

# Zora Neale Hurston's Lost Individuality and Independence in Their Eyes were Watching God

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Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) recounts the events of Janie Crawford's enslaved life that depends on a frame-tale as a technique. The onset of the novel is the same as its coda, where the same two characters appear in the same setting but two hours passed. This paper is a portrayal of desperation, inequality, abuse, and humiliation of the black people especially women in which some of the information is part of Hurston's biography. Hurston skillfully introduces the issues of race and gender without turning to fury and resentment. Janie fights to discover her individuality and entity. All her life, Janie has been ordered and told to do what others want rather than been asked what she wants or feel. She left no stone unturned to find peace and tranquility, which make her sense her real humanity as an individual who is independent and not a replica of others. In the time of writing the novel, the proper way to treat women or show control especially on the black women was to assume responsibility or take the patriarchal role to those who are inferior. The relationship between women and men at that time was built on submission and obedience. There were two distinct ranks, the men who are superiors and women who are inferior, and the inferior has to serve the superior. The novel seems dedicated to Janie with her unintentional mistakes especially marriages attempting to explore her place in this vast world or identity to gain respect, recognition, and entity.

**Key words:** *Independence, Gender, Individuality, Black, Identity.*

## Introduction

Hurston's (1890- 1960) novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is among rare works that frankly probes the remains of man's soul that looks for its place in this vast world. Hurston examines the African American society in that novel who presents individuals and milieu, which embody the courageous black community in America of early decades after abolishment of slavery. In Harlem Renaissance, Hurston relied heavily on symbols that convey disruptive views within African Americans (Berg, 2015) during her writing of this novel. Janie Crawford, Hurston's protagonist, symbolizes the transformation from slavery and servitude to liberated African American who rebels against the beliefs whether in the capital or her town, Du Bois, for the sake of her own will and desire.

The story behind Zora's (Awkward, 1990) *Their Eyes Were Watching* revolves around Janie Crawford, the novel leading character who suffered unmeritedly throughout her life in search for her true identity and self-fulfillment. Though she lived with her grandmother whose perspective about women's freedom was restricted to submission and men's protection, she continuously attempts to find an answer of her role in this life and refrained to admit the imposition of the out-dated impression of a reliant woman (Fanon, 2008). This is the reason that makes her create her own world based on her concepts and standards. Consequently, Janie had to marry three men before she became a fully independent woman. The two first husbands, Logan Killicks and Joe Starks, each time she made herself believe that he would endow her with feelings of love and appreciation, (Garner, 2019) but she always got disappointed as she found out that they were just different faces of the same coin, that is oppression. However, with Tea Cake the third husband, things were different as he seemed like her twin soul that loved her and appreciated her femininity along with making her experience the true feeling of freedom, the thing that (Hurston, 1937) strengthened her to hold tightly onto her life and self by doing whatever it takes to own them and let nobody control them again. For that reason, she gave up the love of her life by killing her husband Tea Cake at the point where her life was threatened. Although the situation was hard for her, eventually the whole thing was a blessing in disguise as she grew up after all the sorrow a strong black woman who as ready to overcome male supremacy and dominance. As a matter of fact, she finally emerged as a model for the strong black woman, who saw herself as an example for all women who were still under (Jones, 2009) the commands of their husbands. For she recounted her story to her friend to celebrate her independence and to deliver the message to all suppressed women that they always have the chance to stand up with their voice to encounter discrimination and sexual harrasement (Konzett, 2002).

Along the history of African- American that is filled with blood, slavery, dehumanization, and injustice. America started to realize the importance of all Americans regardless of their origin or colour. America would like to include all folks as an important component in the

foundation of an American identity (Patterson, 2002). That identity has its origins in the culture, heritage, and spirit of immigrant people. It was an enduring spirit, the kind that was essential to surviving the effects of America's literature. Various incidents brought to the attention of a confused and struggling people an awareness of their native culture and individuality. So, the literature of the 1920s-1930s was devoted to the common man, the heroic figure who saw in his/ her native folklore a longstanding tradition that carried on in all times especially in the depression and after it (Deborah, 1956).

The author's life has played an important and vivid role in writing this novel. What the writer cannot express in public due to colour or gender- based discrimination and segregation are bitterly expressed in the novel. In the beginning, it may look as if it is full of contrary issues, where the key character is the extraordinarily unyielding and spirited Janie Crawford who has to begin with a saying about the life of men, who subjugated women. Nevertheless, it is one of the several insightful observations of (Rajlksmi, 2017) Zora's great gifts: her skill to portray a complete world with its enigmas and restraints within several sentences. Then, employing her attitudes in that world of how black people, women and men that she created functioned, triumphed, and survived. The coming ship carries the rebellious soul of our protagonist Janie Crawford, where we recognize that she had been on her own journey alone only with her ambitions that are scorned to death by time but they are not entirely overwhelmed. The very beginning of the novel is like a journey of a woman (Genevieve, 2005):

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. Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly (Deborah, 1956).

The above paragraph that inaugurates *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, creates the novel's unfamiliar standpoint on sex and change since the story talks about a woman who is the first key novel written and published by a coloured woman. *Their Eyes Were Watching God's* main characters are coloured women so it is seen as novel that tackles feminism and bondage of women. It is known that feminism is often related to the idea of equality of rights and duties between men and women; here, the author and the narrator directly creates an essential difference between the two genders; men and women. The idea that men and women seek for their individuality, entity, and being referred to as an independent human being. They are definite things recurs from each other several times through the novel, as Janie's search for the ideal man who can complete her and grant her the things that she never has before. The three husbands; Logan, Jody, and Tea Cake are only attempts in their lives to fulfill their own

particular desires through their own affairs with Janie. Moreover, the paragraph foreshadows and predicts thematic apprehensions (Zarrinjooee and Fard, 2014) of the novel as the words regarding women who are proud and bold saying that whereas men do not certainly achieve their ambitions, women have the control over their drives to pursuit those unfulfilled dreams. As the novel develops, Janie draws her priorities based on this view, fighting and challenging hardships paving the thorny way towards her ultimate dreams (Zora Neale Hurston, 1937).

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* depicts Janie's spiritual journey towards physical and mystic illumination and the germination of individuality and independence, mainly through Janie's affairs with other men. In Janie's relations with Nanny, Killicks, Starks, and Tea Cake, Zora employs the themes of control, power, exploitation, and esteem to successfully elucidate how such relations have effect on individuality, identity, and self-development. The first Janie's relation with Nanny, which first represses her self-development. Her relationship with Nanny is very close and she considers her as an outlet of her dejected life so she has a great level of respect for Nanny, who brought Janie up the moment Janie's mother escaped. That kind of Janie's respect towards her grandmother is profound and deeper than the respect required by customary relations. Janie as a child has strong attachment to her mother-like caretaker. But, Janie's respect for Killicks decreases as Killicks' authority on her. Killicks' decreased and weak control on Janie is obvious through Janie's daring rejection to be Killicks' workhorse and "Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman". (*Their Eyes were Watching God*, 30) After Killick's relationship with Jane is over, this leads to Janie's development of the sense of self-independence with a small growth in individuality and independence in the sense that she now has a transparent idea of what she needs to find in new love.<sup>6</sup>

In the beginning, Janie gets the momentum for individuality and independence when she encounters new image of nature in early youth. While observing and seeing the enlightenment of nature represented by bees and flowers of pear, Janie reveals that "the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her" (*Their Eyes were Watching God*, 13). The pear flowers and the tree symbolically establishes Janie's journey in disclosing a profound eternal passion of love. The first major scene of nature, Janie embarks on a life-long journey to unveil her real essence in relation to other people; "Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, and things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches" (*Their Eyes were Watching God*, 10). Although Janie evaluates her life with Pheoby as a mature woman, she can differentiate the relationship she got with the surrounding nature as the fusing element of her freedom and individuality. The consequence of that encounter with the nature, Janie realizes that she is an oppressed and subjugated woman (Delia, 2002).

Throughout the novel, Hurston straightly recognizes nature as a chief motivation in Janie's fluctuated stormy life. In the last, Janie states that, "Love is lak da sea. It's a movin' thing, but

still and all it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore.” (*Their Eyes were Watching God*, 226) Janie starts her agonized life as an unknown young girl, who searches for her existence in the middle of man-dominated society and she increasingly becomes resilient and independent because of her connections with nature and her experience with others. Hurston makes the novel from the beginning to the end revolves around metaphorical comparisons between Janie's life and nature as “She pulled in her horizon like a great fish net” (*Their Eyes were Watching God*, 227). Women of Hurston's world want to prove their identity and individuality through men and affairs to realize self-independence through two things; God and nature (Delia, 2002).

Frantz Fanon says that “identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an “image” of totality.” (Michael, 1990) Based on the notion, Zora describes the novel's characters who attempt to identify themselves depending on their own internal whims and thoughts. There are certain references and clues in the novel that reveal the key character's selfhood tendency and individuality, and identity fluctuate when she is subject to the new and different circumstances, certainties and experiences. In the conclusion of journey of Janie, she transformed into unified and self-recognize individual that passes through a psychological development, which is defining black people as any other human who could be recognized as having self or individuality and identity (Pia Sandved Berg, 2015).

It is not Janie alone who has this oppression of selfhood, Nanny and Joe also have the same quest for their individuality. Each one of them remembers his past and how the whites were brutal and merciless. The style they use to evoke their painful past and black identity is through their memories. Nanny, for example, narrates her story to Janie to motivate and encourage her to face whites;

You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will. Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither. It sho wasn't mah will for things to happen lak they did. Ah even hated de way you was born. But, all de same Ah said thank God, Ah got another chance. Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me. Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah'd take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her. She would expound what Ah felt. (*Their Eyes were Watching God*, 19)

Nanny chooses a way to talk that points out she is completely self-reoccupied with black woman. She is profoundly aware of the actual condition of the black people in a white-dominated society, who usurp all privileges and rights. She sees herself as an influential bold leader who is speaking to and encouraging the enslaved souls and other subjugated communities about the pleasure of enjoying independence, individuality, and liberty and that leader also wants to achieve identity. But what is unusual of Nanny's talks is that she narrates these talks in certain way that additionally highlights black leadership and establishing of the self. When she talks about black issues, she mentions the outrages and wrongdoings of the whites and their evils towards the blacks (Sharon, 2009).

Zora in her novel exposes the woman's dilemma of general black people especially black woman. She wants to show that the black women dependence on men does not mean that they are unable to run their affairs or live independently away from the man's dominance. On the contrary, the women of that time including the protagonist, Janie, or the writer herself, prove that they can be independent and assume responsibility as men do. Zora generalizes the idea of dependency and independency where:

“De white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man to pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his woman folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see.” (*Their Eyes were Watching God*, 17)

The author portrays through these words the grief and distress of the black people to the extent they were described as being mules and the symbol is used intentionally by the writer to accentuate the humiliation of the black people and to show the victimization and bondage and the degraded living standards of the black, “honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out.” (*Their Eyes were Watching God*, 17) This image created a wound, which will never healed and even if it is healed, the scar will remain because it is a scar in the soul and humanity of the black. She doesn't have any voice nor a place in the society and not is accepted as a dignified member or as a peer equal to men (Frantz, 2008).

Though relations are implicit to be essential to a satisfying life, Janie is searching for spiritual contentment that is essentially focuses on her existence and entity. When she is left alone at the end but she gains her content and individuality. She releases herself from her sorrowful and fruitless relations with Logan and Jody, who impede and defame her life as a woman. When she and Tea Cake have close and sincere relationship, Janie feels for the first time that this experience is true and fruitful, which paves her way towards perfect autonomy. Her views for the world around her are changed, which are associated with profound sense of connection to everything surrounding her to the extent that the essence of Tea Cake's spirit accompanied her everywhere. Therefore, when the time she is alone, the feeling of loneliness

vanished. The protagonist has attained her goal of cultural independence as a black woman; Janie's incessant struggles lead her to reach self-identity, which served an inspiration to all women (Zahra, 2014).

Janie after the death of her husband, Joe, she tastes freedom and independence. She is aware that her psychological emancipation is the result of her relation with Tea Cake. Her long and tiresome journey to the horizon has led her to the desired peace, and now she is free to pick her own choices as appropriate to her situation. Janie's search to hold her identity, which the manly world deprived her, comes to life as she decides to escape with Tea Cake that man who appreciates Janie as a human being regardless of other things. For example, in contrary to Joe who obliges her to wear a piece of cloth to tend and exploit Janie's body in any way he likes, Tea Cake loves and appreciates feminine attractions of Janie like her hair and behaviour. Thus, hair of Janie turns to be a symbol of freedom and new-born identity especially after Joe's death when the horizon becomes the ultimate goals she wants to reach and grasp, "She tore off her kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair" (*Their Eyes were Watching God*, 104) After Joe's death, Janie's hair flies and flows with the air to refer to her new free spirit that is emancipated from the bondage of humiliation and slave-like life, this kind of new life reminds us of the beginning of the novel when she was blooming tree and the horizon (Anna, 2019).

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel that evokes a woman's thorny journey to discover herself in a man-dominated world. Janie has passed through three marriages as if they are in tests. In each attempt, Janie encountered a new type of man and a new type of predicament or experience and these attempts give Janie time to re-order herself to fight again, but she never gives up until she finds the appropriate chance with Tea Cake. At that moment, she realizes the sense of freedom, equality, independence, and self-fulfillment.

## **Conclusion**

The novel creates a wide range of controversy among publishers, white men community and even the black community rejected the details of this dare novel. The author's knowledge as an anthropologist gives her the ability and skill to create real and authentic milieu and characters. She succeeds to establish that sense of belongingness to that time as readers have the ability to see how Janie, Joe, and Teak Cake behave and react.

Zora's major goal is to give a clear picture for the world about the life of African-American in the time they lose most of their rights. The three marriages of Janie have given her more immunity against white-dominated community. The novel seeks to establish the notion of equality, freedom, individuality, and identity. Janie sacrifices and wastes years of her life and attempts several experiences to get her supreme goal, to reach to the horizon.



## NOTES

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