

The African American Women's Plight in Zora Neale Hurston's Novel 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'

Abdullah Abbas Altayb Hamza

Department of English language, Faculty of Arts, AL Neelain University, Khartoum, Sudan.

Corresponding author E-mail: nooa993@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the African American women's plight as depicted in Zora Neale Hurston's novel 'Their Eyes Were Watching God' (1937), by analyzing the elements of characterization. African American women have been excluded from theory, history, and women's rights movements for centuries. Their dilemma is shaped by issues of race, class, and gender, operating at various levels, intellectual, institutional, social and cultural. Hurston depicts the African American women's plight which is shaped by different forms of oppression, racism, classism, and sexism in her character portrayal in 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'. Hurston uses 'speech'-dialogue between the characters as the major characterization technique. Equally, speech is used to reveal other elements of characterization- physical appearance, actions, reactions, and inner thoughts. These methods of characterization adequately depict the African American women's plight. Due to the complexity of the African American women's plight as depicted in Hurston's 'Their Eyes Were Watching God', the researcher uses the interdisciplinary approach, the formalistic, post-colonial, Marxist, and feminist approaches.

Keywords: Sexism, Racism, Classism, Womanism

Introduction

The African American women's plight is determined by different forms of oppression, operating at different levels, individual, social, cultural, and institutional. Race oppression, class oppression, and Sexual exploitation intersect to shape the African American women's dilemma. African American women reflect their experiences in their literary productions to signify their standpoint and position in America. They express how it means to be black, colored, female, and poor in America. The call for developing an inclusionary literary theory to approach works written by African American women writers, which reflects the struggle of black women, is necessitated. Thus, identifying the nature of the black women's plight is one of the major concerns of African American women's theories, such as feminism, a critical theory that seeks to establish a comprehensive approach for dealing with the diverse issues in women's writing. Black women recognize their marginalization by men merely because of their gender. However, the black women's fight for their rights is further complicated by problems of racism, classism, and sexism, operating at different

levels, cultural, social, and psychological. Equally, African American women became aware of their enslavement along with their men by white capitalists who aim to increase their capital at the expense of other ethnic minorities and those at the bottom of the social ladder. Besides, they are discriminated against because they are women. The term 'gender' becomes inseparable from race and class in the case of African American women. That is to say racism intensifies the dilemma of the black woman, where race and class determine gender based concepts and practices of the critical theory of feminism. This asserts that racism, sexism, and patriarchy in America are the cause of the plight of Black women who suffer from organized forms of oppression. The American social structure is shaped by racial differences and patriarchal attitudes that expose black women to abuse by their men. This system makes Black women troubled by their spouses, brothers, lovers, etc. Barker, E. Ellen clarifies the condition of Black women in a racist America governed by white male chauvinists causing white women to battle for their feminism, Black men for their blackness while Black women have to contest against all forms of aggression

racism and sexism. (Bloom 2008: 79) In *'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens'* (1972), Walker states:

Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in society, "the mule of the world," because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else-everyone else-refused to carry. We have also been called "Matriarchs," "Superwomen," and "Mean and Evil Bitches." Not to mention "Castraters" and "Sapphire's Mama." (405)

Walker, praising Hurston's independent spirit, describes her as: "... a woman who wrote and spoke her mind—as far as one could tell, practically always. People who knew her and were unaccustomed to this characteristic in a woman. . . attacked her as meanly as they could" (Hemenway xiv). Zora Neale Hurston (January 7, 1891-January 28, 1960) is an American author, anthropologist, and filmmaker, who has portrayed racial struggles in the early-1900s American South and published research on hoodoo. She has written more than 50 short stories, plays, and essays. *'Their Eyes Were Watching God'* (1937) is the most popular of her four novels. The novel tells the story of Janie Crawford who searches for true love. She experiences three marriages and eventually she discovers herself and her relationship to the universe. Walker equally celebrates Hurston's contribution to the concept of womanism which later developed into a theory. Along with other African American female writers, Zora Neale Hurston-applies this concept in her literary works to depict black females' experiences. Walker considers Hurston's essay, *'How It Feels to be Colored Me'* (1928), as an expression of her feminist views. In her essay, Hurston asserts that:

I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads. I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries...sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me." (155)

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for shedding light on the plight of African-American women in racist America – a plight that is shared by many black women in racist communities worldwide. The study highlights how such women suffer the injustices of racist and patriarchal systems in the hope of drawing the attention of human rights organizations, institutions concerned with protecting oppressed women against domestic violence, male chauvinism, racial discrimination and patriarchal dominance, male oppression and sexual exploitation. The study is worthwhile since it casts light on the negative impact of such practices on black women's psychology which may impede their leading a healthy life if its findings are generalized to other similar settings.

Questions of the Study

The researcher poses the following questions:

- a. What elements of characterization does Hurston use in her novel *'Their Eyes Were Watching God'* to depict the African American women's plight?
- b. To what extent do these elements of characterization contribute to the portrayal of the African American women's plight as reflected in the text?

Objectives of the Study

This study aims at:

- a. Examining the elements of characterization used in *'Their Eyes Were Watching God'* to depict African American women's plight.
- b. Exploring the African American women's plight as reflected in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *'Their Eyes Were Watching God'*, by analyzing her portrayal of the female characters in the text.

Methodology of the Study

The researcher collects data from different sources; books, critical articles, journals, and the internet. Due to the complexity of the African American women experiences, concerning the topic of the study, the researcher employs an interdisciplinary approach; the formalistic, post-colonial, Marxist, and feminist approaches.

Literature Review

It is significant to illustrate different views on race, class, and gender issues in this section due to the complexity of the African American women's plight which is shaped by various forms of oppression. Barone (1999) claims that, any form of oppression, sexism, classism, and racism, operates on various interactive levels, macro (institutional), meso (intergroup), and micro (personal). Nevertheless, an integrative analysis of any of these kinds of oppression is rarely provided. Feminists emphasize personal dynamics of sexism to analyze oppression of women, and likewise studies of race focus on prejudice and discrimination of intergroup. Moreover, class studies tend to focus on the institutional level of class oppression. Understanding class oppression as a social oppressive system, 'classism', operating on different levels and embracing both social structure and human agency, is missing in spite of the fact that more recently a new field of race, class, and gender has been established to combine these topics and focus on their intersections. The newer field of race, class, and gender studies largely disregards the macro structural insights of Marxist sociologists, political economists, and historians into class oppression. Further, Marxists, particularly political economists, ignore the perceptions of the new field of race and gender studies into the personal and social dynamics oppression and the role of culture. There is an inadequate understanding of class oppression resulted from the failure of to identify class oppression as an oppressive social system 'classism' by most scholars who work within these intellectual traditions, including Marxists. Even in the interdisciplinary field of race, class, and gender, classism receives less attention and it is usually conceptually ill-defined. To completely understand the interweaving of race and gender with class oppression, a greater

multilevel analysis of class oppression is demanded. Consequently, class liberation, and equality of race and gender are attained due to such complex understandings. (1-5) Rothernberg (1992) assumes that, racism denotes the subservience of people of color by white people.(7) As a communist and women's rights activist, Reed (1970) claims that, the struggle for women's emancipation goes beyond the limits of feminism of the last century. The explanation of the source of women's oppression proposed by Engels's classical Marxist analysis of capitalism attracts the attention of women's liberators. According to the analysis of the Marxist method, women's oppression is a result of the development of class society, operating on family, private property, and the state. Nevertheless, this approach is misunderstood and wrongly interpreted by some women who define themselves as radicals or socialists. They go against the Marxist claim; consequently they become disoriented theoretically, attributing women's oppression to biological differences. Moreover, some of these theorists believe that women form a separate class or caste, and this class is oppressed by men who form another class, the oppressor class. Such ideas are unfamiliar to Marxist approach and they lead to false results, concluding that the main genesis of women's suffering is the man not capitalism.(15-17) To relate gender issues to class matters, Selden (1988) argues; in spite of the fact that not all feminists are socialist, the parallel between classism and sexism is noticeable. Being aware of the nature of the relation between these forms of oppression is essential to ideological revolution or reformation in modern societies. On one hand, some feminists attribute the analysis of women's oppression to the understanding of class oppression. On the other hand, others disbelieve in this notion, claiming that patriarchy is traced back to a long history when class societies have not been formed. In addition, they look at the extremes, socialism and capitalism, as oppressive to women. In 'Sexual Politics' 1970, Kate Mellit uses the term 'patriarchy' to define the source of women's oppression. Undoubtedly, the claim of women's inferiority is traced back to the era of Aristotle, who asserts 'the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities.' This assumption continues and is enhanced by Freud's idea, arguing that 'penis envy' shapes women's

sexuality (520). The examination of these forms of oppression, racism, classism, and sexism, is very essential to the analysis of the African American women's plight. The intersection of these forms of oppression leaves negative impacts on black women and their community.

Hurston's Depiction of the African American Women's Plight in Character Portrayal

Hurston reveals the complex situation where African American women are trapped. In her portrayal of the female characters in the novel *'Their Eyes Were Watching God'*, Hurston illustrates the sufferings of female characters, who represent her women in the African American community. Race, class, and gender oppressions are portrayed, operating at different levels and taking different forms. Racism affects all people of color in America as reflected in the novel, regardless of gender. Racism is mainly depicted as an oppressive means which flames up sexism, affecting African American women. Nanny, Janie's grandmother, is aware of the fact that, "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world...." (14). Black women are trapped in the American society which proved to be racist, capitalist and sexist. It turns African American women to animals, mules, used and abused by everyone, white men, white women, white children, and black men. Nanny also expresses her fear to her granddaughter Janie: "And Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa you. Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah'm a cracked plate." (20). In Nanny's words, racial oppression precedes gender oppression: as manifested in the treatment of women by men. White men are mentioned first, and then black men. This reflects the intersection of gender and racial issues: they are directly related when practiced by white men and apparently indirectly related when practiced by black men, who oppress their women due to their subjugation by white people. The hierarchy of African American women's oppression is drawn by the grandmother who addresses her granddaughter:

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' fah it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!" (14)

In addition, black women are also racially discriminated against by white women. Nanny receives orders and slaps on the jaws from Mists, insulting her severely:

Nigger, whut's yo' baby doin' wid gray eyes and yaller hair?' She begin tuh slap mah jaws ever which a'way. Ah never felt the fust ones 'cause Ah wuz too busy gittin' de kivver back over mah chile. But dem last lick burnt me lak fire. Ah had too many feelin's tuh tell which one tuh follow so Ah didn't cry and Ah didn't do nothin' else. But then she kept on astin me how come mah baby look white. She asted me dat maybe twenty-five or thirty times, lak she got tuh sayin' dat and couldn't help herself. (17)

The question of race is raised here, "But then she kept astin' me how come mah baby look white." (17) She wonders how black women give birth to white or white-like children. She is not able to comprehend this fact because of her racism. Nanny who mothers a white-like child protects her daughter without any feeling of discrimination against her. This shows how black women strive for the survival of all humans with their various external diversities, as proposed by womanism. As a black woman, Nanny demonstrates her motherhood and humanity to save all humans, no matter blacks or whites, while she is rigorously hurt physically and psychologically. Detest and deep desires of hurting are expressed by Mists when she promises Nanny that she is to be whipped over something she has not any control over. Not only that but also the baby is promised to be sold, treating her as an unworthy property. Consequently, before her body is healed she dares to run away to save her baby along with herself. This shows the sacrifice of black women who suffer to save their children and society. She chooses to face

moccasins and other biting snakes over waiting for being tortured by whites. The brutality of slavery is made clear her, practiced even by white women. Europeans are more harmful than snakes to Nanny, that is why she runs away meeting those fatal and poisonous creatures which are less hurtful than whites. The black female sexuality is determined by racial segregation and contemptibility of African Americans, enslaved and treated accordingly. Nanny is raped by whites whom she cannot resist and she is sexually abused because of her dark complexion. Black women are turned into sex objects who are insulted and scorned after they are used. “Ah don’t know nothin’ but whut Ah’m told tuh do, ‘cause ain’t nothin’ but uh nigger and uh slave.” (17) She does not own herself, so she is unable to object even when it comes to rape, that causes psychological and physical wounds. Not only, Nanny who experiences rape from white men, but also her daughter Leafy is raped because she is colored and the role of law is very weak for blacks and colored people are not taken seriously in America. Physical pain is depicted by the act of crawling on hands and knees after being raped, which is interpreted as inferiority and suffering of females, especially colored or black. The incident of rape remains in Nanny’s memory, hurting her, “Look lak Ah kin see it all over again.” (19) And in turns, it causes destruction to Leafy, who leaves school to be pregnant and being junky, leaving home and never comes back. While Nanny rejects the idea of marriage to avoid male maltreatment hurting her daughter, Leafy, she is raped a white school teacher. She sends her daughter to get educated; believing that a school is a place of knowledge and those teachers are the prophets of good thoughts and deeds. However, her daughter becomes a victim of the ‘ideal place’ and the ‘ideal person’, who is supposed to add knowledge and reform the community during classes and through moral deeds. This reveals the victimization of women of color and their inevitable fate, even in the ideal places, educational institutions and courtrooms which are manipulated by whites to serve certain purposes.

In addition to being racially discriminated against, African American women fall victims to classism and sexism. These forms of oppression shape Nanny’s view point on marriage: she

wants her grand-daughter to marry old Logon Killicks in order to secure her life socially and financially. As a young woman, Janie begs her grandmother not to make her marry Logan Killicks, “Ain’t gointuh do it no mo’, Nanny. Please don’t make me marry Mr. Killicks.” (15) She does not have the chance to make her decision, it is her grandmother’s. This shows how elders interfere to choose their children their future according to their own perspective, which is shaped by different experiences. In this instance, Nanny’s view is merely materialistic, looking at marriage as a means of security while Janie looks for love and simplicity. “‘Tain’t Logan Klicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection.....” (15), marriage is protection according to Nanny. The society’s issues are summarized here; a woman is not protected if there is no man in her life. But later, Janie lives without men in her life after marrying three times.

Nanny struggles from a very early age until she becomes a ‘cracked plate’. Her last wish is to save her granddaughter for she claims that, “de angel wid sword is gointuh stop by here...” (15). The grandmother wants to make sure that her granddaughter is to be protected after she dies and the only way is to make her marry Logan Klicks. She does not mention love and emotions to Janie, who wants to live her life following her heart. Nanny’s view point goes against her granddaughter’s freedom and self-esteem. Janie is beaten, slapped by the grandmother, for rejecting the idea of marrying old Logon. Nanny acts as a tool of oppression, expressing verbal and physical violence to oblige her granddaughter to marry, with no regards to her emotions. The victimization of old Nanny is passed to her granddaughter whose experience of marriage is expressed; “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.” (11) Janie is married to old Logon against her will. Moreover, Logon threatens Janie: “Ah’ll take holt uh dat ax and come in dere and kill you!” (31) When she meets Joe for the first time, she is told that she is not for work; rather others are to serve her. However, when he marries her, things also change and she is exploited through working in the store and denied the fact that she is doing something worthy after working for twenty years. All her efforts are credited to her

husband, Joe, who believes that he is superior to her and she cannot run this business without his assistance. Her place is under the control of men, but later she objects this bias division of roles governed by patriarchal constraints. Male domination is obviously depicted, operating on women who are meant to play subordinate roles in different ways while men have the ultimate control over them. Joe comes from a background where money is the major pillar of life and that women are treated as possession and accessories through which men can complete their titles. Joe earns a lot of money; people come to buy houses to live in the new town. He has gone on tours to do marketing. He represents first class black men, copying the Euro-American model and acting as the provider of glory to his people. He wants his wife to be the most highly ranked woman in the town, "... nobody else's wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang." (41) He wants his wife to be superior to other women due to his social status. He treats his wife Janie as his treasure; the more valuable it gets the higher status he achieves. Moreover, he attempts to make her beautiful through her look, buying luxurious stuff, while not allowing her to present herself in front of others. She is silenced when she is asked to say something to her people, embarrassed along with the introducer; "Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (43). Home is considered as the proper place for women according to Joe, but she is used to work in the store for her husband. This sort of contradiction reveals the subjugation of black women. That means, if she is not in the house, she has to work in order to increase his capital, but when it comes to speech making she is not allowed to stand for her mind. It is claimed that she does not know how to make speech as Jody puts it in words, and she is hurt by the way he expresses his idea. She is not given the chance to even apologize; instead he speaks on behalf of her. This shows how male domination is practiced against women. Janie is meant to be silenced from delivering a speech and now she is not to tell nice stories. Joe's judgement against these people reflects his sense of superiority and bossy attitudes towards others. Besides, he represents a patriarchal figure that

controls his wife and makes a slave out of her for she has no freedom to express herself, only working to increase the Mayor's income. Moreover, she is turned into one of his possessions to fulfil certain tasks of a Mayor, one of his accessories. He marries her for her external beauty which becomes the main focus to him, but never thinking of her as a human who wants live a normal life, associating with others and sharing them what they do. She objects her husband's classism which creates distance between her and others. Nevertheless, Joe laughs when these 'trashy people' speak and when it gets hot he sends Janie to the store in order to keep her away. His meanness is shown obviously and Janie notices that, and she starts hating this form of life:

"But de mayor's wife is somethin' different again. Anyhow they's liable tuh need me tuh say uh few words over de carcass, dis bein' uh special case. But you ain't goin' off in all dat mess uh commonness. Ah'm surprised at yuh fish askin'." (60)

As a woman, Janie is deprived of living a normal life because she is the Mayor's wife. Joe acts very mean to her due to his male domination and sense of supremacy over other black people, looking at himself as the best of all. He wants to go to the dragging so as to deliver a speech to feel more important while leaving his wife at the store which resembles jail and place of exploitation to her. She wants to participate in the occasion like the other people. Her talent of public speaking is shown when she speaks on the freeing of the mule and she is appreciated for that but Joe does not want her to speak out what she thinks and feels. Rather, he just wants her limited to certain things which fulfil his own interests. Hurston reveals the stereotypical views on women, claiming that women are intellectually far less than men. Through the dialogue between Janie and her husband Joe, these negative views on women and their subjugation are pointed out:

"I god, Janie," Starks said impatiently, "why don't you go on and see whut Mrs. Bogle want? Whut you waitin' on?" Janie wanted to hear the rest of the play-

acting and how it ended, but she got up sullenly and went inside.

"You sho loves to tell me whut to do, but Ah can't tell you nothin' Ah see!"

"Dat's 'cause you need tellin'," he rejoined hotly. "It would be pitiful if Ah didn't. Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves."

"Ah knows uh few things, and womenfolks thinks sometimes too!"

"Aw naw they don't. They just think they's thinkin'. When Ah see one thing Ah understands ten. You see ten things and don't understand one." (70-71)

The discussion of gender is direct here, how men look at women representing the patriarchal views on women. Joe thinks that women need 'somebody' to think for them. 'Somebody' refers to human being and women are excluded from being humans, rather they are classified and listed with animals for they are not able to think. Nevertheless Janie stands for her rights as a human, fighting back with her words. As a result, she is physically oppressed not to talk back. Due to this male domination, she keeps silent and he keeps subordinating her. Janie's idea and feeling about her marriage experience and the way Joe treats her are concluded:

Times and scenes like that put Janie to thinking about the inside state of her marriage. Time came when she fought back with her tongue as best she could, but it didn't do her any good. It just made Joe do more. He wanted her submission and he'd keep on fighting until he felt he had it. (71)

As a result of Joe's cruel practices, Janie is forced to submit to her husband's maltreatment. Pressing teeth together is a sign of verbal oppression. In addition, marriage is metaphorically described as a dead bedroom where there is no life no more. She is to be in the sitting room, shaking hands with visitors:

So gradually, she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush. The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again. (71)

Further, Janie receives slaps from Joe for trivial reasons: "So when the bread didn't rise, and the fish wasn't quite done at the bone, and the rice was scorched, he slapped Janie until she had a ringing sound in her ears and told her about her brains before he stalked on back to the store" (72). She is oppressed by her husband who has promised her a happy life before they get married. She is kept isolated from people, locked in the store like a prisoner, undermined to the level of animals, and severely beaten. Her relationship with her husband is marked by disrespect and violence, so, "She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered." (72)

Hurston reflects violence practiced against women through the male characters who discuss this issue variably. As it is put in words, Tony does not beat his wife because he believes that women are very weak, they are like 'baby chickens'. His perception of the matter is not shaped by the fact that the act of beating is brutal and wrong, he rather belittles women. This view point supports the notion that women are very weak. On the other hand, Lindsay expresses his aggressiveness towards the matter:

"Tony won't never hit her. He says beatin' women is just like steppin' on baby chickens. He claims 'tain't no place on uh woman tuh hit," Joe Lindsay said with scornful disapproval, "but Ah'd kill uh baby just born dis mawnin' fuh uh thing lak dat. 'Tain't nothin' but low-down spitefulness 'ginst her husband make her do it." (75)

Women are regarded and treated like animals, 'mules' and 'baby chickens'; these animals stand for two extremes. The former represents strength of black women in the sense of being

physically exploited, doing hard labor, rather than positively described as strong. The latter projects women as weak creatures; this view is not out of tenderness or sensitiveness, but it rather shows pity and disgust. Then women are treated accordingly. These views determine gender based concepts in the African American community. Physical violence against women seems an inevitable fate faced by African American women; even Tea Cake, who loves Janie and makes her happy, beats her to show that he is a man. He admits that Janie has not done something to be beaten for, as he explains:

"Janie is wherever Ah wants tuh be. Dat's de kind uh wife she is and Ah love her for it. Ah wouldn't be knockin' her around. Ah didn't want whup her last night, but ol' Mis' Turner done sent for her brother tuh come tuh bait Janie in and take her way from me. Ah didn't whup Janie 'cause she done nothin'. Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss. Ah set in de kitchen one day and heard dat woman tell mah wife Ah'm too black fuh her. She don't see how Janie can stand me." (148)

The act of beating is resulted from the racist attitudes of 'ol' Mis Turner' who tries to turn Janie against her husband, whom she thinks he is 'too black' for Janie. This is to say racism causes the tension between African American women and their men who are racially discriminated against. Racism interferes to determine gender roles and issues. This leads to the point that the dilemma of African American women is resulted from racism which causes male domination, turning good black men against their women. Another black woman who reflects female suffering is Mis' Tyler. She, abandoned after being exploited, is one of the examples of exploited women, reflecting the victimization of African American women. Women exploited financially, physically and emotionally, and then they are left alone. Leaving a woman is one of the most common problems of the African American society. This is resulted from the destruction of the social fabric created by Europeans.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In her character portrayal in 'Their Eyes Were Watching God', Hurston depicts the African American women's plight which is shaped by different forms of oppression, racism, classism, and sexism. The major characterization technique used by Hurston is 'speech'-dialogue between the characters. Speech is mainly used to reveal other elements of characterization- physical appearance, actions, reactions, and inner thoughts. These methods of characterization adequately depict the African American women's plight. Hurston makes her female characters directly speak about racial oppression and its traumatic impact on the African American women and their community. Black women in racist America experience brutality of whites, physical and verbal aggression, exploitation, and sexual abuse-rape due to their race and gender. Nanny, Janie's grandmother, expresses her views on racial oppression practiced against black women. Nanny is verbally and physically insulted by whites, men, women, and children. Black women are sexually abused: Nanny and her daughter Leafy, Janie's mother, are physically violated, raped by white men. Classism is also portrayed by the use of characterization methods. Black women are trapped in poverty because of their race and gender. Even after slavery, African American women live in miserable situation in capitalist America. Janie is victimized by her grandmother's decision of marrying old Logon because of his property. Logon attempts to enslave Janie to increase his income. Janie shifts to another social class when she marries Joe, who represents first class. As a well-off mayor, Joe wants his wife, Janie, to be superior to the other women. Janie expresses her rejection of this role proposed by her husband. During the course of the novel, Janie experiences different classes, lower class, middle class, and first class. Each social class sets black women to play certain role in the community, subjugated due to their race and gender. Female characters are aware of their social class as it is expressed in their speech, and actions. Sexism is obviously depicted in Hurston's character portrayal in '*Their Eyes Were Watching God*'. African American women are discriminated against by their men. Views of women's inferiority are revealed by dialogue between the characters. Black female characters are vulnerable to subjugation, and physical and verbal violence. They are humiliated and beaten by their own men. Janie is

slapped and beaten by Joe and Tea Cake. Black female subordination is realized by the conversations held by the characters: even minor characters express their male chauvinism. To conclude, Hurston's use of characterization techniques adequately depicts the African American women's plight caused by racism, classism, and sexism.

This study is limited to the examination of the African American women's plight as depicted in Hurston's *'Their Eyes Were Watching God'*, by analyzing methods of characterization used in the novel. The researcher recommends the following topics for further work:

- a. Spiritual and psychological development of Janie with reference to *'Their Eyes Were Watching God'*.
- b. Black female bonding as a survival in *'Their Eyes Were Watching God'*.

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