

Construction and Subversion of Gender Performativity in *The Awakening* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*



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Construction and Subversion of Gender Performativity in *The Awakening* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

A handwritten signature in black ink. It features a stylized, geometric initial 'S' followed by the name 'Noman' in a cursive script. A long, horizontal line extends from the end of the signature.

Dr. Sayeed Noman

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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.



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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to myself for having the courage to start over, the strength not to give up during the toughest phase of my life, and the faith to believe in a new beginning.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the social construction of womanhood in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. It analyses how gender identity is not portrayed as natural or fixed in these novels but as something shaped through social norms, male authority, cultural discourse, and repeated performance. The study uses Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as the main theoretical framework to interpret how femininity is produced, regulated, negotiated and challenged within patriarchal society. It also uses selected ideas from Simone de Beauvoir, Stuart Hall and Anne Fausto-Sterling to deepen the understanding of identity, representation, and the social construction of womanhood. Through close reading and textual analysis, this dissertation focuses on the experiences of Janie Crawford and Edna Pontellier as women whose identities are shaped by marriage, social norms, male authority and community expectations. At the same time, the study argues that the two protagonists do not remain passive within these patriarchal structures. Instead, they negotiate, resist and subvert the roles imposed on them in different ways and with different consequences. By analysing two novels from different racial contexts, the dissertation broadens the discussion of gender construction and shows how literary texts can unfold the complex relationship between identity, power, and patriarchal social expectation.

Keywords: Gender performativity, gender roles, construction, subversion, identity, womanhood, patriarchy

Chapter 1

Introduction

Across the world, women have often been treated as subordinates, expected to perform in ways that patriarchal society demands and confined within a male-dominated hierarchical system. Patriarchy and racial prejudice have created major barriers to women's freedom and emancipation. As a result, many women have been denied their rights and forced to live under harsh conditions. The question of what it means to become a woman has remained central to feminist literary study because literature repeatedly shows that womanhood is not treated as a natural condition but as a role shaped by society, culture and power. Their acts of resistance and defiance against these rigid structures have often been represented in numerous texts by radical female writers. This research examines two such texts to demonstrate how these radical writers used fiction to challenge and change the patriarchal views and values imposed on women. The protagonists, Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* and Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, are pressured to embody ideal femininity, how these ideals are enforced by men and society, and how the two women negotiate them. Additionally, the study explores the outcomes of subverting gender performativity. Existing scholarships discuss these novels separately, while this research brings these two novels together to examine how gender roles are socially formed, performed, and challenged across different racial and historical contexts. By applying Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in the close reading of the primary texts, this study shows how the protagonists' identities are shaped by their experiences and the social expectations placed on them.

Judith Butler is an American philosopher and gender theorist whose work has significantly influenced feminist literary texts. Butler as a gender theorist has changed the way people see

gender, performance, sexuality, and discourse. In their seminal book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, they assert:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontology's....will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate.....those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (Butler 43-44)

Butler's idea of gender performativity rejects the previously assumed notion that gender roles and performance are biologically determined and fixed. The core argument in their theory is that gender and sexuality are culturally constructed. Butler argues that identity is something we perform and something we become as shaped by society, not something we biologically are. Butler does not mean that gender identity is just a performance that someone consciously puts on. Rather, they argue that the performance comes before the performer. In other words, there is no fixed inner self behind gender. What we call gender is created through repeated actions, behaviors, and expressions, which produce "the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core" (*Butler 173*).

In their book, Butler states that:

(...) Gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed (...) There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.

(Butler 33)

With this idea, Butler builds on Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement from *The Second Sex* that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" (Beauvoir 330). Body and gender do not always match in the way society expects. A person may have a female body, but that does not mean they must act or appear feminine according to the rigid man or woman binary.

This research also focuses on Butler's idea that gender performance can work as a way of surviving within strict social systems. Society, culture, community and family often create rules about how a person is expected to present or perform gender. Butler emphasises that in our society we "regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (Butler 178). In the case of women, they may try to move away from patriarchal norms, which limit their freedom and weaken their ability to act freely in society. Butler explains that this male dominance comes from culturally created prejudice about the female body. They also draw attention to the need to free the female body from biological restrictions so that women can find new ways and possibilities to act. Butler states:

The female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law, posing as subversive but operating in the service of that law's self-amplification and proliferation. In order to avoid the emancipation of the oppressor in the name of the oppressed, it is necessary to take into account the full complexity and subtlety of the law and to cure ourselves of the illusion of a true body beyond the law. ...The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its "natural" past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities. (Butler 119)

Butler uses the term "subversion" to challenge the role that society has fixed for women. They say "to cure ourselves from the illusion," meaning that women need to break the limits

society places on them through fixed roles and move beyond them in order to achieve freedom. Together, Butler's ideas provide a useful framework for examining how femininity is constructed and how that construction is negotiated or subverted in these novels examined in this research.

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is a novel about Edna Pontellier, a married woman living within the rigid social world of late nineteenth-century Creole society. At the beginning of the novel, Edna seems to occupy the conventional position of wife and mother, but with time, she becomes dissatisfied with the roles assigned to her. Her emotional, spiritual and sexual awakening leads her to question marriage, motherhood and the roles that define womanhood. As the novel progresses, Edna struggles to claim authority beyond domestic identity. Her journey shows how men and patriarchal society control women's lives even when they attempt to move beyond it. The novel is therefore significant not only as a story of a woman's dissatisfaction but also as a literary exploration of how gendered roles are socially constructed.

Their Eyes Were Watching God tells the story of Janie Crawford, a Black woman who narrates the story of her life and her search for selfhood. The novel begins when Janie returns to Eatonville after a long time and the townspeople begin gossiping about her. She then tells her story to her friend Pheoby. Through her experiences with her husbands, Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake, Janie negotiates different forms of gendered control and gradually moves toward a stronger sense of self. Logan offers security but treats Janie like a laborer, Joe gives her social status but silences and controls her, and Tea Cake offers companionship and a sense of freedom, though that relationship also brings emotional control. Hurston's novel is crucial for this study because it shows that the construction of womanhood is shaped not only by patriarchy but also by race, slavery, community and the historical realities of Black womanhood.

While *The Awakening* is from the late nineteenth-century Creole society of Louisiana and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is from the early twentieth-century Black community in Florida, both novels reveal how female identity is formed and regulated within different patriarchal societies. These two novels have been selected because both are about women who struggle to fit into societies that try to define them in restrictive ways. Even though the novels come from different times, places and racial backgrounds, they both show that womanhood is shaped by social rules, marriage and male authority. Reading them together helps make the study broader and inclusive. These two novels help this research show both the similarities and the differences in how womanhood is constructed in different social and racial settings. The study is based on the following research questions:

1. How are gender roles constructed through male authority and society, how are they performed or resisted by women, and what are the social and personal consequences of such performances in *The Awakening* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*?
2. How does reading the two novels together under one framework reveal the connection among construction, subversion and consequence across different racial and cultural contexts?

The objective of this research is to examine how *The Awakening* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* represent the social construction of womanhood and the different ways in which the protagonists negotiate or resist that construction. It also analyses how Butler's theory helps to explain that gender is not something the protagonists possess naturally, but something they are made through repeated performances. In this way, it studies the novels as complex literary texts that depict the process through which identity of women is produced.

This study is significant because it reads both novels through one clear theoretical idea while still paying attention to their different social and historical backgrounds. It expands the

discussion of these novels beyond general feminist reading. Alongside, the study shows how literature can help the reader understand how gender is shaped by society and male authority, not something naturally fixed. By reading these two texts together, this dissertation tries to show that women's stories in literature are not only about their personal journeys, but also about the social systems that construct, restrict, and control their identities. The next chapter outlines the methodology and theoretical framework of this study, followed by the literature review, analysis, and conclusion.

Chapter 2

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This research is conducted through a qualitative approach to examine how gender identity is socially constructed and challenged in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. These two novels have been selected as primary texts because both portray women living within patriarchal societies where womanhood is constructed by the society and men. In both texts, the female protagonists are expected to perform socially approved roles such as wife, mother or respectable lady. Additionally, both novels show instances where these roles are negotiated or challenged. For this reason, the novels are suitable for an in-depth analysis on the social construction of gender identity and its subversion.

The method used in this research is close reading. Important scenes, dialogues, descriptions and symbols are examined carefully to trace how gender norms are imposed on Edna Pontellier and Janie Crawford. It also explores how the protagonists respond to the prescribed gender roles and the consequences of such actions. This study is also supported by different secondary scholarly sources. These sources help to build the theoretical foundation of

the research and support the textual analysis. However, the main focus remains on the close reading of the two primary texts.

The main theoretical framework of this research is Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, drawn from their book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. In this work, Butler argues that gender is not something natural, fixed, or biological. Rather, it is produced through repeated acts and social expectations. As gender is produced through repeated actions, it can also be disrupted through acts that do not conform to social norms. Subversion does not always appear as open rebellion. It may also take the form of refusal, bodily autonomy, speech, desire or behaviour that breaks the expected pattern of womanhood. In this way, Butler's idea of subversion helps this study in analysing how the female protagonists negotiate and challenge the identities imposed upon them by the patriarchal system.

The study also uses a few theorists' ideas to support Butler's argument. Simone de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* is also crucial to this study. As she writes in her book, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir 329). This idea supports the concept that womanhood is not natural or fixed but shaped through social and cultural norms. Anne Fausto-Sterling, in her book *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, supports this research by challenging the idea that fixed gender roles can be justified by neurological differences between women and men. She argues that many claims about sex differences in the brain are influenced by social beliefs and are often scientifically unstable. Furthermore, Stuart Hall's ideas in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* help to explain how identity is constructed through discourse, language, social perception and cultural meaning.

Although these supporting thinkers are important, Judith Butler remains the main theorist of this dissertation. Her ideas on performativity and subversion, from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, are used to analyse the novels. The supporting theorists are used only to strengthen the argument.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* mostly focus on female identity, patriarchal society restrictions, motherhood, sexuality, and the meaning of Edna Pontellier's suicide. Over time, the novel has not only been read as a story of an unhappy wife but also as a complex narrative about the social construction of womanhood and the obstacles of creating a self beyond the roles imposed by marriage, motherhood and society. This critical tradition is important for the present study because it shows that Edna's dissatisfaction grows from a society where women are expected to perform obedience, domesticity, and sacrifice themselves. Criticism on the novel does not move in one direction. Some scholars treat Edna's awakening as a feminist struggle for autonomy, while others argue that her rebellion is incomplete or self-destructive. These discussions by scholars are crucial since the present study asks not only how gender roles are constructed through male authority and patriarchal society, but also how women perform or resist those roles and what social and personal consequences follow from such acts.

Chopin is one of the late nineteenth-century authors who depicts how the female characters in fictional works struggle to find their own voices and challenge patriarchal standards. Martha Cutter's discussion of resistance in Chopin's fiction shows that she often imagines female resistance in indirect ways rather than dramatic ways (Cutter 19). In her reading of Chopin's short stories, women do not always resist patriarchy openly. Instead, they often survive through

negotiation, mimicry, and partial compliance. Cutter analyses the strategies of female protagonists to survive in a male-dominated society. In her earlier short stories, the characters like Euphrasie and Naomi are either silenced for being submissive or tagged as 'insane' when they aggressively try to express their desires and to claim agency. In her later works, Chopin began to write about women who are covert and strategic in negotiating the gender roles imposed by male figures or society. In her latest stories, Chopin's characters employ a form of resistance called 'voice couvert', where mimicry allows characters to strategically undermine patriarchal norms by performing expected gender roles. Cutter's idea of covert resistance is helpful here because it moves the discussion beyond a simple opposition between submission and rebellion. In the short story "Charlie", the protagonist Charlie tries to rebel as a tomboy but evolves by conforming to the roles of a dutiful daughter. Thus, she gains agency over her life and avoids unwanted marital pressures. Though Charlie appears to conform to prescribed gender roles, she secures a measure of independence by doing so. While many of these characters face social failure or death, Cutter argues that their stories still survive to challenge gender roles constructed by the men-dominated society.

If Cutter provides a broad framework for understanding negotiation within a male-dominated society, the Beauvoirian analysis of *The Awakening* directly shows the construction of womanhood. Scholars such as Zahraa Abdulhasan Abd Ali and Saman Hashemipour read Edna's life through Simone de Beauvoir's ideas of woman as "Other," immanence, transcendence, and the social production of femininity (Ali and Hashemipour 2170). From their analysis, Edna's dissatisfaction emerges from a gendered order that defines women through wifedom, motherhood, and dependence while allowing men full access to autonomy. Léonce's treatment of Edna as a possession and the pressure placed upon her to embody the ideal of the "mother-woman" reflect

how patriarchal society makes self-sacrifice and restriction to the domestic sphere seem as a natural part of womanhood. This study depicts clearly how femininity in *The Awakening* is constructed through social expectation and male authority.

Catherine Mainland presents a slightly different view by framing *The Awakening* as Edna's bildungsroman structured around prominent male characters (Mainland 75). According to Mainland, characters such as Edna's sons, Victor, Arobin, and Dr Mandelet mark a stage in Edna's psychological and social development. Through a close reading of Edna's life, Mainland concludes that, despite male influence and rigid societal norms, Edna's awakening is progressive rather than regressive (Mainland 75). This paper is relevant as it suggests that Edna's character is shaped by the influence of men. However, she is still capable of resisting the rigid gender roles imposed on women by patriarchal society.

This question of construction of womanhood becomes more complex when critics examine the ways women conform to or resist those roles. Peter Ramos offers one of the most useful arguments for this dissertation because he does not view Edna either as a triumphant rebel or as a helpless victim (Ramos 147). Ramos argued that identity is a social construction that requires willpower to maintain. Ramos shows Edna's suicide as the absence of willpower in accepting the rebellious life she chose (Ramos 163). What makes his essay especially important is that he does not focus on Edna alone. By placing her beside Adèle Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, Ramos shows that women in *The Awakening* respond differently to patriarchal gender roles. Women like Adele Ratignolle use the construction of gender performativity to their advantages. Adele embraces the role of a mother-woman and thus achieves her agency and authority in a male-dominated society (Ramos 155). Ramos argues that Mademoiselle Reisz is a successful portrayal of resistance to gender roles. She steps outside the "women-like" expectations of her time by living

alone, speaking freely, and choosing not to marry (Ramos 148). Her rebellion works because she commits to this different way of living and fully accepts it. Edna, however, remains unstable and confused between roles. Ramos's discussion depicts how different performances of femininity produce different possibilities and limitations within patriarchy.

While scholars like Ramos view Edna's suicide as an inability to sustain in a male-dominated society, researchers like Yoharatnam, interpret it as an act of liberating triumph, a final escape from the restrictive gender roles (Yoharatnam 314). In this analysis, the sea becomes a space of spiritual release, self-recognition, and freedom from the demands of wifehood and motherhood (Yoharatnam 312). At the same time, it also reveals a problem within the scholarship. Read beside Ramos, Yoharatnam's article becomes more productive. Together, these two critics expose a central debate in *The Awakening* criticism. That is, whether Edna's resistance leads to freedom from patriarchal confinement or a failure to sustain in the world by resisting gender roles. This debate is closely connected to the present research because it raises the issue of consequences.

Beyond direct resistance, criticism moves beyond marriage and motherhood to examine how gender is regulated through sexuality, intimacy, and space. Elizabeth LeBlanc argues that Edna Pontellier functions as a "metaphorical lesbian," a figure who resists heterosexual norms and patriarchal definitions of womanhood (LeBlanc 289). Drawing on Bonnie Zimmerman's concept of the "lesbian as sign," LeBlanc frames Edna as a "disrupter of heterosexuality" who challenges social expectations without engaging in literal same sex relationships (LeBlanc 290). Unlike Adèle, the epitome of mother-woman, Edna seeks self-discovery through her art, her emotional bonds with women, and her connection to the sea. She creates both physical and psychological spaces of independence, such as her pigeon-house and atelier, which allow her to resist social and marital obligations. LeBlanc also draws on Adrienne Rich's ideas of compulsory heterosexuality

and the lesbian continuum to show that Edna's meaningful relationships are with the female characters. Adèle introduces her to female intimacy, while Mademoiselle Reisz introduces her to independence and artistic freedom (LeBlanc 290-291). The sea further acts as an erotic and spiritual fulfillment outside the male dominance ((LeBlanc 302). LeBlanc's analysis aligns with Butler's concept of gender performativity. Edna refuses to conform to socially prescribed roles and actively constructs a sense of self beyond the expectations of wifedom and motherhood. By redefining her body, creating autonomous spaces, and forming non-traditional bonds, she exposes the socially constructed and restrictive cultural norms.

Additionally, Carolyn L. Mathews adds a symbolic dimension by showing that femininity in *The Awakening* is also constructed through the body and visible social signs (Mathews 129). Her article aligns with Butler's notion of gender performativity by demonstrating that gender is not just an abstract performance but a physical one mediated by clothing. Dress, appearance, and bodily presentation become part of the cultural system through which women's identities are regulated and made socially acceptable. Using the cultural matrix theory of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White and Thorstein Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption, she explains that middle-class women's clothing worked as a strict system that showed they did not do productive work and reflected their husband's social position (Mathews 132). In this system, Leonce Pontellier controls Edna Pontellier's appearance and becomes upset when she does not follow proper dress rules for social occasions. Edna tries to resist this norm by creating a "hybrid" identity, where she mixes respectable clothing with styles linked to the "low-other" to feel more independent and freer. Mathews' article supports the argument that gender is repeatedly performed through acts and visible codes. Mathews also suggests that embodied subversion has limits. Edna's struggle to

produce a different self through clothing does not finally secure a stable freedom. This makes the article relevant to the present study's concern with both performance and consequence.

The novel's reception history is important to understand how perception about feminism and gender roles change across time among the readers. Sarah M. Corse and Sandra Davis Westervelt show that *The Awakening* was initially disapproved in 1899 because reading practices of the time could not value a narrative focused on a woman's dissatisfaction with marriage and motherhood (Corse and Westervelt 139-140). They argue that the novel later became popular because feminist critics helped people read it in a new way, as a novel about women's identity and patriarchal oppression. Their study shows that the meaning and value of *The Awakening* did not remain fixed. They changed as the cultural frameworks for reading women's lives and the ideas about genders changed. This is relevant to the present dissertation because it reinforces the larger claim that gender roles and the ways they are interpreted are not fixed but socially produced and historically reworked.

Existing literature on *The Awakening* discusses important issues such as motherhood, female dissatisfaction, sexuality, resistance, and Edna's suicide, but these concerns are often treated in isolation. Most studies focus mainly on Edna's quest to freedom rather than examining how gender roles are socially constructed through male authority and patriarchal values. As a result, there is still room for a connected reading that brings together construction, performance, subversion, and consequence under one framework. This dissertation addresses that gap by using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to examine how gender roles are imposed, negotiated, resisted and how these different performances lead to different social and personal consequences in *The Awakening*.

As discussed earlier, while *The Awakening* helps to understand how the construction and subversion of gender performativity, it does not fully depict how womanhood is shaped, performed, and negotiated across different cultures and races. This is why Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* becomes an important text in this study. If Kate Chopin presents the confinement of a white woman within marriage and social norms, Hurston widens the discussion by showing how Black womanhood is also constructed through beauty standards, marriages, community surveillance, labour divisions and male authority.

Existing literature on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has analysed the novel through several concerns. Which include Black female subjectivity, language, racialised representation, space, labour, naming, folklore, and resistance. Together, these studies make it clear that Janie's struggle is not just personal or romantic. Rather, it is shaped by social systems that define how Black womanhood is seen, shaped and regulated. These scholarly works are crucial because they help situate Janie's experience within the structures of discourse and representation, even when they do not always depict the issue in terms of gender construction.

Stuart Hall's discussion of representation in "The Spectacle of the Other" is an important starting point to understand how Janie Crawford's identity is shaped through representation, stereotype, and social interpretation (Hall 215-216). Hall states that culture constructs meaning about people and groups. Identities are not natural but produced through cultural discourse. He also argues that "difference" is never neutral. It is socially produced and organised through binary oppositions such as self/other, civilised/primitive and normal/deviant. Hall is useful here because he helps to understand that Janie Crawford's identity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is not formed naturally or individually, but through social meanings imposed on her as a Black woman.

Following Hall's argument and to understand the construction of Black womanhood, Rupe Simms's article "Controlling Images and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women" is important. Simms argues that pro-slavery ideology produced stereotypes such as mammy, Jezebel, and mule. These stereotypes contributed to the social construction of Black women's gender (Simms 879-80). He also outlines a rigorous method, drawing on slave narratives, Black feminist thought, and hundreds of primary sources from religion, law, science, politics, and popular literature (Simms 880-81). This article provides historical insights behind Janie's treatment in Hurston's novel. Janie is not only asked to perform wifehood but also she is positioned against a longer racial history in which Black women were imagined as labouring bodies, sexual bodies, and burden-bearing bodies. The mule image becomes significant here because it depicts how Janie's marriage to Logan and later with Joe are shaped by expectations of labor, and usefulness. A limitation of Simms' article is that it focuses on slavery rather than literary character analysis. Therefore, this dissertation uses Simms's idea by tracing how those older controlling images are still relevant within a twentieth-century literary text.

Among the articles specifically on the novel, Pattison's "Sites of Resistance: The Subversive Spaces of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" offers one of the most insightful readings of Janie's movement toward achieving selfhood. Pattison argues that Janie's development is related to spatial dynamics, especially the porch (Pattison 10). He considers the porch as a liminal and productive site through which Janie negotiates public and private identity (Pattison 14). He suggests that Hurston presents material, psychological, and narrative spaces that allow Janie and the reader to challenge dominant discourses of race and gender (Pattison 21). Pattison shows that resistance in the novel does not happen abstractly, rather it happens in concrete social spaces where Janie is either silenced or enabled to speak (Pattison 10). His reading of the porch as a site of

narrative and psychological transformation is useful because it helps explain how Janie gradually reclaims voice and subjectivity. One limitation of Pattison's study is that its primary focus is space rather than gender. Despite the limitation, it offers a valuable framework for understanding how identity is negotiated through setting, narrative, and location.

Bertram D. Ashe's reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is significant for understanding how beauty and appearance function as sites of control in Black women's lives. He argues that Janie's long hair and light skin place her close to a racialised beauty ideal shaped by white standards, but Hurston does not present these features as simple markers of privilege. Instead, Janie's hair becomes a contested space where beauty, power, and autonomy intersect (Ashe 580). Ashe shows that Jody Stark's insistence on Janie covering her hair with a head-rag is an attempt to regulate her public image as a mayor's wife and assert possession over her body (Ashe 581). Ashe strengthens the idea of gender performativity by showing that Janie's femininity is not internal but is staged, and politically controlled. He helps to establish the idea that patriarchy in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* works not only through marriage but also through disciplined display of female body. At the same time, Janie's uncovering of her hair after Jody's death signals a symbolic rejection of that control. Ashe therefore helps illustrate how femininity in the novel is shaped, monitored, and then challenged through beauty politics and bodily appearance.

Wendy J. McCredie, in her article "Authority and Authorization in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," argues that Hurston's novel is concerned with Janie Crawford's struggle to gain a voice and the authority to use that voice. McCredie states that the text establishes "a female voice of authority" through Janie's gradual movement toward "self-authorization," showing that narration itself becomes an act of self-possession (McCredie 25). McCredie sees the novel as Janie's effort to find her own voice and, through that voice, claim her sense of self. She also

suggests that Janie's growth happens gradually, in different stages: before Tea Cake, during her relationship with him, and after his death, when she finally narrates her own life on her own terms (McCredie 28). According to McCredie, Janie's early inability to speak effectively under Nanny, Logan Killicks, and Jody Starks reveals how patriarchal authority suppresses female subjectivity. Jody, in particular, attempts to become the "big voice" for Janie, limiting her to a possession whose speech must pass through male control (McCredie 26). McCredie's reading becomes important in demonstrating that Janie's eventual narration to her friend Pheoby is more than recollection. It is the moment when Janie's past becomes her own possession and her voice becomes self-authorizing (McCredie 25). McCredie's argument helps to explain how Janie's resistance to patriarchal control is enacted through language and narration. Her essay is relevant to a Butler's idea of gender performativity, since it shows that gendered power in the novel is deeply tied to who is permitted to speak, who is spoken for, and how a woman reclaims subjecthood by becoming the narrator of her own experience.

Ms. Parminder Kaur studies Janie through Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. She argues that gender is not natural or fixed, it is socially imposed and repeatedly performed (Kaur 47). Using Beauvoir's idea that one is not born a woman but becomes one, Kaur explains that femininity is shaped through cultural norms, social expectations, and conditioning rather than biology (Kaur 47). She then applies Butler's concept of gender performativity to show that Janie's role as a woman is produced through patriarchal expectations within marriage and society. According to Kaur, Janie is expected to perform obedience and domesticity under the authority of men such as Logan Killicks and Joe Starks (Kaur 48). However, she gradually resists these imposed roles. In conclusion, Kaur suggests that Janie redefines womanhood not through conformity to patriarchal expectations, but through resistance and self-assertion (Kaur 48). Her

reading shows that Janie does not completely step outside gender performance; rather, she revises the script imposed on her. By rejecting passively assigned roles, she moves toward an identity grounded in autonomy and individuality. In this way, Kaur presents womanhood not as a role to be obediently performed, but as a lived experience shaped by agency and resilience.

Mary Jane Lupton reads *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a narrative of female survival and self-definition. She argues that Janie should be seen not simply as a romantic heroine, but as a resilient woman whose life is shaped by endurance, struggle, and personal growth (Lupton 53). Tracing Janie's development through successive stages of experience, Lupton suggests that her journey takes the form of a heroic pattern of survival (Lupton 47). Janie's life is marked by marriage, hardship, loss, and eventual self-possession. Lupton gives particular attention to Janie's resistance to male domination, especially in her relationship with Joe Starks, where her speech, visibility, and self-expression are tightly controlled (Lupton 46-47). She ultimately presents Janie's return to Eatonville as the return of a woman who has endured suffering and acquired the authority of experience (Lupton 54). In this way, the article highlights survival as a central dimension of Janie's identity and shows that resistance in the novel is closely tied to endurance, adaptation, and the preservation of selfhood.

Sigrid King's "Naming and Power in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" makes another important contribution by showing how language becomes a site of power. King argues that naming in the novel is not random (King 683). It is tied to hierarchy, social control, and self-definition. For example, King describes that Janie's first husband Logan Killick's name is tied to the word kills; The marriage was killed as it lacked love and companionship (King 688). Hurston gives early signs of Joe's real character through the names he uses for Janie when they first meet. He calls her "lil girl-chille" and "pretty doll-baby," which already suggest that he sees her as

someone small, decorative, and easy to control (King 688). These names hint at the limited role he will later expect her to perform as the mayor's wife in Eatonville. When Joe says he wants to make a wife out of Janie, King argues that he is not seeing Janie as an equal person but as someone he can shape into the kind of wife he wants. In this way, his act of naming Janie places him in a position of authority and power over her (King 688). Even when Joe dies, Janie's new name becomes "widow of Joe Starks" (King 691). Thus, this study is crucial to understand how language and naming used by men construct the identity of a woman.

Claire Crabtree's essay on folklore, feminism, and Black self-determination argues that Janie's journey is quest for self-realization rather than simply a sequence of marriages (Crabtree 55). Crabtree argues that an important but neglected area in Hurston's criticism is "the intimate connection" between the novel's feminist and Black self-determination themes and the folkloric motifs embedded in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Crabtree 54). Rather than treating folklore as ornamental, Crabtree treats it as a rhetorical strategy that asserts authenticity, shapes narrative authority through storytelling frame and structures the protagonist's movement toward autonomy (Crabtree 55). Hurston did not want Janie's happiness to depend on a man. Instead, she wanted Janie to find peace and fulfillment in her own self. At the end of the novel, Janie's journey becomes less about love and more about personal growth. While this essay is useful for understanding Janie's journey toward selfhood, it leaves room for further analysis of how that selfhood is socially constrained.

SallyAnn Ferguson's "Folkloric Men and Female Growth in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" reads Janie's three husbands through folkloric patterns and also shows how those relationships shape her growth (Ferguson 185). Ferguson argues that Logan, Joe and Tea Cake are linked to familiar folk types. Logan reflects the familiar "old man and young girl" motif, Joe Starks

is linked to the Black folklore figure “Jody the Grinder,” and Tea Cake is associated with the folk hero Stackolee (Ferguson 185). However, Ferguson argues that Hurston does not just repeat these familiar patterns. Rather, she carefully revises them to show Janie’s growth in consciousness (Ferguson 188). She shows Janie Crawford as a complex woman who struggles to find love, dignity, and selfhood within a patriarchal society. Through her three relationships with Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake, Janie learns about the limits of marriage, the pain of male domination, and the difficulty of achieving love. Ferguson’s work is crucial in her discussion of Tea Cake, since she challenges glorified readings of him (Ferguson 195). Although Tea Cake offers Janie love and companionship, the relationship is still marked by patriarchal power. Particularly in the beating scene where the community considers it as a sign of possession and passion rather than abuse. Ferguson’s article thus shows that Janie’s growth happens not outside patriarchy, but through negotiating its different forms.

In conclusion, the existing scholarship on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* shows that Janie’s journey is shaped by race, gender, language, space and social expectation. Critics like Stuart Hall and Rupe Simms help to explain how Black womanhood is represented and controlled. However, most of the criticism discusses these issues separately, particularly from a feminist perspective. This study aims to bring all the aspects together to examine how Janie’s identity is constructed as well as how she negotiates that construction throughout the novel.

Chapter 4

Analysis

4.1 Analysis of *The Awakening*

Men and women may choose or need to take on certain responsibilities. However, when society pressures women into fixed roles and strictly defines what they should do and how they should behave, it creates conflict, suffering, and sometimes serious consequences. The idea of the New Woman, popularised in the 1890s, referred to an educated and independent woman who sought an identity beyond marriage and motherhood. *The Awakening* is one such text that can be read in this context, as Edna reflects many of the qualities associated with the New Woman.

This chapter focuses on Edna Pontellier's experience in *The Awakening* through Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity, while also drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of marriage and womanhood. Butler argues that gender is not a natural essence that exists prior to social life. Rather, they say, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 33). Butler further argues that gender is "instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 178). This framework is particularly useful to trace Edna's crisis that develops through the pressure to keep performing socially approved femininity as wife, mother, and respectable woman. Beauvoir's argument is relevant here because she shows that marriage has historically placed woman in a subordinate position, where she is expected to serve as wife, mother, caretaker and socially dependent being rather than as an autonomous subject. In her book *The Second Sex*, she asserts:

Marriage has always been presented in radically different ways for men and for women.

The two sexes are necessary for each other, but this necessity has never fostered reciprocity;

women have never constituted a caste establishing exchanges and contracts on an equal footing with men. Man is a socially autonomous and complete individual; he is regarded above all as a producer, and his existence is justified by the work he provides for the group. (Beauvoir 501-02)

She also explains that marriage is imposed on women as both social function and survival. She states, A young girl's free choice was always highly restricted; and celibacy... ranked her as a parasite and pariah; marriage was her only means of survival and the only justification of her existence" (Beauvoir 503-04).

Together, these ideas help explain how Edna is forced into the roles of wife and mother-woman through social routine, marital expectations, and the rigid values of the community around her. In the novel, Edna's conflict and restlessness begin within a world that repeatedly tells her how to behave, how to be a wife and mother, and what kind of woman she should be. Her identity is shaped through domestic duties, maternal expectations, class decorum, and emotional restraint. The category of the "mother-woman," the instructions of her husband Léonce Pontellier, the example set by women like the epitome of perfect woman Adèle Ratignolle, and the pressure of the community all work together to produce a model of femininity that demands compliance, sacrifice, submission and service. Edna struggles within these prescribed patriarchal roles, tries to negotiate with them, and gradually makes brave attempts to move past them. However, as Butler suggests, acts of subversion come with consequences. This paper focuses the consequences of Edna's rebellion against the patriarchal construction of womanhood.

4.1.1 Staged Womanhood: The Construction of Gender Performativity in Edna's Life

This paper explores how Edna's gendered performance is socially constructed through marriage, motherhood, domestic labour, emotional suppression, and respectability. From the beginning of the novel, her difference from the prescribed femininity is visible. The text states that she "was rather handsome than beautiful. Her face was captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression and a contradictory subtle play of features." (Chopin 6). This description of Edna matters because it already places her somewhat outside the softer and codified femininity that the society around her expects.

Marriage plays an important role in patriarchy by shaping a woman's identity through the roles she is expected to perform. Edna's marriage to Léonce is described as "purely an accident," resembling many marriages that "masquerade as the decrees of Fate" (Chopin 28). The word "masquerade" is important because it suggests that marriage is socially staged and falsely naturalised. Beauvoir marks the same issue when she argues that woman's "free choice" has historically been highly restricted and that marriage becomes "her only means of survival and the only justification of her existence" (Beauvoir 503-04). Edna's marriage is thus less an act of individual choice than an entry into an institution already established by patriarchy. Marriage further reinforces this construction by turning Edna into property of her husband rather than an individual being. Léonce's perception of Edna after sun exposure is described as the look of a man at a "valuable piece of personal property [that] has suffered some damage" (Chopin 28). It reveals how femininity is tied to display, exchange, and ownership of men. Edna's body is socially legible not as her own, but as an extension of male prestige. In Butler's terms, gender is sustained through

a public system of signs, and Edna is compelled to occupy the feminine position that this system recognizes.

Léonce serves as an enforcer of this gender performance. He expects Edna to enact the social rituals of bourgeois wifehood. Handling visitors, wearing proper dress, managing the house, doing social activities, and preserving appearances. When she fails to perform her Tuesday reception, he is horrified that she went out “without excuse” and insists that “we’ve got to observe les convenances” (Chopin 75-76). This is significant because it shows that wifehood is a public performance of social decorum. As Mathews argues that femininity in *The Awakening* is controlled through visible markers like dress, physical appearance and class manners. This shows that Edna is expected not only to act like a proper wife but also to look like one in ways that reflect and protect her husband’s social status (Mathews 132). Beauvoir likewise discusses that the home is not simply private. It is also a social display of wealth, taste, and status and it is “essentially the woman” who must organise that exhibition (Beauvoir 649). This is what Léonce expects from Edna to perform. Even his irritation with the servants reveals that he sees her as manager of domestic affairs, just as he manages the office (Chopin 77).

The novel presents womanhood as something shaped and controlled by male authority. When Edna refuses to attend her sister’s wedding, the conflict becomes less about the wedding and more about who has power over her choices. Léonce refuses to intervene, but the Colonel sees this as weakness and tells him, “Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife” (Chopin 105). The scene suggests that a woman is expected to remain under male control and perform the roles she is instructed to. At the same time, Edna is blamed for failing in her expected role. Her father accuses her of lacking filial duty, sisterly

affection, and “womanly consideration” (Chopin 105). This shows that patriarchal culture not only demands obedience from women but also defines femininity itself through submission and duty.

One of the novel’s most revealing passages explains:

Another time she would have gone in at his request. She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us.

(Chopin 47-48)

This is one of the clearest literary articulations of Butler’s theory in *The Awakening*. Gender survives through ordinary repeated motions that come to seem unthinking and inevitable. Edna’s wifehood is thus maintained through habit long before it becomes openly contested.

Through this novel, femininity can be understood as a cultural construction enforced through social expectation. Edna is different from the other women around her, especially in relation to motherhood. This social ideal is clearly expressed in the category of the “mother-woman.” Chopin writes:

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman. The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.

(Chopin 12-13).

Here, Chopin places Edna in direct contrast to the ideal of womanhood at Grand Isle, most clearly represented by Madame Adèle Ratignolle. In this model, the ideal woman is not an

independent self but a self-sacrificing figure who makes motherhood and devotion to her husband the centre of her identity. Adèle becomes the clearest example of a woman who fulfills patriarchal expectations. Chopin describes her as “the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm” (Chopin 13), the “faultless Madonna” (Chopin 16), and a married woman who is “always talking about her ‘condition’” (Chopin 14). Her femininity is visible, admired, and socially approved. Edna, by contrast, functions as Adèle’s foil.

The Awakening depicts that motherhood is constructed as duty rather than personal choice. Léonce reproaches Edna for “her habitual neglect of the children” and asks, “If it was not a mother’s place to look after children, whose on earth was it?” (Chopin 9-10). This question makes it clear that both society and the husband expect a woman to care for her children as a nonnegotiable part of her role. However, Edna does not experience maternity in the idealised way expected of her. Beauvoir is useful here because Edna is not struggling with biological maternity itself, but with the social demand that a woman must become maternal in a self-sacrificing way. Edna does not fit that model of ideal motherhood. She is “fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way,” and their absence gives her “a sort of relief,” freeing her from “a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her” (Chopin 28-29). So, the issue is not simply motherhood, but gender performativity. Edna cannot fully repeat the emotional role expected from maternal femininity. Beauvoir’s critique of masochistic maternal devotion helps explain this. She argues that some mothers are socially pushed to become “slaves of their offspring,” surrendering their own lives and treating sacrifice as virtue (Beauvoir 634-35).

Overall, the novel shows how Edna’s identity as a woman is not natural or self-defined, but socially constructed through the repeated norms of marriage, motherhood, obedience, and respectability.

4.1.2 Undoing Womanhood: Edna's Subversion of Gender Performativity in *The Awakening*

Edna's awakening begins when she starts to see herself not just as a wife or mother, but as an individual person. Edna is described as "beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her" (Chopin 35). She has not fully rebelled yet, but she begins to think of herself as a person before thinking of herself as a woman in a social setting. That inner change soon turns into visible subversion when Edna learns to swim. In the sea, Edna feels "a feeling of exultation" and senses "some power of significant import" given to her, as if she can finally control "her body and her soul" (Chopin 42). Her desire to swim "far out, where no woman had swum before" shows more than excitement. It reflects a break from the repeated performances of ideal femininity. The sea thus becomes the first powerful space where Edna begins to move beyond the limits of the role society has assigned to her.

Edna's act of subversion gets stronger as the novel progresses. When Léonce finds Edna lying outside the house and commands her to come inside, she answers:

No; I am going to stay out here.' ... 'This is more than folly,' he blurted out. 'I can't permit you to stay out there all night. You must come in the house instantly.' ... 'Léonce, go to bed,' she said. 'I mean to stay out here. I don't wish to go in, and I don't intend to. Don't speak to me like that again; I shall not answer you.

(Chopin 47-48).

This moment matters because Edna no longer obeys him out of habit. Earlier, she would probably have gone inside out of habit, but now she becomes aware that this habit is actually a

form of control and she resists it. In Butlerian terms, the repeated act no longer secures the identity it once reproduced (Butler 178-79).

Edna's change and act of rebellion becomes visible to her husband. As the narrator says :
 He could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world.

(Chopin 85).

This is one of the important moments in the novel for understanding gender as performance. The image Edna has been showing to society is described as something worn "like a garment." This connects strongly with Butler's idea that identity is shaped through repeated social acts rather than revealing any true human nature. So, Edna's awakening is not about finding a pure self outside society. It is about removing the false gendered role that society has made her wear.

The subversion becomes stronger when Edna takes off her wedding ring, throws it on the carpet, and tries to crush it under her heel (Chopin 78). This moment is crucial because the ring works as her identity as a wife. It is not just a piece of jewelry. It symbolises the role and bond that marriage places on her. Beauvoir helps to explain this when she says that in marriage a woman "becomes his vassal" and "gives him her person" (Beauvoir 506). So Edna is not only reacting to Léonce but also attacking the symbol of the institution that tries to define and contain her.

Her rebellion against gendered roles then moves beyond the house and into society. The narrator says,

She began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked. She completely abandoned her Tuesdays at home, and did not return the visits of those who had called upon her. She made

no ineffectual efforts to conduct her household en bonne ménagère, going and coming as it suited her fancy.

(Chopin 98).

Earlier, the expected role of a wife depended on controlled behavior, social etiquette and proper household management. Now Edna starts choosing on her own as how to act, where to go, and how to feel. She no longer performs sociability and domestic duty as though they are natural parts of wifehood.

Edna's romantic involvement with Robert Lebrun and Alcée Arobin can be considered as acts of subversion against the role of the chaste and faithful wife that patriarchal society expects her to perform. As a married woman, Edna is supposed to keep her desire controlled and directed only within marriage. However, her emotional attachment to Robert and her physical intimacy with Arobin break that rule. Her relationship with Robert shows that her emotional life cannot be contained within the duties of marriage. Her romantic connection with Arobin challenges the idea that a wife's body must remain sexually obedient to her husband. In this way, Edna's adultery is not just presented as moral failure, but as a rejection of the gendered code that defines a woman through chastity, loyalty, and sexual submission. Through her intimacy with these men, she begins to claim desire as her own. This hence becomes another important way she resists the identity forced on her as wife.

From the beginning of the novel, Edna is shown as different from the ideal of the "mother-woman." She does not behave like the typical mother represented by Adèle Ratignolle, who centres her whole life around her children. Unlike Adèle, Edna does not perform the self-sacrificing maternal role that society expects from women. In one of the most important lines in the novel, she tells Adèle:

I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me.

(Chopin 70-71)

Edna makes a difference between caring for others and losing herself completely. She is not rejecting love or sacrifice. What she rejects is the expectation that a woman must erase her own identity for her husband and children. This is where her subversion becomes very clear. She refuses the idea that femininity means self-sacrifice.

One of the boldest acts of subversion occurs when Edna moves to a separate house of her own, the pigeon house. When Mademoiselle Reisz asked Edna the reason for moving, she said it , “I'm tired looking after that big house. It never seemed like mine, anyway—like home. It's too much trouble” (Chopin 117). She then makes the reason even clearer: “The house, the money that provides for it, are not mine. Isn't that enough reason?” (Chopin 118). What she wants is “the feeling of freedom and independence” (Chopin 118). Most importantly, Edna makes this decision “without even waiting for an answer from her husband regarding his opinion or wishes in the matter” (Chopin 124). Edna is rejecting the idea that a wife must remain tied to her husband's house, his money and the domestic role assigned to her. Elizabeth LeBlanc's argument of Edna as a “metaphorical lesbian” and a “disrupter of heterosexuality” further strengthens this idea because it suggests that Edna's rebellion is not limited to rejecting her husband's dominance. Rather she also disrupts the heterosexual script of wifedom by creating independent spaces (LeBlanc 289).

Edna's resistance becomes even stronger in the way she speaks about herself. She tells Robert, “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose” (Chopin 160). She challenges the accusation that her behaviour is not feminine:

“I suppose this is what you would call unwomanly; but I have got into a habit of expressing myself. It doesn’t matter to me, and you may think me unwomanly if you like” (Chopin 156). The society may see her freedom and choice as “unwomanly,” but she refuses to go back to the role expected of her.

Even Edna’s final return to the sea can be read as an attempt to reclaim herself. Standing naked, she feels “like some new-born creature” (Chopin 168). Edna tries to return to a state before society marked her with roles such as wife, mother, and her husband’s possession. She wants to exist outside duty, title, and social control.

Anne Fausto-Sterling’s idea supports this subversive notion because it rejects the view that femininity is natural or fixed. Fausto-Sterling argues that we “cannot understand the underlying physiology of behaviour without considering... social history and contemporary environment” (Fausto-Sterling 235). So, Edna’s rebellious change shows that femininity is not something inborn. It is socially produced through repeated behaviour. When Edna stops performing it, that constructed nature becomes clear.

4.1.3 Punishment and Possibility: Consequences of Edna’s Subversion in *The Awakening*

Edna’s subversion of gender performativity has both negative and positive consequences. Butler suggests that when a person stops performing gender in the expected way, the result is often punishment because gender is controlled by strict social rules and those who do not follow them face “punitive consequences” (Butler 177). Butler also says that once these rules are disturbed, gender can be understood as something changeable and not fixed, something that may be lived differently and “less violently” (Butler xxiii). Edna’s experience in *The Awakening* reflects both sides. Her refusal to continue performing the roles of the obedient wife and ideal mother-woman

brings pain, confusion, and isolation. However, it also opens spaces for freedom, independence, desire, self-expression and self-discovery.

Edna's subversion allows her to experience parts of herself that had been suppressed. One of the first signs of this happens when she learns to swim. The narration says:

A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless... She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before.

(Chopin 42).

This bold step allows her to feel physical freedom and confidence in a way she had not felt before. As Edna continues to resist social expectations, the narrator says, "She began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked" (Chopin 98). This shows one of the most positive outcomes of subversion. For the first time, Edna starts to live according to her own desires rather than simply acting out what society expects from her.

Edna's rebellion also creates space for art and self-discovery. As she moves away from the roles forced on her, she begins to imagine a different life and a different self. Her rebellion is painful, but it is also creative because it helps her shape an identity beyond wife and mother. This is supported by Mademoiselle Reisz's belief that the artist must have "the brave soul. The soul that dares and defies" (Chopin 94-95). In this sense, Edna's subversion gives her the courage to imagine herself differently. It also leads her toward artistic and emotional growth. She no longer wants to remain trapped in the role as a wife and mother that was imposed on her.

Another positive consequence is that Edna begins to understand her romantic desire in a new way. Her subversion allows her to explore sexuality outside the limits of marriage. The narrator says, "It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a

flaming torch that kindled desire” (Chopin 124) It shows that once Edna stops repeating the expected performance of respectable wife, she is able to discover desire as something real and personal. She begins to claim her emotional and sexual choices directly. A very important positive effect of Edna’s subversion is that she begins to reject the idea of herself as her husband’s property and starts to see herself as someone with the right to make her own choices (Chopin 160). She no longer sees herself as property, but as a woman who can choose for herself. Her move to the pigeon house also shows the positive side of her subversion. Edna becomes tired of living in the large house because it does not feel like her own home and it depends on her husband’s money (Chopin 117-18). By moving out, she tries to create a life that is independent and personal. Even though that freedom is limited, it still gives her a stronger sense of independence.

One painful result of Edna’s subversion is that the people around her begin to see her as unnatural or unstable. When she stops showing the submissiveness expected from a wife, Léonce can no longer understand her. Her changed behavior “bewildered” and “shocked” him (Chopin 85). Rather than trying to understand what she is feeling, Léonce thinks only in terms of duty and control. He discusses Edna’s change with his friend Dr. Mandelet and thinks that Edna is becoming mentally unstable. When Edna decides to leave the big house, his main concern is not her happiness but “what people would say” and how it can damage his reputation and business (Chopin 137-38). This shows that when Edna stops performing womanhood in the socially approved way, she becomes a threat to the community order around her.

Edna also faces emotional and psychological consequences. The world around her begins to feel strange and hostile. She feels disconnected from everything around her, as if she no longer belongs in the life she is living: “She felt no interest in anything about her... all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic” (Chopin 80). Even ordinary scenes of

domestic comfort do not bring her peace. Instead, they fill her with emptiness and boredom, as she sees in them “an appalling and hopeless ennui” (Chopin 84). Later, when she says, “I feel as if I had been wound up to a certain pitch, too tight, and something inside of me had snapped” (Chopin 136), it shows that she is struggling internally. These moments matter because they show that breaking away from gender roles does not just bring freedom or a stable new identity. It can also lead to loneliness, confusion, despair and emotional pain.

At the end of the novel, motherhood acts as one of the strongest pressures dragging Edna back into the role society expects of her. Adèle’s request, “Think of the children, Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!” (Chopin 162), is not just an emotional statement. It is also a way of reminding Edna of her duty as a mother and trying to bring her back into traditional femininity through guilt. This creates overwhelming pressure on Edna. Chopin says, “The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days” (Chopin 168). This is important because it shows that motherhood for Edna becomes a form of control rather than comfort. It shows how gender roles try to reclaim her even at the very end through guilt and shame.

The image of the falling bird brings together the whole idea of punishment in the novel. At the end, Edna sees “a bird with a broken wing... reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water” (Chopin 168). This image connects to Mademoiselle Reisz’s warning that “The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings” and that it is “a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (Chopin 123). This shows that Edna’s attempt to rise above social rules has dangerous consequences. The bird becomes a metaphor of what happens to those who try to break free from tradition. In this sense, the metaphor suggests that to subvert gender roles is to try to fly beyond convention and the

social world punishes those who refuse to stay within the place assigned to them. For Edna, the ultimate punishment of subversion is losing her life to get the freedom she longed for.

In the end, Edna's rebellion is both painful and meaningful. It leads to isolation, suffering, and punishment, but it also allows her to experience freedom, desire, artistic growth, and a stronger sense of self.

4.2 Analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the protagonist Janie's life is a strong depiction of Butler's notion that gender is not something fixed or biological, but rather it is socially constructed. Gender roles are produced through social expectations, male authority, labour divisions, and community surveillance. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides the central framework for understanding that gender is not an expression of a pre-existing identity but is instead "instituted through a stylised repetition of acts". These acts, repeated over time, create the illusion of a stable gender identity. Gender appears natural only because it is continuously performed and socially accepted. This framework is especially useful in reading Janie's life, as her identity is repeatedly shaped by expectations that she must enact in order to be a "proper" woman. Additionally, Butler emphasises that gender performance is not freely chosen by any specific gender, particularly the females. It is regulated through social norms that produce "punitive consequences" (Butler 178) for those who fail to conform. This idea is crucial in analysing both Janie's subversions of gender performativity and the consequences she faces. Hurston's novel reveals that deviation from expected femininity is never neutral. It has a price to pay.

To complement Butler's theory of gender performativity, this analysis employs Rupe Simms' discussion of how Black womanhood has historically been constructed through controlling images such as the "mule." Stuart Hall's idea of "the spectacle of the Other" helps to

understand that difference is culturally produced through representation. In unequal societies like the Black community, stereotyping reduces individuals to fixed and simplified meanings. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie is repeatedly interpreted through such representational frameworks. Her identity is not merely personally lived but socially produced through discourse and surveillance. Hall's framework thus complements Butler's theory of gender performativity by showing how the cultural image of Black womanhood is constructed. Through scientific research and explanations, Anne Fausto-Sterling supports this by challenging the idea that gender roles arise naturally and biologically. These frameworks allow a deep understanding of how Janie's identity as a woman is constructed by different factors. Fausto-Sterling's critique of scientific attempts to naturalize both sex and racial difference provides an important framework for understanding the construction of Janie's identity as a woman in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In *Sexing the Body*, she shows that early scientific research on Black people, referred to as "Negro studies," was not neutral, but shaped by racial ideology (Fausto-Sterling 122). These studies tried to justify racial hierarchy by presenting Black people as biologically inferior. Hence making inequality appear natural and biological. Fausto-Sterling argues, what is accepted as biological fact is often shaped by political and social context rather than objective truth. This allows Janie's position in the novel to be read not as a reflection of natural gender roles but as the result of historically constructed expectations. Just as racial hierarchy was falsely grounded in biology, the gender roles imposed on Janie are socially constructed. Her positioning as a laboring figure reflects what Rupe Simms marks as the "mule" archetype. This reveals how Black womanhood is shaped through intersecting systems of racial and social control. This perspective further strengthens Judith Butler's argument that gender is not natural but a result of repeated social norms. From the opening of the novel, Janie's identity is defined by others before she can define herself. This aligns

directly with Beauvoir's argument that one becomes a woman through social conditioning, and with Butler's claim that gender is produced through repeated norms, it is not innate. From Nanny to three different marriages with Logan Killicks, Joe Starks and Tea Cake, different social forces impose different versions of femininity upon her. The novel also portrays the instability of these constructions. Through Janie's gradual changes in actions, Hurston shows that gender roles can be questioned, negotiated, and disrupted and these come with consequences. Later in the novel, Janie does not follow the roles and rules prescribed by patriarchal society. She gradually negotiates and subverts her performance as wife and woman that others attempt to impose on her.

4.2.1 Constructing Black Womanhood: Men, Race, and Social Control

To trace how the construction of gender happens in this novel, we must go back to Janie's life before she gets married. The construction of womanhood and gendered expectations started before her marriage. The earliest and most influential force who shaped Janie's gender identity is Nanny. Nanny's worldview is shaped by generational trauma, slavery, rape, and sexual exploitation by white men. Nanny's perception of womanhood can be understood when she tells Janie, "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see." (Hurston 17). She defines Black womanhood not through choice or self-expression but through burden and service. Black womanhood is tied to labour and slavery, as Simms argues in her article that the "mule" was one of the controlling images that contributed to the social construction of Black women's gender and reduced them to beings valued mainly for labour (Simms 880). What Nanny is describing is not an eternal truth about women rather she is describing a social condition created by racial and patriarchal oppression. Judith Butler asserts:

The body is always under siege, suffering destruction by the very terms of history. And history is the creation of values and meaning by a signifying practice that requires the subjection of the body.

(Butler 165)

Nanny believes that safety, marriage and material security is the highest forms of protection for a Black woman. Her view of womanhood is inseparable from the history of slavery and the vulnerability of Black women's bodies within a racist & patriarchal society. She teaches Janie that a woman should find protection and safety through a man because the world is dangerous for Black women. This shows that the construction of gender is historical. Safety comes at the cost of a woman's agency. Nanny tells Janie, "Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection" (Hurston 18). Janie's marriage to Logan is arranged not because Janie loves him but because he can provide safety and economic stability. Through Janie's grandmother, Hurston presents marriage as a form of protection for Black women. However, in reality, this keeps women from gaining equality and freedom in society.

From the very beginning, Janie is treated as someone who must fit into an already existing role. This relates directly to Beauvoir and Butler. Beauvoir argues that someone becomes a woman through social conditioning, while Butler states that gender seems natural only because these roles are repeated and enforced. Butler asserts:

Men or women, for, as Beauvoir established, no such nature "exists": one must understand that men are not borne with a faculty for the universal and that women are not reduced at birth to the particular. The universal has been, and is continually, at every moment appropriate by men. It does not happen, it must be done. Perpetrated by one class against another.

(Butler 148)

Janie is not born into a naturally defined womanhood. Before she can define her own desires, she is taught what kind of woman she must become. Janie is not allowed to imagine herself freely. Nanny thus becomes one of the earliest enforcers of this repetition. Based on what she has seen as necessary for a woman's security, she pushes Janie to follow the same path. In her view, a Black woman must perform the role of a wife in order to survive and protect herself. Nanny therefore introduces Janie to a version of femininity built on labour, dependence and endurance.

Marriage is one of the social institutions which is significant in the construction of the idea of womanhood. Janie's marriage to Logan Killicks is a form of the construction of womanhood where a wife has to repeatedly play the role of labouring body. With this marriage, the idea of femininity is constructed through usefulness and service. Janie is expected to cook, serve and do physical labour in the fields. This takes romance out of marriage and turns it into an economic deal. Janie's vision of love through the pear tree, which is a symbol of mutuality, beauty and reciprocity, is shattered by this reality. As Hurston says, "She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (Hurston 30). Through Janie, Hurston shows how Black American society limits women to marriage. It leaves little room for romance or dreams of love. Janie's marriage to Logan Killicks brings her only sadness and disappointment. While marriage is a bond of love and intimacy to Janie, her husband does not feel the same way. Her role as a wife is to work and obey. She serves as a functional wife within the economic structure of society. Logan tells Janie, "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick" (Hurston 37). Butler's idea of repeated performance is relevant here. What Logan expects from his wife is a role created by the Black community through repeated performances.

Logan shames Janie for expressing her needs. He compares her to his ex-wife who used to work the way Logan expected her to do. He says, “Mah fust wife never bothered me ’bout choppin’ no wood nohow. She’d grab dat ax and sling chips lak uh man. You done been spoilt rotten” (Hurtston 31). He compares Janie to his ex-wife who better fit his expectations of womanhood as labor and service. It shows that a woman’s role is not limited to the home only; she is also expected to work outside, in the fields. In Janie’s case, this role is controlled by her husband, who treats her like a worker under his authority. As a result, she has to labor both inside and outside the home. He does not consider Janie as an individual. Rather, he is forcing her into a pre-existing role. Neither are these roles natural nor did Logan create these roles. He is referring to an already available script of womanhood. A woman is useful to get work done and must be domesticated. His expectations appear natural because they are culturally created through repetition.

Janie marries Joe Starks with the hope of finding love and intimacy in marriage. However, Joe also dominates and controls her, though in a different manner from Logan. If Logan defines Janie as a laboring wife, Joe defines her as a trophy wife. It is a different script in which Janie is expected to perform the kind of wifehood Joe desires. Her duty is no longer centred on maintaining the dignity, status and public image of being the mayor’s wife. Joe’s remark makes this expectation clear:

You’s Mrs. Mayor Starks, Janie. I god, Ah can’t see what uh woman uh yo’ stability would want tuh be treasurin’ all dat gum-grease from folks dat don’t even own de house dey sleep in. ’Tain’t no earthly use. They’s jus’ some puny humans playin’ round de toes uh Time.

(Hurstons 63)

When Joe calls her “a pretty doll-baby,” (Hurstons 34). He compares her to a doll, which implies that Janie is like an object that can be controlled and placed wherever he wants. He also uses the word “baby” to show her dependence on him. Like a baby with its mother who cannot survive without her mother’s protection. As King, in his article, shows that naming in the novel is connected to power and social control. This helps to explain Joe’s way of naming Janie, which makes her seem small, decorative and easy to control (King 688). Furthermore, Joe says, “You ain’t knowed what it was to be treated lak a lady, and Ah wants to be de one to show yuh” (Hurstons 35). Joe Starks makes it clear that he will treat Janie according to what he thinks is suitable for her.

Joe is more sophisticated and socially powerful than Janie's ex-husband. As the wife of a mayor, Joe expects Janie to uphold his image. Unlike Logan, Joe does not want her to work in the fields but he also does not want her speaking in the public, engaging in conversations, participating equally or expressing her desires. He limits her public speech. He makes her into a figure to be seen but not heard. In this way, Joe becomes the dominant voice in Janie’s life, so she is only allowed to speak in ways her husband wants her to (McCredie 26). Joe reconstructs Janie's identity as a wife who he thinks should be at home. When the townspeople ask Janie to speak and Joe answers for her:

Thank yuh fuh yo’ compliments, but mah wife don’t know nothin’ ’bout no speech-makin’.

Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home.

(Hurstons 51).

Joe also controls Janie’s physical appearance. Her body, hair and voice all become regulated. Joe makes Janie wear a head rag which is significant because it symbolizes Joe’s desire to contain his wife's sexuality and individuality. To Joe, a wife must obey the husband and be submissive. As Hurston writes in the novel, “He wanted her submission and he’d keep on fighting

until he felt he had it” (Hurstons 84). Ashe’s article deepens this point by showing that Janie’s hair functions as a space where beauty, autonomy and possession meet. The head-rag hence works more than a clothing. It is a sign that turns femininity into something strictly monitored (Ashe 580).

Butler’s concept of performativity is clearly portrayed here. Janie is pushed to repeatedly enact a form of femininity which is restrained, elegant and quiet. She must stand in support of male authority without actively participating in it. Construction of womanhood here happens not only through direct command, but through repeated everyday actions. Such as who speaks, who listens, who works, who appears, who is seen and who is heard. Hurston’s novel depicts that gender norms are maintained through repetition, which is why Butler’s theory is useful here.

Tea Cake, Janie’s third and last husband, gives her more freedom to speak, move, and enjoy life. With him, she laughs, travels, plays with checkers, goes fishing, tags along in picnics and movies, works in the fields and starts to enjoy her fully. However, Tea Cake too is not an escape from patriarchy. It is just a softer form of authority. His supportive intimacy and love still contain power and control. Janie is freer but she is not outside the boundary of gender hierarchy. Even in this marriage, femininity is performed. It is just a different performance of femininity. Janie is no longer a labourer or a decorative wife, but a loving and desirable woman who cooks for Tea Cake, waits with hot water for him, joins his work and shares his pleasures. Tea Cake’s way of controlling is through his love, emotion and passion. Janie is still not free to choose whatever she pleases. SallyAnn Ferguson in her article also rejects the romantic view of this relationship by showing that Janie’s growth with Tea Cake still takes place within patriarchal control, not outside it (Ferguson 195).

In Butler’s terms, gender is not a fixed essence but “a stylized repetition of acts,” a social performance produced through bodily gestures, movement, labor, and style. Janie’s life with Tea

Cake shows just a shift in performance. Joe controlled Janie through silencing and authority while Tea Cake controls through affection, emotion, jealousy, and sexual closeness. He also asserts masculine authority through Janie's body. When Mrs. Turner's racial prejudice threatens Tea Cake's place in Janie's life, he reasserts his authority by slapping Janie around. The reaction of the community regarding this beating is an important aspect to observe, because both men and women consider this violence as desirable and romantic. As Sop-de-Bottom tells Tea Cake, "Tea Cake, you sho is a lucky man. . . . Uh person can see every place you hit her. Ah bet she never raised her hand tuh hit yuh back, neither" (Hurstons 172-173). Tea Cake beats Janie not because she has done anything wrong but because this mild violence helps him reassert control and makes him the dominant spouse. As he later tells the men in the field, "Ah didn't whup Janie 'cause she done nothin'. Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss" (Hurstons 173).

His masculinity is therefore performed through possession, jealousy and authority. On the contrary, Janie is positioned as the soft and vulnerable woman whose value lies in her submissiveness and obedience. Through this scene, it can be said that gender performativity is socially produced. Masculinity is tied to domination while femininity is tied to submission, and both are reinforced by communal approval. Socially expected femininity is not erased but restaged with Tea Cake. Janie's role changes form but still it remains shaped within social expectations of how a woman should be.

4.2.2 Resisting the Script: Janie's Acts of Subversion

Janie's first instance of subversion is when she leaves Logan Killicks and marries Joe Starks. By leaving Logan, she rejects the idea that a woman must contribute to a marriage by providing labour. This is a refusal of marriage based on economic safety and gendered labour. Janie is rejecting the idea that a woman must depend on a man for economic security even though

the man is old and there is no love in the marriage. This is a bold subversive move for a woman of color.

Just like the construction of genders that has different forms, the subversion is also different. One of the most important acts of subversion occurs when Janie speaks back to Joe publicly. Janie openly rejects Joe's authority to define her when she declares, "Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life" (Hurston 94). Instead of accepting Joe's attempt to shame her body and age, she turns the attack back on him and exposes the emptiness of his masculine authority. In this scene, Janie no longer remains the silent wife Joe has tried to create. She speaks publicly and challenges the image of womanhood that he has imposed on her. Read through Butler, this moment can be understood as a break in gender performance: Janie stops repeating the silence and submission expected of her and instead asserts a self-defined identity. Throughout their marriage, Joe has controlled her language to assert male authority. When Janie challenges him in front of others, she disrupts the gender order. Janie challenges the traditional role of women by speaking up, even though male authority expects women to remain silent and confined to the kitchen.

This is an instance of performative disruption. Janie stops repeating the feminine script of silence and refuses to submit to the male authority. Janie shows resistance to gendered roles when she burns the head rag after Joe's death. During Joe's life, her beauty had be controlled by him as it represented sensuality, and independent presence. Once she removes the head rag and lets her

hair down, she reclaims her body from patriarchal control. This is not just an act of relief. It is a symbolic rejection of femininity imposed by Joe.

After Joe's death, instead of mourning, Janie seems to be close with Tea Cake and wearing colorful dresses. Phoeby tells Janie, "Folks seen you out in colors and dey thinks you ain't payin' de right amount uh respect tuh yo' dead husband" (Hurston 133). To which Janie replies:

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 wearin' it for de rest of y'all.

(Hurston 133)

This is a strong example of a subversive act. In addition to that, Janie chooses love and compassion over status. She decides to marry Tea Cake and start a new life with him. She says:

Cause Tea Cake ain't no Jody Starks, and if he tried tuh be, it would be uh complete flommuck. But de minute Ah marries 'im everybody is gointuh be makin' comparisons. So us is goin' off somewhere and start all over in Tea Cake's way. Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine.

(Hurston 134)

A woman is supposed to choose a partner who is older than her. However, Janie rejects that norm and chooses Tea Cake who is 12 years younger than Janie Crawford. After Joe, she could have remained in a respectable position as a wealthy widow. Instead, she chooses a younger man, leaves behind status of a widowed wife of a mayor and enters a thrilling and uncertain life with Tea Cake. Janie made a decision not organized by community approval, age expectations or class

respectability. She is choosing her desires and dreams. This is one of the clearest signs that Janie is rewriting femininity according to her wish. She is choosing selfhood over the expectations of a patriarchal society. Janie also chooses her own life over Tea Cake's by killing him, subverting the patriarchal expectation that a woman must always protect her husband's life above her own.

By the end of the novel, Janie returns alone, challenging the idea that a woman needs to be accompanied by a man. She does not return as someone seeking male validation and companionship. She returns with memory, pain, experience, knowledge and authority. She now narrates her own life. The act of storytelling itself is subversive. Janie becomes the speaker of her experience.

4.3.3 Freedom and Its Costs: The Consequences of Janie's Subversive Acts

As Butler states, subversion can lead to both punishment and possibility. Since gender is performed within strict social rules, those who do not follow those rules often face "punitive consequences" (Butler 177). On the contrary, when these rules are challenged, gender can be seen as "a changeable and revisable reality" that may be made "differently and, indeed, less violently" (Butler xxiii). Similarly, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's subversion of gender performativity has consequences. Janie's refusal of imposed gender roles has consequences, both painful and empowering.

The most apparent example of the consequences of subversive acts is social judgments and criticism. Whether Janie is leaving Logan, marrying Joe or having an affair with Tea Cake, the community deeply observes her and harshly judges her actions. Janie's deviation from expected social norms makes her vulnerable to criticism, punishment, and isolation within a patriarchal society. Her life becomes a topic of gossip because a woman who acts against the prescribed roles threatens the structure of the patriarchal community. This is an example which shows that

patriarchy disciplines not only through male authority but through social shame and isolation. Janie's independence isolates her. She gains agency, but at the cost of belonging.

When Janie returns to Eatonville after burying Tea Cake, she faces harsh judgement instead of sympathy and support. The conventional expectation is that a widow should mourn through dress to express grief. Janie, however, does not perform womanhood in the expected manner. The following reaction of the townspeople reveals how strictly femininity is policed through appearance, age and class:

What she doin' coming back here in dem overalls? Can't she find no dress to put on? Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in? Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her? What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal? Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid? Thought she was going to marry? Where he left her? What he done wid all her money? Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain't even got no hairs, why she don't stay in her class?

(Hurstons 2)

This shows that Janie's appearance and personal matters become public issues open to judgment. The gossip reveals that womanhood, even in the coloured community, is not treated as natural but as something that must be repeatedly performed through dress, expressions and behaviour. Janie is criticised not only for wearing a blue satin dress but also for allowing her hair to hang freely and for failing to remain "in her class."

The judgment and shame the society passes on a widowed woman is also depicted in Hurston's novel when Joe Starks dies and Janie chooses to wear the clothes she wants. The following remark from the people of the community is a sharp instance of such judgment.

It was after the picnic that the town began to notice things and got mad. Tea Cake and Mrs. Mayor Starks! All the men that she could get, and fooling with somebody like Tea Cake! Another thing, Joe Starks hadn't been dead but nine months and here she goes sashaying off to a picnic in pink linen. Done quit attending church, like she used to. Gone off to Sanford in a car with Tea Cake and her all dressed in blue! It was a shame.

(Hurstons 130)

Subversion can lead to vulnerability and uncertainty. When Janie left Logan, she was uncertain about what her life with Joe would be like and whether he would actually marry her. Her life with Tea Cake is emotionally less daunting but it also leads her into suffering, instability and ultimately grief. This indicates that to choose a life beyond rigid social scripts means giving up the safety and benefits that those scripts offer. Janie earns her selfhood, but it is not free from emotional pain.

The most devastating consequence is seen in the final part of the novel, when Janie shoots Tea Cake. This portrays that female agency can come with traumatising consequences. A woman prioritising her life and safety over her husband's life can cause her lifetime trauma.

However, not all the consequences are negative. Janie's subversion leads her to enjoy a life of her own where she can live it on her own terms. By the end of the novel, she owns something she did not have at the beginning. A self not defined by men, marriage, respectability or society. She comes back alone but not empty. She has a voice, a memory, and a way of seeing the life that belongs to her. This is the most significant outcome. Her solitude is not failure. It is evidence that a woman can exist without depending on male protection, dominance and security. Janie's subversive does not create a utopian reality, but it gives her subjectivity. She is the author of her own story.

Their Eyes Were Watching God shows that Janie's struggle is not only against her husbands but also against the social construction of Black womanhood. Her moving from one marriage to another and facing different kinds of rules, expectations and norms proves that gender performativity is not innate, rather it is constructed.

Through Butler, Janie's life can be understood as a journey away from the repeated gender roles of obedience, silence, labour, and submission that are imposed on her. Butler argues that gender is constituted through repeated acts and that identity is not an essence but an effect is crucial here because Janie's growth as an individual begins when she stops repeating those roles. This also reflects Fausto-Sterling's argument that sex was never understood in an objective or neutral way. Scientific discourse often constructed men and women, as well as White people and Black people, as fundamentally different. Those differences were used to justify unequal value and unequal rights (Fausto-Sterling 39).

Hurston's novel depicts Simms's argument that Black women have historically been forced to be controlling images such as the mule. Through Hall's notion of representation, the novel can also be read as a struggle over social representation. Majority of the time in the novel, Janie is defined and interpreted by men and society. However, by the end of the novel, she is no longer an object of their meanings and expectations. Janie becomes the one who speaks and shapes her own life. Janie not only resisted gendered roles but also claimed her authority.

Chapter 5

Findings

This study finds out that in both *The Awakening* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, gender is not innate or fixed. Instead, it is constructed by society and male authority through repetition of roles, behaviours and expectations. Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study shows that both Edna Pontellier and Janie Crawford are expected to perform womanhood in ways that patriarchal society accepts as normal. They are forced to play the roles of submissive women, obedient wives and sacrificing mothers. In both novels, femininity is shown as something women are taught to perform repeatedly.

Additionally, the study demonstrates that gender is constructed differently in the two novels because of racial and societal differences. In *The Awakening*, Edna's identity is shaped by white upper-class ideas of marriage, motherhood, domestic duties and submission to men. She is expected to become the ideal wife and mother and to sacrifice her own choices. On the other hand, *In Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's identity is also shaped by patriarchy, but in a Black southern context. Janie's construction is rooted in the history of Black womanhood and slavery. Her life is shaped by marriage, labour, silence, abuse and control over her body. It can be said that Butler's theory works well for both novels. However, the way of constructing womanhood and their roles is different based on race, class, culture and history.

Another important finding is that both Edna and Janie begin to resist the roles forced on them and their ways of subversion are different. Edna resists through her refusal to fully accept motherhood as self-sacrificing act, her interest in art, her sexual awakening, her rejection of her husband's commands, and through moving into a separate house of her own. Janie resists through rejecting marriages that silence her and demands labour, through speaking back to Joe and being

vocal, through refusing to remain as a worker or possession, and through telling her own story in her own words. In both novels, the women begin to break the roles the male-dominated society made them repeat. This supports Butler's idea that gender is created through repetition of roles and can also be challenged when that repetition is broken.

The study also shows that resisting gender roles can cause painful consequences. When women stop performing femininity in the expected way, society reacts negatively. Edna is considered strange and selfish. Janie is judged and harshly criticised by the people around her. This shows how society punishes women who do not follow the prescribed rules. Gendered roles are not only through family and marriage, but also through shame, guilt, gossip, judgment and social exclusion.

At the same time, the study shows that subversion creates possibilities. Edna's resistance helps her experience freedom, desire, independence, artistic growth and self-awareness. Janie's resistance helps her gain voice, independence and a solid sense of identity. So, it can be said that subversion in both novels has two sides. However, the outcomes are different based on the racial, cultural and class differences. In *The Awakening*, Edna's acts of resistance create freedom for a short time. At the end of the novel, she sacrifices her life as she sees no way to escape the constraints of patriarchy. Her journey towards freedom ends in isolation and destruction. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie suffers pain, loss, and oppression but her story ends differently. She returns to her town with self-authority and freedom.

In conclusion, this dissertation demonstrates that both novels depict gender as socially constructed and regulated through repeated actions. Both Edna and Janie challenge the feminine roles forced upon them. Their resistance shows that these roles are not natural or fixed. The study also finds that the construction and consequences of gender are not the same for every woman.

These change depending on culture, race, class and social setting. In this way, the dissertation supports Butler's theory and also shows that gender performance must be understood in relation to history, race, culture and power.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how gender performativity is constructed and subverted in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. The study has shown that in both novels, womanhood is not presented as natural, fixed or biologically determined. Rather, it is shaped through repeated roles, behaviours, and expectations imposed by patriarchal society. Edna Pontellier and Janie Crawford are both pressured to perform forms of ideal femininity that are socially accepted as proper and normal. In this way, the dissertation supports Butler's argument that gender is something produced through repetition within a rigid social framework. By studying two texts of different racial and cultural contexts, this study supports Butler's idea that gender is not innate. If gender were natural and fixed, there would not be such different forms of construction, subversion and consequences across race and culture.

This dissertation also suggests that gender performativity existed even before the term was coined. Even in present times, performativity-based violence and suppression still happen in different ways. Women are still judged by how well they perform socially accepted femininity. Because of this, studying older literary texts is important. These novels help us to understand how women dealt with gendered expectations in the past and what happened when they resisted them. If these struggles are not discussed, they may be forgotten or not taken seriously. This is why studying such texts in the light of gender performativity is crucial.

At the same time, this dissertation is not meant to create a men versus women division. The purpose is to make readers and thinkers aware of how rigid gender norms can affect women's lives and what consequences these norms can have on them. This study has some limitations because it is based on only two texts. It cannot represent all women's experiences or all forms of gender performativity. A wider study with more texts and more cultural contexts can give a deeper understanding of gender performativity and its consequences. Still, this dissertation hopes to contribute to feminist literary study by showing that *The Awakening* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* both reveal that gender is socially constructed, repeatedly performed, can be negotiated and subverted, and shaped by power, history, culture and society.

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