

## Interpretation of Their Eyes Were Watching God from the Perspective of Queer Theory

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### Abstract

**Their Eyes Were Watching God is the masterpiece of American black woman writer Zora Neale Hurston, which revolves around Janie's three marriages. From the theory of gender construction by Judith Butler, this paper interprets the special gender construction of Janie. Janie denies the female social norms from patriarchal society, rejects to internalize the bond for female body from patriarchal society, uses her special body language to break the body norm for women, finally reverses her gender role in patriarchal society, and forms her own gender construction.**

### Keywords

**Gender construction; gender discipline; gender acceptance; female body norm.**

### 1. Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston is regarded as one of the most famous black female writer in American literary for her masterpiece *Their Eyes Watching God*. [1] Many Scholars hold that this novel changed the traditional narrative mode of American literature by putting black women in a prominent position. [2] This novel tells the story of Janie Crawford's three marriages, revealing Janie's special gender construction to readers. This paper interprets the process of Janie's gender construction based on the gender construction theory of Judith Butler.

Queer theory is one of the most significant intellectual movements in the late 1980s and early 1990s, first put forward by Teresa De Lauretis. Based on the fundamental premise that queer theory is "an another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual" [3] that debunks the stability of identity categories by focusing on the historical, social and cultural construction of desire and sexuality intersecting with other identity markers, such as race, class, and gender, among others, queer theory has been influential both in the academy and in cultural politics. [4]

Judith Butler develops Queer theory by integrating Foucault's identity politics and discourse politics, and puts forward the theory of Gender performance. Judith claims that the category of "sex" is, from the start, normative and it is what Foucault has called a "regulatory ideal". [5] And she also maintains that both the subject and the identity are constructed through the physical representation of gender through the translation of normative actions. [5] Therefore, in Butler's eyes, gender is social law regulating people's behaviors, excluding those who do not conform to this law, and finally achieving the goal of defining bodies with gender characteristics and establishing our gender identity.

### 2. The Female Body View under Western Patriarchal Society

Judith Butler argues that gender is not natural, but generated by social construction and serves for that purpose in her book *Gender Trouble*. [6] Meanwhile, she maintains that "sex" not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that

is, whose regulatory force is made clear as kind of productive power, the power to produce, demarcate, circulate, differentiate the bodies it control. Thus, "sex" is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, "sex" is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. [5]

In order to make women believe that man are bestowed with the right to control their bodies, western scholars turn to religion for help. Genesis in Holy Bible tells that God creates Eve by taking one rib of Adam, in other words, woman is a part of man, so woman is born to subordinate to man. Woman is tempted by Satan to eat the forbidden fruit, and let the entire human bear the cross of original sin. Therefore, God gives man the right to discipline and govern woman. Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher, also believes that man are superior to women, and woman is the defective and incomplete form of man. Therefore, man rules the world while woman is confined to home. Since then, the western world has established the authority of man, and woman has been gradually materialized as tools to reproduce and satisfy man's desires. "The root of woman's oppression is man's rule over her body, which is the foundation of the patriarchal system". [7] Before getting married, woman is under the control of her father, who transfers the control to her husband through wedding, making woman his husband's property. After marriage, woman is further materialized for her husband usually treated her as a tool to show his wealth and social status.

How is woman's gender constructed and being materialized? Butler points that the construction of gender operates through exclusionary means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of forclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation.[5]Patriarchal Society bestows man upon man the right of discourse, while deprive that of woman, making woman the passive voiceless object.

Man puts woman under his own gaze, regulates woman's behavior according to the female gender requirement that he made, disciplines woman verbally, and finally materializes this gender requirement. Woman whoever completing this gender construction will subconsciously adjust her behaviors according to the requirements of gender unconsciously. In *Their Eyes Watching God*, Janie lives in others' discipline. They constantly use the discourse power granted by the patriarchal society to discipline Janie's behavior, in an attempt to make her a normative woman.

### 3. Gender Discipline from Others

Crucially, then, construction is neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects. Construction not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of reiteration. [5]Janie, the protagonist, suffers discipline from her grandmother, townspeople and three husbands in her female gender construction. Janie is under the gaze of her grandmother and townspeople all the time. According to the gaze theory, townspeople are the gazer and Janie is the under their gaze. Gazer uses his right of gazing to regulate gazed's performance, and the gazed adjust his behaviors according to value system imposed by the gazer unconsciously, otherwise he will be disciplined by gazer. In the novel all the female except Janie are willing to accept gender norm under patriarchal society, and spare no effort to discipline Janie.

When Janie is a little girl, her grandmother tries to discipline her in accordance with the female gender code under the patriarchal value system in order to make her tamed. Grandmother's life experience makes her see woman as the weak, and marriage is the only way for women to seek life security and social status. Grandma is trying to help Janie find her support, "Now I pray to

God to let me live until I can see you find a man to rely on.”[1]When her grandmother finds out that Janie kisses Johnny Taylor in private, she uses the right of gazer to discipline her. She slaps Jannie in the face, and marry Janie to rich Logan Killeks. When Janie complains her loveless marriage, her grandmother reprimands her, “How can you so silly? You have found a person to rely on for the rest of you r life, now you are talking about love.”[1]

Grandma never treats Janie as an individual who can pursue the life she wants, all she want is that Janie would abide by the female gender requirement of patriarchal society, in another way, being Mrs. Killeks. Grandmother places Janie under her gaze, using male discourse to discipline her subversive thoughts and behaviors. Meanwhile, townspeople use their right to regulate Janie’s behaviors, which reinforces their control over this town. Female gender norm is controlled by a series of social norms, which represents the dominance and control of man over woman under the patriarchal system. Man tells woman what she can do and what she can not. The purpose of gaze is to make Janie accept female gender acceptance, internalize the requirements of female gender attribute, and achieve gender construction.

The attitudes of Jenny's three husbands towards her reflect the oppression of female by the male at different levels. Logan, her first husband, regards Janie as his property, the same as his house and land, “I'll do whatever I want you to do. [1] 33 When Joe, her second husband, asks Jannie to marry him, she treats Joe’s proposal as an opportunity to escape from Logan's control, the chance to start a new life. However, Joe also regards Janie as a tool to show off his status and wealth. When Janie tries to communicate with Joe, he refuses to listen to her; When Janie acts against his will, Joe would fight back until Janie obeys. Dick, her third husband, goes shooting and fishing with her. He lets Janie express her innermost thoughts, which makes Janie believe that she finally meets someone who can treat her equally. However, when dick is injured, Janie follows the doctor's advice to let dick sleep alone. Dick thinks that Janie wants to dump him, so he turns to killing in order to let Janie stay. Obviously, dick thinks it is him that brings happiness to Janie, and Janie should be grateful and obedient. When Janie behaves against his expectations, dick tries to discipline her with violence.

As Butler’s said that an infant is under the gender discipline. Take the medical interpellation which shifts an infant from an “it” to a “she” or a “he”, and in that naming, the girl is “girled”, brought into the domain of language ans kinship through the interpellation of gender. The founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalized effect. [5] Janie refuses to be disciplined by her grandma, townspeople, their husbands, in other way, she refuses the traditional gender acceptance in order to be herself.

#### 4. Janie’s Special Gender Construction

When an individual assume a sex, then he looks up and deliberate on which sex it will assume today, a grammar in while assumption is quickly assimilated to the notion of a highly reflective choice. But if this “assumption” is compelled by a regulatory apparatus of heterosexuality, one while reiterates itself through the forcible production of sex, then the assumption of sex is constrained from the start. [5p12]

In traditional patriarchal society, woman is materialized objects. Her emotional and physiological desires are suppressed, so she cannot pursue her desire as man. So when Janie complains the lack of physical pleasure in her marriage, she does not get the comfort but criticism from her grandma, "if he doesn't want you, you shouldn't ask." [1]25 Instead of yielding to her own fate, Janie uses her unique body language to resist the domination of patriarchal discourse. Janie’s gender construction starts from the awakening of her body. She tries to break the control of the patriarchal society on her body. Janie was thrilled to see a pear blossom in her backyard when she was 16. Different from the traditional women waiting for

love, Janie takes the initiative to pursue the happiness she wants. With infinite longing for love, Janie becomes Mrs. Killick. However, in her marriage, Janie does not suppress her emotional desire as required by her society. She longs for someone who could satisfy her inner desire.

Janie senses something different in her heart when Joe proposes her. She unwraps her apron and abandons it by the side of the road, proclaiming that she is free from Logan's control. However, after getting married with Joe, he materialized Janie's body further, forbidden her to unwrap her hair. The suffocating married life makes Janie realize that it is not what she wants. Thus, Janie stops resisting and accepts everything passively. On the night of Joe's death, Janie tears off the headband, lets her thick hair hang down, and looks at her body with admiration. On the night of Joe's funeral, Janie burns all the ribbons, and shows her thick, waist-length braids to others the next morning. The headband represents the bondage of Joe and the patriarchal society he represents to Janie's body, and the burning of the headband and the display of her body beauty represents Janie's control of her body.

Dick ignites Janie's dream of finding someone appreciating her. Dick is attracted by Janie herself, not her wealth and social status, "just like a little girl wearing a beautiful dress for Easter, it's so nice". [1]He brings great pleasure to Janie both physically and mentally. Janie no longer sees herself as others' wife, but herself. She puts on Dick's favorite blue dress and dresses like a young girl. This time, what Janie does makes the residents of the small town angry, then they send her good friend, Fabio, to discipline Janie. As for the discipline from others, Janie bravely has her own voice, "we will go to another place and start our life (...). I've lived in accordance with my grandmother's discipline, and now I'm going to live in my way." [1]In Janie's eyes, the relationship between she and Dick is based on the mutual understating, from which both parties get the greatest spiritual pleasure. Janie makes up her mind to pursue their ideal life, so she abandons comfortable city life and follows Dick to the Florida everglades. In this marriage, Janie shoulders all the suffering with Dick, and they share all things together, "once upon a time I used to expect nothing, only hope to die. But you give meaning to my life. So I am grateful for the experience we shared together." [1]

However, their marriage is not always harmonious. Janie gradually realizes that Dick's love is built on the base that she will always be with him. Once Janie refuses to be with him, Dick uses every mean to control her, even shooting her. Janie shoots Dick to protect herself. After burying Dick, Janie leaves the Florida everglades, a place where nothing could make her happy again.

## 5. Conclusion

Janie, a woman grows up in patriarchal society, refuses to be bound by the gender norm imposed on women, rejects the gender acceptance by the patriarchal society, avoids to become a materialized body. She expects to live like men, with the right to pursue her ideal life. However, her self-pursuit is forbidden in her society. She follows her inner voice and pursued happiness regardless of others' criticism, which arouses the gender discipline from others in her society. Janie refuses to be materialized, and uses her unique body language to fight against the gender discipline powerful patriarchal society, and finally makes her voice heard.

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