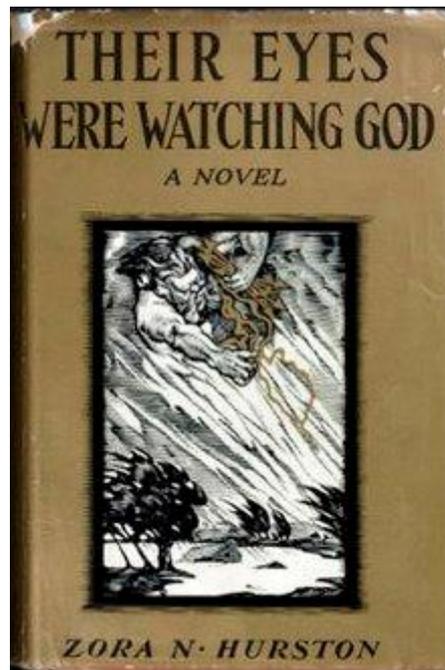


**Emergence of New African-American Woman: A Study of Zora  
Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God***

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Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Their\\_Eyes\\_Were\\_Watching\\_God](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Their_Eyes_Were_Watching_God)

### **African–American Feminism**

African–American Feminism draws a clear line of descent from the self-positioning of Zora Neale Hurston, a Southern Black Woman Writer of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1891–1960). Her unique status as the literary foremother to her contemporary Black Woman Writers and to the second generation Black Woman Novelists like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison is evidently seen in Alice Walker's launching Hurston's revival in 1975. Hurston slipped into literary obscurity for more than three decades since 1950s. It was only Alice Walker, the leading spokesperson of Black Feminism, unearthed the buried treasures of Hurston's works.

### **Hurston**

Hurston was born in 1891, fifth of eight children to the parents, dark-brown Ann Lucy Potts and John Hurston, a mulatto man. Her home town was Eatonville, the Southern all-black-town, in Florida. Hurston moved to Harlem, the black capital in New York City, where she was able to establish her position as a serious writer with her affirmation of Black Cultural Values with its tradition and heritage.

### ***Their Eyes were Watching God***

The assessment of her master piece novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) projects her as a trendsetter in making “a commitment to an exploration of self” (Christian 1985, 172). This path breaking work, written with feminist perspective established her in the evolution of Black Woman writing as the pioneer.

The female protagonist of this novel Janie Crawford emerges as a new woman. Hurston puts Janie on the track of autonomy, self-realization and independence. Critics feel that Hurston has endowed her protagonist Janie with such power and presents her as a daring woman. Hurston herself was a strong and tough-minded woman with greater audacity and she also struggled in the male-dominated Canon and suffered scholarly neglect. Being an uncompromising feminist, fierce and a charismatic personality, she has attempted in this novel to focus on Black Woman’s quest for self-identity, celebration of female consciousness, independent life and total freedom as a human being. The Black women felt their need to break their invisibility by challenging patriarchy thereby creating a space for them.

### **African-American**

African-Americans were earlier known as Black Americans; later as Afro-Americans. After the struggle for racial-equality they are nowadays given the prestige as the African-Americans. Their experience shows that their quest for self-identity and self-definition in the context of dominant American Culture is much complicated. The Black’s attainment of this self-identity and self-esteem becomes a struggle, because, this problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was the problem of the “Color line”.

### **Double Consciousness, Triple Consciousness**

The condition is worse in the case of women. DuBois has coined the phrase “Double Consciousness” to explain the jeopardy of the Negro who is at once both Black and American. Hurston has gone a step ahead to revise the metaphor of DuBois to explain the disfigurement in the lives of the black women. She depicts black woman characters as bearers of “Triple consciousness” so as to bring out convincingly the condition of the black woman who is at once “black, American and female”. Hurston's observation, “De Nigger Women is de mule uh de world” (*Their Eyes.14*) depicts the black woman's plight under the different forms of racism, sexism and capitalism in America. She is conscious of the difficulty in fixing “The Self” of these victimized black women in the hostile and the changing socio-cultural conditions of the male and white society. The black women have been oppressed not only by the white world but also by the men of the black world. Black women are called victims of what Barbara Smith calls “Geometric oppression”. (Hernton 51) It is obvious that Black women have been victimized not only by racist and sexist assumptions but also by scholarly neglect. Hurston, like many other black women writers at that time suffered “Intellectual lynching” at the hands of white and black men and white women. Barbara Johnson makes a valid observation on black woman's invisibility and throws more light on the plight of the black women in America:

Black women suffer from both sexism and racism within the very movements whose ostensible purpose is to set them free. The “black woman” has never been considered as separate distinct category with a history and a complexity of its own [...]. The term “Women” is synonymous with black men. The very existence of black women thus disappears from an analogical discourse designed to express the types of oppression from which black women have the most to suffer [...]. The black woman is both invisible and ubiquitous: never seen in her own right but forever appropriated by the others for their own ends. (372)

### **Authentic Ideology for a New Black Womanhood**

Hence, Zora Neale Hurston the central figure in the Black Female Literature has not stopped with merely giving a graphic account of the denials, deprivation and dehumanization of the Black women. On the other hand, she goes a step ahead and makes a conscious effort at giving an authentic ideology for a new Black womanhood.

Despite the hostile male writer's attitudes and men's personal prejudices towards her, Hurston with her fierce spirit and with a strong and tough - mind and audacity transgressed the boundaries of the expectations of women in those days.

Hurston's Novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) is a pioneering work in the African American fiction, exploring the black female selfhood. This novel uses the folk life of the rural south to create a brilliant study of race and gender in which Janie finds her true identity.

### **Janie**

The protagonist of the novel, Janie is a beautiful mulatto woman who struggles against conforming to the definition of the black woman as the mule. The black women are identified as "Mule" in the Hierarchical world of race and gender. Hurston's preoccupation in her fiction *Their Eyes* is to challenge the Grandma Nanny's Version: "De Nigger Women is de mule Ah de world so far as Ah can see" (*Their Eyes 14*) Hurston's famous phrase "de mule" which has become the metaphor for the suffering and suspended Black women is the embedded image that haunts Janie through two marriages.

The major theme of the novel *Their Eyes* is Janie's search for and attainment of self-identity which is not something that exists as a finished product waiting to be claimed by Janie. Instead, she had to pursue a journey towards the "far horizon" (*Their Eyes 29*) to fulfill her wishes and the romantic dream that she had under a blossoming pear tree. The romantic vision under the tree revealed her the mysteries of life, showing the pear tree as the symbol of love, marriage, and procreation. Janie acknowledged sexuality as a natural part of life, a major aspect of her identity. Only from this moment, her conscious life and her efforts to know herself began. Therefore, Janie's quest for the horizon set her to search for the autonomous sexual choice through which she hoped to attain her love and freedom, consequently self- identity.

Being a teenager, Janie's inexperienced state blinds her to the barriers that would attenuate her desires. Through her first two marriages, she learned that marriage did not make love. She achieved her targets of selfhood, the emotional fulfillment, freedom and free love with the third man, Tea Cake. Hurston devotes the whole novel to portray Janie's growth in

her search for self-actualization and heterosexual love which she searches for nearly thirty years.

### **Emotional Fulfillment**

The conflict between Janie's own definition of self and the definition imposed on her by others may be relevant for a proper understanding of this black woman's struggle in her acquisition of self - definition. While Janie thinks that achievement of emotional fulfillment through real love and individual freedom alone can offer positive avenues for potential self-growth, her grandmother Nanny, on the contrary, strongly believes that material property alone can bring a woman, happiness and security. Much against the hopes of Nanny, the marriage fails, as it does not guarantee Janie the much-needed genuine love and warmth, expected of a true marriage. Killicks always treats Janie as a mule and expects her to be a passive victim of his male domain. Thus, Janie's grandmother Nanny, with her obsessions with materialism as a way to success, destroys Janie's personality and aspirations.

When Janie married Joe Starks, she has not found fulfillment of her inner desires. This second marriage with Starks was not forced by anybody but chosen on her own volition. This marriage also fails as Jody Starks proves to be no better than Killicks and Jody views her as a lifeless property and not as a human being with her own thoughts, feelings and aspirations. These two marriages, in fact, dehumanize her. Quite appropriately Jon Woodson observes, in Janie's life, the destructive forces are manifested as "conventions of male - dominated marriage, aggressive territoriality, and materialism" (631).

### **Safest Escape from the Hazards of Racial and Sexual Oppression**

As for Nanny, her slavery time experiences have led her to see the domestic pedestal as the only safest escape from the hazards of racial and sexual oppression. Her confined vision stems out of her history as a black slave woman. She knows that "Us colored folk is branches without roots" (Their Eyes 16). Under slavery, she had been used as a work ox and brood sow. The history of the grandmother represents the class, race, and gender prejudice in America. During slavery, her own dreams were stifled and she thinks Janie's dream of love is also a myth because she is aware of the violent realities of Black female life in America. One of the major themes of the novel is expressed by the protagonist's grandmother thus: "De nigger woman is

de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see” (Their Eyes 14). The black woman is like the mule, carrying the burdens, heaped upon them by society and family. For the slave woman like Nanny, marriage is meant for protection and financial stability.

Janie’s views on marriage with heterosexuality are quite contrary to the middle-class values opted by her grandmother through Janie’s first marriage. She rejects the text of Nanny’s misguided and confined vision, formulated by the oppressive racist and sexist society. Fearful that Janie would be ruined by men folk, black and white, like Janie's mother Leafy, she forces Janie into early marriage with an affluent and unromantic middle-aged man Killicks. Her dream for her daughter Leafy was already shattered when Leafy was raped by her white school teacher, at her age of seventeen.

### **Slavery Time - Nanny**

In Janie’s journey towards self-definition, Hurston perceives the appropriateness in drawing the attention of Janie to the sad plight of black women at the time of slavery. Hurston, through the voice of Nanny, in *Their Eyes* articulates the black woman’s pitiable place in the history of slave tradition. Nanny preaches “a great sermon about colored women” (*Their eyes 16*). A few critics agree that Hurston uses the first few chapters of *Their Eyes* like a neo-slave narrative to narrate the slave history of women. Nanny’s narration documents black female slave experiences. Nanny could not fulfill her dreams but lived miserably as a concubine of her white master.

Hurston portrays Nanny’s dehumanized condition in the big plantation close to Savannah. When Nanny gave birth to the baby of her White Master, the angry White mistress entered her room and slapped in her jaws accusing, “Nigger, What’s yo baby doin’ wid grey eyes and yaller hair?” (*Their Eyes 17*).

Black Women were defined by the plantation society, as promiscuous women, prolific breeders, hardworking mules or nurturing mammies. This inherited conception from a patriarchal and racist society functions as obstacle to Janie's potential to realize her creativity and independence. By recollecting her own unhappy past as a slave, Nanny preached her granddaughter: “Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find

out [...]. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see. Ah prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you" (*Their Eyes 14*).

Hence Nanny prefers for Janie, protection through marriage rather than freedom. She fears Janie's dream and freedom may make her "the spit cup" by both black and white. Grand mother preaches Janie with ancient wisdom, the admonitions about the vulnerable conditions of black women in the racist and sexist society in America. Here is the anxiety of the grandmother to bring a vision to her granddaughter about the sexual and racial barriers even after emancipation. The profound slave narrative and the textual function of Hurston through the old Nanny in *Their Eyes* brings to light, two things. First, Racism is the legacy of American slavery. Yet, the black woman's condition was much worse than the black man's because "To be Black and Female" was to be in "Double Jeopardy" (Beale 90). The sexual vulnerabilities of both the grandmothers and mothers would continue down to their daughters of black community. Secondly, the term "de mule uh de world" (*Their Eyes 14*) indicates the figurative of black women. The mule symbolizes the suffering maternal legacy of the African-American women.

### **Mulatto**

The word "Mulatto" itself etymologically is derived from the word "Mule" and "the mule is a cross breed between the donkey and the horse and a being that itself was incapable of producing life" (Christian 16) The mulatto woman who has the white and the black blood mixed in her vein is also a cross breed like the mule which is a hybrid offspring of a male ass and a female horse. Mules are beasts of burden because of their ability to withstand hardships and perform work under conditions so, hard. Hurston's heroine Janie in her quest for self-fulfillment repudiates this role as a mule.

### **Redefines Black Feminine Identity**

Hurston redefines the black feminine identity. She evaluates the condition of black women through their meaningful struggle as "black and female" and focuses them as strong "bodacious women". The protagonist Janie emerges as a new African - American woman, resilient with "Stoic toughness". She believes that through women bonding together, the

community of women may attain the redemption of the self. The friendship and bonding between women is a means of liberation from patriarchy.

### **Dalit Literature in India**

One can identify striking similarities between the literatures of the African - American and that of the Dalits in India. Historically the experiences undergone by the Blacks are similar to those of the Dalits in India. Dalit Literature is a literature of protest and a demand of the oppressed for social equality in the caste and class-based society. The black woman, being black and female is doubly oppressed that she becomes the double victim of both race and gender oppression. She is looked down upon as a wanton creature available for instant sexual gratification by her white master. The powerful white male crushes, exploits and emasculates the black male who in return attacks black female brutally. Thus, the black woman becomes the “*Slave of a Slave*”. Similarly, Dalit women in India are marginalized economically and socially and exploited sexually. The Caste and gender factors join hands to crush them inhumanely. Her search for meaning and identity ends in doing subservient works and she meets with violence and oppression both at home and outside the family. In short, like the black women in America, Dalit women also are socially manipulated, physically raped, used to undermine their own households, and they are powerless to reverse this syndrome. Thus, the harsh and violent realities of Black female life in America is comparable to that of the Dalit women in India.

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