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DREAM CONTRADICTED BY DESTINY: A CRITICAL READING THROUGH JANIE'S LOVE STORY, IN *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*, BY ZORA NEALE HURSTON

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Abstract

Although Hurston was a well-known actor of the Harlem Renaissance, her best fictional work *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, set in that context has been revealed only after her death. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston dares adopt a different posture, almost contradicting the global philosophy under the meeting at Harlem. In effect, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has portrayed a social environment where all the protagonists, the good and the bad, are Blacks. By so doing, Hurston has presented the black man as the misfortune of his fellow Blacks. The novel has presented Janie, the main character, whose eventful marital experiences, full of challenges and dreams, has ended up with unanswered questions. Janie's grandmother was a slave and her biological grandfather was white. Janie's mother, who is also "lighter" skinned, is rapped by her school teacher. Throughout Janie's life, her fairer skin plays a large role in how she views herself and how others view her. The present research paper aims at exposing how dreams of those newly emancipated Blacks could not be accomplished, far from the white man's responsibility.

Key-words: *African American – emancipation – unaccomplished dreams - destiny*

RESUME

Bien que Hurston fut célèbre de par son œuvre pendant la Renaissance de Harlem, sa plus célèbre œuvre romanesque *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, n'a réellement pris d'importance qu'après sa mort. Hurston osa, à travers son roman, prendre le contrepied de ses compatriotes écrivains à Harlem, en adoptant une posture à polémique. En effet, dans son roman, Hurston a dépeint un environnement entièrement noir, où tous ses personnages, les bons comme les méchants, sont Noirs. Le roman a pour personnage principal, Janie, dont les expériences maritales successives, basées sur la quête d'amour parfait, s'achèvent sur une note de satisfaction écourtée ou inachevée. La présente étude vise à exposer le côté sombre des relations inter noires américaines aux lendemains de l'émancipation, de mêmes que certains de leurs rêves non réalisés, du fait de leurs compatriotes ou tout simplement du destin.

Mots clés: *Noirs Américains – émancipation – rêves non réalisés - destin*

INTRODUCTION

Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was written in 1937, in plain context of the Harlem Renaissance, but the plot depicts the African Americans' community life of the early 1900's. The novel's main protagonist, Janie, belongs to the very second Blacks generation following emancipation, since Janie's mother, Leafy, was born only two days before the abolition of slavery.

The topic of love has been a subject of great attention to many writers. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston stands deeply communicative to the Blacks, rather than just condemning the Whites. She has called on Blacks' consciousness, to African-American womanhood and showing them that the responsibility in Blacks' plight isn't a mere matter of race caused by the Whites; Blacks too have their part of responsibility. One of the main topics in the novel is love, and how people view it. Love, from the novel, seems to be complex, yet clumsily-assembled combination of every idea one might attempt to describe it with. It seems that everyone must find an answer to the question of love for themselves. Hurston's choice of Janie Mae Crawford, a black woman as the main protagonist, has often led people to classify the novel as a feminist novel. As the novel unfolds, Janie acts according to this notion, battling and struggling in the direction of her dreams.

Moreover, although Hurston's novel approaches racism from a limited perspective as being between blacks and whites; she mainly broadens the concept of racism into what Lester refers to in her critics on Hurston's novel: "It was "largely ignored" and "greatly criticized" by Hurston's African American male contemporaries, whereas it was celebrated by feminist critics (Lester, 1999: P. 13). In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston we have to conceive that love is sacrifice. Indeed, the pleasure of love is sex because of the fact that "love" loves to love "love". It means that the sexual relations constitute a fundamental element for the conception of true love story.

The reading of Hurston's fiction puts the emphasis on the historical context in which the novel was written, that is the frontier between slavery and emancipation. According to Kirsznner and Mandell's argument, literary imagination "does not exist outside time and place and cannot be interpreted without reference to the era in which it was written." (Kirsznner and Mandell, 1938, Page 47). In other words, because the present analysis gives particular importance to such context that governs the fiction, the literary approach used here is that of New Historicist Criticism as presented by Kirsznner and Mandell. As such, consideration has been given to the characteristics of the newly emancipated Blacks, marked with discrimination and segregation, and which can explain the state of conceitedness and the loss of identity in the black American community. The present study is then a critical analysis of Zora Neale Hurston's work in the context in which it was produced. To better apprehend Hurston's message through the character of Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it will be important to first revisit both the conception of the early emancipated Blacks on their women in general and about marriage and marital life in particular, then to scrutinize the global context of the writing of the novel.

1. CONTEXTUALIZING THE STUDY

1.1. EMANCIPATED BLACK AMERICANS' CONCEPTION OF MARRIAGE AND MARITAL LIFE

The condition of the black family in America has been an issue of intense debate since the Civil War, and at the heart of this debate is the belief of some scholars that slavery created a propensity for a weak and fatherless family. This matrilineal (mother centered) family, they argue, became typical of African Americans both during slavery and after emancipation, a state that has been perpetuated generationally to the present time. Other scholars vehemently disagree; they counter that black American families cannot be classified as either weak or fatherless. These scholars maintain that Blacks adapted to their difficult circumstances in creative ways to preserve familial ties. Although the end of the Civil War resulted in legal

freedom for slaves, black families continued to face challenges in creating and preserving familial ties. No doubt, Blacks placed a high priority on their families both during and after slavery despite the overwhelming difficulties they faced. Slaves and then African Americans have always viewed their families in term of kin networks that formed the social basis of their communities. Since it frequently happened that slaves were forcefully removed from their families, they adapted to their circumstances by creating family units with other slaves with whom they lived and worked. Blacks then conferred the status of kin on non-blood relations, addressing each other as brother, sister, aunt, or uncle. Slave parents taught their children to address all older slave men and women by kin titles, a practice that bound them to these adults and prepared them in the event that death separated them from their own parents and blood relatives. Parents relied on these kin networks to help them raise their children and understood that at any time, they may also need to assume the role of aunt or uncle. All this conception of family in the black community explains why Hurston has made her characters' lives to be a concern of all the community, from Florida to Jacksonville, then to Everglades, even though these surrounding people have rather been presented as gossipers.

The fight for marriage equality in America, which made significant progress in 2015 with the Supreme Court ruling that "No American can be denied the freedom to get married, basing on their sexual orientation". That fight for freedom in marriage was quite the goal of many writers of the Harlem Renaissance, also called Harlem Literature. Among the writers of that trend, is Zora Neale Hurston. But what makes Hurston particular in the Harlem context is her shifting from the typical Blacks' works that stuck on Whites' racism, by shedding light on new aspects and themes concerning Blacks' interrelations. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in this context, explores the issues of marriage in correlation with love. Far from being generational conflict, Hurston exposed the conflictual conceptions of the two concepts from the Blacks perspectives. The real question, which unfortunately remains unanswered by the author till the end, is: which of marriage and love prevails over the other; more specifically, the unsolved problem is whether a young girl (Janie) should marry and then love, or marry because she loves?

1.2. THE CONTEXT OF THE NOVEL AND HURSTON'S MESSAGE

Their Eyes were Watching God, published in 1937 is rightly associated with the Harlem Renaissance which celebrated the African American culture. The novel presents the problems related to marriage and marital life of African Americans, especially with women in the early moments of emancipation.

Zora Neale Hurston, in lyrical prose influenced by folk tales she heard while assembling her anthology of African American folklore *Mules and Men*, has Janie Crawford (the main protagonist) tell her three marriage experiences, her growing reliance, and her identity as a black woman. Much of the dialogue conveys psychological insight through plain speech written in dialect. Whereas her first two husbands are dominating, Janie's third husband, Tea Cake, is easygoing and reluctantly willing to accept Janie as equal.

Hurston manages to characterize these three different men without resorting to caricature in the first two instances or idealization in the third. Janie is one of few fictional heroines of the period who is not published for her sensual nature. It is not easy for Janie to pass through these three marriages and move from town to town and from one man to another in such a conservative and conventional society. But she thinks each marriage experience to be

the harbor where she can anchor the ships that carry the dreams of love, happiness and equality. It is only with Tea Cake, her third husband that she finds all those qualities and dreams.

The novel opens with the description of the difference between women's and men's dreams and desires. Men do not dream a lot because they can do what they want without dreaming. They are the patriarchs of society and can control their life. Women like dreaming because they cannot have everything as real. For them, "dream is the truth" (Pge 11) because they get what they want only after a long battle.

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 want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.

Love and marriage matters are not somehow something strange, since many writers, novelists, poets and scholars have tackled the issue. James Baldwin, in the second part (*My Dungeon Shook*) of his essay *The Fire Next Time*, said that "love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war, love is growing up" (Pge 73). It is then normal that Hurston's main protagonist Janie has been striving with all her energy and life, in search of true love; it is also not a typical situation when her true love has turned into a tragedy, with Janie being forced to murder her true lover in order to survive.

2. THE DREAMS OF JANIE THROUGH *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

2.1. JANIE'S MODERN CONCEPTION OF LOVE

Janie Mae Crawford is a beautiful and determined fair-skinned black woman, and the main character of the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Since her childhood, she has dreamed for love, a true love that could lead to marriage. In fact, Janie Mae Crawford does not want to have the same kind of life like Nanny, her grandmother who was raped by her master as a slave; nor does she want to have the same way of life as Leafy, her mother who was also raped by her school teacher. Nanny too, has devoted all the remaining of her life to ensure Janie a good marital life. Hurston has described Nanny and Leafy's lives as disturbed by indelible wounds. This deception induced Nanny, Janie's only parent, to believe that true love never exists. For Nanny, and based on her long life experience, love leads to no secured marital life, and as such the most important thing for a woman is to have a man who cares, who provides food and security; in short, for Nanny, love comes after marriage.

However, for Janie, it is really not possible to marry a man you don't love. This contradictory conceptions of love from the girl and her only parent, has made Nanny to be attentive about every step of Janie: the little and vulnerable girl must never be let to fall in the traps she, Nanny and Janie's mother, Leafy, have fallen in. But the too much attention Nanny has paid to the growing young girl has made things to go quicker than Nanny herself might have anticipated. Nanny would never offer her so beautiful granddaughter to old Logan Killicks, if she hasn't overseen Janie being kissed by a young boy, Johnny Tailor. That kissing has meant so much for Nanny, because kissing is the step that leads to sex, and this probably is how Leafy was raped.

This is also an indication that Janie is no more a child; she has now become a young woman. Although Janie clearly puts it that she doesn't want a relationship in which she wouldn't be totally satisfied due to the fact that her dream is formed on the basis of her dream of a true love and happiness, Nanny has forced her into marriage with Logan Killicks. Janie's first exposure to love is unique in that it doesn't come from a human mentor, but rather from the natural world and unchecked ideas. But her first experience with marital responsibility has been forged on principles that do not make her a beneficial, contrarily to Nanny's intentions, since morally and emotionally, she has not been satisfied. When after two weeks of marriage Janie goes back to Nanny, the old woman has just showed her satisfaction: now that there is a man to care for her granddaughter, now that raping and prostitution are improbable, she can die peacefully; and a few days later, Nanny has died peacefully. Hurston uses natural imagery of "glistening leaf-buds" and "snowy virginity of bloom" and the "the panting breath of the breeze" to liken Janie's blooming womanhood to the flowering of the pear tree. She then lets Janie watch as "a dust-bearing bee" that lowers itself into the tree's blooms becoming the quintessential embodiment of love as Janie would define it. She glorifies the simple, idyllic purity of the natural exchange, the give – and – take of bee and a bloom. Janie has not hoped to live any love experience again after her past two unhappy love experiences, but one day, in her store, a much younger man than her, Vergible Woods nicknamed *Tea Cake*, appears in her life to revive the dying flames of love in her.

Cake discovers that Janie Mae Crawford is a widow and is immediately attracted to her despite the fact that he has little to offer Janie. But Janie is charmed by the man's happiness and lovely words.

Janie is happy because of the fact that Tea Cake has supported all the criticisms coming from the people of Eatonville, due to her age and Tea Cake's poverty. Contrarily to the two previous husbands, Tea Cake wants to take care of Janie by working in the field to earn a little money, although in actual fact much of their living depends on Janie's wealth. This has confirmed his true love for Janie. That's why Janie thinks she has now come across true love, although Tea Cake uses her money with other women outside. Janie eventually realizes that love can procure happiness. In her relationships, Tea Cake has been the one to confirm Janie's ideas of love. In the case of their couple relationship, they have had sweetness, romance, and consent and trust as shown to her by her pear tree superstitious indication. In that relation, Janie is not forced into any marriage with Tea Cake; this third marital experience is based on true love.

2.2. CRAWFORD'S CONCEPTION OF MARRIAGE

Janie Crawford's love story has passed through three marriage experiences. At first, she got married with Logan Killicks, an old and rich farmer. Afterwards, she had married Joe Starks (Jody), a too ambitious gentleman and the future mayor of Eatonville with whom she ran off leaving old Logan. Her last husband was Vergible Woods (Tea Cake), the guitar player. For Janie marriage is an engagement which permits to establish lovely relations, to be recognized and respected by the society as a woman who is married and who then deserves dignity. Then when Janie is forced to marry Logan by her grandmother, it isn't because of any love that matches her dream. It is simply in view of the external world; a woman marries for people to see in her the values imposed by the society. Johnny Taylor's kissing has meant to lead the young girl astray, that is why Nanny has had to take her responsibility. After Janie's wedding, on waking her husband just wants to see that the house is clean. Then he'll sit at the table, eat

the food prepared by Janie and his conversation is limited to living activities, chopping and potatoes peeling; then he takes the road of his farm with his old clothes. He will at times criticize and make allusion to Janie's long black hair and fingers that he dislikes. And at night, when he comes back from his farm with his wad of tobacco, he will order the young woman to sleep for sex. This situation has led Janie to share her whole life into three different periods: first, a bloom time when she was an innocent girl; then, a green time when she happened to dream of living a kind of marital life guaranteed to her white friends; and lastly, an orange time when she has been forced into premature maturity. As such, with this marital life, when Nanny has passed away, the young woman cannot stand seizing the occasion given to her by Jody. Hurston has left no suspense as for Janie's conviction with Joe Starks: after abandoning Logan Killicks, "Janie has got marriage the same day, before the sundown with Joe Starks" (Page 45). Jody has quickly become hugely influential in the Eatonville town where he and Janie are now living; he is elected mayor. Jody's dream of being a big voice has then become true, to the detriment of his wife. The kind of marriage mirrored to Janie now has proved false; as a town mayor, Jody has ignored his wife, leaving her for a mere trophy; through Janie's beauty and good appearance, Eatonville people will give respect and consideration to their mayor, and that the only thing his wife has existed for. As such, Jody's deteriorated health and impending death has appeared to Janie as a prison break. This also is why after she has accepted marrying the much younger Tea Cake, she has preferred them leaving Eatonville to escape both her past with Jody, but also Eatonville gossipers' critics about her new lover.

Janie trusts Tea Cake with her life, she has full confidence in him. In fact, she just hope Tea Cake will succeed in clearing her two past marriages, and she is ready to believe in all his words: "And honey, don't you worry 'bout yo' lil ole two hundred dollars. It's big pay day dis comin' Saturday at de railroad yards. Ah'm gointuh take dis twelve dollars in mah pocket and win it all back and mo'" (Page 125). Although she hasn't known Tea Cake for long, Janie truly believes his words, even though everyone tells her that Tea Cake will finish her money. For the first time, Janie has met a man who does not like to see her sadness or unhappiness; and he will sometimes play his guitar in order to make her happy; he sometimes has fun teaching Janie how to use a gun and play the guitar. He also manages to end up changing his bad feelings towards other women to devote himself to Janie. Globally, they have embarked on a beautiful romantic relationship, with dreams of travelling from country to country and eventually settling for a good time in Jacksonville. It is the first time Janie has seen the importance of marriage. Unfortunately, good things last short, and this true marriage has collapsed with the death of Tea Cake, shot by Janie out of self-defense.

2.3. JANIE'S SEARCH OF FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENCE IN MARRIAGE

In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie has gone through three tumultuous relationships. In these relationships, she has eventually learned how being an independent woman in the household is vital for self-development. In her first marriage, she has had no choice but to become a woman. Although she happens to reply to Logan's bad words and critics, she has really had little to decide as for the direction to give to her marital life. With Logan, Janie has got her independence only with Nanny's death. Then, it is clear that Janie's marital life has depended on Nanny rather than herself or her husband; that is why abandoning Logan and going away with the stranger Jody has posed no difficulty. Logan is not willing to let her go, but he is powerless to achieve that goal. had Nanny been alive, Jane would never have had the courage for breaking her marriage with Logan, no matter her conditions with him. The real prison for Janie in this first marriage is then Nanny and not Logan. But Janie has simply

broken a prison to fall into another with higher walls. With Jody, there is nobody to be taken as responsible if Janie is not satisfied. Nobody has forced her into this marriage, and this probably has made her bondage into Jody stronger.

With Joe Starks, Janie has been forbidden and prevented from speaking her mind. The only thing she can exchange with Eatonville people in the shop she is keeping is greeting. When Jody died, Janie has been left with twelve hundred dollars in the bank and her independence. Then, Tea Cake has come along, to make Janie's independence effective. Although he isn't perfect, he has encouraged and driven Janie into self-confidence. He lets her talk to his group of friends and he has even taught her how to shoot a gun. With him, Janie has lived out the life she has always dreamed of. Janie has always been an independent soul as portrayed in the novel by Hurston; what is more she has never seen herself as any different from the white girls she has been raised with. Then Janie Crawford steadily grows into an independent woman.

Despite the fact that her relationship with Tea Cake is viewed as a scandal by the community, she perfectly embodies her strong will and independence. She believed she has deserved love and individuality just as they have. This is why her love for Tea Cake is so immense in comparison to her previous husbands. Her favor for her relationships is in direct comparison to the level of empowerment that comes with it. Janie is considered as a hero because she has fought against gender discrimination during her marriages. "Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly" (Page 1). In the first page of the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston showed the difference between men and women. That's why the author took Janie as a heroine and developed her "female quest". Hurston glorified Janie's quest of self-discovery and self-definition by recognizing her understanding of life's pure value. Janie's dreams of true love and prolonged romantic marital life have appeared then as unreachable due to manifold handicaps.

3. THE HANDICAPS TO JANIE'S DREAMS

3.1. JANIE'S UNATTAINABLE TRUE LOVE

The black African-American woman Janie has dreamt since her childhood to find romantic love. However she has accepted going into precocious wedding with the old farmer Logan Killicks just [out of] respect for Nanny, her grandmother. With Killicks, Janie has experienced no true love, since her husband has proved so archaic to force her to sex, or rape her. What Janie has always dreamed of is romantic love. This is what Jody has promised her, after she gets married. Janie's dream is ~~the~~ still vivid when she has abandoned Killicks for Jody. As such, when Joe Starks enters Janie's life, she has expected he will offer the ideal alternative to the dull and pragmatic Logan Killicks. With his ambitious talk, Jody has convinced the likewise ambitious Janie.

Unfortunately, Janie quickly learns that Jody's excessive exertion of power will only stifle her, and that dreams are not to come true soon. But just before Jody's death, Janie's repressed power breaks through in a torrent of verbal retaliation. Her somewhat cruel tirade at the dying Jody measures the depth of Jody's suppression of her inner dream and life. Having begun to find her voice, Janie blows through social niceties to express herself. Her dream isn't effective just because of destiny. Janie then has decided after Jody's death to stop her research of love because she thinks that it is her destiny and she has learnt in her last relation that love never exists. That's why she has had to spend a long period of time without thinking about love.

From comparison, she would probably have preferred Vergible Wood more than her two previous husbands and is not sure that she can find another person that can give her all those positive feelings which she has had with Tea Cake. Janie goes on to tell about her final relationship with the migrant worker (bean picker) Tea Cake Woods, who is ten years younger than herself. With him she finds the love and respect she has always dreamed of. She sells the store and closes up her house to go off with Tea Cake. They lived happily for a year and a half, picking beans until a huge hurricane wrecks the Everglades and Tea Cake contracts rabies. Unfortunately, that sickness can't be treated, and Tea Cake became as a foolish dog and Janie has killed him to save her soul when he tries to kill her. After escaping jail, she now understand that all her life has been guided and commended by destiny, that is why by some ironical twist, she kills the only person she loves.

3.2- THE EFFECTS OF DESTINY ON JANIE'S THREE MARRIAGES.

In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the main character, Janie, has been on a permanent quest of [for] true love. That quest of true love (useless repetition) is what makes her discover that there is no perfect love, and that life is nothing but destiny. Indeed, destiny has at some moments had grave effects in her life. After three tumultuous marriage experiences she has remarked that destiny 'does not makes the way easy for everyone. Only destiny can have made the kissing from Johnny Taylor possible, since this has occurred by chance; Only destiny can have let Jody pass by, at that mean time to take her away; likewise, nobody has suspected Jody's sickness until it has been revealed, that has led to his death. Why can she accept marrying a ten year younger man, if this is not a matter of destiny? And lastly, why does the hurricane disaster include them, and how can it be admitted that she eventually is the one to kill her true lover? Destiny has probably sought to punish her for making an error twice. Once can be forgiven, as it may be a mistake. But twice, that's an error, and that is unforgivable. So her destiny then has been to live with Jody, otherwise she could have sold the Eatonville house altogether with the shop, and then will have to go to Nanny home place after Tea Cake's death.

CONCLUSION

Their Eyes Were Watching God is an autobiographical novel and one of the most successful written by Zora Neale Hurston an African-American feminist novelist. The story begins when the protagonist, Janie Mae Crawford is coming back from the burying of her deceased husband, Tea Cake. Her journey begins in her grandmother's plantation with her important dream which is the research of true love represented by the blossom on the pear tree. Nanny's protective love has driven her granddaughter to her first and arranged marriage with Logan Killicks despite the fact that she doesn't love him; it is true, as has expected Nanny, this marriage has provided Janie security and social protection, but not the kind of love Janie has desired. Her second wedding, with Joe Starks, has not brought the dreamed love either. In Eatonville, Janie has endured a possessive and slave-like life, due to Jody's power goals and charisma. Her words and initiatives are always under the control of her husband, and she feels like in jail. Thus, after Jody's death she has thought of abandoning her true love quest. But when Tea Cake appears Janie is lovely attracted. The romantic love thus born provides her passion, freedom, independence, tolerance, but also jealousy. Although Tea Cake has contracted the rabies after the hurricane, it has had no effect on their love; it is the loss of physical and mental control and especially Tea Cake's attempted murder towards Janie, which has forced her to kill him. However, it is evident that Janie has found a true love with Tea Cake.

At the end, Janie has learnt that « *A winner is a dreamer who never gives up because love doesn't make the world go round. Love is what makes the ride worthwhile* ». (P. 345)

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