



INSANITIES AND SELF DESTRUCTION OF THE POST EMANCIPATED BLACKS IN AMERICA: A CRITICAL READING THROUGH *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*, BY ZORA NEALE HURSTON

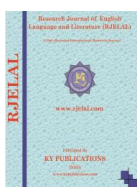
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ABSTRACT

Blacks' evolution in America has been the result of a long chain of sacrifices. Indeed, after centuries of slavery, a new life was proposed to those descends of African' ancestry who then took great part in the building of the New World. The advent of emancipation, for sure was seen as an opportunity to change their life from submissive domination into auto-improvement. Thus, anyone from the outside of the Blacks' environment, or from America in short, would have anticipated on a community of Blacks, entirely conscious of the long and hard way back, and totally willing to found a nation deprived of all kind of ill winds, ill deeds, and reprehensible attitudes. The 'New Negro', as he became a now person, was supposed to behave like a perfect man, an example of integrity, an open minded person. Unfortunately, Black Americans' history is full of facts that raised controversial opinions among Blacks themselves; the emancipated Black has shown to become a current and prospective danger to his fellow Blacks. However, until the immediate post Harlem Renaissance period, it hardly conceivable to have some black writer expose this bad condition created by the Black to himself and to his fellow men. Such was the main characteristic of the 1920-1940 Harlem Renaissance, which rejected Zora Neale Hurston, together with her novel, *Their Eyes Where Watching God*, which dared present the Black American's negative side.

Key-words: insanities – African American – Emancipation – selfishness -

1. Context, objectives and methods

1.1. Contextualizing the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston

Their Eyes Were Watching God was published during the Harlem Renaissance period. This represented an artistic, political and cultural rebirth of the Negro, in literature and art. In the period, the majority of the Harlemites were not

concerned with depicting the life that the African Americans had then been living in the New World as a whole and Harlem in particular. The racial issue was then so hard that, as a black novelist or writer, to dare portray any negative side of fellow blacks would be seen as an offence to the whole African American community. The Harlem Renaissance was then meant to counterattack the white man's negative propaganda against Blacks' capability to

live on their own, to emerge as a true human being, and their capacity to be productive in any way.

With legislation like the Jim Crow Law that prevailed from 1890 to 1910, African Americans were almost returned into a new form of slavery. The Black codes and Ku Klux Klans' activism had led to the decline of Blacks' hope and the promise of Abraham Lincoln's emancipation gift was then jeopardized. Baptist preacher Thomas Dixon wrote *The Leopard's Spot: a Romance of the white Man's Burden* (1902), asserting White supremacy amidst the supposed African American evil and corruption. The book was so popular that Dixon added a trilogy. His second novel, *The Clansmen*, adapted for the film *The Silent Birth of a Nation*, portraying the African American as an unintelligent, sexually aggressive person. To counterpart that negative view on the black man, writers at the Harlem Renaissance were urged to consider improving the image of the Blacks in America. Racism gained legitimacy in the period of time leading to the Harlem Renaissance, during which Hurston wrote the novel.

Many of Hurston's fellow writers were participating first in Du Bois's uplift agenda, but she refused to follow the system. As a matter of fact, Hurston's work has not been accepted by Harlem black literary activists until 1970, when Alice Walker dug them to revival. During the period of the Harlem Renaissance, it was not tolerated such a 'humiliation' from Black Americans themselves. Zora Neale Hurston was criticized by Alain Locke who asked her about when she would finally start writing a real "social document fiction" instead of writing documents that do not worth¹ Hurston was in fact accused of satisfying white folks who saw or expected 'clown and villain' in every Negro. In an essay by Nick Aaron (1967), Hurston is quoted to have said: "Many Negroes have criticized my novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, because I did not make it a lecture on the race problem"; Hurston, though not rejecting this remark, explained her choice as follows:

¹ Reader's Guide : National Endowment for the Arts. The Big Read, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Pge 7 to 8

" ... I was writing a novel and not a treatise on sociology..... I have ceased to think in term of race; I think only in terms of individuals. I am interested in you now, not as a Negro man, but as a man. I am not interested in the race problem, but I am interested in the problems of individuals, the white ones and the black ones"²

It is then clear that Zora Neale Hurston's aesthetic style and literary choice was misunderstood at the period, so much so that she happened to regret writing the novel at all. In a letter she tried without success to explain that she intended neither to insult Black Americans, nor to satisfy White folks' cruelty. "I tried ... not to pander to the folks who expect a clown and villain in every Negro. Neither did I want to pander to those 'race' people among us who see nothing but perfection in all of us"³.

2. Objectives of the study and methodology

The present paper aims at revealing, analyzing and interpreting the bad attitudes and harmful practices of some Black Americans towards the fellow Blacks, following emancipation. These attitudes and practices include the patriarchal domination on women, the abuse of fellowmen's confidence, the economic political and sexual exploitation.

The methodology used here is mainly based on documentary research; data have priority been collected from the plot as presented and developed by Zora Neale Hurston through the novel, and the analysis and comment have been made on the basis of the African American post emancipation history. In effect, although fictional, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the revelation of Black Americans' negative side life, in a period they were in search of security and improvement of living conditions, a period when they were denouncing the white man's atrocious legal and non-legal measures against them.

² Article 'The Hierarchy itself : Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the Sacrifice of Narrative Authority', by Ryan Simmons

³ Idem

2.1. Literature review

Many noteworthy studies have been carried out by scholars and authors, both white and black Americans, that depict the insanities and idiocies of African Americans within the larger American society. The increasing number of black men in the American prisons, charged with theft, violence, murder and many other crimes have drawn those writers' attention. It is true, Blacks experience during slavery and the immediate post emancipation period could explain some of their deviances as freed men, but not justify it. Hara Villaverde, from the University of Miami supports the concept of the intimate connection between insanities and racism, and he then admits that black men behave violently even upon their peers, especially women⁴. He has come to the conclusion that there exists an impact of race upon mental health and the correctional system. All the same his studies have displayed the public's attitude towards violence and race, and have deduced that race has considerable impact upon all areas of Americans' life. The paradigm for analyzing and interpreting black men's insane attitude towards their fellow blacks in general, and black women in particular, has much emphasis on the race and racism which news voices have arisen to support or banish in this American nation.

Mary Wingerson from the Yale University, who has analyzed race and insanity in the American South from 1940 to 1990, has come to the conclusion that the prescribed causes of mental illnesses in African Americans mainly centers around restriction of freedom and social mobility. He explains his notion of mental illness as a socially constructed attitude. However, Thomas Szasz's landmark: *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1990)⁵ refutes the premise of pathology behavior and proposes that insanity is a problem with living. But Szasz has then backed up the notion of social effect without realizing that.

Zora Neale Hurston, in her *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, has dealt with the same issue and shown through the behavior of her black male

characters, the remaining effects of their past. She emphasizes on the lack of education and the stigma the Blacks have been through in their past as slaves, which could explain their violence, hatred for the Whites, and lack of love for one another, which has made true integration into the large American society incomplete.

3. Black men's insane attitudes as exposed through *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Each and every individual faces obstacles and limitations, unique to their own circumstances, and the way that those obstacles are met and overcome ultimately determine the fulfilment and happiness that a person is able to acquire. Perhaps one of the most influential but commonly looked over influences on one's development is the attitude of others, in addition to one's own attitude. Whether it be despite ^perseverance and optimism of the individual or in junction with the two, the attitudes of others' have the ability to influence one's life in a significant way. Such attitudes have appeared with the characters of Loggan Killicks, Joe Starks and Vergible Woods, all three having got successively married with the main protagonist, Janie.

3.1. Men's sexual exploitation on women

Male dominance is one of the earliest known and most widespread forms of inequality in human history. Being too big for their boots, men stand on their power position over women to exploit them at their ease and for several uses such as social and sexual dominations. This power of men over women has been described in the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through the way Janie Crawford was treated first with her two early marital companions, being respectively Logan Killicks and Joe Starks. Indeed, Logan Killicks in the one hand has considered Janie for her use in sexual affairs when night comes after a hard farming day and also for the help she is meant to provide him in his farm. But, Nanny had forth warned Janie: "*the woman is the*

⁴ Hara Villaverde (1996), *Racism in the insanity defence*, eds U niversity of Miami, Law review Pge 75

⁵ Thomas Szasz' (1990), *The Myth of Mental Illness* Pge 43

*mule of the world*⁶. As such, woman have already been formatted to accept that conception and exploitation from men, in that male dominant society. The slaves, male and females have lived in the masters' house to see that all women have to be at the service of men, and even the white woman has not been spared from that domination from her husband. Also, for Nanny, sex is not dependent on love, and her granddaughter doesn't have to bargain this with her husband, Loggan. When after two weeks of marriage Janie goes back to Nanny in tears, because of her incapability to find that love she is supposed to find after accepting living with Loggan, the answer of Nanny has been clear cut: a woman should give her husband sex whenever the latter pleases; she should obey every orders, that's how God has decided for all humans. Sex in that sense has nothing to do with love, nor with feelings, and the woman cannot pretend of any such envy. In the other hand, when Joe Starks has appeared in the life of Janie, it is first for her beauty and then her sexual attraction. Jody just wants to have Janie to show the other women and the overall black community that he is an important personality; for this to be possible over time, Janie has to be kept far from the other men, and even from the women in the community: what is unreachable is precious, indeed. Janie then has to live as a trophy set and exposed in a glass closed room; people will admire but never will they touch. This power over women has increased Jody's power over the people of Eatonville. He makes love to Janie but in the same time doesn't allow her to have the floor in people and considered her like a trophy.

Through her harlemite piece of literary work, Zora Neale Hurston has sought to depict this sexual domination on women by men. This has started early in the novel with Nanny's own rape case from her white master, that has resulted in the birth of Leafy, and here, it is still slavery time, toward the end; then, Leafy has been raped by her school teacher, a black man, in the immediate post emancipation time; this sets a kind of similarity between the former male master, and the now male

emancipated black in term of sexual appetite and exploitation. In this process, and based on her own experience through slavery and freed woman, Nanny has sought to prevent her granddaughter from living the same ill-wind of male sexual rape and exploitation. Unfortunately, the solution for her has been to impose on Janie a marital life deprived from love consent, which has led the young girl into a kind of premature womanhood, and sexual exploitation along through the remain days of her life.

3.2. Men's conception of the place and role of the woman in society

Women who have had no right in love and marital matters cannot stand for what they think or express their opinion about their choices in their social life. Everything they do or decide on, greatly depend on what men think about it. Men, considered as superiors to the women, have treated the women in some insane ways in the global society as well as in households. They do not consider women as full human beings, capable of thinking for themselves and achieving anything for themselves. Such has been the strife of the woman in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. It is true that some of those women have tried to reject such apprehension and domination. This can be noticed when Janie has tried to convince Joe Starks that women think too just like men do:

"Ah knows uh few things, and womenfolks thinks sometimes too"

"Aw naw they don't. They just think they's thinkin'. When Ah see one thing Ah understand ten. You see then and you don't understand one."

These attitudes are in fact exposed all along the adventure of Janie Crawford, through the novel. First, she has had to be Loggan Killicks' wife by the will her grandmother Nanny. Loggan Killicks instead of considering her like a partner, a lover or even a companion, rather takes her like a house maid who should help him for his work in farm, to arrange his staff and the house, to obey his orders and to do all

⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, (1937), *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Page 33

kinds of activities where and whenever need be. With Loggan Killicks, Janie is put in a position or place where she is expected to be a mule to the service of a master. On top of all the physical labor expected from her, Janie endured physical beaten from her husband. Hoping for more value, she decides to leave Loggan and run off with Joe Starks. Her second lover too, Joe Starks frequently has had the same thought of women like Loggan Killicks. Jody thinks that girls are nothing and then are capable of nothing either. He said "Somebody got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves"⁷. As such, Loggan makes a parallel between the woman in general and the black woman in main, with children and even animal. Although this might be conceived as a heritage manliness from their mal masters' attitude vis a vis their wives, it is also clear that the white woman would never have been compared to any child let alone any animal by their husbands.

Along with Loggan, Jody frequently asserts his belief in male superiority in general and his own in particular. He uses to tell Janie what to do but she can't tell him 'nuthin'. Jody is quite sure that there is no reason why he should ever listen to Janie or any other woman. Both Jody and Loggan Killicks want Janie to be domesticated and silent. Jody even goes further to force his wife to silence in the store, a public place, and therefore a male dominant space. Janie is then limited to replying for greetings and telling the prices of articles in the shop she is running. To explain such a restriction imposed on his wife, Joe says "...Muh wife don't know nothing 'bout no speech makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat"⁸. For Joe, the only one place girls and women should be, is home.

With one last hope, Janie, after Joe Starks's death, has engaged in a marriage with Tea Cake, a much Younger soul, and things finally seems to look up for her. Contrary to Logan and Joe, Tea Cake has treated Janie with care and affection and made her live a bit what love is. Tea Cake has considered Janie, offering her the kind of affection she has expected so far. But Tea Cake is not any exceptional male in

full. He soon show his selfish side, when on the break of death, he has considered that he cannot die and live Janie to the sexual and affectionate benefit of some other man; he has planned killing the woman. Such a devilish selfishness has been displayed by Zora Neale Hurston to depict the Black man's bad and insane side.

3.3. Black males' economic and political exploitation of their women

Their Eyes Were Watching God also portrays the way black male have taken profit from their women economically and politically. Loggan Killicks has considered that Janie's duty is to help him plow his land, then ensuring the survival of the household. By so doing, Janie will contribute to making of him a capable man, since for him Janie is not only a wife, but also a burden that has to support. Failure to feed Janie will be seen by the community as sign failure, that is why Janie has to contribute and help him meet that economic needs. If is true that the woman should contribute in the survival of the household, it is likewise true that she should not be over worked as a mule, as Loggan has considered his much younger wife.

Joe Starks has had a similar conception of the woman; after mirroring a wonderful life to Janie while snatching her from Loggan Killicks, he has brought the young woman to Eatonville to make of her a single shop keeper. Janie's first role has then been to increase Joe's wealth through the sale in the shop. The woman then appears as an investment that has to bring back some fruitful income. Also, for Joe Starks, Janie's physical construction and beauty are key instrument for his political status to grow and keep growing. Having a beautiful wife is a sign of respect from people and that is why he is ready to invest in Janie's clothing and body care, not for the woman's satisfaction but for his own. People will look, not at Janie, but at the mayor's wife; the will admire and appreciate not the one the see, but whom that one belongs to. Such is how Joe's political and economic status will grow.

^{7 7} Zora Neale Hurston, (1937), *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Page 56

^{8 8} Zora Neale Hurston, (1937), *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Page 61

Finally has come Tea Cake whose careful attitude toward Janie is rather a strategy to exploit the woman economically. Indeed, Tea will frequently take Janie's inherited money to play and stay out with other women, leaving Janie at home. It is then clear that the three husbands of Janie have exploited her in their different way. The two first trying to gain from Janie effort, and the last one using what the woman possesses.

3. Black women negative apprehension on themselves

3.1. Nany versus Janie about marriage and marital life

Among the things Zora Neale Hurston has sought to reproach women in her novel, there seems to emerge the fact of not being confident in themselves and also not considering themselves as people full of virtue and value; the greatest prototype of this is Nanny who thinks that Women are the mule of the world. Zora Neale Hurston here explores the life of a southern black woman, Janie Crawford whose three marriages domineering control of men have made her acknowledge her independence and self-satisfaction as an African American woman. The author also reveals not only the dominating role of men but also the influence of other women on their alike. This is demonstrated by the influence of Nanny on the life of her own granddaughter, Janie, by taking a fatidic decision for the young girl her life, without and even against her consent. Janie has grown up under the care of her grandmother, since her mother who has given her birth at seventeen has got mad soon after, and has disappeared. Nanny's background of slavery, together with the fear that the girl might live the same life with her mother Leafy, has made her push Janie to be someone she could not be because of slavery and her being a sexual objet to her white master; she then urges Janie to marry Loggan Killicks. Janie is not in love with the old man, but Nanny and the whole community they belong to, have pushed her to do so. For her grandmother, love comes after marriage, and the impossibility of

disobeying her grandmother has left her no choice than to have that first but harsh experience. The immediate consequence is that, once Nanny has passed away, Janie has found herself liberated from pressure obedience, then she has left Loggan Killicks for a passerby gentleman, Joe Starks.

3.2. Black women's racial conceitedness and selfishness

Gender identity is a kind of personal conception of oneself, male or female. This concept is intimately related to the concept of gender role, which is defined as "the outward manifestations of personality that reflects the gender identity"⁹. So gender identity in nearly all instances is self-identified as a result of a combination of inherence and extrinsic or environmental factors; gender role in the other hand is manifested within society by observable factors such as behavior and appearance.

African American women had their own apprehension of their situation in the post slavery era. Nanny is aware of this when she tells her little daughter Janie that "De nigger woman is the mule of the world"¹⁰. This is the image of the black woman as the mule, good at giving birth to other mules, to stay in the kitchen and cook, to respect and be submissive. But black Women will soon realize that they have to go through another domination, the one of men, but this time not because of their skin color, but because of their female status. The American Society has always been divided into classes and different levels. At the first level lays the whites, and particularly the white men who have dominated both white women and blacks. Then comes a second category, at the lowest level, that is black people's experience of poverty, domination, and injustices. This second class includes a rather a more tiny and and narrower subclass with black women who see themselves undergoing a dual domination from the white belonging to the first level and from their own black men fellow from the same social class.

⁹ Oxford American Dictionary (1982), Avon Books, Ney York

¹⁰ Zora Neale hurston (1937), Their Eyes Were Watching God pge 29

3.3. Black women Ideal in the Society

Women's fight for their ideal in society is being intensified with the time. Since the theory of spawning Eve from the side of Adam, they have been considered as second class human beings, or incomplete beings relegated to the second place. Yet, women have always sought the ideal of gender equity, of respect and consideration. This ideal is what Janie has pursued when she first objects to getting married with Logan Killicks, then and going with Joe Starks, in search of love, and not just by interest. Black women want to love and be loved, they want to stand aside the man, and not behind, and then participate in the decision making. The greatest aim is to break this everlasting chain that has bound their hands and prevented them from being free. Black women, according to Zora Neale Hurston, do not want to sit passively and let their world and important aspects of themselves as their sexuality, become regulated by someone else than themselves. In the Black American's history, there have existed heroines like, Sojourner Truth, Simone de Beauvoir and others. Those female figures have fought to make the Black woman proud and independent. This mission is what Hurston has set for her main character, Janie, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie, despite her many marriage experiences, has not been seen as a prostitute. She has had an ideal that she has pursued; except for abandoning her first husband Logan Killicks, Janie has played her role as a wife, taking care and respecting her husbands. No doubt, Zora has wanted to keep that positive image of her main protagonist; that is why Janie has not had any daughter, any child at all, since this would have brought so many changes in the overall conception about Janie, through her eventful marital lives.

The most important ideal of the black woman is then true and free love without the male domination. A woman would not like her marriage to be the end of freedom, where she will be kept the tentacle of marriage and subjected to a patriarchal system. Love is a vital element in the marital life; It bounds the man and the woman before marriage

and stays through marriage. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nanny says to her little daughter Janie that " Marriage compels love like the sun the day"¹¹. So marriage is the act making love grow, rather than making love disappear between two persons who have vowed love; it sets respect for each other, strengthen the marital relation. Most importantly for the post emancipation black women, marital life and the notion of men domination have to be extricable.

Also, Black women have the will to serve in the political arena and participate in the decision making. In America, many reasons have belated the integration of black women in general into the political affairs. Among these are the religious beliefs. Since the theory of Eve convincing Adam to eat the apple, men believe that women are too sensitive to make politic, and that the woman will always drive the society astray. It has always been believed that men are the only human beings made to lead and governed, and to impose their will onto the women, which has to change now. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for instance, when the people of Eatonville ask Logan Killicks to let her wife talk, he replies that he didn't marry her to give speeches and do politic.

Conclusion

The post Emancipation African American has emerged as a rather bad mirror, in part, to the expected integration of Blacks in the country they have contributed to build. In that context, the black woman has been the greatest victim from their men's negative domination. Zora Neale Hurston has sought to unveil then combat this negative attitude which, rather than clearing the ground for real acceptance by the Whites of the former slaves into the American community, has rather presented them a danger for America, setting then a strong handicap for true integration. The Black women however, are victim of a dual domination of the slavery institution, and their male suchlike violence. Black men after emancipation proclamation have dominated their wives, put them aside when

¹¹ Zora Neale Hurston (1937), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* pge 42

decisions making, considered as incomplete being or too emotional to lead. This gender bias will fetter the Black women to reach their highest ideals, that is, the claim of gender equity, and the specific black woman's emancipation.

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