

The dilemma of
control in their eyes
were watching god
and stranger in a
strange ...



The institution of marriage has changed over the last century from a patriarchal control construct to a more open organization. The books *Their Eyes were Watching God* and *Stranger in a Strange Land* both attack the institution of traditional marriage and present alternatives. This paper will discuss the ways in which these books present critiques of the traditional marriage model, especially the aspects of control and jealousy. Both books depict profound cultural paradigm shifts that eschew the ownership model of marriage in favor of a romantic partnership. Despite the similarities of their preoccupations, Heinlein and Hurston take radically different approaches to the post-patriarchal marriage.

Recent news stories about gay marriage have highlighted the fact that Americans are extremely concerned with the shape of the nuclear family. Both sides frame the debate in terms of preserving the family unit. One side considers gay marriage to be an affront to the traditional family and the first step to total dissolution of the family as a viable institution. The other side argues that gay marriage represents merely a variation, similar to previously forbidden familial bonds including interracial marriages and single parent households. Neither side is arguing on behalf of a radical reconfiguration of the nuclear family; however, the popularity of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Stranger in a Strange Land* is partially rooted in the direct challenges to the traditional family with its implicit system of control in which terms like “head of the household” meant something beyond a tax deduction.

A traditional patriarchal marriage meant control. The man controlled his wife and his family. The familial stability was based upon this influence and domination. A marriage that was not based upon these controls was

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considered suspicious. Men were supposed to control their wives whom were considered child-like in the social order. “ Aristotle defined Man as a “ rational animal”, and by that he really meant men, not human beings. Unlike Plato, he saw women as less able to reason, hence less “ human” and more “ animal”. In Europe, well into the twentieth century, women were generally seen as somehow intellectually deficient” (Turner). The 20th century witnessed a radical reevaluation of this institution and the values of romance and mutual respect superseded the previous values of patriarchal control. The value of stability remained important, yet the definition of stability became less concrete and more fluid. In the absence of an objective perspective, the ability for a family to function as a unit must find models that are not in the control and possession model.

Both *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *Their Eyes were Watching God* depict the way that the traditional views of marriage were challenged and reconfigured in the 20th century. These books not only reflect their eras but their individual authors. *Their Eyes were Watching God* was written in 1937 by Zora Neale Hurston, an African American woman who was one of the most talented artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Richard Wright dismissed the novel with: “ The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy” (23). Robert Heinlein wrote *Stranger in a Strange Land* in 1961. It won the Hugo and became a cult classic as well as the basis for sixties counterculture experiments such as communes. Both novels found their major audiences in

the 1970s and 1980s as challenges to the traditional nuclear family became extremely significant to national dialogues.

One of the novelties of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the fact that Zora Neale Hurston depicts a self-contained African American community that does not interact with the white majority. The racist framework in which black men and women were controlled by systematic racism remains in the background leaving a story primarily concerned about gender relations. Janie's grandmother and mother are raped by a slave owner and a school teacher respectively. When the mother disappears into alcoholism, Janie's grandmother Nanny attempts to protect Janie from her own sexuality by forcing her to marry Logan Killicks. As far as Nanny is concerned, all gender relations involve control and possession. Nanny thinks that if Janie is not controlled by a stable man like Killicks, she will become like her mother – controlled by either an abusive man or a series of men.

Logan expects Janie to provide farmhand services. “ If Ah kin haul de wood heah and chop it fuh yuh, look lak you oughta be able tuh tote it inside...you done been spoilt rotten” (32). For Logan, controlling Janie is the basis of marriage. As far as Logan is concerned, he owns Janie. Janie does not want to be dominated by Logan and her decision to abandon him for the seemingly more romantic Joe Starks communicates her value system which defines marriage as a relationship about love and companionship.

Although Janie's values are correct, her choice in men turns out to be misguided. In the second marriage, Janie learns that Jody Starks is the kind of man that her grandmother tried to save her from. Starks is an industrious

man who builds a general store in Eatonville; however, he does not see Janie as an individual. For Joe, Janie is a possession that he has won. Jody wants Janie to be the submissive wife. Due to her romanticism, she spends years attempting to conform to that role to preserve the ideal of the marriage. Interestingly enough, it takes her almost twenty years to lose her illusions. Yet, her very public emasculation of Jody quickly leads to his death.

In light of Killicks and Jody, Tea Cake is the culmination of Janie's youthful romantic beliefs. Despite her disappointments, she never gives up on her romantic perspective. Like Jody, Tea Cake is a man that Janie chooses for herself. However, Janie chooses Tea Cake as a mature woman who has won enough self-possession to choose a man that will not assume the dominant role. With Tea Cake, there is also a controlling aspect to the relationship, but it is a mutual control. Both Janie and Tea Cake have fits of jealousy. Tea Cake even hits Janie in a passage that has a surprisingly blasé perspective on domestic violence. However, rather than stifle passion, the struggle for control enhances it: "They wrestled on until they were doped with their own fumes and emanations; till their clothes had been torn away till he hurled her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance with the heat of his body" (162). The ideal marriage for Janie is not a marriage without control; rather it is a marriage in which Tea Cake and Janie maintain a constant tension that combines passion and jealousy. The text represents their struggle as ideal. Janie and Tea Cake are both jealous and they have absorbed the traditional marriage values of ownership from society, but Tea Cake does not believe that he owns Janie like her first two husbands assumed they owned her.

By contrast, *Stranger in a Strange Land* provides a direct challenge to institutional marriage that endorses polygamy. Despite the heteronormative nature of the book, many characters reconfigure their marriages and vocally advocate an elimination of nuclear family structure. The jealous passion that Janie and Tea Cake exemplify is considered a problem that needs to be eliminated by the Heinlein characters. Marriage is not the only target for Heinlein's characters. All social obligations are heavily scrutinized. In the final chapters, Jubal learns about the alternate family that Smith has set up with his "water brothers." When one of the characters, Sam, mentions oral contraceptive to Dr. Jubal, he continues with a dismissal of the medical profession:

"What happens to that big industry – and to the shrill threats of moralists – when a female can conceive only when she elects to as an act of volition, when also she is immune to disease, cares only for the approval of her own sort...and has her orientation so changes that she desires intercourse with the whole-heartedness that Cleopatra never dreamed of – but any male who tried to rape her would die so quickly, if she so grokked, that he wouldn't know what hit him? When women are free of guilt and fear – but invulnerable other than by decisions of self?" (487)

Hurston was reconfiguring that family unit in a romantic passionate setting.

By contrast, Heinlein's characters are proposing a social order that is free of the nuclear family and all of its influence, control and possessiveness. In

another scene, a couple that has had an unhappy marriage talk about how much they love each other in the absence of the traditional bonds of

marriage. They still have a relationship but their lack of a mutually exclusive
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obligation renders their marriage null which pleases both spouses, who would rather freely be each other's fifth or sixth choice rather than their contractually obligated first and exclusive choice. There are several caveats to this system, including the fact that Smith is killed by an angry mob. Also note that Heinlein is primarily concerned with how liberated women will engage in more sex as opposed to careers or politics. However, the sexual nature of the liberation may highlight the original teenage boy audiences for 1960s science fiction rather than any agenda.

Even though the non-nuclear family that Heinlein proposes in *Stranger* had some popularity in fringe groups, it has rarely been put forth as a viable alternative to the nuclear family. One exception is Dr. Deborah Taj Anapol who proposed a combo family in which “three to eight adults, of any mutually agreeable age and gender mix, form a marriage-type partnership. Possibly they incorporate or form a family trust, since there is no legal means of marriage for more than two people in the United States” (Anapol). This group marriage might work, but it is currently not the most popular model.

In conclusion, the traditional family has been challenged throughout the twentieth century in many ways. Regardless of where people are on the political spectrum, few would endorse a marriage that is exclusively about one (male) partner control the (female) spouse. *Their Eyes were Watching God*, in which a woman leaves her husband in search of a passionate love affair, and *Stranger in a Strange Land*, which provided the inspiration for several polyamorous relationships speak directly to this cultural shift. In many cases, these challenges found audiences due to the system of control

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and possession in the traditional nuclear family structure and the quest to find something radically different. Although the prevailing cultural norms favor a marriage as depicted in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (perhaps without the punch in the face), the *Stranger in a Strange Land* model is not without its adherents. As long as humans attempt to form familial units, these books and books like them which question and put forth alternatives to the traditional family and the structure of control will be represent significant contributors to the discussion.

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