

THE PROBLEMATIC OF BLACK WOMANHOOD RECONSTRUCTION IN *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* BY ZORA NEALE HUSTON

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**ABSTRACT:**

The article explores the strategies used by the black protagonist of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie, to resist the societal and economic restrictions imposed upon her within the black community and her determination to achieve self-realization as a liberated black woman. It is well known that black women in the United States have been heavily affected by the exploitative ideologies of race, gender and class prevailing since the slavery era. In the novel, Janie's grand mother is an embodiment of the plight of the slave woman not only for her labor, but also as a sexual object and a contributor to the increase of the master's chattel of slaves.

In addition to her identity crisis due to the fact that like her mother, she is a product of rape, Janie undergoes two loveless marriages in which her successive black husbands expect to exploit her like a mule. During the years of silent rebellion, her exposition to the lying sessions under the store porch of her mayor husband provides her with the liberating potential of black oral traditions that will empower her to challenge the oppressive authority of Joe Starks in a game of playing the dozens leading to the symbolic death of the latter. His actual death would ultimately mean her liberation and the possibility of achieving the wholeness of a black womanhood through a marriage based on equal partnership to a younger loving husband.

**Keywords :** Black womanhood, slavery, oppression, oral traditions, signifying, liberation.

**RESUME :**

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Féminité noire, esclavage, oppression, traditions orales, importance, libération.

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**INTRODUCTION.**

Reconstructing black womanhood in the American context has always been a long and painful process for black American women or for the characters who are victims of racial, sexual and

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social oppressions in works of fiction by black American women writers. Such a reconstruction presupposes bringing together fragmented pieces of a negated self for the prospect of giving it a new wholeness with an empowering perspective. In this process, the factors which contributed to the disruption of the female character's womanhood are not simply wiped away, but are regarded as steps toward the achievement of freedom. These steps will be illustrated by the resilience of Janie, the protagonist of *Their eyes were watching for God*, and by the strategies at her disposal and which permitted her to overcome the obstacles toward self-determination.

### 1. Black womanhood in slave narratives

The destruction or rather the negation of the feminine virtues of beauty, fragility and chastity associated with white women to black women constitutes an important body of slave narratives. The most representative books of this literature are certainly *The Life of Olaudah Equino or Gustavus Vassa, The African Written by Himself*; *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave Written by Himself*; and *Incidents in The life of Slave Girl: Miss. Harriet Brent Jacobs, Written by Herself*.

All these narratives contain vivid pictures of practices related to the economics of slavery prevailing in southern plantations where black male slaves were reduced to laboring chattel. As for women slaves, they became sexual objects with a surplus value deriving from their capacity to increase the master's stock in addition to the sexual gratifications. Therefore, the mulato children born from the sexual exploitation were also the proof of the master's successful sexual aggression as well as the mark of his domination. To some extent, the widespread sexual violence that the slave women were subject to was aimed at black men as well. It was the white master's way to impress upon vanquished men the totality of their defeat.

While Gustavus Vassa's narrative is more about the commercial deportation of African captives into the Americas and the Christianization of the slaves, Brent's account of the economic system of slavery suggests that the black woman's value depends on the capacity of her womb as stated here: "woman are considered of no value unless they continually increase their owner's stock"(p.76).

She also denounces the hypocrisy and complicity of white southern women: "southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of little slaves...They regard such children as property, as marketable as pigs on the plantation"(p.57).

The regular selling away of these children inheriting the slave status of their mothers in response to the increasing demand for slave labor would have profound effects on slave women owing to the disruption of familial relation between mothers and infants. In some cases, the separation takes place much earlier on the plantation. In *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, one can read: "My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant before I knew her as my mother" (p.22).

The author-narrator is then informed through rumors about his slave-holder being his father, sustaining a double relation of master and father that only uncontrolled desires, cunning and greed could allow.

Pioneering the reconstruction process of black womanhood, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, stands as a reference since its publication in 1937 for black women writers committed to the issue of black women liberation in the United States. In this regard, the narrative of the fictitious Janie Crawford, the protagonist of *Their eyes were watching God*, partly told by herself is quite both enlightening and inspirational. According to Houston Baker Jr, this novel reveals the endurance and continuity of the discourse that finds its earliest literate manifestations in slave narratives (P.57).

In Hurston's novel, the process of Janie's reconstruction relies on her search of a voice, continually denied or made inaudible by her grandmother and then by her first two husbands. Incidentally, it is this search that constitutes her trajectory of self-definition and self-realization.

## 2. The causes of Janie's identity crisis in childhood

Janie Crawford's reconstruction of her womanhood in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is supposed to deal, among other things, with the effects of the victimization of the black woman dating back to the period of slavery. Account is given of the trauma experienced by black women slaves through Nanny's slave narrative which is also Janie's genealogy delivered in a story embedded in Janie's story. Nanny tells her grand-daughter how she was raped and impregnated by her white slave master. The fruit of that rape is Janie's mother a de facto added value to the master's chattel according to the commercial ideology of plantation slavery.

But the mulatto child becomes a further cause of trouble for Nanny because her enraged mistress beats her and promises that the overseer will whip her at the whipping post "till de blood run down to yo' heels! Ah mean to count mahself." (p.18). Then, she adds: "anyway, as soon as dat brat is a month old ah'm going to sell it offa dat place" (p.18).

Knowing that the selling of slaves like any other pieces of commodity is a common practices, Nanny leaves the plantation secretly at night both to avoid the unhuman treatment awaiting her the next day and to save her baby from being sold away to another slave holding family, meaning separating child from mother forever.

The next episode of the exploitation of Nanny as a black woman starts when she takes up a job of black mammy for the Washburn white family. Because nobody worries about what her real name is, every member of the white family calls her "Nanny". Thus, a loss of identity of this black character adds to her racial and economic exploitation in the period following the abolition of slavery. Just then, her daughter, Leafy, is also raped by her black school teacher and Janie is the fruit of this rape.

Janie's being brought up in the backyard of a white family deprives her of the kind of childhood expected by both white and black girls. This condition is at the origin of her identity crises due to the lack of a lineage and a family name recognized by the community. Instead, she is called "Alphabet". This identity crisis also explains Janie's inability to recognize herself on a photograph taken with the washburn children, not knowing that she is not white as she exclaims: "Aw, ow! Ah'm colored" (p.9).

Janie's condition of early self-negation and lack of genuine community links either within the black community or outside of it is likely to instill a feeling of self-esteem deficit. For Janie, therefore, the supreme longing would be for a true love within a marriage in order to give a meaning to her existence. No doubt that she expects to fill the hollowness of her life with an uncompromising love from a man who loves her and that she loves according to the metaphor of "the dust bearing bee "Sinking" into the sanctum", symbolizing the dream of consummated and dedicated love acknowledging its central role in a marriage as well as in the achievement of womanhood.

### 3. Janie's loveless marriages

Owing to Nanny's memory of the victimization of black women during slavery and in the postbellum years, her main preoccupation is to protect Janie from being exploited like a mule by men. This means providing her with economic protection through marriage to a man of property before her death. She believes that by marrying Logan Kilicks who owns sixty acres of land, Janie will enjoy freedom and gain a voice of her own. She reminds Janie that: "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as ah can see. Ah been prayin' for it tuh be different wid you, lawd; lawd, lawd!"(p.14).

When Janie is reluctant to the prospect of marrying an older man who is unattractive and unromantic, Nanny argues to convince her of the necessity of having an economic protection: "Tain't logan Kilicks ah wants you to have, baby, its protection."(p.15). Unfortunately, sixteen years old Janie realizes that her hope to find love after marriage is meaningless. Consequently, she wonders whether marriage compels love and comes to understand that marriage does not necessarily make love. The narrator's comment is: "Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (p.25).

Instead of the dust-bearing bee, Janie finds a man who only cares for his land and expects to use Janie as a mule for tilling it.

It is interesting to notice that Janie's journey toward freedom coincides with her search of a voice. This started earlier with her self-negation as a black child followed by her capacity to develop a divided self made of an inside and an outside in her relationship with Nanny and then with logan Kilicks by accepting their rules based on middle class values while preserving her dreams for future opportunities.

Another period of male dominance opens with the second husband who Janie expects to satisfy her hunger for love. Through her marriage to Joe Starks, Janie enjoys wealth and power as the wife of the mayor entrepreneur and fulfills Nanny's dream of "sitting on high clair" as a prerequisite for a "pulpit", that is, having a voice.

Houston Baker Jr, would comment that in a sense, Janie's new status reflects Nanny's conflation of the securing of property with effective expression and that having been denied a say in her own fate because she was property, she assumes that only property enables expression (p.57).

But at the welcome ceremony organized by the Eatonville people in honor of the mayor and his wife, when people ask Janie to make a speech, Joe Starks refuses: ‘‘thank yuh fuh yo’ compliments, but mah wife don’t know nothin’ about no speech making. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home’’ (p.43).

He does not give her a chance to utter a single word. When at some other moment her husband performs a noble action by buying a worked out mule in order to set it free, Janie makes a speech which is highly appreciated by the audience as expressed below by a character: " yo’ wife is uh born orator, Starks, us never knowed dat befo'.

She put jus’ de right words tuh our thoughts’’ (p.58).

Rather displeased by this eloquence, her husband will not allow her to repeat her performance and to indulge in conversations under the store porch.

In fact, Joe Starks views his wife primarily as part his property, adding to the prestige of his status of mayor, storekeeper, postmaster and landlord. He makes his wife perform unpaid work in his store for more than twenty years. He also brutalizes her and humiliates her in public.

Because Joe Starks is known to be ‘‘ a man who changes everything but nothing changes him’’, he does not care for his wife’s feelings. As a result, Janie is brought to develop a survival strategy consisting of dividing herself between an inside and an outside and knowing how not to mix them. The astute use of two opposing voices within oneself in order to deal with oppressive environments reminds the reader of the concept of "double consciousness" rooted in African American traditions referring to the biracial and by cultural identities of black Americans.

The practice of double consciousness allowed black Americans to survive in a hostile white world over several centuries of slavery and then decades of segregation and discrimination. In this regard, the deathbed advice given to the protagonist of *Invisible Man* by his grandfather telling him to have one mind for his interaction with white people and another one for himself applies to Janie’s behaviour toward her oppressors within the black community.

#### 4. The liberating potential of black oral traditions

Chapter six is almost entirely dedicated to exchange of arguments between the characters sitting under the porch of Joe Stark's store and engaged in *signifying* to spend time. In the *Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, reviews various definitions of the concept of *signifying*. It is basically a game activity of verbal dueling engaging participants who contest in arguments that never end and in hyperboles for no other reason but for the pleasure of keeping on arguing. *Signifying* is also known to be a language of indirection because of its encoding intention to say something, but to mean quite another thing.

The endless storytelling in chapter six reveals various forms of *signifying*. The commentaries on Matt’s mule and the boys’ acting the courtship of Daisy are great moments of verbal competition. This chapter which marks the climax of Mayor Starks’ power in Eatonville after the buying of Matt’s mule for the noble purpose of setting it free also sets the stage for the upcoming confrontation between Joe Starks and Janie.

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Joe Starks always manages to send Janie into the store to sell something whenever the conversation becomes exciting especially about women. He also seizes any opportunity to insult Jamie and utter degrading statements about women: "Somebody got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows" and then, " when ah see one thing ah understand ten, you see ten things and don't understand one" (p.71).

When Janie disagrees with some of the most sexist opinions voiced by the porch sitters, Joe immediately intervenes: "You gittin' too moufy, Janie...go fetch me de check board and the checkers" (p.75).

The reason for sending her into the store is to exclude her from participating in the verbal activity of the community as something reserved to men. The effect of such humiliating scenes is that "gradually, she pressed her teeth and learned to hush" (p.71). After another unjustified slapping accompanied by an insult, the narrator reports: "Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her" (p.72).

It is thanks to Janie's capacity to manage opposing areas of a self divided into an inside and an outside and acting like in a double consciousness mode that Janie is able to bear the unbearable over several years of sexist oppression and exploitation. In the meantime, Janie has learnt a lot of verbal skills from the black oral traditions by listening to the storytellers who gather at her husband's store every afternoon.

In fact, Joe Starks' frequent attacks on Janie are motivated by various factors including the assertion of his power, the lust for having complete domination over his wife, jealousy and the awareness of his advanced age reported as follows through Janie's stream of consciousness:

"One day she noticed that Joe didn't sit down. He just stood in front of a chair and fell in it. That made her look at him all over. Joe wasn't so young as he used to be. There was already something dead in him. He didn't rear his knees any longer. He squatted over his ankles when he walked. That stillness at the back of his neck. His prosperous-looking belly that used to intimidate folks, sagged like a load suspended from his loins. It didn't seem part of him anymore. Eyes a little absent too". (p77)

Janie, on the contrary, still displays the charm of a beautiful mulatto woman around forty years of age. Rachel Blau du Plessy describes Janie according to the gossiping judgment of male characters in these terms:

"Janie is an expressively sexual woman (her buttocks and " pugnacious breasts" are immediately mentioned). She is black, but her "great rope of black hair" operates as a marker of her racial mix, an evocation of her internal color lines in African American community". (p.79)

In view of such a beauty, Joe Starks is certainly afraid that she may be seduced by a sexually powerful man who could possess her. He also fears that she could notice the signs of his elderly age.

The tense atmosphere prevailing between Janie and her husband, despite her strategy of silent rebellion, reaches its climax in chapter seven. The open conflict is ignited by Steve Mixon's complaint to Joe Starks about the tobacco Janie sold him, which is in reality 'a joke to tease Janie a little'. But Joe Starks misunderstands Mixon's intention to fuel the signifying game with 'some more good natured laughter at the expense of women.' (p.78) so that they can keep on talking and laughing for no other end. His failure to understand the language of indirection implied in the rhetorical game of signifying is the direct cause of the confrontation between him and his wife. His insult in a way the audience believes would shock any woman leads to a terrible game of playing the dozens meant to provoke each other to anger until there is a winner.

The starting point of the verbal dueling is Joe Starks' blatantly insulting Janie in public:

'I god amighty! A woman stay around uh a store till she gets old as Mathusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stay dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me with yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees.' (p.78).

Infuriated by this unjustifiable attack on her age and her intimate parts, Janie's retaliation is devastating as she questions his masculinity in public. '...You big bellies round here and put a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph, Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! when you pull yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life'. (p.79).

The reaction of listeners to this fatal blow shows that Joe has lost the verbal competition he instigated because of the damage caused by the attack on his male vanity in front of his peers:

'Great God from zion! Sam Watson gasped. Y'all really playin' the dozens tunight'. (p.79).

'Ah ruther be shot with taks than tuh hear dat 'bout maself,' walter taunted, (p.79).

The narrator's comment goes as follows:

'Then Joe Starks realized all the meanings and his vanity bled a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of inesistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible...She had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing.' (P.79-80).

The game of playing the dozens referred to by Sam Watson is a verbal game in which each protagonist tries to destroy totally his opponent with words. For Brown, the dozens are unrelentingly by a mean game because they are structured to make someone feel bad. The deadly power of Janie's counter attack helps redefine her relationship with her husband. Joe Starks' domination over Janie and the people of Eatonville is brought to an end and the vanity of the most powerful man in this town suddenly vanishes. Janie's astute use of oral skills patiently assimilated on the porch at a strategic moment allows her to kill her her husband symbolically through the power of her words acting like a sword. His actual death would result from the symbolic one shortly after. Janie's victory redefines the pattern of power relationship by reversing the male, female status in a critique of the authority of the male voice and its sexism. After Joe Starks' death, Janie's oppression and exploitation are over. She can at last achieve freedom and gain a voice in a reconciled self. The liberation after more than twenty years of confinement by an authoritative sexist husband is confirmed by the burning of her

headrags, the symbol of her enslavement, after the celebration of Joe Starks' funeral. This action marks her declaration of independence.

The second half of the novel going from the tenth through the last chapter reveals the picture of Janie as an emancipated female character in control of her wholeness, fully integrated in her community and eager to enjoy good moments of life. As a wealthy widow who is beautiful, she enjoys the economic security guaranteed by the wealth left by her late husband. Janie is now free to participate in the lying sessions Joe Starks used to prevent her from, to attend events of all kinds, to play games and even to fish and to hunt with Tea Cake, a young gambler who becomes her third husband. Bernard Bell believes that this love adventure shows that:

“Janie is more faithful to her symbolic significance as a bodacious woman, an individualist who audaciously rebels against social conventions and rejects family in pursuit of her romantic personal interest, dreams, and development.”(p.125).

Owing to her individualism, she moves to other parts of Florida doing migrant work not for need of money, but for the pleasure of working with tea kake in an atmosphere of fun and self fulfilment as equal partners until the tragic death of her husband that she kills in self-defense.

All this regeneration of life is summarized by Janie to her friend, Pheoby, in these terms: “Dis ain't no business proposition, no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game.” (p.171). As for Houston Baker, Jr, Janie's lyrical autobiography delivered to Pheoby is like a blues song that recapitulates the experience of all black women treated as “mules of word” (p.58). Robert Hemenway is rather impressed by the fact that “Janie's poetic self-realization is inseparable from Zora's concomitant awareness of her cultural situation. The novel celebrates the black woman's liberation from a legacy of degradation.”(P.236).

## CONCLUSION.

Surely, Janie's trajectory from nothingness to womanhood is characterized firstly by submission to social conventions imposed by her grandmother and sexist oppression by her first two husbands, then by a silent rebellion using the resources of a divided self, and finally by an open rebellion in order to break the yoke of oppression leading to the achievement of her freedom. Such a trajectory should inspire all those who believe that they are victims of oppression of any kind.

Ironically, it is the economic security dreamed of by Nanny as a condition for having a voice which her marriage to Joe Starks brought her, that her allows Janie to enjoy freedom and be spared of what her grandmother used to call the traditional fate reserved to black women as beasts of burden, after the death of that husband.

This trajectory is also the one that leads Janie from ignorance to self-knowledge, and ultimately to an enlightened affirmation of herself as an autonomous being. The achievement of her complete self is materialized by a voice of her own fed by black oral traditions. The result of this process is that the protagonist can tell her story to her friend, Pheoby, with the skills of a storyteller.

## NOTES.

1. Harriet Brent Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). New York : AMS Press, 1973, P.76.
2. *Ibid*, P.57.
3. Frederick Douglass. *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself* (1845). Cambridge : Belknap Press, 1967, P.22.
4. Houston Baker, Jr. *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American literature : A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago : The University of Chicago Press
5. Zora Neale Hurston. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. (1937), New York : Harper Perennial, 2013, P.18. All other quotations from the novel are from this edition.
6. Rachel Blau du Plessy. 'Power, Judgement, and Narrative in a work of Zora Neale Hurston', Micheal Awkward, ed. *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Cambridge : University of Cambridge Press, 1990 PP.95-123. P.95.
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