

# ZORA NEALE HURSTON: A UNIVERSAL FEMINIST ENDEAVOR THROUGH THE NOVEL *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

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“*What is most personal is most universal*” (Carl Rogers, 1902-1987)

## Abstract

*Prior to the radical feminist movements in the world is the authorship of Zora Neal Hurston in her *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Although regarded as influential to both African-American literature and women's literature, the achievement of this novel's authoress distinguishes her as a black woman in the struggle for women's liberation. Is the novel race-oriented or does it stand as a work written in the interest of the universal woman no matter her race? This research work, through feminist and African American theories, highlights the pioneering contribution of a black woman to the global struggle against women's alienation. It suggests that restricting literary works to only their author's race interests does not only underestimate the work itself, but also makes it loathsome with regard to the creative genius of the writer.*

**Keywords:** *black woman, femininity, liberated woman, masculinity, women's literature, race.*

## Résumé

*Antérieure aux mouvements féministes radicaux dans le monde se trouve la paternité de Zora Neal Hurston à travers son *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Bien que considérée comme figure influente d'aussi bien la littérature afro-américaine que la littérature féminine, le succès de l'auteure de ce roman la distingue comme une femme noire dans la lutte pour la libération des femmes. Le roman est-il orienté vers la race ou se présente-t-il comme un travail écrit dans l'intérêt des femmes à travers le monde sans égard à la race ? Ce travail de recherche, à travers les théories féministe et afro-américaine, fait la lumière sur la contribution pionnière d'une femme noire à la lutte mondiale contre*

*L'aliénation des femmes. Il suggère que, réduire les travaux littéraires uniquement aux intérêts de la race de l'auteur non seulement sous-estime le travail même, mais lui crée aussi du dégoût au regard du génie créatif de l'écrivain.*

**Mots-clés:** *femme noire, féminité, femme libre, masculinité, littérature des femmes, race.*

## **Introduction**

African American writers have always resisted the racist and curtailing considerations they receive from white supremacists and editors. Some, consequently, end up in a situation where they stop writing about Blacks' relation with Whites in the U.S or on themes dealing with Blacks. Others utterly quit the arena of writing for distress to be qualified as black writers. During his leadership in the Harlem Renaissance literary movement of the 1920s, W.E.B. Dubois, vehemently promoted a black cultural organization around entities that are exclusively well-thought-out by the black community. "Dubois interests...lay in culture, not in politics" (Fabre, 1993: 47). He therefore strongly recommended that the Harlem writers, that is, African American authors produce literary work only about black life in the U.S or black life in general. He was motivated by the mainstream's condition to accept an ethnic group to be part of it if only that ethnic group could prove the intelligibility of its culture. Poets like Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer openly resisted their leader's whim, which gave them only the qualification of confined authors: "Black writer." Jean Toomer quit writing because his was not meant to be appreciated only by black community; and Countee Cullen insisted on producing arts on any given aspect of the universal nature.

Although Zora Neale Hurston's work was dealing with women, she did not care who is going to be the beneficiary of its outcome. Her work simply aims at offering possibilities. As Samira Kawash (1997: 169) puts it, "Hurston offers the possibility of a transformed relation of being together in the world." Are we to consider her work according to her color and

conclude that she is promoting solely the right of African American women, or simply take her work to be in the interest of the universal woman? This research work, through feminist and African American theories, highlights the pioneering contribution of a black woman to the global struggle against women underestimation. Only critics found out the varying reactions according to who the author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is, what her color is and whom she is writing for. Richard Wright, for instance, found that Hurston's work was not prepared to revamp the black culture in the U.S even if it was written by an African American woman. He found it not political, not poignant enough to point out the cultural intelligibility of the black ethnic group. Barbara Christian (1980: 62) reports that "Richard Wright called the novel counterrevolutionary and a continuation of the minstrel image." However, this reaction is rather the one that comes to sustain the thesis of the universality of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* because she may be classified among those who say: "we believed we could articulate spokespeople to and for the masses." (Baker, Jr., 1988: 13). Apart from the relevance of themes such as the themes of 'masculinity,' 'femininity,' and 'liberated woman' inherent in that work, the tone of colorlessness of the contents of this novel is vibrant at the end, where a bench of white judges resort to acquitting the black protagonist who killed her husband in self-defense under a warm applause of white audience.

Thus, through feminist and African American theories, the theme of masculinity will be elaborated in the first part of this article. The focus will be laid on the universality of Zora's work. The main argument in this section is on the revision of the patriarchal source of inspiration about the gender roles, which mostly give the toughest part of our daily activities to women. It is out of this roles' distribution that forestalls the inferior position of a woman.

The second part of this article is about femininity and the liberated woman vis-à-vis the gender roles set by our communities in the context of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. A liberated woman here is the one with voice for free expression. The emphasis is on the fact that this search of voice which is the fundamental issue in this novel is not exclusively dealing with black women and that Hurston remains neutral in her approach to these universal themes.

### **1. Masculinity at Work: Revisiting the Source of Inspiration**

Hurston's work appeared in the middle of struggle for freedom by Blacks in the United States of America. Therefore, a careful reader of literature according to contexts would remind her to remain in the context of oppressed people fighting for their freedom because the most obvious entity of that struggle is by men and for men only. But since her race matters less than her gender, it could be permissible to find it tangible that she is vehemently reorienting, through her protagonist, the masculine way of considering women in her novel. "Quantitative sociological studies of feminist identities often use methods that assume women's race has relatively little to do with their relationship to feminism." (Harnois, 2005: 809-810). In this perspective, we argue that, Hurston's work is universal and is not confined to black issues at the time it should be solely dealing with issues of fighting for Blacks. But a careful observer could resolve that since women are among the oppressed, in this case, Hurston's work could be qualified as a double-edged sword because not only does it fight for women in general, but it also gives incentives to oppressed races. "The intersection of race and gender... creates unique aggregates,... the life chances and experiences of which assume patterns that cannot be anticipated simply by adding the effects of race to those of gender" (Ibid.:

809). So, on the one hand, the group of her gender (universal woman) will focus on her work as feminist endeavor. And on the other hand, black leaders, even if the work is not straightforwardly addressing the black cultural issues, should be proud at least because of her creative power, which could not be expected to emanate from a black lady of that period. Moreover, if Richard Wright were a woman, his reaction could have been less ethnocentric just because the universal woman is being revenged through the novel.

For a clear understanding of this work, let us proceed through the plot of Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

Janie Crawford, an attractive, confident, middle-aged black woman, returns to Eatonville, Florida, after a long absence. The black townspeople gossip about her and speculate about where she has been and what has happened to her young husband, Tea Cake. They take her confidence as aloofness, but Janie's friend Pheoby Watson sticks up for her. Pheoby visits her to find out what has happened. Their conversation frames the story that Janie relates.

Janie explains that her grandmother raised her after her mother ran off. Nanny loves her granddaughter and is dedicated to her, but her life as a slave and experience with her own daughter, Janie's mother, has warped her worldview. Her primary desire is to marry Janie as soon as possible to a husband who can provide security and social status for her. She finds a much older farmer named Logan Killicks and insists that Janie marry him.

After moving in with Logan, Janie is miserable. Logan is pragmatic and unromantic and, in general, treats her like a pack mule. One day, Joe Starks, a smooth-tongued and ambitious man, ambles down the road in front of the farm. He and Janie flirt in secret for a couple weeks before she runs off and marries him.

Janie and Jody, as she calls him, travel to all-black Eatonville, where Jody hopes to have a "big voice." A consummate

politician, Jody soon succeeds in becoming the mayor, postmaster, storekeeper, and the biggest landlord in town. But Janie seeks something more than a man with a big voice. She soon becomes disenchanted with the monotonous, stifling life that she shares with Jody. She wishes that she could be a part of the rich social life in town, but Jody doesn't allow her to interact with "common" people. Jody sees Janie as the fitting ornament to his wealth and power, and he tries to shape her into his vision of what a mayor's wife should be. On the surface, Janie silently submits to Jody; inside, however, she remains passionate and full of dreams.

After almost two decades of marriage, Janie finally asserts herself. When Jody insults her appearance, Janie rips him to shreds in front of the townspeople, telling them all how ugly and impotent he is. In retaliation, he savagely beats her. Their marriage breaks down, and Jody becomes quite ill. After months without interacting, Janie visits him on his deathbed. Refusing to be silenced, she once again chastises him for the way that he treated her. As she berates him, he dies.

After Jody's funeral, Janie feels free for the first time in years. She rebuffs various suitors who come to court her because she loves her newfound independence. But when Tea Cake, a man twelve years her junior, enters her life, Janie immediately senses a spark of mutual attraction. She begins dating Tea Cake despite critical gossip within the town. To everyone's shock, Janie then marries Tea Cake nine months after Jody's death, sells Jody's store, and leaves town to go with Tea Cake to Jacksonville.

During the first week of their marriage, Tea Cake and Janie encounter difficulties. He steals her money and leaves her alone one night, making her think that he married her only for her money. But he returns, explaining that he never meant to leave her and that his theft occurred in a moment of weakness. Afterward, they promise to share all their experiences and opinions with each other. They move to the Everglades, where

they work during the harvest season and socialize during the summer off-season. Tea Cake's quick wit and friendliness make their shack the center of entertainment and social life.

A terrible hurricane bursts into the Everglades two years after Janie and Tea Cake's marriage. As they desperately flee the rising waters, a rabid dog bites Tea Cake. At the time, Tea Cake doesn't realize the dog's condition; three weeks later, however, he falls ill. During a rabies-induced bout of madness, Tea Cake becomes convinced that Janie is cheating on him. He starts firing a pistol at her and Janie is forced to kill him to save her life. She is immediately put on trial for murder, but the all-white, all-male jury finds her not guilty. She returns to Eatonville where her former neighbors are ready to spin malicious gossip about her circumstances, assuming that Tea Cake has left her and taken her money. Janie wraps up her recounting to Pheoby, who is greatly impressed by Janie's experiences. Back in her room that night, Janie feels at one with Tea Cake and at peace with herself. That is the plot.

The masculine/patriarchal treatment earmarked to the protagonist Janie is of old civilization that the Grandmother Nanny has observed not only from her parent but also from her master who raped her. We firstly notice the main concern of Nanny, which is to see her granddaughter under a masculine protection. This tacitly refers to the unavailability of a masculine power to lead when a woman's security is at stake. Whether the woman is able to protect herself or not, the protection in a marriage should be the role played by the bridegroom. It is also noteworthy that the sexual maturity of Nanny's granddaughter has never been noticed till when she was caught kissing a young man. The list in the perspective of the masculine role in the stable characteristics of women is endless. But if we take it to be naturally verified, let us glance at what motivated the protagonist to wail for freedom of action and voice. What

inspired her is also a natural phenomenon that gives the chance to bees to freely land and kiss blossoming pear trees in spring.

Even if an androgynous society is not being prone by Hurston, the resistance to masculinity throughout the novel guarantees the omnipresence of the latter in every aspect of women's subjectivity. Susan Meisenhelder (Cited in Powers: 2002: 231) sees:

[A] Manichaeic division between men and women in Hurston's work, with black men as insidious surrogates of white power. Enclosed in her role as an exemplary literary ancestor, Hurston's own pugnacious defiance of the clothes and categories of gender tends to retreat meekly behind the gender divide of contemporary criticism. Taking Hurston's appeal to equality, individualism, and androgyny seriously, it seems clear that men and what it means to "be a man" play a more complicated and important role in Hurston's imagination than is generally recognized. Above all, men possess and display power—whether sexual, geographic, literary, or religious power—that Hurston desires for herself. Males, then, are regularly oppressive, but there is, nevertheless, something about their "masculinity" that is also often desirable.

This quotation proves Hurston's general considerations of masculine domination in the society. No matter how this masculine oppressive dominion is described and resisted in *Their*

*Eyes Were Watching God*, besides her pursuit for individualism and self-reliance, Hurston's admiration to masculinity and her struggle against it are sourced in her ethnic folktales, for which she has a specific use. According to Susan Meisenhelder (1996: 269), "Hurston had her own anthropological views to express in *Men and Mules* as well. What she discovered when she looked at her culture through the spyglass of anthropology was that the folktales she had always heard were not merely amusing stories or even relics of slavery, but living forces, strategies used in her own day for dealing with power inequities." But never can we admit that her objective is to live in an androgynous society. If that were the case, she could not be found spending a single instance with a man as husband. She rather wants to remain a self-reliant woman with voice and liberty.

Elsewhere in her work: *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, it can be observed that Hurston is eager to be in the boys' playing party, where she is even able to hurt some rather than playing with girls, who end up in complaining about her physical strength. She admits:

I discovered that I was extra strong by playing with other girls near my age. I had no way of judging the force of my playful blows, and so I was always hurting somebody. Then they would say I meant to hurt and go home and leave me. Everything was all right, however, when I played with boys. It was a shameful thing to admit being hurt among them. Furthermore, they could dish it out themselves, and I was acceptable to them because I was the one girl who could take a good pummeling without running home to tell. (Hurston, 1984: 39).

Although Hurston's pursuit for voice and liberty can be qualified to be in a frame of radical feminism, her technique of characterizing her male playmates allows the inference of the insinuation of her being equal to men. Not every woman but she alone. In the foregoing quotation, it is clear that only she is physically equal to and admitted by boys to play with them without any complaint.

In patriarchal societies, it is commonly assumed that being a boy implies a certain toughness one must show and girls constitute the weak sex. As bell hooks (1992: 87) puts it, "In our southern black Baptist patriarchal home, being a boy meant learning to be tough, to mask one's feelings, to stand one's ground and fight—being a girl meant learning to obey, to be quiet, to clean, to recognize that you had no ground to stand on." However, in the preceding quotation from Hurston's novel, one can easily observe that the authoress associates such toughness not to a boy, but rather to a girl. Through the novel, Hurston is deconstructing the false image of physical toughness as a reserved privilege of boys/men. Here, she makes a girl/woman feel as equal as the boys with whom she plays. It therefore sounds that she is trying to construct herself as being a girl who can compete with boys but not being a boy. It is because she is a girl that she has the pride of easily playing with boys. This clarifies that Hurston remains a woman but with physical features of a man, sensing that this desire alone transfers a sort of powerful position to men.

Masculinity is unavoidably omnipresent and naturally vivid and dominates the human society. It is through cultural endeavors that women like Hurston can try to highlight its parameters and break the acme of its negative consequences on the voice and liberty of the other sexual category. And this could be achieved only through mental change from both men and women on the superiority of men. The only woman who can

think of the high position of men should be the one who takes that position as a point to reach through hard work and claim of right. It should not be taken for granted that men are superior to women for their physical strength because there are women who are as strong as men and vice versa.

The following part is addressing the deconstruction of the masculine system of female misdemeanor in the advantage of the feminine liberation and acquirement of voice.

## **2. Femininity and the Liberated Woman vis-à-vis the Gender Roles**

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* explores the theme of traditional gender roles and some social binary opposition, which determines the relationship between men and women. Nanny believes that Janie should marry a man not for love but for “protection.” Janie's first two husbands, Logan Killicks and Jody Starks, both believe Janie should be defined by her marriage to them. Both men want her to be domesticated and silent. Her speech, or silence, is defined by her physical locations, most often. For example, Starks forces her silence at the store, a public – and therefore, male space at the time. He says, “... Muh wife don't know nothin' bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's ah woman [.] and her place is in de home.” (Hurston, 2006: 38). Janie is also forbidden from socializing with the townspeople on the porch. Tea Cake is Janie's last husband, who treats her as more of an equal than Killicks and Starks did, by talking to her and playing checkers with her. Despite this, Tea Cake does hit Janie to show his possession over her. Thus, Janie's life seems defined by her relation to domineering males.

It is relevant to notice that in the book, men view women as objects to pursue, acquire, and control through courting, manipulation, and even physical force. Janie's journey for the

discovery of her self-identity and independence is depicted through her pursuit of true love – her dream – through marriages to three different men. Each of the men she marries conforms in some way to gender norms of the day. The role of femininity is portrayed through the symbolism of property, mules, and natural elements. Women in the book are considered a trophy prize for males, to simply look pretty and obey their husbands. The analogy of the Mule and Women is stated repetitively in the book and is used to represent the gender role of women. The grandmother Nanny explained to Janie at a young age how African-American women were objectified as mules. “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see.” (ibid: 16). Mules are typically bought and sold by farmers, usually to be used to work until exhaustion. Later in the book, Janie realizes that Nanny’s warnings were true when she identifies with an abused mule in Eatonville. She sees herself as a working animal with no voice, there for the amusement of others and at the expense of her own free will. This identification is shown in the novel when the townspeople are laughing at the mule that Jody had eventually bought and rescued (in an attempt to manipulate Janie). However, Janie doesn’t laugh alongside the townspeople as she is shown to empathize with the mule and she feels disgusted by the situation. The mule represents the feminine gender role in the story by which men suppress and degrade women who are stereotyped as unable to think for themselves and needing constant guidance from men. These stereotypes become a chain on the American women, preventing them from developing individuality, and from pursuing their personal happiness and ultimately what forces them to mold into their gender role. “Even women who embrace feminism . . ., often find their attempts to achieve liberty and equality stymied by their own feminine attraction to things that bolster patriarchy, as well as by the dominant gender norms imposed on them”(Snyder-Hall, 2010: 256).

But now Janie is searching for her own voice and identity throughout the novel. She is often without a voice in relation to her husbands as she will not fight back. Janie is also faced with situations that make her feel that her value as an African-American woman is little to none. She is seen as distinct from other women in the novel, who follow traditions and do not find a life independent of men. Janie's physical appeal becomes a basis of Starks and Tea Cake to have jealousy and belittle her looks. Starks orders Janie to cover her long hair as other men are attracted to it. Similarly, Tea Cake remarks on Janie's lighter skin and her appeal to Mrs. Turner's brother. But Janie begins to feel liberated in her marriage with Tea Cake because he treats her as an equal and mostly does not look down on her. As a result, she loves him more than she did with the other two spouses.

Janie does not find complete independence as a woman until after the death of Tea Cake. She returns to Eatonville with her hair down and she sits on her own porch chatting with her friend Pheoby. By the end of the novel, she has overcome traditional roles and cultivates an image of the "liberated black woman."

The narrative technique in the context of places occupied by the protagonist in her various marriages promotes a shifting canvas that Hurston uses to stimulate the psychological evolution of her main character. The distinct spatial locus – psychological space, physical space, and the narrative space constitutes the road map through which Janie undertakes her pursuit for voice and self-fulfillment. Before moving to the second marriage, it is clear that one can never remain in the farm with Logan alone without any common people to interact with. In the second marriage it is almost the suitable place to mess up with clientele coming to the store. But still, understandably, boring and chosen place by Jody is apparently a confinement for Janie who has set a horizon to hit. In addition to Jody's misconduct, this place in the store, that the reader could find better than the previous one, is crucial

because she found a type of resistance to Jody's mistreatment in the public. She even threatened Jody with her voice to accelerate his death. Without having passed through this second marriage, Janie's relation could not have had a distinctive success, where the space with Tea Cake is wider and gives more chance for interaction.

Therefore, the experience gotten from the three marriages has now brought the protagonist the liminal point. She now exercises her freedom of speech. She speaks when she wants – as she is now doing in the porch with Phoebe – or she keeps silent when she desires so. “Janie's ability to enter and produce subversive spaces – both materially and psychologically – directly results from her understanding of the porch as a liminal space. (Pattison, 2013: 10). This is, according to Pattison, a Foucauldian heterotopia, a theoretical concept of great importance to this essay. Since Janie's character and indeed Hurston's novel move us beyond rigid conceptions of discourse situated in physical place, it is inferable that the three places are complement to one another in a critical way. (ibid).

The most noteworthy aspect of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the heterosexual desire that is insinuated in the protagonist's relation with the three men. This does not exclude the focalization of the discussion on the finalization of the plot by the death of Tea Cake. Rather, her ability to tell her story does signify a lot because that is the horizon she set herself, which is the psychological place to consider.

The heterosexual idyll with Tea Cake is thus not the culmination of the plot, but a transformative moment that leads to culmination. In other words, the theme of finding a voice does not supplement the heterosexual romance plot of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that supplants that plot, just as the story of Janie's *telling*

her story frames and in framing displaces the ostensible main story of Janie's quest for heterosexual love. (Hite, 1989: 268).

This may not persuade us to do away with the perception of the subversive places the protagonist has created on her way to self-fulfillment and voice. Even the deconstructive ways she used to counteract various subservient handlings from men set examples for every woman who fights for self-reliance, which is a universal norm.

## **Conclusion**

Historically, the power of voice has been a central theme to African American literature and literary criticism. Writing out of a history of enforced silence, African American authors have represented voice as an important source of personal and political agency; and the search for language in African American fiction is often simultaneously a search for identity and an affirmation of individual selfhood. Much the same can be said for women's fiction and feminist literary concerns. Women have historically been constructed as women by silencing their access to public speech. Tillie Olsen (reported by Deborah McDowell in Winston Napier ed., 2000: 173) points out that, "the fear of reprisal from the publishing and critical arenas is a looming obstacle to the woman writer's coming into her own authentic voice." Indeed, gaining voice is not a simple process. Political freedom, including the freedom of speech, has historically in no way insured a personal or social ability to voice one's sense of identity. (Obourn, 2012: 239). It is in this perspective that the concern of the universality of Hurston's authorship has been the focus of this article, which is in two main parts.

The first part addressed the sources of inspiration of masculinity and the parameters of the binary oppositions that confer an inferior status to women in general under the superiority of men. The emphasis in this part is laid on the natural sources from which the superiority of men is inferred and derived, among them women's admiration of the masculinity and the old ways of life in slavery and misconceptions that are taken for granted. At the same time, the counter-reflection has realized the natural issue that motivated the protagonist of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to journey for freedom of speech and self-fulfillment. This part ended in the apprehension that if Hurston were promoting an androgynous society, the protagonist of this novel could not go from husband to husband. Rather, the aim of the latter is to be respected and considered equal to her partner with every possible chance to socialize with common people.

The second part focused on the liberated woman that Janie has become after her journey. Even if critics lay emphasis on the ascendancy of sexual love in the plot of the novel, the outcome of Janie's efforts to counteract with men she came across in her life alludes to the hitting of the target she set herself. The deconstructing system adopted by the protagonist informs the reader about the possibility to miss someone we love and feel at the same time the presence of the latter. Janie killed Tea Cake out of self-defense, but still appreciates the relationship with him. This is where we could imagine if really Janie has reached the horizon she intended to. We closed this part by clarifying that the discussion on this novel pushes us to go beyond the rigid places visited by the protagonist. Therefore, instead of limiting the plot of the novel to the death of Tea Cake, we rather consider that the porch where Janie speaks freely to her friend Phoebe constitutes a liminal point because it is here that she spreads the most her freedom of speech to narrate her story.

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