

# **Their Eyes were Watching God: Quest for Self-discovery and Self-definition**

**Mudasir Ahmad Bhat**

*Research Scholar Department of English*

*AMU, Aligarh (India)*

## **ABSTRACT**

*Zora Neale Hurston, a short story writer, folklorist and an anthropologist is a well known figure in the field of African-American literary oeuvre and her portrayal of racial struggles of black people in general and black women in particular in the American South. Initially she didn't get much recognition for her works until Alice Walker wrote "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston". However soon after the publication of her chef D'oeuvre *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she became widely read. The paper aims to show how Hurston depicts women confined by men to positions of passivity, domesticity and as objects of desire and represents a woman redefining and revising a male-dominated canon. Besides this the paper endeavors to illustrate how Hurston's mouthpiece Janie Crawford struggles to be indistinguishable in a society dominated by men and her pursuit for self-sustaining and emancipated woman.*

**Key words:** *Chef D'oeuvre, Emancipated Woman, Literary Oeuvre, Mouthpiece, Zora Neale Hurston.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Zora Neale Hurston is often viewed as the first in a succession of great American black women writers that includes Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor and is considered as an iconic figure on a par with Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* published in 1937 was Hurston's third book and made a significant remark in the history of African-American literature. Through this magnum opus piece of writing "Hurston achieved what few of her contemporaries did - she honoured black cultural traditions and acknowledged the legacy of racial injustice, resisting by telling the truth about all of us" (Dubek 128). Soon after its publication, the novel received mixed reviews, many of which failed to take the novel seriously. However critics later on regarded it as the most widely known and the most privileged text in the African-American literary canon. Joseph R Urgo says thus, "after some years of abuse and neglect, [the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*] has made its way into the revised canon of twentieth century American fiction" (41). The novel covers various issues of the age like gender relations, African-American identity, love, work, travel, food, weather, fight, and occasional demands by men and women owing

to jealousy and unfaithfulness. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is all about Janie Crawford's maturity from a dynamic and vigorous, but voiceless, teenage girl into a woman. It is the study of a woman - a black woman, an extraordinarily vibrant woman, who lives according to her own dreams and ideals. In Janie Mae Crawford, Hurston rejects nineteenth and early twentieth century stereotypes for women and creates a protagonist who though silenced for most of her life ultimately finds her own voice. Janie scorns cowardice, oversimplification and hasty judgement and loved courage, strength and sincerity. Most of the black women readers found Janie Crawford different from any woman character they had ever before encountered in literature for her power and self-reliance. It was a very challenging task for Hurston to give a woman characters such power and such daring when their role in the society was not encouraged. Although Hurston does not talk much about racism for which she was widely criticized, yet Ethel A. Forrest believes that "Every phase of the life of the Negro in the south, like self-segregation of the Negroes themselves and the race hatred displayed by the southern white man, has been interwoven in this book" (107). She was severely criticized by black male critics for she did not depict the harsher side of black life in the South and made black southern life appear easygoing and carefree. However we do clearly get some glimpses of racial segregation displayed by the southern white man in the novel. For example during the days of the flood the white victims were buried in pine boxes, but the bodies of the unfortunate Negroes were piled into a hole and sprinkled with quick lime. Race distinctions went with them even down to their graves. Janie realizes her racial difference when she does not find herself in a photograph taken of her and the Washburn children (the Washburn family where her grandmother Nanny worked as a slave) "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" (Hurston 9). Searching for her face among the others, Janie asks, "where is me? Ah don't see me" (Hurston 9). Everyone laughs, including Mr. Washburn, and then Miss Nellie asks, "[D]on't you know yo' ownself?" (Hurston 9)

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is praised for its incorporation of American folk materials, for its use of universal myth patterns, presentation of a strong and independent black female protagonist, and for its various affirmations of human dignity and human love. The novel gives the vivid description of black history during the time surrounding the depression, especially the position of the poor southern black woman. The story here told is that of a very attractive woman in search of love and her quest for identity. According to Jurgen C. Wolter "[t]he novel traces not only Janie Mae Crawford's development from a dependent child to an independent personality, and her successive relationships with four men, but also records the broader history of Janie's family from slavery times to the day when Janie turns this history into *herstory*" (234). Therefore the novel is first and foremost a story of Janie's search for spiritual enlightenment and a strong sense of her own identity. It is this quest for identity and self that differentiates her from other women in the novel who follow the traditions in place. She tried three men in her quest and after many bitter and dreary experiences was at last rewarded with what she sought. Janie believed marriage as the only route of expression and satisfaction for a woman. The quest begins when Janie was sixteen and three men to whom she was successively married marked the three

stages of her search. The story of Janie's life suggests a development in these relationships. Janie's first marriage was a miss match which was hastily arranged by her grandmother Nanny when she perceived that Janie at sixteen was nubile enough to get married besides this "she did not want Janie to bear a child out of wedlock" (Forrest 106). Nanny's own slave life and that of her lost daughter had left her with only one sole hope that Janie should "take a stand on high ground" (Hurst 16). Janie goes into this relationship expecting love to come from it. She believes marriage as a source of love. So Janie was married to Mr. Kellicks who gave her nothing except hatred and drudgery. The union was a mere mismatch. Janie's marriage to Kellicks is an immediate disaster for Janie in the novel. Kellicks has no high seat for Janie, and within six months he tries to get her to chop wood, cut seed potatoes, and work in the field. He tries to have a full control over her and treats her as his property but Janie defends her with utmost resistance. Her marriage to Logan Killicks sparks off her social and economic rise; however, her husband's chauvinism and abuse turns the marital bond into bondage.

Her second marriage takes place with Joe Starks, who gave Janie security and position which her grandmother had craved for her, but left her frustrated soon after his death. He paints to her a glowing picture of what her life with him would be, and Janie, feeling that anything would be better than the drab life she is living, leaves with him and goes to Florida. There, her husband, by his ambition and aggressiveness, becomes the mayor of the town, and Janie becomes the first lady of the township. This honour, however, does not bring her happiness at all. Joe Starks is an egoist and self centered who is only concerned with his own image. He wants to live with dignity and neglects the same for Janie, thus uses Janie as a tool for his personal status. He degrades her and believes that she as a woman can't compete with men. Her place is seen as in the home and not out on the porch. When the crowd demands a speech from Janie, Joe Starks forces her to be silent and tells the townspeople that his "wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (Hurst 43). That is why she feels a sense of freedom rather than of grief when her husband dies. Then comes Tea cake with whom Janie stepped from her frayed existence into his bright, exciting life and found at least what she had sought. This relationship is quite different from the other relationships because her prior husbands wanted to have a full control over her. However in the company of Tea Cake she allows herself to step out the tight boundary lines that she had been in while married to Joe Starks. She enters this relationship because her previous two relationships had almost demolished her hopes at achieving true love. Tea Cake "teaches her to hunt and play checkers and asks her to work with rather than for him" (Wolter 239). Janie is supremely happy for the first time in her life although her friends always try to induce her to leave Tea Cake because he is dark and she is fair. Janie and Tea Cake improvise a life together, negotiating the terms of their partnership and remaining open to change. Tea Cake empowers Janie in numerous ways, teaches her to shoot guns and encourages her participation in their social existence. He allows her to follow her interests and be happy. He shares everything with her. Janie becomes very cheerful in company of him.

At the very beginning of the novel Janie is depicted as a girl who is unsure of who she is or how she wants to live. She is not able to make decisions of her own and live a life according to her own accord. It is Nanny who

decides to get her married although Janie pleads with Nanny not to make her marry, and if she has to marry to let her wait. She cannot directly refuse Nanny's authority, as she had earlier, for she has no voice of her own. She gave that up when she accepted the protection and comfort of Nanny's lap. But Nanny insists that her protection will not suffice for Janie the woman. She cannot protect Janie from man, because "as a black woman, she could never occupy the elevated seat of white male prerogative" (Wolter 235). Zora Neale Hurston depicts repressed female voice in a male centric environment. Nanny wanted Janie should marry a man not for love but for protection because she herself is a product of slavery and "thought in the terms of a white patriarchal system as characterized by hierarchy and linearity" (Wolter 235). That is why she wanted her granddaughter to marry the socially respected Logan Killicks so that she could be able to sit "on uh high chair" (Hurston 114) and "on porches lak de white madam" (Hurston 114). Her first two marriages is a complete failure. Kellicks wants her to be domesticated and silent. He tries to marginalize and suppress her voice. However she remains firm and "runs away from Killicks, expressing the most basic response to oppression, flight" (Urigo 46). Starks orders Janie to cover her hair as other men found it a source of attraction. Despite his equal treatment in the beginning, Tea Cake does hit Janie in order to show his possession over her. Yet this did not by any means end her endeavours to rise as a free and independent woman. She tries to destroy verbally her male counterparts with her wit. Janie is shown as a girl superior to Tea Cake when it comes to decision making. This is evident at the time when it starts drizzling Janie says, "it's too awful out dere. Maybe it's better tuh stay heah in de wet than it is tuh try tuh" (Hurston 160), however he cuts off her words and compels her into silence and obedience. If Tea Cake had listened to Janie, they would have escaped the ferocity of the storm, including the dog bite. Janie is covetous and has a desire to change her life style that is why we see Janie altogether different in the end what she was at the beginning. She at the end of the novel is looking well, feeling content and has a good friend, a house, money in the bank and the comfort of the memory of the experience of love. Later in her life, Janie is able to sit on her own porch and chat just like the men. She is alone at the end, yet seems content. She liberates herself from her unpleasant and unfulfilling relationships with her husbands, who hinder her personal journey. Through her relationship with Tea Cake, Janie experiences true fulfillment and enlightenment and becomes secure in her independence. She is an independent minded girl who rejects the role of weak women in an aristocratic world and demands her rights and privileges. She yearns for decency and dignity while facing all oppositions in a male dominated society. Janie exhibits self-respect and sticks to personal principles and values. It is her sense of longing for love and identity that she kills Tea Cake, insults Joe Starks and leaves Killicks for the same reason. She is ardent, free-willed, with a man's vigorous mind and a woman's heart. At the end of her journey, Janie returns to Eatonville a strong and proud woman. Even though she is alone at the end, she doesn't feel alone. Therefore *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is essentially the change from a white/male voice to a black/female voice. And Nanny's dream for Janie, a dream of protection through a house and money in the bank, has come true. Thus "*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the story of Janie's struggle to articulate, to appropriate her own voice and, through her voice, herself" (25).

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