

## **EN667 Harlem to Hogan's Alley: Black Writing in North America**

### **How is the oppression of black women linked to slavery in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*?**

Throughout the decades' slavery has been a constant and prevalent discourse within African American studies and other academic subjects. Slavery has often laid the foundation for many African American novels, using a slave narrative to convey the on-going oppression of African Americans. Outside of historic and academic discourses, many people may question the importance of studying slavery after abolition. The transatlantic slave trade began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and ended in 1807. Despite the progress made after abolition, much of the trauma and destruction caused by slavery has had lasting effects. Zora Neale Hurston dedicates her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, to presenting the story of a biracial women in the 1930's called Janie. She uses the protagonist to convey the impact of slavery on the lives of black women, faced with the double oppression and consciousness of being a black woman in a systematically racist and patriarchal society. I will be investigating how the oppression of black women is linked to slavery in *Their eyes were watching God*. Examining the impact of slavery on black women allows us to contemplate the roots of systematic racism and sexism that promotes the enslavement of black women. I will begin this essay by analysing the enslavement and oppression of black women post slavery by looking at the protagonist's marriages. I will be comparing traditional slave narratives to Janie's marriages to illustrate the similarities. Within this argument, I will discuss the different positions men and women hold in society in an attempt to understand the power dynamic between slave and

master and men and women. I will then proceed to discuss how slavery prompted the negative perception of black women and how this is now engrained into the black community.

Hurston highlights issues that are still relevant in today's society and are being tackled by womanist such as Alice Walker. She described womanism to be 'simply another shade of feminism. It helps give visibility to the experience of black women and other women of color who have always been at the forefront of the feminist movement yet marginalized and rendered invisible in historical texts and the media'.<sup>1</sup> Hurston's novel deals with a range of issues such as female identity, oppression, colourism and slavery, bringing to light many issues that are overlooked in feminist discourse. Feminist Zillah Eisenstein outlines the importance of white feminist's participating in conversations about black history in order to better support black women. She says 'As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture.'<sup>2</sup>

Hurston uses a traditional slave narrative with a twist to show the ongoing enslavement of black women post-slavery. Hurston critiques the black community and presents a novel that reflected the enslavement of women within society. I will be using this as my focal point throughout the essay. This argument proves important to the black feminist and womanist community along with their allies, as the continuous discussion surrounding slavery helps

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Walker, What Is A womanist? ,The Progressive Pupil (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Zillah Eisenstein, The Combahee River Collective Statement, (1977), In: *Home Girls, A Black Feminist Anthology*. (New York, 1983).

tackle issues that have arisen from slavery and understand its contribution to the oppression of black women.

Janie's identity is shaped by her gender, her light skin and her class. These factors enslave and oppress her. Hurston uses the institution of marriage to illustrate the enslavement of black women and presents an alternative slave narrative. Janie experiences various levels of oppression within her relationships due to her status as a black woman. Founder of the NAACP and civil rights activists W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term 'Double consciousness', Du Bois writes 'It is a peculiar sensation, this double, consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused, contempt and pity.'<sup>3</sup> Double consciousness suggests the duality of existing within two social groups that both look down upon you. Black feminist Eisenstein identifies the double consciousness experienced by black women she says 'Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes'.<sup>4</sup> This is evident in *Their Eyes*. Janie is not respected in society as a woman nor is she respected as a black member of American society. Both aspects of her identity are simultaneously rejected, this creates a conflict in identity, leaving black women feeling ostracised and enslaved by society. Hurston presents the isolation of being a black woman struggling with oppression from all angles. At the age of six, Janie recognises she is different from the white children she grew up with. she says, 'before Ah seen de picture Ah thought

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<sup>3</sup> DuBois W.E.B, *The souls of black folks* ,(Chicago:McClurge &Co,1903).

<sup>4</sup> Zillah Eisenstein

Ah wuz just like de rest'.<sup>5</sup> This isolation is carried on throughout Janie's life. she discovers she has no place amongst white people but also no place within the black community. Janie's first husband Logan says to her, 'you ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh.'<sup>6</sup> Janie is treated like a slave who has no home and can be sold at any time. Hurston illustrates the prevalence of slavery within marriage. Feminist critic Simone De Beauvoir recognises the systematic constructs put in place designed to oppress women. She writes 'Through the myths this society imposed its laws and customs upon individuals... the myths penetrate even into such existences as are most harshly enslaved into material realities.'<sup>7</sup> De Beauvoir examines the sense of manipulation in institutions and traditions used to enslave women. Being young and naïve Janie does not identify marriage as an institution that enslaves her, she frees herself from Logan only to be mesmerised by Joe Stark. His charm and wealth entice Janie leading her back into captivity. In this marriage, Janie experiences the same isolation and oppression.

Hurston uses men as a symbol of the slave master and the oppressor. Jody's desire for power and wealth leads him to imitate white slave owners. He treats Janie as his property. 'He wanted her submission and he'd keep on fighting until he felt he had it. So gradually, she...learned to hush'.<sup>8</sup> Janie's attempts to rebel and fight to have her voice heard have repeatedly failed. Discouraged and with no choices, Janie is forced into submission.

Eisenstein recognises the social customs women are forced to adopt. She writes 'we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being "ladylike" and to make us less

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<sup>5</sup> Zora Neale Hurston *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. (HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2006). pp.9

<sup>6</sup> Zora Neale Hurston

<sup>7</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, '*the second sex*'. trans. by H. M. Parshley, 1st (France: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1949). PP.100

<sup>8</sup> Zora Neale Hurston PP.71

objectionable in the eyes of white people.’<sup>9</sup> Eisenstein explains how black women are raised to become submissive to both white people and black men. Janie’s relationship with Jody is parallel to the relationship between the runaway slave and the master. The master beats the slave into submission in order to assert his dominance and claims the slave as his rightful property. The master is able to mentally chain his slaves through fear and dominance. This is also seen within Janie’s last marriage with Tea Cake. Despite Tea Cake’s free-spirited nature and lower-class status, he still oppresses Janie as he sees her as his rightful property. Janie is whipped into submission by Tea cake, this ‘reassured him in possession’.<sup>10</sup> Not only does Tea Cake beat Janie to reassure himself but to convince his community of his power and dominance over Janie. Black men are forced to constantly prove themselves in a society that oppresses and emasculates them. This is another issue Hurston conveys to be a lasting effect of slavery.

Simone De Beauvoir explains the position men held within society, she writes ‘Man is a socially autonomous and complete individual; he is regarded above all as a producer.’ De Beauvoir’s description appears synonymous to the portrayal of slave masters in slave narratives. Both Hurston and De Beauvoir suggest the powerful positions held by men in society allow them to abuse women and use them as slaves. Hurston also illustrates a mutual understanding of the power men have over women. She writes ‘De nigger woman is de mule uh de world’.<sup>11</sup> Throughout *Their Eyes*, Hurston shows women occupying very different role in society to men. Janie is defined by the men in her life, she acts upon her master’s orders. In Hurston’s world marriage is the chain that enslaves women. Women’s right’s activist Sojourner Truth made a speech at the women’s convention in 1851 in Ohio, conveying the struggle of being a black woman. ‘I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and

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<sup>9</sup> Zillah Eisenstein

<sup>10</sup> Zora Neale Hurston pp.196

<sup>11</sup> Zora Neale Hurston pp.14

no man could help me! And ain't I a woman?'<sup>12</sup> Truth suggests black women occupy a different space in society to white women with no power and no privilege black women are made the slaves of America.

Historically black women have been subjugated to the value of an animal. Used as slaves, child bearers and sexual objects to be misused and disposed of. Black women are denied the right to express their unique individuality. Hurston illustrates this through Janie's position in society. Janie takes on the symbolic role of a house slave as her fair skin and white features make her desirable to the slave master. This is evident in her relationship with Jody. 'She was there in the store for him to look at not those others'.<sup>13</sup> Janie's only use is for Jody's pleasure. Her additional qualities and identity beyond her light skin and beauty are disregarded.

Jennifer Jordan states that 'Janie's struggle for identity and self-direction remains stymied. She never defines herself outside the scope of her marital or romantic involvements.'<sup>14</sup>

Janie's self-worth and identity is found solely within her relationships. Despite Her mistreatment in these relationships. Janie is continuously drawn back to her only source of self-worth. Ifechelobi comments on this, she says 'Women are shackled by their own negative self-image by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy.'<sup>15</sup>

feminist Ifechelobi suggests Patriarchal ideologies force women into oppressive marriages.

Thomas Jefferson questions slavery's effects on the self-esteem of the black community.

Jefferson writes 'How did a person maintain a sense of worth (and worthiness) when survival

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<sup>12</sup> Sojourner Truth: Ain't I A Woman? Women's Rights National Historical Park Women's Rights Convention, Old Stone Church, (Akron, Ohio.1851).

<sup>13</sup> Zora Neale Hurston PP.73

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Jordan, 'Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God', Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature, Vol. VII (Tulsa University Press,1988) pp. 105-117.

<sup>15</sup> Ifechelobi, J.N, Feminism: Silence and noiselessness as Tools of Patriarchy in Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus, African research review 8 vols. vol. IV, (2014)

required "degrading submissions"<sup>16</sup> Hurston answers this question through the protagonist's unhealthy reliance on her husbands. women are confined by men's notions of propriety, using insults to tear them down. Janie's confidence appears to return after Jody's death. She takes back ownership of her body, letting her hair lose once again and enjoying the things that make her an individual.

Eisenstein explains black men's interaction with black feminism, she says 'The reaction of Black men to feminism has been notoriously negative. They realize that they might not only lose valuable and hardworking allies in their struggles but that they might also be forced to change their habitually sexist ways of interacting with and oppressing Black women.'<sup>17</sup>

Eisenstein recognises black men as mutual oppressors of black women along with systematic racism. Einstein helps us to understand the power dynamic between black women and black men that allows men to maintain patriarchal power whilst being victims of oppression themselves. Eisenstein's feminist statements give us insight and reasoning behind Jody's harsh critique of Janie. In order to keep Janie under his control he has to make her believe she is nothing and will never be anything. This is the same technique used by slave masters.

Hurston uses the repetition of slave narratives convey the parallels between the slave master and black men in marriage.

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XVIII. (1781).

<sup>17</sup> Zillah Eisenstein, The Combahee River Collective Statement, (1977), In: *Home Girls, A Black Feminist Anthology*. (New York, 1983).

The novel shows similar philosophies of black womanism and black feminists. Hurston illustrates the factors that oppress black women. Rubin identifies how intersectionality can help to better deal with black feminist's problems. He says 'By intersecting the factors of race, gender and class one can precisely examine the complex process of black women's oppression.'<sup>18</sup> Hurston shows the impact of slavery on the complexity of black women's oppression. *Their Eyes*, conveys the continuation of slavery within the black community. To conclude through analysing Hurston's novel in my argument. I believe slavery will continue to be an inevitable part of society both covertly and overtly due to the inequality in the world. The unequal distribution of power authorises a constant slave and slave- master relationship. I believe and have hope that once global equality is achieved slavery will come to an end.

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<sup>18</sup>Derek Rubin *Their Eyes Were Watching God: Black Feminism and White Ideals* BA Thesis English Language and Culture, Utrecht University, (2012)

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