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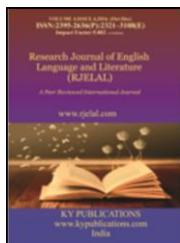


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LESBIAN CONTINUUM IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S "THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING  
GOD" AND IN ALICE WALKER'S "THE COLOR PURPLE"

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ABSTRACT

The present paper intend to establish that black women writers of today have responded to issues of alternative sexualities and lesbianism at a deeper and more complex level than mere debunking of social constructs. This paper interrogates the two novels by two canonical writers of Afro America. In 19th and 20th century African American literature writer shows the conflicting ideas of realistic depiction of stereotypical images of black sexuality. This paper makes an attempt to discuss the major issue in lesbian criticism with the help of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Gender criticism became very popular in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. The emergence of sexuality as norm in western culture gave birth to gender studies in the literary Canon. Lesbian criticism and feminist criticism grew from the same soil as the response to the patriarchal oppression. Moreover Lesbian theory says that lesbian is not necessarily a woman who had sex with another woman. A woman could be lesbian if she has life long attraction to other woman. This definition permits us to recognize lesbian existence written the boundaries of heterosexual marriage. In the work Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*, the relationship between Janie and Pheoby and in *The Color Purple*, the relationship between Shug Avery and Celie gives light on their particular issue.

**Keywords:** Queer, lesbian, female relationships, woman - identified.

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A lesbian is a woman- identified woman and Adrienne Rich calls it 'Lesbian continuum' she explains lesbian continuum is "Include is a range through each woman's life and throughout history of woman identified experience no simply the fact that a woman has had consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman (25)". Rich argues to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women including the sharing of a rich inner life.

*Their Eyes were Watching God* is overwhelmingly centered on Janie's relationship

with Tea Cake. Whereas certain critics recognize the female search for self and need for community as key issues in the novel, most still give priority to heterosexual love and experience as the sole informers of Janie's existence. Feminism and Black self – determination in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* that "Tea Cake expands Janie's horizons both literally and figuratively"(57). Later in the article Zora writes, "the sense of sexuality and shared roles found in Janie's relationship with tea Cake is another aspect of Janie's development as a person. .... It is in her life's

on the muck' of the Everglades with Tea Cake that Janie achieves Equality with man"(60).

Although her conclusions are somewhat, Maria Tai Wolff echoes Crabtree when she states, "Tea Cake gives Janie the world, from which they will make a 'dream' together. He offers her experience"(31). Crabtree's and Wolff's arguments are problematic. Crabtree states that Tea Cake expands Janie's horizons while Wolff claims Tea Cake gives Janie the world and offers her experience. In both instances we may note that Janie is a passive character, viewed by these critics as an object acted upon by Tea Cake.

In direct opposition to this statement, *Their Eyes were Watching God* emphasizes Janie's search for self and her final union with Pheoby. At the novel's end the reader senses that the two women have, in effect, created their own porch-front community which serves to nurture and support the two women.

The first scene of the novel illustrates the complexity of the author's stance toward community. On page one of *Their Eyes were Watching God* Janie returns to Eatonville and must walk past the judgmental eyes of her neighbours gathered on the porch-front. The author highlights the anger and despair that these individuals endure. They are portrayed as tired and hungry, affected by "the envy they(have) stored up from other times" (2) Janie is, for them, a symbol of independence and freedom that they have lost, or more accurately, have never had the opportunity to gain. So they sit with "their mouths setting open and their ears full of hope"(2). They hope that Janie can provide them with the freshness of self-awareness she has acquired on her journey. They wait for a glimpse of the self-assurance that they themselves do not possess.

This longing in the community members is manifested in a destructive bitterness. The Eatonville porch-front community members "chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive."(2).

The words they pronounce together are harmful and dangerous. The women criticize Janie for her appearance. They are envious that she wears comfortable, non-inhibiting overalls and that she strolls with, "her hair swingin'down her back lack some young gal"(2). They wonder why she is walking towards her home alone. For these women. Janie is incomplete without a man by her side and without the constricting garments and fashions that the women feel compelled to wear for acceptance.

Similarly, the men objectify Janie and notice her only as a sexual being created for their eyes with

Her firm buttocks like ... grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unrevealing in the wind like a plume; ... her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirts. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eyes *Their Eyes* (2).

We understand from this that Janie is a sexual object to them. Not only is she seen this way by the men, she is thought about and remembered as an object, as well. Hurston explains that, collectively, the men and women of the porch-front community "hope that (Janie) might fall to their level some days" *Their Eyes* (2).

Skillfully portraying the ambiguities in just one page of text, Hurston quickly introduces the reader to the woman who is potentially a source of positive, life affirming hope for the community members as well as for Janie. Pheoby wants, after hearing the neighbours criticize Janie asserts herself to support Janie as she tells the others to reserve judgment because they are not aware of Janie's specific situation. In this way, Pheoby acts as a bridge between Janie and the seething porch-front community. She is still accepted as a member qualified to sit on the porch with the others. However, Pheoby, although she has never left Eatonville to explore and find herself, does not sit in judgment of Janie as the others do. She says that she is Janie's "best friend" and that if Janie has anything to say, she will tell Pheoby. Anticipating Janie's physical needs, Pheoby promptly excuses herself and goes to the aid of her friend "to go take her some supper"(3).

Hurrying off to Janie's house with her arms full of food, Pheoby instinctively uses the back and thus more intimate entrance to Janie's house. It is in this scene between friends that we begin to understand that Pheoby is there for Janie to nourish her both physically with her cooking and emotionally as a person who will truly listen. Furthermore, we recognize the extent of the intimacy Janie and Pheoby share; the relationships a fundamental source of strength for the two women. No doubt, these two characters are woman-identified.

Bell Hooks identifies this type of relationship between women as essential in her book *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women* could accommodate. It is also a relationship that embodies Lorraine Bethel's notions of African American woman-identification. In her essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich explains that all women, whether female- or male-identified, exist on the "lesbian continuum." According to her, this continuum is "a range of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (217)

Furthermore, she argues that we must "expand (the term lesbian) to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women including the sharing of a rich inner life..." (217).

Rich explains :

As the term lesbian has been held to limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself. But as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence, as we delineate the lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely the body itself. (218).

Based on this definition, we may see Janie's and Pheoby sitting together quietly on the back porch, sharing their own inner life experiences and thoughts, existing on the lesbian continuum and considered as lesbian.

As Rich Points out, Hurston's survival relationships were all with women, beginning with her mother. Perhaps *Their Eyes were Watching God* is a reflection of Hurston's

Woman – identification relationship that she could not celebrate openly in a patriarchal, homophobic society. In fact, by considering the social context in and from which Hurston was writing, we can understand the truly landmark text Hurston has created in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. First published in the early 1930s Hurston was a woman-identified artist at a time when being woman-identified was not acceptable.

Rich states that the "..... Overall homophobic attitude of the black community,.... The enmity toward homosexuality has long been rampant in black life" *Compulsory* (184), and Barbara Christian further explores the notion of homophobia in the African American Community:

Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privileges, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining 'straightness' is our last resort. Being out (as lesbian), particularly out in print, is the final renunciation of acclaim to the crumbs of tolerance' that.... Black women are sometimes fed."

That Hurston chooses to frame her novel with a woman-identified relationship despite the restriction of homophobia in the African American Community as well as the restrictions of a dominant and oppressive white/male patriarchy is truly revolutionary.

Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* illustrates intimate female bonding relationships that are often overlooked, dismissed, or kept hidden. As Gregory Woods suggests, "it is high time" that readers assess the lesbian or woman-identified content in works by the many writers living and writing during a time when women-identified texts and subtexts had to be concealed for publication purposes (128). The woman-identified narrative framework Hurston created still resounds today as we understand the struggles that women writers have to endure. As Bethel writes,

Women in this country have defined the dominant sexist society by developing a type of folk culture and oral Literature based on the use of gender solidarity and female bonding as self affirming rituals. Black women have a long tradition of bonding together in a community that has been a source of survival information, and psychic and emotional support. (12)

*Their Eyes were Watching God* exemplifies the defiance that many women have maintained despite the controlling, objectifying, patriarchal influences of our society. Hurston's text is a valuable piece of fiction which can be read into many women's realities yet today. Pheoby and Janie, although often overlooked, have created a back-porch community with which all woman may identify. Perhaps even more importantly, the community they have created is one which we may all strive to join.

Although Hurston was living and writing in what has since been named the Harlem Renaissance, the climate for African American artists at the time was hardly one of a nurturing renaissance or rebirth. In the article "Zora Neale Hurston and the Text", Henry Louis Gates, Jr. highlights the racist society that dictated what was written by the "talented tenth" in Harlem. The effect this dictation had on African American artists and the work they produced should not be underestimated. Gates writes, "To redress their image as a negotiation of all that was white and Western, black authors published as if their collective lives depended on how their texts would be received"(171).

The concept of lesbian continuum can be explained by the relationship of Celie and Nettie in *The Color Purple*. Celie only writes to God since she has nobody else to write to the turning point in her life is when she starts writing to Nettie. She got her identity back when she identifies herself with her sister. Similarly this continuum is also found in the relationship of Janie and Shug.

In *The Color Purple*, the novel describes how black girls grow up an independent and confident woman with the help of woman community, especially her woman loves. Her growth involves many aspect of lesbian such as Celie's homosexual love to Shug,

Shug's bisexuality the reverse gender role of Sofia and Harpo and the demonstration of black /white binary oppression. Celie for the first time gets attracted towards another human being other than Nettie. She refers to something beautiful. This acts as a large stepping stone from her emotionless state largely caused by the men in her life .When Shug and Celie first met, Shug is nothing like what Celie had made her out to be Shug. First conversation with Celie "You sure is Ugly to Celie. Despite this, they get to know each other more and they grow closer to one another. In the climax, Celie and Shug exhibit a lesbian relationship. As can be seen with the two sucking on each others breast, they share a very close relationship that is more than just sex. To Celie, her relationship with Shug is more important because Shug makes her feel important she gives Celie a sense of identity and makes her feel sexually, physically and emotionally more comfortable their relationship is very significant because it helps Celie to grow into the independent free thinking woman. The relationship boosted Celie's confidence, and empowered her to be an independent woman.

Lesbian Continuum has its own specific area in the literary corner but there are some areas, which are common between lesbian/gay criticism and queer theory. Thus we can say that the aim of lesbian continuum is explore the oneness & power in literature and culture, and this can be seen in Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* Walker's *The Color Purple*

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