

BEHIND THE MASK OF CONFORMITY CONSCIOUS RESISTANCE IN *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

Sepideh Hozhabrossadat
Shahid Chamran University,
Ahvaz, Iran

Abstract

Resistance has many different interpretations and manifestations. Zora Neale Hurston, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, represented a black woman in a patriarchal society. This protagonist, Janie, decides not to conform but to resist. This resistance takes a lot of forms and manifestations in both physical and internal worlds. In this study, the aim is to show that Black women, including Janie live two lives, one in the patriarchal society and one for themselves. This double life is called double consciousness.

Key words: Psychology, Feminism, Black, Consciousness, Suppression, Power, community

We are all familiar with the famous theories of Freud, especially his oedipal stage. As the theory goes, the child experiences no difference between itself and the world. Following this stage, there is the awareness that the world around is different from itself, that is child and the same old story about castration and the processes which lead to the formation of the superego, id and ego. Feminism used these concepts to map the formation of identity in women. According to Freud, girls see that their mothers are castrated and the power is in their father, so consequently they are attracted to their fathers or better to say to patriarchal society. However, girls, do not lose their affinity with their mothers. That's why, they are less individuated than boys; meaning that, their identity is fluid. In both cases, "the passage through the Oedipal stage creates a gendered ego structure, which means that throughout life, how we experience ourselves is inseparable from how we experience our sexuality: 'I' is then always a gendered term."¹

But to make this statement more clear, we should notice that feminists followed Lacan more often than Freud. Lacan introduces a stage which is pre-Oedipal, called the imaginary order in which there is no difference and no language to express and explain the experience of difference between self and the outside world. The next level is Oedipal stage and later post-Oedipal stage, in which the subject enters the symbolic order. The symbolic order is another term

¹ Deborah L. Madsen, *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice* (London: Pluto Press, 2000) 106.

for acquiring the language of the father, and entering the realm of law, order, reason and social relations. The unconscious is born from a lack felt as a result of leaving the imaginary order. The patriarchal Symbolic Order is associated with "singularity, unicity, symmetry and sameness; the feminine Imaginary Order is associated with multiplicity, difference and asymmetry." ²

Hereby, I would like to argue that Janie, the main protagonist of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, actually did pass from the imaginary to the symbolic order. ³ Janie didn't see her father and can't remember much of her mother. All she ever had was Nanny, her grandmother. But, there are two worlds in her life; one is the world of the pear tree and the other the world of her marriages. If we consider the world of pear tree as her imaginary stage of life, then we may ascribe the symbolic order to her marriages. She enters the symbolic order in which, women are defined by men as an object of exchange.

Male identity, for the most part, is formed in relation to the world and female identity in relation to others. This shows that women care about others and include them in the process of their identity formation. Consequently, women have a fluid identity, one in which, there are multiple others in oneself. As it is mentioned in previous part, Janie has an exterior and interior existence. Diana Miles refers to a concept by Freud that is "what is inside the psyche is the meditation of the outside through desire, repression and so on. In trauma, there is an incomprehensible outside of the self that has already gone inside without the self's meditation." Miles believes that this interior/exterior space should be read as a kind of split that split off "a traumatic memory from the rest of consciousness." ⁴

I would like to argue that Janie reacts to her exterior self by recognizing the patriarchal society and finding the means for survival, but at the same time she reacts to her interior self by searching new meanings, rejecting oppression and looking for new interpretations or better to say finding what she really is inside. Behind the mask of behavioral conformity imposed on African-American women, acts of resistance have long existed. Black women, including Janie live two lives, one in the patriarchal society and one for themselves.

Janie's courage and endurance in her personal struggle against male domination made her a role model for a liberated black woman. "For the first time in black literature, we feel the growing up of a black girl, not from without but from within." ⁵

Resistance can show itself in the form of escapes. Whenever the physical escape is impossible for Janie, she strives for the psychological escape; it is interesting to notice that "one of the first internal escapes arises in Janie's first marriage when she learns to feel anger but not express it." ⁶

During her first marriage to Logan Killicks this inner/outside self best represents itself in the final moments of their shared life together. When Logan decides to buy another mule, so that

² Madsen, 107.

³ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1990) 1.

Hereafter referred to as *Their Eyes* and in parentheses as TE followed by page number.

⁴ Diana Frances Miles. *Women, Violence and Testimony in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston*, diss. (Georgia State University United States, 2000)129130.

⁵ Sieglinde Lemke, *The Vernacular matters of American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)104.

⁶ Judith Marie Lofflin, *American Freedom Story: A Journey from Adventures of Huckleberry Finn to The Secret Life of Bees* Diss. (University of Kansas: 2009) 117.

Janie works on the land side by side, Logan, she remembers Nanny's words about the mule. Although she hates this business, she keeps her inner emotions. I believe that because her inner emotions shatter, she gains the ability to escape inwardly. The first manifestations of developing a voice come into Janie's first marriage to Logan, and here she seems to develop a defiant voice about what she wants to be. When Logan tells Janie, "if Ah kin haul de wood heah and chop it fuh yuh, look lak you oughta be able tuh tote it inside. Mah fust wife never bothered me 'bout choppin' no wood nohow. She'd grab dat ax and sling chips lak uh man. You done been spoilt rotten" (TE, 25)

Her first marriage is a big step toward self-consciousness and to realize the differences between inside and outside of herself. She gets married to a man and her marriage is without the love that leads to death of her spirit, her imagination and creativity. She needs to go away from the place and Logan, so she escapes with Joe.

In her marriage to Logan and her exterior self: Logan thinks of buying a second mule so that Janie can work alongside Logan. Here, Janie notices that she is going to have the same fate that her Nanny feared of, so what she recognizes is that she can't just stand there and wait for her a doomed fate. She escapes with Joe.

In her marriage to Logan and her interior self: Logan threatens to kill her with an ax and, "Janie turned from the door without answering, and stood still in the middle of the door without knowing it. She turned wrong side out just standing there and feeling....." (TE, 32) Here to probe deeply into herself, she separates herself from the circumstances. She indulges within and self-evaluation begins.

Leaving Killicks for Starks becomes a "lengthy false escape in which she loses more of the hope of the 'pear tree moment' and becomes even more broken emotionally, living an outer life distinct from her inner life." ⁷Jody or Joe, is an ambitious man but short-sighted in love. Janie becomes an object for Joe, and also endures his jokes about herself and her body. She learns to defend herself little by little. At one point, "she robs Joe of his irresistible maleness that all men cherish."(TE, 75)

Hilbert refers to this change in Janis as, "in this example Janie seems to be using her "voice" in a male manner, a "voice" to hurt for no reason, not for the sole purpose of self-discovery, but rather self-preservation. However, when Janie does speak for self-discovery and on behalf of women, it is a commentary on the limitations of a male society." ⁸ So, one thing is clear here and that is, Janie voices herself only when she is provoked. Although she makes good steps toward self-definition, she has still a long way to go. She gains a voice when she goes to Joe's deathbed and defeats Joe, but she again becomes a lone.

In her second marriage these psychological escapes become even more evident. After Joe dies, Janie is left thinking about herself: "Years ago, she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass. It had been a long time since she had remembered. Perhaps she'd better look..." And, she tore off the head rag from her head, studies her face, "starched and ironed her face forming it into just what people wanted to see."(TE, 87) here it is apparent that she consciously can control her facial expressions, another evidence to show she differentiates between her inner/outside self.

⁷ Lofflin, 131.

⁸ Kathy L. Hilbert. *Mouth, Tongue, Voice: Crossing Boundaries in Selected Works of Zora Neale Hurston*. diss., (United States, 1996) 13.

In another instance, “No matter what Jody did she said nothing. She had learned how to talk some and leave.” Or “She was a rut in the road. Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down by the wheels.” (TE, 75)

In these two examples, we see the result of suppression. She realizes the only thing that this marriage brought to her was money and so she wanted to find a new value in her life. She begins to find something worth valuing. Finally, after so many years in which the physical escape was impossible, the marriage shatters. The Narrator tells us that, “The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again,” another example of living an inner and outer life.” (TE, 71)

But after Joe dies, Janie decides to protect her inner self: “Janie starched and ironed her face and came set in the funeral behind her veil. It was like a wall of stone and steel. The funeral was going on outside.” But, “. . . nor did the things of death reach inside to disturb her calm” (TE, 88) This is the growth happening in Janie toward selfhood. She chooses to show some of the changes inside her to the public, such as revealing her beautiful hair, but she also chooses to hide certain things she discovers about herself.

Janie thinks about her two marriages and concludes that, “Although the men were different, twenty years of life as Joe’s wife proved equally as confining for Janie as her shorter time with Logan Killicks. Logan saw his identity reflected in the success and respect that came to him through hard work, ownership of property, and possession of a young and pretty wife. Joe’s god was the lust for power and control over the whole community, including his wife.”⁹ Janie survives because she learns when to break into her inside self and how to assume her outside self. This will help Janie to gain her voice.

In her marriage to Joe and her exterior self: we are told in the novel that Janie confronts many situations in which she can and should talk but prefers to be silent. As she feels confused over the store matters and the math calculations and Joe seems dissatisfied, she “went through many silent rebellions over things like that.” (TE, 54)

In her marriage to Joe and her interior self: Joe slaps her to ensure his superior power over Janie and then, “something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside her 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.” (TE, 72)

Here is an example of this double consciousness of Janie: “The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again,” another example of living an inner and outer life.” (TE, 71)

When Janie goes inside herself, she sees 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.” (TE, 72)

I believe that in marriage to Joe Starks, Janie has developed a strong inner self. She believes that, “Having learned to separate her mind and her spirit from her physical surroundings Janie has taken a step toward attaining her own voice and thus control over her life. Initially she

⁹ Lofflin, 122.

begins *mentally* to challenge Starks' control over her. Soon, however, she will challenge Starks *with words*, and make clear that he has not completely subdued or dominated her."¹⁰

I would like to suggest that the main reason for Janie to think of her third marriage as successful and/or full of love is that she learns from Tea Cake to see herself better. Tea Cake becomes a companion for her and constantly reminds Janie about her beauty and her great personality. In another word, he helps Janie to develop her inner self. Tea Cake is the first person in her life to notice the difference between her inside/outside self: "Yo' face just left here and went off somewhere else." (TE, 104)

The first step in Janie's quest becomes this wavering attempt at community as she struggles to share her 'inside' and 'outside' even after she has seen herself as just a "rut in a road."¹¹ As the pages go forward we see that her internal freedom becomes more tangible: ". . . her soul crawled out from its hiding place." (TE, 128)

During her marriage to Tea Cake and her exterior self: Tea Cake slaps Janie out of jealousy and to show who is boss at home. Janie, again recognizing this pattern of patriarchy has reacted mildly and soon forgets the matter. Another silence happens.

In her marriage to Tea Cake and her interior self: she is desperate over Tea Cake's sickness, she goes out and looks hard at the sky. She looks "hard for something up there to move for a sign. A star in a daytime, maybe, or the sun to shout, or even a mutter of thunder. Her arms went up in a desperate supplication for a minute. It wasn't exactly pleading, it was asking questions." (TE, 178)

The marriage with Tea-Cake is still another step forward toward self-definition. She finds love and a voice. She is encouraged by Tea-Cake to know and learn about her inside self more and more. Tea-Cake permits Janie to make her voice public. But as Hilbert contends, "even though Janie seems to be "voicing" herself more, all of what she is telling the reader is directly related to what Tea-Cake wants and dreams, not necessarily what Janie wants. She is becoming more self-defined but it is through the help of a man."¹²

Passages that are supposed to represent Janie's interior consciousness begin by marking some internal change in Janie, and then gradually or abruptly shift so that a male character takes Janie's place as the subject of the discourse; at the conclusion of these passages, ostensibly devoted to the revelation of Janie's interior life, the male voice predominates.¹³

Here is an example from the text to clarify the argument: "She (Janie) sat a long time with the walls creeping in on her. Four walls squeezing her breath out. Fear lest he depart while she sat trembling upstairs nerved her and she was inside the room before she caught her breath." (TE, 84)

And then, we have Jody, a male voice which dominates the discourse to come. But the question remains that, in what way does Janie's consciousness differs from those of Nanny, her mother and most other women in her life? The one interesting matter in this novel is to show a heroine without any childbirth and no biological descendent. Women, naturally, have babies from men who claim to own women's bodies. Janie, on the other hand, produces no

¹⁰ Lofflin, 122.

¹¹ Lofflin, 124.

¹² Hilbert, Kathy L. *Mouth, Tongue, Voice: Crossing Boundaries in Selected Works of Zora Neale Hurston*. Tarleton State University: UMI, 1996. 15.

¹³ Lofflin, 109.

offspring from her three marriages; instead, she gives birth to a narrative outside the patriarchal society. Janie endured much violence through her marriages and this" leads her to be, impregnated with the seed of alterity that implicitly rejects reproduction of and with males in favor of self-reproduction. The psychic split that impairs Janie's speech in the courtroom signals the birth of another self-a consciousness articulated by the desire to testify to the experience of violent and oppressive heterosexual relationships."¹⁴

The violence in heterosexual relationships leads to a split in consciousness; and for Janie, this split leads not to a negative action, rather it produces a 'daughter', that is Janie with her matured identity and with her new voice. Janie gives birth to a new generation of black women. She promotes social changes by teaching other women to love themselves and create a bond of sisterhood. This is her new consciousness. This is her daughter. Her story lives long to ensure the authenticity of herself.

Critics always tend to focus on construction of the female self "in relation to marriage and/or romantic love as we look at Janie's relationships with men, we "overlook Hurston's concern with the construction of 'female imagination' and the formation of a critical space where woman's creativity can be nurtured and sustained"."¹⁵This space can be explored in the relationships between listeners and speakers. Janie, while telling her narrative to Phoeby, says:" Naw, 'tain't nothin' lak you might think. So 'tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it." (TE, 194) And she says: " Phoeby, we been kissin'-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought. And Ah'm talking to you from dat standpoint." (TE, 19)

Janie addresses an ideal listener, an ideal watcher who sees, hears, and understands with her heart. As is clear, "it appears that the title of novel addresses an audience of ideal listeners, those who have understanding because they have not closed off the spiritual senses, "their eyes were watching God"."¹⁶ So, Janie needs listeners and watchers who do not misread her story and her self-revelation. She reaches the consciousness, and self-revelation moulds itself in the form of the narrative she tells Phoeby. All these happen as a result of Janie's determination to change her fate and create a space for herself. If she had continued the role that Nanny chose for her, she would have never been able to sit on the porch and tell a story worth hearing. Massengale contends that Janie "rejects her grand mother (and implicitly, the cultural politics of many of her contemporaries) because Nanny gives up on female desire."¹⁷

The novel ends with this sentence: "She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see." (TE, 193) Many critics believe that the ending is very static and finally Janie didn't reach a true independence but Massengale interpreted novel's ending very beautifully. She believes that we should focus on every single word. If pulling the horizon reminds us of Nanny and how she prevented Janie to reach it, the next phrase is more revealing. Pulling in a fish-net means, catching something and in Janie's case it refers to catching knowledge, wisdom. As I believe it has a sense of harvest. To "drape" it over herself can connote Janie draping her desire over men and so the sense of satisfaction. Catching the

¹⁴ Miles, 147.

¹⁵ Massengale, Kate J. S. *Self (Reliance) and Feminine Desire: Strategies for Engagement in Literature(s) Written by Women*. diss. (North Zeeb Road: 1999)148.

¹⁶ Massengale, 156.

¹⁷ Massengale, 159.

whole picture together, she experiences this moment and "meshes" refers to complexities, layers of experience, of life and death. But, "if their eyes were watching God during the storm, here in peace, it is her soul which sees. She becomes both the subject and object of her existence, dissolving separation, and complicating our need as readers for a resolution of which is....." ¹⁸

To conclude from these various parts regarding gender in its relation to consciousness, we may say that Janie's identity becomes intelligent. It means that based on power relations her identity fails the system in not following the norm of society. It is clear that Janie in her journey toward self-consciousness reaches a state of subject in control of power.

Butler wants to show that gender constitutes the performances of the person. In this novel, Janie constitutes her gender through her actions. Janie, in other words individuates herself. "Thus, the thought of the individual is always an identification of the individual as individual, an identification of its similarity with others but, at the same time and above all, an identification of its tension, or nonidentity, with its own concepts."¹⁹ Janie's role is cloaked in a "socialized ambivalence" context, to use West's words and still there exists options for resistance. West believes that in the fictive world that Hurston creates, "marriage is never the refuge hegemonic culture would have women believe. Patriarchy fails."²⁰

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¹⁸ Massengale, 172.

¹⁹ Gillian Howie, "Conserving the Principle of Identity: Identity, Representation and Equivalence," *Women: a cultural review* 14:2 (2003) 12.

²⁰ Genevieve West, "Feminist Subversion in Zora Neale Hurston's Jonah Gourd Vine," *Women's Studies* (2002) 31:499-515. 509-510