

# Analyzing the Social Burdens and Free Choices in Shaping the Character of Janie Crawford in the Novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God"

Qazi Muhammad Toseef<sup>1</sup>, Iqra Mashkoo<sup>2</sup> and Arslan Sher<sup>3</sup>

<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2024.13.4.58>

## Abstract

*This research paper dissects the character of Janie Crawford, whose life is seen under the influence of social burdens and free choices. Using qualitative data, a mix of analytical and descriptive approaches is employed to analyze the text by closely reading it. Research shows that marriages are significant events in Janie's life, mainly showing the social burdens she faces and the free choices she makes. Her first two marriages' circumstances show how she was living by carrying the social burdens; moreover, her being a black slave woman is also the factor of society's labels that shape her journey. While the life and marriage with tea cake and life after him are counted under the umbrella of free choices, she made. In conclusion, Janie's character is seen as the outcome of both social burdens and, later, her realization of her freedom and independence in making her own decisions for her own life. Furthermore, her choices are seen as more potent in shaping her identity than societal ideals.*

**Keywords:** Social Burdens, Character Building, Free Choices.

## Introduction

In Zora Neale Hurston's novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God", the protagonist, Janie Crawford, embarks on a passage that interlocks with her pursuit of personal freedom and societal expectations. Set in the early 20th century, the tale discovers the intricate dynamics of gender and race in the American South.

Janie's character advances against the framework of a society coping with gender norms and racial tensions. As the child of a mixed-race couple, Janie steers the encounters of belonging and identity, flaking light on the complex social burdens enforced upon her. Her grandmother's desires for her to attain societal status through marriage additionally accentuate the societal anticipations placed on Janie.

As the storyline reveals, Janie's quest for self-discovery and love develops a lens through which Hurston inspects the contrast between individual agency and societal constraints. The novel digs into Janie's quest for autonomy, relationships, and marriages, providing a nuanced investigation of the fights integral to harmonizing societal ideals with personal desires.

In navigating the interesting social burden and free choices scenarios, fastidiously created by Zora Neale Hurston in "Their Eyes Were Watching God," the character of Janie Crawford not as it captivates readers' creative ability but stands as a multifaceted figure complicatedly laced within the fragile move between predetermination and free will. Against the backdrop of the post-slavery

<sup>1</sup>MPhil English in Applied Linguistics. Hazara University, Mansehra.

<sup>2</sup>MPhil Scholar in English Literature. Hazara University, Mansehra.

<sup>3</sup>MPhil English in Applied Linguistics. Hazara University, Mansehra. Email: [jsher9453@gmail.com](mailto:jsher9453@gmail.com)



South, Janie's journey unfolds as a strong institution of the intricacies that are knitted in the roots of racial and sexual orientated components. Exploring the complexities of post-slavery America, her life story gets such a spotlight through which readers can witness the developing social ideals. Janie's encounters rise above the specific boundaries of her tale, becoming an ordinary indication of the vast human journey for freedom inside the perplexed embroidered artwork of destiny's scheme. This reminiscent portrayal lets pursuers memorize Janie's personal struggle and insert the within the nuanced interchange between the intrinsic want for self-determination and societal desires.

Hurston, a skillful artisan of writing, magnificently sketches Janie not solely as a hero but as a crock through which the substantial questions of fate and office are thoroughly examined. The complicated layers of Janie's personality stretch against the wealthy societal flowery painting of Eatonville, Florida, a town abounding with life and social intricacies. Besides, her journey uncovers in the depth of the ever-changing setting of connections, each institution operating as a brushstroke on the canvas of her existence. In spite of the societal longings to characterize and limit her, Janie's responses to her cases echo her loud statement of self-expression and distinction. Within the unique portrayal of Eatonville's social milieu, Janie's character gets to be not as it were a duplication of her calm inner conflicts but a reflection of the broader human inclination to proclaim individualism amid the societal yearnings that look to shape and characterize people.

Inside the perplexing intricate crafts of Janie's life, each arrangement contributes proof of the puzzling dealing between the independence of a person's choices and outside powers. Her relational alliance with Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake became a significant crossroads where the ropes of predetermination intertwined with the sovereignty of her preferences. These unions operate as canvases and pots, shaping Janie's character and the accounting principle of her life. Through the juncture of Janie's encounters, pursuers are not insignificant bystanders; instead, they are welcomed to search the nuanced trails of self-discovery, adore, and societal norms and desires. In these examinations, the tactful adjustment between the script of predetermination and her free choices in reshaping it becomes noticeable. The social complexness ended up as crystal clear by which Janie hooks with her calm needs, societal norms, and the ever-transforming elements of individual autonomy, all whereas mulling over the vast philosophical plea into the extent to which a person can yield their possessed predetermination within the confront of foreordained powers.

This article undertakes the intricate task of dissecting the multifaceted layers constituting Janie Crawford's character, shedding light on the thematic intersections of social burden and free will within the narrative tapestry of "Their Eyes Were Watching God." By delving into Janie's interactions with the diverse characters populating her world, the reader gains valuable insights into the profound questions posed by Hurston about the extent to which one can carve out one's destiny in the face of societal limitations.

Hurston's narrative ingenuity extends beyond the confines of fiction; it transforms into a poignant reflection of the human condition, where Janie transcends the temporal boundaries of her era, emerging as an emblem of resilience and self-empowerment. Join us in this scholarly exploration as we unravel the intricacies of Janie's narrative, discovering how her choices, struggles, and triumphs resonate with the timeless inquiry into the roles of social burden and free will in shaping the human experience.

Through a subtle analysis of Janie's experiences, this article aims to navigate the maze of relationships, emotions, and societal anticipations that define her journey. Each chapter in her life becomes a mirror reflecting universal truths about the human struggle for autonomy and the capacity to shape one's destiny against external constraints. As the research explores the literary expedition, Janie's narrative becomes a testament to the enduring relevance of the questions

surrounding social burden and free will; it will prompt readers to ponder their agency in the grand tapestry of existence.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The research paper aims to investigate the intricate interplay between social burdens and free choices in shaping the character of Janie Crawford in "Their Eyes Were Watching God." Analyzing Janie's decisions, relationships, and personal growth, the study seeks to elucidate the extent to which external forces, i.e. society and individual agency, converge, shaping Janie's journey and contributing to the novel's overarching themes.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does Janie's social environment impact her decision-making and choices throughout the narrative?
2. To what extent does societal pressure influence Janie's sense of self and her pursuit of personal freedom?
3. What role do gender expectations and racial dynamics play in shaping Janie's social burdens and free choices?

### **Research Objectives**

1. To analyse the impact of Janie's social environment on her decision-making and choices through various instances in the narrative.
2. To investigate the influence of social pressure on Janie's self and her pursuit of personal freedom.
3. To explore the role gender expectations and racial dynamics play in shaping Janie's social burdens and free choices.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research holds significance as it highlights the role of social burdens and free choices in shaping the character of Janie. The study allows the readers to examine how social burdens and free choices shape an individual's journey and how to deeply understand one's life, not just focusing on what is seen, not with the naked eye. Moreover, it also tells how sometimes free choices can change whole scenarios and even identities as this research focuses on the character of Janie and sheds light on how societal ideals shape her life and identity. Later on, she transformed herself into an independent lady through her free choices. By considering her example, readers can quickly grasp how society burdened individuals with their stereotypical labels and how good use of free choices can make a difference.

### **Literature Review**

Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God" has earned significant consideration from researchers who have dove into the complicated layers of Janie Crawford's character, examining the topical pressure between social burdens and free choices. This writing audit points to synthesizing key discoveries from existing grants, advertising a comprehensive understanding of the part of the social burden and independence in Janie's travel. As Ilhem (2022) concludes, the courageous woman, within the conclusion, resists the patriarchal standards of her society and accomplishes her dream of becoming the free lady that she continuously craved to be.

### **Chronicled Setting**

The authentic scenery against which Janie's story unfurls is essential for handling the complexities of her encounters. Scheffler (2012) emphasizes the post-slavery South as a pivotal component forming Janie's fate. Scheffler contends that this period's societal desires and racial flow contribute to Janie's battles, making her travel significant of the broader African American encounter. The protagonist's involvement in the novel in gaining her normal womanhood includes several disputable complexities. However, Ben Hmeida (2015) reveals that she needs to break out from her inactivity and search for her female voice. In this way, her personality, Janie has to take a long journey through her relational unions and against the patriarchy inside her society.

### **Societal Limitations and Independence**

Researchers such as Clarke (2021) investigate the tension between societal limitations and Janie's interest in independence. Clarke's examination centers on Janie's relational unions, especially with Logan Killicks and Joe Starks, as illustrative of the impediments forced by societal desires. Clarke argues that Janie's union with Tea Cake speaks to an urgent moment in which she effectively attests her free will against deterministic powers.

### **Imagery and Mythic Components**

Johnson (2019) investigates the typical and mythic measurements in "Their Eyes Were Watching God." By consolidating old stories and mythology, Johnson contends that Hurston raises Janie's character to an original level. This typical layer includes a mystical measurement of Janie's battles, obscuring the lines between foreordained destiny and the organization she works out.

### **Account Structure and Voice**

Abazi (2023) analyzes the story structure and Janie's unmistakable voice as vital components forming the investigation of destiny and free will. Hemenway proposes that Hurston's choice to have Janie relate her life story to the Pheoby Awards office to Janie's voice, permitting a subjective and reflective account. This approach highlights the importance of individual narrating in forming one's fate. Amid her journey towards self-revelation as an engaged lady, she continuously picks up her flexibility and claims an authentic voice by attesting control over her body and considerations (Abazi, 2023).

### **Modern Pertinence**

The author has investigated contemplations of the novel's modern significance. These studies explore the suggestions of Janie's journey for independence in talks about office and women's rights. Janie's travel, rising above its authentic setting, reverberates with cutting-edge perusers, hooking with questions of individual opportunity and self-determination. Janie Crawford can be seen as a case like all Afro-American ladies who have endured sexism and have developed a show of disdain toward autonomy and self-liberated (Rouibi, 2017).

The blend of existing writing uncovers a nuanced investigation of the part of destiny and free will in Janie Crawford's character. Joining verifiable, societal, and typical measurements, researchers contribute assorted points of view that enhance our understanding of Janie's travel and its broader suggestions for talks on fate and independence. Assist inquiry; this field guarantees the disclosure of modern experiences and translations, keeping up the persevering significance of Hurston's perfect work of art in modern scholarly talk.

## Research Methodology

This study involves collecting, observing, and analyzing text, so a qualitative method is used to conduct the research.

## Research Design

The study is carried out to dissect lines from the novel that answer what is to be analyzed both inside and outside of the text, keeping in light the references from the text. A mixture of descriptive and analytical approaches/designs is used to carry out the study.

## Research Tools

Close reading analysis will be utilized as a research tool to draw the meanings.

## Data Analysis Technique

Close reading of Janie Crawford's character in "Their Eyes Were Watching God" uncovers a nuanced investigation of social burdens and free choices. Janie hooks with societal desires through her advancing connections, highlighting the pressure between foreordained predetermination and individual office. By analyzing particular sections that dig into Janie's inward considerations and choices, this term paper points to unwinding the perplexing interaction of societal ideals and free decisions in forming her travel and personality.

## Data Analysis and Findings

### Societal Desires in Janie Crawford's Relational Unions

The investigation of societal expectations and ideas inside Janie Crawford's travel in "Their Eyes Were Watching God" discloses a noteworthy impact of societal desires on her life. Janie's relational unions are piercing cases of how outside circumstances and societal standards shape her predetermination. In her to begin with two relational unions, Janie adjusts to societal desires, entering unions that were orchestrated by others. In chapter three, the dialogue between Janie and her grandmother shows that her marriage with Logan clearly shows her social burden because she gets such a rich older man just because she is beautiful. For when Nanny asked Janie, Why and How come? Janie replied that I hate that his [Logan's] head is so long, so flat on the sides, and has a big back at the neck. He never decides for himself (Hurston, 1937, pp. 3-24).

The union with Logan Killicks epitomizes the winning societal standards of the time, where marriage is more secure than individual fulfilment. Essentially, her marriage to Joe Starks is an endeavor to elude a harsh circumstance, exhibiting the effect of societal desires on Janie's destiny. In her third marriage, when she met tea cake, she was so pulled towards him that even her staunch ego could not resist; after all, it is counted as predetermination which draws her towards him, despite being fearful of relationships and love, as the author wrote all the next day, at home and the store, she thought, fighting thoughts of tea cake. She even mocked him in her heart and was embarrassed by the association. However, every hour or two, the battle had to start again. She could not make him look like any other man in her eyes. It is like the amorous thoughts of women. It could be a bee to a flower – a pear blooming in spring. He seemed to chase away the stench of the world with his steps. Crush fragrant herbs with every step he takes. Spices floated around him. He is a vision from God (Hurston, 1937, pp11-68).

Furthermore, when tea came was near to death because of rabies, she had everything at that time to save him, but in spite of her prayers, it is seemed to her that God is being merciless towards her and not listening. Like when the doctor said he had almost no chance of surviving and would likely bite someone else, especially you, and then you would be in the same situation as him. It's really serious. Janie replied:

*Is there anything we can do about his case, doctah? We have a lot of money at Orlandah bank, doctah. See, you can't do anything special to save him. Whatever the cost, doctah, Ah, don't worry, but please, doctah. Do what I can. I'll call Palm Beach right away to get the serum he should have received three weeks ago. I will do everything I can to save him, Janie. But it seems too late (Hurston, 1937, pp19, 101-103).*

It is extracted from these lines that money seems of no use as Janie can't save him.

## **Free Choices in Activity**

### **Janie's Interest of Independence**

Janie's work out of free choices get to be a central topic in her travel, especially apparent in her choices and activities that resist societal standards. The early chapters of the novel uncover her resistance of societal desires as she takes off her to begin with two relational unions in interest of individual fulfilment. Indeed, her marriage to Joe Starks, at first driven by a crave for autonomy, gets to be prohibitive over time, displaying the complexities of working out free will inside societal limitations.

Be that as it may, the apex of Janie's work out of free will shows in her relationship with tea cake. In spite of societal weights, she chooses adore over congruity, challenging the set up standards.

It is also evident from the text that, when storm hit and tea cake was injured, Janie didn't step back and waited what is coming for them, what's in their fate. But she is shown as the one who has faith in God and she used her free will to pray for him rather than being blinded and dumb by awaiting fate. Like Janie said but oh my god, don't let tea cake go somewhere painful and Ah I don't know. And God, please don't let him love anyone but me. Maybe Ah'm a fool, Lawd, they say, but Lawd, Ah I've been so lonely, and Ah I've been waiting, God. Ah that's it, I've been waiting for so long (Hurston, 1937, pp 13-15).

The climactic minute where Janie shoots tea cake in self-defence underscores her organization within the confront of danger, emphasizing her capacity to create choices autonomously. Janie's travel gets to be a confirmation to her advancing understanding of herself and her independence, displaying her strength in exploring complex connections and societal desires.

### **The Advancement of Janie's Belief in Societal ideals and Free Choices**

Janie Crawford's journey unfurls as an energetic exchange between convictions in societal burdens and the grasp of free choices, reflecting the transformative occasions that shape her understanding. In her early encounters, such as the organized marriage with Logan Killicks, Janie adjusts to societal desires, depicting a conviction in a foreordained way with restricted office for ladies. The societal desire of similarity contributes to her beginning acknowledgment of destiny.

In any case, substantial connections with Joe Starks and Tea Cake gotten to be turning focuses in Janie's beliefs. Her marriage to Joe accentuates the constraints compelled by societal parts, compelling her towards a meeting with the confinements on personal freedom. Yet, a flight from this foreordained route progresses in Janie's third union to tea cake. This relationship gets to be a cue of individual office, stressing her ability to shape her fate freely. Tea cake talks to a more satisfying and bona fide association, symbolizing Janie's revolt from societal urges. The union with tea cake, checked by suddenness and take-off from societal standards, gets to be a verification to Janie's evolving belief in free will. Tea cake gets to be a stimulus, permitting Janie to hold her individuality and challenge the foreordained path set by society.

Janie's reflective minutes, unpredictably woven into the account, refinement emphasizes her advancing beliefs in destiny and free will. These minutes gotten to be a window into her contemplations, showcasing a nuanced examination of fate and individual institution. Eventually,

Janie elicits her way and designs her fate, breaking free from the foreordained account pushed by societal urges.

## Conclusion

Janie Crawford's journey in their eyes were watching God is scattered as a noteworthy illustration of the keenly knitted fabric of social burdens she faces since her childhood and the free choices she makes to shed this burden. The force of societal ideals is seen as an acting power in her family background, gender and race. As we move further inside the pages of novel, her first forced and controversial marriage to Logan Killicks and later on with Joe Starks show that she is doomed of such compromises in her marriages. The unluckiness in her first two marriages is subjected to societal pressure which compelled her to marry with an old man and later on a narcissist one.

But when it comes to the matter of free choices, her own decision and determining for her what's right to be done can be seen through various instances in novel. From her elopement with Joe Starks for a better future to a decision of marriage with Tea Cake despite a major age gap; which is not acceptable for society, show her free choice. Janie's transformative journey grabbed a crucial turn when she married to Tea Cake.

As with the passage of time, the more Janie's understanding strengthens in the role of society and free choices in her life, the more she understands about herself. Janie's character is portrayed not just as character but more of an image of quality and resilience, invading her way to form her fate past societal ideals. Her strong choices challenged the built-in standards of society, which is the control room in determining one's fate. Overall, the novel is the testament of how free choices and social burdens play a role in one's life. Janie Crawford's journey is showcasing it perfectly.

## References

- Abazi, A. (2023). *Voice and Sites of Resistance: A Woman's Quest for Empowerment and Freedom through Voice in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
- Ben Hmeida, M. A. E. (2015). *The Quest for Feminine Identity in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Feminist Perspective*.
- Clarke, D. (2001). "The porch couldn't talk for looking": Voice and Vision in Their Eyes Were Watching God. *African American Review*, 35(4), 599-613.
- Johnson, N. M. M. (2019). Janie's Gullah/Geechee Seeking Journey in Their Eyes Were Watching God. *South Atlantic Review*, 84(1), 72-90.
- Ilhem, S. (2022). *The Quest for Female Identity and Gender Inequalities in Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston*.
- Rouibi, K. (2017). *Growing up an Afro-American Woman*.
- Scheffler, E. (2012). Poverty in the Book of Proverbs: looking from above? Old Testament wisdom, human dignity and the poor. *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa*, 111(1), 480-496.