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### **Is “Their Eyes Were Watching God” a Feminist Novel?**

In addition to such an important problem as racial inequality, in her novel “Their Eyes Were Watching God” Z. N. Hurston touches upon quite a controversial issue – the role of woman in society. Throughout the whole novel, the reader observes the process of the main character's personal development – her continuous struggle for happiness that involves experiencing the confrontation between her ideals and harsh reality, her attempts to survive under the pressure of hypocritical social norms, and her efforts to assume complete responsibility for her own life. Janie is in constant search of new horizons – in other words, of limitless freedom and true love. Therefore, this novel may be treated as a feminist one as the main idea consists in justifying women's right to pursue happiness despite their gender.

Janie's development is tightly connected to her relationships with men and to her understanding of the notion of love. In Janie's interpretation, love may be defined as a powerful, even sacred, force that determines one's psychological growth. Each relationship experience, which she has had, performs a valuable function of an impulse that leads her to the next stage of her personal development. Janie perceives love as a changeable phenomenon: “Love is like sea. It's a moving thing... it takes its shape from the shore it meets” (Hurston). Each of her relationships differs from the previous one as she gains more experience and realizes her own

desires. For Janie love is not a state. It is rather a process that gives her an opportunity to become more mature by means of making constant efforts to find herself.

Janie's first marriage is initiated by her grandmother who, due to her own unhappy experience in slavery, strongly believes that financial wealth and social status are the only necessary conditions for a person to be happy. This principle is imposed on Janie, and as she is too young, she acts according to her grandmother's wish since she has no other choice. However, even at this stage, it is evident that Janie's own views on marriage differ from Nanny's: she expresses her protest against marrying Logan. For Janie, money is not a decisive factor while choosing a husband: her ideal is someone physically attractive and someone with whom she may have an emotional attachment. Although Nanny accuses her of being naïve and careless, in fact, Janie is already able to make an independent judgment; in her system of values, wealth does not play the leading role. It is not surprising that she willingly abandons Logan at the first opportunity.

For Janie, her next husband, Joe Starks, symbolizes new horizons, which she dreams to reach. She nourishes her hopes for a better life in which she can express herself in love to her husband. However, once again, she confronts social norms that require her to be not a personality but a wife. Due to his faith in a strict social order, Joe not only treats Janie as inferior, but also limits her communication with other people whom he himself considers to be unworthy since they occupy lower positions on a social ladder. His authority over Janie makes her feel imprisoned, makes her suppress her feelings and forget her dreams, and this definitely contradicts her nature. Still, she does not refuse to conform to her husband: she does not deliver a speech; she does not attend the mule's funeral; she wears a head-rag etc.

The situation is paradoxical. On the one hand, Janie demonstrates total subordination to her husband obediently following his orders and in this way accepting her inferior position. It may seem that she has already reconciled herself to her role of a submissive wife who is nothing more than her husband's shadow. However, it is an erroneous impression; on the contrary, Janie's silence may be interpreted as the expression of her dignity and strength: "She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them" (Hurston). Having already reached such an inner state when she feels self-confidence and self-respect, now she decides herself how to behave; as B. Smith indicates, "She continues to make an outward show of obedience to Joe while she nurtures and protects her innermost self" (Smith). Therefore, her silence is not imposed on her by any external force – it is her own choice. And it is her own choice to put an end to her silence. When she feels she cannot bear such an attitude anymore, she allows herself to express her indignation: "In confronting Joe she publicly exposes the ineffectiveness of his masculine authority" (Smith). Joe's death liberates her from her sufferings; now, free from her husband's control, she removes her head-rag, which symbolizes her emotional liberation.

Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is drastically different. For her, this man is the embodiment of her dreams since what he offers is freedom and respect – something she has always expected from men but what she still has not received. In addition, he respects her not only as a woman but also as a human being, not undermining the importance of her personality. Although Tea Cake is of lower social status, Janie does not pay attention to the gossip; she feels that this man is the one whose image she has seen in her dreams, the one who can help her release her emotions and finally reach the horizon: "Janie looked down on him and felt a self-

crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place” (Hurston). His love makes her free, not imprisoned, and she feels truly happy, for the first time in her life.

In her struggle for happiness, Janie realizes that “...for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you....” (Hurston): there is always some space left for further development – moral, psychological development that allows her to feel self-respect and inner peace. Having gone through her relationships with men, now she clearly knows that what she has been searching for is understanding and recognition. Definitely, she is a strong character – she is one of those women who “forget all the things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget” (Hurston), who are not afraid to challenge themselves and the society which they belong to.

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**Works Cited**

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1998. Web. 11 Dec. 2015.

Smith, Brenda R. "Voodoo Imagery, Modern Mythology and Female Empowerment in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Serving the Spirits: Women & Voodoo in Literature and Popular Culture* (2008): n. pag. Web. 11 Dec. 2015.

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