compliment one another and, consequently it is essential first to map out the most important themes in Black feminism. In addition, it is no coincidence that many key contemporary black women writers (Toni Morrison and Alice Walker for example) are also the advocates of Black feminism/Womanism.

Contrary to what is often thought, Black feminism did not suddenly appear in the 1970s, but a viable black women's movement had existed already a century earlier. However, what nowadays is understood as Black feminism, its methodology and aims, was more or less

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[10] Quoted in Ula Y. Taylor, "Making Waves: The Theory and Practice of Black Feminism," *The Black Scholar* 28.2 (Summer 1998): 26, EBSCOhost <http://search.epnet.com/>

developed in the 1970s, during its "claim to fame." Then again, although Black feminism gained popularity and many significant black feminist thinkers emerged during the 1970s, it was still not reaching the masses of black women. In 1970 Williams noted that average black women did not yet possess "a feminist consciousness," and a decade later Torrey still wondered why black women are yet not at the first row of the women's movement, despite being more oppressed than both white women and black men.[11] Of course, this last opinion is debatable, for as it will be later seen, black women have been weary of the (mainstream) women's movement for many legitimate reasons, and, although in the past two decades black feminists have been more and more on the same wavelength with the white feminists, it is understandable that they nevertheless are, and will be, more concerned with issues specific to black women. Thus, in spite of the concerns voiced in the 1970s, namely that there were not enough black women in the mainstream feminist movement or the critique that black women did not have feminist consciousness yet, the decade was nonetheless very fruitful in black feminist theory, critique and writings and it could be said that during the time, the modern foundations of the movement were laid.

There are, however, some broader themes in Black feminism about its purpose and direction. For instance, Collins defines Black feminism as situating black women to study how the issues affecting them in the USA can be also applied to women's issues in global context as well as "ensuring political rights and economic development" through group action in order to try to change social institutions, and Taylor writes that Black feminism is "politically opposed to imperialism and racism."[12]

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[11] Maxine Williams, "Why Women's Liberation Is Important to Black Women," *The Millitanton* (July 1970), Reprint, *A Merit Pamphlet* (Dec 1970): 5, *Documents from the Women's Liberation Movement: An On-line Archival Collection,* SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARY, DUKE UNIVERSITY, 2 Dec 2005 <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/>; Jane W. Torrey, "Racism and Feminism: Is Women's Liberation for Whites Only?," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 4.2 (Winter 1979): 281, EBSCOhost, 11 May 2006 <http://search.epnet.com/>

[12] Patricia Hill Collins, "What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond," *The Black Scholar* 26.1 (Winter/Spring 1996): 13, 14. EBSCOhost. 11 May 2006 <http://search.epnet.com/>; Taylor, 19.

Further, as it has, and will, become obvious, race is one of the corner stones of Black feminism. Nellie McKay has argued that to black feminists, the question of race is thought to be “central to the problem of gender,” while Collins says that “inserting the adjective ‘black’ challenges the assumed whiteness of feminism” and that at issue is also in what way do the voices of black women together create, establish and sustain a distinct and active African American women’s stance.[13] Taylor sees the task of Black feminism to be, in addition to fight against “exploitative capitalism” and against negative portrayals of black women’s sexuality that are based on race, “. . . to protect . . . black women’s minds and bodies” (1998, 18-19). Finally, Collins maintains that black women must accept the heterogeneity of black womanhood, and she also declares that they should move away from stressing black women’s oppression in favour to studying “How institutionalized racism operates in gender specific ways” (1996, 16).

Then, what is “Black feminist consciousness” that many of the black feminists talk about? According to Evelyn M. Simien, it basically conveys that black women are first aware of being doubly discriminated against because both of their race and gender, and second that they see themselves as a collective group.[14] Moreover, Morrison reflects that “as a black woman I view my role from a black perspective - the role of black women is to continue the struggle in concert with black men for the liberation and self-determination of blacks.”[15] In addition, black women’s negative experiences of having been oppressed, discriminated against and abused are also the core of Black feminism, and Jennifer Hamel and Helen Neville state an agenda also vital to this thesis, namely that the main task of Black feminism

[13] Nellie McKay, “The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticisms,” *New Literary History* 19.1 “Feminist Directions” (Autumn 1987): 162, JSTOR, 9 Sep 2006 <http://www.jstor.org/>; Collins (1996), 9, 13.
[14] Evelyn M. Simien, “Gender Differences in Attitudes toward Black Feminism among African Americans,” *Political Science Quarterly* 119.2 (2004): 324, EBSCOhost, 11 May 2006 <http://search.epnet.com/> ; Simien and Rosalee A. Clawson, “The Intersection of Race and Gender: An Examination of Black Feminist Consciousness, and Policy Attitudes,” *Social Science Quarterly* 85.3 (2004): 795, EBSCOhost, <http://search.epnet.com/>
[15] Toni Morrison, “What the Black Woman Thinks about Women’s Lib,” *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader,* ed. Barbara A. Crow (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 454.

". . . is to challenge the heterosexual, gender, and racial ideologies that consistently portray black women as Jezebels, Mammies and Sapphires and they argue that these stereotypes facilitate the persisting power relations that are rooted in race, gender and sexuality."[16]

At this point it is valid to mention that besides "Black feminism" there is also a similar, but nonetheless slightly different theory created by and addressing black women, which is that of Womanism. The credits for establishing this concept goes to a black woman writer Alice Walker who coined the term and the theory in the early 1980s, and took the word "Womanism" from the southern Blacks' folk utterance. Hence, Womanism is often seen as being more closely tied to the concrete historical experiences of black women as well as to the black folk tradition (Collins 1996, 10), and according to Taylor (1998, 26), the main themes of Womanism consist of Womanists being black feminists who love culture and self and recognize the value of the culture of women. Further, although these two dogmas share many parallel agendas, Collins (1996,10) argues that some black women prefer Womanism to black feminism for it is seen as supporting tighter relationships between black women and black men. Finally, Walker has uttered a somehow perplexing maxim, "womanist is to a feminist as purple is to lavender" (quoted in ibid.), which could be interpreted to evoke a kind sugarcoated hierarchy of colour in disguise of an elegant metaphor. That is, purple as a colour is darker than lavender, thus it can make one wonder if a womanist is ideologically "blacker" than a feminist, and consequently more racially "real" and worthy in the African American community? All in all, it can be contended that there is more that unites Black feminism and Womanism than separates them. Taylor (1998, 26) writes that both theories address the significance of black women's history and culture in their activism, as well as urging black women to cherish and love their unique selves, and lastly, both acknowledge that black women have a responsibility to fight against domination.

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[16] Jennifer Hamer and Helen Neville, "Revolutionary Black Feminism: Toward a Theory of Unity and Liberation," *The Black Scholar* 28.¾ (Fall/Winter 1998): 24, EBSCOhost, <http://search.epnet.com/>

Finally, Barbara Ransby seems positive about the future of Black feminism, for she states that "black feminists are not invisible, nor have [they] been effectively silenced" and besides, she notes that nowadays there is a known history of Black feminism and a large body of heterogeneous writings which thus ". . . can give [them] greater optimism for the future."[17]

In the next chapter, I will examine a theme which is defining to Black feminism, namely the unique position that African American women have (had) in the USA.

2.1. Where Do They Belong? The Position of African American Women in the USA

One of the clearest reasons for the growth of the black women's movement of the late 19th century was their exclusion from the public sphere, as well as the discrimination and oppression they daily encountered, and consequently it can be argued that it was crucial for black women to get also their voices heard. Thus, already a century ago, the (educated) black women always recognized their oppressed status, for example Fannie Barrier Williams stated in 1900 that they have always been "the least known and the most ill-favored class of women" in the USA.[18] Four years later Williams did not seem any more optimistic, for she wrote that whether she lives in the North or in the South, she knows that she will not be valued at all.[19] Another early important black woman thinker and activist, Anna Julia Cooper, further noted that although black women have to deal with both the race and the woman question, they are nonetheless an ignored issue in both.[20] It could even be maintained that Black feminism is founded on this unique position, for historically black women established their clubs, groups and later feminist organizations because they felt that they did not belong to nor were

[17] Barbara Ransby, "Black Feminism at Twenty-One: Reflections on the Evolution of a National Community," *Signs* 25.4 Feminisms at Millennium (Summer 2000): 1220, JSTOR, 26 Jun. 2006 <http://www.jstor.org/>
[18] Fannie Barrier Williams, "Club Women among Colored Women in America," *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, ed. Gerda Lerner, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972; Reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1992): 575.
[19] ----------, "A Northern Negro's Autobiography," *Black Women in White America*, 166.
[20] Anna Julia Cooper, ("The Colored Woman of the South Should Not be Ignored") *A Voice From the South by a Black Woman of the South* (1892), *Black Women in White America,* 572-73.

accepted in white women's movements. However, if they were accepted, they soon realized that their unique problems were usually ignored, for it was assumed that what applied to white women's needs and experiences, would also automatically apply to those of the black women.

Thus, what does this "uniqueness" mean? On the surface it signifies that black women are racially and culturally different from white women in the USA, as well as being different from other ethnic minorities there. As a result, their race (or "blackness") is a significant mark of their uniqueness, but at the same time, however, they are also unique from black men in that they are women. It must be noted, though, that this uniqueness has often been considered a positive aspect. That is, historically African American women have been able to turn the negative features and experiences, such as oppression and racism, into something positive, that is to say that they are unique and hence they should rely on, and support, one another, and fight together for their common good. Thus, African American women are unique because they are both women and African American, for they are separated from mainstream (white) womanhood because of their race and culture, as well as being separate from their African American "brothers" because of their gender. This differentiation from both black men and white women has often been seen also in terms of black women being multiply oppressed. They have even been described as "a slave of two slaves," which means that black women have been toiling for and being oppressed even by other oppressed - in this case by white women and black men (Torrey 1979, 284). In 1944, Anna Arnold Hedgeman already noted that ". . . it must always be remembered that Negro women have had to battle for their disinherited men and have also faced the sex handicap. . . ."[21] Hence, not only have they had to fight for and with black men for their freedom and rights, they have also been faced with the "hindrances" of their gender, that is, as Ann duCille writes, not only are black women

[21] Anna Arnold Hedgeman, "The Role of the Negro Woman," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 17.8 (April 1944): 465, JSTOR, 17 Jul. 2006 <http://www.jstor.org/>

"the second sex - *the other*" but they also belong to "the last race, the most oppressed."[22] Moreover, Simien states that "having to bear the burdens of prejudice" of both sexual and racial inequity has the outcome that black women in the USA "continue to lag behind other race-sex groups on practically every measure of socioeconomic well-being" (2004, 324). Thus, this is one way in which the "unique position" of black women as "uniquely" oppressed defines their place in the US society.

African American women's shared history and the way it connects them with one another despite for instance regional and class differences, is also a theme that defines this unique status of theirs. In other words, most of them share with one another the centuries old long history as the oppressed, first as slaves and then the struggles experienced during segregation up to their contemporary efforts. Hence, it seems to be a principal agenda for black feminists to keep the history of black women and their past struggles present, lest they be forgotten. For instance, already in 1957, although writing about black women and education, Jeanne Noble stated that "Any current exploration of the education of Negro women *must necessarily* be grounded in history" as well as also posing a question "What are the echoes of history that resound today in the current attitudes?"[23] Moreover, Lorde has said that ". . . there is a history we [black women] share because we are Black women in a racist sexist cauldron, and that means some part of this journey is yours, also," while Simien states that there is "a sense of belonging or conscious loyalty" among black women, which derives from their shared experiences.[24] Finally, Joyce A. Joyce writes, "I see an inextricable relationship between my experiences as a Black woman and a scholar, teacher and critic, experiences that have their

[22] Ann duCille, "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies," *Signs* 19.3 (Spring 1994): 592, JSTOR, 3 Mar. 2005 <http://www.jstor.org/>
[23] Jeanne L. Noble, "Negro Women Today and Their Education," *The Journal of Negro Education* 26.1. (Winter 1957): 16. JSTOR. 17 Jul. 2006 <http://www.jstor.org/> (my emphasis)
[24] Lorde quoted in Saidiya Hartman, "The Territory Between Us: A Report on 'Black Women in the Academy: Defending Our Name: 1894-1994,'" *Callaloo* 17.2 (Spring 1994): 439, JSTOR, 20 Sep. 2005 <http://www.jstor.org/> ; Simien, 2004: 326.

roots in the historical oppression of Black women."[25]

In the next chapter, I will briefly discuss the often forgotten aspect of *class* in Black feminism.

2.2. Black Feminism and the Question of Class

As Black feminism is to a great extent preoccupied with questions of gender and race, the question of class is sometimes shadowed or even overlooked by the two "main" issues. For example, Diane K. Lewis has claimed that the shared racism experienced by African Americans has regularly obscured class boundaries.[26] However, although black feminists highlight that it is a uniting factor that many of them share the same history and cultural heritage, it should be noted that this is sometimes misleading or even untrue in the present day. That is, being black, female and American today does not necessarily denote the same heritage and class, for there are black women in the USA whose ancestors were not slaves, or black women may live in many different economic situations, depending on their resources, education, work, family and the place of habitat. According to Taylor, ". . . there is not a single, monolithic black woman's standpoint, because too many variables (regional differences, skin tone, sexual orientation, age, and class . . .) divide and subdivide women" (1998, 25).

However, it should be mentioned that during the "first" black women's activism movement in the late 19th century, black women intellectuals clearly defined themselves apart from the poorer, lower-class, "immoral" black women, who were mostly from the rural South. In fact, they regarded them as hierarchically lower (class) and their attitude towards them was often

[25] Joyce A. Joyce, "Black Woman Scholar, Critic, and Teacher: The Inextricable Relationship between Race, Sex, and Class," *New Literary History* 22.3 "Undermining Subjects" (Summer 1991): 546, JSTOR, 3 Mar. 2005 <http://www.jstor.org/>
[26] Diane K. Lewis, "A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism, and Sexism," *Signs* 3.2 (Winter 1977): 360, JSTOR, 24 Jul. 2006 <http://www.jstor.org/>

benevolent and elitist. For instance, on the education of lower class black women Mary Church Terrell says, “the instruction . . . in this school is of the kind best suited to the needs of *those people* for whom it was established.”[27] Terrell also talked about southern black women as “less favored and more ignorant sisters,” and that even if they (the educated black women) wanted to turn away from the lower class black women, their actions nevertheless would influence them, for “policy and self preservation would demand that we go down among the lowly, the illiterate and the vicious” because they were bound to them by race and sex.[28] According to Jones (1982), this statement reveals the class biases of the black women elite and the fact that the southern black women were actually seen as “Black [intellectual] women’s burden” (p. 28). Therefore, it seems that there was a definite class bias in the benevolent attempts to elevate the black womanhood by rescuing the southern less “genteel” black women. Terrell (1898), again, painted a vivid picture of the status of the South: “In the backwoods, remote from the civilization . . . on the plantation reeking with ignorance and vice, our colored women may be found battling with evils which such conditions always entail” (p. 9). So, in Terrell’s view, virtue becomes analogous with (western) civilization and the southern black women are like natives (savages) who have to be “converted” in their mission.

Moreover, in the past, the class difference has often been marked by a “colour line” among African Americans. That is to say, the lighter skin tone one had the more probable it was that one belonged to the upper echelon of the Black society. As Elizabeth A. Ferguson observed in the late 1930s, “Negro society is ruled by the color lines which Negroes have set up; the lightest mulattoes are the aristocrats,” while also noting how skin colour can define black

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[27] Mary Church Terrell, “The Progress of Colored Women” (1898), *From Slavery to Freedom: The African-American Pamphlet Collection, 1824-1909. American Memory,* THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS: 13. 28 Sep. 2005 <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbaapc:@field(DOCID+@lit(rbaapc291...> (my emphasis) ; Terrell was an influential early African American woman intellectual and the first President of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW)

[28] Quoted in Beverly W. Jones, “Mary Church Terrell and the National Association of Colored Women, 1896 to 1901,” *The Journal of Negro History* 67.1 (Spring, 1982): 20. JSTOR. 20 Sep. 2005 <http://www.jstor.org/>

women's place in the marriage "market," stating that "'High yellow' girls are in a very favorable position being in great demand as the wives of dark men."[29] That is, if a black woman had a lighter skin tone, that could alleviate being poor or from humble origins, for she had better chances "climbing up" in hierarchy by marrying a well-to-do black man than a darker skinned black woman had. This "colour line," as so many other significant matters, beliefs and traditions in the African American experience, derives from the era of slavery when the lighter skinned house slaves (who were often the illegitimate children of the White men living in the house) were higher in the slave hierarchy than the darker field slaves. As Patricia Murphy Robinson remarks, this is how different (social) classes among Blacks were historically created, and as a result, Foster notes that "a caste system" emerged in which the lightest Blacks, who naturally resembled the whites most, assumed the higher status in it.[30] This was possible because they had already been granted more privileges due to their "lightness" during slavery than the "average" darker slaves.

The "colour line" can also been seen in *Their* Eyes and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, but it is interesting that while both the protagonists, Janie in *Their Eyes* and John in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, are mulattoes, it is the male one, John, who is affected by his "lightness" and many times resented because of it. That is, his stepfather Ned, for example, is clearly bitter about the light skin tone of his stepson, and all that it represents. When John's mother Amy defends him staying inside when it is raining instead of working, Ned retorts, "'John is de house-nigger. Ole Marsa always kep' de yaller niggers in de house . . . Us black niggers is de ones supposed tuh ketch de wind and de weather'" (*JG*, 4). Also, in *Their Eyes* there is Mrs. Turner, a fair-skinned black woman, who, because of this, considers herself to be socially and

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[29] Elizabeth A. Ferguson, "Race Consciousness Among American Negroes," *The Journal of Negro Education* 7.1 (Jan. 1938): 34, JSTOR, 17 Jul. 2006 <http://www.jstor.org/>

[30] Patricia Murphy Robinson, "A Historical And Critical Essay for Black Women of the Cities (excerpts)," *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation* 1.3 (Nov. 1969): 5, *Documents from the Women's Liberation Movement: An On-line Archival Collection. Special Collection Library*, DUKE UNIVERSITY, 2 Dec. 2005 <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/fun-games3/>; Frances S. Foster, "Changing Concepts of the Black Woman," *Journal of Black Studies* 3.4 (Jun. 1973): 439, JSTOR, 24 Jul. 2006 <http://www.jstor.org/>

mentally superior to darker Blacks. That is, first she tells Janie that she "'. . . hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid 'em. Us oughta class off'" and then she moans about her "sad" fate:

> "Look at me! Ah ain't got no flat nose and liver lips. . . . Ah got white folks' features . . . Still and all Ah got tuh be lumped in wid all de rest. It ain't fair. Even if dey don't take us in wid de whites, dey oughta make us uh class tuh ourselves." (TE, 211)

Here are thus examples of how Hurston saw the colour line among Blacks in the early 20th century, and a proof that it really existed and it could be either read as a critique on behalf of Hurston towards some Blacks or then just as a candid depiction of the construction and actuality of black social classes.

Although it could be argued that nowadays class lines do not follow any sort of "colour line" or geographical line in the African American society because today many of the economically richest Blacks come from the entertainment and sports world, in which the colour of one's skin or one's place of birth is not the measure of success, it should not nevertheless be forgotten that for a long time there has existed among African Americans visible bias based on one's origins or skin colour. Moreover, it should be mentioned that even nowadays the economical "upper class" comprises a very small percentage of African Americans, that is, the majority of them might be said to belong economically to the working and poorer classes. Therefore, it is fair to contend that as a result not all black women are in the same economic situation despite many of them sharing similar heritage. As Collins (1996, 15) states, black feminists, who mostly are highly educated, should bear in mind that what they see as key themes for black women might not be the same what the majority of black women (who often have not had access to higher education) deem imperative. Even so, the main consensus among black feminists seems to be, as voiced by an anonymous one, that they ". . . were able to do what white feminists have failed to do: transcend class lines and eradicate labels" (quoted in Lewis 1977, 359). This was essentially because the black feminist

organizations attracted women from all economic and social classes (ibid.), and thus not just middle-class and better-off women, of which the mainstream feminism has been accused.

In the next chapters, I will look at the criticism against (Black male) sexism and of course against Black men as well as critique against White racism and White feminism.

3. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”[31]

In this chapter I will quickly chart the criticism by black women against Whites and their oppression and racism. To begin with a brief historical example, the early black women intellectuals did not recoil from criticising the white society and white men in particular. Although they sometimes were visibly elitist and discriminating towards the poorer “immoral” southern black women, they were nonetheless aware, and unanimous, that the moral destruction of the southern black girls were mainly caused by (southern) white men’s sexual oppression of them and by the centuries-old double standards that still governed. Terrell (1904), for instance, wrote that black girls have been held “the rightful prey of white gentlemen in the South . . .” and that “they have been protected neither by public sentiment nor by law” (p. 210).

In the modern era, McKay (1987, 163) has stated that one important task of Black feminism is to always confront White (also feminist) racism as well as black male patriarchy. However, despite the criticisms by black feminists towards black men, there is still on the background a feeling that the biggest culprit (for the sometimes unhealthy relations between black women and black men) is the white society and white men and women who have historically abused and oppressed them. It has been argued that consequently, African Americans have been denied so-called normal relationships and the normal family structure. Incidentally, the modern arguments about white society being the culprit are based on historical experiences of Blacks. Foster, for instance, claims that due to black women slaves being “favoured,” they consequently received more education and better starting points in life than black men and after the emancipation it was easier for black women to find jobs, and thus “. . . white society is directly responsible for breakdowns of some Black family units . . . and for the not uncommon rivalry between the Black female and the Black male” (1973, 438).

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[31] Audre Lorde, “The Masters Tools Will Never Dismntle the Master’s House (1979), *“Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches,* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984): 110.

Foster also claimed that many black women have intentionally chosen to toil for the black liberation, for ". . . though the Black woman's oppression is compounded, the true oppressor is the same as that of their Black brothers" (1973, 440) and Toni Cade urged black women to ". . . submerge all breezy definitions of manhood/womanhood . . . until realistic definitions emerge through a commitment to blackhood" ([*The Blackwoman,* 1970, 109], quoted in Foster 1973, 440). These views thus argued that black women should put gender issues aside until the oppression of the Blacks as a group is destroyed, for the main perpetrator was the white society, and not black men.

In 1979, Audre Lorde, a black lesbian feminist poet, uttered the defining thought, "The master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house," meaning that using the methods of White society will not help in the fight against racism and injustice (1993, 110). That is, Blacks and black women should not strive to be like whites, but to devise their own, better system. Therefore, using the methods of the dominant society to fight back - a society which discriminates Blacks, sexual minorities and women, ". . . will never bring about genuine change," and ". . . in our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower" (ibid., 112). Patricia Murphy Robinson had earlier warned that Blacks should not dream about the "material possessions and power" because they are mere material power and "not power itself," and referring to the stereotypes created by whites and the lures of the western world she urges to "vomit them up!" thus igniting black women's empowerment (1969, 6). Foster went even as far as stating that "blacks must exorcise the European aspects of themselves if they are to achieve any positive and unified self" (1973, 443). Hence, these early black feminists were adamant that black women do not have to follow the path of the white society, but they can rise above that.

These comments, voiced in the 1970s, show that the criticism against the white power structure and against the "white way of living" was very central to the modern Black

feminism when it was fresh, as well as the pondering of the relations between black women and black men, and how they should not imitate the white model of female-male relationships. For instance, Mary Ann Weathers observed that black women do not have to be servants to black men, but at the same time they also do not have to question black men's manhood and consequently force them to "mess around" since that ". . . is not the way really human people live. This is whitey's thing."[32] Again, of course it should be recognized that these precise opinions were voiced during the prime of the Black power movements in which also many Black feminists took part, and drew inspiration from.

In the next chapter I will recount black women's criticism of black men and the sometimes difficult position they, as African Americans and as women, are in, having to balance between their race and gender.

3.1. Race Vs. Gender: Criticism of Black Men and Black Male Sexism

Although black feminists often maintain that Black feminism is not "anti-male," they nevertheless have not shied away from criticizing black men for their sexism and patriarchy. Historically speaking, it has been claimed that during slavery, black men did not dominate black women, like white men dominated white women, because both were ruled by whites (James Boggs quoted in Robinson 1969, 4). Hence, it could be argued that the contemporary power relations between black women and black men were born only after slavery when freed slaves began to emulate the white way of living, in which there were clearly defined gender roles and hierarchy. According to Lewis (1977, 341), the oppressed position of black male slaves led to them feeling inferior; that is, she claims that since white men dominated the African American society at the same time as black men were subjugated as well as

[32] Mary Ann Weathers, "An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force," *No More Fun and Games: A Journal of Female Liberation* 1.2 (Feb. 1969): 2, *Documents on the Women's Liberation Movement: An On-line Archival Collection*, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARY, DUKE UNIVERSITY, Dec. 2005 <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/>

witnessing the sexual abuse of black women by white men, it increased “black male powerlessness” (ibid.). This powerlessness has since repeatedly been justified as the reason for black men abusing black women, merely for them to feel empowered. Morrison (2000, 456) states that for a long time black men have been able to vent their anger solely on black women, while Robinson contends that “In the black world, the black man could only be a man at the black woman’s expense,” which is a result of him not being able to “beat the master” (1969, 6).

This inferiority experienced by black male slaves as well as the myth of the black female matriarch (who holds all the power and emasculates black men), or the “Superstrong Black Woman” are sometimes held as a direct cause for the pervasiveness of promoting black male superiority in the late 20th century. Consequently, black men have emulated the “White model” in which women must be subordinate to men, as a result of which, “Sexism could serve black men as well as it has whites . . . At the expense of their women” (Torrey 1979, 288). In addition, Williams notes that in the racist USA, black men “. . . were made to feel less of a man” and consequently they began to blame black women for their own oppressed status, and because black men feel “inferior,” they have subsequently known to use their spouses “. . . as scapegoats for their own oppression” (1970, 4).

Another important and sometimes controversial issue in Black feminism is the balancing black women (have had to) do between what is considered more imperative: fighting racism or sexism, for at times it seems these two agendas are mutually exclusive in some rhetoric. Consequently, this balancing has sometimes even culminated in the questioning of black feminists’ race loyalty. It is important to note, however, that the majority of black feminists are of the opinion that Black feminism is a construct of both these aspects. That is, black feminists and especially Womanists do not only address the issues and needs of (black) women, but they take into account issues affecting the black community and black men, too.

Historically, the rights of black women have time and again been shadowed by the rights of the Blacks as a group, which again many times has been understood as the rights of black men solely. Further, black women themselves have often consciously or unconsciously chosen battling for the benefit of the Blacks as a group over battling for the issues concerning specifically themselves. This has occurred because it has been argued (mostly by black men) that race (loyalty) must override gender concerns. Thus, for black women, Black liberation has oftentimes come before (black) women's liberation. Both Robinson (1969, 5) and Williams (1970, 5) have claimed that even during slavery, black women consciously let white men use and abuse them sexually in order to save the lives of the black men dear to them. Hence, since the slavery era, it has become a myth in itself that black women will sacrifice themselves for the good of the Black race and black men.

This aforesaid stance further became very obvious to black women during the Civil Rights movement and the following Black Power movements in the 1950s and 1960s. Angela Davis has asserted that the black freedom movements in the 1960s worked from the premise which entailed that (female) gender had to be submerged and silenced.[33] Further, in 1970, Williams aptly described the frustration that many black women felt towards the Black power movements and their patriarchy, ". . . but now, 'Black is beautiful,' and the Black woman is playing a more prominent role in the movement. But there is a catch! She is still being told to step back and let the Black man come forward and lead" (1970, 4-5). She also criticised the leaders of the Black Power movement, for some of their leading figures had given sexist comments about black women's place in the movement. For example, Stokely Carmichael had famously stated that "the position of women in the movement is 'prone'" and later Eldrige Cleaver remarked on the status of black women in the struggle, that they have

[33] Angela Davis, *Black Women, Writing, and Identity:* 172, quoted in Ula Y. Taylor, "'Negro Women Are Great Thinkers as Well as Doers': Amy Jacques-Garvey and Community Feminism in the United States, 1924-1927," *Journal of Women's History* 12.2 (Summer 2000): 106

"pussy power" (quoted in ibid., 5). In retrospect it is puzzling that these kind of sexist attitudes were supposed to excite and motivate black women to fight for the common good, which of course meant more or less "their men's" rights. Lewis has marked that some people were of the opinion that black women's appropriate job during that era was "the bearing and rearing of warriors for the struggle" (1977, 348). Again, black women were made to feel that they had a very "significant" part in the Black struggle, for what could be more important, powerful and fulfilling than being the "breeder woman" once again? Thus, in this atmosphere it was not easy for black women to pursue Black feminism; that is, according to Cynthia Harrison, the machismo of Black Nationalism made advocating Black feminism equal to treachery to the Black race.[34] This is at times true even now, for Kimberly Springer has argued that even during the 1990s black feminists were still writing that they are often made to feel that in concentrating on battling sexism and women's oppression they are in turn working against "antiracist efforts."[35]

Basically, there seems to be a "not-so-unspoken" hierarchy in the black "struggles," and it is thus interesting that black women are still made to choose their "side," considering that the early black women thinkers clearly saw that in order to "uplift" the whole black race, black women had to come first. In other words, black women have been aware for generations that it is imperative to improve their own position, for not only does it help them, but it is also in the end for the good of black men and the whole black community. Already during the Second World War, Mabel K. Staupers, a black woman, had noted that the war effort of black women was to help black men in their Civil Rights struggle while they were away fighting: "It is impossible for Negro women to permit their men to return from battlefields and find lack of privilege and opportunity" (quoted in Hedgeman 1944, 471).

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[34] Cynthia Harrison, "Bridges and Barriers: Sex, Class, and Race in Twentieth-Century U.S. Women's Movements," *Journal of Women's History* 13.4 (Winter 2002): 198, EBSCOhost, <http://search.epnet.com/>

[35] Kimberly Springer, "Third Wave Black Feminism?," *Signs* 27.4 (Summer 2002): 1059, JSTOR, 26 Jun. 2006 <http://www.jstor.org/>

However, studies demonstrate that black women often really are more aware of racism than sexism, and for many of them, black consciousness takes priority over feminist consciousness (Torrey, 282, 287). During the first steps of the modern black women's liberation movement, Weathers (1969, 2) claimed that so far black women have put their energy and effort into liberating black men, as well as also questioning how they can then be expected to "free" somebody else, when they themselves are not liberated? That is, despite the growing criticism among black feminists against the sexism of black men in the 1970s, black women still continued to favour black men. Foster observed in 1973 that although many black women were currently becoming more and more visible in the USA and in its media, most of those women think that "strengthening the Black self-image" should be and is their main cause (Foster 1973, 440-1). Thus, collective Black experience rules over collective gender experience, or, as Collins remarks, among Blacks, a rule prevails which states that "black women will support black men, no matter what" (1996, 14).

However, it could be argued that despite their "common" experiences as women living in a sexist and patriarchal world, it is white women/feminists who have faced more criticism and "flak" than black men on the behalf of black women/feminists, which will be examined next.

3.2. The Relationship between Black Feminism and White Feminism

There has been a long history of distrust and discontent in the white women's movements on the part of black women - as Morrison has stated, "What black women feel about women's lib? Distrust. It's white, therefore suspect" (2000, 454). For over a century, black women had tried, usually in vain, to be fully included in the "universal" US women's movements, only to be rejected, discriminated against or ignored. As a result, black women saw that the only solution for them to have some bearing on their own lives and rights was to form their own organizations that catered especially to their needs and interests. The reason for Black

feminism's emergence is voiced aptly by Hamer and Neville (1999, 23) who state that it rose as a parallel to the white mainstream women's movements which did not discuss racism seriously, or take women of colour into account in their action and theory. Further, Collins observes that many women, both black and white, still think of feminism as ". . . the cultural property of white women" (1995, 13), and as Taylor notes, too many Blacks even now connect feminism solely to white, middle-class women, and not to the great efforts commenced by African Americans "to gain freedom, justice and equality" (1998, 18).

The first pivotal women's movement in the USA from which black women were excluded, was the universal women's suffrage movement, the launch of which in the USA was, it is worthy to note, closely tied to anti-slavery work; that is, the first principal white women who fought for woman suffrage, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were first involved (with their husbands) in the anti-slavery societies. The famous Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls was organized in 1848 and there Stanton made the radical claim for women's suffrage, much to her husband's shock, who left the town due to her "outrageous" claim.[36] However, it should be noted that Seneca Falls was organized by white women for white women, and Davis has pointed out that while there was one black man present at the meeting, there were no black women, and further, they were not mentioned in the documents, which is odd considering the abolitionist roots of the organizers.[37] This is even more baffling in view of the fact that the women's rights campaigners often compared their struggle with the struggle of the slaves, as for instance in 1860 Stanton said that women could identify with slaves for "while the man is born to do whatever he can, for the woman and the negro there is no such privilege. . . ."[38] What is more, during the Reconstruction, the battle between black men's

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[36] *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*, ed. Nancy F. Cott, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 235.
[37] Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Random House, 1981; Vintage Books Ed., 1983): 57.
[38] *Elizabeth Cady Stanton/Susan B. Anthony: Correspondence, Writings, Speeches*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois, (New York: Schocken Books, 1981): 83.

right to vote and universal women's suffrage intensified and a rift happened in 1870, when the 15th amendment gave black men the vote but excluded all women, the result of which was that the white suffragists excluded both black men and black women, as well as supporting the South's disfranchisement of black male voters.[39]

However, many black women did not even want to join white women's movements, for they would not have been in most cases admitted as members, for the women's movement was more or less racist.[40] For example, in 1897 Adella Hunt Logan, a black member of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), applied for speaking time at a NAWSA convention and was refused, for Anthony would not ever give the stage to ". . . a woman who had a ten-thousandth part of a drop of African blood in her veins, who should prove an inferior speaker . . . because it would militate against the colored race."[41] Thus Anthony actually insisted it was for the good of black women and their future credibility that their representative could not speak in public, for Anthony clearly assumed that she would not be eloquent or intelligent enough to handle the situation.

As the modern Black feminist movement gained momentum in the 1970s, so again did also the critique towards white feminists. For example, Foster (1973, 436) said that it is difficult for black women to relate to, or fit in, the white women's movements because black and white women simply live in different worlds, and as a result it is not easy to find matching opinions among them, while Toni Cade questioned "How relevant are the truths, the experiences, the findings of White women to Black women? I don't know that our priorities are the same, that our concerns and methods are the same" (1970, 10; quoted in Lewis 1977, 347).

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[39] Cott, 304; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Afro-American Women in History" (1989), in *Major Problems in American Women's History* (2nd ed.), eds. Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M. Alexander, (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1996): 16.
[40] Gloria Wade-Gayles, "Black Women Journalists in the South, 1880-1905: An Approach to the Study of Black Women's History," Callaloo 11/13 (Feb. - Oct., 1981): 148. JSTOR. 14 Oct. 2005 <http://www.jstor.org/>
[41] Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 119.

Torrey (1979, 287) also points out that black women find it hard to see white women as their companions because of their common history when white women were the mistresses or bosses while many black women were under their oppression and economic manipulation. Also, what did not help the relationship between black and white feminists was the re-emerging theme of white women comparing their "struggle" with the struggle of the Blacks as a group.

One issue that divides black and white women is the agenda of "women and work," for the second wave of White feminism famously wanted to free women from the domestic drudgery, demanding the right to have a job/career outside their homes in order that women could fulfil themselves and their ambitions. Of course, there is no denying that the right for women to have a career and to be independent is an imperative subject to women and feminism, but what the white women and feminists neglected to take into account was that this right was not a universal need or sign of one's independence for all women. For example, the vast majority of black women had laboured, toiled and worked for their whole existence in the USA, not because it made them feel "independent" or "liberated," but because it is a necessity for them, simply in order to subsist. Hence, historically, work for the majority of black women has not been "liberating," especially as it often took place in a white man's (or a woman's) house, under their surveillance. As said by Williams, work did not make black women independent in the "white sense," but they did become "more subject to the brutal exploitation of capitalism as black, as worker, as woman" (1970, 4). Further, as Hernandez has remarked, "liberation may mean being able to choose *not* to take a job outside the home" (1974, 18; quoted in Torrey, 1979, 285), or, as Williams has put it in a more colloquial fashion, "[the Black woman] does not feel that breaking her ass every day from nine to five is any form of liberation (1970, 6)." As this last statement proves, there was a lot of cynicism and doubt on the behalf of black feminists to the agendas of white feminists, because they simply did not

relate to the black women's lives and experience. According to Lewis (1977, 346) black women contrasted their situation with that of the white women's, many of whom (at least in the bourgeoisie lib movement) did not have to work, for their husbands provided for them as well, while simultaneously black women were doing menial labour, not to forget that many of them could not rely on male support.

Another issue that is seen as widening the gap between Black feminism and mainstream feminisms is that black feminists are very adamant that the feminism they advocate is not anti-male. This is in contrast with the aura and opinions that the most radical mainstream white feminists spread in the 1970s by arguing for a female unity and world in which there was very little room for men, and there is (still) a widespread notion that these feminists were very hostile towards men in general as well as blaming them for all the ills possible. This view is quite foreign to black women, however, and a one reason for this could be that historically black women have always been a great deal more equal with black men than white women have been with white men. In the first metres of the modern Black feminist movement, Weathers stated that "Let it be clearly understood that Black women's liberation is not anti-male; any such sentiment or interpretation as such can not be tolerated . . . It [the movement] is - pro-human for all peoples" (1969, 2), a thought which is also essential constituent of Womanism especially. Thus, it could be contended that from the start of contemporary Black feminism, many black women wanted to create a movement that, unlike their experiences with White feminisms, would be unbiased and racially and sexually tolerant.

It has also been claimed that many black feminists have not had much respect for white women, for as some black feminist thinkers have argued, because of white women's actions, and because the long sensitive shared history between them, black women actually feel superior to white women. Morrison, for instance, argues that ". . . black women have always considered themselves superior to white women. Not racially superior, just superior in terms

of ability to function healthily in the world" and she also says that it is impossible for black women to have a high regard for white women, for they do not think they are generally capable and proficient, and hence also the offhand attitude towards White feminisms (2000, 458). Finally, it could be claimed that the distrust toward white feminists has occurred for a valid reason, for many of the white feminists wrongly thought that the "women's liberation," which was planned by white women for the needs of white women using the history and experiences of white women, would be applicable to all racial, ethnic and sexual minority women. To sum up, Torrey (1979, 287) claims black women in general have had an accumulation of feelings towards white women and as a result, it is difficult for them to see them as "sisters" or "partners" in the same struggle against the same enemy, and that is why Torrey has stated that to get black women genuinely to take part in the feminist movement, whites ". . . must make an effort to work with Black women and to see the problem of racism as clearly as they see sexism" (ibid., 291). Hence, it is often easier for black women feel connected with black men than with white women, that is, in the experience of black women, race is felt to be a more uniting characteristic than gender.

In the last theory chapter, I will discuss Black feminist literary theory, its aims as well as the central question of who can legitimately analyse black women writers' texts.

3.3. Black Feminist Literary Theory - Who Owns Black Women's Literature?

The awakening of the black women's liberation movement and Black feminism in the 1960s and 1970s also increased the interest in black (women's) literature, making it a defining part of blackness. Consequently, in the search for the roots of Black experience, black women and men started to unearth the long ignored "missing" black authors and their works, of whom Zora Neale Hurston, for instance, is a valid example. Also, this is the era in which Black feminist literary criticism was really developed to provide black women with their own

distinct experiences with regard to black (women's) literature. Of course, black male writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright were known in the black community, but they were men and what was thus missing was awareness of works by black women, not to mention that, as Foster has said, "as far as the major white literary critics are concerned, Black literature never existed" (1973, 444). Christian simply says that it is a fact that black literature has been often overlooked in the USA, and McKay mentions that especially black women writers were not valued, and their works were ignored or even derided by the main society.[42]

Foster, however, also notes that as early as in 1895, a black woman, Victoria Earle Matthews, had written an address titled "The Value of Race Literature" and thus she is, "a part of a long tradition of extracurricular literary study."[43] That is, even though black literature, and mainly that by black women, was obscured from the white world, there still had been a tradition in the black (middle-class) community of backing and writing about black literature. In addition, it should be noted that black women had set up literary clubs already in the early 19th century and in the early 20th century black journals such as *Crisis* published poems and stories by black writers. The 1920s further were a rich time for black literature, for it gained from the whole trend of black culture being a novelty and exotic and thus in great demand and popular. It is simply that after the Harlem Renaissance, by and by black culture ceased to be "in vogue," and the overall interest in black literature outside the black community diminished.

Although there had been Black (feminist) literary criticism before 1960s and 1970s, it would only gain national and wider attention through the re-emergence of the interest in (classic) black literature which also coincided with the emergence of the "new" authors, poets

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[42] Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies* 14.1 (Spring, 1988): 71, JSTOR, 25 Jan. 2007 <http://www.jstor.org/> ; McKay, 104.
[43] Frances Smith Foster, "African American Literary Study; Now and Then and Again," *PMLA* 115.7 "Special Millennium Issue" (Dec., 2000): 1966, JSTOR, 9 Sep. 2006 <http://www.jstor.org/>

and writers, such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gayl Jones just to mention a few. Further, it was black feminists who were the ones to hoist the literature by black women into new heights and in the public eye as well as in the academia. It could be further noted that Black feminist literary criticism was also spurred by the ignorance and neglect about black women writers and their works in mainstream feminist literary theory. In her introduction to the anthology *Blackwoman*, Toni Cade Bambara states that the book was partly created "out of an impatience . . . That in the whole biographic of feminist literature, literature immediately and directly relevant to us wouldn't fill a page."[44]

As Black feminism, Black feminist literary criticism is also shaped by and connected to the history of Blacks, especially that of the women. Harris notes, "The close ties between African American history and literature are undeniable. . . ."[45] Black women writers in particular have been prolific in writing about the experience of black women during slavery, which of course is not very surprising, for many of the traumas and stereotypes even current today have been said to stem from that era. Collins contends that the fictional works by black women writers comprise a uniquely ". . . rich site for exploring Black women's agency and reclaiming the voices of the oppressed."[46] Thus, in this sense black women's literature becomes a tool for coping with the traditionally unique but often burdened and painful history of black womanhood in the USA.

What are Black feminist literary theory's main agenda and its themes? Christian charted one way in which Black literary criticism differs from White literary criticism, and this can also be applied to Black feminist literary criticism. First Christian criticises the prevailing governance of theory over the literature itself in the academia, arguing that many critics ". . .

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[44] Toni Cade Bambara, "Introduction to *The Blackwoman: An Anthology* (1970)," *Radical Feminism: Documentary Reader*, (2000): 425.

[45] Trudier Harris, "This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character," *Literature and Medicine* 14.1 (1995): 109. *Research Library. Getty Research Institute*. 22 Aug. 2006 <www.getty.edu/>

[46] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, (New York: Routledge, 2004): 60.

are not concerned with literature, but with other critics' texts" but she goes on to state that also black people have always theorized, but in ways that are different from "the Western forms of abstract logic," and she elaborates that theory for black critics is based in the narrative, in the stories themselves, as well as in "riddles and proverbs" (1988, 67). Further, Joyce writes that what are central questions to Black literary criticism is the query "whether form is more important than context" and whether you can base literary analyses simply on the subject of race (1991, 557-8), as well as also emphasizing that black critics - both females and males - must not waver from writing from a distinctly black perspective for there is an "obligation to tell all" that they know. Talking about Black feminist literary theory, Christian says that their aim should be to be receptive to complexities in the "language, class, race and gender in the literature" (1988, 69) and McKay states that it is essential for black feminist literary critics to discover a "separate autonomy," but she still sees that it is important to co-operate with white feminist literary critics (1987, 164). In 1991 Joyce (1991, 459) wrote that the unique position of black women at that time meant that black women literary critics recognize their special relation to the white power structure as well as to black men, as a result of which they not only feel empowered but which will also help them to initiate new ideas.

The question of representing stereotypical notions of black womanhood, i.e. the Jezebel, the matriarch, the Superstrong Black Woman and the mule will be delved into more deeply later, but it can be mentioned here that despite the negative implications that these stereotypes have among Blacks, some of them still abound in black literature, although for instance Barbara Frey Waxman understandably claims that African Americans should move away from the traditional (white) representation of Blacks in literature.[47] Of course, black writers do not represent black people stereotypically the same way in their works as many whites do. For

[47] Barbara Frey Waxman, "Canonicity and Black American Literature: A Feminist View," *MELUS* 14.2 "Theory, Culture and Criticism" (Summer, 1987): 92, JSTOR, 30 Oct. 2006 <http://www.jstor.org/>

obvious reasons, the equivalents of the “Black rapist” and the overtly sexualized “Jezebel” for instance are not very common in connection with white characters, but variations of these do however exist in the context of black community and experience.

The sexism of black male critics in the academia is also one major reason for the rise of Black feminist literary criticism. As Joyce states, many black male critics are elitist and sexist, and consequently they try to “silence, censure and rebuke” black women critics for defying their critical values (ibid., 560), and in a similar vein Christian (1988, 76) has criticised the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, although being an important developer of Black literary criticism, for nevertheless being sexist. In other words, it is the old story once again, when the ideology of the 1960s referred to “Black” power, “Black” literature and “Black” arts, it actually meant “Black male.”

One controversial issue in Black feminist literary criticism/theory is the question of “Who owns it?” That is, black feminists have wondered and argued whether it is justifiable for white women to analyse black women’s texts *and* receive recognition for their analysis. In other words, some black women/feminists have felt that it is not simply that they brought black women writers into the light in the academia, but that in return for this, white women critics and feminists are reaping the benefits. There is also the feeling of lawful “possession” among black women about black women’s literature, no matter how “un-academic” it may sound. Although black feminists/women scholars want the works of black women writers to be recognized and studied outside the black community, some of them still have conflicting feelings about white women entering “their territory.” However, it must be noted that black women have a valid reason for reacting possessively to black women’s literature, for in the past, few people have been truly interested in it outside the black community. It can be perplexing that suddenly, after black women’s literature was “re-discovered” in the 1960s and 1970s, and as a result, it gained wider recognition in the academia, as well as in the media, all

of a sudden there appear countless white women critics/feminists who take interest in the literature of black women. Christian has critiqued this development stating that it is annoying that white feminists are now "reaping the harvest" by writing about black women's literature when the black feminists did the hardest work and paved the way in the 1970s. She remarks that "Historical amnesia seems to be as much a feature of intellectual life as other aspects of American society" (1990, 61, quoted in duCille 1994, 601). Moreover, duCille has reflected on her own views and prejudices concerning this topic:

> I have a burning need to work through . . . my own ambivalence, antipathy, and, at times, animosity over the new-found enthusiasm for these fields that I readily - perhaps too readily - think of as my own *hard-won* territory. . . . I want to make explicit my own dis-ease with the antagonism to which I have admitted and by which I am myself somewhat baffled (ibid., 597, my emphasis).

However, duCille also criticises the fact that black women are not expected to begrudge this turn of events, and as a result, she says that many black women intellectuals have a "sense of being a bridge - of being walked on and passed over, of being used up and burnt out. . . ." (ibid., 605). This feeling is related to what black feminists call "a commodification of Black womanhood," which means that since the 1970s many works of black women have been analysed time and again, and they have been regarded fashionable in the academia, which has sometimes led to exploitation. As Collins puts it, ". . . black women's 'voices' now flood the market," that is, according to her, at first it seemed refreshing that the media for instance was full of black women's works, but simultaneously this change into a "hot commodity" is imminent somehow to demean the works of their critical value (1996, 9).

To conclude, it can be deemed important that black feminist literary critics acknowledge their reluctance to share "their" literature, for it also causes us white women to think about our position and agenda when analysing the works of black women writers.

The next chapters will introduce the myths and controlling images of black womanhood and how and if they are portrayed in *Their Eyes* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.

4. General Notes on the Myths and Controlling Images of Black Womanhood,

In this chapter, I will generally outline the status of black women as oppressed as well as summarizing the controlling images of black womanhood. First, however, a brief look at why the study of the controlling images is important in the context of black (female) literary tradition.

Calvin C. Hernton distinguishes a difference between the oppression suffered by African Americans as a collective group in contrast to the oppression suffered by African American women in the USA. He quotes W. E. B. Du Bois who in 1903 wrote that because the "Negro" is both Black and American, he has to bear a double consciousness, but moreover, if this is the case, Hernton points out that then the black woman has to bear "a triple consciousness," being a black American woman.[48] Consequently, they have not only suffered racism and oppression from white men and white women, but they have also been the victims of sexism in their own black communities. This is certainly the situation in Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes*, in which the black women characters, with the exception of Nanny in *Their Eyes*, although not being depicted as being directly and personally affected by racism as African Americans, are nevertheless affected by sexism in their own black communities for being (African) American women. Specifically, for instance Janie in *Their Eyes* is the sufferer of sexism in a sense which manifests itself as the mental oppression and suppression of her voice and ideas. That is, the black women in the black communities are not encouraged to express their own opinions. As an example of Janie's forced silence is the episode of "mule talk," which refers to the communal gathering when the black community in Eatonville amused themselves and each other by telling outrageous and funny stories about a mule – an event in which Janie would like to participate. Instead, Joe discards the idea saying "'You'se Mrs. Mayor Starks, Janie. . . . Ah can't see what uh women uh yo'stability would want tuh be

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[48] Calvin C. Hernton, *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers: Adventures in Sex, Literature, and Real Life* (New York: Anchor Press, 1987) 50-51.

treasurin' all dat gushers from folks dat don't even own de house dey sleep in'" (*TE*, 85). Thus, Joe justifies his silencing of Janie by class difference between them and the other town people, although it could be argued that he simply does not want Janie to cross her boundaries created by him. Thus, Janie as a (black) woman is constructed to be silent because that is for her own benefit. In this sense Hurston shows the patriarchal order that governed in the black community, and she seems to be implying that it makes little difference whether a black woman is well provided for or poor, for she is still expected to be silent behind the black man.

Collins (1990, 67) states that one of the central themes in black feminism has been to question the controlling images and stereotypes attached to black womanhood which have been enabling to some extent the oppression of black women. Moreover, black women have usually been seen as the "other" in contrast to the norm of the white woman. In the 19th century, the "cult of true womanhood," that is, the ideal white womanhood, was usually seen as virtuous, asexual, fragile and obedient. In contrast then, black women had to embody the opposite negative characteristics. Further, Hazel Carby suggests that black womanhood was thought to lack especially the characteristics of piety and purity, which incidentally were considered the core of the "cult of true womanhood."[49] For example, an extract from *Jonah's Gourd Vine* proves that at least Hurston's black characters were acutely aware of the devaluation of black womanhood and the classification of all black women as sexually promiscuous due to the supposed behaviour of one person. That is, when John Pearson is before a white court divorcing his second wife Hattie, his friend questions him why he did not let his friends tell the whole truth about Hattie and her bad character to the jury, to which John answers that:

> "Dey wouldn't make no great 'miration if you had uh tole 'em Hattie had all dem mens. Dey spectin' dat. Dey wouldn't zarn 'tween uh woman lak Hattie and one lak Lucy [John's first wife who was of good character] . . . Dey thinks all colored folks is de same dat way. De only difference dey makes is 'tween uh nigger dat works hard and

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[49] Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 32.

don't sass 'em, and one dat don't." (*JG*, 169).

This same observation was made by many of the early black women intellectuals who themselves knew, and were hence concerned that the whole race, and especially its women, would be regarded as sexually licentious because of a few individuals. According to Mary Church Terrell, "the world will always judge the womanhood of the race through the masses of our women" (quoted in Jones 1982, 27), or, as an anonymous black woman wrote in an article in 1902, "a colored woman, however respectable, is lower than the white prostitute" (*Black Women in White America* 1992, 167).

On a more external level, black women have of course been deemed lower than white women because of their looks. Williams (1970, 4) argues that despite the visible racial differences between the looks of white and black women (i.e. black women characterically having kinkier hair, fuller lips, darker skin), comparisons were continuously being drawn between them, as a result of which black women were regarded as the direct opposite of what was considered beautiful. As a consequence, Collins argues that the majority of black women are immediately excluded as unpretty or even ugly, and therefore, black women will never "measure up . . . [because] under these feminine norms, African American women can never be as beautiful as white women because they never become White (2004, 194). It is commendable, thus, that Hurston's women are not classified or defined through their looks, even though Janie in *Their Eyes*, although perhaps being the typical beautiful "mulatta" and possessing the often marveled striking long straight hair, is not described as any "better" or more worthy as for instance tiny dark-skinned Lucy in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, for what ultimately characterizes both these women, is not their looks, but their personality and spirit inside the exterior.

However, the most prevailing controlling images of black womanhood are not based on black women's outer looks, but are instead centred upon a few characters defined by their

alleged behaviour and features that emerged and were endorsed in the era of slavery. These images were the creation of white men (and women) in the slave-holder system and they helped them to justify the exploitation and oppression of black (female) slaves. The images will be examined more thoroughly in the following chapters in connection with *Their Eyes* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, but I will briefly mention them here. The most prominent characters that black women have been forced to portray are the "Mammy" who is an unthreatening and asexual older woman; the "Jezebel": a sexually promiscuous woman who is free to be exploited by men of both races. Then there is the character of the "Sapphire" who is portrayed as aggressive and bitchy, and the "matriarch" who is masculine in that she has taken over the traditional male role and thus emasculates men. Further, there is also the stereotype of black women as oppressed, which can be seen in their depictions as "mules" who literally as well as figuratively carry a heavy load on their shoulders by labouring hard. Finally, there is the more modern stereotype of the "Superstrong Black Woman" or the "SBW," who is a black woman who triumphs over suffering and victimhood because of her superhuman (mental) strength. Although this last one is a newer stereotype, or it has been "discovered" later, it could be contended that it has nevertheless been present in black women's literature (and in everyday experience) since the era of slavery.

It ought to be noted, though, that black women were not of course alone in being oppressed and stereotyped, but African American men also suffered from oppression and negative controlling images, of which the lascivious black man (or the "Black rapist") was probably the most unfair and which was the male counterpart for the Jezebel just as the "plantation uncle" was a counterpart for the Mammy. However, the most common image of black manhood is probably the Sambo, who is depicted as lazy and stupid. Even though in this study I will not delve much into the representations of black men, it is nevertheless important to also acknowledge their oppressed status, in spite of their seemingly preferred and powerful

position because of their gender. That is, black men could not take advantage of their gender like the white men, for like black women, they were also regarded as racially inferior. Thus in this case race overrides sex in the social hierarchy.

I will begin my analysis of the controlling images and myths of black womanhood with the character of "Jezebel" in connection to Hurston's female characters in *Their Eyes* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.

4.1. Jezebels: The Image of Black Women as Lascivious and Sexually Aggressive

This chapter will concentrate on the controlling image of the sexually promiscuous Jezebel, and its appearance in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Jezebel,[50] as the biblical name already connotes, is a woman of questionable character, and this has been perhaps the most controlling image of black womanhood in history. The character of the Jezebel was depicted as a sexually aggressive black woman who was lascivious by nature. It should be noted, that the terms "sexually promiscuous" and "sexual" are of course completely different, that is, for instance Janie in *Their Eyes* is depicted as a sexual woman, but she is never sexually wanton, while on the other hand Hattie in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is portrayed as being (considered by the black community at any rate) sexually loose, which of course denotes being sexually active with several men outside of wedlock.

Both bell hooks and Hazel Carby maintain that the idea of black women as sexually promiscuous derives from the era of slavery when both white men and white women reasoned the exploitation of black women slaves by stating that they really were the ones who initiated the sexual relationships (or rapes, as they in most cases actually were) with white men.
As a result, hooks states that ". . . a devaluation of black womanhood occurred . . . that has not

[50] In the Old Testament's Jezebel is the wife of the Israeli king Ahab, who makes him worship the idol Baal. In the New Testament Jezebel is an evil woman who uses a corrupting power. "Jezebel," *Microsoft (R) Encarta*. Copyright © 1994 Microsoft Corporation. Copyright © 1994 Funk & Wagnalls Corporation.

altered in the course of hundreds of years."[51] According to Collins the role of the Jezebel was twofold: first it categorized all black women as sexually aggressive, which facilitated the white men's exploitation, and second, this overly sexual image also denoted their reproductive capacities, and consequently, Sally Robinson notes, black slave women were often ". . . advertised as 'good breeders'" which reinforced their African roots and the stereotypical animal-like qualities associated with the native African peoples.[52] It should be mentioned that of course also black men were described using animal terminology, that is, for instance in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the main character John Pearson is described by a white (former slave owner) man as "'What a fine stud! Why boy, you would have brought five thousand dollars on the block in slavery time!'" (*JG*, 17). Further, later the white man describes John as a "splendid specimen," thus as if there were many "sub-species" of African Americans of whom he is an impressive example of the highest species.

Returning to the stereotypical representation of black women, according to Sally Robinson (1991, 140-141), behind the classification of black women as sexually lascivious was the white men's fear over female sexuality, which of course could not be assigned to white women, but which had to be displaced to black women. As a result, white women remained pure and sexually unthreatening, and thus, it could be argued, they did not threaten the white patriarchal power structure. African American women, however, could be represented as sexually aggressive, for they were considered inferior in two ways: because of their gender and because of their race. Further, by exploiting black women sexually, white men helped emasculate black men and to strip them of their masculine power as well as of their dignity. Therefore, it could be argued that the construction of black women as Jezebels had also an ideological and political function: it helped to establish and maintain the racist and sexist

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[51] bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981) 52-53. See also Hazel V. *Carby Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987) 39.

[52] Collins (1990), 77; Sally Robinson, *Engendering the Subject: Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) 140.

white power structures.

The categorization of black women as immoral has had repercussions to modern times. bell hooks (1981, 110) states that in the American patriarchal system, all women are seen as sexually evil, but because white women have been put on a "symbolic pedestal," black women have been assigned as sexually loose. This white-black antithesis has also reached black communities, where fair-skinned black women have often been put on a pedestal, while dark-skinned women ". . . have been seen as bitches and whores" (ibid.).

There is not an explicit representation of the Jezebel in *Their Eyes*, in other words, Hurston does not construct any women in the black community as being overly sexual and consequently sexually promiscuous. This could of course be a conscious decision on Hurston's part to challenge the myth of the Jezebel in favour of representing black womanhood in which sexuality is only a support and not the foundation. That is, Janie's sexuality is never alluded as being immoral or simply "bad" according to the era's governing social and Christian values. In Hurston's first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, however, the character of the Jezebel is acknowledged without avoidance by constructing one of the main female characters, Hattie, to represent her. Moreover, the main male character in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, John Pearson, has extramarital affairs with women who are more or less depicted as Jezebels, and it must be acknowledged that he himself is constructed as over-sexualized, thus representing the stereotype of the lascivious black man. However, it could be contested that this is to create a clear distinction between John and his saint-like wife, Lucy, as well as separating her from John's sexually promiscuous "other women." One of these other women, Hattie, actually succeeds in marrying John after Lucy dies and consequently she gains a legitimate position. In the minds and talks of the black community, however, Hattie remains a Jezebel despite her new married status. When John's friend hears about the marriage, he is shocked, for:

> "Dat strumpet ain't never done nothin' but run up and down de road from one sawmill camp tuh de other and from de looks of her, times was hard. . . . You done got trapped and you ain't got de guts . . . and run her 'way from here. She done moved you 'way Eatonville 'cause 'tain't 'nough mens and likker dere tuh suit her." (*JG*, 138)

Of course, John has only married a "strumpet" like Hattie because she had used hoodoo[53] to ensnare him. This could be read as Hurston's critique that men do not marry sexually promiscuous (i.e. sexually confident) women unless they are pressured or "cheated" into the marriage, for men often see them as good for sexual use only, because they allegedly inherently agree to be used. This is proved by John's derogatory remarks to Hattie:

> "Ah ain't begged you tuh marry me, nothin' uh de kind. Ah ain't said nothing' 'bout lovin' yuh tuh my knowin,' but even if Ah did, youse uh experienced woman - had plenty experience 'fo' Ah ever seen yuh. You know better'n tuh b'lieve anything uh man tell yuh after ten o'clock at night. You know so well Ah ain't wanted tuh marry you." (*JG,* 143)

In Hattie, Hurston has constructed a female character that has to bear the burden of being regarded as a Jezebel. However, it must be mentioned that Hattie is only seen through male eyes, who see her as sexually licentious, and as a result she is constructed as a Jezebel whether she wants it or not. In fact, these observations about Hattie are uttered by the male characters, and not by the narrator who does not describe her that much. In other words, the depictions of Hattie come from the lines spoken by the men in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. However, as it will be discussed later, the Jezebel represents only one side of Hattie, for she can also be seen as embodying the characters of the Sapphire and the matriarch. Nevertheless, it could be argued that Hurston is presenting and criticising the age-old governing double standards concerning women's sexuality. That is, it is not a vice or a big issue, if a man has multiple sexual partners (before marriage), but if a woman acts in a similar fashion, she is labelled "damaged goods" or sexually loose and as a result her personality will often be defined only through her sexuality. Thus, Hurston shows that when a black woman is sexually free and secure, she is often turned into a Jezebel, for her sexuality poses a threat to the patriarchy that

cannot handle a (sexually) independent woman.

Moreover, in *Jonah's Gourd Vine,* John eventually divorces Hattie, and soon marries another woman who has a good character, but that does not stop him from being unfaithful. Into his life bursts a young woman, Ora, who is a classic example of the Jezebel in that she pushes herself forward to John. She comes on to him saying "'Ora so bad now, big, good-looking daddy is mad wid her! Po' Ora can't help who she like . . .,'" and soon she makes an outright proposition saying "'Dat's right sweet daddy. Let de wheels roll. Ah loves cars. Ride me 'til Ah sweat'" (*JG*, 197). After they have slept together, it becomes clear that Ora is a prostitute, for when she has got her payment she plans that "'. . . Ah means tuh git me . . . some new garters - one red tuh draw love and one yaller one tuh draw money'" (*JG*, 200). However, it could be argued that since Ora is only a minor supporting character, she is constructed a Jezebel not to draw attention to the existence of sexually licentious black womanhood, but to highlight John's own moral corruption. In other words, Ora may be a Jezebel, but at least she is honest about who she is, while John, a newly married preacher man, can be said to represent the falsehood of men as well as the hypocrisy of the American society in which sexually independent women, irrespective of race, are labelled Jezebels, whereas men are free to - to put it subtly – "express their sexuality."

It is significant that John thinks that all women, except his first wife Lucy, are there to fulfil his sexual urges, and consequently he constructs most of the women as Jezebels, for they yield to him because he is a "yaller god." After Lucy's death, John is only relieved that he does not have to feel guilty about having affairs: "There was no more sin. Just a free man having his will of women. He was glad in his sadness" (*JG*, 136). That is, John is aware that there are plenty of "Jezebels" for him to use. In this instance John is constructed as a male "Jezebel," that is, being highly sexualized and promiscuous. I would not, however, call him

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[53] We contemporary people are familiar with the term "voodoo" but Hurston uses the more traditional or archaic (American) term of "hoodoo" which nevertheless means the same.

the “black rapist,” for this label is a white racist construction connected with the (historically illegal) sexual liaisons between African American men and white women. Moreover, it should be noted that all the women he sleeps with in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* are willing sexual partners to him and he does not have coerce them against their will.

All in all, “Jezebel” has been a core part of the constructed black womanhood in the USA, although among black women it has been always regarded as a false and unfair generalization. One of the key challenges for black feminists has been in trying to make both white men and white women as well as black men see that the myth of the sexually licentious black woman is just a myth created by white men in order to justify the sexual exploitation of black women and the inferior status of the African Americans as a group. Further, it can be seen that Hurston did not want overtly to promote this fabricated black womanhood in her novels, for although in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* there are jezebel-like characters, in her most famous work, *Their Eyes*, she does not construct sexually promiscuous black womanhood. She can be said to have helped in challenging the myth of the Jezebel, while not causing her female characters to lose their credibility and realness, as well as sexuality, in the process.

If the “Jezebel” was the ultimate negative construction of sexualized black womanhood then the familiar image of the “Mammy” had often been viewed in a positive light in the (white) American tradition.

4.2. The Mammy: The (White) Ideal of Black Womanhood

This chapter will deal with the opposite image of the Jezebel - in other words the image of the “Mammy” or “aunt Jemima,” who was usually portrayed as an asexual, fat, older black woman character that was a product of the slavery and the “southern” tradition in the USA. The Mammy’s greatest virtue was her unconditional love towards her white masters whom she willingly served and obeyed. Further, she was usually the one who took care of the white children from their infancy until they were married, and as a result she had an important and

special role (compared to other slaves) in the white family. hooks (1981) argues that the character of the Mammy was loved by whites because ". . . it epitomized the ultimate sexist-racist vision of ideal black womanhood - complete submission to the will of whites" (p. 84), that is, the most important characteristic of the Mammy is that, although "loved" by the white family in which she belongs to and works, she has nevertheless acknowledged and accepted her subordinate position (Collins 1990, 71). Moreover, Rupe Simms suggests that the Mammy image ". . . contributed to the stability of white male domination . . . [and she] exemplified the ruling class definition of white male superiority and the Black female subaltern."[54] It should be mentioned that the Mammy also appears in black tradition, but it is worthy of note that there she is represented as being quite different from the image in the white tradition; that is, in the black oral tradition the Mammy is often crafty and deceitful and not at all pleased with her servant status (Christian 1985, 5). Hence, it could be argued that the unthreatening and amiable image of the Mammy has been adapted to the common southern tradition to prop up the myth of the good old Dixie in which the slaves were always happy and content with their lives under benevolent white masters and mistresses, while the "real" black Mammy lives a double life in the black tradition.

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine* there is not a clear Mammy figure, although there is the brief appearance of John's grandmother "Old Pheemy," who is probably a Mammy herself, for at least she has good relations to the white master and her task is to take care of the people about the plantation. However, she is only in the background in just a few scenes, and therefore, like the masses of ordinary black women, we do not get to know her, she can just be said to be a compulsory illustration of, and in, the southern setting. In *Their Eyes*, though, there is the prominent character of Nanny, who is Janie's grandmother, and who can be argued to represent the whites' construction of the Mammy. To clarify, when I am discussing Nanny as

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[54] Rupe Simms, "Controlling Images and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women." *Gender and Society* 15.6 (Dec., 2001): 882. 3 Mar. 2005 <http://www.jstor.org/>

a Mammy figure, I mean that she is endowed with the mentality and some characteristics of the stereotype, and not that she really *is* a Mammy, for the character of Nanny never worked as a Mammy in the era of slavery, for she was a young woman then, and only an "ordinary" slave. As a young woman, before her "mammyhood," Nanny epitomizes the sad but common lot of the black woman slave - namely that she is sexually exploited by her white master and consequently gives birth to an illegitimate mulatta child. After the birth of her daughter, she realises that she must escape from slavery, for the master's resentful wife comes to question Nanny about her newborn daughter asking "'Nigger, whut's yo' baby doin' wid gray eyes and yaller hair?'" (*TE*, 33-34). When feeling understandably intimidated by the Mistress, young Nanny assumes the role of the obedient Mammy and answers "'Ah don't know nothin' but what Ah'm told tuh do, 'cause Ah ain't nothin' but a nigger and uh slave!'" (*TE*, 34). This does not calm down the mistress, however, but since she owns Nanny and thus has power over her destiny, she threatens to whip her and to sell her baby away. As a consequence, Nanny must take the responsibility for her own life, which means setting aside her Mammy character in order to be able to flee with her daughter. Nonetheless, after she has escaped and is free, Nanny still never becomes resentful towards whites, despite having been sexually exploited by a white man and as a result physically abused by his wife, but she adapts the characteristics of the Mammy again after she has settled down with "some good white people" (*TE*, 36).

Furthermore, Nanny's granddaughter Janie explains how Nanny was assigned the impersonal name "Nanny." She recalls that "'Ah never called mah Grandma nothin' but Nanny, 'cause dat's what everybody in de place called her.'" (*TE*, 20). In other words, Nanny did not become the Mammy figure during her slavery, but after the emancipation when she worked self-sacrificingly for her white "family." Naming (and not naming) was a common way to dehumanize slaves and servants, for it made them impersonal, so the white masters

and employees did not have to consider them equals, but only as “girls,” “boys,” “aunties,” “uncles” and “nannies.” Thus, Nanny in *Their Eyes* is a Mammy figure whether she wants it or not, for that is how her white contemporaries perceive her. Additionally, what is often connected with being the impersonal “Mammy” or “Nanny” is taking care of other people’s children, both white and black, for in the concrete sense that was the main task of mammies. This holds also true with Nanny in *Their Eyes*, for although it is not directly referred to whether she takes care of white children, it is probable for she nevertheless raises Janie and three other grandchildren when living with some white people who have children as well.

However, what is more important than the “actual” work Nanny may or may not have done, is that Hurston constructs her as a Mammy figure in showing that she has internalised certain ways of thinking common to “whiteness.” That is, Nanny is the type of black person to whom the life(style) of the whites represents the ideal, and consequently, she wants Janie to lead as decent and as ordinary life as possible, which means a financially secure future in a marriage that will save her from out-of-wedlock sexual exploitation, and hence she decides to marry Janie off to an older and respectable black man when Janie is only sixteen. Nanny justifies her decision saying “‘. . . Ah don’t want no trashy nigger . . . usin’ yo’ body to wipe his foots on’” (*TE*, 27). Although Nanny obviously wants the best for Janie, the best according to her is what she has seen in the white ways of living, and it could even be contended that Nanny considers most blacks as “trashy niggers,” just as the whites whom she works for probably do. For Nanny, a black person (woman) is happy when she settles for her lot as a subordinate to whites, but nevertheless tries to succeed in that limited situation, and in this case the best for Janie according to Nanny is old Logan Killicks with his sixty acres of land. However, Nanny actually admits to Janie that “‘T’ain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection (*TE*, 30). She therefore only wants Janie to have a secure, if uneventful life, and not fall into the pitfalls common to poorer black women, who do not have

the luxury of protection from oppression and abuse by men unlike the majority of white women, who no matter how poor, would at least have had the security and advantage of their race. A similar scene can also be found in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* when Lucy's mother Emmeline, who is not a nanny figure per se, but who nevertheless looks down on "ordinary" Blacks, wants Lucy to marry an old black man, mainly because he has established himself, that is, he has "'. . . sixty acres under plow and two mules . . .'" when Lucy herself wants to marry John, who, in Emmeline's opinion, is "'. . . uh nigger dat ain't hardly got changing' clothes'" (*JG*, 77).

When Janie is older she understands Nanny's motives and her admiration of the white lifestyle better, and she tells her friend Phoeby that Nanny:

> ". . . was borned in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn't sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin' on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat's whut she wanted for me - don't keer what it cost. Git up on uh high chair and sit dere. . . . De object wuz tuh git dere." (*TE*, 172)

It could be stated that having been constructed as a Mammy by whites leaves Nanny no other choice but to turn into a Mammy character who looks up to whites, and who wants Janie to be financially and sexually protected in life just like the white ladies she admires. Lucinda MacKethan aptly argues that Nanny does not realise ". . . that the protection she arranges for Janie in the marriage to Killicks is only another name for the slavery that she had once fought so hard to escape."[55] Moreover, Nanny does not understand that asphyxiating Janie's quest for (romantic) love and freedom by sentencing her to a lifetime of drudgery of everyday rural work is not security, but a prison for a sixteen-year-old girl. Janie herself later reflects her resentment against Nanny, who she believes shattered her dreams by marrying her off, and describes her feelings in metaphors evocative of slavery and animality: ". . . she had been whipped like a cur dog . . . [and] she had been set in the market-place to sell. Been set for

[55] Lucinda H. MacKethan, *Daughters of Time: Creating Woman's Voice in Southern Story,* (London: The University of Georgia Press, 1990) 82-83.

still-bait" (*TE*, 138).

To conclude, I argue that Hurston has constructed Nanny as possessing mammy-like characteristics, for that is the truth of how she would have been seen by the contemporary white people and thus there would have been no other role for her to adopt if she wanted to lead a safe and economically secure life. However, it could be argued that Hurston also questions some myths of the Mammy in her portrayal of Nanny, for she does not represent Nanny as donating her time to serve her white family. In fact, Hurston barely mentions the white employers and instead we see Nanny, like so many black women before and after her, dedicating her life to raising other people's children (called "othermothering"), in this case her granddaughter Janie.

To contrast, the next controlling images of black womanhood - the Sapphire and the matriarch – cannot by any means be accused of being submissive and meek.

4.3. Black Matriarchy and the Image of the Sapphire

In this chapter I am going to discuss the prevailing myths of the strong, assertive black woman who is seen as emasculating men with her aggressive attitude and behaviour. According to Robinson, also the myth of the black matriarchy is derived from the era of slavery, although it has been mostly present in the latter part of the 20th century, and she states that ". . . this myth assigns to black women a power that they simply do not enjoy" (1991, 145). Further, Collins (1990) notes that the matriarch is represented as a ". . . sexually aggressive woman . . . who emasculates Black men because she will not permit them to assume roles as Black Patriarchs. She refuses to be passive and thus is stigmatized" (p. 78). According to hooks, the seeds of black matriarchy were sown in the era of slavery in the sense that white slave owners made slave women do so-called "men's" work and thus they were represented as capable of enduring pain and harsh conditions, while simultaneously also being

able to perform their "female" household tasks, and as a result, white men argued that black women were not genuine women but "masculinized sub-human creatures" (1981, 71).

The controlling image of the Sapphire is the product of the 20th century, and it is based on a character in *Amos 'n' Andy* TV-show that was popular in the 1950s, and it has some similarities with the matriarch. Christian writes that Sapphires were represented as "loud-mouthed, strong-willed and practical . . .," but her most important feature is that she makes fools of black men.[56] Moreover, hooks (1981) adds that the Sapphire is also often depicted as ". . . evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful, in short all that the Mammy figure was not" (p. 85). Hence, it could be stated that an independent and assertive black woman is easily viewed as the black man's worst rival, for she is seen as emasculating because of her traits. It ought to be pointed out that although the "Sapphire" was popularized after Hurston had already written *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes*, she is nevertheless a figure that is probably derived from the myth of the matriarch as well as from the sexually promiscuous character of Jezebel, and thus she is relevant in this study.

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, there are several examples of women characters being depicted as matriarchs or Sapphires, the only difference being that, except for Hattie, none of these women are sexually aggressive. The first of these female characters is John's mother, Amy, who has a lazy and abusing husband Ned who tries to control and bully his family, but Amy will not let him do that without resistance, for in the tradition of the Sapphire, she is not afraid to speak her mind. For instance, when Amy forgets her "place" and is too wise and knowing for Ned's liking, he retorts "'. . . you always talkin' more'n you know. . . . You needs uh good head stompin', dass whut. You sho is one aggravatin' 'oman'" (*JG*, 1). Later Amy challenges Ned saying "'. . . Ah dare yuh tuh hit me too. You know Ahm uh fightin' dawg and mah hide is worth money. Hit me if you dare! Ah'll wash *yo'* tub uh 'gator guts and dat quick.'" (*JG*,

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[56] Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1980) 77.

3). Amy is represented both a matriarch and a Sapphire given that, despite Ned's quest to be the patriarch, which he tries to attain by intimidating and badmouthing Amy and John, Amy is the true head of the family, for she refuses to be passive and does not shy away from defending herself and her children, be it with words or with action. Consequently, it can be detected that at least Ned himself feels emasculated, for the more he is proved wrong, the more he tries to usurp the patriarchal power he feels he should exert as the man.

It is worthy of note that in addition to John's mother Amy, also Lucy's mother Emmeline is portrayed as a matriarch, who keeps a strong hold on her family, that is, she is very commanding, controlling and unbending, contrary to her husband and daughter Lucy who both are depicted as easygoing and gentle. When Lucy tries to talk sense to her suspicious mother, which she interprets as Lucy being "hard-headed," she states "'Don't you back talk *me*. When Ah speak you *move*'" (*JG*, 73). Later, when Lucy has decided to marry John against her mother's wishes, she says "'Dis gal done provoked me . . . Ah birthed her, she didn't birth me, and Ah'll show her she can't run de hawg over me'" and then she complains to her husband, who is on Lucy's side, that "'Dat youngest gal uh your'n done sassed me out, and dared me tuh hit uh. Ah birthed uh but now she's older'n me. She kin marry dat yaller wretch, but Ah means fuh her tuh tote uh sore back when he gits uh'" (*JG*, 78). These examples accordingly prove that Emmeline is loud-mouthed like the Sapphire as well as being a true matriarch in its negative sense; thus, she not only exerts her "power" on her henpecked husband, but also on her daughter, and it could be argued that this is not done out of love and concern, but merely because she wants to have power over everyone in her family.

It was earlier discussed that Hattie in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* can be said to represent the Jezebel figure, but on the other hand, Hattie also clearly has characteristics belonging to the controlling images of the matriarch and the Sapphire. That is, Hattie is accused of

emasculating John, and Hurston does depict her as treacherous, nagging, and strong-willed. It could be argued, however, that Hattie is at the same time the most independent of all Hurston's female characters in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes*, and certainly the one who is the freest from male oppression. Further, it is these "negative" characteristics of the matriarch and the Sapphire that enable her to remain self-sufficient, for she does not succumb to the role of the obedient, demure and oppressed female.

Before Hattie enters John Pearson's life, he has already been ridiculed as a "wife-made man," for his first wife Lucy is the one who is ambitious and who pushes John to succeed, and hence it could be stated that in the Pearson family, although John is seemingly the patriarch, the one who really governs is Lucy (*JG*, 113). That is, John hears comments from other men such as "'She's making a man of you. Don't let her git away'" and "' . . . 'taint you . . . Iss dat li'l' handful uh woman you got on de place . . . Anybody could put hisself on de ladder wid her in de house. . . .'" (*JG*, 85, 109-110). Further, even Lucy, though most of time being depicted as docile and sweet, is reprimanded by John of being too loud-mouthed - on at least two occasions John pleads Lucy not to "tongue lash" him (*JG*, 88, 95). Nevertheless, it could be argued that Lucy is neither a matriarch nor a Sapphire, for although strong-willed, she nevertheless represents the conventional idealised womanhood that is chaste, unassuming and submissive. Moreover, because John already was a "wife-made" man before he met Hattie, she cannot be blamed for emasculating him. However, Hattie is constructed as a woman who is self-confident, ambitious and who knows what she wants and is willing to achieve it by any means necessary - for example, she uses hoodoo to obtain John's affections. After they have been married, John's friends begin to bash Hattie, and when John does not defend her, she chides him:

> "Ah don't call dat no friend - comin' right in yo' house and talkin' 'bout yo' wife lak she wuz uh dog. If you wuz any kind of uh man you wouldn't 'low it . . . Him and them sho treats me lak uh show man treats uh ape . . . tryin' tuh put you 'gins me . . . you ought not tuh 'low 'em tuh cheap, but 'stid uh dat they comes right to yo' face and calls

yo' wife uh barrel uh dem things" (*JG*, 139).

This is the first instance when Hattie shows her "bad," loud-mouthing nature, which, it could be maintained, she is entitled to do to question John's masculinity after he has not defended her against his friends. Genevieve West states that unlike Lucy, Hattie refuses to be submissive and mothering to John, and when John tries to blame Hattie for his decline, Hattie will not take the responsibility.[57] Hattie makes it clear to John that she is not the worshipping little wife that Lucy had been to him, and that she will not tolerate his caprices and wayward behaviour: "' . . . Ah ain't no Miss Lucy, 'cause Ah ain't goin' tuh cloak yo' dirt fuh yuh. Ah ain't goin' tuh take offa yuh whut she took so you kin set up and be uh big nigger over mah bones'", finally saying that she will not be "'. . . no ole man's fool'" (*JG*, 145). Hattie thus boldly states that she will not submit to his patriarchal power only in order to let John be "the man in the house." According to Hernton (1987), the basis of patriarchy is that "men should be all-powerful and women weak" (p. 12), and indeed, West (2002, 509) argues that it is precisely the patriarchal culture that causes Hattie to manipulate John instead of mothering him. Hence, Hurston could be seen as criticising the fact that it is patriarchy that incites women to be independent and strong-willed, for they are assigned the role of a weak subordinate whether or not they accept it, and when the patriarchal society cannot handle that, those characteristics are turned into bitchiness, loud-mouthedness and emasculating. Hattie's matriarch and sapphire-like qualities are seen in a positive light when she realises, after John has been violent towards her, that she does not want to be with him any longer and files for a divorce. That is, she does not passively stay and tolerate his abuse and infidelity while waiting for him to change, but she shows that she does not need a man like him. According to West (2002, 508), Hattie uniquely refuses the cultural definitions of the proper femininity.

It is true that Hattie is constructed to represent both the matriarch and the Sapphire, but it

[57] Genevieve West, "Feminist Subversion in Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*," *Women's Studies* 31 (2002): 507. *Academic Search Elite*. EBSCOhost. <http://search.epnet.com>

should be remembered that it is the men who see those controlling characteristics of assertiveness and independence as negative and unfeminine. Thus, without being untrue for herself, Hattie could never obtain the patriarchal ideal, or, what is most important, she does not even want to. It is interesting that in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes*, Hattie is the only female character who frees herself from an oppressive relationship. That is to say, she does not just wait for the man to die, but she divorces him and lets the whole community know about his faults. Of course, Hattie cannot be seen as purely a liberated and strong black female, for it should be remembered that she relentlessly pursues John until he marries her. Had she wanted to escape all of the negative connotations of the matriarch and the Sapphire, she would not have wanted to marry a man who is unfaithful and whose ideal is the patriarchal rule. Thus, it could be said that Hattie is constructed as a matriarch and a Sapphire, and in some sense she promotes the negative myth of the bitchy black woman with a malicious tongue. However, I would argue that Hurston tries to show that this is the only way for a black woman to remain self-assertive and independent from the patriarchal power. Hurston herself was never afraid to express (loudly) her own, sometimes unconventional opinions, and she certainly did not apologize for them or for herself, a trait which led to her being often criticized by (black) men.

In the following section I am going to discuss the victimization of black women and the myth of them being long suffering but eventually surviving.

5. "De Nigger Woman Is de Mule uh de World": Black Women as Victims

In this chapter and the following sub-chapters I will study the black woman's position as the victim of oppression with regard to being considered "mules," as well as also recounting the modern and pervasive myth of the Superstrong Black Woman, and finally I will analyse one of the most famous heroines of black (women's) literary tradition, Janie, of *Their Eyes*. Further, in this main chapter I will deal with the general characteristics of black women's position as a victim of oppression and violence, as well as being considered and expected to be superstrong.

hooks has stated that African American women as a group are one of the most devalued in the USA, while SallyAnn Ferguson observes that Hurston describes the black woman's lot in life that she must prepare to support ". . . her own spiritual and physical survival because an oppressive, male-dominated world conspires to make her its beast of burden."[58] Moreover, according to Collins (1990, 6-7), there are and have been three levels of oppression of black women. First, there is the exploitation of black women's labour, the black women as "mules," which will be studied in the next chapter. Next there is the "political dimension of oppression" meaning that black women have been denied the ordinary rights (such as voting) that the white male citizens have, and finally, there are the oppressing stereotypes of black women constructed during the era of slavery, but most of which are even nowadays in force. Therefore, it is common that black women are often (constructed as) burdened with multiple victim status, in other words, they are the victims of racism, sexism, oppression, and violence.

Additionally, black women are especially often represented as oppressed in their relationships with black men as well as regularly suffering under domestic violence, and this theme is also quite prominent in Hurston's novels. According to hooks, (1981) "sexism fosters, condones, and supports male violence against women . . . men are encouraged to

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[58] Hooks (1981), 108; SallyAnn Ferguson, "Folkloric Men and Female Growth in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Black American Literature Forum* 21.1/2 (1987): 186. 14 Dec. 2004 <http://www.jstor.org/>

channel frustrated aggression in the direction of those without power - women and children" (p. 105). Moreover, she (ibid.) adds that "most men in patriarchal society . . . like to think that they will not use brutality to oppress women. Yet at very young ages male children are socialized to regard females as their enemy . . . as they grow older they learn that aggression towards women lessens their anxiety and fear that their masculine power will be usurped" (p. 107). This depicts accurately the circumstance in which Janie becomes the victim of physical violence by "the love of her life," Tea Cake, who had so far treated her very well and with respect. He, however, becomes jealous of Janie and, by using violence against her, he will show her, and the surrounding black community, who is the boss:

> Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss" (*TE*, 218).

It is telling and somehow significant that Tea Cake decides to "discipline" Janie and demonstrate his patriarchal power over her the same way the masters and overseers disciplined slaves, and "put them back in their place," only a generation or two before. That is, although being freed from slavery and all the ills it caused, black women can not still escape being oppressed and violated against, or being the bearers of the autocratic caprices by their men. Hurston further emphasizes black women's helpless position under the accepted violent atmosphere in the black community, meaning that nobody is appalled about the beating of Janie in the hands of her husband. On the contrary, the black men of the community are almost ecstatic. They actually say that Tea Cake is lucky to have Janie as the object of his violence, for "'uh person can see every place you hit her'" and it is important to them that it is said that "'. . . she never raised her hand tuh hit [Tea Cake] back, neither'" because apparently it is no pleasure hitting "ol' rusty black women," because they will fight back. One of the men says:

"Dat's de reason Ah done quit beatin' mah woman. You can't make no mark on 'em at

> all. Lawd! wouldn't Ah love tuh whip uh tender woman lak Janie! Ah bet she don't even holler. She just cries, eh Tea Cake? (*TE*, 218-19).

Missy Dehn Kubitchek tries to argue unconvincingly that the violence Janie experiences is actually "a necessary component of Janie's desire to experience truly and fully," and further, "for Janie, full participation in the life of her community must include observing, experiencing and expressing violence."[59] I would argue that this again seems to be one way of spreading the false message of the black superwoman whose worth seems to increase the more she can proudly suffer and survive. That is, instead of condemning violence against (black) women in the hands of (black) men, Kubitchek tries unsuccessfully to find something positive in the experience. She seems to suggest that violence is such an integral part in the lives of black women that they just should make the most of it in order to be and grow spiritually stronger.

It has however been implied that since black women have to continually face oppression and hardships, they have become mythically adapt at surviving. hooks (1981) blames the myth of survival partially on black men, arguing that ". . . black women [are] made to feel that when survival [is] the crucial issue, personal dignity should be sacrificed," while she also notes that the same is not expected of black men, for in her experience, many black men she knew in her childhood were of the opinion that there were some jobs that "were not worth doing, because of the loss of one's personal dignity" and that they were instead sympathized for not accepting "'the man' bossing them" (p. 77).

In *Their Eyes*, when we first encounter Janie, she is epitomizing both the myth of the Superstrong Black Woman who has survived many trials and tribulations, and is now returning home after being away for a few years:

> So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. Not the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden death, their eyes flung wide open in

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[59] Missy Dehn Kubitchek, "'Tuh De Horizon and Back': The Female Quest in Their Eyes Were Watching God," *Black American Literature Forum* 17.3 (Autumn, 1983): 112. 14 Dec. 2004 <http://www.jstor.org/>

judgment. (*TE*, 10)

This description refers to Janie losing her great love Tea Cake by a violent death in her hands, as well as consequently having had to be judged not only by the white jury but by the black community around her. This myth of survival is thus connected to one of the most pervasive and still current stereotypes of black womanhood, namely to the myth of the Superstrong "superhuman" Black Woman. Unlike some other stereotypes about black womanhood that have always been perceived as negative and derogative by African Americans themselves, the Superstrong Black Woman, or the SBW, is an exception in that it has often been promoted and even valorised among black women and black men. It has only occurred during the past few decades that black feminists have begun to question the accuracy of it and instead have started to view critically the effect it has on the representation of black womanhood in literature and the media. Also, more importantly black feminists have begun to examine what false and unfair expectations the SBW stereotype creates on ordinary African American women, for the SBW has been, and is, so persistent that it is often accepted without questioning as the innate characteristic of all black women. As a consequence, if black women show any traces of weakness they are often chastised, for they are expected to be strong and to simply cope with all adversities that life may bring about. Accordingly, Beauboeuf-Lafontant asserts that the governing image of the SBW ". . . is a limiting rather than empowering construction of Black femininity and that it rewards women for stoicism that draws attention away from the inequalities they face in their communities and the larger society."[60]

Finally, after the recently recounted "burying the dead" account, when Janie is returning to her home, her strength is acknowledged by the black community, and all eyes are on her,

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[60] Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, "Keeping Up Appearances, Getting Fed Up: The Embodiment of Strength among African American Women," *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism 2005* 5.2 (April 2005): 105, EBSCOhost. <http://search.epnet.com/>

especially the women take in her unassuming look and behaviour, for “It was a weapon against *her strength* and if it turned out of no significance, still it was a hope that she might fall to their level some day” (*TE*, 11, my emphasis). Hence, it could be claimed that although Janie is perceived to be a strong black woman, this strength is not respected in her, for to the surrounding community she is the prodigal daughter, who survived its disdain and judgement after she had broken its codes. In other words, this is an instance in which Hurston presents a situation in which the valued characteristic of strength can turn against a black woman, if it “deviates” from the accepted limits and norms of the stereotype and instead is used by a black woman for her own well-being and purposes.

3.1. Black Women as “Mules”: Toting the Heavy Load and Labour of Humankind

This chapter will concentrate on how black women are victimized in regard to the exploitation of their work in the labour market as well as in the domestic sphere. Simms (2001) writes that slave women were often seen as “insensible brutes and subhuman beasts who were only to be valued for their labor. . . .,” and further, “. . . the image of the mule justified white male superiority and validated the inferiority of African women and their exploitation as labor units” (p. 883).

Probably the most famous speech in *Their Eyes* is about Black women’s lot in the world, and it is uttered by Nanny who tells Janie that:

> “Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. . . . So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin’ fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!” (*TE*, 29)

This speech hence proves how the world really worked in the rural American South, and it is no surprise that the truth is expressed through a black woman. Although it was rarely, if ever, uttered aloud or acknowledged, the truth is that without the work effort of black slaves, both

male and female, the South and its white elite would not have been as wealthy as they were, not to mention the impact and wealth that the work of slaves guaranteed to the US economy, for without slaves there would not probably have been cotton or sugarcane industry, at least a profitable one. Moreover, it could be even contended that historically black women have been perhaps the most exploited and yet underappreciated in the American labour market, for in addition to the manual labour they have contributed in the fields and in other manual tasks, they were the ones who for centuries ensured the well-being, caretaking and rearing of a large part of the white population as wetnurses, nannies and domestic workers. Additionally, Nanny further enlightens the fate of black women to Janie saying that:

> "Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and s brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither. . . . Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me. Freedom found me with a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah'd take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her." (*TE*, 31-32)

Nanny thus tries to explain Janie that it was not her ideal either to toil hard for a living, nor did she wish that for her daughter, but there was in reality very little she could do about it, for she is a black woman in the South and hence her fate was not really in her own hands. In fact, Nanny actually had higher ambitions and hopes for herself, but she knew that she could not actualize them for "there was no pulpit" for her, and instead she did what she had to, namely took care of her daughter the best way she was able in her circumstance - by labouring hard. Nanny continues and tells about her aspirations for Janie, that is to say, she wants Janie to marry Killicks in order for her to achieve a better life, "'Ah wanted you to look upon yo'self. . . . And Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa you: Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah'm a cracked plate'" (*TE*, 37). Hence, Nanny's dreams have been shattered by life's hard realities of being used as a mule and a work-ox, which have left her "a cracked plate." She can therefore said to embody a black woman who has greatly suffered, but who, on the other hand, has survived the ordeals

of slavery, the hard physical labour, as well as her own daughter being raped. However, Nanny also uses her sufferings as a "weapon of pity" against Janie, in other words, she manipulates Janie by highlighting her own afflictions: "'You wants to make me suck de same sorrow yo' mama did, eh? Mah ole head ain't gray enough. Mah back ain't bowed enough to suit yuh!'" (*TE*, 28) It could be understood that Nanny only wants what is the best for Janie, it is just that in her mind and experience the best is a secure, if boring marriage to a reputable but non-threatening black man. Moreover, it is interesting that Nanny, who would have wanted to achieve herself something (i.e. "preach a great sermon") wants to suffocate this urge in Janie. Specifically, later Janie contemplates how she herself as a teen-age girl full of hope for the future had:

> ". . . been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of *people*; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her. . . . [but] Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon . . . and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love" (*TE*, 138).

Therefore, it could be contended that Nanny cannot see, however, that marrying Killicks will not only destroy Janie's spirit, but also make her a mule, for Killicks will expect her to do also her share of the hard labour on the farm. On this point, however, Susan Willis argues that Killicks regards his young wife as a mule only because in the rural community women were expected to do hard field labour in addition to domestic chores.[61] At the beginning of their marriage Killicks is easy on Janie, for he is mesmerised by her youthful beauty, but after a while he wants Janie to do her part of the work on the farm. Killicks argues that Janie is well capable of working hard like a man, because that is what is expected of rural black women, an example of whom his first wife was, "'If Ah kin haul de wood heah and chop it fuh yuh, look lak you oughta be able tuh tote it inside. Mah fust wife never bothered me 'bout choppin' no wood no how. She'd grab dat ax and sling chips lak uh man. You been spoilt rotten'" (*TE*,

[61] Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (London: Routledge, 1990) 46.

45). Therefore, Janie is immediately considered pampered and thus almost a disgrace to the black womanhood, when she does not right away fulfil her required duties as a black rural woman. Moreover, this is the first time that Janie has felt oppressed, but, being young, she does not realise that there are other worse oppressions than being forced to work hard for a living in order to eke out a living. Consequently, when she meets Joe Starks, who will become her second husband, it is no wonder that the life and prospects that he would have in mind for her sound quite novel and good in the ears of a teen-age girl, whose childhood has been cut short by the initiation into adulthood by a dreary marriage to an older man:

> "You ain't got no mo' business wid uh plow than uh hog is got wid uh holiday! You ain't got no business cuttin' up no seed p'taters . . . A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you." (*TE*, 49)

The result of this speech is that Janie regards the role of "a pretty doll-baby" as better choice than physical labour, and consequently leaves her husband to be with Joe. Later, however, Janie realises why it was not a better choice to be put on a pedestal, that is, after climbing to the "high stool," she ". . . done nearly languished tuh death up dere. Ah felt like de world wuz cryin' extry and Ah ain't read de common news yet" (*TE*, 172). Moreover, also again in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* a parallel incident is depicted when John promises Lucy that he will take care of her, "'Ahm gointer be uh father and uh mother tuh you. You jes' look tuh me, girl chile. Jes put yo' 'pendence in me'" (*JG*, 79). Hence, also John assures Lucy a life with no worries if she only stays as "girl chile" that is dependent on him instead of being a real adult woman with her own personality and will.

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Amy (the mother of John Pearson) is clearly a mule too, for her husband Ned expects her to do both hard manual labour in the fields, as well as to take care of the domestic household duties. When Ned asks whether the dinner is ready, after everybody in the family, including Amy, has had a hard day's work on the fields, Amy retorts to him "'Naw hit ain't. How you speck me tuh work in de field right long side uh you and den have

supper ready jes' ez soon ez Ah git tuh de house? Ah helt uh big-eye hoe in mah hand jes' ez long ez you did, Ned'" (*JG*, 5). To this Ned responses by telling Amy to shut her mouth, and later, when he comes for dinner, and does not find a plate ready for him, he ". . . uncoiled the whip [which he was already carrying in his hand] and standing tiptoe to give himself more force, brought the whip down across Amy's back" (*JG*, 8). Hence, not only is Amy a mule as a black woman who has to toil extremely in order to survive, she is also treated like a disobedient mule by being whipped for not obeying the whims and orders of its master. However, West (2002) has come to the conclusion that Amy stays with her abusive husband because she "understands patriarchy binds her on all sides" and Amy only chooses the better of two evils: her choices are either to submit to a black man or to a white man in order to survive. West truthfully states that "marriage to Ned might provide some refuge from white male oppression, but Hurston also makes it clear Amy needs refuge from the man dominant ideology. . . ." (pp. 503-504). Hence, as many black feminists and black female thinkers have often stated, when studying literature about black women by black women writers, their history under slavery and the manifold oppression they have encountered must always be taken into account. Thus, before ostracizing Amy for not leaving her violent and oppressing surroundings where she is treated like a mule, it must be remembered that she is a poor rural black woman living in the late 19th/ early 20th century in the southern USA amidst Jim Crow. That is, these facts also make her choices limited and this is what Hurston is writing about: the everyday experiences of ordinary rural black women. There is no embellishing for the white audience or the genteel black intelligentsia and middle class.

Hurston thus aptly describes the heavy lot of a black woman as a "mule" in the southern USA during and after slavery, that is, from the 1860s to the 1910s, and in doing this, she departs from the conventions of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston's (female) contemporaries did write about tragic women, but they were usually tragic mulattas of better urban circles and

not rural women who really had to toil in order to survive. That is, the urban heroines often belonged to the Black "upper class" while Hurston's female characters were of working or middle class origin. Therefore Hurston can be said to have been one of the first black women writers whose heroines represented the majority of black women in the USA, in other words, the "mules."

The next chapter will deal with the persistent and often positively viewed stereotype of the Superstrong Black Woman.

5.2. Superstrong Black Woman (SBW) - The Reluctant Stereotype

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, John's much victimized and suffering first wife Lucy sums up her life on her death bed, and consequently gives a wrenching summary about the life of a Superstrong Black Woman: "'Ah done been in sorrow's kitchen and Ah done licked out all de pots. Ah done died in grief and been buried in de bitter waters, and Ah done rose agin from de dead lak Lazarus. Nothin' kin touch mah soul no mo''" (*JG*, 131). She has thus not only been in "sorrow's kitchen" but while there she has also "licked out" all the pots, and therefore she truly knows what suffering is, and as a result, there is nothing that can stir her soul any longer. Again, like the other stereotypes of Black womanhood, the SBW has also its roots in history. Harris writes that black women were seen as ". . . towers of strength against the degradation of slavery . . . [and] they were towers of strength against the abuse of husbands and the demands of children. . . ." (1995, 109). However, she (ibid., 111) also notes that the strength of black women has been such a prominent stereotype that it has been regarded as a virtue, and the reason for this has been that it has been the only virtue that black women have historically been allowed to possess.

The characteristics associated with the SBW are keeping difficult things to herself, being pensive, silent, in self-denial, having Christian patience, doing personal sacrifices and being

authoritative and of course being “superhuman” (ibid.). In addition, according to Beauboeuf-Lafontait (2005, 106) and Harris (1995, 111), SBWs are known not for their own individual selves but for their connections and relations to others, and moreover, they do everything without complaint, and further, the Superstrong Black Women overlook their individual grieves and worries and instead aid others, thus, putting everyone else’s needs in front of their own. What is more, according to Harris (ibid., 122), they cannot fail, or have nervous breakdowns and they cannot simply be multifaceted people who feel, or, as Joan Morgan has described the SBW: her motto is “No matter how bad shit gets, handle it alone, quietly, and with dignity” (quoted in Springer 2002, 1069). For instance, in *Their* Eyes, when Janie’s second husband Joe dies, “Janie starched and ironed her face and came set in the funeral behind her veil. “It was like a wall of stone and steel” (*TE*, 136). Hence, Janie ensures that she deals with the death of her husband the way everybody expects a black woman to handle it - with strength and dignity, and not showing her true feelings, lest it be interpreted as a weakness.

However, Beauboeuf-Lafontait (2005, 112) observes that, on the other hand, pushing African American girls to be strong when they are children is one way of training them for a life that is going to be filled with hardship. According to Collins (2004, 205), one outcome of this valuing and praising of strength in black women in the black community is that it is hard for them to reject exploitative work or simply turn their back on responsibilities; and furthermore, she (ibid., 208) argues that being a SBW means that women will have to bear physical as well as emotional abuse and sexual harassment. Springer (2002, 1071) writes that in every social class, black women are internalized to conceal their flaws because of the fear that they will be otherwise regarded as a disgrace to the race. This in turn is directly connected to “codes of silence,” which mean that one should not air one’s dirty laundry in public. Consequently, what happens in a given black family/community stays there. This is

why it is often difficult for black women to talk publicly about for example sexual abuse or domestic violence by black men, because it would suggest that she is not being loyal to the black race/community. Black women just have to bear it. Simien (2004, 328) notes that is has been argued by both black women and black men that talking about your "dirty" private affairs in public will only feed white efforts at racial domination. As Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2005) has expressed it in a more theoretical frame, "To be a strong African-American woman is to participate in a two-sided performance of being silenced and engaging in self-silencing" (p. 120). Thus, black women are internalized to be silent in certain matters that cannot supposedly see the light of day. Hence, Collins (1995, 14) sees one aim of Black feminism to be to advise black women not to be silent when faced with abuse by any perpetrator.

This instance of the behaviour of the SBW is chronicled both in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and in *Their Eyes*, for all the physically and mentally abused women in them choose to be silent, and not to talk publicly about the abuse, because it could be argued that they are internalized to accept their fate in order to survive in the eyes of the community. However, the black woman characters in Hurston's works are not silent in the boundaries of their homes. For instance, when Lucy has finally decided to "talk back" to John about his adultery and bad habits, but he of course cannot tolerate it and as a result, he hits Lucy which for him is the only way of silencing her. As a consequence, Lucy shares some thoughts of wisdom with her daughter, Isis: "'. . . 'member tuh git all de education you kin. Dat's de onliest way you kin keep out from under people's feet. . . . Don't you love nobody better'n you do yo'self'" (*JG*, 130). Hence, Lucy understands that instead of being the silenced Superstrong Black Woman, she should have probably loved herself more and her husband less and thus she tries to break the circle of patriarchal oppression and violence by having some bearing on her daughter's future and fate. Lucy believes that the "miserable" lot of black women can be changed, but the change must begin within the women themselves. Nevertheless, there is the exception of

Janie, which will be discussed later, who breaks the *public* code of silence, and talks back to Joe after he has verbally insulted her. However, interestingly enough, when the true love of her life, Tea Cake, beats her, she does not tell anyone about it herself, but it is Tea Cake who makes it a known fact in the community. Moreover, curiously, in this example, Hurston has completely silenced Janie, for we do not know or learn how she feels after the beating, for it is not discussed by the narrator, or by Janie herself.

Collins (2004) notes that the myth of SBW knows no class boundaries, but she can be a working-class "bitch" or an educated "bitch," as in both cases the strength of black women is "stigmatized," and she also states that not even contemporary black "mammies," that is, African American women who are perceived by whites as likable and non-threatening - and well-assimilated into the main white society - escape this myth because they have a kind of strength "that is placed in service to White Power and authority" (p. 179). Moreover, according to her (ibid., 184), the myth of the SBW has negatively affected the relationships between black women and black men, in other words, she writes that it has been argued that because black women are perceived as too strong, black men are left to be weak. However, on the other hand, black women are often expected to, in order to compensate for their strength, allow black men to be in charge (ibid.). Finally, Harris sees the representation of black women as superstrong its "own form of ill health," because at least in Black literature, the traditional stereotypes have nowadays been abandoned by renewing this one about the superhumanly strong black women (1995, 110).

In *Jonah's Gourd Vine* the first character to represent the "Superstrong Black Woman" is Amy, the mother of the protagonist John. When her husband is beating her, she does not give in easily, but instead fiercely fights back, and she is described as having a "strength . . . Almost as great as Ned's" (*JG*, 8). Further, when Amy's son John is ran out of the house by Ned and he promises to come and fetch Amy with him when he has earned enough money,

Amy just says "'Don't yuh take me tuh heart. Ah kin strain wid Ned'" (*JG*, 11). However, Amy is actually only performing the expected role of the "SBW," for in reality a moment later, when John has safely left, she lets herself be human and acknowledge that her frailty, ". . . the welts on her face and body hurt her [she has just been whipped by her husband] and the world was heavy" (*JG*, 12). Moreover, Lucy, John's first wife, has also learnt to be an "SBW" from an early age on, because she has seen and experienced that life is hard for black women. When only a teenager, Lucy says to John (talking about what she will do if she is caught sneaking to see him, which her mother has prohibited) that "'. . . dey can't do nothin' but beat me, and if dey beat me, it sho won't kill me, and if dey kill me dey sho can't eat me. . . .'" (*JG*, 74). She thus attests that she will not succumb to a "mere" beating simply as if being beaten was just an obstacle to be cleared in the life of a black female - that is, she will survive "minor" barriers like that. Lucy is also portrayed as being mentally stronger than her husband John, an illustration of which is depicted when their daughter Isis becomes very ill and John's reaction is, "'Ah can't stand 'round and see mah baby girl die . . . Ah got tuh go 'way 'til it's all over. Ah jus' can't stay'" (*JG*, 117). In other words, instead of being strong and helping Lucy to take care of their daughter and to cope with the situation, John decides to take the easy way out and he flees to spend time with his mistress Hattie, thus leaving all responsibilities on the shoulders of Lucy. Finally, John's last wife, Sally, also shows signs of being a SBW, for when John should leave to visit his friends and he hesitates for he feels he ought not to leave Sally alone, Sally is the one to urge him to go. Further, she feels empowered by her actions, for the fact that she will be strong enough to let him go, despite her yearning for him, for "Sally exulted in her power . . . she made him go, seeing the pain in John's face at the separation. *It was worth her own suffering ten times over* to see him that way for her" (194, my emphasis). This is a classic instance of a black woman putting the needs of a black man ahead of her own true feelings, and moreover, as a result getting some

sort of satisfaction out of being the victim who can cope for she is tremendously strong.

In conclusion, it can be definitely contended that Hurston does perpetuate the stereotype of the Superstrong Black Woman in many of her women characters in both *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and in *Their Eyes*. In addition, it is also interesting that while the majority of the black women characters are depicted as possessing the traits of the SBW, similarly many of the black men characters have been portrayed as decidedly weak in terms of coping with their own inadequacies as well as with the possible hardships of life. In other words, while the black men characters have been allowed to be mentally vulnerable human beings who can be flawed, the black women characters do not have that kind of luxury, for they are depended on upon keeping up the facades and appearances. Thus, they have to be superstrong not only for themselves, but for their loved ones.

Next I will look at how Janie, the main female character in *Their Eyes*, may or may not be illustrating the controlling images and myths about black womanhood.

5.3. Negating the Controlling Images of Black Womanhood while Remaining a Dependent Victim?: The Case of Janie

In this chapter I will concentrate on Janie of *Their Eyes* and how she challenges the oppressing images of black womanhood, but nevertheless remains oppressed. Further, although Janie has already been mentioned in the previous chapters, and especially in 3.1., and not to mention that she has been the subject of numerous ([black] feminist) analyses, I have nevertheless decided to give her a chapter of her own in which she will be examined more thoroughly, for it cannot be overlooked that she is one of the most important black female literary characters ever.

First it should be noted that Janie cannot be said to represent any of the controlling images of black womanhood. Although her sexuality is a key element in the novel (when Janie enters

the town after being absent for a long time she is described in sensual and even sexual terms: "the men noticed her firm buttocks . . . the great rope of black hair . . . her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt" [*TE*, 11]), she is not constructed as sexually promiscuous or lascivious. Further, she is not the Mammy type either, nor does she represent the Sapphire or the matriarch, although she does at times adapt some of their qualities. She could be said to resemble a victimized black woman or the SBW the most, who, although suffering, ends up surviving. Hence, Hurston has constructed Janie as a black woman who is not the expression of white-invented stereotypes.

Janie has been heralded by many a critic as a modern heroine who through adversities finds her voice and becomes self-reliant, and as a result she has often been put to a symbolic pedestal of the ideal black womanhood. Ferguson (1987, 187) argues that Janie is capable of gaining a victory over patriarchal oppression during the whole of her life, while Ryan Simmons, for example, sees her as a risk-taker.[62] Moreover, Carla Kaplan states that Janie does not need to find her own voice, for she already has it, and Elizabeth A. Meese has argued that the main theme in *Their Eyes* is ". . . forceful resistance to black women's oppression in a sexist and racist society."[63] Hence, Janie is seen as epitomizing the successfully freed and independent black woman. However, although Janie does gain some independence and consequently becomes more self-reliant, I would argue that she cannot and does not succeed in escaping the negative aspects of black womanhood. Thus, even though she is deconstructing some character myths of black womanhood (that is, she cannot be regarded as a Jezebel or a matriarch, for example), she nevertheless remains an oppressed

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[62] Ryan Simmons, "'The Hierarchy Itself': Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Sacrifice of Narrative Authority," *African-American Review* 36.2 (2002): 191. *Academic Search Elite*. EBSCOhost. <http://search.epnet.com>.

[63] Carla Kaplan, "The Erotics of Talk: 'That Oldest Human Longing' in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *American Literature* 67.1 (1995): 118. *Academic Search Elite*. EBSCOhost. <http://search.epnet.com> ; Elizabeth A. Meese, *Crossing the Double-Cross: The Practice of Feminist Criticism* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986) 41.

black woman.

First, however, I will look at how Janie tries to resist the oppression and the stereotypical notions of black womanhood. Early on in her life, Janie is depicted as being very compliant and always putting her own needs in the background, especially when it comes to speaking her mind. For example, she justifies her own silence by saying "But Ah hates disagreement and confusion, so Ah better not talk. It makes it hard tuh git along" (*TE*, 90). However, finally Janie breaks her "code of silence" which happens after her second husband Joe has verbally humiliated her in front of their community saying "'Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees!'" (*TE*, 121). Janie, however, cleverly wins this verbal battle by informing Joe:

> "Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. . . . But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh lot more'n *you* kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. . . . Talkin' 'bout *me* lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life." (*TE*, 122-123)

Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues (1988) that with this exchange, Janie gains power over Joe by belittling his masculinity and ". . . thereby ending his dominance over her and over the community, and thereby killing Jody's will to live" (p. 201). Further, Margaret Marquis writes that ". . . through reducing Joe's perceived power, [Janie has] succeeded in her own burgeoning independence."[64] With her speech, Janie can be said to adapt the characteristics of the Sapphire and the matriarch by loud-mouthing Joe and hence emasculating him. However, it is Joe who sees Janie's defensive speech as emasculating, for he would have wanted Janie to remain silent, for "'Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves'" (*TE*, 110). Moreover, earlier when the community had asked Janie to give a speech when Joe was elected mayor, he had retorted

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[64] Margaret Marquis, "' When de Notion Strikes Me': Body Image, Food, and Desire in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Southern Literary Journal* (2003): 81. *Academic Search Elite*. EBSCOhost. <http://search.epnet.com>.

"'. . . 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'" (*TE*, 69). In other words, Joe makes it clear that Janie's thoughts do not matter, and in fact, Janie does not need to think, for she has Joe to do that for her. When Janie finally thinks for herself, she is actually almost accused of killing Joe by robbing him off his manhood. Further, although Joe dies soon after Janie's powerful speech, I would argue that Joe does not die because Janie has suddenly claimed the role of the matriarch by emasculating the patriarch, Joe, but he is responsible himself for letting Janie's words of resistance to affect his will to live. When Joe is on his deathbed, she lets Joe hear her true feelings, for she is no longer afraid of voicing her them to him, and she wants herself to be heard by him one last time before he dies:

> "Ah knowed you wasn't gointuh lisses tuh me . . . but . . . Ah ain't gointuh hush. Naw, you gointuh lissen tuh me one time befo' you die. . . . Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Naw! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me." (*TE*, 133)

When Joe dies, Janie expresses her newly found freedom by untying her hair, an act of liberation for her, for Joe had ordered her to always tie her hair up because "She was there in the store for *him* to look at, not those others" (*TE*, 87). Further, although after Joe's death Janie exclaims to her friend Phoeby that "'Ah jus' loves dis freedom'" (*TE*, 143), it could be claimed that she is not able, however, to be free and independent yet - or then she does not even want to, for she could be argued to be oppressed by her continual search for romantic love. Nanny sees this quest for love as a weakness, and she says to young Janie, who is complaining about her loveless marriage to Killicks, that "'Dat's de very prong all us black women git hung on. Dis Love!'" (*TE*, 41).

After Joe's death, Janie finally falls in love, for she meets and is pursued by Tea Cake, who looks "like the love thoughts of women" (*TE*, 161). It is true that this relationship is not ordinary and Hurston should be commended for boldly breaking one convention and taboo,

for Janie and Tea Cake fall in love despite the fact that Janie is fifteen years older than him. Further, it would appear that in her relationship with Tea Cake Janie is finally respected and treated as an equal. However, even though Janie is happy with Tea Cake, she is still content in being oppressed, and her only aim seems to be pleasing Tea Cake and being loved by him. The worst that could happen to Janie in her own mind is to lose him. Thus, it is obvious that although Janie is now free to voice her opinions, she still remains oppressed and far from being self-reliant, and cannot therefore be heralded as a black feminist apparition. That is, although they lead an unconventional life full of love and excitement, Janie nevertheless lets Tea Cake to control her, her money and their life as a whole. As Jennifer Jordan writes, "Janie's quest for excitement and pleasure . . . does not lead to an independent, self-fulfilled womanhood. She never learns to shape her destiny by making her own choices.[65]

Hurston does not seem to be satisfied with the relationship between Janie and Tea Cake either, for she has written it to end contradictorily and violently, and further, she seems to be implying that Janie cannot be fulfilled in the relationship and must be freed from Tea Cake. This happens when Tea Cake is infected with rabies and consequently becomes mad and attacks Janie, who shoots him dead for self-defence. In other words, in the end when she has to choose between him and her own life, she chooses herself. Kaplan (1995, 132) and Marquis (2003, 84) are of the opinion that Tea Cake's death enables Janie to continue her quest in finding self-revelation and in becoming independent. I would argue that this seems slightly forced, for had Janie not been made to shoot Tea Cake because he became mad and tried to attack her, she would not have even considered leaving him in order to search for self-fulfilment and independence. In other words, she cannot be stated to be self-reliant, for she does not willingly choose to be independent, but it is thrust upon her. Jordan (1988, 112) is correct in arguing that Tea Cake's death provides Janie with the means for "self-direction."

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[65] Jennifer Jordan, "Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 7.1 (1988): 111. JSTOR. 15 Nov. 2004. <http://www.jstor.org/>

Therefore, Tea Cake's death does not automatically turn Janie into an independent black woman liberated from the oppressing life familiar to black womanhood, but it gives her the chance to try to become self-reliant without male presence.

Janie is brought to trial for her killing of Tea Cake, but she is acquitted. After her release, she decides to return to Eatonville, the place where she had lived with Joe and where she has a house. Jordan (1988) states that Janie returns to the safe environment because she, ". . . cannot continue her quest for excitement without Tea Cake and has demonstrated no ability to survive alone" (p. 113). This might be true, for having returned to Eatonville and to her house, she spends most of the time reminiscing about Tea Cake, and not enjoying her newly found independence. However, it seems that Janie herself feels that she has grown and become self-sufficient, for in the end she advises her friend Phoeby that:

> "It's uh known fact, Phoeby, you got tuh go there tuh *know* there. Yo' papa and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves." (*TE*, 285)

To conclude, although Janie deconstructs the personalized stereotypes of black women, she nevertheless is constructed to follow the typically oppressed life in which a woman is always dependent, and in which her happiness depends, on a man. Thus, in this sense it is false to argue that Janie is the embodiment of a free and independent black woman, who is liberated from the controlling images of black womanhood. Although she is neither a Jezebel nor a Sapphire, she does consent to being oppressed in her relationships. It is true that she leaves her first husband because she is not satisfied with his treatment of her, but it should be remembered that she leaves him for another man, a man who makes her his "pretty doll-baby." Moreover, although Janie is alone in the end, it does not automatically make her independent, for it could be argued that she would have wanted to remain with Tea Cake had he not become sick. All in all, Hurston has constructed Janie a woman who has potential to question the oppressing images of black womanhood, but who nevertheless chooses to follow

that path. In comparison to "wicked" Hattie in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston's representation of Janie might seem on the surface a little reactionary to a contemporary woman reader who is influenced by and familiar with, contemporary feminism.

The point is that one should take into account the time in which the novel was written and the time which it depicts. Hence, there might be "mitigating circumstances" in the case of Janie, for example, why she does not, in my view, seem to satisfyingly fit the model of the feminist heroine of which she has often been proclaimed. In other words, Hurston wrote *Their Eyes* in 1937, decades before the Second Wave of Feminism, not to mention the Black Feminist movement. Moreover, the era she depicts in the novel is the early 20th century, a time when women did not yet possess even the right to vote in the USA,[66] and a time when the lives of most (rural and southern) African Americans were shadowed by extreme discrimination, segregation and everyday violence and fear. Thus, if we analyse Janie in this context, her behaviour and actions seem more radical, at least compared to what was expected from women, both black and white, during that time. Therefore, it could be contended that demanding more from Janie, just to please modern feminist criteria, would have been implausible and strained.

[66] The 19th Amendment granted suffrage to women in the USA in 1920.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, in this Pro Gradu I have tried to examine the controlling images and (negative) stereotypes of African American womanhood, and to determine how they are represented in the female characters in Zora Neale Hurston's two novels *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* using Black feminist (literary) criticism as the theoretical frame. First in the theory section I mapped out the main ideas of Black feminism, including the unique position of black women have compared to white women and black men, as well as, the relationships black women have (had) towards them. Also, I looked at the construction of class in Black feminist criticism and briefly explored the relations to the hegemonic white society. Then, in the analysis part I first discussed generally the historical constructions of Black womanhood and it became evident that the controlling images of the Jezebel, the Mammy, and the matriarch all derive more or less from the era of slavery when they were held as a true characterization. For example, the Jezebel is a character that has probably been the most pervasive image of black womanhood, and moreover, it is still evident today in contemporary popular culture. One only has to look at the American rap and hip-hop music videos and there she is in skimpy clothes "strutting her stuff" and grinding her body to please (black) men. To contrast, the image of the Mammy was Jezebel's opposite, for she was totally asexual in addition to also being submissive and obedient. Thus she was often regarded as the ideal of black womanhood and it is not surprising that she has been a popular character in (white) fiction and movies for the past centuries. The characters of the matriarch and the Sapphire were ridiculed for they were unfeminine in that they were not afraid to challenge patriarchy and voice their own opinions, and, as a consequence, the matriarch became emasculating while the Sapphire was seen as bitchy and loud-mouthed. Like all of the above-mentioned controlling images, also the matriarch and the Sapphire are still present in the African American culture of today, where there is often seen the character of a self-assertive

and tough "sister."

In my analysis of these controlling images in *Their Eyes* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* I found out that although Hurston alleviated the crudest stereotyping, she nevertheless represented all of the images in the novels. Thus she was not able to deconstruct the myths, but she neither perpetuated them. That is, although there is not a clear Jezebel figure in *Their Eyes*, there are examples of "Jezebels" in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* in which in addition to minor female characters endowing jezebel-like characteristic, there is the important character of Hattie, whose (threatening) active sexuality becomes to define her as a person. Moreover, Hattie represented the characters of the Sapphire and the matriarch in that she was depicted very vocal, that is, loud-mouthing, and consequently emasculating. The character of the Mammy was not to be found in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, but in *Their Eyes* she was presented compellingly by Janie's grandmother Nanny, who also epitomized the mule.

In the second part of the analysis I examined how black women were represented as mules and victims, and how this is reflected in the two novels. Further, I studied the old but at the same time the most contemporary myth of black womanhood, the Superstrong Black Woman. It became evident that the idea of black women as mules was also from the era of slavery when they were made to do excruciating labour which dehumanized them, and consequently they were often actually regarded as mules. In addition, because of the centuries under the stereotypes and oppression, Black women have become the ultimate victims, which is directly connected with being an "SBW," and this status is also deep-rooted in the African American community where it is sometimes even valorised. Certainly the women in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes* are no strangers to this myth, for the lives of many of the women, especially Janie in *Their Eyes* and Lucy in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, are characterized by their position as the victims of sexual, racial, labour and social oppression. Also, my analysis Janie demonstrates that although she does escape the negative controlling images of Black

womanhood and is in some sense self-sufficient in the end, she cannot be completely self-reliant or independent because she does not actually pursue or even does not seem to want to be all of the above. She is so preoccupied with finding (heterosexual) romantic love that she willingly subjects herself to the patriarchal oppression.

All in all, what became evident through this study was that Hurston herself, although it could be argued that she did a groundbreaking work in developing a new African American womanhood, nevertheless represented many stereotypes and controlling images about it in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes*. In other words, it is commendable that Hurston gave voice and visibility to average black American women, namely, women who were from southern rural poorer origins, and not from the at the time so fashionable urban middle-class more affluent surroundings, and whose main concerns in life were depicted to be their struggle between the black and white world as they were usually portrayed as quite light-skinned. However, it could be argued that Hurston did represent her black women in some ways stereotypically, for instance the Mammy figure Nanny in *Their Eyes*, in addition to possessing the innate characteristics of the Mammy, she "speaks" exactly like the clichéd mammies in old American movies. Thus, it could be that Hurston herself had at least to some extent internalized as true the white lores and myths about the southern plantation mammies that she incorporated one in *Their Eyes*, for in this case perhaps the fable is stranger than the truth.

In the introduction I reflected briefly on my own position as a white Nordic woman studying the texts of an African American woman writing about the experiences of African American women. As I have mentioned before, there has been (legitimate) resentment on behalf of black (feminist) scholars towards their white (American?) counterparts, for they have felt that many of the white women scholars have unfairly annexed what black women have deemed to be their terrain - namely the works by African American women writers.

Moreover, this has had also a consequence to the way in which many white women (feminist) scholars interpret and analyse texts by black women (writers), for they feel compelled to justify, or at least explain, their reasons for entering the "black feminist critics' terrain." I have often felt slightly uneasy when reading their accounts, for to be honest, they have sometimes been too personal and filled with unreasonable guilt. However, lest I be hypocritical, I now find myself doing the exactly same thing; explaining my position to the probably reluctant reader, and thus I will try to be concise. Hence, after finishing this Pro Gradu thesis about the construction of black womanhood in two of Hurston's novels, I can honestly say that I did not feel at any stage guilty or awkward by my "whiteness," nor did it in any way hinder the work process. If anything, in addition to discovering new and interesting nuances about African American womanhood, I also found out that Hurston's women can transcend racial and global limits. That is, never forgetting that Hurston's women characters are definitely African Americans with their own distinct experiences and problems, many of which are due to the controlling images and stereotypes perpetrated in both white and black tradition, there are still on the background larger issues, fates and feelings that speak to all women, regardless of race, nationality or social class.

Furthermore, especially the majority of black (feminist) women scholars and critics have held Hurston as an iconic figure for them: she has been mostly praised by them, and to many, she has been an inspiration, a role model and a mentor. As Daylanne K. English has observed, ". . . Hurston remains foundational in many versions of African American women's literary tradition," and as an example she quotes Mary Helen Washington who has admitted that many black women scholars have been "protective of" *Their Eyes,* because they have ". . . discovered in it something of our own experiences, our own language, our own history."[67]

[67] Mary Helen Washington, "Foreword to Hurston" *Their Eyes*: xiii, quoted in Daylanne K. English, "Somebody Else's Foremother: David Haynes and Zora Neale Hurston," *African American Review* 33.2 (1999): 284, EBSCOhost, 11 May 2006, <http://www.search.epnet.com>

However, it could be argued that it is the black women scholars and feminists and womanists of the so-called "second wave," that is, black women who were active from the 1960s to the 1980s who have been affected by Hurston's works the most. Hence, it would be interesting to know if and how Hurston and her works are still relevant and as valuable to the new generation of black feminists of the 1990s and of the new millennium, some of whom have been titled for instance "hip-hop feminists." To recapitulate, according to Springer (2002), these women are mainly college-educated and middle-class, and more importantly, they are "the daughters of feminist privilege," (pp. 1066-1067) who have initiated a welcome discussion about the responsibility of black women in their own oppression, as well as voicing how they subjugate each other in connection with class, sexuality and skin colour, thus abandoning the idea of unified black sisterhood as a reality (ibid., 1073). Thus, while Hurston's influence to black women (writers, scholars and feminists) is unquestionable, it could be very possible that the current generation of black women look more up to more recent black women writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gayl Jones, to mention only a few, as well as admiring black women of the hip-hop culture such as Queen Latifah, Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, who are writers in a way too, for they are lyricists. Nevertheless, I would also contend that the texts of Hurston are able to exceed decades and the changing face of black womanhood, and thus they are not, or will not be, "out-of-date," despite having been written seventy years ago as well as depicting time about hundred years ago. Further, as it has been mentioned already many times, as history and the experiences of black womanhood in history have been, and are, very imperative to black women scholars and black feminists and womanists, in this sense I would like to argue that these works of Hurston will never cease to influence and matter, for they chart the path of the black woman from the slavery to the early 20th century.

To conclude, I would contend that owing to Hurston, it is less unlikely that another

talented black woman writer, be it a “genius of the south” like her, or a genius of some other location, will die in obscurity, mirroring the partly fabulous and exiting and partly tragic and mundane life of hers. In other words, since Hurston was rediscovered after her death, as a consequence the interest towards other possibly forgotten black woman writers increased, and thus Hurston can be said to have aided the discoveries of other little known or forgotten colleagues.

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