

Janie's Spiritual Growth in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: A Deconstruction Approach

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Abstract: The woman image in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is vivid and forward-looking, which lays the foundation for feminism. Janie, the heroine of the novel, achieved spiritual growth by subverting the traditional female image in the male-dominated society. This essay will use Derrida's deconstructive criticism to subvert the binary opposition in the text—older members of a family deciding the marriage fate of the younger generation, the superiority of husband over wife and woman's personal freedom depending on her marriage with a man, analyzing how the heroine deconstructs the traditional ideology in the male-dominated society to realize her spiritual growth and revealing the meaning of the advanced thinking represented by Janie and its social meaning.

Keywords: Zora Neale Hurston, Deconstruction, Binary opposites, Self-liberation.

1. Introduction

1.1. Zora Neale Hurston and her *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston was an important writer, anthropologist and litterateur of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s in the United States. Among her published works, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the first black feminist literary work, which is praised as "the classic of black literature and one of the best novels of that period". Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guba, in their review of women's writing, say that American minority women writers "tend to look to a femal progeny to discover their own creativity" (Culp 50). Hurston's works now considered classics of African-American literature, woman's literature and 20th century literature. Zora Neale Hurston devoted her life to the collection and protection of her nation's traditional cultural heritage. She was very proud of her African American identity. She denied that she was confused by the "double consciousness" of being both American and black. She refused to regard black people as the "problem" of American society, and refused to describe black people as deformed children under the racial system (WEN-Peihong 251).

1.2. Literature review and research rationale

In existing studies, the domestic research of her work is mainly divided into three phases; the first one focuses on the introduction of the writer and her works; while during the second period, more approaches and perspectives are applied to produce deeper research. In this period, most scholars focus on the perspective of feminist criticism, and discuss the perspectives of Hurston's creation, race, themes, characters, narrative strategies, the relationship between her works and writers, and the influence of Hurston on African-American female writers; in the third one, the study is more widen and expansive. In this period, there are more diversified perspectives and research themes, such as the perspective of genre, Bakhtin's carnival theory, multi-modal of narratology, new historicism, archetype theory, film inter-textual analysis, male image analysis and other more diversified perspectives. In foreign studies, critics also start from a variety of critical

perspectives, such as feminism, new historicism, African-American criticism, post-colonial criticism, political criticism, cultural criticism and language style.

But the appreciation of this story from the perspective of the deconstruction of Logo-centrism is not common. Derrida's deconstruction theory is to unravel the western way of thinking for thousands of years—the logos centralism thought way. In his perspective, the basic principles of this way of thinking are : (1) dividing things into two halves, A and B; (2) It is believed that one party decides the other party's hierarchical relationship, such as A decides B or B decides A; (3) Each party is considered to be intrinsically unified, self-contained and homogenous. Based on this way of thinking, westerners have always believed that things and the world are unified based on some center. So far, it seems difficult for western scholars to make a precise definition of the concept of Deconstruction. However, post-structuralism is the rise of the floorboard of the mixture of various theoretical criticism thought after the structuralism decline. The thoughts of these theories advocated the elimination of binary opposition, against any center and fixed mode. Among the thoughts of post-structuralism theory, Derrida's deconstruction theory is the most prominent one, and an important feature of this theory is anti-logocentrism. Derrida wants to eliminate this center, because in the view of post-structuralism, the interpretation of language is endless, and deconstructive reading is diversified and not ultimate.

2. Deconstruction in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

At the start of a concrete analysis of the novel's Logo-centrism and its deconstruction, it's necessary to summarize the deconstructions which are divided into two categories: to deconstruct the existing binary opposites—elder member of a family deciding the marriage fate of the younger generation, the superiority of Janie's husband over Janie and woman's personal freedom depending on her marriage with a man.

2.1. Deconstruction of the traditional view of marriage and love represented by Nanny

2.1.1. Nanny's decision

Janie's grandmother, Nanny, realized how serious the problem was when she discovered Janie was dating and kissing a man named Johnny Taylor. In the grandmother's view, her granddaughter is ignorant and incapable of judgment, and she is likely to repeat her own suffering. Janie and Janie's mother were both the result of white men and black men insulting women. Nanny stubbornly stuck to her decision. When she found out Janie was dating on that guy who is likely to trod Janie, she immediately arranged an marriage for her. But the grandmother did this actually out of an consciousness of an oppressed female black slave. Her grandmother had experienced the trauma of slavery, and that trauma was seared into Nanny's consciousness. She had nothing to hope on her daughter, and the only hope she could bear for was her innocent granddaughter. She had paid her hurt and the price so she aimed to impart these lessons to Janie. Nanny hit the ceiling when he found out Janie was dating. From Nanny's words and actions on this issue, including her hitting Janie and then talking to her, it is revealed that Nanny's personal view of love and marriage, as a slave, is actually passive. That is the view of black female slaves under the influence of that era. Women in marriage are generally not free, subservient and abused not only by the white man, but also oppressed by the black man. Under this double oppression, there is no resistance, only silence. Nanny has learned from her miserable life that women are 'mules' for men to burden and ravage. Life experience tells Nanny that neither a white man nor a black man will give true love to a woman, and it is impossible to give true love to a black woman (WU-Yanmei 167). Therefore, under the influence of such ideology, arranged marriage became the best option that the grandmother thought could save Janie from the same suffering. The man Janie will marry met Nanny's needs, in Nanny's view providing Janie with her the basic and the least security-- the 60 acres of land and a house.

2.1.2. Janie's rebellion

Janie is skeptical of her grandmother's arrangements and the marital values she has passed on to her. Subconsciously, she knew that that was not the marriage she wanted. It is intolerable and unacceptable to marry an old man whom she has never met and has to live with him on the mere condition of a house and 60 acres of land. Under the flowering pear tree what marriage Janie yearned for is a two-way attraction and rush and the active pursuit of her own love. It is not blind for a certain purpose or to meet a certain need of life. Here, the love Janie yearns for is active and free. This right of initiative and free choice represents the self-awareness of the responsible attitude towards a marriage, the reasonable use and distribution of resources, love of life and self-understanding. In Janie's arranged marriage, a woman with a clear sense of self was forced to be ordered and arranged by her relatives, so it was difficult for her to maintain her love for life, self-understanding and responsible attitude. Even though after marriage, as Janie says to herself that there will be love between two people in a marriage with the passage of time. But truth is that sharp conflict between her and Logan disappointed and disillusioned her. In the novel, the character of Janie is set as a female character who is brave with strong self-awareness and bold practical actions.

2.2. The deconstruction of traditional concept that female emancipation relying on couple relationship in Janie's third marriage

2.2.1. Implicit forms of inequality in marriage

Janie's third marriage is the sweet, free pear - bee love she yearned for. After being oppressed by more than 20 years of unequal marriage, she experienced for the first time the long-desired happy feeling of equality between men and women (CHEN-Xilin 76). Her third husband satisfied Janie with the freedom and respect she had never had before, and gave her the love she yearned for as sweet as that one between the pear flower and the bee. "Folks seen you out in colors and dey thinks you ain't payin' de right amount uh respect tuh yo' dead husband." "Ah ain't grievin' so why do Ah hafta mourn? Tea Cake love me in blue, so Ah wears it. Jody ain't never in his life picked out no color for me. De world picked out black and white for mournin', Joe didn't. so Ah wasn't wearin' it for him. Ah was wearing' it for de rest of y'all," writes Hurston (93). The conversation between Janie and her best friend is that the bright colors Janie wore after the death of her previous husband were considered an act of disloyalty to her previous husband. But Janie boldly shows the difference between the two husbands. The former does not respect Janie's preferences and feelings, while the latter not only respects but also understands and supports her. It obviously shows that Janie yearns for and cherishes the present love. She is not afraid of other people's opinions and boldly pursues her own passion, which is valuable as well as courageous.

However, in the seemingly perfect marriage life, there are also the existence of traditional prejudices and concepts and the generation of contradictions between husband and wife. But the inequality between men and women in this third marriage is not as sharp as it was in the first two marriages. The conflict is so subtle that the author doesn't even bother to write about Janie's reaction and attitude to it. But just like this subtle discrimination did not really achieve Janie's complete self-liberation. The death of Tea Cake at the ending of the novel does not only overturn the idea that the respect of marriage and love should have the thought of happy endings, but also subvert mentioned traditional concepts of sublimation and the concept that women cannot have the freedom to choose marriage and grow continuously in the marriage without relying on their relationships with men to realize self liberation and to form independent personality.

2.2.2. Woman's complete self-realization through the denial of any form of sexual discrimination

Small contradictions and accidents in the marriage of Janie and Tea Cake are the focus of the analysis, which is where the deconstruction reaches its peak in the novel. The first conflict is about Mrs. Turner, who runs a restaurant. "Janie becomes friends with Mrs. Turner, who runs a restaurant, and has a lot of friends, but Mrs. Turner has racist ideas and hates black people, including Tea Cake, and she wants Janie to draw a line under black people. Janie, however, disagrees. Mrs. Turner was willing to make friends with Janie because Janie had light skin and white features. Tea Cake was very unhappy to hear their conversation and hoped that Mrs. Turner would never come home again. One day, Mrs. Turner arrives with her brother, whom she introduces to Janie. Tea Cake was furious and slapped Janie across the face" (CHEN-Xilin 77). "Not because her actions justified his jealousy, but because he gave vent to his inner fear, and it comforted him to be able

to hit her, to feel that he still had control. It wasn't bad at all. He just slapped her a few light slaps to show that he was the one calling the shots" (Hurstons 218).

The novel does not describe Janie's conscious thinking and resistance after the contradictions in the third as described in the first two marriages. Such a plot is set for the occurrence of accidents and disasters and the death of Tea Cake in the future. It can be said that such implicit inequality bred the death of Tea Cake later, and it was the death of Tea Cake that achieved Janie's final liberation. Only complete equality and respect for women could liberate women. In addition, when Tea Cake gets sick after being infected with rabies and tries to shoot Janie, Janie's defense also reflects the theme that women and men have absolute equal status. "In his delirious state, he took a pistol from under his pillow and pointed it at Janie. At the moment, Janie, in self-defense, picks up a rifle and both guns are fired almost simultaneously. Tea Cake missed Janie, and Janie hit Tea Cake" (CHEN-Xilin 78). "Janie's need to be free and expand her horizons more than she needs love -- a theme that will recur, especially as the novel ends by eliminating the romance with Tea Cake, cutting the romantic hero out of the heroine's life and making him stronger rather than weaker. Here Hurston is consciously turning his back on the traditional happy ending of fiction" (Clair 60). The third deconstruction in the novel is the deepening of the theme of the novel. This deconstruction is implicit in the text, and it is reflected in the subtle decisions made in the critical moment. However, it achieves the maximum deconstruction of the traditional concept that the final and complete liberation of women is independent of the marriage relationship between men and women. "Hurston is inclined to think that the outcome of this third marriage shows Janie's development from "mule" and "caged bird" to an independent, independent and self-reliant capital "man" " (CHEN-Xilin 79).

3. Conclusion

So this is about the appreciation of this text from the perspective of Deconstruction. When we apply this kind of methodology into our realistic life, it directly provides methodology for those who are in need of solutions. There are a lot of different versions of "Janie" in real life, they are more or less suffering from choices suggested by relatives and the choices made by her own, the problem is that overbalance of each side is not palatable. Maybe obedience in front of your relatives with the contemplation in your mind can produce the best choice. And the rest is left to integration. In my view, this is the proper way to solve the conflict between ideas represented by young generation and conventional

stereotypes by old generation. Before being in a marriage relationship, thinking twice before acting is necessary. I do admit we learn a lot from Janie's growth journey and I do appreciate her audacity to move so quickly to the next marriage relationship to experience more. That is probably under the impact of the whole background where slavery and hierarchy were dominant. Janie was not overwhelmed by it, instead she abandons and gets into a marriage until she wins her fate and time. And she has the thinking way of deconstruction to realize her independence and her maturity. This paper not only finds the deconstruction place in the story, but also refines the ideology of deconstruction that can be used in many aspects in real world.

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