Chapter - 4

Their Eyes Were Watching God: Pursuit of Happiness

Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* written in 1937 is often considered as her best work and her masterpiece. Hurston’s creative genius is seen best in this novel. As an anthropologist she has been able to depict the true picture of black life but more importantly as a novelist she has written an inimitable story with real life characters which has now become a benchmark in the African American literary tradition. To quote Valerie Boyd:

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston ransacked the language of the King’s English as well as Eatonville’s Ebonics—to achieve a precision of expression that was stunning. For more than fifteen years, Hurston had been working to capture in words the beauty, the wisdom, and the complexity of her people and of her Eatonville experience. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she nailed it. Significantly, she did so by making a crucial revision to her memories of the village: In all her previous attempts to depict Eatonville in fiction, the porch sitters- the story tellers had been mostly men. In this novel, however, Hurston put her story in the mouth and the mind of a woman and the result is a book of transcendent appeal. (303)

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is set in the Southern part of America. The novel chronicles the life of the protagonist Janie Crawford and her search for identity. She marries thrice and tries to live life on her own terms. Hurston in her effervescent style has presented complex African American culture celebrating black life and experience. In creating this work, Hurston created for the first time a text which validated the black woman’s life and experience, which were earlier marginalized. In
a way she became a path breaker for all other twentieth century African American women writers. When the novel was published, it received scathing reviews from Hurston’s African American male counterparts. Alain Locke in *Opportunity* to Richard Wright in *New Masses* found it unsatisfactory and they even went disparaging it. They were not able to understand Hurston’s literary pedagogy and her genuine efforts to show African American life as a literary artist and not as a sociologist. Today, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has become one of the most popular African American works achieving a canonical status and being exemplary in craftsmanship. Alice Walker deeply influenced by the novel, writes in “Zora Neale Hurston—A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View”:

Condemned to a deserted island for a life, with an allotment of ten books to see me through, I would choose, unhesitatingly, two of Zora’s: *Mules and Men*, because I would need to be able to pass on to younger generations the life of American blacks as legend and myth, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, because I would want to enjoy myself while identifying with the black heroine, Janie Crawford, as she acted out many roles in a variety of settings, and functioned (with spectacular results!) in romantic and sensual love. *There is no book more important to me than this one.* (xiii)

Though not an autobiography, Hurston has poured her emotions into the novel. Hurston was going through a rough and painful relationship with her lover Percy Punter, and in these conditions she left for Haiti after receiving the Guggenheim Fellowship. Hurston writes in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

I wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in Haiti. It was damned up in me, and I wrote it under intense pressure in seven weeks.... so I pitched
in to work hard on my research to smother my feelings. But the thing would not down. The plot was far from the circumstances but I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him in Their Eyes Were Watching God. (210-111)

The protagonist of the novel is Janie Crawford. Janie is a firm minded African American woman who is in search for herself and happiness. Janie, sitting on her porch and telling her story and experiences is the basic narrative framework on which Hurston gradually builds up her meticulous novel.

From the opening lines of the novel, Hurston manifests that Their Eyes Were Watching God is a story of a woman and that this woman has a deep sense of individuality and identity. She has the capacity to take her own decisions and live her life according to her will. While black men are fighting and fretting to achieve their dreams which seem so distant and “mocked to death by Time” (175). According to Hurston:

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 accordingly.

So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. Not the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment.

(175)

This particular opening paragraph of the novel introduces to the main theme of the novel, the theme of the search for identity and individuality. Just as Janie relates
her story to Pheoby, the novel slowly unfolds to reveal Janie’s process of growth and her search for identity.

Janie is brought up by her grandmother Nanny, who works for a white family called Washburn in Western Florida. Janie plays with white children unaware that she is black. One day she sees her photo and realizes that she is colored. Hurston depicts this scene of racial discovery with utmost ingenuity and complexity. Hurston writes:

So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn’t nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat’s where Ah wuz’posed to be, but Ah couldn’t recognize dat dark chile as me. So ah ast, ‘where is me? Ah don’t see me. (181)

Janie had an image of herself as a white which is shattered. For the first time in her life she becomes aware of her identity of being a colored person. She says, “Aw!Aw! Ah’mcolored !”(182). This self-realization is not a painful one, but marks an aspect of development of Janie’s identity. Hurston also shows that by this time Janie has no proper name. Janie says “Dey useter call me Alphabet cause so many people had done named me different names” (181-182). As “Alphabet”, Janie is depicted to be nothing more than a character. At the beginning, Janie is shown nameless and unrecognizable. The photograph reveals that she has no identity of her own. According to, Elizabeth Meese “Janie receives her sense of definition from others. She is woman as object in a racist, patriarchal culture. Failing to recognize herself as the one black child in a photograph, she begins her story without name or color” (61-62).
Janie blossoms into a beautiful black teenager girl, in her youth, she has another self-revelation in her Nanny’s yard. She becomes aware of her sexuality. Hurston writes:

Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the backyard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say; ever since the first tiny bloom had opened it. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds, from the leaf buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How why? It was like flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness.(182-83)

Then Janie sees the vision of the pear tree being pollinated by bees. She goes to see a bee pollinating the bloom. She comes to know that “this was a marriage” (183). At this point of time, Janie’s search for self and identity primarily focuses on the social institution of marriage. She thinks that she will attain her self-realization by getting married to a man. However, corresponding the marriage with total realization of self, once again manifests Janie’s immature consciousness. Unfortunately, Nanny marries her off to a much older and a simpleton named Logan Killcks. He is a man of stable financial position—sixty acres and a mule. Janie vehemently protests against
this marriage but to no avail. Janie leads an unhappy life with Logan who is “ole skull-head in de grave yard” (185). There is no identification in her experience and the visions she had dreamt of for herself. According to Janie, Logan is, “Some folks never was meant to be loved and he’s one of ’em” (193).

In this utterly failed marriage, Janie matures to be a woman who comes to know that merely marrying a materialistic man like Logan Killicks cannot fulfill Janie’s life. Janie leaves Killicks and marries an ambitious man called Joe Starks. In him, Janie sees a new sense of romance. He even promises to rescue Janie from her miserable domestic life. Joe or Jody Starks is a man of “big voice” (196) and big visions. Hurston writes, “He meant to buy in big. It had always been his wish and desire to be big voice and he had to live nearly thirty years to find a chance” (197). Janie is ready to take another gamble with her life in pursuit of her identity, Janie and Joe settle in Eatonville spending the next twenty years together.

Joe Starks becomes the mayor of Eatonville and a man with big properties and ample money in the bank. At first Janie seems to be happy with Joe, but gradually, she feels oppressed. Joe puts a lot of restrictions on Janie. He does not allow her to talk to other members. She leads a lonely life with no voice and does not participate in community life. Joe says, “Mah wife don’t know nothin’ bout no speech-makin. Ah never married her nothing lak dat” (228). Janie once again becomes aware of the futility in her second marriage. She now merely spends the life of a mayor’s wife and is occasionally abused by Joe, both physically and emotionally.

The real Janie is somewhere smothered in this marriage also. She feels completely alienated and lonely once again. Janie once again discovers that this is not the place where she wants to be or Joe the man with whom she wants to be, “Now and again she thought of a country road at sun-up and considered flight. To where?
what?” (236). Janie feels incomplete with Joe and yearns for freedom. Janie cannot tolerate any more verbal abuse of Joe and answers him back. Not only does Janie regain her strength and muted voice but also is able to deal a severe blow to Joe. Soon Joe becomes sick and dies. Janie is now fully matured as a woman who can face any adversity and come out more strengthened and courageous. After a couple of decades, she finally becomes aware of her new found identity “Years ago, she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass. It had been a long time since she had remembered. Perhaps she’d better at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place” (245).

Janie leads the life of a rich beautiful widow until she finds Tea Cake aka Vergible Woods. This time she handles relationship with Tea Cake much more maturely unlike with that of Logan Killicks and Joe Starks. She wants to be treated equally and she experiences it with Tea Cake and for the first time in her life, she is happy, “Setting out for Lake Sabelia after midnight that she felt like a child breaking rules. That’s what made Janie like it” (257) Finally, Janie is able to express herself, gives and gets love that she has been craving for all her life. In fact one important aspect of Janie’s identity, her blackness is expressed when she is with Tea Cake. Tea Cake encourages Janie to express herself and participate in black culture. She becomes one of the most vocal members of the community taking part in “story-telling” and “porch-talks.” Janie and Tea Cake move to Ever Glades. Janie finds her identity as a black individual. Hurston shows that Janie’s blackness is an integral part of her identity.

Their blissful life is cut short when Tea Cake is inflicted with rabies disease when he is bitten by a rabid dog during the hurricane while trying to save Janie. After a month of sickness, Janie has to shoot Tea Cake in self-defense. She returns to
Eatonville after burying Tea Cake. Unlike Joe Starks, the memory of Tea Cake does not hold her back but is a source of inspiration and strength. Though Tea Cake had died, his memories will always be fresh in Janie’s mind and help her to grow.

Janie returns to Eatonville as a strong and independent woman. She has a new sense of identity and is “full of that oldest human-longing--self-revelation”(180). She has a new knowledge and a view of life, of what it is to be complete physically, emotionally and spiritually. Janie finds her identity starting from being a six year old, who is unable to recognize herself to a sixteen year old who is forced into an unhappy marriage and adulthood by her Nanny, to a forty year old matured woman who finally finds her real self after being through all the pain and heart break. Janie says, “So Ah’m back home agin and Ah’m satisfied tuh be heah. Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now” (332). Janie gains her own identity defying the role imposed by related characters like Nanny, Logan Killcks and Joe Starks. Mary Helen Washington writes regarding the Janie’s search for identity:

Janie assumes this heroic stature by her struggles for self-definition and autonomy, for liberation from the illusion that others have tried to make her live by….Moreover, she is always the aware voice, consciously undergoing the most severe tests of autonomy. (16)

_Their Eyes Were Watching God_ is just not only about an African American woman’s search for identity but there are also other important themes in the novel. One of them is the theme of race and racism. Hurston comments extensively on race relation in _Their Eyes_. For Hurston race is not just a biological concept, based on skin color. For her race is a concept construed by people. Hurston’s description of race resembles that of her previous novel _Jonah’s Gourd Vine_. Hurston presents the twin aspects of racism, one that occurs as interracial racism and other is intraracial racism.
Through the character of Nanny, Hurston represents the history of African Americans in America. Though the story is about the protagonist Janie, Hurston gives us a glimpse into her past history, which is necessary to understand her present. Through the characterization of Nanny, Hurston tells about the slavery period, the freedom from slavery and the present days of disorder and confusion. Nanny has lead her life as a slave and faced brutalities of her white master. She had to bear an illegitimate child called Leafy, who bore a striking resemblance to her white father. The white mistress of the plantation was able to deduce that Leafy is her husband’s illegitimate child. She threatened Nanny with dire consequences. Nanny had to run away from the plantation to evade brutal punishment and impending murder of her mulatto child. She hid in a swamp, until Emancipation was declared. Nanny’s past experiences of slavery has coloured her present and she views the life of a black woman dejectedly. Nanny’s decisions are tainted with the fear and apprehensions of the horrible past.

She explains to Janie that black women have the mere status of an animal or a mule in a world predominated by males, whites and blacks. African American women have to bear the burden of both—the white and black men. Nanny poignantly says:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as for as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his women folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see. (186)
Nanny searches for a solution to the problem of racism in the institution of marriage. She thinks that by marrying off Janie to some rich black man she can secure her life. She says, “‘Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, body it’s protection” (186). Finally, she convinces Janie to marry Logan Killicks though unwillingly before “menfolk’s white or black is makin’ a spit cup outa you” (190). According to Lorraine Bethel, “Her horrible experiences have led her to see the domestic pedestal as the safest escape from the dangers of racial sexual oppression” (15).

Right from the beginning Nanny had tried to protect Janie from the aftermath of racism and slavery. In her childhood days, Janie is unable to recognize herself as black in the photograph. This manifests lack of racial consciousness in Janie. Racism also shapes Janie’s relationship with her husband. Janie’s second husband Joe Starks apes the whites. He dresses like whites and walks, talks and lives like white, “Kind of portly like rich whites folks’” (201). Joe rises in his power and status and often thinks his black community people are inferior to him. He models his house after slave plantation houses and even paints it white. He even buys a golden vase for spitting just like his former white boss, “It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own colour could be so different it put you on a wonder” (212).

In the novel, Hurston also depicts the problem of intraracism existing among African American community. Mrs. Turner, a light skinned African American woman with Caucasian characteristics is an embodiment of intraracism. She gloats about her own light complexion and craves for whiteness. Mrs. Turner hates blacks though she herself is an African American woman. She often speaks about them in derogatory terms and does not mingle with them, though she runs an eatery for African American laborers. She vehemently complains to Janie:
You’re different from me. Ah can’t stand black niggers. Ah don’t blame de white folks from hatin’ ’em ’cause Ah can’t stand ’emmahself. Nother thing, Ah hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid’em. Usoughta class off….And dey makes me tired. Always laughin’! Dey laughs too much and dey laugh too loud. Always singin’ ol’ nigger songs! Always cuttin de monkey for white folks. If it wuzn’t for so many black folks it wouldn’t be no race problem. De white folks would take us in widdem. De black one is holdin’ us black…. Look at me! Ah ain’t got no flat nose and liver lips. Ah’m featured woman. Ah got white folks’ features in mah face. Still and all Ah got tuh be lumped in wid all de rest. It ain’t fair. Even if dey don’t take us in wid de whites, deyaughta make as uh class tuh ourselves. (289-90)

Mrs. Turner worships Janie’s light complexion and her other Caucasian features. She often suggests Janie to leave Tea Cake and marry her brother who is also light skinned as Mrs. Turner. Mrs. Turner despises Tea Cake who is dark skinned and is aghast at Janie’s decision to marry black skinned Tea Cake. Mrs. Turner believes that light skinned African Americans like her and Janie should marry white people in order to develop a new breed of white skinned mulattos. Mrs. Turner even chastises Booker T. Washington for doing nothing for the light skinned African American. She says, “All he ever done was cut de monkey for white folks. So deypomped him up. But you know what de ole folks say’ de higher de monkey climbs de mo he show his behind’ so dat’s de way it wuzwid Booker T.” (290-91) Mrs. Turner believes in the credo that White is right and Black is ugly.
The hurricane and its aftermath scene also reveal racially segregated America. Hurston’s depiction of hurricane was based on true events. According to Valerie Boyd, “Hurston borrowed this brutal scene from Okeechobee hurricane, which killed nearly two thousand people in the Florida Everglades….reconstruction of the mass burial in a devastating yet subtle indictment of the racism that formed the backdrop for her text” (305). Tea Cake and other black men are forced at gun point to clean up and bury the dead. Even in death and havoc, racism persists. They are ordered to put white bodies in a pine wood coffin, and to bury all the dead bodies of blacks in a big ditch with quick lime. When workers complain that they are unable to identify white and black bodies as they are ravaged beyond identification, then the guards instruct them to see the type of hair to determine the race, “Look at their hair, when you can’t tell no other way. And don’t lemme ketch none up y’all dumpin’ white folks and don’t be wastin’ no boxes on colored. They’s too hard tuh git holt of right now” (314). Hurston hereby aptly shows that it is not the nature that differentiates between men but it is only men who create such unnecessary segregations and differences.

After the cleaning up job, Tea Cake decides to return to Everglades as all the white people there know Tea Cake. Tea Cake thinks that the white folks at Ever Glades will treat him more liberally than the white people who do not know him, “It’s bad bein’ strange niggers wid white folks Everbody is against yuh” (315), but Tea Cake himself makes racial distinctions as he himself refused to believe the Native Americans who had warned Tea Cake of the hurricane, “Indians are dumb anyhow, and always were” (300). Ultimately, Tea Cake’s racial bias costs him his life. Thus, Hurston presents not only a lopsided view of racism but a total critique of racial discrimination.
Hurston, once again explores the theme of racism in the trial scene where Janie is presented before the jury. Janie is exonerated of all charges by the jury which consists of all white men. White women present in the court are allowed to sit but black people are made to stand in the back. Both white and blacks attend the trial, but are swayed by different opinions. While white folks support Janie, black people held a negative attitude towards Janie. The white women are appalled when the prosecutor does not allow a black man to testify against Janie, and again they sob in happiness and relief when Janie comes out free of all charges. Black people feel the decision is an unfair and biased one. According to them, Janie has been favored because she is light skinned and bears Caucasian features. They say, “Aw you know dem white menswuzn’tgointuh do nothin’ tuh no woman dat look lak her” (329). They allege that women like Janie and white man “kin kill as many niggers” (330). Black men even suggest that Tea Cake, “Worked like a dog for her and nearly killed himself saving her in the storm, then soon as he got a little fever from the water, she had took up with another man” (327). Thus in the trial scene. Hurston depicts prejudices of both white and black people. Hurston also manifests that justice is not delivered on the basis of color, though people judge each other on basis of their skin color. Hurston also exposes the fact that the justice system in America at those times was disproportionate, with a predominance of white males in it. White women being sympathetic to Janie also suggest superficiality and false pretense of white folks who often championed black if it were for their own good.

Class is another important theme that Hurston explores in the novel. *Their Eyes* portrays a wide range of socioeconomic situations. It also portrays Janie’s economic growth from poor working class to the upper class. Janie’s class is in a
state of flux all through the novel. Her thoughts however, stand in sharp contrast to those of her relatives like her grandmother and her first two husbands.

Nanny, having spent her life as a slave in immense poverty and horrid conditions perpetuates her ideas about life. After achieving her liberty from slavery, Nanny starts working as a domestic help in a rich benign white family of Washburns. She wants her daughter to get education and lead a better life, but Leafy is raped by her school teacher and gets pregnant. Janie is born out of this rape and Leafy leaves her new born daughter and mother never to return. Now Nanny pins all her economic expectations on Janie. She wants Janie to marry some rich black man and live the rest of her life prosperously. She believes that marriage is meant for financial and economic stability and not for love, “Heah you got uh prop tuh lean on all yo’ bawn days and big protection, and everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis’ Killicks, and you come worryin’ me’bout love”(192). After marriage, when Janie complains to Nanny that she is not able to love Killicks as he is physically repulsive, Nanny supports Killicks as he is a rich man. Nanny tries to convince Janie and in the process acts as “the chief spokesman for prosaic materialism” (Giles 52). She says:

If you don’t want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo’ parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road....Dat’s de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love !Dat’s Just whut’s got us uh pullin’ and uh haulin’ and sweatin’ and doin’ from can’t see in de mornin’ till can’t see at night. Dat’s how come de old folks say dat bein’ uh fool don’t kill nobody. It just makes you sweat. Ah betcha you wants some dressed up dude dat got to look at de sole of his shoe every time he cross de street tuh see whether he got enough
leather dere tuh make it across. You can buy and sell such as dem wid what you got. Infact you can buy’em and give’em away.” (193)

Nanny marries off Janie to an equally materialistic man Logan Killicks. Killicks views Janie not as a wife but a potential free labor for his farm work. He expects Janie to chop woods, work in the field with a mule and do all house hold chores. Killicks want to increase his economic profits through Janie and tries to assign her the place of a mere laborer in his life without emotionally or physically satisfying her. Logan Killicks represents the new rising black middle class.

Janie’s second husband Joe Starks, better known as Jody represents the ambition of the upper class. Jody has all material comforts; he owns a home and land and has a refined taste. Joe settles in Eatonville with Janie, to become a big man with a “big voice” (196) and “He was glad he had his money all saved up. He meant to git there whilst de town wuz yet a baby. He meant to buy it in big” (196). Joe opens the post office and store in the town and soon becomes mayor despite being a new comer. He craves for power but most importantly, for wealth. He has only one ambition in his life, to horde as much money as he can.

Janie attains the status of being mayor’s wife and “uh big woman” (211). Joe provides her fine dresses and all other material comforts. Joe’s home shows his wealth and his economic status. It is a white antebellum house. Community people resent Joe’s prosperity but are unable to voice their concerns. Hurston writes:

The town had a basketful of feelings good and bad about Joe’s positions and possessions but none had the temerity to challenge him. They bowed down to him rather, because he was all of these things, and then again he was all of these things the town bowed down. (214).
In a way, Hurston depicts intricate complex ties associated with wealth and money in African American communities of Southern America. Though people hanker after all the wealth and status for themselves, but they cannot stand other people owning it. One more reason for the ongoing resentment in the community is Joe flaunting himself like a white man which offends them. Similarly Joe purposely buys Matt Bonner’s mule not out of compassion for the animal, but to show his economic wealth, “Joe down hard on his cigar and beamed all around, but never said a word, The town talked it for three days and said that’s just what they would have done if they had been rich man like Joe Starks” (221). After Joe dies, even his funeral smacks of the pomp and show that he had craved for in his life. “Joe’s funeral was the finest thing Orange County had ever seen with Negro eyes. The motor hearse, the Cadillac and Buick carriages, Dr. Henderson there in his Lincoln, the hosts from far and wide” (246).

Through the characterization of Tea Cake, Hurston represents the working class. His economic status as a worker is in sharp contrast with that of rich Janie. Tea Cake is a manual labor. Community people and even the best friend of Janie, Pheoby do not approve of Tea Cake and Janie’s relationship because Tea Cake belongs to a low working class, while Janie is a rich widow and a dead mayor’s wife. Pheoby warns Janie, “But, Janie, Tea Cake, whilst he aint no jail bird he ain’t got uh dime tuh cry. Ain’t your skeered he’s jes after yo’ money—him bein’ younger than you” (266).

Tea Cake is represented as an antithesis to materialistic Logan Killicks and Joe Starks. Though Killicks and Starks had money, they could not bring happiness in Janie’s life. On the contrary Tea Cake despite being poor makes Janie happy. Tea Cake and Janie decide to go to Ever Glades for bean picking. In Everglades, Janie spends her days as a manual worker sowing and picking beans. Despite spending
twenty years with Joe as a mayor’s wife in material comfort, Janie does not shirk work. Instead she feels elated to work alongside Tea Cake. Hurston writes, “So the very next morning Janie got ready to pick beans along with Tea Cake. There was a suppressed murmur when she picked up a basket and went to work. She was already getting to be a special case on the muck,” (283). Janie wears work clothes just like other workers and readily mingle with them without distinction of any class. Janie for the first time in her life freely interacts with the people and this helps her to perpetuate her own idea about relationship with different people. Unknowingly, class plays an important role in Janie and Tea Cake’s lives at the time of leaving Ever Glades. Before the hurricane, Tea Cake refuses to follow their suggestion of leaving the “muck.” In his viewpoint as long as rich white are dwelling in Ever Glades, nothing wrong can happen. In this way, Tea Cake makes a value judgment for the wealthy whites over the Native Americans that proves to be fatal” (Jones 195).

Religion is another theme evident in Their Eyes Were Watching God. The theme of religion is dealt with in an indirect manner. In Their Eyes religion is not shown as separate, but is related intricately with the characters and situations. Hurston manifests her choice of the title of the novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God in the hurricane scene Hurston writes, “They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God” (305). Hurricane is symbolic of God’s omnipotence. It also reminds one that it is God in whose hands our fortune rests, it seems that Janie is making her choices but ultimate choice is made by the all mighty God and Janie has to accept her fate. After hurricane, Janie’s life takes an unexpected turn forever. Thus, Hurston shows that multiple factors constitute a person’s life.
In the novel, Hurston makes use of religious contexts and imagery to portray various facets of the characters. For example, Nanny is shown as the preacher sermoning to Janie. Sharon L. Jones writes is this regard:

Nanny represents a spiritual figure whose main goal is to set her granddaughter on the right track. She functions as a sort of genesis for the rest of the narrative, even if her role is minimal confined to a small part of Janie’s story. Her constant advice to Janie on how to act is her means of expressing herself, her sermon, since as a former slave she was never able to achieve what she wanted and fulfill her potential.

(195)

Speaking in a religious language, preacher Nanny advices Janie, “Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about’ colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me” (181). Nanny sermonizes Janie about her past experiences. Through her sermoning she wants to make Janie aware of the hazards of life. Commenting on Nanny’s sermon to Janie, Deborah G. Plant writes:

For Nanny, the folk preacher’s voice is the voice of liberation, of freedom. Thus, it is her will to preach. The sermon would embody her liberatory message. The sermon she wishes for herself, daughter, and granddaughter would not only remove the shackles that objectified her as nothing but “uh nigger and uh slave” but it would also remove those shackles that objectified her as female “other.”.... That she felt her text was worth saving, worth passing to a third generation, and worth preaching still speaks to her ardent belief in African American religious traditions as intrinsically defiant and emancipatory. It speaks as well to her belief in the necessary empowerment of Black women as
speaking subjects a conclusion Maria Stewart came to as early as 1831.

Similarly, Joe Starks also acts as a sort of preacher in his community apart from being a coercive leader. He also views himself as a divine saviour for Eatonville. He refers to himself as “I God” (209). In a sermonic tone he says to his community folks, “I god. Ah don’t see how came yuh can’t. tain’tnothin’ at all tuh hunder yuh if yuh got uh thimble full uh sense. You got tuh. Ah got too much else on mah hands as Mayor. Dis Town needs some light now” (209). Joe Starks installs light posts in Eatonville and purposely uses this incident to show off his power which according to him is full of divinity. He compares himself to “Sun-maker” (210) to bring the light to the town and into people’s dark lives. Joe asks a man to pray and Thank God for bestowing light on the town. Joe uses this event of light to inflate and project his power in more surreal terms. Hurston writes:

While Davis chanted a traditional prayer-poem with his own variations, Joe mounted the box that had been placed for the purpose and opened the brazen door of the lamp. As the word Amen was said, he touched the lighted match to the wick. (211)

Hurston also installs some god like features in the protagonist Janie Crawford’s character. Mrs. Turner worships Janie and “paid homage to Janie’s Caucasian characteristics as such. And when she was with Janie she had a feeling of transmutation, as if she herself had become whiter and with straighter hair and she hated Tea Cake for his defilement of divinity” (293). Similarly Tea Cake refers to Janie in a spiritual term “you got de keys tuh de kingdom” (273). Just as Janie is “keys tuh de kingdom” (273), Tea Cake is “a glance from God” (261). For Janie, Tea Cake is a saviour sent by God. Interestingly Hurston juxtaposes two husbands of
Janie, one is Joe Starks who thinks himself as a God, but is abhorred by Janie, while Tea Cake is revered by Janie as “a glance from God” (261).

In the novel, Hurston does not portray only Christian religion but for her religion is something omnipotent and omnipresent in every form of thing present on earth, living or non-living. Throughout the novel Hurston represents religion having folkloric quality. Hurston being an anthropologist had collected folklores and had a broader vision of religion encompassing various types of imagery, both Christian and Non- Christian. Nature imagery such as sea horizon, sun seems imbued with spirituality while she also presents mystic visions like personified image of Death which are surrealistic.

The very opening lines of the novel present us with the classical Biblical imagery of a person gazing at the horizon. Janie’s story starts with biblical imagery. Hurston writes:

-Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. (175)

The novel begins with an image of the horizon and the metaphor of horizon refers to an individual’s future, dreams and aspirations, just as the sun meets the sky at the horizon, a person also moves towards the horizon in order to achieve his goals, but the horizon is never attainable for anyone. Thus, the horizon represents possibility as well as limitation. To quote Dolan Hubbard:

-Hurston presents us with the classical Biblical picture of the looker standing before the horizon and wondering if she and the horizon shall
ever meet. The looker sees a picture that is both in time and timeless, finite and infinite. The ships on the horizon are emblematic of the dreams of the person standing on shore; this timeless picture speaks of a person’s desire to be related to God, the ultimate other. (102)

The metaphor of horizon has a deep intricate meaning in the protagonist Janie’s life. The metaphor of horizon is used to relate Janie and Nanny’s relationship. Janie delves into her past and comes to Nanny; her life took a turn for the worst. Janie says:

Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her. (183)

Later Janie marries Logan Killicks on Nanny’s order and she is extremely unhappy with Killicks. Then she meets Joe Starks, who is a well-dressed, ambitious man with fine tastes who offers Janie a new life with him. Janie is attracted to Joe because “he spoke of far horizon” (197). In Joe she sees her chance of freedom and goes away with him. But unfortunately, Joe too proves to be an unfulfilling husband for Janie. It’s only after the death of Joe, when she meets Tea Cake, she feels like she has met her horizon. After the death of Tea Cake, she returns to Pheoby and tells, “Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now” (332) referring that she has achieved in her life what she had wanted. Just as the novel opened with the imagery of Horizon, Hurston also ends the novel with the same, “She pulled in her horizon like a great fish net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see” (333). Hurston symbolizes horizon with achievements as well as unattained dreams of
Janie. The last imagery of the horizon in the novel occurring in the concluding lines, Janie pulling in the horizon may also represent the end of her lie and the ultimate harmony with nature that she has achieved. Thus the horizon symbolizes far-off mystery, with which she had always craved to commune. Devrona Mallory writes in this context:

Janie spent her life watching for the magical god on the horizon who would arrive and protect her from harm. In turn, all her gods expected Janie to worship them out of gratitude for taking care of her. Like proud and sacred idols of spirituality, they also expected her to bow down to them in watchful obedience. However, she toppled each blossoming within herself. (11)

Concomitant with the metaphor of horizon is the symbol of water. In Their Eyes, water occurs as a sea, calm and gentle or as a hurricane in its full fury. Hurston juxtaposes both the forms of water in the story to show its nourishing power as well as its destructive power. Hurston begins the novel with the reference of sea as metaphor for people’s lives. Hurston writes, “Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide” (175). Hurston delves deep into the human psyche and compares human experiences with water which acquires its characteristics of fluidity. These opening lines with a metaphor of water sets the framework of Their Eyes, which is a novel about a human being’s aspiration and search for identity. “The evocative opening statement illustrates the flowing, cyclical nature of an individual’s wishes and desires in the world” (Jones 184).

Apart from human aspirations, water also embodies the spirit of freedom. Hurston uses the metaphor of water to depict freedom regarding the character of Nanny. When Nanny’s daughter Leafy, is born she is threatened by her white
mistress. In order to save herself and her newborn child, Nanny runs away and takes shelter in “de swamp by de river” (489). Nanny remains hidden in the marsh near the river infested with snakes and other reptiles. At the port Nanny comes to know about the freedom of the slaves, meaning that she too is free now. Thus Hurston here represents water for freedom. In a sense Hurston shows that just as water has its innate quality intact only when it flows freely without any restrictions so are the lives of human beings. They can develop fully only when they are free and go unrestricted.

The hurricane symbolizes destructive force of water. It also represents the power of God. Hurston depicts the hurricane in biblical proportions. Hurston writes:

As soon as Tea Cake went out pushing wing in front of him, he saw that the wind and water had given life to lots of things that folks think of as dead and given death to so much that had been living things.

Water everywhere. (305)

The hurricane episode uproots Janie and Tea Cake’s life completely. Even in this hurricane Janie and Tea Cake come closer and love each other more than ever. Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog while saving Janie and then dies after a month. Thus, Tea Cake “a glance from God” (261) is taken away by God. “Janie’s response to the flood is not simply intellectual it is experiential and total. It is a religious response born out of her having come to terms with the improbable majesty of the divine” (Hubbard 111).

In the end of Their Eyes, Hurston again brings in the imagery of water by depicting Janie washing “her strong feet in the pan of water” (332) while ending her story telling to Pheoby. Hurston then again returns to the metaphor of the sea, “Love is lak de sea. It’s uh movin’ thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and its different with every shore” (332). Hurston through her mouthpiece
Janie tells us that love is as large and tent as the sea. It alters and changes the course of life. Love can also be equated to journey albeit an evolving one. This introspection by Janie about love changes the life of her best friend Pheoby, Hurston again uses the imagery of the sea for the last time, concluding the novel, “She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net” (333). Just as a fish-net is used to catch fish, Janie has used her past experiences to attain love and wisdom to give a new direction to her life.

One of the most important symbols in Their Eyes Were Watching God, is that of the pear tree. Throughout the novel Hurston eludes metaphorically to Janie’s wish to be “a pear tree - any tree in bloom” (183). The pear tree imagery becomes a measure of her individual development throughout the novel including her three marriages. As Hemenway says, the pear tree “comes to represent the organic union Janie searches for throughout her life” (233). Janie experiences her first awakening under a pear tree. This awakening is actually Janie’s dream for love and fulfillment which is represented by a blooming pear tree. Hurston writes:

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 invisible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust bearing bee sent into sanctum of a bloom, the thousand sister-calyxes arch 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 marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. (183)

This revelation becomes a pivotal point in Janie’s life. It also acts as a guiding principle for Janie in her quest for love and life. Nanny, realizing Janie’s sexual awakening, soon marries her to a much older man named Logan Killicks despite the
fact that “the vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree” (185).

Undoubtedly, their marriage is doomed to failure with Killicks impotence, negating the sexuality of Janie. Janie says that she wanted “things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think” (193). She returns again to her pear tree fathoming her future.

As Janie had married Killicks knowing that he was “desecrating the pear tree”, Janie marries a second time to Joe Starks even though “he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees” (197). Hurston once again brings the symbol of pear tree regarding Janie’s relationship with Joe. For the next twenty years she lives with Joe in oppression and when Joe raises her hand over Janie for the first time, “She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be” (233). According to Kubitschek, Hurston has greatly emphasized the role of pear tree and the “real pear tree in Nanny’s yard acquires transcendent significance” (27). After the death of Joe Starks, Janie meets Tea Cake, “a pear blossom in the spring” (261). For the first time in her life she sees her image of pear tree coming to reality, With the companionship of Tea Cake, Janie feels blossomed just as the iconic pear tree in her Nanny’s yard. Thus, the pear tree symbolizes Janie’s love and fulfillment for which she has craved throughout her life. According to Morris and Dunn, “The central symbol is a pear tree” (8).

The predominant imagery in the novel is that of trees. Tree imagery has a special symbolic significance and keeps cropping up throughout the novel. Richard Cavendish writes in his influential book *Man, Myth and Magic*, that trees are considered sacred because they represent different deities. People perform religious ceremonies under them. Trees also signify the immortality and fertility of nature (2656-2662). Janie’s spiritual bond with the pear tree is greatly symbolic as discussed
before. However the tree imagery associated with Nanny is that of an obsolete Christian tree with her “palms christi” leaves, complete antitheses to the blooming pear tree. Hurston writes:

Nanny’s head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm. Foundation of ancient power that no longer mattered. The cooling palm christi leaves that Janie had bound about her grandma’s head with a white rag wilted down and became part and parcel of the woman. (184)

This use of tree imagery by Hurston connects Nanny to Janie who is represented by the blooming pear tree. For Nanny, world is as dark and scary as the woods. After being threatened by the wife of the white master, Nanny runs from the plantation in the nearby woody swamps, but there tree can also serve as a shelter as one day Nanny puts her newborn daughter “wrapped up in Moss and fixed her good in a tree” (189). Interestingly, Nanny names her daughter Leafy, reminding us of the tree imagery.

Also while preaching her “great sermon” (187) to Janie, Nanny aptly uses tree imagery to make her point. She says to Janie, “Us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways” (187). Nanny, herself being a slave had suffered every kind of exploitation at the hands of her masters. Being plucked out from their homeland and sold and resold in the slave markets, made black people feel they were without roots meaning thereby, the black people could not have a close knit proper family and social structure.

Tree imagery is also associated with Janie’s three successive husbands albeit in different ways. Janie’s first husband Logan Killicks as the name suggests “Kills” woods and logs and lives among stumps in the middle of the forest. Hurston writes,
“It was a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had ever been” (191). Hurston uses “stump” as a phallic symbol, symbolizing that impotent Logan Killicks never satisfied Janie.

Unsatisfied and disillusioned when Janie meets Joe Stark she feels Joe as a growing young tree full of potentialities. Hurston writes, “They sat under the tree and talked.... Every day after that they managed to meet in the scrub oaks across the road” (197). Janie is greatly impressed by Joe and feels that he is her sheltering tree and decides to run away with him. Significantly, they marry each other in a place called “Green Cove Springs” (200) indicating a new beginning for Janie. In case of Joe Starks, the tree also becomes a symbol of power. He feels like a big tree with wide expanse on which his community depends, “under the big live oak tree...Jody doing all the talking” (206). Joe also uses trees to be used for lamp posts which become a symbol of his power in the community, “He sent men out to the swamp to cut the finest and the straightest cypress they could find, and keep on sending them back to hunt another one that pleased him” (209). Ironically, in the end Joe Starks is himself chopped down literally and figuratively by Janie when she comments on his impotency in front of everybody.

Just like the other two husbands of Janie, Hurston associates Tea Cake too with the tree imagery. The birth name of Tea Cake is Vergible Woods which at one strikes the analogy with Janie’s imagery of blossoming pear tree. The name Vergible Woods can be viewed as “an organic metaphor related to the Pear tree metaphor” (Fanni 51). For the first time Janie sees her vision of pear tree being fulfilled with Tea Cake, who makes her complete. According to Morries and Dunn, Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship is associated with nature and spring time (8). Hurston uses another tree imagery to manifest Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship, “Tea Cake
making flower beds in Janie’s yard and seeding the garden for her. Chopping down that tree she never did like by the dining room window. All those signs of possession” (364). Janie and Tea Cake marry and decide to settle in “Everglades”. In Everglades they spend the best years of their lives loving and living, “do nothin’ down dere but make money and fun and foolishness” (279). The packet of seeds that Tea Cake had left for Janie has its own special significance and is symbolic. Hurston writes:

She had given away everything in their little house except a package of garden seed that Tea Cake had brought to plant. The planting never got done because he had been waiting for the right time of the moon when his sickness over took him. The seeds reminded Janie of Tea Cake more than anything else because he was always planting things. (331)

Janie decides to go back to Eatonville because she does not want to stay in the “muck” without Tea Cake. On her way back, she takes only the packet of seeds with her. These seeds act as a token of remembrance of Tea Cake. Janie decides to plant these seeds in her yard so that as they grow it reminds Janie of Tea Cake and symbolically Tea Cake is with Janie, in the form of a plant or a tree. The seeds also symbolize Janie’s resurrection. Though Tea Cake is dead, she is now a strong woman and will live a new life.

Thus we see that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is replete with nature imagery. With the use of natural imagery such as “pear tree”, “dust bearing bees”, trees, seeds, Hurston has tried to create a spiritual trinity between God, nature and man, a relationship which has been part and parcel of African American traditions. African Americans arrived on American soils as slaves with their own African culture and traditions. Nature played a very important part in their life. To quote Levine:
For the most part when they (slaves) look upon the cosmos they saw Man, nature and God as a unity, distinct but inseparable aspects of a sacred whole.... Life was not random or accidental or haphazard. Events were meaningful, they had causes which Man could divine, understand, and profit from. Human beings could “read” the phenomena surrounding and affecting them because Man was part of, not alien to, the Natural Orders of things..... It was crucially necessary to understand the worlds because one was part of it, inexorably linked to it. Survival and happiness and health depended upon being able to read the signs that existed everywhere, to understand the visions that recurrently visited one, to commune with the spirits that filled the world: the spirit of the Supreme Being.... the spirits of all the matter that filled the universe—trees, animals, rivers.... the spirits of contemporary human beings the spirits of ones who linked the living with the unseen world. (32-58)

Not only as an African American but also as an anthropologist, Hurston knew the importance of nature and assigned a special role to it in all her literary works. For Hurston, nature was God’s power which played a significant role in a human’s life. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston imbues nature imagery with deep intrinsic meaning making it innate to the framework of the story. Kathleen Davies writes in this context:

Nature is Hurston’s vehicle for her poetics of embalmment, and it both serves as a subversive means for articulating rage and provides basis for literary authority. As a Hoodoo priestess, Hurston perceived the flora of Nature as intimately linked to the ultimate force of God. As a
folklorist she comes to see “Nature worship or paganism as the
foundation of all religions.... Hurston saw Afro American Language as
reflecting this direct connection to Nature. Nature also provided
Hurston a very personal source of literary authority: As a small child
Hurston began making up tales based on her “conversing” with a
particularly old pine tree and other natural entities such as the wind and
a lake, which often bestowed privileges and transmitted special powers
to the child. Finally, in a very significant passage in Dust Tracks she
refers to Nature as “Dame Nature” and in other passages, she aligns
herself with this goddess figure and her awesome power. (3)

Apart from themes like race and class as discussed earlier, Gender is another
important theme in the novel. Through the story of Janie, Hurston comments on
gender issues. She even challenges the conventional stereotype roles assigned to men
and women in the African American community. According to Lilli P. Howard, “the
story of Their Eyes, has universal implications for women in that it protests against
the restrictions and limitations imposed upon women by a masculine society” (93).
Hurston sets the story on an African American woman rallying for her freedom under
constant patriarchal male domination Barbara Johnson in her influential essay
“Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in Their Eyes Were Watching God” explains the
precarious position of African American women in society:

What can be said of the black woman’s? Here again, what is constantly
seen exclusively in terms of a binary opposition—black versus white,
man versus women—must be redrawn at least as a tetra polar
structure…. What happens in the case of black woman is that the four
quadrants are constantly being collapsed in to two. Hurston’s work is
often called nonpolitical simply because readers of Afro-American literature tend to look for confrontational racial politics, not sexual politics. If the black woman voices opposition to male domination, she is often seen as a traitor to the cause of racial justice. But if she sides with black men against white oppression, she often winds up having to accept her position with the Black Power movement….The very existence of black women thus disappears from an analogical discourse designed to express the types of oppression from which black women have to suffer—both invisible and ubiquitous: never seen in her own right but forever appropriated by the others for their own ends. (53-5)

Hurston through the characterization of Janie articulates her idea about black woman’s strength and importance in the community. In the beginning Janie’s ideas about her thoughts as a woman stems out of her grandmother Nanny’s perceptions. Though Nanny shields Janie from race consciousness to the point of lack of self-awareness, she does not falter to instill gender roles in Janie’s impressionable mind when she is a teenager. With a morbid resignation she tells Janie that “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (186). Hurston exposes the pathetic condition of African American women who had borne the burden of not only white male oppression but also black male oppression. Nanny wants Janie to settle with a financially stable man like Logan Killicks. Nanny rejects Janie’s romantic notions of love because for her a woman’s life means marrying a man and settling down even if it means submission. She says, “Tain’t Logan Killick Ah wants you to have baby, it’s protection” (186). This assigning of stereotyped role to an African American woman by Nanny stems out of her experience as a slave woman where she
was treated as a mere object. She has a pragmatic view about her daughter Leafy and granddaughter Janie’s lives.

Janie wants to break free from conventional gender roles prescribed for her by Nanny and the community. She wants to create her own gender identity. Janie’s first self-awakening under a blooming pear tree guides her to the different roles played by men and women just as a bee and the flower. Despite stiff resistance, Janie is married to Logan Killicks who not only expects Janie to work in the kitchen just like any other African American woman cooking and cleaning, but also to do a man’s work like plowing with mules and chopping the woods. Killicks says:

> If ah kin haul de wood heah and chop it fuhyuh, look lak you oughta be able tuh tote it inside. Mahfust wife never bothered me’bout choppin’ no wood nohow. She’d grab dat ax and sling chips lak uh man. You done been spoilt raften .... Ah needs two mules dis yeah. Taters is goin’ tuh be taters in de fall Bringin’ big prices. Ah aims tuh run too plows, and dis man. Ah’m talkin’ bout is got uh mule all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle ’im. (195)

Ironically, Nanny’s worst fears regarding Janie that she would be treated as a mule by a man seems unfortunate but true. Unintentionally, while “prayin’ fuh it tuh be different” (186) for Janie, Nanny puts her in a pernicious situation where she has to work hard and labor as a mule and also submit to the whims of her selfish dominant husband.

Joe Starks rescues Janie from being a mule, but he also assigns another conventional gender role to Janie played by upper class women. He tells Janie, “A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan y’self and eat p’taters dat other folks plant just special for you” (797). He constructs a portrait
of a fragile, tender woman in need of leisurely life. After the marriage, to show his male domination, Joe restricts Janie in every aspect of her life. He not only alienates her from the community but also makes her a mere mute spectator. On the pretext that she should be “class off” (265) as she is “Mrs. Mayor or Starks” (208). Joe is an epitome of patriarchal domination and views himself as provider of his wife as well as his community. At the inauguration of the store he does not allow Janie to speak even on people’s request, instead retorts, “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” (208). Joe has clearly delineated a role for Janie and she must act on those preconceived notions. Michele Wallace aptly points out:

> He acts as though he and the black woman are at war, as though he might win something by her destruction. He uses the debilitating game of sexual superiority as a substitute for establishing something worthwhile.... That’s how he’s kept his place. (124)

As Joe through his manliness tries to dominate Janie, she retreats into her shell, saving all her dreams and love for another man. Hurston writes, “She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never led Jody know about” (233). A symbol of his possession of Janie can also be seen in the floral spittoons that he buys for Janie, “Little sprigs of flowers painted all around the sides” (212). Spittoons symbolize masculinity but Joe buying a floral spittoon for Janie represents his exerting power on Janie. At another instance to show Janie her undermined subvert status he forces Janie to fetch his shoes, Hurston writes:
Janie came back out front and sat down. She didn’t say anything and neither did Joe. But after a white he looked down at his feet and said, “Janie, Ah reckon you better go fetch me dem old black gaiters. Dese tan shoes sets mah feet on fire. Plenty room in ’im, but they hurt regardless. She got up without a word and went off for the shoes. A little war of defense for helpless, things. She wanted to fight. about it.

(220)

When Janie can’t take it no more, she challenges his masculinity and feminizes him in front of everybody, “Talkin about me lookin old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (238) A stunned Joe Starks resorts to violence by hitting her as he cannot answer Janie. The masculine power of Joe Starks is deflated by his own wife. After Joe’s death Janie has to play the role of grieving wife out of social pressure. Hurston writes “Janie starched and ironed her face and came set in the funeral behind her veil. It was like a wall of stone and steel” (246).

Janie in her next relationship with Tea Cake shatters conventional gender roles. We see a reversal of gender roles. Forty year old Janie marries a twelve year younger Tea Cake. She has more than Tea Cake and even takes care of him financially at a few instances. Even Tea Cake plays a reversed gender role. He combs Janie’s hair and prepares breakfast for her, “He wouldn’t let her git him any breakfast at all. He wanted her to get her rest. He made her stay where she was” (262), but this relationship is not about domination with Janie or Tea Cake with either of them dominating each other. It is about equitable gender roles where both give enough space and respect to each other. Hurston writes:
Tea Cake and Janie gone hunting. Tea Cake and Janie gone to Orlando to the movies. Tea and Janie gone to a dance. Tea Cake making flower beds in Janie’s yard and seeding the garden for her. Chopping down that tree she never did like by the dining room window. All those signs of possession. Tea Cake in a borrowed car teaching Janie to drive. Tea Cake and Janie playing checkers, playing coon-can, playing Florida flip on the store porch all afternoon. (264)

In the Everglades, Janie works alongside Tea Cake picking beans, emphasizing their equal status as man and woman in this relationship. Despite being a woman, Janie interacts with other community members perfecting the art of storytelling. She becomes an articulate story teller which is considered a traditional domain of African American men. Story telling by Janie has a special significance because it symbolizes shattering of conventional gender roles and it also is a prelude to telling her story to Pheoby. Sharon L. Jones writes in this context:

As a woman she is in control of her own narrative. She crafts and tells her own life by transcending standard gender roles and breaking free from the expectations of her grandmother and her husbands, Janie has been able to construct an identity that affirms self-awareness, self-discovery, and self-respect. The tale ends in tragedy, but Janie emerges strong, a free woman who determines her own life and, by telling the story to Pheoby, inspires others. (199)

By creating Their Eyes as a black love story in an all-black setting and also by creating the character of Janie Crawford, a complex African American independent female character incurred the wrath of her fellow male African American writers. Through her story, Hurston emphasized “the woman’s perspective and demonstrates
that women have had a different set of values than black male writers and this is made clear in their fictional recreations of black life” (Story 134). Hurston like her protagonist Janie struggled against male chauvinism of African American male writers throughout her literary career as she had revolted against conservative literary ideologies. Ralph D. Story explains:

To put it in simple terms, black male writers during the 1930’s were unwilling to concede their own territorial literary dominance over the most “Serious” subject matters—interracial conflicts, the “state’s” inadequacies, the fight of black folk against racism and poverty and the recreation of black historical figures in fictional form. Thus even if a talented black female writer had emerged who wanted to deal with such issues, it would have been extremely difficult for her to convince publishers and / or readers that she was up to the task given the chauvinism and sexism (and to mention racism) so characteristic of American life in the pre-WW II era. Black male writers, perhaps unconsciously, were also unwilling to perceive the struggle of black women for sexual equality and the perspective brought to bear on that struggle by a great black woman writer as literary territory and as an orientation worthy of detailed delineation in Hurston’s novel. (134)

Hurston and her protagonist Janie both break free of the barriers imposed upon them by their own people. They assert their choice and stand for it. In this sense, they not only break conventional archaic gender roles but also create a new female consciousness.

Theme of sisterhood is evident in Their Eyes. Janie and Pheoby are two best friends who support each other in tough times. Pheoby always advices Janie and
makes her aware of her decisions which would affect her later in life. Janie returns to Eatonville to tell her story and she chooses Pheoby to be her mouthpiece for her in the community. In turn, Pheoby feels changed after listening to Janie’s story. She says, “Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you” (332). This theme of sisterhood bonding started by Hurston is later repeated by contemporary writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor in her works.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is replete with animal imagery. Hurston has used this as a strategy to bring out certain traits of a character and their ideologies. This use of animal imagery stems from Hurston’s anthropological perspective where animal tales were an integral part of African American folklores. Robert Hass writes in their context:

Hurston’s anthropological work in the deep South brought her probably closer than any other writer of her time to the African roots of American oral folklore. Animal tales frequently feature animal protagonist, especially the hare, elephant, hyena, lion leopard, and monkey. Hurston’s story similarly, gives prominent roles to Matt Bonner’s fabulous yellow mule, a flock of anthropomorphic buzzards, and most obviously, the mad dog that bites Tea Cake. (219)

Hurston uses animal imagery to describe the characters physical features. Nanny calls Logan Killicks as “grass-gut, liver lipted nigger” (192). While Janie describes Logan Killicks as “belly is too big too, now ,and his toe-nails look like mule feet” (193) and “Logan with his shovel looked like a black bear doing some clumsy dance on his hind legs” (199). Hurston writes about Joe Starks, “He was seal-brown colors” (196). Joe Starks insults Janie saying, “You’se uh ole hen now” (237). After Janie is beaten by Joe, she, feels “whipped like a cur dog” (247).
Hurston also uses animal imagery in context with other minor characters and community people. When Joe Starks decides to buy the mule from Matt Bonner, he is “wringing and twisting like a hen” (220). After Joe’s death, some men try to take advantage of Janie who is lonely and helpless “lak uh pack uh hawgs” (248). Janie is deeply embittered by the ongoing situation and “felt like slapping some of them for sitting around grin ning at her like a pack of cheese cats” (248).

However, most of the animal imagery that Hurston uses is associated with Tea Cake. When Janie sees Tea Cake, she thinks “he could be a bee to a blossom” (261). Tea Cake is a young, energetic man who “jumped out like a deer” (261) and can swim and “split the water like an otter” (310). Before going to the Ever Glades or “Muck”, Tea Cake ironically compares himself to a dog, unknown to him is the fact that during hurricane he will be bitten by a diseased dog. He says “been workin’ lak uh dwag” (263). When Tea Cake is afflicted by rabies disease he starts acting strangely. Hurston writes, “She saw him coming from the outhouse with a queer loping gait, swinging his head side by side and his jaws clenched in a funny way.... like he was some mad dog” (324). Even after his death, people relate him with dog imagery, “He worked like a dog” (327).

The interaction between animals and humans in Their Eyes is not a harmonious one. Humans are often seen hunting and killing. Hurston depicts Janie and Tea Cake shooting and killing for fun or for selling their hides. Hurston writes:

Tea Cake made her shoot at little things just to give her good aim. 
Pistol and shot gun and rifle.... It was the most exciting thing on the muck....She got to the place she could shoot hawks out of a pine tree and not tear him up. Shoot his head off. She got to be a better shot than Tea Cake. They’d go out any late afternoon and come back loaded
down with game. One night they got a boat and went out hunting alligators. Shining their phosphorescent eyes and shooting them in the dark. They could sell their hides and teeth in Palm Beach besides having fun together till work got pressing. (281)

Even in the wake of the approaching hurricane, people did not forget to kill animals rather than running away from the impending danger. Hurston further writes:

Snakes, rattlesnakes began to cross the quarters. The men killed a few, but they could not be missed from the crawling horde. People stayed indoors until day-light. Several times during the night Janie heard the shot of big animals like deer. Once the muted voice of a panther….A baby rabbit, terror ridden, squirmed through a hole in the floor and squatted off there in the shadows against the wall, seeming to know that nobody wanted its flesh at such a time. (304)

By portraying violent relationship between African American men and animals, Hurston perhaps wants to rewrite the roles of black men. From the beginning, African American men have been equated to animals. Hurston has de-animalized black men by showing them hunting, shooting the animals and themselves assuming the role of the “empowered” just like any other white. Hurston also makes them devoid of any animal instinct as dubbed by white Americans of black men to be full of animal instinct and savagery. In the hurricane episode when hordes of animals start leaving the Everglades and going east Tea Cake and his fellow African American men refuse to follow them to be with whites as, “De white folks ain’t gone nowhere. Dey oughta know if it’s dangerous” (301-302).

There is a great significance of the rabid dog that bites Tea Cake in the hurricane. This imagery of mad rabid dog is actually symbolic of Janie’s ill fate. After
being bitten by the mad dog, Tea Cake dies within a month and Janie is left alone again forever. Hurston writes:

The dog stood up and growled like a lion stiff standing hackles, stiff muscles, teeth uncovered as he lashed up his fury for the charge. Tea Cake split the water like an otter, opening his knife as he dived. The dog raced down the back bone of the cow to the attack and Janie screamed and slipped far back on the tail of the cow, just out of reach of the dog’s angry jaws. He wanted to plunge in after her but dreaded the water, somehow. Tea Cake rose out of the water at the cow’s rump and seized the dog by the neck…. They fought and somehow he managed to bite Tea Cake high up on his cheek bone once. Then Tea Cake finished him and sent him to the bottom to stay there. (310)

The mule imagery occurs throughout the novel making it one of the most important symbols in the novel. The mule has always been an important animal for African American people. Mule was a means of livelihood for poor and middle class African Americans. Mules are well known for hard work and labor with meager maintenance. Mules were used for farming, transportation and other farm works. In this way, they proved to be the best means for African American community to survive poverty and other financial difficulties.

Nanny, grandmother of Janie thinks African American women to be like a mule for the whole of the world. Through the metaphor of mule which Hurston tries to portray the plight of African American women. Hurston through her mouthpiece Nanny portrays the pathetic condition of African American women. Nanny says, “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (186). In words of
Bhaktin “The ass is one of the most ancient and existing symbols of the material bodily lower stratum, which at one time degrades and regenerates” (78).

To save Janie from being the mule of the world, she marries him to a man named Logan Killicks, but ironically Logan Killicks is adamant on making Janie work like a mule itself.

The mule also plays an important part in Janie and Joe’s marriage. Janie marries Joe only became he had promised to save her from becoming Killicks mule, but gradually, Joe Starks starts suppressing Janie. He does not allow Janie to “participate in mule talk” (217) which happened in Joe’s porch. Hurston writers, “Janie loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on mule but Joe had forbidden her to indulge” (217). Through the device of “mule talk”, Hurston emphasizes subjugated status of Janie, in relation to Joe Starks and other African American men. To quote Rachel Blau Du Plessis:

Probably the most striking metaphor of life realized in the text is “de mule uh de world,” for the mule as well as spittoon is the sign under which Janie’s marriage to Joe Starks unfolds. With Nanny’s mule soliloquy groundwork, the choral comments of the male community pass from Jody and “dat chastising feelin’ he totes” (46) to the mule. Indeed the men are called ‘mule talkers’ and the mule is the subject—one might say the allegory they propose. Chapter 6 and chapter 7 contain the climatic analysis and disintegration of Joe and Janie’s relationship, interwoven with the fate of the mule. The mule is any and all “underclasses’ deprived, overworked, starved; it is the butt of jokes, it is stubborn and ornery to its master, with ways of resistance that are deeply appreciated by the talkers. Indeed: “Everybody indulged in
mule talk” says Hurston with devastating clarity. “He was next to the mayor in prominence and made better talking” (50). The figure of the mule summarizes power relations of class, race, and gender: the porch sitters to Joe, all blacks to whites and Janie herself to Joe. (92)

Janie greatly sympathizes with the poor animal. During story telling session when people start physically harassing the mule, Janie shouts at the people to leave him alone. Hurston writes:

When the mule was in front of the store, Lum went out and tackled him. The brute jerked up his head, laid back his ears and rushed to the attack. Lum had to run for safety. Five or six more men left the porch and surrounded the fractious beast, goosing him in the sides and making him show his temper. But he had more spirit left than body. He was soon panting and heaving from the effort of spinning his old carcass about. Everybody was having fun at the mule-baiting. All but Janie. She snatched her head away from the spectacle and began muttering to herself. “They oughta be shamed uh theyselves! Teasin’ dat poor brute beast lak they is! Done been worked to death; done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatment, and now they got tuh finish devilin’ ’im tuh death. Wish Ah had mah way wid ’em all. (219)

Janie’s sympathy towards mule can be seen in her identification with the exploited mute animal. She also feels that she is being exploited and oppressed by Joe just like Matt Bonner and other people are exploiting the poor mule. In fact Janie is so much stirred up due to mule’s mistreatment that she makes her first speech in the community when Joe buys the mule. Joe does not buy the mule to rescue him from his sufferings but to show his wealth and power. He says “Didn’t buy ’imfuh no work. I
god, Ah bought dat varmint tuh let ’im rest. you didn’t have gumption enough tuh do it‖ (21). For Joe, rescuing the mule symbolizes his strength and power over Janie and his community people.

After a few days the mule dies and is given a grand funeral. In this comic scene the mule’s carcass is taken to the swamp where Joe delivers his eulogy standing upon the mule’s dead body to show his assertion of power. Other men too deliver their comic eulogy. They describe the dead mule as “departed citizen, our most distinguished citizen and the grief he left behind him” (223). The funeral ceremony for the mule is quite symbolic because it symbolizes African American people’s triumph over their fear of death as they have often been equated with the mule (Lowe 172). Later a character named Sam, talks about mule heaven where the soul of the mule will be received by the “mule angels’ and will rest in peace. This seems ironic because mule had a tortuous life when he was alive.

Hurston has used the device of personification paralleling human beings and animals. Besides the comic scene of the mule funeral, there is also a buzzard scene where buzzards or vultures are personified. After the carcass of the mule has been left in the swamp, a group of vultures or buzzards flock around the body to eat it up. Hurston portrays the buzzards talking to each other. Hurston writes:

The flock had to wait for the white headed leader, but it was hard.
They jostled each other and pecked at heads in hungry irritation. Some walked up and down the beast from head to tail, tail to head. The Parson sat motionless in a dead pine tree about two miles off. (224)

In African American folklore, buzzards are symbolic of baseness, laziness, lasciviousness, timidity and stupidity (Rowland 16), but in Their Eyes, they have a special symbolic role. They are symbolic of people’s behavior. Just as they mistreated
and used mule for their own personal ends, similarly buzzards also use mule’s dead body to feed off for their own nourishment. Before eating the corpse, the buzzard leader personified as Parson asks who had killed the mule, to which all the flock reply in chorus, “Bare, bare fat.” This is quite symbolic. The buzzards not only name Matt Bonner who was the previous owner of the mule but also all black men who treat their wives as “mules” and exploit them.

The most important personification that occurs in the novel is that of Death. Hurston’s personification of Death is surrealistic as well as haunting. After Janie insults Joe in front of other people about his impotency, Joe becomes seriously ill. He suffers from kidney ailment and is about to die. Janie is informed by the doctor about Joe’s impending death. Hurston writes:

> So Janie began to think of Death. Death, that strange being with the huge square toes who lived way in the West. The great one who lived in the straight house like a platform without sides to it, and without a roof. What need has Death for a lover, and what winds can blow against him? He stands in his high house that overlooks the world. Stands watchful and motionless all day with his sword drawn back, waiting for the messenger to bid him come. Been standing there before there was a where or a when or a then. She was liable to find a feather from his wings lying in her yard any day now. (242)

Hurston personifies Death as a person “with the huge square toes” which refers to the tomb stones which represent death of a person. This helps Janie to understand the strange, mysterious and haunting feature of Death as well as prepares her to bear the death of Joe Starks. Hurston not only personifies death, but also endows him with a weapon with which death takes away the lives of people. Hurston
writes, “the icy sword of the square-toed one had cut off his breath and left his hands in a pose of agonizing protest” (245). After the hurricane, many people had died, “Some dead with fighting faces and eyes flung wide open in wonder. Death had found them watching, trying to see beyond seeing” (314). The vision of death is so terrifying that people even in their last agonizing moments cannot stand the image of it. Janie thinks of death as some haunting neighbour or kinsmen. Hurston writes:

And then again Him-with-the square toes had gone back to his house.

He stood once more and again in his high flat house without sides to it and without roof with his hand. His pale white horse had galloped over waters and thundered over land. (312).

Hurston has created a chilling image of Death. It is awe-inspiring as well as terrorizing. Death is a dreaded figure with huge square toes (tombstones) who carries cold icy sword in his hand to cut off the breath of his victims. He rides on a white horse who is as pale as his master. Death riding on his galloping horse moves across the lands in search of his fateful victims. For Hurston, death was not the final eventuality but a gateway to another life. Death was not the end, but a new beginning. This visualization of death by Hurston is out of her African American culture interspersed with her Christian religion. Dolan Hubbard writes in this regard:

Hurston presents a well-developed religious consciousness that has penetrated the universe in ways the dominant culture has not. The attitude towards death and dying Janie expresses displays a certain intimacy. Her conceptualization is not predicated on fear and stands in sharp contrast to the conventional Western attitude towards death. Death is not final; God has not died in Africa. Physical death is a
passage from one realm of existence to another. As long as there is
God, man or woman will never be a finite being. (109)

The names of different characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are symbolic. Naming is a big concern in African American literature from the earliest of slave narratives to the present works. Naming even becomes doubly important for African American women writers. According to Gilbert and Gubar, one of the crucial issues for women writing within the Western tradition is the dichotomy between woman’s command of language as opposed to language’s command of woman (236). They further assert:

The female need to achieve a command over language has, to begin with, been most practically expressed through strategies of unnaming and renaming strategies that directly address the problem of woman’s patronymically defined identity in western culture. (237)

Zora Neale Hurston was an African American woman writer who refuted against being typecast by others. In this wake, she created her female protagonist named Janie Crawford. Hurston chose the name “Janie” for her protagonist because she wanted her to be different from the characters of other contemporary writers such as Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset. The name Janie gives an identity to the protagonist but it does not limit her potentialities. In the beginning of the novel we see Janie as a nameless character, then being named by her Nanny and then renamed by her successive husbands. The novel ends with Janie being herself. At the beginning of the novel, Janie returns to Eatonville as a nameless character. While narrating her childhood, Janie tells that the Washburn family, for whom Nanny used to work as a domestic help called her as “Alphabet.” Naming of Janie as an alphabet describe her
powerlessness and lacks identity, Being called by different names shows that her life was defined by others, To quote Sigrid King:

It is interesting that Hurston begins both the narrative frame and Janie’s narrative with Janie as a nameless character. The defect is one more of contrast than of resonance, though since Janie as an adult is well-defined and does not need to be named to identify herself, as she did as a girl.” (118)

Janie is married off to Logan Killicks. Logan Killicks calls Janie as “Lil Bit” (195) symbolizing her powerless position in the eyes of Logan Killicks. When Janie meets Joe Starks, he calls her as “lil girl-chile and “pretty doll-baby” (197). Joe’s use of such names for Janie is symbolic because it is indication of Janie’s subjugated status in marriage with Joe. After marriage with Joe Starks, she becomes “Mrs. Mayor Starks” (208), losing her identity and merely being appendage to Joe. In relationship with Tea Cake, Janie does not feel restricted and limited. This time her changing of name does not symbolize her subjugation, on the contrary she feels an equal. After death of Tea Cake, she returns to Eatonville as Janie Crawford Killicks Starks Woods, but now she does not need any name to prove herself. She has become independent and full of wisdom. Hurston once again emphasizes Janie’s namelessness, but with a different purpose to show her empowerment, “She called in her soul to come and see” (33).

Unnaming has a particular significance for the questing hero or heroine in much of Western literature. Many questing literary characters come to the realization that names are fictions, that no particular name can satisfy the energy of the questing self. So long as the questing character sets a name through a prescribed social role, he or she discovers only limitation, whereas, when a character is unnamed, he or she can
have limitless designation which disempet the function of social labeling and denies the applicability of the word’s topical function to his or her unfolding experience. (Benston 7-8)

Besides Janie, there are other characters too, whom Hurston names and renames. Janie’s grandmother whom she and all others call Nanny, has no name of her own. Janie says, “Ah never called mah Grandma nothin’ but Nanny, cause dat’s what everybody on de place called her”(181) Nanny was a former slave in the plantation system and had been tortured and abused. She had been reduced to a mere non-entity. Even after her freedom she is not able to rename herself. Throughout the novel she is known only as Nanny. To quote Sigrid King:

The objectification of slaves is a well-documented method used by slave owners to distance themselves enough from their slaves to treat them as nonhuman. The namer has the power, the named is powerless.

For the powerless, being named carries with it the threat of limitation, reduction, and destruction. (116)

The name of Janie’s first husband, Logan Killicks is symbolic the name Killicks symbolizes killing of Janie’s idea of marriage and her dreams. There is also other implied meaning of the name Killicks. Logan Killicks, kills or cuts down trees in order to make his living. His house is situated in “a lonesome place like a stump” (191). Janie calls her husband as “Mist Killick” symbolizing his superior position in context with Janie.

Joe Stark’s name is also symbolic, the word Stark means barren. Joe Stark and Janie do not have any children and Hurston also gives a fleeting suggestion of their problems in marriage by mentioning that they had separate beds. In the end, Janie also ridicules Joe of his impotency. Throughout the novel, Joe names himself as “I God”
Naming of him as God symbolize his arrogance. He likes himself to be called as “Mayor” symbolizing his strength and power on others. Janie affectionately calls Joe as Jody. In African American folklore the name Jody is quite symbolic. It means a man indulging in promiscuity. Sally Ann Ferguson writes:

In black folklore, “Jody” has become a metaphor for stagnant and fleeting adulterous relationships. Traditionally, he possesses the verbal dexterity and sexual prowess to seduce lonely and vulnerable wives whose husbands are either in jail or in the Army. He lacks, however, the money and much of anything also to keep women from sending him packing when their more responsible mates return. (188)

Jody Starks or Joe Starks just like as in a folklore lures Janie away from Logan Killicks, but he instigates Janie not on the basis of his sexual power but on the promise of “far horizon”. Hurston develops Janie and Joe’s relationship around the folkloric Jody legend.

The name Tea Cake is equally symbolic. Tea Cake is a working class labourer and his name “Tea Cake” which means an inexpensive sweet food symbolize his low economic status. Janie likes him at the very first instance due to his amiable nature. She asks him, “Tea Cake! So you sweet as all dat” (254). The birth name of Tea Cake is Vergible Woods. Tea Cake explains to Janie, “De name nah mama gimme is Vergible Woods. Dey calls me Tea cake for short” (253). The name “Woods” is equally symbolic. Hurston connects Tea Cake or Vergible Woods to Janie’s imagery of Pear Tree.

Pheoby, Janie’s friend to whom she narrates the story also has a symbolic name. The name Pheoby alludes to Goddess Diana or Artemis luminously bright as a moon. Like moon, she will reflect or tell Janie’s story to other people.
Hair is another important symbol in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie’s hair symbolize whiteness. Hurston describes Janie’s physical appearance as “coffee-and cream complexion and her luxurious hair” (288) symbolizing Janie’s Caucasian features.

Hurston uses hair symbol to represent whiteness not only in context with Janie but also other characters. When Nanny gives birth to her daughter Leafy after being raped by her white master, his wife comes to Nanny to confirm whether child is of her husband or not. She orders Nanny to show her daughter’s hair and face if the child bears Caucasian features. The Mistress of the plantation asks Nanny, “Nigger, what’s yo’ baby doin’ wid gray eyes and yaller hair?” (188). The phrase “yaller hair” once again emphasize whiteness.

Hair is also symbolic of independence. Before meeting Joe Starks Janie is able to voice her opinions and maintain her hair as she wants. When she marries Joe, she is gradually stifled and gagged. Joe forces her to tie up her hair and put a head-rag to hide it. Hurston writes:

> The business of the head rag irked her endlessly. But Jody was set on it. Her hair was not going to show in the store. It didn’t seem sensible at all. That was because Joe never told how jealous he was.... She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others. (218)

Joe feels threatened with Janie’s independent and outgoing nature. He tries his best to suppress Janie in as many ways as he can. Tying up of Janie’s hair also means tying up of Janie’s spirit and thus her losing her independence and freedom. When Joe dies, the very first thing that Janie does is removing her head rag and letting her hair free. This very act is symbolic because Janie’s free hair also symbolize her free
spirit. Now she is free from any restrictions and once again independent. Hurston writes:

She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there. She took careful stock of herself, then combed her hair…. Before she slept that night she burnt up every one of her head rags and went about the house next morning with her hair in one thick braid swinging well below her waist. (245-246)

In relationship with Tea Cake, Janie has an equal say and also can maintain her independence. Unlike Joe Starks, Tea Cake never orders Janie to tie up her hair or hide in the hair rag. In fact, he loves Janie’s free spirit symbolized by her free flowing hair. “She woke up with Tea Cake combing her hair and scratching the dandruff from her scalp. It made her more comfortable and drowsy” (258).

Hair also symbolizes Janie’s defiance against petty conventions of society. At the beginning of the novel, when Janie returns to Eatonville, people are seen ridiculing Janie for keeping her hair down, “What dat ole forty year ole’ oman doin’ wid her hair swingin’ down her back lak some young gal?” (175). Janie refuses to follow any preset notion of the community about women. Keeping her hair free, symbolizes her rebellious nature. Janie leading a life as Joe Starks’s widow, again becomes an object of scorn among community people due to keeping her hair as she wants. They say, “it’s somebody ‘cause she looks mighty good dese days. New dresses and her hair combed a different way nearly every day” (264). Once again Janie acts defiantly against the community’s double standard for women which required her to lead a dull somber life as a widow.
Hair also symbolizes sexuality. Nanny describes that her abusive white slave master, before leaving the plantation for Civil War, enters her cabin and forces her to display her hair. Nanny says:

But pretty soon he let on he forgot somethin’ and run into mah cabin and made me let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wrapped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe lak he always done and was gone after de rest lak ‘fightnin’.” (188)

Nanny’s hair represents her sexuality as her white master forces her to display it for him. Janie’s hair too symbolizes her sexuality. Men are sexually attracted to her because of her hair. “The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets, the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume” (176). Though Logan Killicks and Janie have a loveless marriage but he “wonders at her long black hair and finger it” (195). Even Joe Starks feels aroused by Janie’s beautiful hair. He tells Janie, “Kiss me and shake yo’ head. When you do dat. yo’ plentiful hair breaks lak day” (198). After marriage, when Joe feels threatened by Janie’s sexuality and her young age, he orders her to hide her hair in a head-rag. Even other men of Eatonville community fanaticize about Janie’s sexuality through her hair. A character named Hicks says,“Dat‘oman ain’t so awfully pretty nohow when yuh take de second look at her. Ah had to sorta pass by de house on de way back and seen her good. ’Taint nothin’ to her ‘ceptin’dat long hair ” (204). Later, in the store another man named Walter secretly touches Janie’s hair without her knowledge and enjoys it sexually. Though Janie is not able to know but Joe sees him doing so much to his chagrin. Hurston writes:

He never told her how often he had seen the other men figuratively wallowing in it as she went about things in the store. And one night he
had caught Walter standing behind Janie and brushing the back of his hand back and forth across the loose ends of her braid ever so lightly so as to enjoy the feel of it without Janie knowing what he was doing.

(218)

Tea Cake too, is sexually attracted to Janie’s hair, on the very first day he sees her. He confides to Janie, “Ah ain’t been sleepin’ so good for more’n uh week cause Ah been wishin’ so bad tuh git mah hands in yo’ hair, It’so pretty. It feels jus’ lak underneath uh dove’s wing next to mah face” (258).

Hurston shows a clear relationship between hair and sexuality. At one instance, Sam, the husband of Pheoby tells her, “Her hair combed a different way nearly every day. You got to have something to comb hair over. When you see’ uh woman doin’ so much rakin’ in her head, she’s combin at some man or nother” (264). This becomes especially true, in case of Janie. Janie after being in love with Tea Cake, for the first time in her life feels sexual fulfillment which is clearly manifested in her way of dressing and keeping her hair. Now she lives her life with a new vigour.

Hurston has also used Janie’s hair to function as a phallic symbol in the novel Janie’s braid is often described in phallic terms symbolizing masculinity and potency which dissipates gender lines, which in turn endangers Joe Stark’s power.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is about an African American woman’s sexuality written in a cultural context. Hurston has dealt with the sexual themes and representation of black woman’s desires. Through the character of Janie she has tried to break conventional stereotypes assigned to African American women. Sexuality is one of the important themes in *Their Eyes* on which Hurston gradually builds up the novel. It was not easy for Hurston to write about African American women’s sexuality during her conservative times. Treatment of the sexuality of African
American especially that of African American women was one of the most controversial topics. Since whites had equated African Americans with animals and branded them as licentious creatures, African American writers had to follow certain guidelines such as, “nothing that casts the least reflection on contemporary moral or sexual standards will be allowed. Keep away from the erotic! Contributions must be clean and wholesome” (Schuyler 179).

These rules applied more rigidly to African American women writers. “Racist sexual ideologies” Hazel Carby writes, “proclaimed the black woman to be a rampant sexual being, and in response black women writers either focused on defending their morality or displaced sexuality on to another terrain” (176).

Hurston wrote *Their Eyes were Watching God* and created her protagonist Janie Crawford in these conservative times of 1930s. Hurston has masked much of this sexuality in metaphors like “blossoming pear tree” (182) meaning sexual union and “bee to a blossom” (261) meaning sexual partner or lover. In this way Hurston adopts a naturalist approach towards sexuality. The theme has been dealt with artistically. In her life, Janie is involved in four relationships. Her first sexual encounter is with a boy named, Johny Taylor. Hurston writes:

> Through pollinated air she saw a glorious being coming up the road. In her former blindness she had known him as shiftless Johny Taylor to all and lean. That was before the golden dust of pollen had beglamored his rags in her eyes. (183)

In second relationship and her first married, Janie remains sexually unsatisfied with her husband Logan Killicks. Much older plain, looking and a middle class hard working man cannot understand Janie’s desire neither is he interested in the consummation the of marriage. Janie is not attracted to sexually him. Janie says:
Some folks never was meant to be loved and he is one of ’im…. ah hates de way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides and dat poneuh fat back uh his neck…. Ah’s mother be shot wid tacks than tuh turn over in de bed and sister up de air whilst he is in dere. He don’t even never mention nothing’ pretty. (193)

Janie also remains sexually dissatisfied after marrying Joe Starks. Joe Starks or Jody is a domineering husband and in the end readers are told about his impotency. Though Joe and Janie live together, but their marriage is more of marriage a convenience. Joe considers Janie as merely a show piece for himself. Hurston subtly refers to Janie’s sexual unfulfilment “The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor” (232). In her final and last relationship with Tea Cake, Janie finds sexual fulfillment. Tea Cake makes her complete, both sexually and emotionally.

Through the character of Janie, Hurston shows that sexuality is an important part of an identity. Unlike her Nanny, who views sexuality as threatening and deforming, Janie believes sexuality and sexual fulfillment is an important aspect of her life. All through her life, she is in constant search for her sexuality. Carla Kaplan writes in this context:

Reduced to its basic narrative components, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the story of a young woman is search of an orgasm. From the moment Janie is “summoned to behold a revelation” and witness the “panting”, “frothing”, “ecstatic” “creaming” fulfillment of a blossoming pear tree, her quest is set, she wants, as she puts it, “tuh utilize mahself all over.” (137)
In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston emphasizes relationship between sexuality and violence. After her first sexual awakening, Janie feels “a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid” (183). Her first kiss with “shiftless” Johnny Taylor is referred as “lacerating” (184). Joe Starks, Janie’s second husband, at one instance, beat Janie, “until she had a ringing sound in her ears” (232). Even when Janie meets Tea Cake for the first she is afraid of any ensuing violence, “Maybe this strange man was up to something! But it was no place to show her fear there in the darkness between the house and the store. He had hold of her arm too” (255).

Hurston wants to manifest the fact that there may be violence in love relationships. This is perhaps because Hurston herself had gone through violent passionate love relationships. Giving account of such incident with her alleged lover, Hurston writes in *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

> No sooner did we get inside my door than the war was on! One night (I didn’t decide this) something primitive inside me tore past the barriers and before I realized it I had slapped his face. That was a mistake. He was still smoldering from an incident a week old. A fellow had met us on Seventh Avenue and kissed me on my cheek. Just one of those casual things, but it had burned up A.W.P. So I had unknowingly given him an opening he had been praying for. He paid me off then and there with interest. No broken bone, you understand, and no black eyes, I realized afterwards that my hot head could tell me to beat him, but it would cost something.”(208-209)

This passage manifests Hurston’s view on violent relationships, in fact at one point she even justifies it. Hurston believes violence as an inevitable part of a man and woman’s relationship. Just as she wrote of her beating in *Dust Tracks* as “No broken
bone, you understand, no black eyes” (209), she writes of Janie’s beating by Tea Cake as “No brutal beating at all” (294). Earlier Janie had beaten Tea Cake for talking to a girl named Nunkie. Hurston writes, “She cut him short with a blow and they fought from one room to the other, Janie trying to beat him…. They wrestled on until they were doped with their own fumes and emanations” (287). Hurston does not idealize or romanticize Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship. Her treatment of theme is direct and realistic.

Hurston has also used myths in *Their Eyes*. She associates Janie with Janus, the Roman God. She also uses Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris. Hurston also calls Tea Cake as “sun for a shawl” (333) and “son of Evening Sun” (330) creating a mythic structure in her novel.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* has the blues theme. The blues is a musical genre, with its roots in African culture. The origin of blues goes back to late nineteenth century, the period after Reconstruction. The term ‘blues’ was applied to the songs of the poor and illiterate Africans until the first blues were recorded in the 1920s. The blues has its own significance as it represents self-expression and a means to release tension and sorrow for the African Americans. “A related function of blues is apparent in a line popular in black folksongs, “I’m laughin’ jus to keep from cryin.” (Oster 155). Steven C. Tracy explains:

Since the term “blues” refers to an emotion, a technique, a musical form, and a song lyric, its influence can be manifested in a variety of ways, from the very concrete to the very impressionistic. Though as an emotion “blues” is most frequently associated with sadness, sadness crucially related to African American experiences in slavery and the Jim Crow era, there are in fact many celebratory, “happy” blues songs
that suggest that the blues are not just laments or complaints in their surface content. As such, the blues performance may well not be an expression of sadness but a creative celebration of not only the overcoming of hardship but of the nature of human existence in an imperfect world. (122-123)

African American novelists have been inspired by oral blues and used them in written novel traditions. Various subject matters of the blues such as men and women relationships, love, isolation, sensuality, dejection, frustration are often adopted by these novelists in their literary writings. Furthermore, a novelist can employ many other features and devices of the blues in literal as well as symbolic way in their written narratives, such as call-and-response pattern, “voice masking” techniques or off beat phrasing.

Hurston introduces the blues theme in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* at many levels. The protagonist Janie Crawford’s search for love, sexual fulfillment, her struggle, isolation and frustration, and finally her brief relationship with a blues hero Tea Cake, are all part of blues theme. Furthermore with the use of blues imagery and other linguistic devices, Hurston herself acts like a ‘blues performer.’ Janie’s act of storytelling to her best friend is like a blues performance. Pheoby is not only a story listener or a witness to Janie’s acquisition of voice; she also acts as an audience to Janie’s blues performance.

Hurston has also used mascon imagery which are an important feature of the blues theme. According to Stephen Henderson, mascon imagery is:

Words or phrases that contain a massive concentration of Black experimental energy.... cut across areas of experience usually thought
of as separate, but....meanings over lap and wash into each other on some undifferentiated level of common experience. (44)

The imagery of bee related to Janie’s sexuality occurs throughout the novel. The imagery of bee has often been used in the blues. Hurston perhaps, may have borrowed the bee imagery from the works of a blues singer named Memphis Minnie who wrote and sung a series of bumble bee blues songs. The bee image of lover implies a double meaning. The bee’s sting suggests lovers mistreating and abandonment while the honey refers to the sexual pleasures. With Tea Cake she has pleasures as well as pains like that of jealousy and abandonment.

Second mascon imagery that occurs as a part of blues theme is the imagery of mule. Mule imagery has been part of blues and the blues singers often used this image in their songs to sing away their sorrows and plight. Early blues singers in nineteenth century such as Roosevelt Charles often sung “Mule Blues.” Just as blues singer identified themselves with the mule image, (a mule being beast of burden) similarly Janie too, identifies herself with the mule image as being powerless.

Janie’s third husband, Tea Cake is an embodiment of the blues theme. He is like a blues hero. Twelve years younger and socially inferior to Janie Crawford, Tea Cake wins her heart. The very name Tea Cake is a blues name. Hurston also uses other mascon images such as “lil boy rooster” and “the Son of Evening sun” (320) all evoking blues theme He wears suits and a straw hat, carries a “guitar hanging round his neck with a red silk cord and a grin hanging from his ears” (273) and a switch blade knife. He is an expert gambler and fights villains in a jook. Tea Cake is a blues hero not only in outward appearance but sings blues songs and also is an expert guitar player. Hurston writes:
After a while there was somebody playing a guitar outside her door. Played right smart white. It sounded lonely too. But it was sad to hear it feeling blue like Janie was. Then whoever it was started to singing “Ring de bells of mercy, Call de sinner man home…. So Tea Cake took the guitar and played himself. (272-275)

Hurston also explains the scene at jooks which were places of thriving blues impulse. Tea Cake is a regular visitor to these jooks and gambles all night long. Like a hero, he even knocks out bad men. Hurston writes:

All night now the jooks changed and clamored. Pianos living three lifetimes in one. Blues made and used right on the stop. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing love every hour. Work all day for money, fight all night for love. The rich black earth clinging to bodies and biting the skin like ants. (282)

Tea Cake is everything that Nanny dreads and she had always wanted Janie to be kept away from this type of men. Tea Cake like a true bluesman stands in direct opposition to Nanny, Logan Killicks and Joe Stark’s value systems. Tea Cake, a cultural archetype thrives in “an environment filled with heroic violence, flashing knives, Saturday night liquor fights, and the magnificent turbulence of a blues-filled weekend of pleasure and joy” (Barksdale 110-111).

Like Hurston’s other novels, marriage is one of the most important themes in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Not only the most important, but the marriage theme also proves to be highly problematic in the novel. Janie Crawford marries thrice—to Logan Killicks, Joe Starks and Tea Cake. Each marriage provides her with varied kind of experiences. In her marriage with her first husband Logan Killicks, Janie feels imprisoned. She yearns for love that she had always dreamt of. In her second marriage
with Joe Starks, she feels muted and silenced, always unappreciated. With her third husband, Tea Cake, Janie has a happy but brief married life. At the end of novel, we see Janie as a free woman. She is now a single woman and does not need marriage to secure or support her. Hurston shows that marriage is a highly complex issue and affected by many factors such as history, gender, race, class and even fate. To quote Sharon L. Jones:

The text does not put marriage into a positive light, nor does it reject it outright, the novel is far too complex to reduce it to a simple morality tale. There are many valid experiences here but the author is not necessarily asking her readers to judge them. (189)

The metaphor of inside and outside resonates throughout the novel. Janie begins telling her story to Pheoby sitting outside on her back porch. Janie gains her first notion of self-identity outside her house under the pear tree. Hurston writes, “It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh” (183). After experiencing her first orgasm and then a sexual encounter with Johnny Taylor, Janie, “extended herself outside her dream and went inside of the house” (184) on her Nanny’s call. Both Nanny and Janie’s first husband Logan Killicks want to keep Janie within confinement inside a protected surrounding. While Janie yearns for fair “horizon”, “pear-blooms” all which can occur only outside.

Janie’s second marriage to Joe Starks also results in confinement of Janie’s self. Janie’s marriage with Joe further deteriorates when Joe hits Janie. Hurston uses inside outside metaphor to depict Janie’s state of mind:

She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was image of Jody tumbled
down and shattered….She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them. (233)

Tongue as a weapon motif recurs in the novel. In the very opening scene, we see Janie being lashed out by her community people. These people work the whole day work hard like animals silently, but in the night they adorn themselves with “killing tools”. Hurston writes:

It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk….They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment… They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood came alive.

Words walking without masters, walking altogether like harmony in a song. (175)

Tongue as a weapon motif also occurs in Janie’s marriage to Joe Stark. Joe abuses Janie verbally and to some extent he is even successful to some extent in suppressing Janie. Hurston writes, “Times came when she fought back with her tongue as best she could, but it didn’t do her any good.” (232). He uses his tongue to hurt Janie, Joe says:

You oughta throw something over your shoulders befo’ you go outside. You ain’t no young pullet no mo’. You’s uh ole hen now.... Don’t stand dere rollin your pop eyes at me wid your rump hangin nearly to yo’ knees!(237-238)

Finally, Janie is unable to absorb anymore. She decides to use her best weapon, her tongue against Joe. She also reminds Joe of his old age and his impotency. Janie retaliates, “Humph! Talkin’ ’bout me lookin’ old! When you pull
down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (238). Janie with her ultimate weapon, her tongue cuts down Joe Starks. She castrates him and de-masculine him. She makes the final move of inflicting assault with her tongue as a weapon. Joe is reminded of his impotency in front of all the people. Joe is shattered. His powerful image is diminished and his powerlessness is exposed. Joe is unable to retaliate verbally “Joe Starks didn’t know the words for all this but he knew the feeling. So he struck Janie with all his might” (239). Unable to forget his insult, Joe becomes sick and ultimately, dies.

Tongue as a weapon motif again reoccurs during the courtroom trial scene. After shooting Tea Cake in self-defense, Janie is arrested. In court during the trial, the African Americans who are present, lash out at Janie for killing Tea Cake, unaware of the fact that he was suffering from rabies. Hurston writes:

They were all against her, she could see. So many were there against her that a light slap.... from each one of them would have beat her to death. She felt them pelting her with dirty thoughts. They were there with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon left to weak fools. The only killing tool they are allowed to use in the presence of white folks. So it was already after a while and they wanted people to thank so that they could know what was right to do about Janie Woods the relic of Tea Cake’s Janie. The white part of the room got calmer the more serious it got, but a tongue storm struck the Negroes like wind among palm trees. (327)

Hurston shows that in presence of powerful whites, African Americans only had one weapon for their own use, which was their tongues. The blacks are angry at Janie that she had killed Tea Cake. They make false allegations against Janie that she
had shot Tea Cake on pretext of self-defense, so that she could run off with another man. Blacks are even ready to testify against Janie. By using their tongue as a tool against Janie they try their best to implicate Janie in killing of Tea Cake. Janie once again uses her tongue as a weapon for her defense. She wins her trial case because she knows that she is fighting not only for her life but also for her vision and dream.

Quest motif is one of the most dominant motifs in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In fact, it provides structural framework for the novel. Janie, the protagonist of the novel engages in quest throughout the novel. Janie bravely leaves her life of comfort not once but twice and takes on the daunting task of questing. She lives a life of adventure in Everglades, survives a hurricane, faces a trial and finally returns to her home in Eatonville, full of new knowledge and wisdom. Missy Den Kubitsche writes, “Detailing her quest for self-discovery and self-definition, it celebrates her as an artist who enriches Eatonville by communicating her understanding.” (110)

A successful quest has various elements in it: responding to the call to adventure, entering the unknown, facing trials, gaining the prize (this may be in form of symbol or concrete) and finally returning and integrating into the community.

Rachel Blau Du Plessis Points out:

The quest plots of twentieth century women writers incorporate a critical response both to the ending in death and to the ending in marriage, once obligatory goals for the female protagonist. This nineteenth century ending in death had offered muted yet resonant elements of symbolic protest, often referring back to the brief moments of social integration, expressed energy, and personal triumphs..... The hero is representative of a stirring community breaking with
individualism in her rupture from gender-based ends. She encompasses opposites and can represent both sociocultural debates and a psychic interplay between boundaries and boundlessness. In the distinctive narrative strategy of the multiple individual, the female hero fuses with a complex and contradictory group, her power is articulated in and continued through, a community that is formed in direct, answer to the claims of love and romance. (42)

Initially, Janie owing to her immaturity centers her call to adventure on the concept of marriage. After a bland marriage with Logan Killicks, Janie realizes her mistake and as if to rectify her mistake, she leaves Killicks to seek a new adventure with Joe Starks. Janie knows that Joe Starks is nowhere in her vision of pear tree, but still spends twenty years in spiritual hibernation. She temporarily refused the call to adventure in favor of a specious security (Kubitschek 110). After the death of Joe Starks, Janie is ready to respond to the call to adventure. Being wiser, independent and with better grip on her life, it seems as if Janie is reborn into a new entity, but before going to Everglades with Tea Cake, Hurston shows Janie crossing the threshold and risking safety for her quest fulfillment. Janie as the widow of deceased mayor Joe Starks is offered a lot of marriage proposals by other men but she vehemently refuses all of them. Janie now knows that she does not need any “protection.” Janie loves Tea Cake and is ready to risk everything, her social status, her money to be with Tea Cake. In spite of warnings from Hezekiah, Pheoby and other community members, Janie is ready to embark on her quest to achieve her idealized vision of life. She marries Tea Cake, twelve years younger and socially and financially inferior to her and settles in Everglades.
Facing trials is another important part of quest. Janie and Tea Cake face various trials in their brief marriage. Janie has to face her first trial when she faces a possible betrayal by Tea Cake having supposedly an affair with a girl named Nunkie. Janie comes out of this trial understanding that love can also cause jealousy and commitment has the risk of betrayal. Janie’s second trial is a social trial. It is represented by Mrs. Turner, who is a light skinned African-American woman who hates dark skinned African American people. Janie is proud of her African American cultural heritage and race. She replies, “We’ se uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks. How come you so against black?” (289). Janie has accepted her blackness. Janie flatly refuses Mrs. Turner’s offer to marry her brother, who is also light skinned. Janie comes out successfully in this trial. Janie faces yet another trial in the form of the hurricane. The hurricane represents a trial by nature. Just as social trial endangers Janie’s social and personal life, the hurricane endangers Janie’s life as a whole. Janie is in grave danger during the hurricane as she is about to be attacked by a mad rabid dog. However Tea Cake saves her, but unfortunately gets bitten by the dog in the process. Eventually Tea Cake dies and Janie is left alone.

This experience makes Janie wiser. Even after the death of Tea Cake, she does not feel alone and helpless because she can now live with his memories. She does not need the protection of a man. She can live her life on her own. She has achieved her own idealized vision of the blooming bear tree and integrated it with her real life. This is the prize or reward of her quest. Janie says:

You got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo’ papa and yo’ mama and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody’s got
tuh do fuhtey selves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuhtey selves. (332)

The last element of a quest hero is return to the community, though at the beginning there may be some difficulty in reintegration. Like a true questing hero, Janie returns to her community in Eatonville. At the beginning we see that Janie is aloof from her community but then she makes Pheoby her mouthpiece. Janie is “full of that oldest human longing—self-revelation” (180). Janie has been to the horizon and back and “been a delegate to de big association of life” (180).

In this manner, Janie also acts as a trickster. Hurston casts Janie as a trickster, an omnipresent menace of folktales, who just like Signifying monkey or Brer Rabbit, two of these incarnations, strikes down physical superiors, as David slewed Goliath (Lowe 177). Janie follows a trickster tradition of covert action helping to achieve her final goal. Janie “conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee” (Baker 50).

In Their Eyes Were Watching God, settings have their own importance. The context of place plays an important role in the novel. Janie spends her childhood and adolescence, “Mah grandma and de white folks she worked wid. She had a house out in de back-yard and dat’s where Ah wuz born” (181). Hurston gives a little idea about Nanny’s plain houses but it seems that it somewhat resembled the slave quarters where Nanny used to live as a slave in Mr Robert’s plantation. But this is a better and livable.

Similarly, Hurston does not describe Logan Killick’s house in much detail. His “house has an absence of flavors” (191) just like himself, though it has an organ symbolizing Killick’s material prosperity. His house is like a “Stump in the middle of the woods nobody had ever been” (191). Joe Stark’s store and house in the town of
Eatonville is not only the very center of the town, literally and figuratively, but it represents acquisitiveness” (Campbell 63). Starks’ store and house are synonymous to his materialistic nature. Starks’ store has all the required consumer goods as Starks is a seller of these goods. Starks’ house is different from other houses. He has purposely painted it sparkling white once again showing his obsession with white culture and people. The house is of two storeys, with a porch and a few bannisters. It consists of all material comforts like looking vase and floral spittoon. However, Starks’ house lacks flavour just like Logan Killicks. Janie’s position is of a mere non-entity in both the houses. After the death of Joe Starks’ Janie readily leaves this house to be with Tea Cake. Janie finally settles in the “muck” in the Everglades. “Muck” is alive with people’s laughter and lush greenery and plantation. Describing the “muck” Hurston writes:

Everglades was big and new. Big Lake Okeechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything. Weeds that did well to grow waist high up the state were eight and often ten feet down there. Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too. (280)

Tea Cake’s house becomes the centre of the town. All the people gathered in his house to enjoy and have a good laugh in the evening. “Tea Cake’s house was a magnet, the unauthorized centre of the job” (282). Tea Cake’s house stands in stark contrast to Killicks and Starks’ house. While Killicks and Stark’s house had no flavor, warmth and love, tea Cake’s house radiates with love and warmth. When Janie think of her past life spent in previous houses, she can only laugh.
 Their Eyes Were Watching God occupies a foremost place in the annals of African American literature not only because of its unparalleled story and themes, but also because of its complex and pioneering narration style. Hurston has used various modes of narration to accentuate her story.

The opening paragraphs of Their Eyes Were Watching God depict a lyrical, third-person narrative which again reappears at the end of the novel to complete a united whole structure of the novel.

Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. (175)

The lyrical narrator presents two different views of life. The first point of view is that of the “men” and the second view is that of “women” who believe that dreams are representations of truth. The lyrical narrator also manifests to his readers that it is a story of a woman. According to Ralph Freedman a lyrical novel moves as a “qualitative progression” instead of temporal progression usually found in novels. He further emphasizes that in a lyrical novel, “the fictional world is conceived not as a universe in which men fashioned as a design. The world is reduced to a lyrical point of view” (8). The lyric novel functions to transform even sequence to dream like personal vision. This changing of sequence into “lyrical point of view” occurs at multilevel in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Janie’s story is a revelation not only to Pheoby but also to us since the lyrical narration purposely presents a sequence of events where by we try to emulate the experience of the protagonist. To quote Maria Tai Wolff:
The narrator presents Janie’s story as a series of episodes and pictures. Indeed, nearly all of her story is presented in the third person, in it Janie herself narrates the basic problem she must resolve. The following episodes contain images and experiences which she must organize with reference to her own problem. The reader or listener on the other hand, is free to form his or her own evaluation from the material presented, to individually “integrate” the world. (32)

Soon the lyrical narrative dissolves into the third person omniscient narrator who tells about strange and unexpected return of Janie back to Eatonville. Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. (175)

Then comes the first person narrative “chorus” represented by community people sitting on the porch and mongering and gossipping at the expense of Janie:

What she doint’ coming back here in dem over halls ? Can’t she find no dress to put on?—Where 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 doing’ 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? (175-6)

The narration then moves to Janie’s porch where Janie is telling her story of “been to the horizon and back” (332). The narration employed here is that of first person narrative. Janie says, “Ah could sit down and tell’em things. Ah been a
delegate to de big association of life” (179-180). This first person narrative coalesces with third person omniscient narrator, who is the narrator in the larger part of the novel. It tells us Janie’s story and her life’s predicament. This third person omniscient narrative has an important function to play as it highlights the incidents and events beyond Janie’s sphere. Janie’s childhood with Nanny, with Logan Killicks and Joe Starks and ultimately with Tea Cake as an embodiment of freedom, is all depicted by the third person omniscient narrator. Anita M.Vickers writes in this regard, “The omniscient, third person narrative not only traces Janie’s development and growth as a speaker but also evinces the levels of orality within the African-American community” (307).

As Janie’s story is about to end the narration abruptly transforms to first person narration again with Hurston giving the role to Janie as a creator of her own destiny,

Now, dat’s how everything wuz, Pheoby, jus’lak Ah told yuh. So ah’m back home again and Ah’m satisfied tuh be heah…Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now. Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparsions….Ah know all dem sitters-and-talkers gointuh worry they guts into fiddle strings till dey find out what we been talkin’ bout. (332)

The last three concluding paragraphs in the novel are not expressed in the first person narrative, but in the lyrical third person narrative, making the frame of the novel cohesive and complete:

Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl: Of course he wasn’t dead. He would never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great
fishnet pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulders. So much of life in its meshes! She welled in her soul to come and see. (333)

In between the story, Hurston employs other modes of narration techniques. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a story-within-a story. Hurston introduced “mule talk” episode and “buzzard tale” in a narrative technique of a story-in a story. Mule talk episode refers to Matt Bonner’s mule who is the butt of jokes and mule tales (lies). Hurston writes:

New lies sprung up about his free-mule doings. How he pushed open Lindsay’s kitchen door and slept in the place one night and fought until they made coffee for his breakfast, how he stuck his head in the Pearson’s window while the family was at the table and Mrs. Pearson mistook him for Rev. Pearson and handed him a plate…. He did everything but let himself be bridled and visit Matt Bonner. (221-222)

After a couple of months the mule dies and receives a grand mule funeral. Though Janie is deliberately kept away from the mule funeral by Joe Starks, the mule funeral is retold in her story. Within the tale of mule’s pompous funeral, there is another tale of buzzard feast. The buzzard party consists of a “Parson” and his “flock”:

The Parson sat motionless in a dead pine tree about two miles off. He had scented the matter as quickly as any of the rest, but decorum demanded that he sit oblivious until he was notified. Then he took off with ponderous flight and circled and lowered, circled and lowered until the others danced in joy and hunger of his approach. (234)
Hurston also uses technique of narration for narration’s sake to manifest “crayon enlargements of life” (215). Hurston allows us to hear the ‘big talkers’ of the community. Hurston writes, “But sometimes Sam Watson and Liege Moss forced a belly laugh out of Joe himself with their eternal arguments. It never ended because there was no end to reach. It was a contest in hyperbole and carried on for no reason.” (225)

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is also a pioneering novel for the use of what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls as “speakerly text” (181). According to Gates:

> Hurston’s text is the first example in our tradition designed “to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce the illusion of oral narration” The “speakerly text” is that in which all other structural elements seem to be devalued as important as they remain to the telling of the tale because the narration strategy signals attention to its own importance, an importance which would seem to be the privileging of oral speech and its inherent linguistic features. (181)

Hurston uses three different modes of narration. First is the direct discourse. Direct discourse presents voice of characters in black dialect. They are written using quotation marks. Here is an example of direct discourse, “You gettin’ too moufy, Janie,” Starks told her. “Go fetch me de checker board and de checkers. Sam Watson, you’se mah fish” (235).

The second mode of narration is that of indirect discourse. For example, “One Day Hezekiah asked off from work to go off with the ball team. Janie told her not to hurry back. She could close up the store herself this once” (251).
The third mode of narration employed by Hurston which is innovative in itself is the “free indirect discourse” (Gates 191). It is actually a beautiful blend of two types of narration, the direct speech of the character in black dialect and third person omniscient narration in Standard English. The following paragraph is a perfect example of free indirect discourse:

Joe Starks was the name, yeah Joe Starks from in and through Gregory. Been workin’ for white folks all his life. Saved up some money—round three hundred dollars, yes indeed right here in his pocket. Kept hearin’ ’bout them building’ a new state down heah in Florida and sort of wanted to come. But he was makin’ money where he was. But when he heard all about ’em making a town all outa colored folks, he knowed dat was de place he wanted to be. He had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de say so where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin’ dis place dat colored folks was buildin their selves. Dat was right too. De man dat built things oughta boss it. Let colored folks build things too if dey wants to crow over somethin’. He was glad he had his money all saved up. He meant to git dere whilst de town wuz yet a baby. He meant to buy in big. (196-197).

In this paragraph it is seen that there are sentences indicating both the narrator and the character Joe Starks, but sentences represents Joe stark’s speech occur without any quotations or direct discourse. There is a harmonious blend of the narrator’s voice and the character’s voice, which seems to be speaking but yet is silent. In the paragraph, there are various sentences and phrases like “yeah Joe Starks form in and through Gregory”, “yes indeed, right here in his pocket”, “a new state down headin’ Florida and sort of wanted to come” all represent the character Joe
Starks’ thought and reflections rather than the narrator’s. Explaining “the speakerly text,” Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes:

It was Hurston who introduced free indirect discourse into Africa American narration. Curiously, Hurston’s narrative strategy depends on the blending of the text’s two most extreme and seemingly opposed modes of narration—that is narrative commentary, which begins at least in the diction of Standard English and character’s discourse, which is always foregrounded by quotation marks and by its black diction…. There are numerous indices whereby we identify free indirect discourse in general, among these grammar, intonation, context, idiom, register, and content, it is naturalized in a text by stream of consciousness, irony, empathy and polyvocality. The principal indices of free indices of indirect discourse in Their Eyes include those which “evoke a ‘voice’ or presence” that supplements the narrator’s especially when one or more sentences of free indirect discourse follows a sentence of indirect discourse. (191-209)

Hurston especially uses free indirect discourse concurrent with the theme of identity in context with Janie. Hurston uses free indirect discourse when Janie becomes aware of her sexual identity. Hurston writes:

She saw a dust bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom, the thousand sister-calyxes arch 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 marriage... She was lying across the bed asleep so Janie tipped on out of the front door. Oh to be pear
tree—any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. (183)

Hurston has emphasized richness and complexity of black vernacular with the use of the “speakerly text”, and modes of narration such as free indirect discourse. Through these techniques of narration she has not only manifested importance of African American oral tradition, but also solved the conflict between the use of black dialect and Standard English. Thus in Their Eyes Were Watching God, we see a brilliant fusion of narrative techniques which was innovative as well as outstanding in the field of African American literature.

Hurston also uses various metaphors and similes rendered in black vernacular to show the rich black culture. Hurston in her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression” writes:

The Negro’s universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama. His very words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the rich metaphor and simile. The metaphor is, of course, very primitive. It is easier to illustrate than it is to explain because action comes, before speech…. But the Negro’s greatest contribution to the language is (1) the use of metaphor and simile, (2) the use of double descriptive (3) the use of verbal noun. (224-226)

Their Eyes Were Watching God is permeated with rich African American metaphor and similes. Hurston has used these in a most apt manner to highlight African American life. Noticeably, they are not used as profusely as they were in Jonah’s Gourd Vine, some of these are as follows: Mouth Almighty (178); “An
envious heart makes a treacherous ear” (179); “They’s a lost ball in de high grass” (179); “Love is a bed quilt” (179); “colored folks is branches without roots” (187); “Ah’ a cracked plate” (190); “Seeing your sister turn into a’ gator” (212); “He’s de wind and we’ se de grass” (214); “He was a man wid salt in him” (228); “Dey a mighty hush mony” (229); “They have got that fresh, new taste about them like young mustard greens in the spring” (228), “Big bellies” (238), “dat multiplied cockroach” (241), “barkin’ up de wrong tree” (291) “black folks .... draw lightening” (289); “Outer darkness” (326). Hurston uses these three types of adornments to embellish direct discourse of African American characters.

The narrative of ascent and immersion is also present in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Robert Stepto calls *Their Eyes* as the only true coherent narrative of both “ascent and immersion” (164). Explaining the narrative of ascent and immersion, Robert Stepto writes:

The Afro-American pregeneric myth of the quest for freedom and literacy has occasioned two basic types of narrative expressions, the narratives of ascent and immersion. The classic ascent narrative launches an “enslaved” and semi-literate figure on a ritualized journey to a symbolic North, that journey is charted through spatial expressions of social structure, invariably systems of signs that the questing figure must read in order to be both increasingly literate and increasingly free. The ascent narrative conventionally ends with the questing figure situated in the least oppressive social structure afforded by the world of the narrative, and free in the sense that he or she has gained sufficient literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate survivor. As the phrase “articulate survivor” suggests, the hero or heroine of an ascent
narrative must be willing to forsake familiar or communal postures in the narrative’s most oppressive social structure for a new posture in the least oppressive environment—at best, one of solitude, at worst, one of alienation. This last feature of the ascent narrative unquestionably helps bring out the rise and development of an immersion narrative in the tradition, for the immersion narrative is fundamentally an expression of a ritualized journey into a symbolic South, in which the protagonist seeks those aspects of tribal literacy that ameliorate, if not obliterate, the conditions imposed by solitude. The conventional immersion narrative ends almost paradoxically, with the questing figure located in or near the narratives most oppressive social structure but free in the sense that he has gained or regained tribal literacy to assume the mantle of one articulate kinsman. “Articulate kinsman” suggests, the hero or heroine of an immersion narrative must be willing to forsake highly individualized mobility in the narrative’s least oppressive social structure for a posture of relative statis in the most oppressive environment, a loss that is only occasionally group identity.” (167)

As the phrase Immersion as narrative expression in Their Eyes begins with Janie starting her “ritualized journey into a symbolic South with sufficient literacy” (Stepto 167). By sufficient literacy it means her freedom, independence and her power to speak against wrongdoings done to her. She decides to go to Jacksonville or Everglades with Tea Cake. Living in Everglades with Tea Cake is the ultimate act of freedom for Janie. There is also another instance of literal freedom with Janie being freed of all charges of murder of Tea Cake by the white court. Hurston now portrays
Janie as “an articulate kinsman” free and willing to assert her individuality in a stable, familiar environment, comforted by the possibility of peace in what Robert Stepto calls, the “new found balms of group identity” (167) among her community people of Eatonville. (Jones 379). Janie as a questing hero moves from symbolic South to symbolic North becomes an “articulate survivor” but pays the price for her triumph by being isolated from her community. Hurston also makes Janie an “articulate kinsman” who relocates from symbolic North to symbolic South once again reintegrating with her community in Eatonville. At the beginning of the story we see, Janie Crawford, the protagonist of the novel has returned to her home in Eatonville after her symbolic trips of north and South. With two imposed marriages and third one, ending in a tragedy, she has gained her identity. Janie’s movement towards symbolic North starts with her first marriage marking ascent as narrative expression of the novel. Janie’s first marriage with Logan Killicks according to Nanny’s wish, shows Janie’s status as an enslaved and “semiliterate figure” (Stepto 167). Hurston writes, “She was seeking confirmation of the voice and vision and everywhere she found and acknowledged answers. A personal answer for all other creations except herself. She felt an answer seeking her, but where.? When? How?” (183).

Janie’s marriage with Logan Killicks and Joe Starks represents spatial expression of social structure in form of experiences. With her strength of silence, Janie gradually gains a heroic portraiture. Out of these adverse circumstances, she becomes more and more independent and free and reemerge as an “articulate survivor”. Janie surviving bravely her two abusive loveless marriages and finally retaliating against Joe Starks in his own bitter medicine, becomes an articulate survivor. She is a survivor because she has not only grieved but also grown. With each of the oppressive signs read by a survivor and with each subsequent experience
Janie becomes more and more free (Jones 377). Janie tells Pheoby, “Dis ain’t no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandmothers way, now Ah means tuh live mine.” (267)

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is also exemplary of slave narrative. Nanny narrates her harsh experience of slavery being abused in plantation slavery. She say, “Ah ain’t nothin’ but uh nigger and uh slave” (489). To quote John Lowe, “Nanny’s mode of narration as generated by her harsh experiences and thus representative of both slave narratives and what would become known as “protest literature” after Richard Wright exploded on the literary scene” (164). Janie’s search for freedom and search for a man best suitable for her notion of freedom also echoes slave narrative, Janie seems like an escaped slave from the Antebellum South, moving to North for her freedom.

According to Alice Walker, slave narratives where “escape for the body and freedom for the soul went together” is the most appropriate paradigm for understanding *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (“Saving” 5). Like in slave narratives, Janie does not offer direct resistance against her oppressors coming in the form from Nanny and her husbands, but seeks concealed resistance in the form of submission. Referring to slave narrative tradition in *Their Eyes*, Shaun E. Miller writers:

> Janie fits into a long line of black characters whose physical circumstance is inextricably, linked to larger issues of freedom, to suggest a Janie who wins freedom through submission.... She would fit into a tradition of black activists and characters stretching from Booker. T Washington and Charles Chesnutt’s Uncle Julius to Houston Baker’s own father and Ishmael Reed’s Uncle Robin. All of these win power and freedom not by direct resistance or horizontal displacement,
but by recognizing the realities and exigencies of their temporal situation and by using this keen insight within a context of covert resistance. (85)

Hurston has used folklore in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to develop her plot and characters. Though Hurston had used folklore in her previous novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* but it was in profusion. *Their Eyes* is perhaps the best example of the relationship of folklore to literature where folklore plays a functional role in the novel. To quote Henning Cohen:

Folklore appears in American literature in two ways: passively or actively, transcriptively or functionally.... The need for transcription has passed and most writers have come to realize that mere recordings or imitations of folklores are essentially lifeless....Writers who are concerned with creating works of art rather than providing transcriptions from life use folklore functionally. Folklore is recognizably present with all the appeal and power that it has in its own right, but it is put to work ... to advance the plot, to characterize, to provide structure, and to defend, explain and raise questions about the nature of the society. (240)

Hurston has used folklore to manifest cultural and social aspects of African American people as well as developing the novel’s plot. Folklore such as folk language, folkways and folk stories occur throughout the novel. *Their Eyes* in a way is like a document of black culture and black tradition. Hurston, through the use of folk dialect, proverbs, folk sayings, folk tales and stories, and folk rituals renders a folkloric color to the novel.
All the characters speak in Southern rural dialect. Hurston recreates black speech in a most authentic and ethnic manner. All the African American characters speak in black dialect. For example, Hurston writes:

Yeah, Ah know, Janie, but it couldn’t never be lak it ’tis heah. In de first place dey been bringin’ bodies outa dere all, day so it can’t be but so many mo’ tuh find. And then again it never wuz as many dere as it wuz heah. And then too, Janie, de white folks down dere knows us. It’s bad bein’ strange niggers wid white folks. Everybody is aginst yuh.

(315)

Several features of African American dialect are illustrated. “I” becomes “Ah” “like” becomes “lak”, “hear” becomes “heah”, “was” becomes “wuz”, “they” becomes “dey”. Hurston also manifests the use of double negatives in the black rural dialect. For example, Joe Starks tells Janie, “You ain’t got no mo’ business wid uh plow then a hog is got wid a holiday” (197.) Hurston also illustrates the use of hyperboles. When Janie complains to her Nanny about the indifference of Logan Killicks towards her, Nanny issues invective, “Lawd, Ah know dat grass ut, liver - lipted nigger aint’t done took and beat mah baby already! ah’ll take a stick and salivate in!” (192). Hurston also uses vivid metaphors, similes and idioms which are an integral part of African American folk culture. Sherley Anne Williams writes in this context:

Hurston had the literary intelligence and developed the literary skill to convey the power and beauty of this heard speech.... on the printed page.... In the speech of her characters black voices—where the rural of urban northern or southern—come alive. Her fidelity to diction, metaphor, and syntax, whether in direct quotations or in paraphrases of
character’s thought rings..... With an aching familiarity that is a testament to Hurston’s skill and to the durability of black speech. (ix).

Through the speech of the characters we also see the idiomatic quality of the language. In the very beginning of the novel, when Janie returns to her home to Eatonville, her best friend Pheoby goes to meet her with a bowl of mulatto rice, Janie praises Phoeby “Gal, it’s too good! you switches a mean fanny young in a kitchen” (178). This means to say that, Pheoby is an excellent cook. At yet another instance Janie’s first husband Logan Killicks taunts Janie of her illegitimate lineage in an idiomatic language, “Consider in yous born in a carriage thought no to top it” (198).

Hurston has also used proverbs to bring out the folkloric effect in the novel. Nanny’s proverbial expression, “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world” (186), today has become one of the most famous and oft quoted lines of African American literature. This proverbial expression has three fold meanings to it. First of all Nanny is referring to her own horrible life spent in slavery. Secondly, Hurston refers to the position of black women in a racist American society. Thirdly, it also serves as a reminder and caution to Janie to save herself from the “mule” image of African American women. The use of proverbs, idioms, cultural metaphors all reflect the rich culture and folk traditions of African Americans, and also the dexterity with which Hurston has used it in her fiction.

Hurston has also used folk traditions such as dozens, story-telling and speech making. These are all intrinsic part of rich African American oral traditions. Joe Starks makes speeches to emphasize his position among other community people. He uses occasions such as installations of lights in the town and dead mule ceremony to show his power and influence. In African American culture, speechmaking is not only a tool to influence the audience but it is also an indication of privilege and a means to
assimilate in an indigenous culture. While Joe becomes a powerful member of the community owing to his oratory skills, he stifles Janie and pushes her to the background.

Another aspect of folkloric oral tradition is story telling or “lying sessions.” Story telling is an important part of folklores and manifests inherent creativity of African American people. Story telling or tales have their own important role to play in the cultural context. It serves a didactic function to moralize people. Roger Abrahams points out:

This potency of spoken language must be remembered.... because tales are, in the ears of their hearers, permissible lies ...neither a record of reality, nor pure fantasy.... have specific meaning in the lives of those who tell them, referring to personal situations and to particular people known by the group. (1-2)

Mule-talk is one such kind of story telling or “lying session” occurring in the novel. Matt Bonner’s mule is a central object of tales. Matt Bonner’s mule provides new tales and stories for the entertainment of people of Eatonville. Sam, a friend of Joe Starks says:

When Ah come round de lak ’bout noon time mah wife and some, others had in flat on de ground usin’ his sides fuh wash board ... yeah Matt dat mule so skinny till de women is usin his rib bones fuh us rub-board, and hangin’ things out on his hock-bones tuh dry. (216)

These tales are not only a source of entertainment and recreation for the people but in a way also try to teach people how to treat animals. People are actually not ridiculing the mule but Matt Bonner on his alleged mistreatment to the mule. People share a laugh on the expense of Matt Bonner. These “lying-session” surely
indicate that Matt Bonner’s behavior is not socially accepted and he remains isolated from the communal experience.

Another example of folk ritual and oral tradition is “Dozens” which occurs in the novel. Dozens can actually be called an informal contest of verbal insults between two persons. Levine outlines the Dozens as:

An oral contest, a joking relationship, a ritual of permitted respect in which the winner was recognized on the basis of verbal facility, originality, ingenuity, and humor.... [If however,] the losing player breaks the pattern and moves from ritual insult to personal [trouble results].... The Dozens then, was a speech act with clearly understood governing principles. They could be violated, of course, but the cost of deviating from the normal pattern was anger, loss of control, and confusion. (347-348)

As an anthropologist and as an African American Hurston was well aware of the importance of Dozens in African American folkloric traditions. Hurston writes in *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

The bookless may have difficulty in reading a paragraph in a newspaper, but when they get down to “playing the dozens” they have no equal in America, and, I’d risk a sizable bet, in the whole world. Starting off in first by calling you a seven sided son-of-a-bitch, and pausing to name the sides, they proceed to “specify” until the tip-top branch of your family tree has been “given a reading.” No profit in that to the upper class Negro, so he minds his own business and groans, “My people! My people!” (178)
Hurston uses the device of Dozens to bring a new change in the life of her protagonist and it also acts as a turning point of the novel. The outcome of the Dozens scene between Joe Starts and Janie is of great importance to the plot of the novel. This marks a turning point in the life of Janie as well as Joe Starks. This dozen scene marks a culmination of animosity between Janie and Joe, which had been perpetuating between them for years. Joe often used to ridicule Janie of her growing age, though he was insecure about himself, “The more people in there more ridicule he poured over her body to point attention away from his own” (237). Janie had long been ignoring him but one day in the store Janie decides to foil his personal insults. The dozen contest ensues between Janie and Joe when she cuts a plug of tobacco wrong for a customer. Joe scolds Janie:

“I god almighty. A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can’t cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don’t stand dere rollin’ yo’ pop eyes at me wid yo’ rump hangin’ nearly to yo’ knees!”

A big laugh started off in the store but people got to thinking and stopped. It was funny if you looked at it right quick, but it got pitiful if you thought about it awhile. It was like somebody snatched off part of a woman’s clothes while she wasn’t looking and the streets were crowded. Then too, Janie took the middle of the floor to talk right in to Jody’s face, and that was something that hadn’t been done before.

“Stop mixin’ up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through telllin’ me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not.”

“Wha - whut’s dat you say, Janie? You must be out yo’ head.
“Naw, Ah ain’t outa mah head neither.”

“You must be. Talkin’ any such language as dat.”

“You de one started talkin’ under people’s clothes. Not me”

“What’s de matter wid you, nohow? You ain’t no young girl to be gettin all insulted ’bout yo’ looks. You ain’t no young courtin’ gal. You’se uh ole woman, nearly forty.”

“Yeah, Ah’m nearly forty and you’ se already fifty. How come you can’t talk about dat sometimes instead of always pointin’ at me?”

“T’ain’t no use in gettin’ all mad, Janie, ’cause Ah mention you ain’t young gal no mo’. Nobody in heah ain’t lookin’ for no wife outa yuh. Old as you is.”

“Naw, 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 vioce. Humph! Talkin’ bout me lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life.”

“Great God from Zion!” Sam Watson gasped. “Y’ all really playin’ dozens tuhnigh.” (238)

This scene is one of the most important scenes in *Their Eyes*, because it turns the life of both Janie and Joe Starks. Janie not only comes out of imposed isolation but also proves her worth by defeating Joe in his own word game. She not only exposes Joe’s impotency but also robs him of his power of words. After the dozens scene, Janie becomes more and more confident, and Joe Starks dies disgraced and humiliated. Janie comes out as the winner of the dozens.
*Their Eyes Were Watching God* has a unique structure. Hurston tells the story in context of a “frame.” The story of *Their Eyes* proceeds in a chronological order but noticeably, the story is not narrated in first person narrative. Hurston controls the story and makes us aware of Janie’s experiences during her lifetime.

*Their Eyes* consists of four units which forms the basic framework of the story. The first frame that we see is about Janie’s childhood and adolescent years and Nanny’s influence on her. The second unit is actually an interlude. In this unit we come across Nanny’s abusive past and her resurrection. Janie is forcefully married to Logan Killicks. Janie’s marriage with Joe Starks and next twenty years she spends with him is the third section of the framework in the novel. The fourth and the last unit of the framework of the novel is all about Janie’s liberation and love that she experiences in her relationship with her third husband much younger than her, Tea Cake.

The framework of *Their Eyes* is finally complete as Janie’s memorable story comes to an end, “Now, dat’s how everything wuz, Pheoby, jus lak Ah told yuh” (332). Pheoby returns to her husband Sam and promises Janie to tell her story to everybody, “Nobody better not criticize yuh in mah hearin” (332).

Through Janie’s eyes and her point of view we know this story but still, Hurston uses third person narrative in order to bring out other characters and emphasize their perspectives also. Hurston perhaps also used this framework to give voice to Janie in the novel. Hurston neither fully abandons this first person narrative nor solely relies on third person which would have resulted in muting Janie’s voice. Using first person narrative of Janie in the framework, manifests the gradual increasing power and freedom of Janie and her ultimate culmination into a hero. As
Janie says, “Ah been a delegate to de big ’ssociation of life. Yessuh! De Grand Lodge de big convention of life” (180).

Thus, Hurston appropriately adopts a non-linear or circular plot structure and narrative bringing out the overall effect of the novel. There seems to be fluidity in the novel and so is the dexterity in blending together of all the frameworks in which the story has been depicted.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a Bildungsroman as well as Kunstlerroman novel. It is Bildungsroman because we see the protagonist Janie often steered by her nanny and successive husbands to ultimately become an independent woman to take her own judgments and lead a fulfilled life without requiring any man for support. *Their Eyes* is also a Kunstlerroman or artist novel. It established a new precedent in African American literature. To quote Gloria L. Cronin:

*Their Eyes* was variously treated as a black woman’s Kunstlerroman, as the work of a black female blues singer, as by and about a black-identified woman, as a novel establishing a strong black female self-authorizing voice, or as an exposure of the struggle between black man and woman. Generally *Their Eyes* was raised to the status of icon of the Harlem Renaissance, a work featuring a black Colossa of heroic proportions who calls, recalls, fishes for life itself, and makes remarkable pictures. (10)

Hurston through *Their Eyes* brings forth African American women’s past history, from psychic slavery to the present in the individual self. Hurston affirms African American identity not only of African American women but of a race as a whole. Thus, *Their Eye Were Watching God* also falls in the line of the heroic-vitalist tradition.
However, the novel is not without shortcomings. The ending of the novel seems vague and unsatisfactory. Similarly, the narrative mode also shifts abruptly from first to third person. William M. Ramsey writes in this regards:

Hastily composed and published, *Their Eyes* is a text of unfolding, unresolved ambivalences, a narrative begun perhaps as pastoral romance yet veering toward feminist resistance, a celebration of the low-down folk but a prickly critique of provincial mentality, a novel whose unresolved tensions reflect its remarkable creative intelligence. Hurston’s ambivalent pull between praise and critique while not always yielding a fully coherent text, should continue to compel with its inventive vigour to cast its widening net around new readers. (49)

Whatever the flaws, the novel is remarkable and exemplary in African American literature. There are some personal dimensions in *Their Eyes*, like it is inspired by Hurston’s own love affair, Hurston imbues in the protagonist Janie some of her own qualities. Hurston’s questing spirit, rebellious nature and self-affirmation can be found in Janie Crawford also. Self-identity and independence is what Janie seeks throughout the novel and ultimately is able to find it. For these reasons *Their Eyes* is also a feminist novel. Whether Hurston purposely wanted her novel to be of feminist genre or not is not known, but it is a story about a woman’s resistance against her racial, sexual and social oppression. Throughout the story, Hurston conveys the message of equality of men and women in her novel. The protagonist asserts her autonomy and proves herself to be a strong woman whenever she has to be. Valerie Boyd writes in this regard:

Hurston gives the impression that the woman will not die of grief or remorse for her actions. In *Their Eyes* particularly, she makes it easy
for particularly, for readers to envision Janie—still young and attractive, with “firm buttocks, like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets”—living a fulfilling life and loving whomever she chooses.

(304)

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is mainly an incredible story of love and life, Janie Crawford, the protagonist is in search for love throughout her life, but never gives up hope. Even in tough times, she thinks and speaks of love, even at the time of death the novel speaks of life. To quote Howard:

> It speaks for the self, for equality, for the pursuit of happiness instead of possessions it speaks for, and seems to recommend, a way of life uncluttered by traditions, stereotypes, materialism and violence…Hurston novel was affirming life, suggesting that all that is beautiful and necessary can be found among the folk.  (110)

The novel can be comprehended at two levels. On a much simpler level, *Their Eyes* is a story of African American woman in search of her freedom, identity and love, but on a higher note, *Their Eyes* is also an inspiring story which imbues in itself the message that if any person nurtures a dream he or she can achieve it overcoming all hurdles with sheer perseverance. Commenting on *Their Eyes* June Jordan says:

> The book gives us more: The story unrolls a fabulous, written film of Black life freed from the constraints of oppression, here we may learn Black possibilities of ourselves if we could ever escape the hateful and alien context that has so deeply disturbed and mutilated our rightful—efflorescence as people. (6)

Today Hurston is called an American classic writer because of her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. It is such a magnificent novel; it has become a primary
example of black feminism, the most innovative in narrative structure, use of African
American folklore at its best and an unparalleled story. It is simply amazing how
Hurston could write such a classic novel in only seven weeks. *Their Eyes* is a grand
work encompassing a wide array of themes and narrative structures and of course an
inspirational story of a simple woman who finds her freedom and essence of life.

Emphasizing the importance of *Their Eyes*, Cheryl Wall writes:

> Her novels, particularly *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, provide gist for the mills of critics of every persuasion. Feminist critics explore the revision of the romance script in *Their Eyes*—rather than living happily ever after with her lover, Janie lives on without him—as well as its representation of “a maiden language”….Poststructuralists locate moments in *Their Eyes* that challenge the existence of binary and hierarchical model of language and of the reality it represents. Scholars of the African diaspora identify cultural practices and beliefs that are common to societies in the Caribbean and Africa, as well as the United States. (4)

Today *Their Eyes* is regarded as the most successful book of the twentieth century. It has gained wide popularity all over the world. It is celebrated commercially and has gained critical acclaim. Today all writers and critics find it an outstanding work. Iconic writers such as Tony Morrison, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Mary Helen Washington and many others find it a phenomenal work. Alice Walker asserts that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is her favourite book. She comments:

> Reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for perhaps the eleventh time, I am still amazed that Hurston wrote in seven weeks: that it speaks to me as no novel, past or present, has ever done; and that the language of
the characters, that “comical nigger ‘dialect’” that has been laughed at, denied, ignored, or “improved” so that white folks and educated black folks can understand it, is simply beautiful. There is enough self-love of community, culture, traditions—to restore a world. Or create a new one. (2)
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