

***Review***

# Revisiting Neale's "Their Eyes Were Watching God": A Deconstructive Strategy for Racial Injustice and the White Hegemony

**Sepideh Hozhabrossadat**

Shahid Chamran University, Ahvaz, Iran. E-mail: Sepideh\_hozhabrossadat@yahoo.com

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Black feminists reminded the other feminists, about the realities of racism. The key concept of the paper in this regard is to pose the question on whether Janie Crawford, Neal's protagonist in *Their Eyes were Watching God*, adheres to the fixed concept of gender or she rather questions it. The study also examines whether there is any sign in the novel which indicates that she breaks the rule and constructs herself and her identity not according to the structures of power in society but as an autonomous being. To probe this question, the paper maps Janie's journey through life in terms of her gender and its relation to the surrounding and demonstrates that race is a complicated issue to tackle as a key way to challenging outsiders in her community.

**Key Words:** Gender, Black, White, Community, Culture, Racism, Feminsm, Identity

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is said to be a raceless novel, one in which we witness no clashes between white and black people. The geographical places through which we follow our protagonist are mostly all-black community like Eatonville. If there is any white in other places, they play roles in the background. But still, in many parts of the novel, with a deeper look, effects of racism are evident in the life of Janie; and in the lives of black women in particular and black men, in general. It is the

contention of this paper that racial issues are at the heart of the story and that race is a complex concept with its own theories and "Outward appearances certainly cannot account for the meanings attributed to racial difference or for the hatred and oppression scripted by racism." (Meade, 2004)

In light of 'Womanism', or black feminism, believes that race competes with gender and in this competition racial difference is mostly ignored. Recent feminists have tried

to bring the notion of racism to the surface of the debate and to dismantle false universals among women. Race like gender, is a social construction. Unlike some critics who believe that gender and race are two separate categories, feminists believe that they are inseparable.<sup>1</sup> Race represents relations of power among different categories in society in which every person is identified or identifies him/her. Race is a social meaning transformed by political struggle.<sup>2</sup>

After this background information on race and gender issues, the paper suggests to focus on the role of race and its concept in Janie's life. First of all Janie begins her story by remembering her separateness from her parents:

Ah ain't never seen mah pap. And didn't know 'im if Ah did. Mah mama neither. She was gone from round dere long before Ah wuz big enough tuh know. Mah grandma and de white folks she worked wid, she had a house out in de back-yard and dat's where Ah wuz born. (Hurston, 1990, 9)

Janie begins with an outsider status; she is crippled by the situation in which she feels stuck in. She has a racially mixed parentage and her grandmother's life is intermingled with white families. She is an isolated character who feels lonely and lost. She is left alone by her parents "before an age when memory will capture them." (Lofflin, 2009, 110)<sup>3</sup> This is a good start for a heroine like Janie. She is an outsider, so she is free to venture the world if she decides and dares to.

Many critics consider the work as worthless. They argue that Hurston's novel is about how the black culture is on display and ridiculed. I believe that Hurston, contrary to her contemporary writers, tries to show complete, healthy human beings. Robert Hemenway has the same opinion. Hemenway sees Hurston's writing as highlighting the representation of African American life rather than exposing that internal culture to ridicule:

Time after time in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston tries to represent the 'difference' of

blackness through a representation of the folk process. That is why talking buzzards, a ceremonial yellow mule, big picture talkers on Joe Clark's store porch, Bahamian fire dancers, and lying sessions on the Muck appear so frequently. (Lofflin, 2009, 112)

We should take into our consideration some aspects of Janie's life so that we can decide upon the value of the novel in its depiction of the black race. Janie narrates her story from the time she blends into the white family. She is raised by her grandmother, but she calls her Nanny, because the white people call her so. As she lives with them certain identity issues come to surface. "Ah was wid dem white chillun so much till Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till Ah was round six years old" (TE, 8).

This humiliates and confuses the child. The narrative suggests some racial injustice tones. Janie's quest begins where she is confused about her identity and racial difference. There is a family gathering and there, she is shown a picture of children and herself. There she understands that she is not white: "there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, 'where is me?' Ah don't see me" (TE, 8-9). And we witness the way the white society reacts by pointing at her and showing her color: "Everybody laughed at this occasion and this was confusing for Janie. Miss Nelie, a white woman there shows Janie in the picture to her and asks a very world-shattering question, "Dat's you, Alphabet, don't you know yo' ownself?" (TE, 9)

Although she's got a name, she is called Alphabet. This has a serious racial connotation. In the long history of slavery, those who had the power to name subjugated those who were named. Here Janie is named by the white family, among whom she lives, as Alphabet; a strange name that can be interpreted in many ways. I would like to suggest an interpretation of this name. Alphabet can refer to any alphabet and connotes a sense of fluidity between two extremes. On the surface, she is named by whites and so subjugated to them and to their powers, but looking deeply she is free to move. She is free to navigate. She can raise herself from the first alphabet "a" to the last one "z".

She is a child separated from herself and her true identity. Because she has no clear family at the age of dependence on others, she loses her personal image of her identity. She is confused about her image and how she looks like. Her sense of separateness is compounded by the sense that she cannot be claimed even by name. Lofflin narrates from Duplessis about this stage of Janie's life: "The paradox of Janie—her fascination—is Hurston's narrating Janie's efforts to spell her life with more than that one word 'colored,' while

<sup>1</sup> According to Higgenbotham (1992), there is no way to "bifurcate race and gender into discrete categories as if 'women' could be isolated from contexts of race, class, and sexuality." Sandra Harding, Ed., *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 117.

<sup>2</sup> These concepts of race – like gender – acknowledge the instability of categories and their formation within relationships of power that are continuously redefined and transformed in particular historical and cultural locations. (Maede, 114)

<sup>3</sup> Judith Marie Lofflin, *American Freedom Story: A Journey from Adventures of Huckleberry Finn to The Secret Life of Bees* Diss. (University of Kansas: 2009) 110.

necessarily her life is focused by the social, economic, and cultural meanings of blackness."<sup>4</sup>

First of all, we have to remember what Nanny says to Janie while trying to convince her to marry Logan Killicks.

De white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able to find out. De white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womanfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it to be different wid you. (TE, 14)

This speech is the key to the journey. Janie's goal in her quest will be to discover a different answer to the freedom to not become the 'mule'. I would like to suggest that this passage is a narrative of sexual and economic bondage between black women and consequently, Janie's quest as a quest for autonomous sexual choice.

Robert Hemenway depicts Janie's quest as one to liberate herself from, "a world that imposes artificial distinctions of class, and a world that imposes male fantasies of socialization that deny women the right to autonomous decisions."<sup>5</sup> Janie struggles to become something other than 'de mule uh de world'. This race issue makes women's subordination qualitatively different; in societies where "racial demarcation is endemic to their socio-cultural fabric . . . gender identity is inextricably linked to and even determined by racial identity."<sup>6</sup> Nanny also says; "us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways." (TE, 16)

I would also like to mention that black women were two times removed from the power structure. On the first level, they are black and this separates them from white and consequently power and on the second level, being in a patriarchal society, they are women and so considered as inferior to men. Janie experiences this twofold removal and I would like to suggest she experiences, even a threefold removal by being denied from the community she lives in. There is a very interesting part in the novel, which portrays the prevalent characteristic in a black woman. Janie is now living with Joe for many years and her marriage turns out to be a failure. Joe slaps Janie in one part because the food which Janie prepared was not good. At that point, "something fell off the shelf inside her." (TE, 72) Now, she,

"had an inside and an outside and suddenly she know how not to mix them." (TE, 72)

To understand this feeling in Janie, we can refer to a theory by Patricia Hill Collins that she calls learning from the outsider within. In this particular article, " Learning from the outsider within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,"<sup>7</sup> she tries to explain this outsider within feeling in terms of Black women's self-definition and self-valuation, the nature of oppression and the importance of Afro-American women's culture.

Collins explains that self-definition involves the challenging of fixed externally-defined images of Afro-American womanhood and self-valuation is to replace the authentic image with the stereotyped one. She believes that, " when Black women define themselves, they clearly reject the taken-for-granted assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to describe and analyze reality are entitled to do so."<sup>8</sup>

Black women have racialised sexuality and they are oppressed. Madsen introduces a concept in her book, named double consciousness<sup>9</sup>. This double consciousness is the contradiction between what one really is in oneself and what racism of others imposed on the individual in one's culture. This contradiction limits a black woman and prevents her from achieving full subjectivity or selfhood. This contradiction acts as a protective and survival strategy. Janie uses this strategy in many parts of the novel by remaining silent in spite of the fact that she has many things to say, she wants to protest and she knows it's best for her own sake at that specific moment to say nothing.

Here is the best example in the novel: "A little war of defense for helpless things was going on inside her. People ought to have some regard for helpless things. She wanted to fight about it." But Ah hates disagreement and confusion, so Ah better not talk. It makes it hard tuh get along." (TE, 57) Or another example" Janie took the easy way away from a fuss. She didn't change her mind, but she agreed with her mouth. (TE, 63)

These two examples and many others are the evidences that Janie feels a contradiction in herself. She is constantly at war because she has a double consciousness. She puts on a mask in the society and she knows that is not what's going on inside her. She is in disguise. Talking about the nature of these masks worn by black women we may say: "She describes this disguise as the masks that have been created by a racist culture, masks that are 'steeped with self-hatred and

<sup>4</sup> Lofflin, 117.

<sup>5</sup> Lofflin, 115.

<sup>6</sup> Teresa A., Meade, and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks. *A Companion to Gender History* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004)120.

<sup>7</sup> Sandra Harding, ed., *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 2004)103-127.

<sup>8</sup> Harding, 106-107.

<sup>9</sup>Deborah L. Madsen, *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice* (London: Pluto Press, 2000)224.

other internalized oppressions'."<sup>10</sup> But the evolution or emancipation happens only if, women construct their voice and change themselves from an object that is unquestioning, silent and oppressed to a questioning, active, powerful subject.

Although, the actions of the novel take place mostly in an all black community, there is no doubt that everywhere we look, we see the presence of a white male patriarchal society and its effects on black people. The image of a Black woman is a negative one in such a society. They are considered as the "other" and as objects; and they are treated as lacking human subjectivity. Black people are considered as inferior, but as we saw the quotation from Nanny, "de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able to find out....."(TE, 41), black men have more power than Black women. Collins believes that, the inferior position of Black women is the direct consequence of either/or dualities. Sojourner Truth knew this when she stated, " there is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as before."<sup>11</sup>

Culture is one important element that can help Black women regain their true rights and somehow it has an emancipator-like role. Janie lives and grows up in a culture, in which the material condition is very basic to the lives of the community.

The symbols and values that create the ideological frame of reference through which people attempt to deal with the circumstances in which they find themselves. Culture.....is not composed of static, discrete traits moved from one locale to another. It is constantly changing and transformed, as new forms are created out of old ones. Thus culture....does arise out of nothing: it is created and modified by material conditions.<sup>12</sup>

One of the apparent elements in Black women's culture is the notion of sisterhood, and attachment to other women. This is visible throughout the novel and the most explicit example is the relationship between Janie and Phoeby. Janie calls Phoeby a "kissing friend."(TE, 7)

The black female ideological frame of reference that Black women acquire through sisterhood ....may serve the added purpose of shaping a Black female consciousness about the workings of oppression. This consciousness is shaped not only through abstract, rationale reflection, but also is developed through concrete rational

<sup>10</sup> Madsen, 218.

<sup>11</sup> Harding, 109.

<sup>12</sup> Harding, 112.

action.<sup>13</sup>

So this consciousness may lead to activism and this activism may involve opposing covertly the external definition of Afro-American womanhood. In case of Janie Crawford, this activism first begins with silence and then rejecting quietly whatever opposes the picture of her womanhood inside.

Black women, who immerse themselves in the cultural pattern of sociology's group life, want to reach the insider skills of thinking and acting according to a sociological worldview. But on the other hand, Black women's experienced realities, both prior to contact and after initiation, may provide them with "special perspectives and insights...available to that category of outsiders who have been systematically frustrated by the social system". In brief, their outsider allegiances may mitigate against their choosing full insider status, and they may be more apt to remain outsiders within."<sup>14</sup>

Some of these outsiders within decide to leave the society and remain strangers and outsiders forever, but others decide to remain in the sociological domain and suppress their difference. In both cases the subject loses something.

The most revealing part of the novel that exposes racism are Mrs. Turner's dialogues with Janie. Mrs. Turner questions the appropriateness of Janie being married to a black man, considering Janie as a light-skinned woman. This, being heard by Tea Cake creates a jealousy and consequently a fear. This fear can be interpreted as either the fear to lose Janie or the fear to lose power and supremacy. In any of these cases, Tea Cake revenges Mrs. Turner by violence. Violence appears both mentally and physically. He sees to it that Mrs. Turner's restaurant be mashed into pieces by the citizens and to show that it was unintentional. Tea Cake also shows his violence by slapping Janie, "to reaffirm his territorial prerogatives."<sup>15</sup>

Tea Cake also has this color-consciousness about Janie. When he takes the money that Janie pinned to her clothes and has a party with his friends without telling Janie with this excuse that she is too high class for the people he associates with. For Janie, being 'classed off' by her husband's hurts her and limits her from fully participating in the community.

This fear, shown by her husbands, is both internal and external:

<sup>13</sup> Harding, 114.

<sup>14</sup> Harding, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Sharon L. Jones, *Reading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002)95.

With an increasing pitch of jealousy with more violence and the issue of 'making' a light-skinned woman, there seems to be a desire to see the marks of slave-beating on the body of the white, in revenge for the historical beating of blacks. This desire is displaced upon the body of woman, which seems to create a possible understanding of black male violence upon black female bodies as a response to oppression by whites, again a layering of racism now mixed with sexism.<sup>16</sup>

Another interesting point in the novel is the story of head rags that is related to how racism invades the novel. Janie is forced to cover her hair by head rags. When considering the headscarf as a symbol of the White oppression over Blacks through the bondage and suffering of slavery, Joe's insistence that Janie bind her hair in public takes on layered meanings in *Their Eyes*. Slavery was a form of White on Black oppression, and despite the fact that Janie lives decades after the emancipation of black slaves, her husband oppresses her with the restriction black slave women were forced to resort to because of slavery, transforming the dynamic of oppression to Black on Black, as well as husband on wife.<sup>17</sup>

So, based on our observation on the racist aspects of this community and the way Janie grows up and is treated in such a culture, we come to this conclusion that Janie reaches a peaceful state at the end of the novel in which she understands all the racial biases and fears but she successfully passes them all. In other words, race does not limit Janie in pursuing her horizon and constructing her identity. Race functions as a meta-language with a "powerful, all-encompassing effect on the construction and representation of other social and power relations, namely, gender, class, and sexuality."<sup>18</sup> In this novel, race and gender and sexuality are intermingled. Janie becomes an autonomous being, regardless of her race and its limitations.

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<sup>17</sup> Alisha P. Castaneda, *Hues, Tresses, and Dresses: Examining the Relation of Body Image, Hair, and Clothes to Female Identity in Their Eyes Were Watching God and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, diss. (The Faculty of the School of Communication: 2010)53.

<sup>18</sup> Meade, 120.

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