



Eco-Spirituality and Healing in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

ABSTRACT

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston is considered a masterpiece of African-American literature and is praised for its depiction of self-fulfillment and black womanhood. It explores themes of race, gender, identity, and love, and presents a complex portrayal of the experiences of black women in the early 20th century. Rather than promoting traditional gender roles and white male dominance, the novel challenges and subverts these norms and differences as a basis for discrimination or prejudice. Janie Crawford, the main protagonist of the novel, defies conventional gender roles and expectations for women, in particular black women. Her rejection of conformity to conventions and her dedication to the quest for happiness make her a pioneering character in literature.

This study aims to draw a triangle between nature, black womanhood and self-realization in the work of Hurston within black feminist ecological thought. Black women, historically, have been expected to shoulder the burdens of racism and sexism while often being marginalized or ignored by both the black and white communities. This lifestyle profoundly shapes individuals' outlooks and their strategies for comprehending and managing life. Hurston skillfully employs natural imagery, including references to the mule, pear tree, blossoming, and horizon, to convey a dual message. On one hand, these images poignantly illustrate the dehumanizing and oppressive hardships endured by black women. On the other hand, they symbolize the hopes and aspirations essential for the pursuit of love and a fulfilling life with the help of natural healing.

Keywords: Black womanhood, Black feminist ecological thought, Nature, Self-fulfillment, Zora Neale Hurston.

INTRODUCTION

When *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was released in 1937, it drew favorable critical reviews from white critics, who recognized it as an authentic portrayal of southern blacks. The novel has also been acclaimed by African-Americans for its celebration of black culture and language, and by feminists for its depiction of a woman's struggle for self-knowledge and self-realization. The novel's achievement is due to Hurston's extensive knowledge of black folklore and language in the rural south, gained through her work as an anthropologist, and her skillful use of metaphor to reflect the rich cultural heritage of African Americans. It tells the story of Janie Crawford, a young black woman searching for genuine happiness and meaning beyond conventionality. Janie's journey is a quest for a better life, much like Hurston's own journey, as she ventures toward the horizon in search of new possibilities.

For many Black women readers, Janie Crawford represents a radical departure from the often limited and stereotypical depictions of black women in literature. Janie's intricacy, agency and ability to forge her path resonates deeply and offers a more empowering and relatable portrayal. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* remains an important work of African-American literature for its depiction of Janie's journey of self-fulfillment and independence. In her autobiography, she wrote: "I had stifled longing. I used to climb to the top of one of the huge chinaaberry trees which guarded our front gate and look out over the world. The most interesting thing that I saw was the horizon. It grew upon me that I ought to walk out to the horizon and see what the end of the world was like" (Hurston, 1991: 27).

The paramount consideration when contemplating Hurston is her literary genius, transcending gender and ethnicity, despite her identity as a woman and an African-American. Walker wrote: "Zora would have been Zora even if she'd been an Eskimo" (Hurston&Washington, 1979: 3). The very essence of Zora Neale Hurston's personality and identity was so distinctive and unparalleled that it would have remained unchanged regardless of her cultural or ethnic origin. In other terms, it stresses the idea that her personality, spirit, and individuality were not merely defined by her racial or cultural identity. Hurston expresses this situation when she declares in her essay *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* in 1928, at certain times I have no race, I AM ME. For Hurston, it was important to recognize and celebrate the diversity and richness of different cultures.

The study will concentrate on analyzing the convergence of three core notions: nature, Black womanhood, and self-realization from the standpoint of black feminist ecological thought in light of the work of Zora Neale Hurston. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston masterfully employs both direct and indirect quotations to show the complex relationships between slavery, nature, and self-actualization in the lives of black female characters like Janie

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and Nanny. These themes act as strong lenses through which to explore the novel's themes of identity, freedom, and empowerment.

Black feminist ecological thought is a framework that combines black feminism and ecological tenets to raise issues concerning environmental and social justice and the convergence of race, gender, and environmentalism. In her 'manifesto' scholar Chelsea Mikael Frazier defines black feminist ecological thought as follows:

Black Feminist Ecological Thought emphasizes the importance of recognizing this kind of novel as being both Ecological Art and Black Feminist Art simultaneously. Black Feminist Ecological Thought also illuminates the reasons why it is important for us to interweave both perspectives in order to discern the transformative potential of the text. In this case, the transformative potential being: the ecological harms of misogynoir and anti-Indigeneity affect Black women extremely intensely, and those effects also guarantee a despairing destruction for all directly responsible and/or indirectly complicit (Mikael Frazier, 2010).

Thus, black feminist ecological thought puts the voices and viewpoints of black women at the center and affirms the interconnectedness of systems of oppression and exploitation. Embracing nature wholeheartedly without any hesitation and enjoying the rhythm of life has a healing role in the self-fulfilment of Janie. Being with nature is a way of recovering from the trauma of social injustices. As Thoreau says in *Walden or Life in the Woods*;

[...] We need the tonic of wildness,—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed, and unfathomed by us because unfathomable (Thoreau, 2004: 259).

The intersection of nature and Black feminism entails examining how issues of race, gender and social justice are intertwined with environmental concerns. It spans a range of issues from environmental racism to spirituality, activism, and cultural engagements with the natural world. This intersectional perspective sheds light on the unique experiences and contributions of Black women in environmental and ecological discourse.

Representation of Nature

The relationship between women and nature in literature is a deep and intricate subject that keeps flourishing with shifting cultural points of view and prevailing societal norms. It provides a lens through which writers explore gender, identity, power, and the human connection to the natural world. Writers frequently invoke nature as a common symbolic metaphor to illustrate women's experiences and feelings. Female characters can take shelter in natural surroundings where they can contemplate, connect with their senses, or gain insight. Nature is seen as a space where women can flee from societal constraints.

Interrelated with literature, mythology, and folklore traditionally depict female figures closely linked to natural elements and phenomena. These narratives mirror underlying cultural convictions about the interdependence of women and the natural world. King expresses "a woman in touch with nature on an elemental, organic level, and for whom the desire for the sexual and other experiences that will shape her identity is as natural as the trees, flowers, and even the hurricane she experiences in the Everglades" (King, 2008: 60). She considers the experiences she pursues as an intrinsic part of her identity, not separated from it. She recognizes that these experiences will enable her to thrive and self-discover herself, just as the processes of nature shape the world around her.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a narrative deeply ingrained in the concept of the recurring cycles of life. Janie's life experiences and the struggles she faces are symbolic of the varied cycles she witnesses. These cycles often correspond to the onset of each new relationship that Janie embarks on. Each relationship, be it marriage or any other bond, develops like the figurative pear tree of Janie's youth - blossoming and eventually disappearing, reflecting the phases of Janie's life journey. To Washington, "Hurston uses two images from nature to symbolize Janie's quest: the horizon and the blossoming pear tree" (Washington, 1979: 15). To Barr, "these are fundamental images about the Isis-Osiris myth. The horizon represents Isis's double quest, once when her husband is murdered and again when the body is dismembered. And the tree encases his body" (Barr, 2002: 108). In the same text it is mentioned that in terms of the myth, Isis is called the "sorrowing wife" and "Protectress of the Dead" (Viaud, 1968: 9). Just like her, Janie is described as follows: "So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead [...] She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgement" (TEWG: 7). In Egyptian mythology, Isis is often connected with resurrection, rebirth and the cycle of life and death. She is

also regarded as a strong and nourishing mother figure. Making a parallel between Janie and Isis can be understood as a way of interpreting Janie's journey in the novel.

Janie's pre-marital existence finds its core under the spreading branches of her pear tree. This tree is her only source of solace and optimism in the confines of her desolate life. In this private space, she creates an inner shrine for herself, where the vivid imagery of the flourishing pear tree and the distant horizon become haunting symbols of hope. In moments of depression, she keeps her silence patiently and retreats into her inner world, where she finds solace.

She seeks inspiration, comfort, and healing in nature. Trees act as "launching points for stages of Janie's life" (Sivils, 2006: 95). As Patty Kuhel notes "even her mother's name, Leafy, is connected to trees" (Kuhel, 1990: 48). And as for the relation between nature and woman within mythology, Neuman describes "blossom and tree" as "archetypal places of mythical birth" (Neuman, 2015: 241). These images are archetypal, in the sense that they are of a profound, universal significance across cultures and periods.

Janie's granny is the earliest blossom on her tree of life, having raised her from a young age. In many ways, her grandmother plays the role of a gardener, diligently pruning and shaping the path of her beloved granddaughter. She strives to instill in Janie a deep belief in the institution of marriage, deeming it the only means by which she can prosper in this world. What Nanny cannot comprehend is Janie's inherent potential to make her way in life. This helplessness on Nanny's part is deeply rooted in the continuing trauma of the terrible inheritance of slavery. Slavery is an irresistible situation that deprives individuals of their essential rights and fundamental freedoms. Slaves are voiceless, their actions are constrained and they are constantly haunted by the traces of their past. The deep emotional scars of slavery can force individuals to make difficult choices, including actions that may harm others, to protect loved ones from the same fate. For this reason, she forces Janie to marry Logan, a sheltering tree she thinks it will protect her granddaughter.

This situation is strikingly illustrated with the characters such as the protagonist, Janie, and her grandmother, Nanny, in the novel. Sixteen-year-old Janie often sits under a flourishing pear tree and is deeply stirred by memories of a bountiful spring. One day, captured in the ambiance of her rising sexuality, she kisses a boy called Johnny Taylor. It symbolizes sexual and emotional fulfillment of Janie and which represents her sexual awakening. When Nanny catches Janie with Johnny, she determines to settle a marriage with Logan Killicks, a prosperous middle-aged man. She informs Janie of this decision not in a reproachful but in a sad tone. Nannie's expression resembles the exposed roots of a weathered tree whose once sturdy base has lost its significance, as well as the ancient strength it no longer possesses. The comparison of Nannie's appearance with the strong roots of a tree severed after a storm is highly symbolic. It implies that Nanny's appearance bears the marks of time, experience and perhaps hardship. The phrases "old tree" and "storm-torn" imply a sense of endurance and resilience. The phrase "that had no longer mattered" hints that this power may have lost its significance or relevance in the modern context. This could suggest a sense of nostalgia or a changing world where traditional values or wisdom may be fading.

Before she dies, she wants to see Janie in a safe situation that Logan Killicks can ensure. They get married against all odds, and during their marriage, Janie comes back to the pear tree to seek guidance in dealing with a bad marriage, but it is the end of her childhood:

She knew the world was a stallion rolling in the blue pasture of ether. She knew that God toed down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up. It was wonderful to see it take form with the sun and emerge fro the gray dust of its making. The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off. She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so became a woman (TEWG: 28).

Interwoven throughout the novel is Janie's journey into womanhood and self-discovery, linked to her connection with the natural world. Her search for love and self-realization leads her down a path of self-discovery and empowerment, and the pear tree serves as a recurring motif to show this transition. Janie's bond with the blossoming pear tree is one of the most important moments in the novel and marks Janie's awakening and the dawn of her journey to find her inner self: "It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery [...] It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness" (TEWG: 16).

The pear tree is a symbol of resilience. While its blossoms, leaves and fruits blossom, fade and perish in their own time, the steadfast foundation of its roots, trunk and branches endure, waiting patiently for the next spring to come and set the whole cycle in motion all over again. Janie finally contemplates her path in isolation, seeking her life ambitions that are distinct from her granny's singular vision of married life. In time she uncovers her true destiny,

and like the cyclical marvel of the pear tree, she is witnessed once again by the blooming of her inner aspirations and ambitions.

She 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; a 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. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid (TEWG: 16).

The visuals convey a sense of wholeness by paralleling the act of bees dusting flowers with human carnal integrity. Janie perceives this sense of unity to be absent in her marriages to Logan Killicks and Joe Starks. Finally, however, she locates it in her relationship with Tea Cake. The image of love Janie sees through the pear tree guides her on a lifelong quest for love and fulfillment.

After a while, she got from where she was and went over the little garden field entire. She was seeking confirmation of the voice and vision, and everywhere she found and acknowledged answers. A personal answer for all other creations except herself. She felt an answer seeking her, but where? When? How? She found herself in the kitchen and stumbled inside. In the air of the room were flies tumbling and singing marrying and giving in marriage. When she reached the narrow hallway she was reminded that her grandmother was home with a sick headache. She was lying across the bed asleep so Janie tipped on out of the front door. Oh to be a pear tree- any tree in bloom! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? Nothing on the place nor in her grandma's house answered her. She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made (TEWG: 17).

Janie has a connection with nature and a sense of intuition or spiritual understanding. She moves through different seasons and times in her life and during this time she is in tune with the natural world surrounding her. She discerns a kind of wisdom or communication in the natural components, such as the words of the trees and the wind. This points to a deep, almost mystical connection with nature and the ability to comprehend or empathize with the natural world on a subtle level.

So Janie waited a bloom time, a green time, and an orange time. But when the pollen again gilded the sun and sifted down on the world she began to stand around expecting things [...] She knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind. She often spoke to falling seeds and said, "Ah hope you fall on soft ground," because she had heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed (TEWG: 28).

Janie's ability to be empathetic to the dropping seeds and hope that they fall on soft ground represents her compassionate and nurturing nature, as well as her desire for positive consequences and growth. Throughout the novel, Janie's engagement with nature and her soulful journey are repeated themes that contribute to character development and the overall narrative.

Janie's granny remains anonymous and is simply known by Janie as Nanny, a title taken from the names of the white children she fosters. Nanny was raised in the harsh constraints of slavery and recounts her life story to Janie when the girl was sixteen. Nanny's adventures make sorrowfully clear the dangers to which an appealing woman can be exposed. Her child, Leafy, is the victim of the undesired attentions of a white male master. Fearing the ferocious treatment promised by her mistress, Nanny escapes from the plantation. She soon begins to undergo the exhilaration of emancipation and finds a place in Florida where she can earn a living, work and raise her daughter. Nanny hopes Leafy will eventually become a teacher, but this hope is disappointed when Leafy falls victim to a tragic destiny: she is raped, paradoxically by the town's teacher, who deserts both mother and child.

Nigger, whut's yo' baby doin' wid gray eyes and yaller hair? She begins tuh slap mah jaws ever which a'way. Ah never felt the fust ones 'cause Ah wuz too busy gitting' de kivver back over mah chile. But dem last lick burnt me lak fire. Ah bad too many feelin's tuh tell which one tuh follow so Ah didn't cry and Ah didn't do nothin' else. But then she kept on astinme how come mah baby look white. She asted me dat maybe twenty- five or thirty times, lak she got tuh sayin' dat and

couldn't help herself. So Ah told her, Ah don't know nothin' but what Ah' m told tuh do, 'cause Ah ain't nothin' but uh nigger and uh slave (TEWG: 22).

When Janie turns to her to question her about the nature of love in marriage, Nanny finds no response. She has never encountered this kind of love in her own life. Nanny believes that Logan Killicks can give Janie the security she needs. The love Janie seeks is not a high priority in Nanny's eyes. Sadly, Nanny dies only a month after their discussion, leaving Janie alone and without affection. She only seeks the comfort of sitting without anything, and she wants her granddaughter to experience it. Besides, in her opinion, Janie should have prestige in society. She is voiceless, deaf, and blind as the other black people are. To say bluntly, she is like a mule. She works as if she is in the body and soul of the animal.

An important central thematic image of the novel pertains to the laboring men and women, drawing parallels to the hardship of the mules. The men, who have worked hard all day, feel that they are mistreated like mules as they work. It is only at the end of the day, when they enjoy their free time on the porch, that they recapture their sense of humanity. Hurston's portrayal of the mule reflects a short pause for breath at the end of his life, mirroring the desperately needed rest that hard-working men and women, often juxtaposed with mules, enjoy at the end of their exhausting day's work. Janie's grandmother takes the initiative in making this ill-fated comparison between black women and mules, and makes a troubling allegation: "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. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!" (TEWG: 19).

Further, Janie's first two husbands both own mules, and their treatment of these animals reflects their treatment of Janie. Logan Killicks imposes hard labor on his mule, while Joe Starks, after purchasing Matt Bonner's mule, abandons it to the pasture as a symbol of status rather than putting it to work. Bonner's mule also represents abuse and treachery, a feeling that perhaps echoes with Janie because she has been physically abused, although primarily emotionally rather than physically. Irrespective of the type of abuse they both suffer, the mule serves as a moving symbol of the abuse Janie is forced to endure in her marriage to Joe. Like African American women, African American men have a history of being discriminated against and maltreated in the United States. Throughout American history, African American men have also experienced various forms of systemic racism, including slavery, segregation, racial violence, and unequal treatment before the law. Richard Majors states:

Historically, racism and discrimination have inflicted a variety of harsh injustices on African-Americans in the United States, especially on males. Being male and black has meant being psychologically castrated—rendered impotent in the economic, political, and social arenas that whites have historically dominated. Black men learned long ago that the classic American virtues of thrift, perseverance, and hard work did not give them the same tangible rewards that accrued to whites (Majors, 2014:1).

Janie sees her life as a great tree in leaves with the things she has suffered, things she has enjoyed, things she has done and undone. Dawn and doom are in the branches. She is a mulatto. She has not seen her father, and her mother has left her. She has been raised by her grandmother and the white people she works with. She and the white children were always together while playing; therefore, she could realize that she was black at just six. Everybody made fun of her and it was unbearable to see her granddaughter in that position, so she thought that if they had had a house belonging to them, everything would have been better. As the typical bildungsroman depicts the heroine's journey from a state of ignorance to self-awareness, Janie's discovery of her "blackness" is a required step in this progression.

Another turning point in Janie's character development is her increasing self-awareness and her realization that she desires more from life than what she has had in her marriage to Jody. It sets the stage for her journey of self-discovery and she searches for a more authentic and fulfilling life. Janie understands that her relationship with Jody is not as rewarding as she had anticipated. She had suppressed her thoughts and emotions, kept them hidden from Jody, and sacrificed her desires and wishes. She was saving her true feelings for a man she had not yet met, a man who could truly appreciate and understand her for who she was. In this passage, the main character, Janie, has a moment of self-realization and reflection about her marriage to Jody (Joe) Starks.

Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over. In a way, she turned her back upon the image where it lay and looked further. She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings

for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them (TEWG: 68).

In sum, Janie's path in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is defined by self-discovery and self-realization. Despite the tragic ending in which she is forced to kill her husband Tea Cake in self-defense, she returns to Eatonville alone, but she feels accomplished and satisfied because she is married for love. This marriage to Tea Cake gives her real insight and the freedom of speech denied to her by her previous husbands. Janie has experienced significant self-development, shifting from a state of submission and silence to a rediscovered freedom of speech and action. She demonstrates bravery and strength when she kills Tea Cake in self-defense and later when she uses her voice to advocate for herself in front of a white judge and jury. These actions allow her to gain her independence and ultimately triumph over societal restrictions.

Conclusion

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a richly layered novel that explores many themes related to race, gender, and class in the rural South during the early 20th century. Hurston's use of dialect and vivid imagery immerses the reader in the lives of her characters and provides a nuanced perspective on the experiences of African Americans during this period. The novel's focus on Janie's journey toward self-discovery and fulfillment also highlights the importance of individual agency and the struggle for autonomy within a system of oppression.

Her journey is a testimony to her perseverance and steadfastness in her pursuit to break free from patriarchal restrictions and search for fulfillment, love, and self-exploration on her terms. Her story functions as a powerful revelation about gender roles and societal aspirations. She is characterized not only by her interactions with men but as an empowered individual with her hopes and aspirations. Janie's self-reliance is evident in her pursuit of love and happiness on her terms. She is prepared to leave behind comfort and security in search of her true self and a fulfilling life. This independence sets her apart from many female characters who can be portrayed as dependent on others.

Nanny, Janie's grandmother, who has a desire for Janie to marry for security and stability tries to manipulate her. Yet, Nanny's desire is ultimately shown to be flawed and misguided. Considering Nanny's hard efforts and thoughts to persuade and intimidate Janie about marriage and obedience to men, it can be concluded that the legacy of slavery and its impact on black families and relationships extends beyond the era of legal enslavement. Even after slavery was abolished, black families continued to face systemic barriers to economic and social mobility that have had lasting effects on family structures and relationships. It is clear that race, class, and gender have all played significant roles in shaping the experiences of black families and relationships, and that these issues continue to be important areas of study and social concern today.

Fortunately, Janie can unchain her heart from those ingrained senses of heritage through nature. She has a mindful engagement with nature as a means of self-discovery and transcendence. It can be inferred that the pear tree image also helps us to understand Janie's overall position as a woman in touch with nature on an elemental, organic level. For Janie, the desire for the sexual and other experiences that will shape her identity is as natural as the trees, and flowers. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, black feminist ecological thought can be read through Janie Crawford's journey of self-realization. Hurston, through the character of Janie, emphasizes that being in unity with nature plays a healing role in the process of finding racial and cultural identity for the African-American community.

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