

Exploring the Evolution of Female Empowerment: A Study of Gender Dynamics in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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Abstract

This research scholar article employs a post-structuralist feminist framework by Judith Butler to critically analyze the evolving portrayal of women's roles in Hurston's seminal novel, "Their Eyes Were Watching God" (1937); through a deconstructive theory, the study explores how Janie Crawford, the central character, evolves from a state of imposed silence to a position of empowered self-expression. The analysis delves into the complex interplay of power, identity, and behavior received by societal norms that shape Janie's transformative journey. By scrutinizing the intersections of race, class, and gender, this research illuminates the intricate dynamics of female agency within a patriarchal context. Furthermore, it highlights Hurston's adept use of language and narrative techniques to challenge and reconceptualize conventional gender norms. This examination not only deepens our comprehension of the text but also contributes to broader discussions on the contingency of gender roles within both literature and society. Ultimately, this study contends that "Their Eyes Were Watching God" stands as a compelling testament to the potential for women to transcend stifling norms and find their voices amidst societal constraints.

Keywords: Post-structuralist feminism theory, Women's roles, Gender dynamics, Empowerment, Societal norms; Constraints

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Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston's work, "Their Eyes Were Watching God," stands as a beacon in American literature, offering a profound exploration of gender dynamics and the evolution of women's roles in the early 20th century. Within the tapestry of this narrative, the central character, Janie Crawford, embarks on a transformative journey from a realm of enforced silence to one of empowered self-expression. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of post-structuralist feminism, this research scholar article endeavors to dissect the nuanced layers of Janie's trajectory is based on agency, power, and identity.

By peeling back, the intricate interplay of race, class, and gender, we aim to illuminate the complex negotiations that shaped the female experience in a patriarchal society. This analytical endeavour is guided by the belief that "Their Eyes Were Watching God" serves as a literary testament to the potential for women to transcend stifling norms and assert their voices in the face of societal constraints. Through a deconstructive theory of feminism, this article seeks to unravel how Hurston's narrative challenges conventional notions of gender, ultimately redefining the parameters of women's agency in both literature and society at large.

In the realm of feminist discourse, the power of language and narrative has long been recognized as a dynamic force in reshaping women's identities and roles within society. Rooted in the conviction that language constructs and reflects prevailing social norms, Poststructuralist Feminism provides a critical lens through which we can scrutinize how women navigate, challenge, and ultimately transcend linguistic boundaries.

According to Butler, gender is not an inherent or static identity, but rather a performative act that is repeated and reinforced through various social practices and expressions. This idea, central to her influential work "Gender Trouble" (1990), revolutionized feminist theory and significantly impacted discussions on gender and identity. It emphasizes the role of societal norms, language, and behaviour in shaping and reproducing gendered identities.

"Their Eyes Were Watching God" by Zora Neale Hurston was initially praised for its simple story but later resurged due to interest in African American and women's studies. The novel celebrates Black culture, highlighting the creation of

an alternative culture that validates human worth. Hurston's approach freed Black language from white domination. Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God," on the other hand, weaves a narrative of a black woman's quest for self-discovery, offering profound insights into the intersections of race, gender, and class.

This study engages with Poststructuralist Feminism, a theoretical framework that posits language as a dynamic and contingent construct. Within this paradigm, language is not merely a medium of communication, but a site of power struggles, contestations, and subversions. It recognizes that linguistic structures can both empower and constrain, and it calls for an interrogation of these structures to unveil the potential for transformation.

One of the significant contributions of post structural feminism has been to challenge the notion of a universal, fixed category of "woman" or "man". Instead, it highlights the diverse and multifaceted ways in which individuals experience and expresses their gender identities. This perspective fosters a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender, recognizing that it is shaped by a complex interplay of social, cultural, and individual factors. By engaging with post-structuralist thought, post structural feminism offers a critical lens through which to analyze and deconstruct existing power dynamics, norms, and stereotypes associated with gender. This approach not only enriches feminist discourse but also contributes to broader discussions on identity, subjectivity, and social construction.

Deconstructing Linguistic Constructs

In opposition to this viewpoint, poststructuralist feminists dethrone the autonomous subject. This viewpoint is embodied in Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity. It is believed that the idea of the independent subject is false. The argument is not directed against the concept of the subject in and of itself, but rather against the idea that it exists before normatively specified activities take place. Rather than being the source and cause of activities, as the Habermasian perspective claims, subjectivity is understood as a formed outcome of regulated behaviors. Poststructuralist feminism promotes the elimination of an ontologically grounded feminist subject, drawing on Nietzsche's rejection of the idea of the subject as a substantive thing (Nietzsche 1993 (1887): 47). Rather, it is believed that the gendered subject performs, i.e., forms the identity that it is supposed to be.

She says that women have two options: either stay confined in their bodies or use the female body as a means of communication. She bases her theory on the idea that human sexuality is closely related to social communication. The goal of French feminist, psychoanalyst, and cultural theorist Luce Irigaray is to expose the allegedly masculine philosophy that underlies language and to suggest a "new" feminine language that, if it could be spoken, would enable women to express themselves. Post structural feminism, however, has come under fire for tactical naivete in rejecting any kind of female essentialism and for abandoning the humanistic female subject. (Butler, 1990: 25)

Therefore, poststructuralist feminism opens itself to critique by eliminating the "doer behind the deed"; The charge is as follows: feminist politics loses its direction in the absence of an ontologically grounded feminist subject (Benhabib 1995 a: 20; Butler & Scott 1992: xiv; Mouffe 1992: 371 & 381). It is important to emphasize, however, that dismantling feminist subjects does not imply eliminating politics as a possibility when politics is viewed as a representational discourse. This kind of discourse typically assumes that the subject is preexisting, having been defined by the category of "women" and has set interests (Butler 1990:1; Mouffe 1992:373f). Meta-theoretically, poststructuralist feminism rejects this understanding of politics. Rather, it defines as political the rules of intelligibility that are socially constructed and upheld and that are used to create and govern the category of "women". The conception, definition, and discourse surrounding "women" have political ramifications.

Hurston presents Janie Crawford's narrative as a negotiation of linguistic constructs within the context of her identity as a black woman. Through a Poststructuralist Feminist analysis, we examine how Janie navigates the complex intersections of race, gender, and class within her speech, showcasing the dynamic nature of linguistic agency. Poststructuralist feminism, when applied to the novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God" by Zora Neale Hurston, involves examining how gender and identity are constructed and performed within the narrative.

Poststructuralism suggests that identity is not fixed, but rather fluid and contingent. Janie's evolving sense of self and agency throughout the novel aligns with this perspective. Her identity is not solely determined by her relationships with men but is influenced by various factors and experiences. Poststructuralist feminism emphasizes the role of language in shaping and maintaining power

dynamics. Analyzing the language used by the characters, especially in Janie's relationships, can reveal how power is negotiated and maintained.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is relevant to the novel: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Examining how Janie performs her gender roles, and how these performances are received and enforced by others, provides insight into how gender is fashioned and sustained within the novel. Poststructuralist feminism encourages us to consider how various aspects of identity (race, class, sexuality, etc.) intersect and influence one another.

In the novel, Janie's experiences as a Black woman in a racially stratified society intersect with her experiences as a woman navigating gendered expectations. Poststructuralist feminism might prompt an analysis of the narrative itself. How does the novel subvert traditional narrative structures? How does it play with language and perspective to disrupt normative readings of gender and identity?

Poststructuralist feminism allows us to explore moments of agency and resistance within the text. When and how does Janie assert herself, challenge societal norms, or resist oppressive structures? By applying poststructuralist feminist perspectives to *"Their Eyes Were Watching God,"* one can uncover layers of meaning related to gender, identity, power, and agency within the novel. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how these themes are constructed and represented in the text.

Janie's identity is intricately woven into her narrative, reflecting the intersectionality of her experiences. Using Poststructuralist Feminism as a theoretical framework; we examine how Janie's identity formations are influenced by her sociocultural context, showcasing the dynamic and contingent nature of identity. Janie's journey is marked by acts of resistance against societal norms. Employing a Poststructuralist Feminist theory, we analyze how Janie's linguistic agency serves as a means of defying oppressive structures, ultimately redefining her role within society.

Review of the Literature

Zora Neale Hurston's work, *"Their Eyes Were Watching God,"* has garnered acclaim for its poignant portrayal of Janie Crawford's transformative journey within the cultural and social milieu of early 20th-century America. Central to this

narrative is the theme of gender roles, which is profoundly examined through the lens of post-structuralist feminism theory. This literature review seeks to explore the critical discourse surrounding the redefinition of women's roles within the novel, shedding light on the nuanced interplay of power, identity, and agency.

Post-structuralist feminism, rooted in post-structuralist thought, interrogates the construction and performance of gender identities within a sociocultural context. It underscores the contingent and discursive nature of identities, asserting that they are not pre-determined but shaped through ongoing social processes. This perspective challenges the notion of fixed, essentialist categories of "woman" or "man," opening the door to a more nuanced understanding of gendered subjectivities.

At the heart of "Their Eyes Were Watching God" lies Janie Crawford's evolution from silence to speech, exemplifying the redefinition of women's roles. Through her three marriages - to Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake - Janie navigates the complex terrain of gender expectations and power dynamics. Post-structuralist feminism illuminates how Janie's voice is not innate, but rather a socially mediated construct. Her journey serves as a microcosm of the broader struggle for agency and self-expression within a patriarchal society.

In an article titled "What I Learned about Love from Rereading 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'" (2017), Eve Dunbar remarked her views about the love portrayed by Zora Neale, and mentioned that Richard Wright criticized Hurston for neglecting the "race problem" and prioritizing sensuality over social commentary, causing skepticism among late-20th-century young people.

Kaitlynn N Milvert researched on an article titled "Becoming God: Cycles of Rebirth and Resurrection in 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'" (2016). The paper explores the concept of "God" and its impact on Janie, a woman surrounded by natural and social cycles.

In an article titled "Naming and Power in Zora Neale Hurston's 'Their Eyes Were Watching God,'" Sigrid King writes that names in Afro-American tradition are linked to power, authority, and are bound within white male power structures, affecting black women's ability to endure within them (2008).

In the article "Racial and Sexual politics of Their Eyes are Watching God from a spatial perspective", Lihua Zhao argues that, in a lead black female novel, Janie's poor character attributes stem from racism and gender sexism. Zhao criticizes her ignorance of racial division and her vague feminist consciousness, highlighting the importance of exposing social political issues meaningfully like Hurston's novel (Zhao, 2015).

The relationship between cognition and the formation of the self in Hurston's book 'Their Eyes Were Watching God' is highlighted in the article "The Cognitive Construction of the Self in Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God" (2007) by Patrick S. Bernard. The concept of "thinking, seeing, speaking, and knowing" is embodied in an individual's cognition, which Bernard claims is their inner essence but is frequently influenced by their external environment. The main character, Janie, develops her cognitive abilities throughout the book and uses them to discover who she is. Bernard clarifies that:

"In a conversation with Jody, Janie defends 'womenfolk,' disagreeing with the sexist claim that God made men "different" because they turn "out so smart" (70). When she states that men "don't know half as much as you think you do," Jody interrupts her saying, 'you getting too moufy Janie... Go fetch me de checker-board and de checkers' (70-71) so that he and the other men could play" (Bernard 9).

Methodology

This research seeks to investigate the redefinition of women's roles within Zora Neale Hurston's work, "Their Eyes Were Watching God," employing the theoretical framework of post-structuralist feminism by Judith Butler in her book "Gender Trouble" (1990). The aim is to elucidate how the novel, through its narrative and character development, engages with the contingent and discursive nature of gender identities, ultimately offering a nuanced portrayal of women's agency in early 20th-century America.

Post-structuralist feminism provides the theoretical underpinning for this study. This framework contends that gender identities are socially constructed, and are subject to ongoing negotiation. This research challenges essentialist notions of fixed gender categories, to critically analyze how gender roles are constructed and performed within a given sociocultural context.

“Poststructural feminists use poststructural concepts of language, subjectivity, social organization, and power in an effort to understand why women tolerate social relations that subordinate their interests to those of a masculinist culture” (Weedon, 1987, p. 40).

Critical Analysis

Central to the discourse of Poststructuralist Feminism is the recognition that language is not a neutral tool of communication, but a complex site of power dynamics and socio-cultural constructions. Poststructuralist Feminist theorists argue that language can both enable and constrain women, reflecting and reinforcing existing power structures. This perspective necessitates a critical examination of linguistic structures and an interrogation of how they shape and limit women's self-expression. “Perhaps the strongest inspiration for Hurston's writing of “Their Eyes Were Watching God” was her former lover Percival Punter” (King, 2008) Hurston's autobiography describes the love story between Janie and Tea Cake as a tumultuous affair, describing it as a “parachute jump” (Ibid.).

In 1927, a full decade before the publication of the novel, Hurston embarked on a significant journey to the Southern United States. This expedition was part of an anthropological research fellowship facilitated by her mentor at Barnard College, Franz Boas. During this research fellowship, Hurston was deeply engaged in collecting folk songs and folk tales. This endeavour not only highlights her dedication to preserving and understanding the cultural heritage of African-American communities but also speaks to her commitment to anthropological research, which would later inform much of her literary work (Ibid.).

Hurston's fieldwork and immersion in the Southern cultural landscape undoubtedly played a crucial role in shaping her perspective and providing her with a profound understanding of the nuances of Southern life, particularly within African-American communities. This firsthand experience likely influenced the authenticity and depth of her portrayal of the characters and settings in “Their Eyes Were Watching God.” This historical detail offers a fascinating glimpse into Hurston's formative years as a researcher and writer, underscoring her commitment to documenting and celebrating the rich cultural heritage of African-American communities in the South (Ibid.).

❖ “Their Eyes were Watching God”

Hurston's a feminist novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God" fundamentally revolves around the profound force of love. Janie's relationships are deeply influenced by prevailing gender norms and power dynamics, compounded by her own sexual identity and spiritual perceptions of the world. Moreover, language emerges as a significant thematic element, acting as a conduit for both connection and an emblem of authority. "There is a basin in the mind where words float around on thought and thought on sound and sight. Then there is a depth of thought untouched by words, and deeper still a gulf of formless feelings untouched by thought" (Hurston, p. 23).

One of the central themes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the exploration of gender roles and societal expectations placed upon women. Janie's journey is marked by her relationships with three different men, each representing different aspects of gender dynamics and control.

Janie's first marriage to Logan Killicks is arranged by her grandmother, Nanny, who believes that financial security is paramount for a Black woman in a racially oppressive society. Logan represents traditional gender roles where a woman's place is in the home, and her primary function is to support her husband. Janie quickly realizes that this marriage stifles her spirit and individuality. On page 23, Janie reflects on her marriage: "The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree, but Janie didn't know how to tell Nanny that." This passage highlights Janie's lack of voice and autonomy in this marriage, underscoring a feminist critique of marriages that subordinate women to their husbands.

Janie's second marriage to Joe Starks initially seems to offer more freedom and romance. Joe is ambitious and confident, promising Janie a life of prosperity and respect. However, Joe's view of Janie as an extension of his own status becomes apparent as he attempts to control her appearance and actions. On page 41, Joe tells Janie: "She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others." Joe's insistence that Janie tie up her hair—a symbol of her sexuality and independence—illustrates his desire to dominate and possess her. Despite the material benefits of this marriage, Janie finds herself again silenced and constrained. On page 76, Janie experiences a moment of realization: "Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until

something fell off the shelf inside her." This symbolic moment marks Janie's growing disillusionment with a marriage that denies her voice and freedom.

Janie's third marriage to Tea Cake represents a significant shift towards mutual respect and partnership. Tea Cake treats Janie as an equal, encouraging her to participate in activities typically reserved for men, such as playing checkers and working in the fields. This relationship allows Janie to explore her own desires and identity more fully. On page 101, Janie reflects: "He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring." Tea Cake's respect for Janie's autonomy and his willingness to engage with her on equal terms mark a departure from the oppressive dynamics of her previous marriages. Their relationship, while not without its challenges, offers a more feminist vision of love and companionship.

A key aspect of the feminist analysis of "Their Eyes Were Watching God" is Janie's quest for self-realization and autonomy. Throughout the novel, Janie grapples with her own identity, often in conflict with societal expectations and the desires of the men in her life. Her journey is one of self-discovery and empowerment, as she learns to assert her own voice and pursue her own happiness.

The horizon is a recurring symbol in the novel, representing Janie's aspirations and the possibility of a life beyond societal constraints. At the beginning of the novel, Janie's view of the horizon is limited by her circumstances and the people around her. However, as she grows and experiences life, her understanding of the horizon expands. On page 89, Janie reflects on her life's journey: "She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree, soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arches to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So, this was a marriage!" This early scene sets the stage for Janie's lifelong quest for a fulfilling and autonomous life. The pear tree and its blossoms symbolize Janie's ideal of love and connection, an ideal she seeks to achieve throughout the novel.

The analysis of "Their Eyes Were Watching God" highlights the oppressive gender norms Janie encounters and their impact on her relationships with men. The metaphor of women and mules illustrates the limited roles and expectations placed on women, undermining their individuality and happiness pursuit. This

aligns with poststructuralist feminist perspectives, emphasizing the need to challenge normative constructions of gender and identity.

Janie's nanny introduced her to the objectification of African-American women as mules at a young age: "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see" (Hurston, p. 24). Janie's realization later in the book serves as a powerful awakening to the truth of Nanny's warnings. It is a poignant moment when she identifies with the abused mule in Eatonville. This visceral connection reflects Janie's growing awareness of her own position in the community - as a working entity without agency, existing for the entertainment of others, and devoid of her own free will.

The parallel between Janie and the mule becomes starkly apparent during the town's laughter at the mule-baiting event, orchestrated by Jody to manipulate Janie. In this scene, Janie's refusal to join in the laughter and her empathetic reaction to the mule speak volumes about her evolving consciousness. Her sense of disgust underscores her recognition of the dehumanizing treatment endured by both herself and the mule.

The mule, in this context, becomes a poignant symbol of the feminine gender role prescribed by the society. It represents the ways in which men suppress and demean women, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that cast women as incapable of independent thought and perpetually reliant on male guidance. These stereotypes, as aptly noted, act as chains on women, hindering the development of their individuality and impeding the pursuit of their personal happiness. It's this stifling confinement that compels women to conform to their designated gender roles.

Janie's identification with the mule is a pivotal moment in her journey towards self-realization and autonomy. It underscores the larger thematic exploration of gender dynamics and the struggle for self-determination within a patriarchal society. Janie's evolution from a position of perceived subservience to one of self-awareness and agency is a central narrative arc in the novel, illustrating the complexities and challenges faced by women in asserting their own identities (Hongzhi, 2014).

The novel follows Janie, a Black woman in the early 20th century, as she navigates gender dynamics and her identity. She faces challenges in her relationships with three men, including Logan and Jody, who have misogynistic views on women.

Janie struggles to express herself and finds love with Tea Cake, who treats her like an equal. Through her complex relationships, Janie learns the expectations placed on her as a woman and develops the strength to fight them, ultimately finding true love and a state of peace. Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly (p. 1).

The novel offers a powerful narrative of Janie Crawford's journey towards self-discovery and empowerment. Set against the backdrop of early 20th-century America, and within the specific context of African-American women's experiences, the novel vividly portrays the intersections of race, gender, and class. Through Janie's narrative, Hurston demonstrates how language can be a means of negotiating complex identity formations in the face of societal constraints. Nanny teaches Janie about hierarchical structures from an early age: "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything...white man throws down the load and tells de nigger man to pick it up. He picks it up because he has to, but he doesn't tote it. He hands it to his womenfolk" (Hurston, p. 71).

Janie's grandmother weds her without thinking that love is a necessary component of happiness. Janie defies societal conventions to find true love with Tea Cake, but her need for love keeps her going. Her voice is amplified and she has the supportive environment she needs to be herself because of their shared love. The pear tree appears frequently in the book, serving as a bridge between spirituality, the natural world, and Janie's identity. In addition to being a key component of her femininity and appeal, her hair is a source of conflict and an object of desire. "No hour is ever eternity, but it has its right to weep" (Hurston, 38). In the book, beauty is equated with femininity, and Janie's worth is not much higher. Given that Jody orders Janie to cover her hair with a head covering, their marriage is a sign of his high social standing. Another representation of how race affects power in the book is Janie's hair. Janie restores the "weight, length, and glory" of her hair and her sense of self after Jody passes away by taking off her head covering. "She had waited all her life for something, and it had killed her when it found her" (Hurston, 43).

The institution of marriage becomes a crucible through which Janie contends with societal norms and expectations. In her union with Logan Killicks, Janie confronts the stifling confines of traditional gender roles, ultimately leading her to seek autonomy. Her marriage to Joe Starks, characterized by power imbalances and the

suppression of her voice, illustrates how societal structures enforce silence upon women. Janie's final union with Tea Cake offers a transformative experience, where language becomes a tool for empowerment, signaling a departure from conventional norms: "...but still I found myself melancholy for these nameless men and their inevitable losses" (Hurston, p. viii).

The novel delves deeply into the dynamics of traditional gender roles and the power dynamics within relationships. Nanny's belief that Janie should marry for "protection" rather than for love underscores the prevailing societal norms of the time (Hurston, p. 20). This perspective reflects the limited agency women often had in choosing their partners. Janie's experiences with her first two husbands, Logan Killicks and Jody Starks, highlight their desire to define her solely through her marital status. They both attempt to confine her to a prescribed role, emphasizing domesticity and suppressing her voice. Their expectations reflect the dominant gender standards, which required women to frequently adhere to social norms. He says, "... Muh wife don't know nothin' bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's ah woman [,] and her place is in de home (Hurston p. 53).

Jody Starks' imposition of silence upon Janie at the store is a poignant example of how physical locations were tied to gendered expectations. The public space of the store is perceived as male-dominated, and Starks enforces this division by silencing Janie. His assertion that her place is in the home further reinforces the restrictive societal norms. Despite the constraints she faces, Janie's relationship with Tea Cake marks a significant departure from her previous marriages. Tea Cake treats her with more equality, engaging her in conversation and activities like playing checkers. However, it's important to note that even in this ostensibly more egalitarian relationship, there are moments of possessiveness and control, as evidenced by Tea Cake's physical aggression towards Janie, "Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (Hurston, p. 29).

Ultimately, Janie's journey in the novel is intertwined with her relationships with dominant male figures. Her experiences with each husband reflect the varying degrees of agency and autonomy she is afforded. Through these relationships, the novel provides a nuanced exploration of the complexities of gender dynamics and the struggle for autonomy within a patriarchal society, "In 'Their Eyes Were Watching God', the role of masculinity is portrayed through the subordination and objectification of women. In a reflection of post-slavery Florida, black men are

subordinate only to their white employers and adhere to white patriarchal institutions of masculinity” (Schnieber, 2017).

Janie Crawford, the central protagonist in "Their Eyes Were Watching God," emerges in the opening pages as a character defined by her youthful naivety, striking beauty, and boundless energy. Her spirit seems untamed, exuding a vivacity that promises a life of possibilities and adventures. However, as the narrative unfurls, it becomes increasingly evident that Janie's journey is deeply intertwined with the pervasive influence of societal gender norms, particularly within the context of her romantic entanglements.

With each successive relationship, Janie finds herself subject to the expectations and pressures exerted by her male partners. Their desires and demands shape her path, often at the expense of her own autonomy and self-expression. As she navigates these relationships, Janie undergoes a gradual transformation, losing fragments of her once-unwavering confidence and self-perception. In her endeavor to meet the expectations imposed upon her, she begins to conform to the roles that her husband's envision for her.

This progression underscores the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms in Janie's life. Her experiences serve as a poignant reflection of the challenges faced by women in a society that often defines them by their relationships with men. Through Janie's journey, the novel delves into the complexities of identity, agency, and self-realization within a cultural framework that places significant emphasis on traditional gender roles.

Janie's evolution throughout the narrative provides a powerful lens through which to examine the nuanced ways in which societal expectations can impact individual self-perception and agency. Her story serves as a testament to the resilience and strength required to navigate and transcend these constraints, ultimately highlighting the transformative potential that lies within the struggle for self-definition and autonomy (Hurston, p. 32).

A pivotal moment in Janie's life occurred when she married Joe Starks after first being married to Logan Killicks. Driven by the hope for a brighter future, Janie takes a bold step towards what she believes will be a more fulfilling life. With Joe Starks, Janie's circumstances appear to improve dramatically. As the Mayor of Eatonville, Joe amasses wealth and social standing, elevating Janie's status in the

community. Her position is characterized by a certain degree of prestige and authority, as she is, in essence, "sleeping with authority" and occupying a figurative higher seat (Hongzhi, 2014).

Yet, this newfound status comes at a cost. Janie's elevated position in society is accompanied by a constricting set of expectations. She finds herself confined to the roles of a dutiful housewife, and she becomes, in the eyes of her husband, a prized possession—an emblem of his success and social standing. This dynamic reveals the underlying power dynamics within their relationship.

The comparison of Janie to the king's mule speaks volumes about the limited agency and autonomy she is afforded. In this context, her purpose is reduced to fulfilling Joe's desires and serving his interests. Her aspirations and desires become secondary, if not entirely disregarded. This phase in Janie's life serves as a powerful commentary on the complexities of relationships and the often-unspoken expectations that accompany positions of power and privilege. Janie's journey continues to illuminate the intricate interplay between individual agency and societal norms, underscoring the challenges and sacrifices necessary for pursuing personal goals fulfillment and self-realization.

Janie's relationship with Tea Cake represents a newfound freedom from the strict gender roles that defined her earlier marriages. Unlike her previous husbands, Tea Cake allows Janie the space to express herself and make her own choices. She is no longer confined to prescribed roles or silenced by patriarchal expectations. However, it's important to note that even in this ostensibly more egalitarian relationship, there are moments when Janie's agency is still influenced and, at times, manipulated by Tea Cake. This serves as a reminder that power dynamics and influence can exist in various forms within intimate partnerships: And despite being hit, "she never raised her hand tuh hit [him] back neither" (Hurston, p. 140). Tragically, Janie's love story with Tea Cake takes a devastating turn when he contracts rabies. In a harrowing act of self-defense, Janie is forced to make the unimaginable decision to shoot and kill him. This heart-wrenching event serves as a stark reminder of the complexities and challenges that can arise in even the most loving relationships. Her experiences underscore the intricate interplay of power and vulnerability within intimate relationships, ultimately revealing the resilience and strength required to navigate the complexities of love and human connection. Janie's quest for self-discovery and identity forms the heart of her journey in the novel. Throughout the narrative, she grapples with the challenge of finding her

voice, especially within the confines of her marriages. Janie's reluctance to engage in confrontations with her husband is indicative of the societal norms that restrict her assertiveness, particularly in the context of intimate relationships.

Janie contends with the harsh reality of being undervalued and marginalized as an African-American woman. The prevalent racial prejudices of the time cast a shadow over her sense of self-worth, making her acutely aware of the societal attitudes that undermine her value. Janie's distinctiveness from other women in the novel is a defining aspect of her character. Janie's desire for independence sets her apart unlike those who adhere to traditional roles and societal expectations. Her yearning for a life beyond the confines of male dominance and societal norms marks her as a trailblazer, challenging the established order.

Janie's love for Tea Cake, forged in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and genuine partnership, becomes a profound testament to the transformative power of a relationship built on respect and equality. It is in this union that Janie finally begins to find her voice and assert her identity, marking a pivotal moment in her journey towards self-realization (Harold, 1986).

Indeed, Janie's journey towards complete independence and self-realization is a central theme in the novel. Only after Tea Cake's tragic death can Janie fully embrace her identity on her terms. Returning to Eatonville with her hair down symbolizes Janie's newfound sense of freedom and authenticity. It's a visual representation of her shedding the societal expectations and constraints that had previously bound her. This act is a powerful assertion of her autonomy and an affirmation of her individuality. The scene of Janie sitting on her porch, engaged in conversation with her friend Pheoby, is a poignant moment of triumph. It signifies Janie's reclaiming of her own space and voice. It is a stark departure from her previous roles as a wife confined to her husband's expectations. This newfound independence allows her to engage in meaningful, unfiltered conversations, reflecting her growth and self-assurance.

Janie's evolution from a young woman seeking her voice to a liberated individual who confidently asserts her identity serves as a powerful narrative arc. Her story stands as a tribute to the enduring spirit of those who dare to challenge the norms and carve out their unique path towards self-realization and independence (ibid). Janie's upbringing under the guidance of her grandmother, Nanny, is a significant influence on her early life. Nanny's own experiences as a former slave and

freedwoman deeply shaped her worldview and aspirations for Janie's future. In seeking to protect Janie, Nanny's decision to arrange her marriage to Logan Killicks, despite his lack of attractiveness and advanced age, was rooted in a desire for Janie's security and stability: "In practical terms, a black woman in turn-of-the-century America like Janie, or like Hurston herself, had approximately the same civil liberties as a farm animal....." (Hurston, p. xi).

The practice of valuing marriage within the African-American community during the early 20th century held special significance. Having been denied the legal protections of marriage under the shackles of slavery, the institution took on a heightened importance in the post-emancipation era. However, Janie's experience with Logan Killicks reveals the limitations of this arranged union. Despite Nanny's well-intentioned hopes, Janie discovers that love cannot be forced or manufactured. The emotional connection she yearns for proves elusive, and she grapples with the reality that true affection cannot be commanded.

Janie's decision to leave Logan and pursue a relationship with Joe Starks leads her down a tumultuous path, culminating in bigamy. This act of rebellion against societal norms underscores Janie's yearning for agency and self-determination. After Starks' passing, Janie's encounter with Tea Cake introduces a new chapter in her life. Their love story defies community expectations, as Tea Cake does not meet the conventional standards of success. Suspicion and skepticism from their community underscore the resistance to their unconventional union.

While Tea Cake is not without flaws, his authenticity and genuine affection for Janie set him apart. Janie's choice to embrace their love, despite community misgivings, reflects her growing sense of self and her willingness to prioritize her happiness. The evolution of Janie's romantic relationships, from Logan Killicks to Starks and finally to Tea Cake, serves as a powerful exploration of love, agency, and individuality. Janie's journey is a testament to the complexities of human connection and the enduring pursuit of personal fulfilment and autonomy (Rooks 2004).

During the early 20th century, particularly in African-American communities, there was a prevailing societal expectation for women to prioritize communal and familial needs over their aspirations. This often meant sacrificing personal goals for the greater good of the community. In this context, women were frequently encouraged to prioritize the stability and security that came with marriage,

sometimes at the expense of their desires or aspirations. This emphasis on marriage and family was seen as a means of strengthening the community, particularly given the historical challenges faced by African Americans, including the legacy of slavery, segregation, and systemic discrimination.

Furthermore, the community often upheld traditional, male-dominated values that emphasized the importance of men as providers and leaders within the family unit. This sometimes led to a dynamic where women's choices, including their choice of partner, were influenced or even controlled by the prevailing social norms and expectations. This social environment created complex challenges for African-American women, as they navigated the tensions between communal expectations and their desires for self-realization and self-affirmation. It's within this historical and cultural context that Janie's journey in "Their Eyes Were Watching God" takes place, providing a nuanced portrayal of the complexities and conflicts faced by women in defining their own identities and determining their paths to fulfilment (Hawkes, 2014).

Janie's reluctance to openly complain about her mistreatment reflects the societal norms of the time. In many cases, women were expected to endure such abuse without protest, and doing so was seen as a sign of submission and obedience. This behaviour was often reinforced by cultural and societal norms that placed a premium on male authority within the household. The acceptance or even approval of domestic abuse by some members of the community further highlights the deeply ingrained gender dynamics of the era. It was not uncommon for men to believe that exerting control over their partners, even through physical means was a legitimate way of maintaining their authority (Shi, 2020).

This cultural context underscores the challenges faced by women like Janie in advocating for their well-being and autonomy. Janie's experiences serve as a powerful reminder of the broader societal issues related to gender and power dynamics, and the resilience required navigating such complex and sometimes dangerous situations. (Patterson, 2005). This complexity in Janie's relationships underscores the challenges that individuals, particularly women, faced in navigating intimate partnerships during the period depicted in the novel. While Tea Cake's treatment of Janie is generally kinder and more respectful than Starks', there are still moments of abuse that cannot be ignored. Janie's story serves as a powerful reminder of the resilience and strength required to navigate the complexities of love, power, and self-determination (McGowan, 1999).

The early 1900s was an era marked by deeply entrenched patriarchal ideals. These norms emphasized the authority and dominance of men in various aspects of society, including within the family unit. Women were often expected to conform to prescribed roles that prioritized their roles as wives and mothers while limiting their access to education, employment, and participation in public life, “At fourteen, I did Zora Neale Hurston a serious critical dis-service. I feared my ‘extra-literary’ feelings for her” (Hurston, p. xiii).

In the intimate spaces of the kitchen and the bedroom, Janie is subjected to the authority and control of her husband. This reflects the deeply ingrained societal norms that dictated the power dynamics within marital relationships during that period. Janie's compliance with these expectations is indicative of the prevailing attitudes towards women's roles and the limited agency they were afforded. Her reluctance to question or challenge these dynamics is reflective of the broader cultural context, where open resistance to patriarchal norms was often met with social censure and even ostracization.

Janie's experiences illustrate the complex realities faced by women of that time, highlighting the often-limited options available to them within the framework of existing gender norms. Janie's journey towards self-realization and agency, therefore, becomes a central narrative arc in the novel. Her growth and transformation involve navigating and, at times, challenging these entrenched ideals, ultimately seeking to define her sense of self and purpose beyond the confines of societal expectations. This aspect of Janie's story serves as a powerful lens through which to examine the complexities of gender dynamics and power within intimate relationships during the early 20th century (Zhao, 2015).

It's a powerful symbol of her growing autonomy and confidence in expressing her individuality. The observation that Tea Cake played a pivotal role in Janie's liberation is astute. Their relationship, while not without its challenges, offered Janie a degree of authenticity, mutual respect, and the opportunity to explore her desires and aspirations. Tea Cake provided a space where Janie could begin to transcend the constraints of societal norms and find her voice. Ultimately, Tea Cake's role in Janie's life catalyzes catalyzing her continued journey towards self-realization and independence. Their love story becomes a transformative force, allowing Janie to break free from the limitations imposed by societal expectations and ultimately find a sense of agency and fulfilment on her terms (Todd, 1999).

Janie's initial perception of marriage, influenced by the imagery of the pear tree and the bee, sets up an idealized expectation of unity and mutual fulfillment. However, as she navigates her marriages, she confronts the stark reality of her position as a woman in a society that often places women in subordinate roles within marital relationships. "Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant" (Hurston, p. 24).

Janie's journey, marked by these marriages, serves as a lens through which Hurston explores the broader complexities of gender, power, and autonomy within African-American communities of that era. The novel's portrayal of Janie's evolving understanding of her agency and worth within the context of marriage contributes to a deeper exploration of the challenges faced by African-American women in navigating their roles and identities. Ultimately, Janie's experiences reflect the broader societal and cultural context, shedding light on the intricate dynamics that shaped women's lives within the framework of marital relationships during that period. Her journey serves as a testament to the resilience and strength required to navigate these complex and sometimes oppressive structures (Ferguson, 1987).

The contrast in Janie's experiences in these marriages highlights the nuanced ways in which gender norms were enforced and reinforced within African-American communities at the time. Despite her efforts to seek a better life, Janie continues to face limitations and expectations that reflect the broader societal dynamics of the early 20th century (Bloom, 1986).

The work effectively captures the reality of Janie's experiences as a black woman from the South of the United States by utilizing dialect and colloquial language. This linguistic choice not only grounds the narrative in its cultural and geographical context but also provides a distinct voice for Janie, allowing readers to intimately connect with her story. Janie's dual roles as protagonist and occasional narrator offer a unique narrative perspective. The alternating use of Standard English prose and black Southern vernacular effectively mirrors the duality of Janie's identity and experiences. It allows readers to witness both the external portrayal of Janie's life and her internal reflections on her journey.

Without being given an opportunity to respond, Janie quickly learns that she has little influence over their marriage. It doesn't take long for Starks to try to control

her every trait and action, including making her work in the store. In short, he controls her speech, eating, sleeping, dressing, acting, and every aspect of her life. As time goes by, he even starts to become abusive. The most horrific instance of this violence occurs when he strikes Janie in the store one day, humiliating her in front of everyone. Joe has been making fun of Janie for a long time, calling her an old fool who just needs to listen to him and do things for him. “The worst part is when he makes fun of her behind. For the first time in her life, Janie rebels and leaves Joe behind: Janie fights back for the first time in her life, leaving Joe which all men cherish” (Hurston, 75).

Nanny's reflection on her own life, particularly her acknowledgement of being born into slavery, provides a critical historical backdrop. Her statement poignantly illustrates the lasting impact of slavery on the lives and aspirations of individuals like herself. It highlights how the legacy of slavery continues to shape the possibilities and limitations faced by African Americans even after emancipation. Nanny's words underscore the systemic barriers that existed for Black individuals in the aftermath of slavery. Her inability to fully realize her dreams and potential is a direct consequence of the historical injustices she endured.

This sentiment resonates with many African Americans who faced similar challenges in their pursuit of self-fulfillment and agency. While the novel may not primarily focus on a racist society, it skillfully weaves in these crucial historical and sociocultural elements. This allows for a nuanced exploration of the complex interplay between personal narratives and the broader societal context, enriching the narrative and providing a deeper understanding of the characters' experiences: “Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfil my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery” (Hurston, 21).

This theme is vividly illustrated through the character of Starks and the imagery of his house in the town center. The comparison of Starks to a plantation master, with his imposing house at the center of town, carries profound symbolic weight. It draws parallels between the hierarchical structures within the black community and the power dynamics that were historically present on plantations. This imagery highlights the existence of social stratification and unequal distribution of power within the community: “Mind-pictures brought feelings, and feelings dragged out dramas from the hollows of her heart...” (Hurston, p. 19).

The description of the rest of the town as resembling servants' quarters further reinforces this imagery. It underscores the stark contrast in living conditions and social standing between individuals like Starks and the rest of the community. This vivid portrayal serves as a powerful commentary on the internal disparities that exist, even within a marginalized group. By exploring these internal differences, the novel provides a nuanced portrayal of the complexities within the black community, shedding light on the multifaceted experiences and challenges faced by its members. This thematic focus adds depth and richness to the narrative, offering readers a deeper understanding of the intricate social dynamics at play within the story. "The rest of town looked like servants' quarters surrounding the 'big house' (Hurston, p. 58).

The comparison of Starks to a plantation master, with his imposing house at the centre of town, carries profound symbolic weight. It draws parallels between the hierarchical structures within the black community and the power dynamics that were historically present on plantations. This imagery highlights the existence of social stratification and unequal distribution of power within the community. The description of the rest of the town as resembling servants' quarters further reinforces this imagery. It underscores the stark contrast in living conditions and social standing between individuals like Starks and the rest of the community. This vivid portrayal serves as a powerful commentary on the internal disparities that exist, even within a marginalized group. By exploring these internal differences, the novel provides a nuanced portrayal of the complexities within the black community, shedding light on the multifaceted experiences and challenges faced by its members. This thematic focus adds depth and richness to the narrative, offering readers a deeper understanding of the intricate social dynamics at play within the story: "Us talks about de white man keepin' us down! Shucks! He doesn't have tuh. Us keeps our own selves down" (Hurston, p.48).

Mrs. Turner's admiration for Janie's lighter skin and European features reflects the internalized colorism within the black community during that period. This sentiment underscores the deeply ingrained biases and preferences for Eurocentric features, which unfortunately perpetuated divisions within the community. Mrs. Turner's disapproval of Janie's marriage to Tea Cake due to his darker complexion and more "African" appearance highlights the complexity of racial identity within the novel. It exposes the damaging effects of colorism and how it can lead to internalized prejudices, even among members of the same racial group. This aspect of the narrative offers a distressing commentary on how societal constructs

of beauty and desirability were often tied to Eurocentric standards. It also underlines the need for critical examination and dismantling of these deeply entrenched biases within communities of color. By incorporating this element into the story, the novel provides a thought-provoking exploration of how racial identity and biases manifest within the black community, offering readers an opportunity to reflect on the broader implications of colorism and its impact on individuals' self-worth and relationships.

Conclusion

In examining the narrative tapestry of Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God" through the lens of post-structuralist theory, a profound redefinition of women's roles emerges. The novel, set against the backdrop of early 20th-century America, intricately weaves the personal journey of Janie Crawford with the broader socio-cultural context. Through a deconstructive approach, we witness Janie's evolution from a state of imposed silence to a position of empowered self-expression.

The novel's unique narrative style, employing dialect and colloquial language, amplifies the authenticity of Janie's experiences as a black woman in the Southern United States. This linguistic choice grounds the narrative in its cultural and geographical context, providing a distinct voice for Janie and allowing readers to intimately connect with her story.

The theme of voice and agency resonates throughout Janie's journey, underscoring the intricate interplay of gender, power, and societal expectations. Her marriages to Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake serve as microcosms of the broader challenges faced by African-American women in asserting their identities and navigating their roles in a patriarchal society.

Through her marriages, Janie learns to value herself not only as a woman but also as an African-American woman with a unique voice and agency. The transformative power of language, exemplified in her relationship with Tea Cake, becomes a catalyst for Janie's self-discovery and empowerment.

In essence, "Their Eyes Were Watching God" stands as a testament to the resilience and strength required to navigate the complexities of gender roles and societal expectations. Hurston's masterful storytelling and astute examination of

women's roles within the context of post-structuralist theory provide a nuanced and thought-provoking exploration of the evolving nature of female agency.

This research scholar article, by employing post-structuralist theory, seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics at play within the novel. It underscores the malleability and contingency of gender roles, not only within literature but also within the broader spectrum of society. Ultimately, the redefinition of women's roles in "Their Eyes Were Watching God" serves as a compelling testament to the potential for individuals to transcend stifling norms and find their voices amidst societal constraints.

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