

# The Role of Feminism in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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## Abstract

Equal rights for both gender are an essentiality to humankind. In the work of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the central character Janie Mae Crawford suffered patriarchy in her married life. It focuses on the oppression faced by the character Janie. Her first marriage with Logan Killicks was of compulsion, and she was treated only for household work. She stepped out of the relationship with Joe Starks, seeking her own space to live with dignity and love. Life with Joe Starks was a polished one for society. Joe treats Janie as an object who was served well for the sake of community and forsakes her inner desires and real happiness. The persisting oppression from Joe Starks continued in criticizing her with words, and one day, it was her appearance which made Janie burst out with angry words against him, raising her voice for her twenty years of submission. Despite her marriages earlier, marriage with Tea Cake was different, and she was able to feel loved and dignified. Due to rabies and its later effects, he was no more in Janie's life. The persisting Patriarchal hand upon Janie pushed her to the edge of suppression to get an insight of self-realization and attain fulfillment, even after the death of Tea Cake, to live independently. She became a personality to rely on her self. She carried her struggles as a witness to the people of Eatonville happily, with the contentment of being a feminist.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Patriarchy, Oppression, Janie, Independent

"Feminism is a range of socio-political movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal and social equality of the sexes" ("Feminism," n.d.). "The word feminism was derived from French in 1837. The word was first recorded in English in 1851, originally meaning "the state of being feminine" ("Feminism," 2023). Feminist theory is the extension of Feminism into theoretical, fictional, or philosophical discourse. It aims to understand the nature of gender equality. Themes often explored in feminist theory include discrimination, objectification (especially objectification), oppression, patriarchy, stereotyping, art history and contemporary art, and aesthetics.(High Priest Duncan, n.d.).

This paper deals with the role of Feminism in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in which the main character Janie Crawford strives the Patriarchal system of being treated as a submissive figure. In each phase of her life, she wanted to fight against her submissiveness and tried to evoke herself out of the Patriarchal society.

Janie Crawford, whose sexual feelings for pear tree blossom, impulse her to kiss Johnny Taylor, who passes by her backyard in Florida. Seeing the action of Janie, her only guardian Nanny, married her to Logan Killicks, a sixty-year-old farmer. Nanny made this decision because of her past impact of oppression in the hands of male domination. She thought that getting her married to a man with wealth like Logan Killicks, despite of her age, would help Janie, giving her protection. She convinced Janie, saying: "Ah don't want yo' feathers always crumpled by folks throw in' up things in yo' face. And Ah can't die easy think in' maybe de men folks white or black is mak in' a spit cup out a you: Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah'm a cracked plate"(Hurston 27).

The marriage life of Janie with Logan did not meet any of her sexual urges rather, it put her down in dignity, and she was treated as a submissive figure meant for household work. The thought of Logan towards Janie was all for her to be an unpaid servant at his home. This state of Janie made her to feel insignificant living with Logan. To hold onto herself and not to waste her life with the older man, she stepped out, giving life to her rights.

The life of Janie with Joe Starks was good at the beginning, as he always tried to fulfill lifestyle of Janie with all social needs—a wife for his social status. When the days pass by, Janie's heart seeks out for the right to live her own life. She was treated as an object in the hands of Joe Starks. Typically, Joe was fond of being a BIG VOICE in Eatonville, so he wanted Janie to fulfill his expectation of her to be a wife of the Mayor and didn't want her to have her fundamental freedom or choice. Jody holds back Janie from making conversation with the ordinary people when she is invited to, saying: "Thank yuh fuhyo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her forno thin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (Hurston 49).

She was asked to cover up her hair while working in the store as her long wavy hair would impress the other men who came to the store. All that Jody does to Janie is make her submissive under his rule. "He wanted her submission and he'd keep on fighting until he felt he had it" (Hurston 75). Jody was consistently criticizing Janie for her disability to work. He deteriorated her appearance as he wanted others to divert his aging. So Janie burst out into angry words.

On the deathbed of Jody, Janie tells what she had in her heart for twenty years of their journey together: "You done lived with me for twenty years and you don't half know me at all. And you could have but you was so busy worshipping de works of yo' own hands, and cuffin' folks around in their mins till you didn't see uh whole heap uh things yuh could have"(90).

Ah knowed you wasn't going tuh listen tuh me. You changes everything but nothin' don't change You—not even death. But Ah ain'tgoin' out a here and Ah ain'tgoin' tuh hush. Naw, you goimntuh listen tuh me one time befo' you die. Have yo'way all yo' life, trample and mash down and then die rather than tuh let yo'selfheah' bout it. Listen, Jody, you ain't de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You 'se whut's left after hedied. Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied did me de way Ah was. Naw! Mahown mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me.(Hurston 90)

The death of Jody didn't bury Janie with sorrow, but she was holding the spirit of joy over her space to live a life of her own choice independently. Janie removed the scarf, which symbolizes her suppression under Jody and giving up on her rights. Also, "Before she slept that night she burnt up everyone of her head rags and went about the house next morning with her hair in one thick braid swinging well below her waist" (Hurston 93).

"She was just basking in freedom for the most part without the need for thought"(96). Janie became a personality who could share her happiness with people around without any restriction. The tiring journey of Janie's twenty years came to an end, and now she can make decisions of her own choice. She started to manage the store alone, confined only to her thoughts, and also enjoyed the flirting talks by men around her.

By that time, she came across Tea Cake, with whom she stepped out of Eatonville. Hemet all her expectations by treating her dignified, loving, and letting her own space. Janie felt happy and peaceful in her relationship with Tea Cake. Both had a mutual relationship, where Tea Cake was the one who helped her live independently and securely. He taught her to shoot. The life of Janie with Tea Cake was a satisfying one. He valued the heart and sense of Janie in everything. But they couldn't live together all their life as Tea Cake was bitten by a rabies-infected dog and got deprived of hallucinations, which made him shoot Janie, but in self-defense Janie shot at him. After the death of Tea Cake, Janie left to Eatonville for the same store and shared with the village people all her story through Pheoby, which she thought would be an example to them.

Janie, all throughout her life struggled with the Patriarchy that ruled her and, in each phase, realizes giving importance of her own choice. Though she found men who respect her, she was unable to continue living with him; still she found contentment in living in the absence of a relationship among the townspeople as a feminist.

The role of Feminism dealing with the Character Janie gives scope for one to have fulfillment in one's self despite of the struggles that push them down. Consistency, persistence, and reviving spirit in the midst of breakages are the spirit to be carried in all circumstances.

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