

Feminism in Jean Toomer's Novel *Cane* and Zora Neale Hurston's Novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The intent of the following article is to unveil the function of hegemonies present in the society and culture which in a way contributes a significant role to maintain the role of power. The present article focuses on the Harlem Renaissance Novel by Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Zora Neale Hurston's Novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Both, the Novel's focal point are to depict the struggle of women in a patriarchal society. The study reveals the role of masculine world which incessantly control the Female World. Both, the novel on one hand reveals the issue of Women's struggle; on the other hand they imbibe the message of Women's Empowerment.

KEYWORDS: Harlem Renaissance, Power, Afro- American, Double Consciousness, Resistance.

Introduction:

The Novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Cane* belong to The Harlem Renaissances period. Amritjeet Singh in his book on describing the target of Harlem Renaissance writes in his book *Novel of Harlem Renaissance*: "In the words of Locke, The New Negro was put together "to document the New Negro culturally and socially, - to register the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America that have so significantly taken place in the last few years." He emphasized the need for and value of the Negro's self-portraiture, and he declared, "so far as he is culturally articulate, we shall let the Negro speaks for himself." In a prophetic tone, Locke spoke of the New Negro in a National and International scope; he compared the New Negro movement with the "nascent movements of folk expressions and self-determination" that were taking place "in India, in China, in Egypt, Ireland, Bohemia, Palestine and Mexico" .¹ The portrayal of Harlem Renaissance is not only an attempt of depicting only positive outcome or depicting only positive possibilities, but writers by exploring the experience of Afro-American society have contributed in Harlem Renaissance Movement and thus trying to bring the loopholes in the society where the society and culture has fashioned a wall between man via man.

The society has dissected the division between man via man on the basis of Pure and Impure, Culture and Uncultured, Rich and Poor, Stronger and Weak, on the basis of Race, Caste, Ethnicity, and Gender. Both the Novel expose the ugly side of Afro-American society and thus, in a way have a transformatory approach by subverting the cultural norms and by a vision of reconstruction of a society which will be free from the hegemonies and barriers. Zora Neale Hurston's Novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* came in 1937 and is considered as the best known work by African-American writer. Jean Toomer's Novel and Zora's Novel in a brilliant way echoes the theme of Feminism. The first part of Jean Toomer's Novel depicts the

struggles of women in a very pitiable way and compels the reader to consider about the place of women which is identical all over the place in the world. The author's centre of attention in both the Novel is the apprehensions of women and strives to convey and expose the yearning of women where they are struggling to save their position and are in quest for identity. Jean Toomer's *Cane* on the one hand portrays the problem by presenting the diverse stories in which women are in centre in a very creative style. Jean Toomer narrates and describes them through technique of showing, on the other hand Zora narrates and reveals by telling mode in a flashback procedure. Both the novel portrays the internal and private world of women, their psychological state where their mind and body have been disturbed because of the masculine world. Both the novel focuses the idea, that for the masculine world, they are only an entity whether they belong to any race either 'White' or 'Black'. The world have predetermined their roles and wishes to see them in those unchanging roles as soon as they elevate their tone of voice and asserts for argumentation, then, they face the consequences for it which either approach in form of their death or by the rough mind-set of masculine world which even throw them out from their quarters by putting charges of faithlessness and characterless. The more pitiable part of the women subject reveals that their fight and struggle take place with those with which she has an attachment of love and affection.

This paper has made an attempt to focus on the issue of struggle of women's place in the social order which have been dealt by Tommer and Zora in a very remarkable style. Both the Novel in a way can sense the concealed cry of African – American women and other female who belongs to 'Mixed' race or 'White' race which are trying to tell the world that we are also human being and possess the same longing of living our life with dignity and self-pride and self-respect. Henry Louis Gates in the Afterword given in the Novel *Their Eyes Were watching God* writes:

“Their eyes is a bold feminist Novel, the first to be explicitly so in the Afro-American tradition. Yet in its concern with the project of finding a voice, with language as an instrument of injury and salvation, of selfhood and empowerment, it suggests many of the themes that inspire Hurston's oeuvre as a whole.”²

The main character in the Novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie Crawford, an African-American woman in her early forties tells her story. Nanny's life in the Novel reveals that for the male 'White' world they were only seen as the object to quench their sexual satisfaction. Women like Nanny were exploited in both the manner psychologically and physically, in a way exploitation of their whole being, their body as well as their soul. In a way Nanny's tale reveals also the contradiction of the society. On, the one hand 'White' race considers them inferior and has a feeling of hatred for them, even lynching reveals the intensity of that hatred; on the other hand they do not feel any shame while having sex with them. The feeling of inferiority collapses while raping their bodies and fulfilling their sexual desire from them. Again, exploitation of Female body takes place through Leafy, who is raped by the school teacher. Janie's marriage with Logan Killicks, in a way is an imposed marriage on her by her grandmother who tries to explain that marriage with Logan Killicks in a way will carry to her a life of security and self-dignity. She does not even care the age of Logan Killicks who is an older man and farmer looking for a wife, who wants a wife as a domestic helper. In a way Nanny imposes her order on Janie and in a way reveals in front of reader that patriarchy also functions through women who also tries to

duplicate the act of performance of Masculine World and imposes their ideologies on women. Similarly, in this case Nanny becomes the representative of patriarchy. The man like Logan Killicks portrayed in the novel reveals that they represents to those section of the society who wants to see the women in the fixed role which are fixed by institution and convention of society.

Janie's elopement with the Jody Starks, who takes her to Eatonville, reveals her concealed aspiration of liberation, dignity, and self-worth which she is seeking in the masculine world. She imagines a rescuer in Joe Starks which will escape her from a constricted world to a world in which he will take care of her and will fulfill her life with happiness and love. But, her dreams and thoughts crushes when she finds Joe Starks a man of conventional ideology who wants to have power over the Janie according to his aspiration. She feels herself as an inanimate thing in the house of Stark. In a way he wants from Janie to perform like a puppet which can move according to his will. In a way Janie, who was trying to see liberation and equal space in the society detaches herself from Stark, but her visit to Stark during her sickness reveals the deep female bond and a profound attachment and helplessness of feminine aspect as they find themselves unable to detach them from the male world.

Their Eyes Were Watching God does not meet with the feminist desire of acquiring love and affection. The marriage with Stark does not prove successful and the quest for self-identity and self respect gets broken and in despite of marriage she gets life of humiliation, and alienation. In a way the move towards self- fulfillments gets transformed into self-alienation and made her condition even worse than before. For Jody she only symbolizes a mark of a crown whose purpose is to only serve up the purpose of escalating the status of a person. Jennifer Jordan in her essay *Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God* writes: "Her second marriage to Jody Starks is, at first, not devoid of emotional gratification, but ultimately Jody reduces Janie to an enviable possession that advertises his superior status to less fortunate men. As a possession she is denied any self-defined goals and even the expression of her own opinions. She is publicly humiliated and physically abused".³

Their Eyes Were Watching God in a way does not meet up with the feminist desire that a heroine achieve both self-definition and social obligation, it does capably depict, through its explanation of Janie's marriage to Jody Starks, as the depression and solitude of the middle-class woman whose function is to serve as a piece of decoration and a figure of her husband's public status. The concept of Double Consciousness model imparted by Du Bois in a way helps to understand the position and state of mind of women where the society have imparted them an imposed identity and helps to understand the division of society. According to concept of Double Consciousness- The term "Double Consciousness" as first explored by Du Bois in 'The Souls of Black Folk', published in 1903. The first chapter titled as "of our spiritual strivings" from the book describes the idea of "Double Consciousness". According to the concept of "Double Consciousness" by Du Bois -"It is a peculiar sensation, this Double Consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. one ever feels his two ness -an American, a negro; two souls two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" ⁴ (Lauter,

1376). The theory reveals the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others”. As an identity of difference it is an identity which is imposed on women. She has been exposed to a new identity, in a form of an imposed identity. For patriarchy they are considered as the entity of service, in this mode they have been commodified whose only function is to ‘serve’ for ‘White’ race in case of African-American women. Similarly, in case of women the social order desires them not to defer with the male world, the construction of the human race has ruined them into pieces. The social order leaves no substitute to shatter their self-confidence. They are coupled and compared with weakness.

She also desires a gender freedom and, thus in a manner the move of a Female in both the Novel is a venture for their self affirmation and self-empowerment. Janie’s meeting with gambler named Vergible Woods, who goes by the name "Tea Cake" again shows her shattered desires. She falls in love with Tea Cake who treats her initially with love kindness and respect which she was seeking since her childhood. The character Tea Cake’s act of whipping Janie demonstrates the ugly side of male world where they take women as an entity and treats them in a very inhuman manner and reveals the fact of domestic violence which is a very horrifying reality of Female life. Mary Helen Washington in her Foreword to the Novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* writes: “The language of the men in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is almost always divorced from any kind of interiority, and the men are rarely shown in the process of growth. Their talking is either a game or a method of exerting power. Janie’s life is about the experience of relationships, Jody and Tea Cake and all the other talking men are essentially static characters, Janie and Phoeby pay close attention to their own inner life- to experience-because it is the site of growth”⁵

Janie's marriage to Tea Cake in a way reveals the continuation of male dominance on female body. The argument between both of them leads to murder of Tea Cake and, thus in a fact tend to force the reader the whole journey of a women which now becomes a murderer in attempt of self-defense. In a way the whole Novel focuses the politics of male world which act as an agency to control the female world.

Similarly, Jean Toomer’s *Cane* focuses on the concern of women and through showing method in front of reader, depicts through different stories the identical struggling women in patriarchy, where women desires from masculine world to let her breathe with a life of dignity and self esteem. The Novel *Cane* was published in (1923) is an imperative American Novel. Toomer use language as a medium of expression to offer delight and a fresh sense and with a modern technique displays a development and experimentation which provides pleasure to the reader to read the work with an altered procedure. The foremost piece of the book portrays the life of poor black women in rural Georgia. They deal with such subject matter as infanticide by “Karintha”, miscegenation by “Beckey”, obsession by “Carma”, killing in *Blood Burning moon* and mysticism in *fern* and *Esther*. Taken in totality the stories portray a sharp attack on brutal, natural, and pre- reasonable customs. The first sequence talks about “Karintha”, an account regarding a juvenile black woman looked-for by older men who wish her to mature soon. “Karintha” is described as one who is a beautiful girl and masculine world wants to possess her beauty at every cost. The account brings in front of reader the lustful attitude of male world who do not spare a teenage girl and takes away her childhood days from her by Pregnenting her. The account narrates the repressed sexual craving of masculine world for whom the purity and

innocence of child does not matter and their intolerance who wishes and want to mature her quickly so that they can execute their sexual desires. Her act of becoming prostitute in a way is a slap on society for which women are only an article where they can demolish their body as they would like. In “Becky” Toomer in detail reveals the South’s scheme to disregard miscegenation. “Becky” is a ‘White’ woman with two Negro sons. After the delivery of the first, she metaphorically disappears and does not unveil the name of his lover. She margins herself into the cabin. The account in a way focuses on the profound attachment which a female binds with the male world with which she becomes unable to detach herself. In a way her act of concealment is an endeavor made by her where she is trying to save her lover. In Carma’s tale it discuss about the frantic or fanatical facet of a woman. In reality she represents disturb and upset psyche of the female part which gets perturb due to the masculine world. The account of Carma represents a woman which is charged as infidel and characterless. The Fern, whose full name is Fernie May Rosen, combines the torment of her Jewish father and her Negro mother. Fern in fact represents the concealed aspiration of a female who wishes love and fondness from the society. “Esther” in similar way reveals the study of concealed sexual suppression. The protagonist’s father is the richest colored man in town. She represents the sick and ailing side of feminine aspects, the suppressed yearning which becomes incapable to discover in the society because of the allotment of the predetermined roles. In a way fantasizing is a mode of resistance by which she takes departure from the world of pain to the world in which no torment exists or it is a condition of psyche in which the mind flights from a constricted world to a free-thinking world where she is imagining to get an equivalent freedom to articulate herself, a world free of restrictions and barriers. For example at 16, she imagines herself the mother of conceived child and in a way depicts the role of game which a child plays in their childhood, and thus act of playing in a way plays an important role in the life of child to purgate their concealed wishes. At the age of 27, she tries to modify hallucination into realism by conceding herself to Barlu.

In a way Louisia of Blood Burning Moon has two lovers, one ‘White’ and the other colored, both of them died by claiming their love towards Louisia. Megan Abbott in her essay “*Dorris Dances..... John Dreams*”: *Free Indirect Discourse and Female Subjectivity in Cane* writes: “Most of the chapters that comprise Jean Toomer’s *Cane* share a common textual anxiety, which is rooted in the relation between the narrators and the female characters. In *Cane*, women are often the sites on which men project their judgements and desires, and many of the chapters explore, implicitly or explicitly, the effect this has on women involved”⁶

Cane in its approach reveals the function of customs and culture which forms a significant role to shape women’s life as they desire. In a way Novel reveals the contradiction of society which is actually accountable for shaping the life of women and when they move in that direction, then they feel embarrassment on them. For example no women by her choice goes for prostitution but when they move to that path, then , society feels dishonor and disgraceful on their profession. Society gives them title of characterless but, then, the male world forgets that they play an imperative role in directing women’s life to the profession of prostitution.

In a way the Novel explores the politics of performance of patriarchy by which it functions and maintains its supremacy in controlling the female world. In a

way it can be said that Jean Toomer's Novel *Cane* and Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in a way are interrelated Novel. Both the Novel belongs to Harlem Renaissance period and brings the echo of women who wants to subvert the conventional role assigned to them by the world. The Novel brings in front of reader the performance of patriarchy which becomes the regulator and controller of female body and also depicts the role of masculine world in shaping them through diverse aspects. In a way both the writers uses language as a means to oppose the self-interested arrangement which do not wish for to release the Female from their assigned roles, both the writers in a way inquiring and trying to decode their assigned orthodox role and trying to maneuver the society. Both the Novel in a way echoes the suppressed voice of the women character who desires individuality and a craving to subsist their life with self- esteem and dignity. The Novel in a way also brings a hidden message for women that to survive in this masculine world is not an easy fight. They have to be very strong and must turn out to be competent to detach themselves from patriarchy for their rights. Both the writers help us to comprehend the constitution of inequitable civilization by which they are able to maintain hierarchies and bring a desire to maneuvers this unjust model of society. In a way one can say that we, as being rational human being must discontinue to generate binaries, and arrangement which are separating the humanity otherwise it will demolish our conception of humanistic, social, and wise humankind.

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