

**Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:  
A Quest for Love and Independence**

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**Abstract**

Zora Neale Hurston is one of the brilliant black novelists, who thrived, in spite of extensive challenges and hostilities in the area of African-American writing. Hurston strove to expound on the feministic perspective through her valuable writings and her works are groundbreaking in feministic centered themes. She reveals all pretensions to covering up exploitation and discrimination against women in the male patriarchal society. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston provides an anguished portrait of a black protagonist. Janie Crawford who is invisible and abortive in the patriarchal society, belonging in a black community. As a black female protagonist Janie Crawford, in her journey, fights to raise her voice to build herself in order to ride in the male rustic society, getting married to an affluent man for gaining shelter and financial support, embracing notion of patriarchal gender roles. Unable to achieve any kind of relationship with her first husband Logan Killicks, she leaves him for another husband, Jody Starks who also mistreats her as an object rather than a person and thus her second marriage becomes disaster. In this paper the fundamental issue is the great quest of a woman for love and independence. Hurston is endeavoring to show Janie Crawford's struggle to raise a protesting voice against the sexual oppression in a male dominated society and her pursuit of the dream of becoming a self-sustaining and emancipated woman.

**Keywords:** Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Oppression, Self-Sustaining, Patriarchal Society, Emancipated, Dominated, Groundbreaking, Quest for identity.

Zora Neale Hurston is one of the groundbreaking Afro-American female novelists. She has left her incredible works in the literary world and stimulates many Afro-American female writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker etc. Hurston is one of the eminent black feminist authors and a popular entrant of Harlem renaissance. Her novel examines the struggle of a black woman and her fight from orthodox patriarchal bondage of marriage to upholding the social elevation of her identity. The title of this book profoundly expounds the fact that, even when one could not always tell. People in the novel have an emotional and ever-present knowledge and association with God. While the novel was written about black people, it visualizes how they undergo affliction for being minorities in every patriarchal community. For Hurston's writing of this novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the inspiration is her lover Percival Punter. In this book the protagonist Janie Crawford is searching for her own love, identity and seeking her Independence. In this novel Janie is frequently without a voice and when it comes to her husband then she does not retort back. She is able to accomplish things, having a dynamic personality, unlike the women characters of other conservative authors in that particular era, who are seen to obey the orthodox Patriarchal roles and do not strive to find an independent life like men of that time.

The prelude in the book starts with the protagonist's sexual awakening, following the appearance of a local boy Johnny Taylor; her grandmother Nanny had seen them, while Janie having intercourse with him. Janie's grandmother was a slave ravished by her master, and she gave birth to a daughter Leafy. Leafy is the mother of Janie who is ravished by her schoolteacher and becomes pregnant, later giving birth to a daughter named Janie Crawford. After the birth of Janie her mother Leafy flees leaving Janie with Nanny. Then Nanny convinces Janie to get married to an affluent person for her financial security and Janie marries Logan Killicks an old man, in spite of her disinterest in him. Nanny believes that after getting married to Logan she will be able to take care of herself and Logan will take over all responsibility for her. Logan Killicks as her first husband wanted her as a domestic maid rather than a loving mistress and thus Janie hopes for friendly relationship with husband was destroyed. Janie's marriage to Logan is a terrible debacle in her life.

After getting affliction, disillusion and loneliness she is determined towards having a second marriage and flees with Joe Starks who provides Janie with financial support and her elevation in the male dominated oppressive society, which her grandmother wanted for her before her death. Joe convinces her with his big dreams; and Janie's ambition for love revives that desire again with him when he asks her to call him 'Jody' a nickname. After a few months Joe becomes Mayor of the town and there is a function organized for his victory celebration then Janie becomes ecstatic to see her husband as Mayor. Janie wants to give a speech for her husband's accomplishment, but Joe prevents her and orders her not to provide any speech. He

says a woman should not make any speech in front of crowd then she goes in despondency and embraces her dumbness. Joe Starks is an egoistic fellow who is only concerned with his own image. He is living a lavish life, slandering his own wife Janie Crawford and using her as an effigy for his individual position in the society. He remarks on her fortitude and believes that she can't be equal to a man. Her space is at home and not for outdoor activities. Janie's hair is an essential part of her identity and her beauty. Her hair style enunciates the beauty and makes her distinguish personality from rest of her community. Janie's husband Joe dictates that she combs her hair in an unattractive manner because another man's interest in Janie would be challengeable and be an affront in his community.

One day Joe slaps her after a dinner party, but Janie does not unveil her torment and feeling; she convinces herself to be dummy, not to tell anybody anything embracing her ambition inside. After Starks death, Janie Crawford became financially independent, she gets his estate and becomes independent for some time. But unless a man's support, there can be no long time security for her. Then she meets with another guy Tea Cake. Tea Cake plays guitar for her enjoyment which initially treats her with affection and homage. Janie has become older now and falls in love with Tea Cake. Janie walks into this alliance because all her earlier relationships were vandalized. Now she hopes solely for rectitude and independence without any anguish or sexual oppression. Tea Cake teaches her how to shoot a gun and how to beget some affection for each other. Tea Cake stimulates her and gives her full independence for some time then she becomes ecstatic for the first time with her third husband. Once Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog while saving Janie from drowning. Then Tea Cake becomes strange and unpredictable despite Janie's best effort. Tea Cake beats Janie and this domestic injustice becomes one of the awful puzzle scenarios in the entire novel, hence modern readers begin to wonder at Janie's beating.

Janie's passive acquiescence of the beating reveals her as a revolutionary character in the novel and her dedication to dumbness becomes quite significant. Janie's earlier dumbness with her husband was a symbol of her acquiescence. Now Janie's dumbness becomes a vital part of her life. Cake ultimately strives to shoot her with his gun, and she was obliged to shoot him for her self-defense; then she is charged with slaughter of her husband. Her calm reflects her potential. Tea Cake aided her to get a voice hence this voice has enabled her to augment a love based on reciprocity and mutual homage. This kind of potency enables her to combat the storm boldly and survive the storm subsequently. After slaying her husband Tea Cake, Janie is put on trial on the same day. During the trial all her black friends come to know about her trial, and they all retaliate against her without knowing anything.

Dr. Simmons stands to save her as an innocent and the court gives her not guilty verdict. After the trial Janie gives a royal funeral to Tea Cake. After Tea Cake's funeral the men of muck could feel how they had played with Janie's feelings. She says that they do not espouse what

really means of true love, independence and after that night of slaying her husband she goes in despondency. Now her whole world becomes filled with mourning.

This novel gives glimpses of unusual perspectives on gender dispute. It is the first module of a woman's book published by a black woman and her accomplishment of the production of a feminist novel. Tea Cake shooting at Janie shows a very barbaric scene in this feminist story and his action is a blunder which society does not want from him. Janie is raised by her grandmother Nanny, an ex-slave who wants a better life for Janie and she never thinks her life will face a tragic end. She thinks that her life will be full of beauty and independence. Janie's words show us that she is girl who strives to be fashionable in her own way of blackness, rather than repelling it. She is extremely in favor of her own identity as a black girl. Janie in her earlier marriages did not achieve anything of what she heartily desires. In contrast, her third final marriage to Tea Cake indicated her full awareness and presence in the process of decision making. This sense of her own agency allows her to choose Tea Cake as her husband.

In her third marriage her life has changed a lot and she has become a new person who can decide her own life and freedom. Now Janie gets independence from male oppression after getting married to Tea Cake. As Janie seems to justify herself many times repeating silence and lack of voice in this novel. Janie's bodily disposition is a sign of a particular social order. Hurston's personal attitudes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, reflects Hurston's ambiguity about race, sex, and class. The result is the irrefutable notion that the novel is an appropriate fictional representation of the concerns and attitudes of modern black feminism. In approaching *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with feministic pictures, critics frequently view the text through an ideological prism that colors their vision. The attempts of black feminists to accommodate the often conflicting imperatives of individual transformation, feminine bonding, and racial communalism have had a powerful effect on the reinterpretation of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The novel is seen as a vehicle of feminist protest through its condemnation of the restrictiveness of bourgeois marriage through its exploration of racial sexism and male suppression of women.

This novel provides most effective examination of the stultification of feminine talent and energy within conventional middle class life. It is ultimately suffering the majority of black women whose working-class existence is dominated by hard labor and instability. Hurston's personal attitude about violence in the combat of the sexes makes it unlikely that Tea Cake's slaying is a punishment for his ill-treatment of Janie. So, Tea Cake's death allows Janie to hold her paradise and dream for an impeccable love of independence. And now she can elect to remind herself of the passion of good times rather than sickness, death, and the return of racism, by focusing on voice, race and the fact that Janie's testimony is followed by her acquittal. Many critics have not only overlooked Janie's self-effacement and absence of any mention of self-

defense at her trial, but generally they have failed to attend the novel's extraordinary dissection of agency through its relation to narrative. But Hurston does not give Tea Cake an incapacitating psychological illness, instead she gives him a physical illness whose symptoms like agitation, race of the boundary between what is physical and mental. It seems to be rationally directed - physical acts are really products of an aberrant mental state, which is in turn produced by a specific disease entity. Among the many critics who have seen the slaughter scene in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, most have focused on such questions as to whether Tea Cake's slaughter is symbolic revenge for his earlier beating of Janie, or whether the decision to render Janie's testimony through a summary description by the third-person narrator impairs her achievement of selfhood by depriving her voice at the trial to demonstrate white authorities' enforcement of power over black men and women. It makes the distinction between an act that is justified, one that is excused as critical for the expounding of Hurston's complex construction of the scene of Tea Cake's death and Janie's murder trial. The reversal created by Tea Cake's illness and death provide Janie with the opportunity for self-direction and control over her life. She is capable to arouse herself when she was forced to save her life by slaying Tea Cake and then she moves immediately into a new elevation of independence. Hurston writes this novel to prove the emptiness of the middle class women's segregation and the falsehood of her seeming social elevation. Some critics feel it might be true that Janie in several interchanges with Jody also defends the elevation and dignity of all women, but in the long run her story makes light of the fate of the majority of black women by turning migrant labor into fun, games and wife beating into a prelude to sexual ecstasy.

This novel depicts African Americans laughing, fighting, loving in a black world. In Hurston's novel the quest begins when Janie becomes sixteen years old and the three men whom she married marked the three stages of her search for love and independence. In the last she found what she had sought in the earlier days. When her man Tea Cake died, after his death she becomes briefly content to sit down as a lonely woman of forty. In this story Hurston shows a healthy and moral scorn for the Negro's endeavor to pattern her life according to white bourgeois standard. Janie now knows well how to make presence out of absence. She now learns how to maintain herself as visible and invisible. Janie now becomes both spectator and entrant in her own life. She speaks to her body, as an African American woman, means to recognize its visual, racial difference as well as affirming its sexual identity. Hurston's mind scene and voice reclaim the physical world of pear tree which is the beauty of the visible presence of the blackness. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's third husband Tea Cake may be is not dead for her. He never will be dead until she can wind-up her feeling and thinking. Much of her life is in distress so she called in her soul to come and see her. Despite Hurston's lack of veracity, many critics like Alice Walker, Robert Hemenway and Mary Helen Washington have managed to maintain both certain objectivity about Hurston's weakness and the homage of fondness for her daring talent. The open mindedness and tolerance for ambivalence are not always reflected in the

critical responses to her greatest work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston's love, independence and her disregard to allow her love interest of marriages to hamper her career. Her adventures in confronting the danger of an anthropological research in the violent turpentine camps of the South. In the voodoo temple of Haiti makes her a grand candidate for feminist sainthood. Hurston's violence may be a legitimate description of love, independence and coherent selfhood may be not too much the marker of an achieved mature identity as the momentary and unstable consequence of an ongoing, instrumental narrative process. The moral judgement or even understanding of others may be an unachievable goal. In this novel Hurston's characters such as Nanny, Joe and Janie are individuals who are searching individually to get love, independence and their self-identity. Janie's grandmother Nanny's calculation when talking about her own life of the past and in what way white's cruel manner with her daughter was only because of her black identity. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* when Janie gets a shot of recognition of both her blackness and selfhood. This identity which recognizes her as a black girl is merely external, because white people define her as different based on her external skin and features.

This book enunciates life through the eyes of Janie in dominant society. From here she learns how to look at herself and how to see her beauty. All these experiences are gained after passing many stages in her life. This book becomes an acknowledged classic of modern African-American book and it's compared to Richard Wright's *Native Son*. It manages to express Zora Neale Hurston's hope for a meaningful place for women in the male dominant world and she writes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to prove the inconveniences of the black working class Negro women whose sufferings of silence, in patriarchal social system. Hurston displays for us through this book the conventional gender roles through the relationship between male and female. Nanny her grandmother wants Janie to get married because marriage is one of the best solutions for every woman; without marriage a woman's life is hell. Janie's first two husbands Logan Killicks and Jody Starks both believe that Janie should be defined herself to them through her character. Both of her husband's want her to be domesticated and dedicated because women are not allowed in the society. They are not equal to men at any level. Her life is full of yearning for love and independence. She finds only domination of inequality and discrepancy. Throughout this novel, Hurston variously visualizes how Africa- American women are given value or devalued in their martial relationships.

This paper shows Janie is the profound black protagonist who strove to raise her voices in the white, black oppressive society. There is a great affliction in Janie's life, her search for an identity and her quest for freedom in the society of white people who displayed her blackness and oppression as part of entertainment. Janie's decision to live alone returning to Etonville rather than accepting any other marriage to expand her mental state. Throughout her inner quest, Janie had raised a voice for a merciful love and independence towards her blackness. The novel

beautifully enunciates Janie Crawford's 'From ripening to vibrant, from voiceless to independent, from teenage girl to mature woman and from finger to trigger of her destiny'. In the windup of the novel, Janie Crawford reaches a peace of mind, in which she is putting down the burden of the body by making it unavailable.

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