

Articulating the Self, Culture, And Identity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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ABSTRACT

The paper foregrounds the significance of semiotics and culture in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Semiotics plays a dominant role in intensifying the arbitrariness of a culture. The research demonstrates the cultural and semiotic legacy by closely examining the novel to interpret the function of meaning. The novel celebrates the African Socio-cultural lifestyle and its rich values. The various cultural symbols used in the novel serve as a medium to reinstate identity, religion, belief, custom and so on. The focus of the research is to explore the meaning and the function that the cultural symbols as a sign try to obtain. Further, the study enlightens the importance of culture and history, and its interpretive response by understanding semiotics through culture. Racism and community are the embedded signs which help in analysing the semiotic function of culture in the novel. The article further explores the significance of identity, autonomous voice, and the collective dimensions of memory articulated by the central character, Janie Crawford.

Keywords: Semiotics, Culture, Signs, Symbols, Identity, Racism, Community.

Introduction

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) is an African American novel written by Zora Neale Hurston. The novel explores the life, awakening, transformation and contentment of Janie Crawford. Throughout the novel, she undergoes racial discrimination, marginalisation, identity crisis, and economic and political tensions. Hurston brings out the underlying struggle for individuality, identity and liberation of the entire black community through Janie Crawford. Janie, a vibrant African American woman with beautiful white tresses, longs for true love. Her grandmother, Nanny, insists Janie marry Logan Killicks, an old farmer who merely needs the assistance of a wife to look after his domestic chores. Janie feels distressed living with him and eventually ends the marriage. As she becomes disillusioned and lonely, she elopes with Joe Starks. He takes her to Florida, and they establish a wealthy living after a long struggle.

Soon, Janie realises that Joe Starks treats her as his property; he criticises and physically abuses her. She turns out to be his trophy wife, and he forbids her from the town's social life. Janie becomes financially and physically independent when Joe Starks dies. Soon after his death, she feels confident and recovers from her traumatic past. With his estate, her fortune increases, leaving a lot of admirable suitors at her doorstep. She falls in love with a gambler, Tea Cake. They make a healthy living together, but unfortunately, Janie shoots Tea Cake for her self-defence. At this juncture, she awakens from her dependence on male society. She realises her worth and liberates herself from patriarchy and dual colonisation (racial discrimination and female subjugation).

The novel explores the varied gender roles, suffering of the black community, domestic violence, sexual norms and racial discrimination in the broader light. It further moves from silence and subjection towards autonomy and liberation. Hurston portrays the character of Janie as a strong African American woman, who is shaped by the gender, race, and cultural forces of the society. Her depiction of the African American identity, cultural practices, and authenticity carries the immediate pressure and dominance of Eurocentric standards. The article aims to validate the culture and its semiotic relevance

in the selected novel. Janie is the symbol of transformation from servitude to liberty. Her resilience commences liberation and breaks down the enslavement of the black community and culture. As the leading character, she pursues identity and individuality, ultimately finding fulfilment and contentment. Her feeling of true freedom embraces her when she overcomes male supremacy and dual domination. She becomes a strong and enlightened black woman, reflecting the liberation of black culture from the hands of whites.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in semiotic analysis. Semiotics, as articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure, conceptualises meaning as arising from the relationship between the signifier and the signified. This relationship is not inherent but culturally constructed, allowing for multiple interpretations.

Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of signs—icon, index, and symbol—further informs this analysis by emphasising the relational nature of meaning. In Hurston's novel, symbols such as hair and the horizon function as culturally specific signs that convey deeper meanings beyond their literal representation.

The study also incorporates Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theory of Signifyin(g), which highlights the layered and intertextual nature of African American expression. Additionally, Black feminist theory provides a critical lens to examine how identity is shaped by intersecting structures of race and gender.

Significance of Semiotics

The article highlights the theoretical framework of semiotics in the novel by adjoining the black culture with the life of Janie. The suppression of the black community has a dominant cultural and political history. In America, it is hard for black or mixed-race women to lead a life amongst the racial discrimination, especially when they are married to those (African American Men) who consider themselves as a byproduct of the American lifestyle. There are instances in the text that semiotically

elevate the uprooted Black history and culture. Janie, at the beginning of the novel, wishes to turn into a tree, proclaiming to look calm, composed, lovely and warm. Instead, she is uprooted when she marries Logan, a traditional African farmer. The 'Tree' symbolises the struggle of Blacks and their uprooted history. Though Janie wants to be conventional and grounded, her partners fail to comprehend the intensity of her needs and love.

Janie witnesses the depth of slavery through the stories of her grandmother, Nanny. The latter is seen to prioritise security more than personal fulfilment, which results in the first marriage of Janie to Logan Killicks. Janie is never treated with love or compassion. Logan merely treats her as a maid and has extreme patriarchal control over her. "She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom: the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace" (Hurston 11). Here, Janie realises her need for love and emotional support, but he terribly fails to acknowledge her expectations. He silences her voice and restricts her participation in community life, and forces her to play a subordinate role. Her dissatisfaction grows severe, and she decides to walk out of his turbulence. Cultural theorist Bell Hooks addresses this issue in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, stating, "Hair remains a battleground where assimilation and self-acceptance collide (201)." Janie's transition mirrors this struggle, underscoring how hair choices reflect broader societal pressures and personal assertions of identity.

The overpowering masculinity and gender stereotypes displace her traditional values. Her grandmother tells her that the coloured folks are branches without roots – this dissects the semiotic representation of elevating culture to the branches of trees as it spreads across to give shade and shelter. Culture is one phenomenon that keeps everyone's identity and individuality. Similarly, there is one occasion where Janie decides to let her hair down, and her husband finds it to be sexually pleasing to other men at the store. Therefore, he orders her to wear a headband or to have a haircut. She does not want to cover her natural and traditional hair, which reflects her rich culture. "She tore off the

kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair” (Hurston 209). This act of Janie symbolically represents her rejection of social constraints and her brave move towards defining her self-hood.

Her depiction of the African American identity, cultural practices, and authenticity carries the immediate pressure and dominance of Eurocentric standards (West 89–93). The article aims to validate the culture and its semiotic relevance in the selected novel. Janie is the symbol of transformation from servitude to liberty. Her resilience commences liberation and breaks down the enslavement of the black community and culture. As the leading character, she pursues identity and individuality, ultimately finding fulfilment and contentment. Her feeling of true freedom embraces her when she overcomes male supremacy and dual domination. She becomes the strong and enlightened black woman, reflecting the liberation of black culture from the hands of whites (Zahra 112).

The Mule and Cultural Oppression

The mule operates as a central symbol of oppression within the novel. Nanny’s declaration “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (Hurston 14). encapsulates the historical burden placed upon Black women (Hooks 19). The mule represents both physical labour and symbolic marginalisation. Janie’s identification with the mule reflects her awareness of her own subjugation. The communal response to the mule’s suffering further illustrates how cultural meaning is collectively constructed. Through this symbol, Hurston encodes the intersection of race, gender, and labour.

African Socio-cultural Lifestyle

Janie, at the beginning of the novel, wishes to turn into a tree, proclaiming to look calm, composed, lovely and warm. Instead, she is uprooted when she marries Logan, a traditional African farmer. The ‘Tree’ symbolises the struggle of Blacks and their uprooted history (Hurston 11). Though Janie wants to be conventional and grounded, her partners fail to comprehend the intensity of her needs and love. When Janie marries Joe Starks, she longs for love and compassion, yet he behaves as the master. She finds no difference between the ‘American Plantation Slavery’ and her husband’s

home and shop. She has to work and support him; he demands her to stand by his words and restrict her social life. She compares her life with Starks with the life on the plantation. In the plantation, women slaves were physically and morally abused just as Joe abuses Janie in his store. Later in the day, she becomes furious when a mule goes missing. Joe remarks on the incident as a laughing stock, and it turns out to be the community gossip. Janie pities the mule as she feels that she is treated just as the mule.

Janie Crawford's hair serves as a representation of her independence and nonconformity. Her long, unrestrained hair, which she refuses to cover despite her second husband Jody Stark's insistence, becomes a symbol of her rebellion against patriarchal control: "The great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unravelling in the wind like a plume" (Hurston 195). Janie's hair signifies her refusal to be confined by societal expectations, particularly regarding gender roles. Jody's demand that she keep it covered when in public underscores his desire to control her body and image, a control she later sheds following his death. Thus, hair in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* becomes a metaphor for Janie's gradual liberation and self-realisation.

Janie's three marriages subsequently reflect her marital and cultural journey from being suppressed to finally becoming self-liberated. Each encounter of marriage gives Janie a sense of autonomy and shapes her understanding of freedom. Her first marriage to Logan Killicks signifies her dominant fight and rebellion against patriarchal control. While the second marriage to Joe Starks redefines her understanding of mutual recognition with the unvoiced trap of patriarchal dominance. Joe never allows Janie to dress up to her expectations or to let down her hair. His jealousy makes her tie head rags all the time in their store. Tea Cake is the last man she chooses to marry after all the turmoil she has endured. Only his death marks her self-realisation and claims a positive affiliation to her life.

Janie's marriages illustrate different forms of patriarchal oppression. Logan Killicks represents economic exploitation, while Joe Starks embodies psychological domination (Carby 101). These relationships reflect the concept of double colonisation, where Black women experience both racial and

gender oppression. Her relationship with Tea Cake allows her to experience emotional growth, though it is not devoid of complexity (Bloom 73). Ultimately, Janie's independence is affirmed through her ability to define her own identity.

She, after reaching Eatonville, realises her self-worth and engages in the activities that keep her happy. The foremost thing she did was to let down her hair freely to flow and to burn down the head rags, which was a sign of patriarchal control for her. "She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net" (Hurston 193). This closing image becomes a semiotic marker of her reclaiming agency and integrating her horizon with her inner self (Hemenway 167–70).

Understanding Semiotics Through Culture

When Joe dies, she turns independent and receives multiple suitors as she has inherited the property of her husband. She is criticised and confronted by the entire community for confessing her love for Tea Cake, a gambler. She is old and wealthy; she restricts herself from falling for him, but it goes the other way. Though she is rich and independent, she is not allowed to decide her life. This double colonisation is comprehended by applying cultural semiotics. Whereas a widower, being a man, can opt for frequent marriages when a woman cannot. The patriarchal culture is a dominant theme throughout the novel. Janie shatters all these socially constructed cultural codes and does justice to her identity and individuality by enriching her life with her decisions. Janie's experiences illustrate the concept of double colonisation, where Black women are subjected to both racial and patriarchal domination. Logan Killicks represents economic control, while Joe Starks embodies psychological oppression (Carby 101).

The significance of community and cultural identity plays a crucial role in shaping Janie's character. Her relationship with Pheoby invokes the importance of female solidarity and asserts her identity. Her conversation with Pheoby shows her framework of understanding identity formation and self-liberation. She emerges as a powerful and self-assertive individual. Her life is a real-time example

of an independent woman who defines her own identity. The novel narrates Janie Crawford's journey from silence to self-realisation within a racially and patriarchally structured society. Her transformation reflects the broader struggle of African American women seeking autonomy and voice (Washington 34).

Conclusion

Hurston explores the concepts of 'Harlem Renaissance' and 'African Slave History' in the novel. The novel is a rich source of African lifestyle, as it reflects the culture and domesticity of Black Women. The narrative strongly highlights the distinction of marriage without love, money without independence, life without liberty and life without race. The alienation and frustration that Janie faces in the novel mirror the entire black women's suffering and emancipation. An independent woman's journey elucidates her culture and prominence. The article summarises the cultural semiotics of the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The novel becomes timeless as it explores identity, selfhood, the importance of voice, cultural traditions, and the empowerment of African American women.

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* functions as a semiotic text in which cultural symbols operate as systems of meaning. Through the pear tree, hair, mule, and horizon, the novel encodes the complexities of African American identity. Janie Crawford's journey illustrates the process of identity formation as a semiotic negotiation shaped by culture, gender, and race. Her transformation from silence to self-realisation represents a broader assertion of Black female identity. By situating the novel within a semiotic framework, this study demonstrates that Hurston's work is not only a narrative of personal growth but also a cultural text that articulates resistance, autonomy, and selfhood.

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