

# Their Eyes Were Watching God: Pursuit of Happiness

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**Abstract:** Literature is a reflection of human life. The inter relation between the human mind and the society reflect in the literature, if not consciously, at least unconsciously. Authors registered their traces in their writing, which are hidden within their inner heart. For instance, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), is a novel which registers the unconscious impression of African American struggling of Hurston's inner heart, through the characterization of Janie Crawford, the protagonist of the novel. By taking the lessons from Janie, the present age women should come out of their sophistication zone, to get the determination and tolerance for handling own life challenges, rather than emotionally inferior.

**Keywords:** Society, Determination, Individuality, Adjustment, Feminine Identity, Unconscious Expression, Horizon & Inner Heart.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Zora Neale Hurston is often viewed as the first in a succession of great American black women writers that includes Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor and is considered as an iconic figure on a par with Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* written in 1937 is often considered as her best work and her masterpiece. Hurston's creative genius is seen best in this novel. As an anthropologist she has been able to depict the true picture of black life but more importantly as a novelist she has written an inimitable story with real life characters which has now become a benchmark in the African American literary tradition. To quote Valerie Boyd:

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston.....

....., the porch sitters- the story tellers had been mostly men. In this novel, however, Hurston put her story in the mouth and the mind of a woman and the result is a book of transcendent appeal. (303)

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is set in the Southern part of America. The novel chronicles the life of the protagonist Janie Crawford and her search for identity. She marries thrice and tries to live life on her own terms. Hurston in her effervescent style has presented complex African American culture celebrating black life and experience. In creating this work, Hurston created for the first time a text which validated the black woman's life

and experience, which were earlier marginalized. In a way she became a path breaker for all other twentieth century African American women writers. When the novel was published, it received scathing reviews from Hurston's African American male counterparts. Alain Locke in *Opportunity* to Richard Wright in *New Masses* found it unsatisfactory and they even went disparaging it. They were not able to understand Hurston's literary pedagogy and her genuine efforts to show African American life as a literary artist and not as a sociologist. Today, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has become one of the most popular African American works achieving a canonical status and being exemplary in craftsmanship. Alice Walker deeply influenced by the novel, writes in "*Zora Neale Hurston—A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View*":

Condemned to a deserted island for a life, with an allotment of ten books to see me through, I would choose, unhesitatingly, two of Zora's: *Mules and Men*, because I would need to be able to pass on to younger generations the life of American blacks as legend and myth, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, because I would want to enjoy myself while identifying with the black heroine, Janie Crawford, as she acted out many roles in a variety of settings, and functioned (with spectacular results!) in romantic and sensual love. There is no book more important to me than this one. (xiii)

Though not an autobiography, Hurston has poured her feelings in to the novel. Hurston was experiencing a harsh and difficult relationship with her lover Percy Punter, and in these conditions she left for Haiti subsequent to getting the Guggenheim Fellowship. Hurston writes in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

I wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in Haiti. It was damned up in me, and I wrote it under intense pressure in seven weeks.... so I pitched in to work hard on my research to smother my feelings. But the thing would not down. The plot was far from the circumstances but I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. (210-111)

The hero of the novel is Janie Crawford. Janie is a firm minded African American lady who is in quest for herself and happiness. Janie, sitting on her porch and revealing her story and experiences is the fundamental narrative system on which Hurston step by step develops her meticulous novel.

From the opening lines of the novel, Hurston shows that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a story of a lady and that this lady has a profound feeling of distinction and identity. She has the ability to take her own decisions and live with her life according to her will. While black are battling and worrying to accomplish their fantasies which appear to be so distant and “mocked to death by Time” (175). According to Hurston:

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do accordingly. So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. Not the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment. (175)

This specific opening paragraph of the novel acquaints with the main theme of the novel, the theme of the search for personality and individuality. Just as Janie relates her story to Pheoby, the novel gradually unfurls to uncover Janie's cycle of development and her search for identity.

Janie is raised by her grandma Nanny, who works for a white family called Washburn in Western Florida. Janie plays with white children unaware that she is black. One day she sees her photograph and realizes that she is colored. Hurston portrays this scene of racial disclosure with utmost ingenuity and complexity. Hurston composes:

So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So ah ast, \_where is me? Ah don't see me. (181)

Janie had a picture of herself as a white which is broken. Without precedent for her life she gets mindful of her character of being a minority individual. She says, “Aw!Aw! Ah'mcolored !”(182). This self-acknowledgment is anything but an excruciating one, however denotes a part of improvement of Janie's identity. Hurston always shows that at this point Janie has no proper name. Janie says “Dey all useter call me Alphabet cause such countless individuals had done named me distinctive names! (181-182). As “Alphabet”, Janie is portrayed to be just a character. Toward the start, Janie is indicated as anonymous and unrecognizable. The photo uncovers that she has no character of her own. As per, Elizabeth Meese “Janie gets her feeling of definition from others. She is a woman as object in a racist, male centric culture. Neglecting to perceive herself as the one black child in a photo, she starts her story without name or color” (61-62).

At that point Janie sees the vision of the pear tree being pollinated by bees. She goes to see a honey bee pollinating the blossom. She comes to realize that “this was a marriage” (183). At this point of time, Janie's search for self and identity basically centers around the social organization of marriage. She imagines that she will accomplish her self-realization by getting married to a man. However, relating the marriage with complete of self, indeed shows Janie's youthful consciousness. Unfortunately, Nanny marries her off to a much older and a simpleton named Logan Killicks. He is a man of stable financial position—sixty units of land and a mule. Janie vehemently challenges this marriage however without any result. Janie has a troubled existence with Logan who is “ole skull-head in de grave yard” (185). There is no identifiable proof as far as she can tell and the dreams she had longed for herself. As indicated by Janie, Logan is, “Some folks never was intended to be loved and he's one of 'em” (193).

In this utterly failed marriage, Janie develops to be a lady who comes to realize that only wedding a materialistic man like Logan Killicks can't satisfy Janie's life. Janie leaves Killicks and weds an aspiring man called Joe Starks. In him, Janie sees another feeling of sentiment. He even vows to protect Janie from her hopeless domestic life. Joe or Jody Starks is a man of “big voice” (196) and large dreams. Hurston composes, “He intended to purchase in enormous. It had consistently been his wish and desire to be huge voice and he needed to live almost thirty years to discover a chance” (197). Janie is prepared to face another challenge with her life in quest for her identity; Janie and Joe settle in Eatonville going through the following twenty years together.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is simply not just about an African American lady's quest for character yet there are additionally other significant themes in the novel. One of them is the theme of race and prejudice. Hurston remarks widely on race connection in *Their Eyes*. For Hurston race isn't only a natural idea, in view of skin tone. For her race is an idea understood by individuals. Hurston's portrayal of race takes after that of her past novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Hurston presents the twin parts of prejudice, one that happens as interracial bigotry and other is intraracial bigotry. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is predominantly a mind blowing story of love and life, Janie Crawford, the hero is in quest for love for the duration of her life, however never gives up hope. Indeed, even in difficult stretches, she thinks and talks about love, even at the time of death the novel discusses life.

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