

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
**ISSN-2321-7065**

**IJELLH**



**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

**UGC Approved Journal**



**Volume 6, Issue 9, September 2018**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

Rupalee Jasrotia  
Ph.D Scholar, Department of English,  
University of Jammu,  
India  
rupalee20j@gmail.com

*A Womanist Study of Zora Neal Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*

**Abstract:**

The African-American novelist Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is about a black female Jeanie Crawford, who undergoes a journey of proclaiming her 'self'. Hurston's novel explores the struggle of a black woman to break away from the triple oppression of gender, race and class. Janie succeeds in rebelling the pre-assigned gender roles and also violates the patriarchal notions of a black society. The black women have been sexually exploited both by the white men and the black men. Janie has passively accepted the conventional roles of a woman during her early age. But eventually she learns from the experiences of her three marriages. Janie succeeds in asserting her real self by defying the societal norms. She identifies herself with nature rather than the society in which she lives and defines herself through her association with nature. As it is understood from the novel that Janie finds solace in nature from the society which is oppressing her due to her sex, race and class. The ecocritical overtones are very prominent in the novel. Hurston speaks about the black woman's issues in a white American society. In Alice Walker's terms, Janie is a womanist because she transforms herself to a self-fulfilled and self-defined woman.

**Keywords:** Self, race, sex, class, nature, womanism

Sojourner Truth speech "Ain't I a Woman" defies black men's as well as white men's domination in the lives of African-American women. Though her words are many decades old, but the message is still relevant even today in many parts of the world. The black women have suffered from the times of slavery. They had to work hard in the fields and were also sexually both by the whites as well as the blacks. Their labor and hard work was ignored and they were sidelined when black men were fighting for their rights.

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps

me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?(qtd. in Stewart xxxiii)

The black woman has toiled and labored since ages. Truth stresses on the superiority of the black women in every aspect whether it is physical strength or nurturing. In the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie Crawford had worked hard equally with her first husband Logan Killicks in the fields. Moreover, she has also toiled with her second husband Jody Starks in making the first colored town of Eatonville.

The novel exposes the colorism which the black woman has to face even within the black society. The African-American men prefer light skinned woman rather than a black skinned woman. In the novel Janie is desired by many men when she enters the town of Eatonville. Her brown hair and light skin makes her more beautiful in the eyes of the black men. In Everglades, Mrs. Turner relates herself more with the whites than the blacks because of her light complexion. She takes pride in her light skin and also favors and propagates the racial discrimination of the whites. For Mrs. Turner “Her thin lips were a source of pride. To her way of thinking all these things set her aside from Negroes” (Hurstons 134, 136). She likes Janie for her “coffee-and-cream complexion” (134) and avoids the company of the black skinned women. Even when it comes to make a choice for the marriage, she prefers light skinned men. She reprimands Janie for marrying Tea Cake, who is a dark skinned man. She hates every dark skinned body and it is because of people like Mrs. Turner that the blacks have to suffer even within a black society. People like Mrs. Turner put the entire blame on their brothers and sisters for the deplorable condition of the black race in America. Mrs. Turner says in the novel that:

A can't stand black niggers. Ad don't blame de white folks from hatin' em' cause Ah can't stand 'emmahself. (...) Ah hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid 'em. (...) Always cuttin' de monkey for white folks. If it wuzn't for so many black folks it wouldn't be no race problem. De white folks would take us in widdem. De black ones is holdin' us back (Hurstons 135).

Landscape also plays a prominent in the life of Janie Crawford and her relation with three husbands. The surrounding environment where Janie settles after her every marriage

also reflects her relationship with her each husband. The area where she gets settled with her first husband, Logan Killicks is very dull, hot and dry as compared to her nanny's house. In the same way her relation with Logan Killicks was dry and lifeless. It was more of a master and a slave. As it can be inferred from the ecofeminist literature that patriarchy works through binaries which includes, male and female, culture and nature, mind and body, human and nature, master and slave etc. The unjust domination and oppression of male over female, of human over animal and of culture over nature disrupts the balanced and egalitarian society. Her relation with her second husband Jody Starks can also be equated with the landscape. Many trees were cut for building new houses and the natural surface was also cemented with roads. Likewise, in the beginning, Janie's second marriage was blissful, but in due course, her marriage turns into a disaster. The barrenness of the land reflects the barrenness or childlessness of Janie. Even after the age of forty, Janie was unable to give birth to a child. The patriarchal structures were able to exploit and subvert the female as well as the nature. The place where she went after her third marriage was rich in flora, fauna and scenic beauty. It was the place of her dreams where she wants to live. The lake which she saw after entering the area symbolises her rebirth. In her third marriage, she cherishes her freedom and is not forced to do anything without her choice.

The novel also emphasizes on the mediocre state of African-American women within marriage and the black society. It was very difficult for a woman to improve herself socially as well as economically during those times. Marriage also seems one of the alternatives for a black woman to raise their social status. This view was clearly advocated by Janie's nanny. Nanny chooses for a middle aged man who owns sixty acres of land over a young man. She forces Janie to marry a middle aged man, Logan Killicks because it was the only way to improve socially and economically. Though Nanny was not against Janie's education but she considered Janie's marriage with Logan Killicks as a source of security and protection. Nanny also chides Janie for kissing a young man. For her, economic security is more important than love and sexuality in a marriage. She says:

[y]ou come heahwidyo' mouf full uh foolishness on uh busy day. Heah you got up prop tuh lean on all yo' bawn days, and big protection, and everybody got tuhtip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis' Killicks, and you come worryin' me 'bout love. (22)

The novel also deals with the objectification of the woman. Janie's marriage with Joe Starks has raised her status from a low class to a high classwoman but it has not alleviated her inferior position. Rather than a harmonious marriage it was more of a master-slave relation. Janie was not free to live her life. Starks was against women's education. For him, a woman's place is only in the kitchen and fields. When people of Eatonville insisted Janie to say something on the occasion of lamp-lightening, Starks objected and said: "[t]hankyuhfuhyo' compliments, but mah 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 the home" (41). Starks does not consider women fit in the political and economic sphere and relates them to "chillun and chickens and cows (...) [because, according to him,] they [too] don't think none theirselves" (67).

Black women have been exploited racially, sexually, physically and mentally in the American society. They have been subjected to domestic violence and marital rape by the black men. They have also been exploited for their labor both by the white as well as the black men. During the times of slavery, the black women were sexually as well as physically exploited by the white men. After the abolition of slavery, the black men also treated the black woman as an object and exploited her sexually as well as emotionally. Nanny was raped by her white master. Janie's mother was born as a result of that. She was also sexually exploited by her black class teacher and Janie was born. Janie was physically abused and beaten by her second husband, Joe Starks. Janie was brutally treated by Joe Starks in front of everybody. Even her third husband Tea Cake treats her badly: "[h]e had whipped Janie.... Being able to whip her reassured him in possession" (140). He is of the opinion that: "Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss" (141). The black men treat women as if they are their property. The novel exposes the patriarchal notions of a society as well as the multiple levels of oppression which a black woman faces.

Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* tells that in the Manichean world of Blacks and Whites, one finds "Blacks who are whiter than the Whites" (115). In the novel, Jody Starks behaves like a white man. He is driven by the white man's notion of power and materialism. He mimics white man and it gets clearly reflected in his behavior, thinking and actions. After establishing the town of Eatonville, he behaves like a white master. The house he builds for himself is a white house which reminds us of the house of a white plantation owner. When Starks becomes the Mayor of Eatonville, he acts like a white master and treats others as slaves. Moreover, he even wanted Janie to act like a white man's wife, and the

porch of his big house was built for Janie to sit there like a white man's wife the whole day. He also warns Janie of becoming friendly with the town's people. He wants Janie to wear the black gown which he has brought from an expensive shop. He does not want Janie to wear an ordinary dress prepared by the lower class woman of his own town Eatonville. However, he does ask for Janie's advice in any kind of decision-making. By forcing his choice and image of a woman on Janie, he is trying to subordinate her. Just like he was successful in making his dream come true by making a town out of an undeveloped land, in the same way, he wants to make a perfect "big woman" (73) out of free-spirited Janie. Starks was not only conscious of the class division but was also very overtly propagating the racist and sexist notions.

Alice Walker states in *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*, that a womanist loves woman, loves herself and also loves to struggle. Janie does not shy away from the restrictions and challenges in her life. Rather than submitting to the racial and sexist notions of the society, she strives for a fuller self with which she is in love. Janie in Walker's term is a 'womanish' because she is daring, brave, fearless, free spirited in nature and does not blindly follow the norms of the society. Despite of the first marriage which was forcefully arranged by her nanny, she does not easily accept the forced notions of the society. She always strived and struggled to get away with all kinds of oppression.

Unlike Mrs. Turner, Janie is not a racist. She loves and adores the black culture as well as the black people as it is clear from the conduct of Janie with the folks of Eatonville and Eveglades. She was never proud of her skin and Caucasian features. Moreover, she has never discriminated between the people of different colors, different class and different gender. Alice Walker has opined in *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*:

2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist (...). Traditionally capable (...)."
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love... Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. (xii)

The novel also highlights the relation of Janie and the nature. She is aware of the spirit in nature and is also able to understand the language of birds and animals. Her spiritual connection with nature is apparent in the novel. She is a free spirit that cannot be bounded and circumscribed by any kind of restriction. Music and dancing also makes her free. She was always in search of a true love which she found at last in her third marriage with Tea Cake. She is a woman who is fearless and has never succumbed to any prescribed notions. She loves herself who never gives up in her life against any kind of circumstances. Above all, her spirit had never been tainted by the societal norms of race, class and gender.

Conclusion: Zora Neal Hurston through the character of Janie has presented a woman, who is pure at heart and loves humanity. In America, where black women had to face oppression due to race, sex and class, Janie dares to assert her real self. Hurston has also explored Janie's affinity with nature. Hurston had written during the Harlem Renaissance and has exposed the problems of the black women. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's has also failed to raise voice for the black women. Apart from the black women's issues, Hurston has also criticised the racial discrimination, unjust violence and slavery.

### Works Cited

Fanon, Franz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. Grove Press, 1963.

Hurston, Zora Neal. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Harper & Row, 1990.

Stewart, Jeffrey C. Introduction. *Narrative of Sojourner Truth. A Bondswoman of Olden Time With a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from Her "Book of Life"*.

By Sojourner Truth. 1878. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Truth, Sojourner. "Ain't I A Woman" *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 8 Dec. 2014.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden: Womanist Prose*. Phoenix, 2005.