

QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

PRASUNA. C.S.L

Abstract: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a radical shift in black women's fiction. It is the evolution of a woman protagonist, who metamorphoses from a 'sex serf' to a soaring spirit in quest of her identity. This paper evaluates the black female development from materialism and passivity to self-respect and self-realization. Hurston's novel attempts to articulate the black female self within the unresolvable tension between race and sex.

Black women's novel is the odyssey of black woman from abnegation to self-embrace in spite of numerous challenges and hostilities. Their writings are women-centric, focusing on exploitation and predicament of women in the society. Black woman novelists have strived hard to bring light on the feminist aspects in their magnum opus which is the writer's facet clarion call for equality and freedom.

The double whammy of blatant white racism and black male sexism hurled black woman head long into the dismal abyss of oppression where they are subjected to unedifying spectacle of human debasement and depravity. Their unbearable condition of oppression and their unconquerable endurance to fight against the situation is the both motive and inspiration for their writings. Black woman novelist who scripts her own success stories is not content to be led but prefers to lead are learning to move beyond paradoxes.

Keywords: Black Woman, Exploitation, Racism, Sexism, Quest for Identity, self-realization.

Introduction: America, which is considered a dreamland, was once described "the nucleus of exploitation", when the blacks were treated as slaves and considered beasts of burden. The African 'Queens' and 'Kings' became 'Negroes' and 'Negresses' in an alien soil. They were transported to white America as loads of human cargo, terrorized into submission by cruel methods like lynching and burying. They were turned into faceless and nameless non-entities through brutalization and their painful agonies and cries were muted under the cannon of the whites. Their history of oppression and exploitation was fictionalized by black writers and the fictions served as a mirror to the black society.

But history has always been 'His-Story' and black women were depicted as background figures, refracted in a monolithic mirror of blackness and maleness. Hence, the literature of black women is an attempt to explore the unexplored regions of a black woman's life. As a result, the black women writers exploded into the literary field with an avalanche of their writings. They choose black heroines for their work and like their real counterparts their heroines fight against social injustice. They do not go off alone to plot their destiny like the conventional heroes of black male writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. In defining themselves, Afro-American women writers like Frances Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Nella Larsen, Jessie Faucet, Zora Neale Hurston have necessarily had to confront the interaction between restrictions of racism, sexism and class that characterize their existence. Their novels are directed towards the problems of slavery,

miscegenation and the identity crisis of a tragic mulatta. With the socio-political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, black literature witnessed an explosion of writings by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, Nikki Giovanni, Toni Cade Bambara, Gwendolyn Brooks and Ntozake Shange who focused on developing the rhetorical dexterity to manipulate a multiplicity of discourses. The fiction of these writers is a mirror image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in the country.

The fiction of these writers is generally linked by similar themes and motives. The quest theme, universally found in all literature, takes an important place in their writings. There is usually a black heroine who is involved in the quest to find a meaningful identity and to survive with dignity and integrity in a social environment that is both dominantly male and white. By the end, however she accepts, affirms and celebrates her own definition of womanhood. Identity for the black American woman in particular can be studied at three levels-races, culture and gender. Racially they do not fit into the American community which has the white dominant race that continues to treat the blacks as slaves and bestial creatures. But the blacks had a racial past of their own, that belonged to the continent from which they hail, and they strive hard, in vain, to establish their racial identity in an alien society. Gender attains a predominant place for the black American women writers in their quest for identity. By being black and female these writers write from a unique vantage point.

Zora Neale Hurston, a prolific Afro-American woman writer was considered the great fore-mother of Afro-American women novelists. She retains the honor of being the most productive Afro-American female writer who had published more books than any other black American woman. (1971:90) she has left her indelible mark on the literary world and inspired countless Afro-American women writers among whom Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara and Sherley Anne Williams figure most prominently. She is indeed the spiritual and cultural Godmother of contemporary black women writers.

Zora is a popular personality of Harlem Renaissance. She was one of the first black women writers to do it all; anthropologist, novelist, short story writer, dramatist, essayist, folklorist, journalist, autobiographer, teacher and lecturer. Her seven book-length works are an exciting combination of her acute interests in orthodox religion, folklore, anthropology and fiction. Her four novels *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) reflects many aspects of folk culture. *Mules and Men* (1935), was the first popular book about Afro-American folklore ever written by a black scholar. Zora received the Anisfield-Wolf Award for her Autobiography *Dust Tracks on Road* (1942), for 'the best book on race relations... and the best volume in the general field of fiction, poetry or biography'. (1993:3)

The tide of black literature took a new shift with Ms. Hurston's second novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), which is regarded one of the most poetic works of fiction by a black writer in the first half of the twentieth century, and a woman's quest for a satisfying life. The book became an acknowledged classic of modern American fiction and it is favorably compared to Richard Wright's 'Native Son' and it manages to express Zora Neale Hurston's hopes for a meaningful place in a male-dominated world. It is one of the finest pieces of feminist fiction in Afro-American literature. The key to both the novel's integrity and its women-centeredness is the protagonist's search for identify through her relationship with the black community rather than with the white society.

Zora's precise grasp of black people's ways, their speech, and wisdom gives the novel a native feel. This novel has the Hurston's blend of complexity of character within the frame of a good story. The heroine, Janie Crawford is the first black woman in American fiction who is not stereotyped as either slut, a tragic mulatta, a mammy or a victim of racist oppression. This is a significant novel, a transitional one, in the development of black women images in literature. In it, Hurston revised the mulatta images that had preceded her and led the way toward the

presentation of more varied and complex women characters.

Bell Hooks Praises the way Hurston , "Challenges conventional sexist notions of woman's role in marriage and romantic love". (1995:245) Alice Walker referring to this novel says, "There is no book more important to me than this one". (1988:254) Hurston says in her autobiography that she wrote the novel in seven straight weeks in the Caribbean after her love affair with a man of West Indian parentage ended, and though the circumstances were difficult she said , "I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him in *Their Eyes were Watching God*". (1977:231) Whatever the personal matrix, Hurston's novel is much more than an outpouring of a private feeling. It is both her accomplished work of art and the authentic, fictional representation of Eatonville.

Hurston's novel attempts to locate a space for the articulation of the black female self within the irresolvable tension between sex and race. The novel recounts the evolution of a woman protagonist who metamorphoses from a sex serf to a soaring spirit. Janie Crawford's quest here is to recover her own voice and her own sense of autonomy. As an African-American woman, she ultimately manages to strike a balance between her own individuality and the power of the males.

As Claudia Tate writes, a dominant theme in black women's fiction, "... is the quest theme-a character's personal search for a meaningful identity and for self-sustaining dignity in a world of growing isolation, meaninglessness and moral decay". (1984:16)

As such Janie's search for identity begins when she is sixteen year old and by the time she finds what she wants, she is forty. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* begins with the heroine Janie returning home, a small African community in Eatonville, Florida, shortly after burying her last husband Teacake Woods. She explores her own development by telling her story to Phoeby, her best friend and the symbolic representative of the community. From the beginning, Janie's story is entwined with her grandmother's history.

Janie is raised by her grandmother Nanny, an ex-slave who wants a better life for her grand-daughter, so that Janie could be spared from the traditional fate reserved for a black woman as a beast of burden. Nanny tells her "De nigger woman is the mule of the world so far as Ah can see" (1991:20) at sixteen when the quest for the identity is most profound, Janie's sensuality begins to bloom as she sees the love embrace and ecstatic shiver of nature. Her sexuality awakens as she watches the mystery of a blossoming pear tree in her backyard; Janie gets her definition of marriage from nature.

As a blossoming pear tree Janie remains petal open for love. But she is discarded and she is not even properly pollinated. In an effort to give security to her grand-daughter Nanny before her death, marries the sixteen year old Janie to Old Logan Killicks, a propertied man with sixty acres and a mule but for Janie, he “looks like some ole skull head in de grave yard”. (p.18) Killicks meant mere survival to Janie. He did not offer joy, romance, sexual desire, or understanding and certainly not creativity. Killicks wants a woman who will plough alongside him, cut up seed taters, move manure, and accept sex whenever and however he wants it. He begins to feel that he owns her and thus asserts his dominance over her. For, as Killicks wife, Janie quickly becomes “de mule of the world”. He reduces Janie to a mere engine adoptable to a variety of tasks.

Janie’s lonely and lackluster marriage propels her into the arms of an ambitious, assertive, self-confident Joe Starks who offers to fulfill her dreams on his way to Eatonville, Florida, the town where a coloured man can be his own boss. Janie anticipates a full and fruitful life, but her aspirations are thwarted when Joe becomes mayor and land owner and she is muffled and marginalized as the mayor’s wife. He forcibly installs her as the queen of the porch, she becomes, in this situation a piece of desirable property, cutoff from her community and languishing in the repression of her natural desire to be herself.

He expects his wife to act like a mayor’s wife. Starks believes that women are to be seen and not to be heard. When Mrs. Mayor Starks is called by the people of the community to speak at one of their celebrations, Mayor Starks replies, “...mah wife don’t know nothing bout no speech maken...she’s uh woman and her place is in de home”. (p.53) Jody bullies her, defines her role and place and suppresses her. For Janie, only the terms of the oppression have changed. As the wife of the town’s leading citizen, Janie is denied self, voice and sexuality. Along with this sense of rejection as a woman comes the feeling of loneliness. Jody forbids her to participate in the tales of the menfolk on the porch and demands her to wear a head rag because her beauty is for him alone to behold. If Janie was a beast of burden in her first life, she became a domestic pet in her second life. Janie finally rejects her husband’s rules, thereby asserting her identity. She denounces his potency in public by questioning his manhood. He dies a short time later, bitten by her revolt, shaken by the challenge of her authority. After twenty years of married life with Jody, Janie tastes freedom for the first time. She throws the head rag away which had been a symbol of her imprisonment with Jody. Having tried her grandmother’s way of life, Janie now determines to live her own. Janie’s springtime begins a new growth. A young, gentle, easy-going spirit

arrives in Janie’s life in the form of Teacake, a man much younger to her. “He could be a bee to a blossom...” (p.128) Janie marries Teacake who allows her the freedom to live meaningfully in a community. Together they share resources, work, decisions, dangers and not merely the marriage bed. They go to live in the Florida Everglades, rejecting the finery and status of the mayor’s house because of their desire to live meaningfully in a community which is not concerned with emulating the social mechanisms of a capitalistic society.

Teacake’s behavior is antithetical to Logan Killicks and Jody Starks: he is interested in play rather than work, in spending and dispersing any wealth. He rejects bourgeois values entirely. He provides an environment in which Janie improves her self- image. Most importantly, he teaches Janie how to play in both senses of the phrase, to enjoy herself. He not only allows her to see the physical and spiritual beauty, but also shows her how to enjoy such reflections. He makes her feel alive, vital, needed, wanted, loved and she gives of herself freely. Teacake promises happiness and happiness it is.

Teacake and Janie work happily together in the bean fields of the muck, the rich black land reclaimed from Lake Okeechobee in Everglades. On the muck, the couple work together indulging in sensual pleasures, and participating in the various rituals like parties and lying sessions that are a part of an organic black community. But their bliss is short lived. A hurricane hits the Everglades, and God takes his glance away. Caught in the eye of the hurricane Janie and Teacake are forced to await the outcome. They wait on God to make his move. “They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God” (p.191). Unfortunately, during their escape from the hurricane Teacake saves Janie, but is bitten by a rabid dog. Teacake develops rabies and his illness drives him mad. Eventually he attempts to shoot Janie. Reacting in self-defense, she shoots back, killing him and then is tried and acquitted by a white Jury.

But Janie does not see her life as tragic; she sees it full and rich. Indeed, Teacake is the only man in Janie’s life who treats her as a woman with a heart and a head – Janie becomes a complete woman who is comfortable and happy with herself, her community and the world. It is essentially this message that she brings back to her community and tells Phoeby that self-fulfillment rather than security and status is the gift of life, on the simplest level, Hurston’s novel is about a woman who knows the value of love. On a higher level, it is about the universal quest for the fulfillment of body and soul, for it makes clear that material possessions and security are not really the stuff out of which successful marriages and love are made. The uniqueness of the literature of black women is its powerful and poignant portrayal of both

the anguish and the joy of black life in a largely white world, and its poignant portrayal of what it feels like inside to be a woman struggling for her identity in such a world.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* exemplifies the very best in her writing, for she gave the black woman back to herself in form of Janie who stands as a symbol of self-affirmation and independence. (1991:41) Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a forerunner of the fiction of the seventies and eighties. It has been praised for expressing the genius of black folklore and

denounced for presenting the Negro a folkloric stereotype. It has been cited as an apologia for traditional sex roles and praised as one of the earliest and the clearest black feminist novels and has been analyzed as a quest for self-fulfillment or self-identity .

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Prasuna. C.S.L/ MA.Mphil/PhD/Associate Professor/
RNEC College/Ongole/523001/cslprasuna@gmail.com
D/O Dr.C.V.Ramaiah/ D.No-50-1-62/ Ananda Rao Road/ Ongole