

**Self-Discovery in Zora Neale Hurston's
*Their Eyes Were Watching God***

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Abstract

Zora Neale Hurston, a African-American Literature, an anthropologist and an influential author. Her most popular novel is *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. It is her first narration of spiritual enlightenment with a strong sense of identity. In the beginning and the end, Janie is alone in her search of self and a quest for independence. The author charts Janie's development with the use of language and relationship to her own expression. This paper examines her self-discovery in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Introduction

European philosophy became involved with self and subjectivity for almost three centuries. Humanity became a major topic for literary and philosophical fantasies which examined man as a self-sufficient, independent and knowable entity. Even in 17th major thinkers fell a prey to restraints and were trapped in on with self and individuals. To Marx it was labor and capitalist classes, while Hegel of the 18th century divided the world into Slaves and Masters. These influential writers produced class consciousness, group-consciousness in individuals through their thoughts.

Around the mid-19th century Capitalism was on the rise, while monarchy fell. It coincided with an interest in Self-Discovery. Capitalism defined individual and Self-Discovery to include new considerations. Early 20th century discussions on self-discovery were changed by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the Austrian psychoanalyst. The Black people have been oppressed throughout

history. A rise in the recognition of Black people as normal and as possessing an identity in postcolonial discourses also happened around this time. Self-Discovery includes a search involving what we see in others and a search inside one's self. Post-colonialism as an academic approach to literary criticism revolves around this fundamental value of Self-Discovery, specifically in people of Black origin. Self-Discovery became a major topic and humanity was redefined.

“Self-Discovery is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only the problematic process of access to an ‘image’ of totality” (2008: xxix).

Rise of Feminism

In the 20th century, feminism challenged the patriarchal male-dominated understanding of Self-Discovery by including the experiences of women. The result of this challenge was the recognition of female self, where feministic Self-Discovery was silenced till that time. Colonial discourse by the blacks led to postcolonial understanding of Self-Discovery like Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* characters had women looking for self-realization. Nanny's description of her past on her and her daughter's ill treatment by the whites is a manifestation of black Self-Discovery. She manages to raise the awareness on Self-Discovery of blacks. This is one main technique of oral recounts in one's life can be found in postcolonial novels. Nanny galvanizes Janie to fight against the whites.

You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams. You can't baet nobody down so low till you rob 'em of they will. Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-saw. Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored people sittin' on high but wasn't no pulpit for me. Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms. Ah knowed here you was in de world. (EWG 28)

Zora and Self discovery

Zora's most fictions settings and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published in 1973, is based on Eatonville on purpose. It is the political act on the part of Hurston's connection to the white-black crisis. This novel was appreciated by African-Americans for its rich Black culture and dialects. Further, a wide range of feminists were interested in the novel as it reasserts self-awareness throughout the novel in Janie's selfhood transformations and changes.

Self-Discovery in Nanny, Joe, Janie

Self-Discovery or the sense of selfhood has been one of the most complicated and ever developing notions in literary and critical studies. It continues to become an obsession of critics, novelists and scholars. Terms such as man, woman, body, self, person, individual, I, subject, and human, all have been repeatedly used in literary and critical discussions to refer to the Self-Discovery of a certain person belonging to a particular community or tradition. Their Self-Discoveries are unaffected by external or internal dimensions which otherwise do influence them in some way and as the white European man Etienne Balibar explains:

The core of the representation of Man as the ‘foundation’ of his own thoughts, actions and history, has, for three centuries at least, not been simply a valorization of human individuality and the human species as the bearer of the universal, it has been the representation of Man as the subject. The essence of humanity, of being a human, which should be present, both in the universality of the species and in the singularity of the individual, both as a reality and as a norm or a possibility, is subjectivity. (Balibar3-4)

Nanny’s speeches indicate a self-preoccupied black woman, a woman who knows the true condition of Blacks in a white dominated society. Her imagination of a powerful leader preaching the joys of being independent to the slaves is also Self-Discovery. The most striking thing about Nanny’s stories is that she recollects them emphasizing Black self-construction. Her speeches attack the wrongdoings and evils of Whites to the Blacks. Janie fashions her blackness instead of concealing it from her early childhood. Her famous phrase is

“Where is me? Ah Don’t see me” or her “Aw, Aw! Ah’m colored” (EWG 24).

What is highly significant about this statement is that it reveals a great deal about Janie’s character. Words such as “me” and “Ah” which have been repeated three times in a short sentence show that she is extremely in favor of her own Self-Discovery as a Black girl. Immediately after that short sentence she uses the word “colored” which introduces her as a black female, a clear announcement before the narrative focuses on Janie’s experiences. Joe Starks is another character with a tendency similar to that of Nanny and Janie

**“Mostly he talked about plans for the town when he got there,”
“Ah’m buyin’ in here, and buyin’ in big” (EWG39, 40).**

His main ideal of a coloured city reveals his passion for the struggling black community’s awareness of Self-Discovery . For him becoming independent and separated from the whites constitutes the only practical and viable remedy for black people. Therefore, these three characters might be regarded as representing Fanonian world view which emphasizes independence, self-construction, self-realization and Self-Discovery. When Janie’s culture honors the oral art, “this picture making with words,” Janie’s final words in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* show:

Talkin’ don’t amunttuh uh hill uh beans when you can’t do nothing else [...] Pheoby you got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo papa and yo’ mamma and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuhthemselves. They got tuh go tuh Go d, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fur theyselves. (EWG 142)

Thus, Janie justifies with her repeated moments of silence in the novel. Janie is not in favour of talking and advocates watching, witnessing and experiencing. Talking leads to nothing based on her firsthand experience. Her lack of connection to other women in Eatonville and the reluctance

to tell her story directly to them is to imply the deaf ears of the white Eatonville women. The force and the dynamism of Janie's transforms Phoebe turning her into a different person. She becomes more aware of the happenings around her and particularly the relation between herself and her husband undergoes a dramatic and intense change when Janie Phoebe says:

“Lawd Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied Withmahself no mo’. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin’ wid him after this. Nobody Better not criticize yuh in mahhearin” (EWG 142).

Through Phoebe's speech one can understand the force of Janie's visual retelling of her experience. She is totally changed by her story. Hurston tries to make this point that if black people are going to create a permanent Self-Discovery for themselves they should intensely follow this traditional African form of oral sharing of their stories and experiences. If a major transformation is going to happen it is supposed to happen through the traditional and local cultural black heritage; no white is going to save black people and recognize them as independent individual. For Hurston, black Self-Discovery formation and self begins within black tradition. This is a major connecting line between Hurston and Frantz Fanon. Similarly Fanon believes that black Self-Discovery is definitely related to black peoples' recognition of their own cultural heritage. Janie tells Pheobe to pass on her story to the women of her community:

“You can tell ‘em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat’s just de same as me ‘cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf” (EWG 16).

Hurston puts Janie on a track of self-realization, independence and autonomy. She makes Janie

“wear the outfit of men which suggest power. Janie dresses in overalls, goes on the muck, and learns to shoot-even better than Tea Cake and her rebellion changes her and potentially of her friend Pheoby” (ibid).

Dolan Hubbard believes that by

“placing her narrative in the context of the Christian journey, itself a romance, Hurston violates readers’ expectation that the protagonist should marry her black prince charming and live happily ever after” (ibid).

Having returned from the horizon, Janie Crawford represents the **“mature voice of experience and wisdom” (ibid).**

Conclusion

This paper focused on the way Janie, the central black female character, as well as other characters such as Nanny and Joe try to make their voices be heard in a society which is dominated by White male as well as Black male norms and values. In fact, there is a great oppression in their

life. Janie's Self-Discovery search show her struggle of overpowering whites, who oppressed her for her Blackness. Being exposed to her own blackness for the first time in a white household, Janie becomes conscious of the way, blackness was viewed. Because of the inner force of her character and also through her grandmother's life experience inflicted upon her by the whites Janie develops a kind of love and passion towards her blackness. By the time she grows up as an adult she becomes conscious of other inner transformations in her character through her new experiences in three successive marriages.

In the first two marriages she is greatly passive, but moves towards her Self-Discovery in a new form at the end of her second marriage. A fixed kind of self-realization can be seen in her. Her final speech with Joe on the porch results in his severe illness and finally death. This indicates Janie has changed and in her search for Self-Discovery, accompanied by her self-protection and self-vitality leads to her decision to kill Tea Cake rather than being killed by him. Unlike her first two marriages, her decision to marry him constitutes a moment which suggests agency and activity for Janie's ever developing Self-Discovery. Deciding to live alone and returning to Eatonville rather than accepting Mrs. Proposal to her to motivate Janie to marry to one of her sons is another indication that Janie will remain single the rest of her life; this as well tells us that now Janie is alone, firm and independent.

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