JAMIE'S PSYCHOLOGICAL JOURNEY IN HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

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Abstract

The paper will analyze the evolving image of Jamie Crawford, a young Afro-American woman in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*. The analysis will show how she is mainly defined in terms of her relation to men who fail to recognize her right to individuality and identity as a black woman. The feminist approach will also highlight Hurston's dissociation from Afro-American literary tradition which is abounding in stereotyped images of black female characters who suffer from white oppression by presenting Jamie who is a victim of black community.

Keywords: Harlem Renaissance, black woman, psychological journey, quest for wholeness

MOTTO: "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." (Hurston 1)

Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) was born in Eatonville, Florida, an exclusively black town where her father was a mayor. As a child in an all-black community, she could not experience racism or relate to white society. After moving to Jacksonville where she started school she was first exposed to white people and racism. All through her life she dedicated to fostering self-reliance as well as academic development. She studied anthropology and became the first African-American graduate of Barnard College in 1928. She dreamed of a higher racial cooperation through a powerful transcending race. However, she was disappointed by both the white and the black race. That is why she was against exploring in fiction "America's historical mistreatment of blacks, boosting black self-esteem and changing racist white attitudes about Afro-Americans in the process" (Awkward 3).

Jamie Crawford, the Afro-American heroine from Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* is an increasingly more complex character the way Hurston was as a black woman and writer. Hurston explores through a feminist approach Jamie's desire to find a meaningful relationship with a man. She passes through three marriages until she comes to know and understand herself. Self-knowledge is a prerequisite for Jamie to achieve self-fulfillment. Self-fulfillment for Jamie means freedom from oppression of sex, race, or class. In a similar way, self-fulfillment for Hurston means gaining a literary voice.

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Afro-American literary history is replete with idealized and stereotyped images of black female characters. The image of the mulatto, such as Jamie is, has been present ever since the beginning of the American novel. Cora from *The Last of the Mohicans* is a 'freak of nature' because she is a mulatto. The interrelation between race and sex in 19th c American literature indicates the character's quest for personal freedom from any kind of oppression or for the abolition of slavery. The tragic mulatto is presented as a lone character, unaccepted and isolated by both white and black communities. The moral lesson of the 19th c American literature is mainly connected to the theme of miscegenation. Characters are not allowed to cross racial boundaries through mixed intermarriages. Mulattoes are the result of illicit unions usually between white slave owners and black slave women. These characters are usually punished (through misfortune or death) because they are the offspring of crossing blood lines.

Jamie's fate is different. The novel highlights "Jamie's psychological journey from a male-identified female to assertive womanhood and her exploration of self-acceptance and black identity" (McKay 55).

Jamie's Psychological Journey

Jamie's psychological journey of self-knowledge and self-fulfillment starts in Eatonville, as a girl, experiences three marriages and ends in her return to Eatonville after twenty years.

As a girl, she is raised by Nanny, her black grandmother. She was a slave who witnessed the rape of her only child, Jamie's mother, by a white man. Jamie's mother runs away after being raped. Jamie does not realize she is black until she sees a picture of herself: *"Aw, aw! Ah'm colored!"* (12). She is surprised but not disappointed. At sixteen, Nanny arranges Jamie's first marriage to Logan Killicks. She wants Jamie to be a legitimate wife. Unlike Nanny for whom the economic factor is most important in a marriage, Jamie dreams of true love: *"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." (Hurston 1).

She does not love Logan. She is not impressed by his wealth. Still, she is forced to marry him. It is the first step towards growing up into womanhood: *"By the time she reaches the first blush of womanhood she discovers the restrictive bonds of woman's place in man's world, qualitatively as soul-destroying as the experiences of racism"* (McKay 59).

Nanny could not dream anymore; she did not succeed, and neither did her daughter: *"Ah was born back due in slavery, so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do…Ah didn't want to be used for a work- ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used that way neither. It sho wasn't mah will for things to happen lak they did."* (Hurston 21) *"Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me"* (Hurston 22). But Jamie had the right to choose. Her aesthetics of

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choice shows her struggles against racial, sexual, economic and political constraints. The dream motif is highly important to differentiate men from women. In Awkward's opinion, while men use dreams to resign to reality, women use dreams to transcend reality: *"It is a male characteristic to accept the thwarting of dreams with resignation"* (16) *and "what Hurston clearly regards as a peculiarly female transcendentalism[…], [there are] striking similarities between Hurston's representation of the nature of female perception and Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that it "is a female trait ... to use dreams as a means of transcending rather than resigning to reality: dreams are the woman's means of compensating for a sense of subordination (immanence) through the 'realm of imagination"* (17).

Logan, her first black husband treats her as an object, a machine. There is no love, no sex, no romantic scenes. While in the beginning he was wondering at het beautiful black hair, now he does not allow her to show in the public. She has to plow the land and plant potatoes. Haddox associates Logan to *bourgeoisie, for he is hostile to expenditure and brutally oppressive to his "worker""* (23).

Jamie escapes her grandmother's influence when she runs away with Joe Starks. She knows he is not the man of her dreams, still she becomes his wife in the hope of a better life: "*He spoke for change and chance"* (Hurston 39). She is attracted by his sense of humor: "*A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you."* (Hurston 39). She is better off economically speaking; she is not forced to work the land anymore. She is the wife of a mayor and of the owner of a store. The situation starts to change gradually. The bigger voice he has the more silenced she was. When the townspeople wish to hear a speech from Mrs. Mayor Starks, he refuses by explaining the domestic role of a wife and her restriction to the private sphere: *"Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home."* (Hurston 57). A similar symbol, that of the hair, reinforces her submissive role. She has to hide her hair: "Her hair was NOT going to show in the store" (Hurston 73). He uses all chances to show her inferior role, not only economically but intellectually as well: *"When Ah see one thing Ah understands ten. You see ten things and don't understand one."* (Hurston 95).

Jamie withdraws in her inner world and pretends to have a happy marriage. But when the moment comes she hits in "*irresistible maleness that all men cherish* …" (Hurston 107). She reveals in public a huge secret: her husband is impotent. That is the end of her second marriage. It was a marriage marked by love but with no sex. After her husband dies, she feels free and as a token of her liberty she reveals her "*plentiful hair*" (Hurston 117). She is also free financially as she inherited Joe's estate.

For a time she is woman hunted by men for her money. She keeps strong, not allowing men to get farther than the store. When Tea Cake enters the store he conquers her through the different way he treats her. He considers her his equal. He encourages her to learn checkers, builds up confidence in her, allows her to speak and express: "*He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom – a pear tree blossom in the spring*" (Hurston 142). He makes her feel beautiful and loves her for what she is, not for the money.

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Her third marriage has love and sex as well although she is older than Tea Cake. People judge her and as McKnight asserts "she must leave Eatonville to find some measure of independence" (Hurston 97). They move to Everglades to work on the muck where beans and sugar cane thrive. On the muck, clothed in *"denim overalls and heavy shoes"* (Hurston 179) she achieves union with her community for the first time in her life: *"Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to"* (Hurston 180). Although the Indians warn them against a hurricane, they do not leave the place: *"you couldn't have a hurricane when you're making seven and eight dollars a day picking beans. Indians are dumb anyhow, always were"* (Hurston 206). While trying to save their lives, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog; in his delirium he tries to kill Janie. But he gets killed by her. After committing the crime she looks at the sky waiting for *"a star in the daytime, maybe, or the sun to shout, or even a mutter of thunder"* (Hurston 238). She tells her friend that God knows the reason. The title of the novel refers to the myth of African origin according to which human beings cannot have absolute control in life; everything is controlled by God. People pretend to be all-knowing but they are not. Jody Starks needs a wife to control. He forces her to hide her hair, a symbol of identity and independence. The community tries to create the illusion of control by not breaking away from tradition, for instance the emphasis on morality. The hurricane proves that humans cannot control even nature. The people are watching God helplessly – how HE destroys nature and kills people: *They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God"* (Hurston 212).

She returns to Eatonville alone, but strong and with self-knowledge: *"The relationship with Tea Cake helped to shape her self-knowledge, but in his death she is free to discover security in herself, and the courage to speak in her own black woman's voice, no longer dependent on men"* (McKay 63).

Conclusion

A literary representative of Harlem Renaissance, Hurston wanted to break down the rigid barriers that separated the races. While it contributed to a certain relaxation of racial attitudes among white people, it also reinforced race pride among blacks. She presents Jamie as an object under three types of capitalist domination: with Logan, Jamie was under a competitive capitalism; Jody Starks treats her as a monopoly capitalist object. Her third husband Tea Cake apparently loves her – it is a marriage in which she has both love and sex. However he is a gambler with a knife, who possesses her in a late capitalistic manner through jealousy and physical violence: *"Tea Cake's attacks on Janie are caused by a loss of precisely the capacity for decision-making and self-control that is the hallmark of her fatal shooting of him"* (Korobkin 3). He acts governed by impulses, which is a sign of his immaturity. The sacrifice Jamie makes when she kills the man she loves most brings in the feminist idea of the magnitude of the sacrifice needed in order to reach her self-fulfillment and womanhood: *"Now she was her sacrificing self with Tea Cake's head in her lap. She had wanted him to live so much and he was dead"* (Hurston 246). Moreover, her quest for wholeness requires her return at home to tell her story herself. Her voice celebrates individuality within a

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group: *"collective black American physical and psychological survival depends on the union (even when troubled) of the individual and the group"* (McKay 53).

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