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Social Bonds And Self-Actualization In Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God

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This paper aims to attempt Zora Neale Hurston's novel Their Eyes Were Watching God which delves deeply into an African American woman's search for self-realization within a complex web of social bonds. It traces the journey of the protagonist, Janie, through multiple marriages and communities, revealing how their social norms and personal relationships constrain her development. Her life is marked by multiple oppressive marriages and relationships that silence her. Hurston argues that while social relationships are inevitable and often limiting, true fulfillment comes from resisting or redefining them. Ultimately, the novel self is the dynamic tension between personal aspiration and social expectations, and it affirms the individual's right to self-definition.

Key Words: Self – actualization, Marriage, Inherited trauma, Autonomy, Self-definition, Social bonds, Janie Crawford.

Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston was born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, to John Hurston, a Baptist preacher, and Lucy Ann Hurston, a school teacher. Her family later migrated to Eatonville, Florida, the first incorporated all-Black town in the United States. Hurston would go on to become one of the most famous African American writers, anthropologists, dramatists, teachers, celebrities, folklorists, and urbanites of her time. Hurston was a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance, befriending and collaborating with writers like Langston Hughes. Her commitment in celebrating African American Culture was evident in both her fiction and her anthropological work, collecting folklore in the South, Haiti and Jamaica.

A social bond refers to the connections, relationships, and attachments that individuals form with others within a society. These bonds shape identity, behaviour, and emotional well-being, influencing how people interact with family, friends, romantic partners, and broader communities. Identity involves both how a person perceives themselves and how others perceive themselves; it is linked to the act of seeing from one's own perspective and from the perspective of others. In literary criticism, postcolonialism centres on the idea that, historically, Black people's identities have been suppressed. One of the main achievements of postcolonial

thought is the acknowledgment of Black people as ordinary human beings who possess their own sense of self and identity. According to Fanon (1925-1961), "identity is never an priori, nor a finished product; it is only the problematic process of access to an 'image' of totality"

Their Eyes Were Watching God published in 1973, is valued not only by African-Americans for its vivid depiction of Black culture and language, but also attracts significant interest from feminists because of its focus on female self-actualization. The novel reflects Zora Neale Hurston's political perspectives on both blackness and womanhood. Examining the main character Janie's journey towards understanding herself and her identity, becomes clear that, from the start to the very end of the novel, Janie's sense of self experiences has many developments and transformations. Zora Neale Hurston examines themes of love, power, freedom, and self- Identity in the context of early 20th-century Black Southern life.

Janie's first significant social bond is with her grandmother, Nanny, whose traumatic past as an enslaved woman shapes her rigid views on security and respectability. Nanny forces Janie into marriage with Logan Killicks, believing that financial stability is the best protection for a Black woman. She tells Janie:

> Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!" p-14

Janie's initial marriage to Logan Killicks, orchestrated by her grandmother Nanny, powerfully illustrates how social bonds rooted in duty and tradition can severely suppress individual identity. Unlike her subsequent relationships, this union lacks genuine emotional connection or mutual growth, starkly highlighting the constraints imposed by societal expectations on Black women. Through Logan, Hurston critiques the patriarchal structures and generational cycles that confine women to roles of labour and obedience, thereby setting the stage for Janie's eventual resistance and search for authentic connection.

Logan enters Janie's life as a direct consequence of Nanny's profound fears a response to the systemic vulnerabilities and historical traumas faced by Black women. As a widowed landowner, she symbolizes economic security, a paramount concern for Nanny, who carries the deep scars of enslavement and exploitation. Yet, Hurston meticulously emphasizes the transactional nature of this particular social bond: Logan seeks a worker, while Nanny seeks protection and stability for Janie. Janie, however, yearns for the emotional and romantic fulfilment she envisioned under the pear tree. The profound disconnects between Logan's utilitarian view of marriage "You don't need mah help out dere, Logan. Youse in yo' place and Ah'm in mine" "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick" and Janie's personal aspirations reveals how rigid social roles and expectations can stifle individual desire and emotional needs.

Logan's treatment of Janie further exposes the oppressive nature of these patriarchal social bonds. Initially accommodating, he becomes increasingly hostile when Janie resists his demands, revealing a deep-seated sense of ownership disguised as care. His insistence that she perform arduous labour reduces her to a purely functional role, denying her burgeoning autonomy. Hurston sharply contrasts Logan's inflexible expectations with Janie's growing self-awareness, his chilling threat to treat her "like a mule" symbolizes the dehumanizing ties she must ultimately break. The farm, once a potential haven, transforms into a site of confinement, pushing Janie to reject passive submission and flee with Joe Starks. Though imperfect, this decision marks her crucial first step toward reclaiming her agency and challenging the restrictive social bonds that define her life.

> "You behind a plow! You ain't got no mo' business wid uh plow than uh hog is got wid uh holiday! You ain't got no business cuttin' up no seed p'taters neither. 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" P-4

Beyond individual conflict, Logan represents the heavy generational burdens placed upon Black women. Nanny's insistence on the marriage stems from a survival mentality shaped by the brutal realities of enslavement, where love was often secondary to security. Yet, Hurston masterfully demonstrates how such social bonds, despite being well-intentioned, become oppressive when they deny personal freedom and self-expression. Janie's poignant realization "You ain't done me no favor by marryin' me. And if dat's what you call yo'self doin', Ah don't thank yuh for it. Youse mad 'cause Ah'm tellin' yuh whut you already knowed" underscores the novel's central argument—that true fulfilment requires breaking free from restrictive social ties. Ironically, Logan's failure to "make her know a few things" does not domesticate Janie but instead propels her toward a profound journey of self-liberation and the pursuit of more authentic connections.

Janie's second marriage to Jody Starks introduces a new, and in some ways more insidious, form of social bonds. Unlike the bond with Logan Killicks, which was rooted in rural labour and survival, this union is defined by public performance, social status, and patriarchal control. While Jody promises Janie a life of freedom and prestige, the social bond they form ultimately becomes a gilded cage, trapping her in a role designed to serve his ambition rather than her own identity. Through Jody, Hurston explores how aspirations for upward mobility within the Black community can create a new set of restrictive social norms.

Jody Starks enters Janie's life as a symbol of the "New Negro" charismatic, ambitious, and focused on building a community from scratch. The social bond he forges with Janie is immediately tied to his rise to power in Eatonville. As the town's founder, mayor, and successful businessman, his authority becomes the very foundation of their marriage. Their relationship is not a private matter but a public spectacle, with Janie's role as the "mayor's wife" becoming her primary identity. Jody's promise of a "big voice" for Janie is tragically ironic; he offers her a public, symbolic voice that is entirely dependent on his own, while

simultaneously silencing her private, authentic self. This bond, built on the community's admiration for their power couple, demands that Janie perform a specific, submissive role.

The social bond with Jody is oppressive not through physical labor, but through a constant demand for emotional and intellectual suppression. Jody's need for control extends from the public sphere into their home, dictating Janie's appearance and behavior. His famous insistence that she tie up her beautiful, flowing hair symbolizes his desire to hide her innate sexuality and individuality from other men, marking her as his exclusive property. His silencing of her in the store "you ain't got no business talkin' after me" is the ultimate manifestation of this bond's core principle: Janie's purpose is to be an object of admiration, a trophy wife, not an independent person with her own thoughts and voice. The store itself becomes the stage for this performance, where Janie must publicly embody the silent, beautiful symbol of Jody's success, further isolating her from the community and her true self.

The climax of this social bond's dissolution comes when Janie publicly rebels against Jody's constant verbal abuse. Her stinging rebuke "you're a big-bellied, loud-talkin' man..." is not merely a personal insult; it is a profound act of rejecting the social role she has been forced to play. By mocking his age and perceived impotence, Janie shatters the carefully constructed façade of their marriage and Jody's authority within the community. This act of verbal liberation effectively breaks the social contract that defined their relationship. In the aftermath, the bond between them is completely severed; Jody dies a lonely, bitter man, and Janie is finally free from the silent, suffocating confinement of his patriarchal control. His death marks a pivotal moment, allowing Janie to shed the performative social bonds of her second marriage and prepare for a relationship based on true equality and mutual respect.

Janie's third and final relationship, with Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods, represents the culmination of her quest for an authentic identity and the novel's ideal model of a social bond. In radical opposition to the restrictive, transactional ties of her first two marriages, her connection with Tea Cake is founded on equality, emotional reciprocity, and shared experience. This bond is not a reaction to societal pressure or a pursuit of status; it is a profound choice that liberates Janie from the burdens of both labor and social performance, allowing her to finally live her own life.

The social bond between Janie and Tea Cake is defined by a deep and unprecedented sense of equality. Unlike Logan, who saw Janie as a labourer, or Jody, who saw her as a trophy, Tea Cake sees her as a partner and an equal. This is most powerfully symbolized by the scene where he teaches her to play checkers a simple act that signifies intellectual engagement and mutual respect, something she never experienced with her previous husbands. They share their time, their work, and their resources, making decisions together. Tea Cake's bond with Janie is not about control but about companionship, valuing her thoughts, her laughter, and her very presence as a person. They build their life together on a foundation of genuine partnership, a stark contrast to the hierarchical relationships she endured before.

Janie and Tea Cake's bond thrives on authentic emotional connection, a fulfilment of the romantic ideal she first envisioned under the pear tree. Their relationship is not a public performance for the approval of a community; it is a private, joyful journey they share. They

leave the stifling social hierarchy of Eatonville for the transient, communal life on "the muck," where the social bonds are more horizontal and fluid. Here, Janie learns to fish, to shoot, and to socialize on her own terms, finding a sense of belonging among her peers. Tea Cake provides a space for Janie to discover her own talents and passions, enabling her to shed the masks of "Nanny's Janie" and "Mrs. Mayor Starks" and simply become herself. This relationship is a celebration of the present moment and a shared joy in life itself, making it the most genuine and meaningful bond in the novel.

While their bond is not perfect Tea Cake's brief outburst of jealousy and violence is a reminder of the toxic masculinity that pervades society the true nature of their connection is revealed in their ability to overcome it through honest conversation and forgiveness. The ultimate tragedy of their relationship is not an internal failing, but an external force: the hurricane and Tea Cake's subsequent death from rabies. This external destruction only serves to highlight the strength and purity of their bond, which remains untainted and unbreakable. Even after Tea Cake's death, his memory becomes an internal force that defines Janie's identity. She carries the love and the lessons of their connection back to Eatonville, a woman who is finally whole and self-possessed. The social bond with Tea Cake is the one that truly sets her free, proving that true fulfilment comes from a connection that nurtures the individual, not one that suppresses them.

Self-actualization in Their Eyes Were Watching God refers to the protagonist Janie Crawford's journey towards discovering and embracing her authentic self, independent of societal expectations and external constraints. This process is deeply interwoven with her quest for self-identity, autonomy, and fulfilling her own desires and dreams, rather than merely adhering to the role's others assign her.

Diana Miles argues in Women, Violence, & Testimony in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston that Their Eyes Was Watching God "interrogates the patriarchal social system that condones the use of violence as a way of maintaining control over women" (42). I would add that the novel also examines the use of financial security to control women. Miles identifies three traumas that Janie endures in the relationships she has with men, which allow her to define her identity. These include, first, "a marriage that forces her to make herself sexually available to a man whom she doesn't love;" second, "a marriage where she is silent and powerless;" and third, "a marriage with physical abuse that suggests in order to experience love a man must take ownership of you" (55). Miles does not, however, address the traumatic thinking of Nanny and its effects on Janie beyond the fact that Nanny's experiences as a slave transform her goals for Janie (56). Nanny's opinions on marriage are based not only on physical security, but also on the financial security necessary to enter into a higher social class. Therefore, the early 20th century notion of the politics of respectability fits Nanny's understanding of proper womanhood; however, Janie is not an ex-slave and has not experienced a past filled with racial sexual violence.

Sharon Jones argues this point, quoting Hurston's word choice in describing Tea Cake as "a glance from God" in direct contrast to Joe Starks, who sees himself as a god. Jones argues that Starks's use of the phrase "I, God" to really mean "My, God" or "By, God" illustrates this

contrast (196). William Nash views Tea Cake as a character who “breaks the formerly suffocating heroine out of a lifeless life and reawakens her” (75). Tea Cake is also “bound less by conventional morality than by a devotion to pleasure and aesthetic satisfaction (75). While Jones and Nash argue for Tea Cake’s morality, Janice Knudsen feels that ‘Janie’s ultimate evolution of self is only possible because of the strong, healthy relationship she shares with Tea Cake, which fosters the self-worth necessary for full self- realization” (Ashmawi 203). However, these arguments disregard Janie’s own choices prior to meeting Tea Cake and even choices made while with Tea Cake. If Tea Cake is such a “saviour,” then why must Janie act in self-defence to end his life in order to save herself? Janie, then, is her own saviour, and her salvation is a result of incremental growth.

> She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. p-7

Janie achieves her self-actualization not after Tea Cake's passing, but rather before their relationship even begins, as a result of a gradual, cumulative development that starts under the pear tree. Her relationship with Tea Cake represents the opportunity to finally live out the authentic self she had been aware of, even during her earlier, unfulfilling marriages. The most crucial moment in her journey to self- actualization is not her self-defence against Tea Cake that leads to his death; this event is just one part of a larger process.

This perspective alters the common view of Tea Cake as Janie's sole "savior." Instead, it emphasizes that her newfound self-discovery is the culmination of all her past experiences and relationships, particularly her decision to leave Logan Killicks for Joe Starks and her assertive final conversation with Starks on his deathbed. Zora Neale Hurston, suggests, "The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting." Janie "got" herself years before she was faced with the painful obligation of defending herself against Tea Cake, an act that was also an act of loyalty to her self-actualization.

Before Janie ever meets Tea Cake, her previous relationships already begin to guide her toward self-actualization. These relationships are not stopped to those with men; every connection and significant experience in Janie’s life teaches her something new about herself and clarifies what she truly desires. While it is evident that her marriages shape her through the influence of male authority where these husbands follow the tradition of viewing women as possessions rather than equals, Janie also encounters reinforcement of this male dominance from women themselves, first through Nanny and later from the women in Eatonville.

Nanny’s insistence on securing Janie’s physical and financial safety through marriage to Logan Killicks reflects her belief that stability and respectability outweigh personal fulfillment. Shaped by her own history as an enslaved woman subjected to sexual exploitation and denied the dignity of choice, Nanny views the “domestic pedestal” of the politics of respectability, as Lorraine Bethel describes, as the only shield against both sexual violence and

social degradation. Her ambitions for Janie are rooted in the desire to secure what slavery had denied her property, protection, and social standing believing that marriage to a financially stable man serves as both a safeguard and a symbol of freedom, as Davida Pines notes. Yet this vision requires Janie to suppress her own romantic ideals, fulfilling instead Nanny's deferred dream of "true womanhood," one that prioritizes survival and public respect over emotional fulfilment. In this way, Nanny's protective intentions also reinforce the very gender hierarchy that limits Janie's autonomy.

Nanny prioritizes Janie's physical and financial security over love by reinforcing African-American male dominance, believing this will protect her from sexual assault by white men and from a life of low social standing. As Lorraine Bethel notes, the "domestic pedestal" of the politics of respectability offers the only real protection (15). Nanny's restrictions on Janie arises from her own traumatic past, including sexual assault by her white master during slavery. Having been exploited as a "bed wench" and denied property or prosperity, Nanny dreams of a better future for Janie with stability and status that she herself never had. To achieve this, she arranges Janie's marriage to Logan Killicks, a much older but financially secured man. As Davida Pines explains, in the post-slavery era marriage, like voting, symbolized newly won freedom, citizenship, and equality, affirming Black respectability in a racist society (76). For Nanny, this vision requires Janie to set aside personal desires in favor of social advancement. She tells Janie that slavery prevented her from being "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" and that she does not want her granddaughter reduced to a "Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will. Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither" (Hurston 16). Acknowledging the past but recognizing changed times, Nanny urges Janie to marry for respectability, projecting onto her the unfulfilled hopes of her own youth.

Self-actualization is the process of realizing and embracing one's own unique identity, independent of external expectations and societal pressures. It means reaching a point where personal fulfilment, rather than conformity or the approval of others, becomes the guiding force in one's life. In my interpretation, self-actualization is not just about achieving success or happiness, but about undertaking a courageous journey inward: questioning imposed roles, reclaiming one's authentic voice, and choosing relationships or environments that nurture rather than suppress the true self.

Janie Crawford's journey in Their Eyes Were Watching God is a powerful illustration of this concept. Each stage of her life teaches that external sources of security, power, or affection while important cannot substitute for the inner clarity and peace that come from truly knowing oneself. Her experiences reveal that real fulfilment is not found in the validation or control of others, but develops through honest self-exploration and the courage to pursue one's individual vision of happiness. True self-actualization is achieved when one learns to listen to and trust their inner voice, even when it challenges tradition, security, or external acceptance. It is the ability to draw boundaries, discard constraints, and choose a path that allows the 'soul to come and see' the fullness of one's humanity. Janie's story shows that the road to self-

actualization is challenging and often lonely, but ultimately, it leads to a state of profound peace and self-love—a horizon found within, not outside, oneself.

Conclusion

Their Eyes Were Watching God, Janie's evolving social bonds exemplify the tension between societal expectation and personal desire. Each relationship shaped by generational trauma, patriarchal power, or genuine companionship illuminates the ways in which Black women's lives have been constrained yet also reveals the possibility of transformation. The symbols threaded through Janie's journey mark milestones in her growing agency, culminating in her ability to define herself and her voice on her own terms. Ultimately, Hurston's novel suggests that true fulfilment is not found by conforming to external demands but by forging authentic connections and embracing one's own identity. Janie's triumphant self-realization at the story's end represents a reclamation of selfhood, demonstrating that liberation and harmony are achieved not through the approval of others, but through the courageous pursuit of authentic, self-defined existence.

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