

**SEARCH FOR SELF-AUTONOMY IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S  
*THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD***

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**Abstract:**

*The annals of the African American literature have been filled with lot of writings for more than two centuries. Among the prominent writers of that period, Zora Neale Hurston took her stance on women empowerment and female autonomy through her writings. She belonged to the group of writers who kindled the self-examination and self-exploration. For Hurston, identity is often a special function, as she explored the strong bond between the social environments upon which the fatal positioning of men and women took place. Hurston voiced more on the female identity and self-assertion. As the one who had been a keen observer of the discriminating society, Hurston captured the sketches of longing women. Hurston's women, in her novels face the struggles to assert their identity and in this causes their sufferings. From their own society, they had to encounter alienation from their own family and discriminated by way of color, being marginalized and undergoing slavery.*

**Key Words:** *Marginalized, identity, social environment, empowerment.*

In every piece of writing that Zora Neale Hurston contributed towards the enrichment of African American literature revolved around search of identity by the protagonist. In addition, there is always a sort of preoccupation with self by a person, which is the chief obsession of Hurston's writing. In this paper, an attempt is made to justify the attainment of self-identity by the protagonist Janie, in *Their Eyes Were Watching* (1937). The literary annals of the postcolonialism, when intended to secure academic approach, is centered on this identification of self-identity. More focus was made on the identity search by the Blacks and their struggle for recognition became the hallmark of postcolonial literary discourse. According to Fanon (1925-1961), "identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only the problematic process of access to an 'image' of totality" (Bhabha 51). Identity is considered as the sense in search of selfhood and has become the complex and growing notions in literary and critical studies.

The global meaning of the term "identity" is all about a person's rights, dignity, equality, and unbiased opportunity in social tasks. However, when the term is related to the female identity, it encompasses an exclusive movement. It is through this movement that the genuine demands and legitimate rights of women are advocated. The most striking demand of this movement is the equality in terms of status and dignity on par with men. Similarly, the term "Autonomy" indicates the act of taking decision on own or exercising the self-designed thought and self-assertion. These features highlight the uniqueness of the person's life. When it comes to the matter of female-autonomy, it denotes the assertion voiced by women to show their equality in the society.

Joe Starks too seeks to search his self-identity, as much as Nanny and Janie do. Hurston reveals this desire in Joe: "Mostly he talked about plans for the town when he got there," "Ah'mbuyin'in here, and buyin' in big" (*Their Eyes* 42). He feels that the main objective in his life is to form a city filled with colored

people, disclosing that he is passion in his to struggle for creating such awareness among Black people. Joe thinks that the only possible way to get into his self-identity is to become independent and detach from the whites. This brief analysis of the search of self-identity prompts to derive that Nanny, Janie, and Joe Starks represent the Black community, which longs for independence, self-autonomy, self-realization and self-construction.

Within the social set-up and the folklore practices of the African American race, there has been a prolonged voice seeking female autonomy and female identity. Women of this race felt that they tend to demand these two concepts by searching their relationship to the African American social contexts and racial realities. This demand has evoked many writers from the African American scenario to show case the social pictures. Such writings came enriched with the themes of biological, psychological, cultural, and social issues. The instant recognition of such writings from the critics and the folks was due to the fact that the African Americans themselves accepted that they are viewed as socio-historic products. They have experienced the nightmares of slavery and have been haunted by the experience of racial discrimination. The worst feature is that the African American women have been the victims of oppression and degradation by their own patriarchs.

Hurston creates Janie as a woman trying to create a world of her own, by transforming her as a rebellious person, one who kicks off her journey towards betterment. Janie, despite undergoing various life experiences, gets her sexual awakening at the age of seventeen under the pear tree. Yet, she could not exercise her personal and natural desire due to the suppression executed by her grandmother. This is how she becomes a victim as a wife to an old man for the sake of material gains and protection from the white oppression. Janie's grandmother feels that Janie could be saved from even the Black gaze through this marriage. Nanny is full of anxiety when she looks upon the condition of Janie in the surroundings. Hence, she counsels Janie in her bid of “lacerating her Janie” (Hurston 17). Nanny's words towards Janie evoke the sense of protection: “guidin' yo' feet from harm and danger” (Hurston 18) thereby “de men folks white or black. . . [won't be] makin' a spit cup outa you” (Hurston 26). Nanny refers the story of Janie's mother as well as her own story to convince Janie.

So you don't want to marry off decent like, do yuh? You just wants to hug and kiss and feel around with first one man and then another, huh? You wants to make me suck de same sorrow yo' mama did, eh? Mah ole head ain't gray enough. Mah back ain't bowed enough to suit yuh! (Hurston 19)

At the surface level, Janie's longing for sexual desire may sound eccentric, but her aspirations are the representations of the traditional urge of the black women. In addition to the changing modern trend, Janie's expectations are the hallmarks of real marriage and genuine love in the marital life. Janie is excited to meet her blossoming love by way of her first marriage. However, she could not accomplish it and prove to be failure. The old man exploits her as a mule, by suppressing her emotions and desires. She is forced to accompany him to his farms to do the field work. She is devoid of sexual fulfillment too, as discusses the issue with her grandmother: “Ah wants to want him sometimes. Ah don't want him to do all the wantin” (Hurston 30). Having been devoid of these things, Janie feels disgusted and discards Logan: Some folks never was meant to be loved and he's one of 'em.... Ah hates de way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides and dat pone uh fat back uh his neck.... His belly is too big too, now, and his toe-nails look lak mule foots. (Hurston 30-31)

Thus, Janie starts her journey of self-identity right from her childhood days. Her affinity and closeness to Nanny encourages and shows the way of her journey. The peculiarity of Janie's consciousness and awareness of her identity undergoes three major stages - childhood, adolescent and matured. This accumulation and enrichment of experiences enables her to fix her identity in the society. It is, however, beyond contention that while garnering these experiences to be a refined Black woman, Janie faces bitter

moments of her life at various stages and different situations.

Until, one completes the reading of the novel, it could be difficult to realize the hint which Hurston makes in the beginning. The story reveals that Janie is born out of a rape victim and she senses the racial change at the age of six itself. The picture reference indicates Janie that the color of the race cannot be changed. In addition to her black skin, her school teacher and fellow students call Janie an “alphabet.” As she grows, Janie experiences the sexual identity with the first kiss from Johnny Taylor under the pear tree. This evokes a new sense of her sexual desire and makes her dream further. Still, at times, Janie is reminded of her grandmother's words on the fight between natural blessings and cultural impositions. The married life with Logan proves to be a disappointment and forces Janie to divert her focus on the right location. This diversion proves to be a giant step from Janie towards the self-respect and independence. By seeking autonomy for her acts; she is geared up to reject any sort of victimization, which ends up with her act of running off with Joe Stack.

Janie feels fresh and refined after her marriage with Joe but only for a short while. After six months of married life with Joe, she feels that her married life has proven to be a nightmare. Much like Logan, the way Joe treats Janie exhibits the domestic cruelty, suppression and in this marital life too she is devoid of sexual fulfillment. Hurston, through the voice of Janie, narrates the pathetic condition of Black women:

Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big- bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' briches, you look lak de change uh life. (Hurston 96)

At this crucial juncture, Janie realizes that “two things everybody's got tuh do fuhtheyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuhtheyselves” (Hurston 230). However, much to her dismay, Joe suppresses her to the core and she again becomes devoid of sexual fulfillment. One may not be surprised that Janie does not give her attempt up in search of right partner for her life. As a third attempt, she finds Tea Cake, who readily fits in her expectations, by fulfilling all her needs. Tea Cake provides and fills the vacuum created by earlier two husbands of Janie. He indulges in appreciating her physical beauty and feminine qualities. It is through Tea Cake that Janie gets back her charming face, emotional and physical revival. Tea Cake recollects Janie's past life which paved way for her to unite with him. The irony of Janie's struggle in framing her identity continues even after the death of Tea Cake. As she comes back to Eatonville after her dismal three marriages, she encounters a conflict among the gossipy folk people. Thus, Janie is forced to employ the task of story-telling and narrates her whole experiences. Pheoby acts as an interpreter to the community people and this act from Janie exposes her guts rather than her meek surrender to the social norms. Janie's idea behind narrating her life experiences is to reveal a message to the fellow black women to choose life of their choice.

Globally, marriages are made for the sake of more than one reason. People undertake married life in terms of social identity, emotional exchanges, financial betterment, and spiritual accomplishment. Equally important are the norms and rituals prescribed under the pretext of marriage deeds. Beyond all these factors, love is the basis and the crux of the married life. When it is said love, more energetic and rejuvenating, will be the romantic love. This romantic love turns out to be passionate and entwines the couple with deep intimacy. Love, in general, in marital love leads to marital security and material prosperity. In the novel, Janie realizes the ignorance of love from her first marriage with Logan and her second marriage with Joe. When she somehow attains the fulfillment of true love by way of her marriage with Tea Cake, she recollects the loss of such love in the past: mah mamma didn't tell me Ah wuz born in no hurry. So whut business Ah got rushin' now? Anyhow datain'twhutyouse mad about. Youse mad 'cause Ah don't fall down and wash-up dese sixty acres uh ground yuh got. You ain't done me no favor by marryin'

me. And if dat'swhut you call yo'selfdoin', Ah don't thank yuh for it.” (Hurston 39)

Nanny's narration of the past pathetic conditions of herself out of slavery, physical violence enraged upon Janie's mother are the factors that make Janie seek protection. She assumes that only the marriage is the protective force from the cruel deeds of the society. The conflict occurs between Nanny who seeks material security and Janie who longs for love and physical security. Nanny's convincing words to Janie, “he “Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road [. . .]! Dat's de very prong all us black women gits hung on.” (Hurston 30) But from Logan's view, Janie is “like some ole skull-head in de grave yard” (Hurston 18). Logan intends to treat Janie as much as a slave by forcing her to work in the field as a “fieldhand.” While Nanny plans to commodify Janie by getting her married to Logan, this old man, in turn, plans to exploit Janie to the most. The ill-treatment meted to her by Logan creates a flutter within her and she leaves him. Hurston makes a justifying narration of Janie leaving Logan and joining Joe Stacks:

Every day after that they managed to meet in the scrub oaks across the road and talk about when he would be a big ruler of things with her reaping the benefits. Janie pulled back a long time because he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. (Hurston 37)

Things go in a smooth manner with a reasonable growth as they land in Eatonville. Joe becomes the Mayor of the location and on the other side, Janie dreams of getting the desired love. She even goes to the extent of thinking that Joe would be the last man in her life. He rather assures Janie a position yet not in terms of love: you behind a plow! You ain't got no mo' business wid uh plow than uh hog is got wid uh holiday! You ain't got no business cuttin' up no seed p'taters neither. A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'tatersdat other folks plant just special for you. (Hurston 36)

The end of the novel seems to be a message to the Black women of the present and the posterity. As Janie involves in appraising her act of search for self-identity with Phoebe, it means that the tale told by Janie would inspire and even transform any woman who would listen to it.

According to Daphne Lamothe: “Janie's experience, her story, functions as myth for the folk, teaching them the value of self-expression and the necessity for self-determination” (Lamothe 171).

In this paper, the discussion focuses on the central black feminine character Janie, who transformed herself through various phases of life. Hurston portrays the three main characters Nanny, Janie, and Joe Starks who make their voices heard among the Black patriachs and the dominating whites. Among these three characters, Janie's struggling phase of getting her self-identity is marked by how the whites treated her blackness and how they suppressed her. In a way, it is this suppression on racial basis kindled her and make her to be aware of her own color and community. Her three consecutive marriages are the factors that make her change herself.

Prior to that Nanny's past experiences inflict Janie on her identity and her inner emotions constitute the real change as she grows as an adult. Janie feels completely passive in her reaction to the situations during her life with two marriages. However, just before her third marriage, she realizes the change in her identity, even to the extent of consistent self-realization.

Hurston creates a sensitive situation as Janie talks to Joe, in her final speech at the porch, when Joe is facing his last moments of life. It is her self-protection and self-vitality which leads Tea Cake meet his fatal end of his life. Having become frustrated and furious with her two past marriages, Janie is somewhat consoled and convinced with her third marriage with Tea Cake. Quite strangely and ironically, it is third marriage which furthers Janie to have a deep insight on freedom, independence and self-autonomy. Hurston justifies Janie's action when Janie rejects the offer from Mrs. Proposal to get married to one of her sons. Janie's resolution to be independent and sustain her own identity makes her live her remaining part of



life as a staunch single woman with refined characters.

In this effective piece of fictional writing, Hurston portrays three main characters, Nanny, Janie, and Joe Starks who strive to redeem their individuality and self-identity. They base their struggle on their inner wishes and self-made thoughts. Hurston brings out the inner involvement attached to Nanny through the narration of the past and the ill-treatments meted out by the whites. Nanny engages in adapting to the technique of revealing her own past conditions to Janie. Most of the post-colonial writers found this technique facilitating their deed of oral recounting of one's self past. Hurston accounts Nanny's narration of her past through a resounding passage:

You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams. You can't beat nobody down so low till you rob 'em of they will. Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-saw. Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored people sittin' on high but wasn't no pulpit for me. Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms. Ah knowed here you was in de world. (Hurston 21)

Of these three characters, Janie transforms herself at every stage of her realization. Whenever she is put under changed conditions, life realities and experiences, Janie undergoes an equivalent change in herself. As the novel proceeds and reaches the momentum of the end, Janie proves her worth of struggle, after facing lot of attempts and struggles in search of self realization or even feminine individuality. This act of Janie's search for her identity is intertwined in the brief narration, as she is willing to throw light upon her identity rather than conceal it. "Where is me? Ah Don't see me" or her "Aw, Aw! Ah'm colored." As the words, 'me' and 'Ah' are repeated three times within a single sentence and the expression, 'colored', is also uttered, Hurston makes the impressive expression of Janie's favor towards her Black identity.

Hurston portrays the novel to prove the point that Logan and Joe could provide Janie with monetary contribution that a woman would need in life. But, in Janie's view, they failed to provide her the happy marital life. This makes Janie to excite when Tea Cake provides her full freedom for experiencing the charms of life. For Janie, he is not only younger to her by fifteen years but also a romantic hero. In their life journey, they have become a truly loving couple combined with mutual understanding. Janie is magnanimous in ignoring Tea Cake's act of stealing her money and ill-treating her. By remaining faithful to him, she admires him for he has "de keys tuh de kingdom" (Hurston 146).

Janie's deep love for Tea Cake makes her sustain the emotional conflicts, as she feels the warmth and affection, which she unscrupulously lost in her earlier marriages. Hurston presents Janie in search of true love, all through her life in spite of her struggling phases. This is evidenced by Janie when she tells Joe: and now you got tuh die tuh find out dat you got tuh pacify somebody besides yo' self if you wants any love and any sympathy in dis world. You ain't tried to pacify nobody but yo' self. Too busy listening tuh yo' own big voice. . . . All this bowin' down, all dis obedience under yo' voice datain'twhut Ah rushed off down de road tuh find out about you. (Hurston 105)

### Work Cited

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