

## المخلص

الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تنوير القراء حول اضطهاد ومعاناة النساء السود داخل المجتمع الأمريكي كما ورد في رواية الكاتبة الأمريكية من أصل أفريقي زورا نيل هيورستون كانت عيونهم تراقب الله . في الواقع ، كانت هيورستون واحدة من الكاتبات النساء السود الأكثر أهمية وذلك لمشاركتها في صياغة وتشكيل أدوار النساء السود في مجتمع يهيمن عليه الرجال خلال نهضة هارلم . وقد أسهمت هيورستون أسهاما كبيرا في الأدب الأمريكي الأفريقي والنقد الأدبي كذلك ، لا سيما في إصرارها على ضرورة السماح للكاتبات بالحرية في تقديم وجهات نظرهن حول قضايا عديدة ومختلفة. وروايتها عيونهم كانت تراقب الله هو مثال جيد في هذا الاتجاه . هذه الرواية تكشف النقاب عن الظلم اللانساني والاستغلال الجنسي الواقع على النساء السود في مجتمع يهيمن عليه الرجال والرأسمالية كذلك . و بطلنة الرواية الرئيسية ، جين ، شعرت بالضيق ، والقلق والاكتئاب بسبب التجارب اليومية للاضطهاد. في الواقع ، أنها لم تستطيع تحقيق استقلالها الجنسي والهوية. وقالت إنها ستواصل الكفاح لإنهاء أو تقليل المعاناة الجسدية والقهر العاطفي والنفسي . وكذلك ناني ، جدة جين ، فقدت كرامتها ، والهوية الشخصية والحرية بمرور الوقت بسبب العواقب المأساوية للعبودية ومما لا شك فيه ، قد استخدمت هيورستون هذه الرواية كسلاح قوي لتأكيد شخصية المرأة ، والأحلام ، والحرية ، والهوية الشخصية في المجتمع الأبوي والرأسمالي.

**because of the tragic consequences of slavery . Undoubtedly ,  
Hurston used this novel as a strong weapon to assert women's  
individuality , dreams , freedom and personal identity in a  
patriarchal and capitalistic society .**



## Abstract

The objective of the present study is to enlighten the readers about the oppression and the suffering of black women as reflected in the African American writer Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In reality, Hurston was one of the most important black women writers participating in shaping and forming black women's roles in a male dominated society during the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston contributed significantly to African American literature and criticism, particularly in her insistence that female writers should be allowed freedom in presenting their own views on many different issues. Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a good example in this direction. This novel removes the veil about the inhuman oppression and exploitation done to black women in a male-dominated society. The main protagonist, Jaine, has experienced great loss, anxiety and depression because of the daily experiences of oppression. In reality, she can not fulfill her autonomy, sexual desire and identity. She has fought and continued to fight to end or reduce her physical, emotional and psychological oppression and suffering. Also, Nanny, Jaine's grandmother, has lost her dignity, personal identity and freedom in the course of time



**Lorde , Audre , Sister Outsider , Trumansburg , NY , Crossing ,  
1984**

**Meese , Elizabeth , Orality and Texuality in Zora Neale  
Hurston's Their Eyes Watching God , The Practice of Feminist  
Criticism , Chapel Hill , University of North Carolina Press ,  
1986**

**Ondieki , Benjamin Orina , The Denunciation of Patriarchy  
And Capitalism in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were  
Watching God , Wichite State University , 2008**

**Stacy M . Erickson . Animals As Trope in the Selected Fiction of  
Zora Neale Hurston , Alice Walker , and Toni Morrison ,  
University of North Texas , 1990**

**Tally , Austine , What Do We Do with Zora's Their Eyes Were  
Watching God As A Modernist Novel**

**Walker , Aliche . In Search of Our Mothers , Gardens Womnist  
Proses San Diego : Harcourt Brace , Jovanovich , 1983**

**Weyer , Christine Louise ,Joan Metelerkamp Poet Of  
Connection , University of Stellenbosh , 2007**



- Hurston , Westport C T , Greenwood Press , 2001**
- Davis , D. Adrienne , Slavery and the Root of Sexual  
Harassment Forthcoming in Directions in Sexual  
Harassment, Catherine Mackinnone & Reva Siegal editors  
: Yale University Press**
- Engbreton , Terry , Study Guide For Their Eyes Were  
Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston , Idaho State  
University , Pocatello , 1992**
- Forguson , Sally Ann , Folkloric Men and Female Growth in  
Their Eyes Were Watching God , Black American Literature  
Forum . Vol . 2 No .1/2 Spring – Summer , 1987**
- Halisi , Clyde , The Quotable Karenga , 1967**
- Hooks , Bell . Black Women and Feminism . Boston , 1981**
- Hurston , Zora Neale .Their Eyes Were Watching God , New  
York : Harper Perennial Modern Classics , 1937**
- Hymoni , Naoko , In Search of Jaine's Voice A Reading of Their  
Eyes Were Watching God**
- Jordan , Jennifer , Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were  
Watching God , Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature , Vol .7 ,  
No 1, Spring 1984**
- Karvonen , Kati , The Development of African American  
Vernacular English in two Fiction Texts , University of  
Jyvaskyla , 6.5 . 2009**



## Works Cited

- Abbott , Traci B , The Fictive Flapper : A Way Of Reading  
Race And Female Desire In The Novels of Laren , Hurst ,  
Hurston , And Cather . University of Maryland , College  
Park , 2004**
- Anderson, Lisa ,Mommio No More . The Changing Image of  
Black Women on Stage and Screen , London : Maryland ,  
1997**
- Baym , Nina ed The Norton Anthology of American Literature ,  
University of Illinois , Norton & Company , 2003**
- B.G.S., Sally Good .Women , Violence , And Twentieth Century  
American Literature , Faculty of Texas Tech University ,  
2003**
- Clarke , Deborah , The Porch Couldn't Talk for Looking : Voice  
and Vision in Their Eyes Were Watching God : African  
American Review , 35 , No- 4 Winter 2001**
- Code , Toni , Ed The Black Woman : An Anthology , New York.  
Signet , 1970**
- Collins , Patricia Hill . Learning from the Outsider Within ,  
The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought  
Social Problems , University of Cincinnati Vol . 33 , No . 6 ,  
December 1986**
- Compell , Jossie P , Students Companion To Zora Neale**



**self – exploration and affirmation. The novel is relevant not only to the present, but also to the past and future. By attacking the oppression of the black women in its different forms, she gives black women strength to assert themselves:**

**Using this framework to appreciate Their Eyes, we realize that Zora Neale Hurston seems to launch an overt literary war against patriarchy and capitalism both within her immediate social cosmology and partly within the larger American society. From this observation, we may argue that the text's effect lies in the conscious and successful efforts of its protagonist to denounce the ideological systems of patriarchy and capitalism ... Hurston's Their Eyes serves as a conscious endeavor to liberate the protagonist from the ideological and physical limitations inherent in the protagonist's society, which as the text shows, is systematically dominated by men. We, therefore, ought to see Jaine, the novel's protagonist, as a symbolic archetype of female subjectivity. Each of Jaine's three marriages, in effect, serves as the epitome of an entrenched patriarchal social setting from which she struggles and finally manages to escape . ( 3-4 )**

**.. Tea Cake occupied a leading position while Jaine's was that of an obedient and even passive follower. ..We realize that he dominates her so much so that Jaine seems to experience life only from Tea Cake's point of view . (Ondieki 22-23 )**

**One can conclude from the preceding discussion that Hurston succeeded so much in showing many points on her view of a woman's place inside the American society in the twentieth century. One of the significant points she concentrates on is that women need to search for their independent identity because of the oppression done to them by the hostile male dominated community. In this story, women are viewed as objects for men without an identity of their own. As for Hurston, if women are not satisfied in their marriages , they need to move toward the things that can satisfy them. In any case, one can say that women can be independent without losing their identity when they get married. Undoubtedly, the writer has used this novel as a weapon to assert woman's dreams, individuality, sexual autonomy, and personal identity. This is a strong indication that Hurston is also concerned with the lack of human communication and cohesiveness inside the family and describe the disintegration- within the same family. She aims at enhancing people's awareness of problems within the family. In reality, this story provides women readers with suitable tools for**



opportunity to gain from their own exploitation, exchanging sexual relations with one man in marriage for protection from sexual mistreatment by other men. Female sexual autonomy, in other words, still does not exist for Nanny even decades after emancipation . ( 219-220 )

In the same context , many critics agree that Jaine's third marriage, to Tea Cake, supports patriarchal opinion, bondage, and the material success of the capitalistic system. However, Jaine has not completed her quest for self-fulfillment, identity and her sexual autonomy by the end of the novel. But, she has fought and continue to fight against oppression and violence to find herself and consequently her happiness :

Nevertheless, being a male member of a patriarchal society, Tea Cake equally manifests certain aspects of male domination in his marriage. Tea Cake's maintenance of the dominant system even after Jaine seems to think that mutual love with him will of necessity free her from capitalism and male oppression symbolically suggests that, although capitalism may recede or be defeated, patriarchy still will remain in society. Tea Cake's working class status does not guarantee him ownership of any means of production, but his uncontested maleness dictate that he operates to maintain the patriarchal status quo .

Furthermore, Nanny, Jaine's grandmother, has suffered so much from sexual violation because of illegal system of slavery. Her own master had exercised random brutality as well as systematic violence upon her in order to keep her in her place. Besides, throughout her life, Nanny witnessed many atrocities and physical abuses. Admittedly, she had been denied the human right to know her own identity :

In Nanny's view , the expression of black female sexuality (desire and desirability) leads to unwanted male attention, which leads in turn to violence and exploitation. Therefore, as Nanny explains "It's protection " that black women need since their sexuality makes them vulnerable to male exploitation, but protection is only available through other men, notably, through the social institution of marriage that defines female sexuality as the property of the husband ... Ironically, Nanny's attitude arises from a life of violence and exploitation which began when her sexuality - and her body - were literary another man's property. During slavery, sexual autonomy was absent as a female slave was merely, as Nanny explains, " a work- fox and a brood -sow "for her master. .. Given Nanny harrowing journey of escape to save herself and her child, her willingness to force her granddaughter into marriage makes sense under the logic that in the post-emancipation era, black women at least have the

**social, patriarchal, and historical structures in which she was born and grown up. Abbott adopts the same opinion :**

**Hurston wishes us to recognize that Jaine battles not just with external social restrictions on black female sexuality but also with her own conflicting perceptions, and these perceptions in turn limit her definition of sexual autonomy. Throughout her life, Jaine struggles with traditional conceptions of heterosexual relationships in order to find a way to satisfy her modern understanding of sexual autonomy – the acknowledgment of her sexual desire and her ability to express and fulfill that desire. Hurston seems to suggest that even when a black woman achieves control of her sexual autonomy, she still can not control how her community perceives that autonomy – the social definition of female sexual propriety – or how her male sexual partner utilizes the other component of her sexuality, her sexual desirability, to publicly express his power over her. Significantly, Hurston also exposes the connection between violence and public control of female sexuality, suggesting that men have an additional tool, and additional social affirmation, not only denied to women but exercised at great cost to them.**

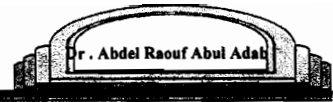
**(215 )**

and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment . ( Hurston 1)

Jordan adopts the same attitude :

The novel is seen as a vehicle of feminist protest through its condemnation of the restrictiveness of bourgeois marriage and through its exploration of interracial sexism and male violence. It is seen as a quest through which the heroine, Jaine Killicks Starks Woods, achieves a sense of identity as a self-fulfilled woman and , through her own self- realization, becomes a leader of women and of her community. .. Furthermore, Jaine's struggle for identity and self- direction remains stymied. She never defines herself outside the scope of her marital or romantic involvements and, despite her sincere relationship with her friend Pheoby, fails to achieve a communal identification with the black women around her or with the black community as a whole. As the novel ends, Jaine chooses isolation and contemplation , not solidarity and action.(105-107)

One can conclude from the above mentioned quotation that Jaine suffers so much from sexual oppression. She can not fulfill her sexual desire and autonomy because of the rigid



shelter from financial instability. Jaine escapes the marriage to Logan Killicks, which provides neither affection nor comfort. Her second marriage to Jody Starks is, at first, not devoid of emotional gratification, but ultimately Jody reduces Jaine to an enviable possession that advertises his superior status to less fortunate men. As a possession she is denied any self-defined goals and even the expression of her opinions. She is publicly humiliated and physically abused. (Jordan 105-117)

However, it becomes clear that racism is an environmental and cultural force that challenges and impedes Jaine in her quest to achieve harmony with the world around her. The opening elegiac page of the novel reflects clearly the painful situation of the gender gap and gender discrimination :

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don't to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do thing accordingly. So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. Not the dead of sick

**ears and told her about her brains before he walked on back to the store .**

**Jaine stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. The she went inside to see what it was ... Joe Starks didn't know the words for all this, but he knew the feeling. So he struck Jaine with all his might and drove her from the store . (Hurston 67-76 )**

**It can be said now that the inhuman oppression created by racism and gender discrimination is an important theme because Their Eyes Were Watching God is concerned basically with the issues of race relations. Many critics believe that racism operates in the novel just like the hurricane and doctrine to which Joe adheres. In reality, Jaine's entire life has been oppressed, deprived, humiliated and depressed by Joe's determination to idolize her by placing her on a lonely pedestal before the whole town. Consider the following revealing quotation :**

**Through the first half of the novel , Jaine struggles to free herself from the expectations of her grandmother, who sees marriage as a haven from indiscriminate sexual exploitation as opposed to the particular abuse of a loveless marriage) and as a**

wants to engage privately in scopophilia within a public forum, without subjecting Jaine herself to this public gaze. Once she is fixed by gazes other than his own, he loses his exclusive ownership of her body ... But the situation reflects more than Joe's concern about Jaine's gaining cultural power ; Jaine's visibility also invokes a classic Freudian scenario ... When Jaine challenges Joe, she does so not just to defend her female identity, but also to protest against Joe's almost constant oppression ... But Jaine does not need simply to find a man capable of assimilating voice and vision, she needs to learn for herself how to formulate a self which is not predicated upon oppression. She finds the task particularly challenging because her racial identity is founded upon invisibility., upon her inability to see herself . ( 599-613 )

One can say that physical and psychological violence is practiced everywhere in the novel and it has become an integral part of Jaine's everyday life. On the other hand , she endures so much and she never complains. But , she does not react :

Jaine was a good cook , and Joe had looked forward to his dinner as a refuge from other things. So when the bread didn't rise, and the fish wasn't quite done at the bone, and the rice was scorched, he slapped Jaine until he had a ringing sound in her

to him, defeated by Nanny's powerful story of her own oppression which seems to give her the right to impose her will upon Jaine ....But her look still lacks the controlling power of the male gaze, what hooks calls the ability to change reality. (Clarke 599-613 )

The above quotation makes it clear that racism and discrimination have been identified as primary factors that cause psychological oppression problems inside the black community. In other words, these social and racial practices leave psychological and physical wounds on black women's lives. In this context. Jaine has experienced great loss, anxiety and depression because of the daily bitter experiences of inhuman oppression. Undoubtedly, the interplay of psychological and physical violence against Jaine is of prime interest in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* :

But Joe has a problem , for while he wants to put Jaine on display in order to reap the benefit of reflected glory as her owner, this is precisely the position which is threatened by the eyes of other men . He wants her to be both present and absent, both visible and invisible, a task he attempts to accomplish by insisting that she keep her hair tied up in a head rag because he sees the other men not "just figuratively wallowing in it " ...Joe



with examples of Jaine's need to look, see, understand and use language visually. Jaine learns thoroughly to transform her gaze into one that accepts and values her own image. One can say that the significance of the title of the novel deeply shows the importance and the greatness of the power of sight: " They sat in company with others in other shanties ...They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God." ( 151 )  
Clarke supports this view :

Hurston establishes the full power of the visual in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Initially subjected to the defining and objectifying power of a communal gaze, Jaine learns to employ vision in ways that are self – affirming rather than self-sacrificing. Returning to Eatonville at the novel's start, Jaine finds herself in a position very familiar to her: the object that all eyes are open. .. She shows her womanhood, a far different sight than that gazed upon by the men, who see not Jaine's presence , but their own desire, desire which her body is expected to satisfy ... The materiality of Jaine's body as an object of desire has, of course, determined much of her history. Her first husband, Logan Killicks, presumably wants to marry her based on what he sees. though her own eyes tell something very different. " He look like some old skullhead in de grave yard. But her vision lacks authority; despite what her eyes tell her, she is married off

and significant contributor to Jaine's growth and her need to find self – definition, identity, freedom and independence in a male dominated society :

Where y'all come from in sich uh big haste ?

Lee Coker asked .

“Middle Georgy,“ Starks answered briskly . Joe

Starks is mah name , from in and through Georgy .

You and yo' daughter goin' tuh join wid us in fellowship? the other reclining figure asked .Mighty glad to have yuh. Hicks is the name. Guv'nor Amos Hicks from Buford, South Carolina . Free , single , disengaged .

I god , Ah ain't nowhere near old enough to have no grown daughter . This here is mah wife .

Hicks sank back and lost interest at once .

Where is de Mayor ? Starks persisted . Ah wants tuh talk wid him . ( 50 )

More than that, Hurston's insistence on the importance of visual language and visual expression stems largely from racism's disregard for African American individuality and freedom. For example, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, looking is more influential than a confrontation challenge. As for Hurston, looking is not a static activity. This novel is replete



talking back to Joe she has not kept up the appearance of the obedient, submissive wife which her husband considers fundamental to his self-importance. "( Tally 99-112 ) Also, she does not surrender to him irrespective of his financial prosperity and power. In fact, she proves her strength of character and humanity through her strong determination. Consider the following convincing quotation:

Sometimes God gets familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised. He was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after him makin' yuh different ; and how surprised y' all is goin tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do. (Hurston 75)

But the power of language remains unequal and striking. To be clear, Hurston's conception of language, and of the relationship between language and the world deserves great attention. Many critics believe that Jaine's conversations and communication skills reveal individual personalities, accurately, swiftly, as if they had no author at all. Undoubtedly, these narrative techniques employed by Hurston help us so much in better understanding the role of voice in Their Eyes Were Watching God. One can identify speech and oral acts as a main

sows envy and consternation within a community firmly based on solidarity . ( Tally 99-112 )

One can conclude from the above discussion that the role played by language in defining Jaine's own identity and self actualization is powerful. Many critics believe that Hurston's powerful use of language keeps up with Janie's quest to find her voice, empowerment and consequently herself: " Language is another cognitive paradigm in Jaine's self-construction... Jaine's relationship to language, and the way she grows in it, is a vital point the novel makes. She acknowledges that self-fulfillment means possessing the capacity to discover new words and the way to connect them into language " (Bernard 1-14). This is to say that Jaine's development of her voice is inseparable from her inner growth . In other words , language is used as a strong weapon of injury and salvation. Undoubtedly, Hurston juxtaposes the form of the novel and its thematic content together by placing great emphasis on the control of language as the source of identity, spiritual fulfillment and personal integrity:"The puzzle of the novel's structure is inseparable from considerations of its theme. "( Meese 39-53). In this context, Jaine humiliates her husband in front of a lot of other black men, whom he considers to be his social inferiors, regardless of the painful results she would have to face: "In

emotional silence ... The final instance of Jaine's mystery that ultimately establishes her power occurs when, in retaliation for Joe's verbal abuse, she humiliates him in front of his male friends . She seizes his authority – language – and leaves him speechless. One of Jaine's greatest lessons about language centers on its power to deconstruct and to construct , to kill or give life . (Meese 39-53)

In the same context, Hurston's acute attack and criticism of the white man way of life, who made the material success as his final aim in life, is very apparent in the following quotation :

At no time does Hurston demand access to a white way of life What is more, through the figure of Joe Starks she actually. condemns the adoption of white patriarchal, bourgeois structures as a model for Black community way of life. While Nella Larson uses her protagonist Helga Crane to voice the contradiction between hating whites while wanting to be like them in every way. Hurston demonstrates just how the concepts of materialism as an end in itself, the quest for power and authority to ensure personal gain , and the figure of woman as possession instead of companion not only destroys any meaningful relationship between a man and a woman , but also



confrontation, “Jaine’s ability to speak out in self- defense is a major step towards self- expression.” (Campbell 66) In fact, when she speaks, she asserts herself and her own power. Earlier, Joe prevents her from speaking and asserting her identity ; now, he himself is left without voice. Thus , this is a strong landmark in Jaine’s quest for self- discovery because she does not need a partner but she needs a secure sense of independence and a strong sense of her own identity :

Through the novel , Hurston also exposes phallocentrism and instructs her reader in the terms of the discourse . By means of their oral skills, the porch speakers demonstrate the powerful effects of logocentrism: “They are the center of the world “ As in white patriarchal culture, language serves as a locus for social control through its centrality within an order of meaning ...To attempt to escape its constraints , Jaine must use power in order to have power. By transforming her characteristic silence into speech, she stands a chance of establishing a different relationship with Joe, that is, a relationship based on acknowledging difference and accommodating change. Eventually she tires of his endless verbal disputes designed to bring about submission. Her silence in the external world reflects her internal repression until the hollow image of Joe Starks crashes from the shelf in her mind, and she discovers her



his powerful position in town . Here , one can say that the people of the town of Eatonville show a deep respect for Joe Starks who clearly values his material success and his public life more than he values Jaine . Joe appears to dominate Janie more than other men dominate their wives in the community . He succeeds in silencing Jaine, and she accepts because she does not like to create conflict . One can say that Joe represents the authority that all African Americans fight against. Hyomi asserts that : “ Voicelessness as a distinct simile of oppression shades Jaine’s marriage to her second husband Jody . The husband repeatedly interrupts Jaine’s participation in the exchange of local lore , and Jaine’s acquiescence causes their marriage to fail “ ( 161 ) . She becomes aware that she is just an object to Joe . However , Jaine remains unfulfilled by their relationship because these notions prevent her from growing and developing . Jaine grows more and more defeated . She silently submits to Joe’s ugly nature and performs her duties while ignoring her emotions : “ Jaine loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule , but Joe had forbidden her to indulge . He didn’t want her talking after such trashy people “ ( Hurston 50 ) For many years she accepts this ill treatment until a day when Joe publicly embarrasses her . She no longer accepts this treatment and in turn publicly humiliates Joe , telling the community that he is not a very good lover . In this



expresses her empathy and connection with the supernatural beliefs with of the folk, animals , and nature as she takes Janie on her quest for a sexually and racial healthy identity . ( 25 )

Her grandmother dies, and after a short time, Jaine leaves Logan for Joe Starks. She runs away with him to the black community of Eatonville. Joe is an ambitious man. He soon succeeds in becoming the mayor and the biggest landlord in town . After he becomes mayor of Eatonville, Joe demands that Jaine behaves only in ways he considers appropriate to the mayor's wife. He insists that Jaine must separate herself from the people she loves. She wishes that she could be a part of the rich social life in town, but Joe does not allow her to interact with common people. He wants to shape her into his vision of what a mayor's wife should be : "Jaine soon begins to feel the impact of awe and envy against her sensibilities. The wife of the Mayor was not just another woman as she had supposed . She slept with authority and so she was part of it in the town's mind. She couldn't get but so close to most of them in spirit. "(46) Joe is physically, emotionally, and psychologically abusive and controlling. He is only happy and secure when he feels that he dominates others. Jaine soon realizes that Joe wants her as a trophy wife . He wants the image of his perfect wife to support





In the same context, the following evocative quotation reflects clearly an even deeper desire, which is the ultimate target of the love that Jaine seeks : a sense of enlightenment and self discovery with the world around her :

[ Jaine ] was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees , the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust – bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom ; the thousand sister – calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. The Jaine felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. ( Hurston 30)

Also , Erickson affirms this fact :

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in particular , Hurston reveals her own feminist vegetarian and folk impulse when she frequently engages in animals -as -trope , not only when she engages in pragmatic tropes when Janie almost becomes “de mule uh de world “ in her marriage to Logan Killicks (who could very well kill or break her spirit), nearly fulfilling her grandmother’s worst fears, but also ethically when she

Honey , de white man is de ruler of everything ...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 hands it to his woman folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you . (Hurston 14)

Ondieki's opinion seems to be identical when he refers to the relationship between Jaine and a mule :

Logan's other plan to buy a second mule implies an equation of Jaine to a work beast. With his competitive desire to maximize profits from farming, he thinks that he must also maximize labor productivity in the field by increasing the labor volume. In Logan's competitive outlook to life, Jaine ceases to play the role of wife, but assumes a new role as a mule. In this new role Jaine will, therefore, supply animalized labor to enable Logan to benefit from the already promising domestic agricultural market. Logan does not hesitate to recall Jaine from the kitchen to the barn to disclose his plans ...Logan gets Jaine to work both in the home and in the field due to his capitalistic mentality that a woman's domestic labor is not productive labor. This idea of labor largely influences Jaine's oppression in her marriage and underlines the economic foundation of the patriarchal capitalist family . ( !0 )



their society. This knowledge creates personal growth and self awareness. Jaine becomes acutely aware of her own desires for love, and realizes that her dreams can only be fulfilled through her own pursuit of them .

One can conclude from the previous discussion that Hurston uses comparison between animals and the miserable conditions of black women in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in order to prove identity, humanity and literary vision. According to Hurston, African American women were often considered mules of the world. Undoubtedly, Hurston's beliefs that African American women are treated the same as workhorses. For example. many critics think that the development of Janie's identity keeps up with her relationship with animals. Another example appears in the relationship between Logan and Jaine. In this relationship Hurston uses the mule as a symbol of oppression and maltreatment Jaine faces. The mule is used as an illustration of the manual labor imposed on African American women. For example, Logan relies heavily on the physical labor of mules in order to successfully manage his farm. In any case , one of the first places in which the mule appears is during Nanny's speech regarding the role of African American women . As for Nanny , the black women and animals occupy the same position:



Failing to recognize herself as the one black child in a photograph, she begins her story without name or color. .. Initially she reconciles herself to the received wisdom, the history of black's place in the prevailing power structure as imparted by Nanny, her grandmother. .. The grandmother's gift of a life different from her own permits Jaine to pursue dreams and visions beyond those that Nanny." a cracked plate" damaged by slavery, could have projected. Jaine creates her own future , the way to her individual happiness, at the same time that Hurston constructs a new legacy through the tale Jaine tells ... The story Jaine tells Phoeby and the narrative the reader receives are vastly different from the shaping and socializing story Nanny tells Jaine. In a sense Nanny is the unreconstructed past and Jaine her fulfillment through a newly constructed present. ..The process of Jaine's freedom from oppressive roles entails several steps and engenders predictable male. Logan Killick expresses his complaint about Jaine's independence in racial terms . ( Meese 39-53 )

It can be said now that Jaine's idealism of existing a loving relationship with Logan is destroyed. Undoubtedly, Jaine strongly desires freedom from female subordination. She openly resists her grandmother who insists that she should woo a man for his wealth as it symbolizes security to her and the people of



Killicks before she has the chance to be sexually exploited. However in doing this, Nanny is taking Jaine away from the freedom to find herself and trying her down to someone who is not at all right to her. In any case, Jaine complies with her grandmother's request and replaces her search for identity with a search for romantic love in marriage :

If you don't want to marry him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo' parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land on de big road ...Lawd have mussy! Dat's de very prong all us black women gits hung on . Dis love! Dat's just what got us pullin' and uh haulin' and sweating and doin' from can't see in de morning' till can't see at night. Dat's how come de ole folks can't say dat being' uh fool don't kill nobody. It jus makes you sweat. Ah bet you wants dressed up dude dat got to look at de sole of his shoe every time he cross de street tuh see whether he got enough leather dere to make it cross . You can buy and sell such as dem wid dat you got . In fact you can buy em away (23)

Also , consider the following convincing quotation :

At the beginning of the story within the story, Jaine receives her sense of definition from others. She is a woman as object under the control of a racist, patriarchal culture.

inside ...Ah aims tuh run two plows . “ (Hurston 27) Logan does not appreciate her for who she is ; he only appreciates her looks and her ability to work . As a result , she is completely subjected to Logan’s views of wifely behavior. However, the ultimate painful effect of Logan and Jaine’s marriage is a sense of domination and isolation which diminishes Jaine’s sense of self and connection to her cultural and oral tradition. In this oppressive marriage , she felt as if she was losing her freedom as well as her identity. More specifically, Jaine is entirely oppressed through both Nanny’s actions and her surrender to Logan’s and manual labor. In any case , Nanny is trying hard to keep Jaine from being hurt like she and Jaine’s mother . Nanny says : “ You know honey , us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born black due in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman ought to be and to do “(16) Here, Nanny is telling Jaine that she was unable to achieve happiness. In other words, having married Logan Killicks because her grandmother wants Jaine to have the security and stability that had been unavailable to black women under slavery. Nanny goes on to explain that Jaine’s mother was unable to seek happiness as well because she was sexually exploited at a young age, which ruined her life. Thus she wants Jaine to have a better life and arranges her marriage to Logan



sincerely believes that he will protect the sexually and intellectually awakening teenager from a heritage of adultery and illegitimacy and from a future of economic exploitation and harsh physical abuse. .. Hurston , however , tailors these aspects of the tale to reveal Logan's inability to fulfill his wife's human desires and , more importantly , Jaine's need to fend for herself . ( 185-197 )

One can say that Nanny's primary desire is to marry Jaine as soon as possible to a husband who can provide financial security and social status for her in a white dominated world : “ Dominated by patriarchy and influenced by material things, Nanny considers economic wealth as the prop for Jaine to lean on in all of Jaine's married days ...Nanny's mind is materially dogmatic and irrevocably dominated by patriarchy , capitalism , and a yearning for middle class status. “(Ondieki 4-5) Nanny arranges for Jaine to marry Logan Killicks, an old rich man and farmer who is looking for a wife to keep his home and help on the farm, even though Jaine does not want to marry at that time. In other words, Logan Killicks wants a domestic helper rather than a lover or partner. He tries to force her to help him with the hard labor of the farm. In other words, Logan uses Jaine as a means of manual labor: “If Ah kin haul wood heah and chop it fuh yuh, look lak you oughta be able tuh tote it



slavery and the material mentality of the white man . In other words , Nanny's values clash strongly with Jaine's independence and desire to experience the world :

Ah was born back in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and do ... Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' high , but they wasn't no pulpit for me . Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms so Ah'd throw up a highway through de wilderness for her...But somehow she got lost offa de highway and next thing Ah knowed here you was in de world . So...Ah said Ah'd save de text for you . ( Hurston 16 )

Also , Ferguson's opinion seems to be identical :

Early in the novel, Nanny, Jaine's ex- slave grandmother, graphically describes the black woman's plight in America. ..In other words, Nanny warns that black and white men alike devalue the black female, who must nevertheless realize her potential as a woman and a human being while avoiding victimization. Nanny also perceives the relationship between a woman's being poor and the likelihood of her receiving mulish treatment. For this reason, she finds Jaine a "rich" husband – old Logan Killicks – and forces the girl to marry him. Nanny



Jaine is the result of all of Nanny's hopes for herself , for her daughter Leafy (Jaine's mother's name implies a time when she, too , was alive and full of possibility like a newly –budded tree ) , and for all African- American women , she tries to awaken Janie to the harsh realities for African American women .The story Nanny relates to Jaine is the story of every slave woman at the mercy of the slave owner and his wife. When Nanny has just given birth to Leafy, the slave owner's wife demands to see the baby. When she sees that the baby indeed appears white, she takes out her anger on Nanny rather than on her husband The white woman is unable to confront her husband, who can do with his slave women as he will, so the outlet for her anger is the African- American woman, whose status makes retaliation impossible. Thus, it is no wonder that Nanny deprecates Jaine's dream, for she, unlike Jaine, is aware of the sexual and political economy under which African American women exist. Nanny opens Jaine's eyes to the burdens of the African- American woman's role in terms of the beast of burden . ( 31 )

The above quotation makes it clear that Nanny completely lacks a sense of individuality or personal identity because of her upbringing as a slave. Therefore, Jaine is forced to face the anxieties and demands of a grandmother whose attitudes towards life still reflected the experiences and ideologies of



named Janie Crawford. Janie never knew her mother or her father. She tells the story of her life and journey to her best friend, Pheoby Watson , so that Pheoby can tell Janie's story to the community to which she has just returned. Her life has three major periods corresponding to her marriages to three very different men and her departures from them. However, each of the three marriages is given a different quality and all stages of Janie's married life are described minutely and vividly .

Nanny, Janie's grandmother, had been a slave who became pregnant by her own owner and gave a birth to a daughter, Leafy. Though Nanny tries to create a good life for her daughter, Leafy is raped by her school teacher and she becomes pregnant with Janie. Shortly after Janie's birth, Leafy begins to drink and stay out at night. Eventually, she runs away leaving Janie with Nanny. Thus Janie was abandoned by her mother, so she was raised by her grandmother . Nanny transfers all the hopes she had for Leafy to Janie. Nanny loves her granddaughter, but her life as a slave and terrible experiences with her own daughter, Janie's mother, has warped her worldview with a strong concern for financial security and respectability . Erickson puts it this way :

s

Nanny is the product of a slave society in which the most that can be hoped for is escape from exploitation , and since

oppression in a sexist and racist society . She does so by means of her own artistic accomplishments, which she shares with her character Janie Crawford. The work has attracted varied attention since it was first published in 1937. June Jordan called it the greatest novel of Black love ever written. Alice Walker has explored its place in Hurston's presentation of herself as a role model for black women artists. A host of critics have discussed the significance of Janie as a black woman who creates herself in her own image ...Hurston's artistic method displays a keen awareness of the performative quality of fiction as it emerges from the tradition of oral narrative as well as a clever consciousness of the storyteller/a writer's role in constructing the history of a people through language. Her brilliant use of dialect, specifying pride and ownership, lends credibility to the novel's claim as a work for the black community. It is a testament to the power and beauty of blackness . ( 39-53 )

One can say that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is one of the most important works of fiction by a black female writer in the first half of the twentieth century and one of the most revealing treatments in modern American literature of a woman's search for satisfaction within herself, freedom, sexual autonomy, and personal identity. The novel traces the plight of the main character of the story, an African American woman



man ,educate their children and participate in social development . We say male supremacy is based on three things : tradition, acceptance , and reason . Equality is false ; it's the devil'sconcept . Our concept is complementary . (Halisi 27 )

Although she recognized physical and psychological oppression as a daily fact and experience of African American life, Hurston 's novels greatly focused more on what black people were doing for themselves than on what their oppressors were doing to them. However, she confronted black male sexism, and violence committed against black women within their black community. Also, she criticized black male leadership . To be sure, Hurston challenged the status quo in the cultural and political life of her community using her writing to present women who defy traditional roles and resist strictures of oppression and other human rights violation to find their way into society. One can say that Hurston wrote powerful literary works that were widely read and recognized by blacks and whites alike , which guaranteed her position as one of the most important women writers of the Harlem Renaissance . Elizebth Meese puts it this way:

Through her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* , Zora Neale Hurston presents a forceful resistance to black women's

**chauvinism: America or imperialism depending on your viewpoint and your terror . ( Cade 7 )**

**There is another comprehensive quotation in which Lorde shows that black women did not only accept their humiliating lot in life but they also engaged in acute and continued resistance in many ways :**

**Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken , distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible and so on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women's movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerabl , our Blackness and that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength . ( Lorde 42 )**

**Many black intellectuals also supported patriarchal roles for black women :**

**What makes a woman appealing is femininity and she can't be feminine without being submissive. A man has to be leader. There is no virtue in interdependence. Black women should remember this. The role of the woman is to inspire her**



three sources of oppression –that of being owned as a piece of property –it did not eliminate the other two sources : those caused by color and gender. “ (Good 131) Therefore, the internal struggle between black men and black women was influential and harmful inside the Black Arts Movement itself because the black males historically dominated writing, painting and music. Black men have also oppressed black women allowing them no voice on the political , social , or economic issues of their community . In any case , the struggle for the complete elimination of any and all forms of oppression and exploitation based upon race , economic status or gender has become the fundamental target of black women writers :

We are involved in a struggle for liberation : liberation from the exploitative and dehumanizing system of racism , from the manipulative control of a corporate society ; liberation from the constrictive norms of mainstream culture, from the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without reaction rather than from within creation. What characterizes the current movement of the 60s is a turning away from the larger society and a turning toward each other. Our art, protest, dialogue no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy ; white people , whiteness , or racism ; men , maleness , or

**An affirmation of the importance of Black women 's self-definition and self-valuation is the first key theme that pervades historical and contemporary statements of black feminism thought . Self-definition involves challenging the political knowledge –validation process that has resulted in externally-defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood. In contrast, self-valuation stresses the content of black women's self-definition – namely, replacing externally- derived images with authentic Black female images . When Black females choose to value those aspects of Afro-American womanhood that are stereotyped, ridiculed, and maligned (in academic scholarship and the popular media , they are actually questioning some of the basic ideas used to control dominated groups in general . ( Collins 177-178 )**

**Also , black female writers have seriously attempted to eliminate oppression created by gender discrimination inside the African American community itself and to achieve equal footing with black men . So , the tragedy of African American women comes from gender discrimination created by not only white men but also men of the same race : “ Black women's continued oppression is a result of not only oppression by white society but also the oppression and abuse by black men . So while the elimination of slavery may have officially ended one of their**

women who have succeeded in surviving slavery and sexual exploitation are actually referred to as the embodiments of strength and endurance . In reality , Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God is a good example in this direction. In her literary works , Hurston concerned herself mainly with the issues of nationalism , deep nostalgia for her roots and helped to expose the ill treatment of the suppressed and oppressed African American women at the hands of their oppressors . Undoubtedly , presenting different themes in her literature , such as the African American woman's search for personal identity , freedom and autonomy ; the bitterness of the struggle of black women in America to achieve political , economic and social success , she succeeded in giving the white dominated man personal portraits of what it meant to be a black female writer struggling with personal , cultural and national identity . She creates black women who are noble and contrary to the false stereotypes . However , in her literary works , Hurston attacks unrealistic and negative depictions , particularly those applied to the Black community . In this context , many black women writers have consistently rejected the falsification of their black female experience , thereby avoiding the negative stereotypes such falsification has often created in the white American female and black male literary tradition :



The racial stratification of the United States ensures that there are many communities in this country whose only exposure to black people is through the media. Media representations, as the only ones, form these people's conceptions of blacks. If there are a few blacks within these communities, they are anomalies, defying expectations. ( 1 )

Similarly, consider the following comprehensive quotation in which Alice Walker, one of the most renowned female black writers, lists many of the dominant and false stereotypes that have been applied to black women since slavery, including the most harmful one to their psyche :

Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in society. "the mule of the world, " because we have been handed the burdens and everyone else – everyone else- refused to carry. We have also been called " Matriarchs," "Superwomen, " and "Mean and Evil Bitches." Not to mention " Castraters " and " Sapphire's Mama . " (237)

Interestingly , the significance of the black woman's struggle to assert control over her life under the white hegemony and American slavery is remarkable . The Black



**culture became her vocation. .. Hurston contributed to the Harlem Renaissance by demonstrating the power of Black folk culture and language. In her short stories and novels , as well as in her staging of authentic Black musicals , Black folklore and lifestyle showed its power and dignity to the world ... Hurston's most famous and best novel is Their Eyes Were Watching God. Equally important is Hurston's use of black folk culture. Much of the beauty of the novel's language comes from Hurston's reproduction of the idioms and the figures of southern black speech . ( 2-3 )**

**Again, as a consequence of slavery , the identity crisis is one of the most dangerous and tragic problems inside the American community. African Americans have been subordinated, marginalized and devalued in every possible manner in a white dominated order and racial hierarchy of American society. Therefore, they have struggled hard to restore their identity within a common culture. Moreover , the Western media and American movies unjustly helped so much in supporting and creating negative images and stereotypes about the black man and woman which have actually become a reality to the white dominated population inside United States in particular and Europe in general. Anderson declares :**



not seen as being part of the society or worthy of acceptance even after slavery was banned...African American English has been the object of scorn so that numerous black students consider AAE as bad English. "(Karvonen 9) On the other hand , Hurston's deep interest in and her wide concern with this language is a strong indication of the importance, greatness, and size of this language: "The first text is from a book Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston . This book was written in 1937 and only the dialogue is written in African American English. "(12) To be clear, the images, the dialogues, and the words employed by Hurston played an important part in intensifying the reality and authenticity of her fiction. Engebretsen affirms :

In Eatonville, the spirituals , tales , and speech rhythms of Black folk culture formed the very atmosphere that gave Hurston life, and she experienced that culture with few reminders that the white community (and educated Blacks ,for that matter) looked down on it as inferior or, at best, primitive. But to Hurston, Br'er Rabbit and Sis Chicken, John and Old Master, and the lying session on Joe Clarck's store porch remained expressions of a dynamic culture. And when, after a long struggle to educate herself, Hurston graduated from Barnard College in anthropology, Black folk



**more contemporary understanding of the term ... Outside of these overt markets for sex , most enslaved women and girls were purchased primarily for their productive labor in the fields or plantation house , but also were expected to have sexual relations with various men (their master , his sons ,or male relatives , visitors overseers , enslaved men) on the plantation as well . Whether in sex markets or “productive “ones , every sale of an enslaved woman was a sale of sexual labor or at least of the right to compel it . Sex was part and parcel of what was expected and coerced from women in the enslaved workforce . (Davis 3-4)**

**There is another and more revealing quotation :**

**Racist exploitation of black women as workers either in the fields or domestic household was not as de-humanizing or demoralizing as the sexual exploitation ... The female slaved lived in constant awareness of her sexual vulnerability and in perpetual fear that any male, white or black, might single her out to assault and victimize .( Hooks 24)**

**Also, slavery has created a wide gap between the language of slaves and the language of their white owners. The white man also has practiced and continue to practice cultural discrimination and hatred against their language:” Blacks were**



black women experienced various kinds of oppression discrimination inside white America according to the stereotypes that have been imposed upon them through past history . They were not allowed the protections that were accorded to white women . They were expected to work hard for the slave owner and to maintain their own homes as well. More importantly , slavery was one of the most extraordinary factors behind the appearance of gender hierarchy and sexual harassment in U. S . history . White men not only practiced sexual atrocities and violence against enslaved women as individuals , that had been a central feature of their oppression as slaves , but also as a tool of racial terror and political authority as well . Many critics admit that :

Slavery also extracted sexual labor from enslaved women . Enslaved women found themselves coerced , blackmailed , induced , seduced , ordered and , of course , violently forced to have sexual relation with men . Sexual access was enforced through a variety of structural mechanisms . Most overtly , the South established markets that sold enslaved women for the explicit purpose of sex . In so called “ fancy girl “ markets ,principally in southern port cities. , enslaved women could be bought to serve as the sexual “concubine “ of one man , or to be prostituted in the



education ... After a short story, "Drenched in Light ," appeared in the New York African American magazine Opportunity, she decided to move to Harlem and pursue a literary career there ... Hurston's work was no entirely popular with the male intellectual leaders of the Harlem community . She quarreled especially with Langston Hughes, refusing to align her work with anybody's ideologies ;she rejected the idea that a black writer's chief concern should be how blacks were being portrayed to the white reader ... and Their Eyes Were Watching God in 1937 . This novel about an African American 's quest for selfhood has become a popular and critical favorite , both a woman's story , and a descriptive critique of southern vAfrican American folk society, showing its divisions and diversity . ( Baym 2096-2097 )

The history of the African American woman largely reveals her predicament within the dominant culture as a victim of oppression , racism , classism , racism and sexism respectively . But , forms of domination and discrimination inside America were completely ignored by the white man . Consequently , most white writers had erased slavery and racism from the history of America . To be concise , due to the legacy and painful results of slavery , racism and discrimination , African American women suffered from economic , educational , and social disadvantages in many areas relative to European Americans . Additionally ,

female contemporaries was powerful and unique : “ In the opening chapter of her book *In Search of Our Mothers's Gardens* , Alice Walker explains the necessity of having a forerunner or model in order to write ... this search allowed her to find out about and meet her foremother , Zora Neale Hurston . “ ( Weyer 55-56 ) In fact , self – determination is one of the major components of Hurston's writing despite the harsh reality of race and gender oppression in a segregated society . Hurston succeeded greatly in showing the negative effects of slavery , physical and psychological violence , gender discrimination , and inhuman oppression on the social position and psyche of African American women . According to many critics , Hurston believed that she had a moral obligation to her black community . and that obligation was completely fulfilled in her work as an outstanding novelist , anthropologist , critic , folklorist and in her everyday life :

Zora Neale Hurston was born in 1891 in Eatonville , Florida, an all –black town ... With her mother's death , Hurston's wanderings and her initiation into American racism began . The early security had given her the core of self-confidence she needed to survive . She moved from one relative's home to another until she was old enough to support herself , and with her earnings she began slowly to pursue an

The purpose of this paper is to trace and enlighten the readers about the oppression and the suffering of black women as reflected in the African American writer Zora Neale Hurston's novel , *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) . Hurston ( 1891- 1960 ) was one of most influential of black American writers during the twentieth century . Hurston was born and lived in a time in which several developments took place that influenced black experiences . It was a time marked by the collapse of former political civil rights , an increase of racial violence and the spread of pseudo-scientific theories of racism inside the American community . Undoubtedly, Hurston contributed significantly to African American literature and criticism , particularly in her insistence that female writers should be allowed the greatest possible freedom in presenting their own views inside a white and black male dominated society. Hurston and a group of young black writers produced a literary magazine called *Fire* in 1926 . She wrote *Jonah's Gourd Vine* ( 1934 ) , *Mules and Men* ( 1934 ) , *Tell My Horse* ( 1938 ) , *Moses* , *Man of the Mountain* in 1939 , *Dust Tracks on a Road* ( 1942 ) , *Seraph on the Suwanee* was published in 1948 , *I Love My Self When I am Laughing ... and Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive*( 1979 ) . Also, she wrote *Under the Bridge*, *Sweat*, *Spunk* and *The Gilded Six Bits* ( short stories ) . Also , Hurston's literary influence on her





**The Oppression Of The African American  
Woman  
As Reflected In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their  
Eyes Were Watching God***

**By**

**Dr . Abdel Raouf Abul Adab Al-Naggar Gebaly  
Lecturer of English Literature,  
Assuit University**

