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RECONSTRUCTING FEMALE IDENTITY IN THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD BY ZORA NEALE

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ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to reconstruct the female identity in Zora Neale's *Their Eyes were Watching God*. African American women are regarded as subordinates in the male-dominated society which strips them their identities due to oppression and exploitation. They are suffered and humiliated under the patriarchal system. They have found themselves in more disadvantaged state than black men in society because they lack identity twice. They are not only oppressed because of their color but also due to their gender when they have lived in a strict patriarchal society where the men claim all the power. The novel aims at reconstructing the female identity that has been marginalized by the aggressive and patriarchal system as well as the racial discrimination. Therefore, Neale depicts her female characters in the novel with motivation, determination and courage in order to survive and reconstruct their identities in the authoritarian world of men. They attempt to reconstruct their cultural and familial identities to stand for their rights. After writing her novel, Neale substantiates that she is a struggler who resists all sorts of exploitation and marginalization that the black women are encountered in their daily life. Her attempt is to deconstruct the fabricated stereotypes of African American women to reconstruct the real image of women. The novel narrates the black girl's fight for reconstructing her identity. In her journey towards self-knowledge, Janie communicates effectively with different ways to represent the dominant culture's models of the selfhood.

Key Words: Identity reconstruction, the oppressed African woman in American Society and symbolism.

INTRODUCTION

Zora Neale Hurston is considered as one of the representative figures of the Harlem Renaissance. She was born in 1891 and died in 1960 with a full life of literary works. After her growing up in the black environment of Eatonville, Florida, she grew up listening to a porch talk, tales and jokes for a long time before becoming folklorist and anthropologist. Here, Hurston shows an assertive

voice of African American women. The assertive voice has become alive in the performative speech acts of black women that function through the stage of oral artist. She considers herself the representative of black people particularly women who have been culturally marginalized and misrepresented through destructive racist stereotypes. Through her novel *Their Eyes were Watching God*, Hurston attempts to help them revive a black oral tradition and reconstruct their

identity that has been marginalized. As one of Harlem writers, Hurston befriended many African American writers at the time of new movement was known the Negro Movement. By then, some of the writers are specialized to reconstruct the identity of black women.

Through oral performance, the oppressed black women have an opportunity to raise their silenced voices. Culturally, they acquire the self-empowerment to strengthen themselves and try to impose their opinions to be accepted in the patriarchal society. By sharing stories with other members of the black community, a strong sense of vitality is established to form their identity within group. For every spokeswoman who has a skilled oral ability, she recognizes and elevates one's social status. In America, slaves were compelled to give up their African identities and were renamed with masters' identities. Naming is strongly linked to racial identities because "to have a name means to have means of locating, extending and preserving oneself in the human community, so as to be able to answer the question 'who?' with reference to ancestry, current status and particular bearing, with reference to the full of panoply time" (Cooke 171). Janie passes through three stages of pains and sufferings in her personal development such as the oppressive power, her freedom as unnamed woman and being renamed.

Identity Reconstruction

African women's identity reconstruction in America has started its promotion as a turning point to achieve their rights. Through Hurston novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie searches for her identity reconstruction. She struggles between two identities, the first one is difficulty recreated from the white world woman whereas the second one is like the identity of black feminist woman who try to reconstruct it. Janie has no name and therefore she tries to remember the nameless as it is pointed out by 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" (1). Hurston's identity is deformed because of her loyalty to white men. Thus, she is proud of her blackness; behavior and physical

appearance despite the fact that she doesn't belong to the world of white women. She further clarifies her speech in the following lines:

Mrs. Turner was a milky sort of a woman that belonged to child-bed. Her shoulders rounded a little, and she must have been conscious of her pelvis because she kept it stuck out in front of her so she could always see it. Tea Cake made a lot of fun about Mrs. Turner's shape behind her back. (16)

Janie's ability to reconstructs her identity was through expressed herself and craved for all her life. Thus, Janie's identity had been expressed when she was with Tea Cake who encouraged her to express herself and participate in black culture. Janie and Tea Cake travelled to Ever Glades where she found her identity as a black individual. Hurston here illustrates that Janie's blackness is an essential part of her identity. Thus, Janie's quest for her identity through idealistic marriage has infatuated with the idea of love: "She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace...So this was a marriage!" (Hurston 11).

Identity reconstruction is constituted the main obsessions of Zora Neale Hurston. The basic argument in this paper is the quest for identity in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). She depicts her characters who try to reconstruct their identities through their own inner desires and thoughts. In the novel, there are some signs and hints which demonstrate the main character's idea of selfhood and identity changes that Hurston exposes to the new conditions, realities and experiences. At the end of Janie's journey, she turns into an integrated and self-aware individual through a psychological process. Theoretically, this paper applies Frantz Fanon's theory that deals with psychological impacts of colonialism on the black colonized people who struggle for achieving their identity reconstruction. The recognition of Black people can be identified by reconstructing identity which is the major outcome of postcolonial discourse. According to Fanon (1925-1961), "identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only

the problematic process of access to an 'image' of totality" (xxix).

Hurston also pinpoints the gender identity by defining the natural phenomenon such as the lake with 'he' and a storm with a 'she'. The following quote explains this fact: "Havoc was there with her mouth wide open. Back in the Everglades the wind had romped between lakes and trees. In the city it had raged among houses and men" (167). Here, Hurston symbolizes the storm that represents a woman by emphasizing her power that destroys white creations. For instance, Tea Cake's sense of racial issue and gender has been affirmed through many changes. He is killed because of the events happened by the storm. His death is not a tragic end but it is represented as a symbolic death of the fake values he aims to represent. Finally, this paper shows the identity reconstruction of Janie after all her attempts to search for self-realization and feminine identity which gains a great success in achieving her goals.

The oppressed African Woman in American Society

South America has become an area of exploration and colonization. It was made a colony for European countries and therefore there are still many cultural aspects in that region. Through the colonization and patriarch society, black women are doubly oppressed and subjugated. Thus, this paper highlights the main argument is focused on the oppressed and suppressed black women in the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). According to Humm, feminist theory has come into existence as source of awareness, power and knowledge to reject the patriarchal system, Humm says, "Feminism incorporates diverse ideas which share three major perceptions: that gender is a social construction which oppresses women more than men; that patriarchy shapes this construction; and that women's experimental knowledge is a basis for a future non-sexist society" (X). Thus, this novel shows how black women are represented by both white and black males. It sheds more light on the confrontation between black women and white men disclose the main character's childhood memories. To prove such points, Nanny, Leafy and Janie are exposed to the reality of exploitation in terms of

their gender and race. They are regarded as toys that would be used for enjoyment with no respect for their identity as women or human beings. They have become the easy targets for being raped and marginalized. For example, the force has been imposed on Nanny by white male to devastate her life. Nanny expresses the cruelty she faced through the metaphor of broken plate. While Leafy fades away because of what the white man has done to her mind and body.

Furthermore, the novel chronicles the protagonist Janie's life as she goes through three consecutive marriages to three black men named Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake in order to get her freedom and search for self-realization. Therefore, she doesn't feel comfortable in marriages because she has suffered all sorts of oppression and objectification with each one of her husbands who struggle to dominate her and silence her voice. She is subjected to punishment and humiliation from them without any particular reason. The main aim of these men is to define Janie as selfless whereas her identity should be shaped by them but not by herself. Janie undergoes her marital relationship with the patriarchal black society in which she is further colonized and subjugated. According to Lorraine Bethel, "Her horrible experiences have led her to see the domestic pedestal as the safest escape from the dangers of racial sexual oppression" (15). Hurston has aimed to make her novel as a feminist genre that narrates a story about black woman's resistance against her sexual and social oppression.

Moreover, Janie feels that she is incomplete with Joe, therefore, she longs for freedom. Janie cannot tolerate any other verbal abuse of Joe. She refuses to answer him again and again. Here Janie succeeds to regain her strength in order to raise her voice which has been silenced. Thus, she has become able to target Joe by severe blow. After Joe has become sick and at the edge of death and therefore he later dies. Janie has become a matured woman with ability to face any adversity with a strength and courage. Two decades later, she becomes aware of her identity reconstruction "Years ago, she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass. It had been a long time since she had

remembered. Perhaps she'd better at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place" (87).

Hurston uses her vivacious enthusiastic style to present a complex African American culture about the black women's life and experience. In this case, she has become a path breaker for all other twentieth century African American women writers. African American women are oppressed and suppressed by both the experience of colonization and the male-dominated society. Women in the eyes of men are nothing but objects to be possessed and controlled under their authority. They are regarded as exotic women who easily surrender themselves to men.

Symbolism

The trajectory of the novel refers to some places where Janie moves through different houses in which each of them represents some experience of limited consciousness with some exception of the places she shares with Tea Cake in the Everglades. In the novel's frame we meet Janie in Eatonville, where she lives as an artist who can enrich the life of the community around her with stories about her quest for self-discovery and self-definition.

Hurston symbolizes an intense tension between an individual and a common dimension in which the community makes a benefit from the story of the woman who has been "tuh de the horizon and back" (Hurston 191). The impulse is for taking a risk and returning to the home place, are articulated through the symbolic dimension of the Horizon as one of Janie's favorite metaphors which stands for exploring life. Janie's desire for self-knowledge is obtained by her experience that has been expressed the recurring references to the Horizon. Hubbard asserts:

Hurston presents us with the classical Biblical picture of the looker standing before the horizon and wondering if she and the horizon shall ever meet. The looker sees a picture that is both in time and timeless, finite and infinite. The ships on the horizon are emblematic of the dreams of the person standing on shore; this

timeless picture speaks of a person's desire to be related to God, the ultimate other. (102)

Furthermore, the trees are presented to sustain a significant nature which refers to a distinct characteristic of black American women writers as it is pointed by Sivils, "function as connecting points between human experience and the natural world, as anchors in time, place, and human spiritual consciousness...serve as semiotic platforms, dynamic frameworks upon which writers place a seemingly endless variation of symbols or meanings" (91). Therefore, Hurston uses the trees and other natural images throughout the novel to help and support her overall portrayal of Janie as "a woman in touch with nature on an elemental, organic level, and for whom the desire for the sexual and other experiences that will shape her identity is as natural as the trees, flowers, and even the hurricane she experiences in the Everglades" (King 60). Through symbolic imagery are used in the novel such as the pear tree, Janie's hair, and the horizon. Another example of symbol is used by Janie for Tea Cake as "a glance from God" (106). Hurston symbolizes the hurricane as a symbolic scene of God's omnipotence, she writes, "They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God" (160). This reminds Janie of fate to makes her choice which is made by God. Thus, Hurston exemplifies of the multiple factors that constitute a person's life.

Conclusion

As a black girl, Janie's identity has been rejected due to patriarchal society has oppressed her. She represents the black women in American society who are oppressed and stripped from their identity. Janie aims at reconstructing her identity that has been marginalized in society of men. She embodies her idea to be an example for back women who are suffered and ignored in the white world of men. Thus, the oppression of black women in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* represents one of the most important elements of Hurston's novel. With regard to the issue of black woman in the novel, one has to be more careful in dealing with this issue because it must be addressed through investigation to show its

depth. Janie undergoes an excruciating experience because of her identity loss as a woman is exposed to the violence of the male-dominated culture in both white and black society. Therefore, by the name of gender, the black woman is doubly oppressed because of her gender and race. Men also struggle to dominate woman and silence her voice. For instance, Janie is further colonized and subjugated throughout her life. She has tried to make her voice be heard in a society dominated by men and their norms and values. Janie has become aware of the way blackness is viewed. She struggles for reconstructing her identity which takes a new form in her future. Her identity reconstruction, after taking decision, will be reconstructed and protected by getting rid of her last husband, Tea Cake.

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