

# Emergence of Black Woman's Identity: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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**Abstract** - The most distinguished Afro-American writer of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Zora Neale Hurston, becomes a voice of Black dignity and self-fulfillment. Her writings depict the wretched condition of subjugated Black women who undergo various trials and tribulations in the (white) patriarchal society. Being a Black writer, Race and racism is the dominant feature of her creative venture. In her most acclaimed novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she portrays a poignant expedition of an innocent "nigger" girl who looks forward for the fulfillment of her innermost desire to love and to be loved as a woman. but within the patriarchal framework she is treated as the other. In fact the Afro-American Literature represents the psyche of Black women suffering from trauma within the traumatized societal set up, and marginalized within the framework of gender and race. The author has voiced that how male dominance in society silences the voice of females. How they make the woman of color, tongueless, eyeless, and earless. Hurston through her writing depicts the plight of Afro American women and the huge oppression and mistreatment they are subjected to especially after marriage. Hurston's aim as a writer is not only to free her community from external prejudices but also from internal menaces. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* portrays not only the negative side of "nigger" woman's struggle but it also depicts her incessant struggle to form herself, to voice her desire and to reshape her identity. The protagonist starts her journey from self-doubt to self-fulfillment from speechless to speech and from impossibilities to possibilities.

**Keywords** - Racism, Marginalization, Patriarchy, Prejudice, Dominance, racism

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## PAPER

The Afro-American novelist, Zora Neale Hurston, emerged as a distinguished black literary voice when Harlem renaissance was at its full swing propagating the rich black culture and heritage through art and literature. The movement marks the unparalleled accomplishment of black American art and literature through writings of some very prominent literary figures. Hurston was one of those in whose hands the African-American literature got an upsurge. Through her writings, Hurston has given voice to black dignity and self-esteem. Being a Black writer, Race and racism is the dominant feature of her creative venture but her works depict the wretched condition of Black woman who undergoes various trials and tribulations in the (white) patriarchal society. For decades the African literature was veiled from world and especially the identity of women was shadowed. According to Learner, patriarchal dominance and oppression owing to discrimination based on race and gender was prevalent almost 2500 years back. Freedom of women was unappreciated since Victorian and Rhy's Era. Similarly in African-American history, the rank of woman was not higher than a mule. Western gender dogma that promotes male dominance and female enslavement added to the agony of black women as

the colonizer concept was already imposed forcibly to the already prejudiced culture. The diminished status of women was further declined by their colonial masters who were even less equitable in their treatment of female gender that was already prevalent in the civilization. Nigerian Ibo women withhold considerable prejudiced authority preceding to British colonialism however the Colonial administrators supposed politics as "a man's concern" leading to depreciation in the role of women in politics too.

Zora Neale Hurston's most celebrated novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is a representative work of black literature. Here the protagonist of the story is a female character, Janie Crawford whose expedition from suppression to self-assertion marks the main plot. Though the progression of self-realization is extensive and grueling, she always remained consistent with her aim. She had spent her formative years with children from white families unaware of the discriminatory colour boundaries existent between them. Her journey towards self-awareness starts with the group photograph with the white children wherein for the first time she identified herself as a colored girl. This consciousness of her blackness made her feel as "other" and so different.

Her journey as a black woman began at such a tender age that her young mind failed to comprehend her subaltern position in the society. Her encounter with the self as 'the other' was quite perplexing and traumatic at the same time. The following lines aptly speak her state of mind:

So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah waz's posed to be , but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me .So Ah ast, 'where is me ?Ah don't see me. (Hurston9)

The journey of Janie's life begins with self-awareness and then progresses towards asserting her integrity and individuality challenging the racist mind-set of the world. The story of Janie is the story of every woman who suffers from one form of marginalization or the other. According to Weems, the novel suggests that the greatest impediment in man woman relation is "Sexism". Every black woman undergoes dual marginalization: one on the basis of race and the other on the basis of gender. The black woman could not do anything according to her will and desire. They were expected to endure the ill-treatment silently and perform their work as good wife. Black woman experiences exploitation and suppression by male members inside as well as outside undergoing huge turmoil and oppression due to double marginalization. Seeing herself as a different identity from the white throws light on the discernment of white Americans who feel that white reflect culture and civilized where as black reflect uncivilized, uncultured. Thus the concept of post-colonialism is also a dominant theme in this novel. The relationship between either between white and black or man and woman is governed by the single notion - the master-slave binary. This is again a Western concept that every relationship should be seen within the parameter master-slave dichotomy. Janie's husband always tried to decree over her and this dominance is due to patriarchal and colonial ideology, where male reflect transcendental image of creativity contrary to Earth bound images of female. This enhanced the suffering of already suppressed black woman owing to the concept of double marginalization. Feminism and Post-colonial studies are interlinked as both these terms highlights the ill-treatment and suppression borne by females especially in African American countries where status of woman was no less than a mule.

In this novel, Hurston describes the emotional journey of an innocent "nigger" girl who looks forward for the fulfillment of her innermost desire to love and to be loved as a woman. Being a black woman, the path towards self-realization was not so easy. It was a difficult journey but she exhibits undaunted courage and unremitting struggle for self-fulfillment. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* depicts the body urge with implanted yearning of a nigger woman to love and to be loved. The realization of her sexual self is at a primitive age of sixteen when she compares herself to

the blossoming pear tree. The pollination and proliferation of the tree symbolically represents the projection of her sexuality: "Janie had spent most of her day under a blossoming pear tree in the backyard.....It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously" (10). Janie is a woman who gives expression to her sexuality. The notion of fertility governing her being largely goes back to the fertility cult of the pagan age when Goddess worship was in practice. Woman then enjoyed central place in the pre-civilized society. After the emergence of Christianity, the feminine principle was suppressed reducing and curtailing the woman power in every sphere of the society. Janie emerges as a woman who is ready to transgress all boundaries and reinstate her natural instinctive self. Janie's exploration of her own sexual desire urges her to yield to Johnny Taylor and permit him to kiss her. This act of making love before marriage was highly disapproved by Nanny, grandmother of Janie believed "virtuous women suppress these desire in order to sit on the pedestal of morally righteous woman"(Hawkes).

Janie, the protagonist, married thrice in the novel and surprisingly at each time of her marriage she had to undergo cruelty coupled trauma. Her emotions with different partners are portrayed by different symbolic representation depicting love and resistance. Her unbounded fight at her household chores, her battling with her partner for inconsequential demands made her realize her potentialities gradually over a span of time. Nanny witnessed marriage as the only act of survival for black women. Nanny felt that she and her daughter were the victim of sexual exploitation only because they lacked the shield of marriage. Janie that looked life through Nanny's eyes also believed that marriage was inevitable for survival for all black women. Nanny was exploited at the plantation by her white master whereas her daughter was raped by black school teacher. This degrading position had to be accepted by the black woman as a natural outcome of remaining unmarried and to protect Janie from being a vulnerable catch. Nanny feels marriage is the only rescue from being an easy prey to "the men folks white or black" (20). This is also affirmed by Maria Frias Rudolphi: "In Hurston's discourse marriage oppresses women's mind and bodies, victimizes women, and prevents them from blooming to their full potentials" (37). For her marriage is a vicious web full of absurdity and hollowness where females are expected to meet the phallogocentric laws to be accepted in the male dominated society. Janie is eventually married to Logan Kellicks, man much older than her. She accepted him due to his financial stability. This marriage proved to be an utter failure deprived of passion, natural fertility and sexuality with distortion, decomposition and accretion of affluence and authority over the other. Killicks at the formative years of marriage provides for both of

them however gradually he expects Janie to give her share for her living

'If Ah kin haul de wood heah and chop it up fuhyuh look lak you oughta be able tuh tote it inside . (Hurston,2004,p.28).

Logan Killicks expects Janie to be indebted to him that results in domestic violence. The patriarchal mindset blinds him to a point where his consideration in maintaining farm is more than sustaining marital life. Reflecting on their relationship Fouzia Usmani writes, "This was not the union of two true souls rather two forms mechanically leading a life of utter boredom and dullness." They were united for all the wrong reasons. It was not their innermost true feeling which brought them together rather safety and financial security which marriage brings in the life of the females. Their relation was absolutely devoid of love; their conversation was more on household chores like chopping woods and peeling potatoes than love making. Months before their final separation, Janie realized that her husband had stopped all conversation with her. He had stopped wondering at her long black hair and playfully finger it. Janie led a monotonous life confined only to kitchen, mechanical routine of household chore and this gave rise to a sense of dissatisfaction and revolt in her mind, contrary to the guiding principles of Nanny. Her believe in the natural process of creation, destruction and recreation "God tore down the world every evening and build a new one by sun-up". (25) personify the Schopenhauer an concept of "the will to live"(Edman217).She ponders :“What was she losing so much time for?” and with “A feeling of sudden newness and change came over her. Janie hurried out of the front gate and turned south.” (200).

Wretched by Killicks attitude, Janie finally leaves for Joe Starks with renewed hope and positivity. Janie is described as “young and restless” and she jumps at the first possibility of change and chance when she met the stylish, citified Joe Starks. “He looked much older to the seventeen year old Janie and did not seem to represent sun-up and blooming trees, but Janie is willing to experiment” (Peck118).Life with Joe Starks turns no better than the one with Killicks. He wants Janie to realize the sudden difference in her status from Janie to “Mrs Mayor Starks”. He wanted her to oblige him with the difference he had brought in her socio-economic condition by liberating her from the clutches of Killicks. Love and mutual respect that forms the very essence of conjugal life was absence in this relationship too. According to Yvonne Johnson, Joe “wants only to put on a pedestal, to make her an ornament, a testimony of his greatness (50).” This is aptly revealed in the following lines: “Not that he wanted anybody else, but just too many women would be glad to be in her place” (Hurston98).The traditional patriarchal set up of the society personify only andocentric association and Janie feels “like daybreak after relentless darkness”(Campbell 66).Joe though a “big voice” himself, suppresses the voice of his wife.He emulates the behavioral norms of the white.

He uses power and position at public and private level to replicate supremacy. His desire to bow the world before him comes to forefront as he becomes the Mayor. At a gathering Tony invites Janie to address the crowd which was turned down by Joe without Janie consultation: “Thank yuhfuhyo’ compliments, but mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout speech-makin”(43). No matter how intense was the patriarchal domination, Janie did emerge as a voice of resistance. When Joe physically abuses Janie by hitting her for cooking a bad meal, she resists:

“She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was, it was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered”..(233)

Prejudice due to racial dogma is prevalent not only due to racial discrimination but also due to prejudiced menaces beholding members of identical race. Joe is at the center of black community and lined by his own patriarchal norms keeps his wife at the periphery. He snatches away absolute liberty from her.She locks her emotions and succumbs to everything that Joe imposed until her silence gave away and she refused to bow down and accept the patriarchal monopoly.Joe’s death finally sets Janie free from his captivity:

“Inside the expensive black folds were resurrection and life....She spent her face to Joe’s funeral and herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world.” (246)

The first two marriages for Janie were only a farce.She was only a victim to the patriarchal trap of society. Janie disapproves marriages as a means of material advancement and she denounced the male-centric black community of Eatonville and went to live with Tea Cake “her soul crawled out of its hiding place” (192). Marriage with Tea Cake empowers Janie in several ways.Tea Cake though eighteen years younger to Janie do not pay much attention to money or material possessions. It liberated Janie. She could enjoy her married life without any preconceived notions imposed by the society. “Neither seemed to care about material wealth. They work, play, make love and care for each other” (Campbell77).He unshackles her from the margins of patriarchal society and permits her to lead her life to the fullest:

To Janie he “looked like the love thoughts of women. He could bee blossom –a pear tree blossom in the spring. (261)

Her love for Tea Cake is natural and bountiful. “Janie is no longer alienated from her but attains wholeness, a wholeness that destroys the distance that developed in the relationship with Joe” (McGowan 98). Though she killed Tea Cake as an act of self-defense yet his love allowed her to embrace the horizon.

He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memories made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace . (193)

The seeds brought by Tea Cake for plantation reminds Janie of their relationship and love they nurtured together. Logan and Joe commanded for ownership and demanded for outsized space with a notion to suppress their wife. "Only with her third and last love ...does Janie at last bloom as does the last pear tree that stands beside her grandmother's tiny log cabin" (197)

Hurston through her work has explored the factual spirit of a woman by giving prominence to the invisible "I" extremely visible in the later part of the novel. Patriarchal ideology in the society leads to male autonomy on one hand and subjugation of females on the other. Though race and racism is at the center of this novel Hurston through her writing has revealed the evil practices still prevalent within their own race. Mrs. Turner, a light skinned woman looks down upon people of her own community due to their darker complexion. She also tries to sow the seed of discrimination between Janie and her man on intra racial prejudice however their abound love and respect surpasses all these inter and intra racial boundaries.

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