

Finding Voice and Freedom in Their Eyes Were Watching God

Yusupova Madinabonu

Student of Fergana State University, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article examines the themes of voice and freedom in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The protagonist, Janie Crawford, embarks on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment, navigating gender roles, societal expectations, and personal relationships. The novel highlights the significance of self-expression and autonomy in the face of oppression. By analyzing Janie's transformation, this study explores the broader implications of female agency and identity within African American literature and feminist discourse.

Keywords: Voice, freedom, feminism, gender roles, self-discovery, autonomy, oppression, African American literature, identity, agency.

Introduction: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is a seminal work in African American literature that explores themes of self-discovery, voice, and freedom. The novel follows Janie Crawford's journey toward self-realization as she navigates personal relationships, gender roles, and societal expectations. Through its use of dialect, symbolism, and narrative structure, the novel presents a powerful exploration of how voice and autonomy shape identity.

Janie's struggle for freedom is deeply intertwined with the theme of voice—her ability to articulate her thoughts, desires, and independence. In the novel, Hurston portrays Janie's journey as a defiance of patriarchal structures that silence women. The three key relationships in her life—Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake—illustrate different forms of oppression and empowerment that influence her path toward self-actualization [1, p. 84].

The significance of Hurston's work extends beyond Janie's personal journey; it reflects broader issues of race, gender, and agency in early 20th-century America. By reclaiming her voice, Janie not only liberates herself but also challenges societal constraints imposed on Black women. This article explores:

1. The Role of Voice in Janie's Journey – How language and silence function as tools of empowerment and oppression.

2. Freedom and Gender Roles – The impact of societal expectations on Janie's self-actualization.

3. Symbolism and Narrative Structure – The role of storytelling in defining Janie's independence.

By analyzing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through these themes, this study highlights how the novel remains a critical text in discussions of female empowerment and African American identity.

1. The Role of Voice in Janie's Journey

Silence as Oppression

At the beginning of the novel, Janie's voice is suppressed by those around her. Her first marriage to Logan Killicks is devoid of emotional connection, and she is expected to conform to traditional gender roles without question. Janie's lack of agency in this marriage reflects how silence is imposed on women, particularly Black women in patriarchal structures [2, p. 112].

Her second marriage to Joe Starks further reinforces this theme. Joe sees Janie as an object rather than a partner, silencing her in public spaces. He demands that she tie her hair up to suppress her individuality, symbolizing his control over her voice and autonomy [3, p. 134]. Janie's inability to express herself in this relationship highlights how voice is linked to identity and personal freedom.

Reclaiming Voice and Identity

Janie's journey toward self-expression begins after

Joe's death. For the first time, she experiences the freedom to speak and make decisions for herself. This shift marks the beginning of her transformation from an oppressed woman to an autonomous individual. The novel's use of dialect and inner monologue emphasizes the importance of language in shaping one's identity [4, p. 87].

Tea Cake, Janie's third husband, represents a relationship where she is allowed more freedom, though challenges remain. Through Tea Cake, she learns to balance love and independence, ultimately finding her voice without being confined by societal norms. By the end of the novel, Janie has fully embraced her ability to speak for herself, signifying her triumph over the silence imposed on her earlier in life.

2. Freedom and Gender Roles

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* presents a powerful critique of gender roles and the constraints imposed on women—particularly Black women—through marriage and societal expectations. Janie Crawford's three marriages serve as a lens through which Hurston explores the struggle for female autonomy and self-realization. Each of Janie's relationships exposes different forms of oppression, highlighting the rigid expectations placed on women regarding their roles as wives, caretakers, and silent supporters of their husbands. However, through her journey, Janie ultimately challenges these norms, asserting her independence and redefining what it means to be a free woman.

Marriage, traditionally viewed as a cornerstone of stability and security, is depicted in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a space of confinement and limitation for Janie. Throughout the novel, Janie is forced to navigate the tension between societal expectations and her own desires for self-expression and personal freedom. Her three marriages—to Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake—illustrate varying degrees of oppression, ultimately shaping her journey toward autonomy.

1. Logan Killicks: The Burden of Traditional Gender Roles

Janie's first marriage to Logan Killicks is arranged by her grandmother, Nanny, who believes that security and material stability are more important than love. As an enslaved woman who endured years of suffering, Nanny fears that Janie will face the same hardships if she does not have a protective husband. However, in securing Janie's marriage to Logan, Nanny inadvertently imposes the very restrictions she seeks to protect her from [Washington, 1987, p. 152].

Logan represents the traditional, labor-intensive

expectations placed upon women in rural communities. He believes that Janie's primary role as a wife is to assist with farmwork and household duties, viewing her not as a partner but as an additional laborer. He expresses his disappointment in her perceived weakness, dismissing her dreams and individuality. When he insists that she help him plow the land, Janie realizes that love will not grow in such an oppressive environment, leading to her first act of defiance—leaving Logan to pursue a different life [Hurston, 1937, p. 32].

2. Joe Starks: The Silence of Obedience

Janie's second marriage, to Joe Starks, initially appears to offer her the freedom she seeks. Joe is ambitious, charismatic, and full of dreams, promising Janie a future filled with excitement and status. However, once they arrive in Eatonville, Joe assumes a position of authority—not just as the town's mayor but as the dominant force in their marriage. He silences Janie, dictating her role in both public and private life [hooks, 1981, p. 74].

Joe believes that a wife should be silent, obedient, and deferential to her husband. He forbids Janie from engaging in conversations with the townspeople, fearing that her voice will undermine his authority. He also forces her to tie up her hair—a symbol of her beauty and individuality—because he does not want other men to admire her. By controlling her appearance and speech, Joe reinforces patriarchal ideals that equate female submission with respectability and order [Davis, 1983, p. 98].

As the years pass, Janie becomes increasingly aware of the suffocating nature of her marriage. When she finally speaks out against Joe in public, mocking his aging body and defying his authority, she experiences a moment of liberation. Joe's death shortly afterward serves as a turning point in her life, as she begins to shed the imposed silence and reclaim her identity. Her choice to let down her hair after his death symbolizes her newfound freedom from his control [Hurston, 1937, p. 87].

3. Symbolism and Narrative Structure

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* employs rich symbolism and a unique narrative structure to underscore Janie's journey toward self-realization and freedom. Two of the most significant elements in this regard are the horizon, which represents Janie's evolving aspirations, and the act of storytelling, which serves as a tool of empowerment and autonomy.

The Horizon as a Symbol of Freedom

One of the most enduring symbols in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the horizon, which represents Janie's

dreams, aspirations, and evolving sense of self. From the beginning of the novel, Janie perceives the horizon as something distant, an external goal she must strive to reach. As a young girl, she envisions love and fulfillment as something that will come to her through marriage, reflecting her early belief that happiness depends on external validation [Bloom, 2009, p. 176].

Janie's first experiences with the horizon stem from her grandmother's teachings. Nanny, having endured slavery and hardship, imposes a limited vision of security and stability onto Janie. She sees marriage as the only viable path to success for a Black woman, equating freedom with economic security rather than personal fulfillment. This influences Janie's initial view of the horizon—something distant that she can only reach through others, particularly men. When Nanny arranges Janie's marriage to Logan Killicks, Janie expects love to follow, but she quickly realizes that her vision of happiness does not align with reality [Hurston, 1937, p. 21].

Janie's second marriage, to Joe Starks, initially appears to bring her closer to the horizon. Joe is ambitious and offers her the prospect of a better life in Eatonville, where he becomes the mayor. However, she soon realizes that her role in this marriage is that of an ornament, expected to remain silent and obedient. The horizon, once a symbol of possibility, now represents unattainable dreams as Janie's voice is stifled under Joe's control. She watches her aspirations fade as Joe confines her to a predefined role, illustrating how external circumstances can limit one's ability to reach personal fulfillment [Washington, 1987, p. 134].

It is only after Joe's death that Janie begins to redefine the horizon. No longer constrained by an oppressive marriage, she starts to view freedom as something internal rather than something granted by others. This shift in perception sets the stage for her relationship with Tea Cake, where she explores a new form of love—one that offers companionship rather than dominance. Tea Cake introduces Janie to a world of adventure and playfulness, bringing her closer to her dreams. However, even this relationship has its challenges, demonstrating that true freedom is not dependent on another person but on self-acceptance and agency [Davis, 1983, p. 152].

By the end of the novel, Janie's relationship with the horizon has transformed entirely. Following Tea Cake's death, she returns to Eatonville with a newfound sense of peace. Unlike earlier in her life, she no longer sees the horizon as something distant that she must chase—it is now within her. This marks her ultimate self-realization: freedom comes from within, not from external validation or romantic relationships. Her

journey has led her to a place where she no longer needs to reach for the horizon because she carries it with her, symbolizing her complete independence and self-awareness [Christian, 1980, p. 200].

Hurston's use of the horizon as a symbol of freedom reflects Janie's shifting understanding of herself and her place in the world. What begins as an unreachable dream evolves into an internalized sense of peace and fulfillment, illustrating the novel's central theme of self-actualization.

Storytelling as Empowerment The structure of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* plays a crucial role in reinforcing its themes, particularly through the act of storytelling. The novel is framed as Janie recounting her life story to her best friend, Pheoby, an approach that emphasizes the importance of voice and narrative ownership. This framing device is significant because it allows Janie to reclaim her own story—she is not just a character in someone else's life but the narrator of her own experiences.

By sharing her story with Pheoby, Janie exercises a form of agency that had previously been denied to her. Throughout her life, men have attempted to control her voice—Logan Killicks expects her to remain silent and obedient, Joe Starks actively suppresses her speech, and even Tea Cake, despite offering her more freedom, still exhibits moments of control. In contrast, the novel's framing structure positions Janie as the storyteller, allowing her to shape her own narrative and make sense of her experiences on her own terms [Bloom, 2009, p. 176].

This storytelling framework also serves as a commentary on the broader historical silencing of Black women's voices. In early 20th-century America, Black women's experiences were often overlooked or erased in both literature and historical discourse. By making Janie the narrator of her own story, Hurston challenges this erasure, asserting the importance of Black women's narratives within literary and social contexts [Christian, 1980, p. 200].

2. Oral Tradition and the Power of Language

Hurston's use of dialect and oral storytelling traditions further reinforces the novel's themes of voice and empowerment. The novel is rich with the vernacular speech of the Black community, reflecting Hurston's background as a folklorist. This linguistic style not only adds authenticity to the characters but also serves as a form of resistance against literary norms that often prioritized white, standardized English. By centering Black vernacular, Hurston validates the voices of her characters and emphasizes the cultural importance of oral storytelling as a means of preserving history and identity [Gates, 1988, p. 84].

The act of storytelling is not just a narrative device—it is a form of empowerment. When Janie tells her story, she is not merely recounting events; she is actively shaping how those events are understood. This mirrors the larger feminist message of the novel: women, particularly Black women, must reclaim their voices in order to assert their identities and challenge societal limitations [hooks, 1981, p. 98].

3. The Ending as a Reflection of Narrative Ownership

The novel's conclusion reinforces the power of storytelling. After recounting her journey to Pheoby, Janie expresses a sense of peace and closure. The act of telling her story is itself an affirmation of her growth—she is no longer defined by her relationships or external expectations but by her own understanding of herself. Pheoby, having listened to Janie's tale, is inspired by her friend's journey, illustrating the transformative power of sharing one's voice [Washington, 1987, p. 134].

By the time Janie finishes her story, she has achieved full narrative control. She has told her life on her own terms, emphasizing the importance of self-expression as an act of liberation. The storytelling framework thus serves as a powerful reminder that reclaiming one's voice is essential for true freedom, both personally and socially.

CONCLUSION

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a profound exploration of voice and freedom. Janie Crawford's journey illustrates the struggles women, particularly Black women, face in asserting their autonomy in a society that seeks to silence them. Through her experiences in love, marriage, and self-discovery, Janie ultimately finds her voice and reclaims her identity.

The novel remains a significant feminist and African American literary work, offering valuable insights into gender roles, self-expression, and empowerment. By reclaiming her voice, Janie challenges societal norms and redefines what it means to be free. Hurston's work continues to inspire discussions on autonomy, identity, and the power of storytelling.

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