



## CONCEPT OF EMERGENT WOMAN IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

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### **Abstract:**

African-American women are the victims of triple oppression. They have been identified as the 'Others' in the racist America and they stayed outside the mainstream culture of the society. This endless victimization is a real impediment in the journey of these marginalized women from oppression to liberation. Constant insults, oppression and subjugation instil a kind of feeling in these women that they are worthless, ugly, polluted and inferior. The moment they start believing that they are inferior and worthless; their sense of self- slowly fades away and leaves them with no identity. The present study examines how African-American women construct their cultural identities from the space of intersecting oppressions in the racist, sexist, and classist society they live in. The study analyses select work from the perspective of feminist politics.

**Key Words:** Emergent women, Triple oppression, Identity, African-American women, marginalization.

The Black feminist movement grew out of, and in response to, the Black Liberation Movement and Women's Movement. Black women were triply marginalized on the basis of sex, gender and class. The purpose of the movement was to develop a theory which is adequate enough to address the way race, gender and class were interconnected in their lives and also to take action to stop racist, sexist, and classist discrimination. This study examined the factors that contribute to the development of the political consciousness, self-empowerment and self-identification of a black woman. Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis in *Common Difference: Conflicts in Black White Feminist perspective* (1999) states "the racism, classism, and sexism associated with each woman's experience of being black, female and poor in the America are critical measurements of their oppression" ( 238 ). As this quotation suggested, the black female experience is characterised by the intrinsically linked oppressions of race, gender and class. These were interwoven into social structure, and work together to define the history of the lives of black women.

All African American women shared a common culture and common experience. This commonality of experience suggested that certain core themes shape African American women's rhetoric and rhetorical behaviour. These core themes were (a) legacy of struggle against racism, sexism, classism,(b) the search for voice and the fight to erase the controlling images that continue to degradethem,(c) the independence of thought and action (d) empowerment in the context of everyday life.

Black women have been at the bottom of every social hierarchy created by men, based on the interaction of race, gender and class hierarchies and systems of identity they have fought against sexual discrimination as well as race and class discrimination. It has been traditional that the man is the head of the family. He is the leader of the house/nation because his knowledge of the world is broader, his awareness is greater, his understanding is fuller and his application of this information is wiser. Women cannot do the same things as men. They are made by nature to function differently. Women are seen as incapable, dependent and incomplete.

Zora Neale Hurston was an outstanding African American novelist, playwright, auto biographer, folklorist, anthropologist and essayists. Her works were considered as an important part of the African American and Harlem Literature. She used folk language, folkways and folk stories as symbols to measure the intrinsic values of the Black oral cultural tradition. Hurston spent much of her life in the town of Eatonville, Florida; the first all-black community to be incorporated in the United States. Rich in its culture and tradition, Hurston made the town of Eatonville the setting for much of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

Janie, the protagonist of the novel, took all the challenges to become the 'new emergent woman'. At first, she was in conflict with her goals as she had to face a lot of barriers in a male dominated black community and its perceptions about a woman. She was not at all ready to accept the traditional concept of a woman who being inferior and submissive to men, who worked hard like a mule in the fields. Janie wanted to make a difference in an all-male dominated black community. By being 'a new emergent woman' all she desired was to become a model for other black women who were still in the clutches of male supremacy and mental torture. What made Janie 'a new emergent woman' was that she had her own choices in her relationships; she had a voice of her own, and she had financial independence. Moreover, she told her own story to her friend Pheoby and that itself inspired Pheoby. This was very evident from Pheoby's speech itself, "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh, Janie" (257). Pheoby admitted that she had an unsatisfied life with her husband, Sam and infact, Janie's story truly inspired her to become an emergent woman.

Rather than merely waiting for a man to change Janie's life, she questioned the traditional gender roles and emancipated herself in the course of the novel. She developed from naive and passive observer to a self-determined woman who actively strived for love and happiness. Janie not only found true love in this quest, but also discovered the power of her own voice and the ability of self-expression.

Janie's three marriages represented her process of maturing on the level of the novel. Janie's first marriage was arranged by Nanny, her grandmother, whose main concern was giving security for her granddaughter. In her view, this could only be provided by the protection of a wealthy man or by the institution of marriage. When Nanny forced Janie to marry an older, wealthy farmer, Logan Killicks who possessed "sixty acres of land", Janie immediately rejected Nanny's plan, understanding that this concept of marriage was not what she wanted for herself. But she surrendered to Nanny's pressure and married Killicks. She soon realized that she could never develop any feeling for her spouse. In order to gain control over his young wife, Killicks tried to destroy her spirit by threatening to make her help with the backbreaking labour of the farm. Killicks had the traditional ideas about marriage. Janie's idea of marriage was destroyed by Killicks.

When Janie realized that she could never be happy with Killicks, she preferred to take her chances with Joe Starks who was on his way to Eatonville. The relationship with Joe too didn't embody her dreams about love. Just like Killicks, Joe also had very definite notions about a woman's place. For him, a young beautiful woman like Janie, was a possession, just like his store and his white house in Eatonville. He expected her to fulfil the role of Mrs. Mayor Starks, representing his political power in town. He made her work in his store, and forced her to wear a headscarf while working there. "He ordered Janie to tie up her hair in the store. That was all. She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others" (87). In course of their marriage, their relationship became increasingly unbearable for Janie. Joe dominated every aspect of her life and ridiculed her in front of the customers. Finally, she lost control and tried to fight back. She got all the spirit and the courage to disclose the truth among the public about Joe that he was impotent:

You big-bellies around here and put on a lot of brag, but t'aint nothi' to it but yo'big voice. Talking 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life. (123)

Even though Janie managed to emancipate herself from Joe to a certain degree, it was only after Joe's death that she freed herself from his oppression. His death did not give grief for Janie, but freedom. Not long after the funeral she admitted to her friend Pheoby, "ah jus' loves dis freedom" (142). She felt like she freed from the boundaries drawn by Joe Starks.

Janie's new-found self-confidence was the basic prerequisite for the equal and happy partnership with Tea Cake, her third husband. The manner of their first encounter was fundamentally different from the way Janie met Joe. In contrast to her previous marriages, the relationship to Tea Cake was based solely on mutual attraction and affection. The happiness of their marriage was not based on traditional gender roles- the man as the dominant, protecting part, the woman as the yielding, passive part- but rather on the individual feelings they share.

When we analyse the characters of Nanny and Janie, we could see that Nanny was a suspended woman who internalises every kind of negative images prevailing in the society as she was a slave woman. She advised Janie that black women were considered as the mules of the world. But Janie was not ready to accept the concept of women as mule. She seemed to be the new emergent woman who strived for her own identity and her own voice in a community which was antagonistic to woman's emancipation. For this community, "uh woman by herself is uh pitiful thing and dey needs aid and assistance. God never meant 'em tuh try stand by their selves" (86). This was the general conception a black woman in their community.

The novel in fact succeeded in telling the story of Janie's struggle to articulate, to appropriate her voice and, through her own voice. Telling her own story was symbolic of Janie's attainment of voice, since story telling was supposed to be the task of men and women were restricted from telling stories. And Janie redefined this concept by telling her own story. Thus, Janie by every means was a new emergent woman.

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