

**Surfacing of The New Woman in Zora Neale Hurston’s  
*Their Eyes were Watching God***

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**Abstract:**

The paper analyses the character of Janie Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston’s monumental novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*’ as one of the pioneering New Woman characters in the writings of African-American novelists, especially among women writers. Struggling against a demanding and colonised life, Janie is a revolutionary breaking the traditional gender and racial roles laid down by the society, and an artist who she finds true beauty in the pear tree, the horizon, and most importantly the nature in its raw form.

**Keywords:** New Woman, Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston, racial uplift, double consciousness, gender roles

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“She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was all there. She took careful stock of herself, then combed her hair and tied it back up again” (Hurston 106).

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God* was written in the early twentieth century America focusing on the central character of a black woman, when the life and experiences of such characters were marginalized both in life and in fiction. Her text authenticates the life of such women while placing them on the central stage. Hurston, as

well as other women artists of the Harlem Renaissance had begun a mission of reclaiming a lost history, a memory and mark of identity that was once denied to their race and gender.

Janie Crawford, the protagonist of Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*, is a captivating character in the history of African American literature. The novel celebrates Janie's flight with her insatiable desire towards true love and freedom. Janie's sanguinity is the central idea of the novel. More than a platonic love, she demanded a connection between her bodily and her spiritual world. Throughout the novel she is seen trying to direct her own life. But often she became a puppet to other's demands, and hence her failed relationships stopped the readers from considering her a leading figure.

Janie was raised by her grandmother Nanny who believed love to be "de very prong all us black women gits hung on" (Hurston 30). As her parents left her at a very young age, most of Janie's childhood was spent within in the yard of Mrs. Wash Burn. She grew up playing with the white children and her classmates who always taunted her as an outsider. It is only when she sees herself in a photograph that she realizes that she looked different from others. That was one suggestion of Janie's self realization. She then comments, "aw, aw! Ah'm colored!", and continues that, "Before Ah seen de picture ah thought ah wuz just like de rest" (Hurston 13). It was from this instance that Janie started peeping out of the cocoon and began creating a new path in finding her own identity. Her father was a white man but she was brown skinned. Hence Janie always faced a duality in her life. In the eyes of the white community she belonged to the trivial group of the "colored" and in the eyes of her own people, she was different. Janie's mixed heritage tied her identity within the chains of her class and race.

As Janie matures, the woman in her is surfaces. The oddities and the imperfections she experienced as child till date gets erased. The evolution of Janie from a child to a woman is a beautiful moment of completion like a flower blooming with its petals. The image of a tree is a recurring motif in the novel, and “Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” (Gates 201). Pear is always associated to female subjectivity and body. The time Janie spent under the pear tree had significantly shaped her naissance as a new woman. As a sixteen-year-old girl, lying under a pear tree at the time of spring, she watches bee gathering pollen from a pear blossom. This experience becomes a symbol to Janie’s concept of an ideal relationship, where two souls unite in contentment. When Janie kisses the young man Johnny Taylor, the reader gets the image of Janie as a child entering the realm of the symbolic order, where she is acquainted with inter-subjective relations, ideological conventions and the ‘Name-of-the-father’. But Janie names this moment to be the beginning of her “conscious life”.

Janie’s childhood was influenced by her grandmother, Nanny, who along with her suggestions and orders catered to the sustenance of the white and male dominated society. She offered Janie ideas on a futher division of gender within the race to which they belonged. According to Nanny, “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” (Hurston 20). Hence Nanny forces Janie to get married to a middle aged man, Logan Killicks, with the belief that she would get a lawful husband as well as secured life. Eventually when the novel progresses Janie is gifted with all worldly possession, all of which constantly pulls her back to current of race and gender hegemony.

Logan Killicks, the old hardworking farmer with no zest for life buys a second mule to tie Janie to both his field and his kitchen. And like her grandmother's prediction Janie becomes a mule to be commanded and exploited. When Janie finds her marriage to Logan Killicks unyielding to her desires, she protests in tears to her Nanny, "Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage, lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (31). But in this marriage, Logan desecrates the ideal of the pear tree from Janie. Hence Janie decides to abandon her life with Logan and plans another one with Joe Starks, a "citified" man, who seemed worldlier than Janie herself and brought to her mind the potential of "change and chance." With Joe, she once again began dreaming that, "she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything" (41). But soon after their wedding and them reaching Eatonville, a "colored town," Logan's sweet words on love changed its theme to commerce.

Joe establishes himself as a successful man and gave Janie the best of what money could buy. And very soon Janie became one of Joe's possessions that he valued as a commodity of pomp. He held Janie like a jewel and insisted her to sell goods at their store or work in their post office, but with a "head-rag" to cover her hair. Joe had forbidden Janie to do everything that she loved, especially to participate in the storytelling business that her neighbours engaged in. Joe belittles Janie at every opportunity he gets. At one instance when Janie tells him, "Ah knows uh few things, and women folks thinks sometimes too," Joe replies, "Aw naw they don't. They just think they's thinkin'. When ah see one thing Ah understands ten. You see ten things and don't understand one" (Hurstons 86). To the men around Joe describes his wife, "a woman and her place is in de home"(53).

After Joe's death, Tea Cake arrives in Janie's life. And Janie tells Pheoby that, "Tea Cake ain't no Jody Starks," and that their relationship was, "ain't no business proposition,

and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma's way, now I means tuh live mine" (137). Though Tea Cake arrives at Janie's door as a liberating force with the promise of good life, he also dominates her in a newly contrived way. He dictates in a more pernicious way different from that of Logan and Joe. Readers are made to believe that it was not for money that Tea Cake pursued Janie. But when he finds two hundred dollars in Janie's pocket, "he was excited and felt like letting folks know who he was" (147), and spends it all on a party. Tea Cake also slaps her in anger, and "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" (176). It is this domination that Janie revolted against while she attempted to shoot him.

Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey* notes that Janie's first two marriages are thoroughly bourgeois and are hence characterized by a formula of capitalism and possession. When Logan had forced Janie into labor, Joe had devised another method or organized control on Janie. He had turned Janie herself into a commodity. W.E.B Dubois theorises "double consciousness" as the sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others. It suggests the struggle of Black Americans in reconciling with their identity as black people and as American citizens. Here the self struggle within a race is being extended by Hurston, by portraying the struggle of a woman who is in search of her own self living in the midst of living in a society that is filled with demands and expectations. Janie in the beginning stages of her life becomes a pawn to other people's desires. Her desires were nullified in three ways. Firstly, as Janie belonged to the community of the black. Secondly, Janie's family had a history is black slavery, and thirdly because she was a woman.

Right from the beginning of the novel, the readers see an unevenness existing between Janie's actions and her desires. She therefore takes up the existence of a woman living a double life, or what Alice Walker term's as "contrary instincts." Janie is a revolutionary and an artist who she finds true beauty in the pear tree, the horizon, and most importantly the nature in its raw form. But she is pulled back by her worldly belongings, family, love and marriage. Janie develops in this reality a newly framed intermediate self to become the New Woman. Sarah Grand coined the term, "The New Woman", who is "consumed with a desire for new experiences, new sensations, new objects in life" (Lyn Pykett 138). She is personification of many complex social tendencies. The New Woman is different creature who sits apart from the "cow-kind of woman", the "scum" women, "in silent contemplation... thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with the Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy" (Grand 30).

The New Woman is harbinger of social change and the beacon of progress. Hurston's character, Janie is the epitome of The New Woman. It is the profound defence that Janie holds in front of her that has made her an extraordinary pillar in the history of black writing. Janie is one among the literary predecessors that waved the flag for all the women's rights activism that followed in the twentieth century. Even though she was made helpless by fate, the hope in her encouraged her to strike back for the life she wanted.

The beauty of Hurston's novel lies in its open ending. She makes it a 'writerly' novel while she leaves the question of Janie's "liberation" unsolved. It is left to the readers to designate whether Janie is liberated or not. The obvious reading would be that the woman here is liberated as she is seemingly left free from the shackles laid down by her male partners and those who previously represented the patriarchy. But it is to be once again taken

into consideration the predicament of a woman like Janie, who is a representation of a new woman. By the theories of Immanuel Kant the reading that Janie is 'liberated', would be a 'phenomenal' reading of the text. But what often goes unseen is the 'noumenal' world projected by Hurston's book. The 'noumena', in Kant's philosophy is the reality of the unintelligible world, which is far beyond what it appears to the observer. Considering the reality of existentialism and the limitations of human experience there are more unknown-knowns and known-unknowns than known-knowns. Therefore it is not possible to decide whether Janie is left to live her life happily-ever-after. The beauty of the novel escalates in its open ending where Hurston leaves it to her readers to decide whether Janie is truly liberated or not.

Women writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance thoroughly dealt with issues of both gender and race. They experienced racial as well as gender prejudices from other working artists who limited their ability from obtaining opportunity and training. And this was predominantly reflected in their writing. According to Helen Cixous and Catherine Clement,

"Women...are double. They are allied with what is regular, according to the rules, since they are wives and mothers, and allied as well with those natural disturbances, their regular periods, which are the epitome of paradox, order and disorder" (Cixous and Clément 8).

Considering Janie's reality, or in fact any modern woman's reality, life is filled with contradictory images of both happiness and sadness. And Hurston has employed the use of imagery and symbols to suggest the same. She has used them metaphorically to signify contradictory meanings. Hurston begins the novel with the image of the horizon which

symbolises endless possibilities, dreams and desires for any individual. But when an individual attempts to advance his way towards it, the horizon simultaneously recedes farther back. Therefore Hurston here points to the endless possibilities and hope that the world promises, along with the limitations it puts forward. In the novel, Janie's ambitions are also emblematic of the horizons. The more she tries to near them, the more they retreat. Similarly, water is another motif in the novel. It is both a nourishing as well as a dangerous force. Hurston had begun the novel with a paragraph on sea that stands as a metaphor for human life.

“Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men” (Hurston 1).

Like P.B Shelley calls the West Wind, “the destroyer and preserver”, Hurston also sees water as the giver of life and as a symbol of danger. The hurricane that strikes Jacksonville is the clearest example of how man is helpless under the destructive powers of nature. Even the writing of the text is carefully planned by Hurston in a way that oral tradition had crossed over to written expression, just like how the modern woman tactfully blends her professional life with her personal. Hurston's language had carried with it the culture of the African-American narrative which provided unique forms and subjects that helped to establish the subjective and as well as the group identity. Moreover Hurston synthesized English with the African American culture, and left the character of Janie to be commemorated by all the Womanist and Feminist movements that followed.



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