

Black Feminism in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Abstract

Black women lived in the bottom of the society; they suffered from oppression of both sexuality and racial discrimination. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the writer Zora Neale Hurston creates a positive image Janie who seeks for female rights and fulfills herself through her own efforts. In the course of Janie's pilgrimage toward female rights, she goes through three stages, that is, Janie's loss, Janie's awakening, and Janie's fulfillment. Janie's struggle expresses black feminist consciousness-awareness, which becomes an independent female individual bursting her voices in the male-dominant world.

Keywords

Their Eyes Were Watching God, Black feminism, Loss, Awakening, Fulfillment

1. Introduction

The miserable life of black women has been reflected in many works in American literature. Black women lived in the bottom of the society; they suffered from oppression of both sexuality and racial discrimination. Zora Neale Hurston's masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is taken as one of the black Americans literary classics and one of the most outstanding works in modern literature of black feminism which focuses on woman's quest for rights and dignity.

Since its publication, American literary and cultural scholars have begun to explore the novel's thematic, ideological, and aesthetic complexity. Some scholars study the realism in this novel; other from some different perspective, such as Maria J. Racine explores the voice and Interiority in the novel, pointing out "As Janie gains voice, she associates with men who have progressively

more voice, or fuller voices. Hurston, however, does not demonize even the voiceless men; indeed, she facilitates the reader's empathy toward them." (Racine, 1994: p. 292). Leila Hajjari endeavors to examine the novel and its heroine in a romantic context. It is argued that Janie's personality is subject to a tri-partite development (Hajjari, 2016: p. 3552). Sawsan Qashgari studies "Racism, Feminism and Language", which focuses on racial conflicts, African American dialect and African American women gender oppression (Qashgari, 2017: pp. 32-41). Norman Marín Calderón focuses on how, in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), African American women get noticed through the use of gaze and visual experience. The marginalization African American women have experienced over the years makes them produce an alternative communication system based on sight and visual understanding. That is, the visual takes over the impossibility of black women to express themselves verbally: instead of voice there is sight (Calderón, 2018: pp. 261-269). However, this novel suggested Hurston's own hopes for an equal place in a patriarchal world. Chery A. Wall, a specialist studying Hurston's works, mentioned that Hurston is the first real linguistic writer who created and reflected the miserable life of black women.

2. The Oppression Janie Suffered

Their Eyes were Watching God is regarded as the first African American works which describes the awakening of African American women. Black feminist critics analyze the works of black female writers from a feminist or political perspective, and it is regarded as a practice, a way of reading inscriptions of race, gender, and class in modes of cultural expression. The black feminists of the Combahee River Collective, in their manifesto of April 1977, declared:

"The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face." (The Combahee River Collective, 2014: p. 271).

Bell Hooks mentions in *Feminist Theory: "From Margin to Center"*, that African American women, with an unusual position, were not only at the very bottom of the occupational ladder collectively, but also the lowest in American social class". Obviously, they are oppressed by the pain of sexist, racist, and classist.

The first pressure is from the Oppression of Racialism. The racial oppression impresses readers in many respects in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie's grandmother, Nanny, whose experiences show that whites control over everything in the society. They think they are superior to blacks. They can command the black to do anything. The miserable and harsh status of blacks can be exposed completely. They have no choice but to listen to whites' command. Whites name them as "negro" and "nigger", which have a strong discrimination. The white mistress in the novel can be regarded as a source of racism as well. The mistress always beats Nanny and intimidates her to sell her newborn daughter

Leafy. Raped by the white owner and threatened by the white mistress, Nanny determines to escape from the plantation. Nanny fears her daughter to be sold to other slave owners and live the miserable life as she ever does. She hopes her child could live a happy life. Thus she escapes from her slave master with her baby and hides in a shabby place until the slavery is abolished. At that time, she supposes that there is no oppression and difficulty any more. She sends her daughter to school, hoping that one day Leafy could become a school teacher. However, the reality breaks her heart again. Leafy is raped and gets pregnant when she is only seventeen. The tragic fate occurs to the mother and the daughter again. After Janie's birth, Leafy runs away without leaving any words. Besides, whites feel superior to blacks. They show no respect to blacks. The patriarchal society and the oppression of racism have a deep impact on Nanny. She is a tragic character and her values about life also change a lot, she experiences great sufferings both in body and in mind. These experiences that Nanny goes through in the racial and patriarchal society also leave a strong influence on Janie, which is harmful to her healthy growth. People usually call Janie "Alphabet" when she was a little girl, because "so many people had done named me different names" (Hurston, 1978: p. 9). Haunted by the miserable memories under the oppression of racism, Nanny compelled Janie to marry Logan Killicks, who is an old man but wealthy. However, Janie and Logan do not love each other, and this marriage does not bloom fully. In a word, both Nanny and Janie turn out to be a victim of the racial oppression in American slavery society. Although blacks have fought for their equal rights all the time, they are still not treated as equal citizens by the society. Blacks couldn't enjoy equal opportunity for better education, nor could they get equal chance for better jobs. They also do not have the right to vote or be voted. The severe discrimination from whites results in the humblest living situation of black people. Blacks are tortured both in body and in spirit.

The second pressure is from the Oppression of Sexuality. As the feminist critic Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of one's own* declares that men have and continue to treat women as inferiors. It is the male who defines what it means to be a female (Bressler, 1999: p. 181). *Their Eyes Were Watching God* not only shows men's absolute domination over women, but also represents the spiritual linking between nature and women. Murray Bookchin indicates that "the very idea of the domination of nature by man comes from the very real domination of human by human" (Bookchin, 1998: p. 1). Hurston shows men's maltreatment to women and nature, men's exploration of nature and men's domination over women in the novel. Simone de Beauvoir also asserts that the female becomes "the other", an object whose existence is defined and interpreted by the male, who is the dominant being in society. Always subordinate to the male, the female finds herself a secondary or nonexistent player in society (Bressler, 1999: p. 182). Once hurt by men, Janie always identifies herself with the tree, because she can get comfort except the tree. We can find that in a particular situation when Logan Killicks is indifferent to her, Janie turns to the natural thing—the tree.

“Her breath was gusty and short. She knew things that nobody had ever told her; for instance, the words of the tree and the wind. She often spoke to falling seeds and said, “Ah hope you fall on soft ground, because she had heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed ... The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off ” (Hurstons, 1978: p. 25). We can reckon that, nature becomes the medium for women to radically pursue spirit as well as the subversive deconstruction of the power structures that enhances man-dominated world itself and patriarchal language in Hurston’s novels. In the novel, also some elaborated descriptions can be seen about men’s exploitation of nature and the trees. After Joe Starks becomes the mayor of the town, “he sent men out to the swamp to cut the finest and straightest cypress post they could find, and kept on sending them back to hunt another one until they found one that pleased him” (Hurstons, 1978: p. 47). Under the influence of patriarchy, Joe Starks exploits anything freely which nature can supply. Men’s chopping down trees not only leads to the environmental deterioration but also threatens women’s housework. All in all, Hurston shows men’s occupation of the environment through men’s control over women in the patriarchal society.

The third pressure is from Janie’s Miserable Marriage. Janie went through three marriages which differed from one another. This could be seen from Janie’s different ways to deal with her three husbands. Janie identified her husbands’ with the pear tree respectively. Janie often visits her grandma’s garden in order to search for a key to the world she had dreamed of under the pear tree before marrying Logan. She thought that marriage could no longer feel the existence of loneliness. However, when she went into Logan’s house, all the hopes and expectations in her heart were collapsed—unlike the blooming pear tree in Nanny’s garden where there was full of vitality and fragrance, Logan’s house was “a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had ever been”, and it was “absent of flavor, too” (Hurstons, 1978: p. 39). She thought that “the vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree” (Hurstons, 1978: p. 28). Joe Starks came to realize that his world was arranged in hierarchies and he didn’t want to be at the bottom. Therefore, he was determined to become the master of others. He treated dominance as a way of life. He preferred to control everybody who possibly be brought under his control, naturally Janie and other blacks of Eatonville included. The only difference was that Janie, like the Mrs. Mayor, was not only under his control but also the very symbol of his control. Therefore, unlike what Logan did, Joe did not control Janie by forcing her to labor, but by changing her into a thing or his property. Joe restrained Janie from many aspects, such as her hairstyle, clothing, freedom of speech and communication with other townspeople. Gradually that Joe claimed absolute domination over Janie further and estranged her from her “pear tree” image and connection with the world. As for her second marriage, although Janie became silent, she did not give up her self-pursuit and vivid imagination in her inner heart. After Joe’s death, she experienced an exclusive period of self-reflection which helped

her relive her feelings. Then she continued to looking for the ideal love and harmony in her heart. Acquainted with Tea Cake, Janie thought that “He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring.” However, Hurston’s bee image had two contrary sides—the bee as pleasurable side and painful side. Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake involved much pleasure as well as pain—laughter, joy as well as skepticism, hurt, and jealousy. Janie experienced feelings and sensations from her youthful experience under the pear tree with Tea Cake. Unlike Joe confined Janie to a highly organized system with fixed laws and directions, Tea Cake encouraged her spirit to blossom and helped Janie to recognize herself just as she really was. Despite the affection and affinity of love between them, doubt and conflict also exist. Compelled by the patriarchal society, Tea Cake absolutely owned the ideology of domination. The activity of killing Tea Cake indicated that Janie’s mental was more mature. The trial interpretation of Janie’s ideas about pear trees represented her immature sexual mentality, because she only focused on the social meaning of marriage at that time. But gradually, she became more mature in her mind and had great vision and horizon.

3. Janie’s Awakening

Being a black woman, Janie’s rebellion came from the burst of her voice. The outburst of Janie’s earsplitting voice relived this anger, and also enhanced the progress of self-pilgrimage. It was a process from silence to burst and from inside to outside.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie discourages her first two marriages before she meets “Tea Cake” Vergible Woods. It is important that Tea Cake’s first gesture toward Janie is to invite her to play checkers, an invitation that profoundly has an impact on Janie:

“He set it up and began to show her and she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play.” (Hurston, 1978: pp. 91-92). A feeling of freedom strikes Janie, and this experience continues throughout her relationship with Tea Cake. Hence when that evening Tea Cake escorts Janie home from the shop, Janie feels:

“Maybe this strange man was up to something! ... Tea Cake wasn’t strange. Seemed as if she had known him all her life” (Hurston, 1978: p. 94). Tea Cake succeeds in satisfying Janie’s dream of “a bee for her blossom”. They exhume worms at midnight and fish until dawn; they rent automobile and drive to the nearby city to watch baseball games. Janie’s blueprint of love and marriage is shaping when she watches the perfect combination between the singing bees and the pollinated pear tree flowers in her grandmother’s garden. Janie strongly desires for fulfillment through establishment of an ideal relationship with a man, and Tea Cake is such a proper person. Tea Cake also helps Janie discard the definition of male/female that Joe has internalized and compelled on her. Tea Cake is described as following:

He looked like the love thoughts of women and a bee to a blossom—a pear

tree blossom in the spring (Hurston, 1978: p. 101). The model of masculinity employed in the bee can be represented by Tea Cake, encouraging Janie to express her thoughts. Janie's life with Tea Cake represents the final decision to march toward the pilgrimage, toward self-definition. Tea Cake makes Janie feel alive, free, vitally needed, loved, unlimited.

4. Janie's Fulfillment

In the course of Janie's self-fulfillment is the way to search for self-definition. In this process Tea Cake has an ulterior meaning for Janie, because "he done taught me the maiden language all over" (Hurston, 1978: p. 13). Tea Cake gives Janie the instruments to help her to find her own voice. As Elaine Showalter states that to find a perfect voice is "to find a new language, a new way of reading that can integrate our intelligence and our experience, our reason and our suffering, our skepticism and our vision" (Showalter, 1998: p. 39). So now she can open her heart and talks about her ideas in public freely, which symbolizes that she has freedom of communication. Besides, she has an equal status and power as men.

Striking off poverty perhaps is the efficient and quick way to encourage black women to change their social and family status, to unite women from various background and different ethnic groups, and to help them have the proper attitudes towards marriage and work. Looking back, Janie's first marriage is appointed by Nanny on the basis of economy. But Janie wants to realize true self-fulfillment. At first, she doesn't know what to do due to her age, so she has to follow Nanny's arrangements. Even if Janie is not satisfied with Joe, it is still evident that she is lucky to meet Joe when she knows nothing about money. When Janie is with Tea Cake, she tries her best to make life meaningful and enjoyable. She prefers to work in the field with him; at the same time, other women have no choice but to work in the field in order to make a living. Janie enjoys the process of work while the other women dream that they will someday meet a rich man and no longer drudge as a mule.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from a perspective of black feminism, which portrays the heroine's journey to become a self-reliance woman. Janie's pressure, including the oppression of racialism, the oppression of sexuality, Janie's undesirable marriage, Janie's awakening, Janie's resistance, Janie's fulfillment, including the independence of personality and the independence of economy could be witnessed by time and history, which expresses black feminist consciousness. Finally, Janie grows up to an independent woman who bursts her voices in the world. After undergoing the repeated failures in her marriages, Janie eventually has the feminist awareness and becomes independent as a woman. Moreover, Hurston's novel does not only examine racism from a certain perspective as being between blacks and whites, but she also broadens the concept of racism. While Hurston not only to discuss the racial issues but goes further to

discuss gender, as Sawsan Qashgari states that this novel “celebrates the complexity of African American society and their language, portrays the dark side of racism and follows a black female’s search for identity and freedom. It represents one woman’s courage to go beyond the luxurious life and to explore the real beauty of life and love. It is a story that never ends because ‘there is no end to reach’.” (Qashgari, 2017: p. 39).

Conflicts of Interest

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