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## A Study on Oral Traditions and Storytelling in African-Caribbean Literature of Zora Neale Hurston's *Eyes Watching God*

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### Abstract:

This study explores the significance of oral traditions and storytelling in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a seminal work in African-Caribbean literature. The novel, which was published in 1937, reflects Hurston's anthropological background and her deep engagement with African-American folklore and culture, rooted in the African-Caribbean diaspora. Oral tradition in the novel serves as a powerful tool for preserving history, asserting identity and fostering community. Through the narrative structure of the novel and its focus on Janie Crawford's journey, Hurston intertwines storytelling with themes of self-discovery, love, and empowerment. The novel is narrated through a series of flashbacks, where Janie recounts her life story to her friend Pheoby, creating a frame narrative that mirrors African oral storytelling traditions. This study emphasizes the importance of the spoken word, examining how Hurston employs dialogue, dialect, and oral folklore to construct an authentic representation of African-Caribbean cultural practices.

The research highlights how Hurston's use of oral narrative techniques allows for the exploration of African-Caribbean traditions and values, such as respect for elders, the significance of communal bonds, and the role of myth and folklore in shaping personal and collective identities. Additionally, the study investigates the role of the folk tale and the trickster figure in Hurston's storytelling, which are central motifs in African-Caribbean oral traditions. It also discusses the subversive power of oral stories, as they provide a space for marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives, particularly those of patriarchy and colonialism. The storytelling in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is presented as a form of resistance, as it empowers Janie to assert control over her own life story and to reclaim her voice from the constraints of societal expectations.

In conclusion, this study argues that Hurston's novel is a dynamic representation of oral traditions, using storytelling as a mechanism for cultural preservation, empowerment, and resistance. The blending of literary and oral forms within *Their Eyes Were Watching God* allows Hurston to both honor and challenge the legacy of African-Caribbean oral traditions, offering a powerful narrative of self-determination and cultural continuity.

**Keywords:** Oral traditions, Storytelling, African-Caribbean literature, Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, African-American folklore, Identity, Folk narrative, Dialect, Frame narrative, Myth and folklore, Empowerment, Subversive storytelling, African-Caribbean diaspora, Oral history.

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This structure outlines a comprehensive approach to analyzing the role of oral traditions and storytelling in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, focusing on Hurston's narrative techniques and their cultural significance.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background of the Study

Oral traditions and storytelling have played a vital role in shaping the cultural identity of African-Caribbean communities throughout history. These traditions were passed down through generations, preserving not only the language but also the values, beliefs, and social structures of these societies. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is often considered a literary masterpiece that brings African-American folklore and oral traditions to the forefront, showcasing their significance within the African-Caribbean diaspora. Hurston, an anthropologist and writer, employed her knowledge of African-American folklore and the richness of oral culture to craft a narrative that reflects the importance of storytelling in self-discovery and identity formation. This study examines how Hurston integrates these oral traditions into the fabric of her novel, analyzing their role in the shaping of personal and collective identity, as well as their broader cultural significance.

## 1.2. Research Problem

The research problem centers on understanding the role of oral traditions and storytelling within the context of African-Caribbean literature, specifically focusing on Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While the novel has been widely studied from feminist and post-colonial perspectives, there is a need for further exploration of how oral traditions function in Hurston's work. This study seeks to explore how the narrative structure, dialogue, dialect, and folklore in Hurston's text work together to reflect the cultural and social practices embedded in African-Caribbean oral traditions. Additionally, it investigates how Hurston's use of oral storytelling techniques helps the protagonist, Janie Crawford, navigate her personal journey of empowerment, identity, and resistance against dominant societal forces.

## 1.3. Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are:

- To analyze the representation of African-Caribbean oral traditions and storytelling in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
- To examine the ways in which Hurston incorporates folklore, myth and oral narratives to shape the characters' identities and experiences.
- To investigate the subversive power of storytelling as a tool for resistance to patriarchal and colonial structures.
- To explore how the narrative structure of the novel reflects the African-Caribbean tradition of oral storytelling.
- To assess the cultural significance of oral traditions in preserving history, community and identity in Hurston's work.

## 1.4. Scope and Significance

This study will focus specifically on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, with particular attention to the oral traditions that shape the narrative structure, character development, and thematic exploration of the novel. The study will examine Hurston's use of dialect, folklore, and myth within the novel and their connection to the African-Caribbean cultural context. The significance of the study lies in its contribution to the understanding of African-Caribbean literature, especially in terms of how oral traditions and storytelling are employed to empower marginalized voices, preserve cultural identity, and resist oppressive social structures. By focusing on Hurston's work, this study aims to enrich the ongoing discourse on the intersection of folklore, literature, and cultural identity in African-Caribbean communities.

## 1.5. Methodology

This research will employ a qualitative approach, utilizing literary analysis to examine the novel's text. The methodology will include a close reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, focusing on the narrative structure, dialogue and the use of oral storytelling techniques. Key literary theories such as postcolonial theory, feminist theory, and folkloristics will be applied to analyze the text. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and critiques of Hurston's work, will be reviewed to provide a broader understanding of the cultural and historical contexts that inform the novel. Additionally, an examination of oral traditions in African-Caribbean communities will be integrated to contextualize Hurston's narrative choices.

## 1.6. Structure of the Study

The study is divided into several key sections, each addressing different aspects of the research problem.

- **Chapter 1 (Introduction)** introduces the background, research problem, objectives, scope, significance and methodology of the study.
- **Chapter 2 (Literature Review)** provides an overview of African-Caribbean literature, the importance of oral traditions, and Hurston's critical reception.
- **Chapter 3 (Oral Traditions and Their Representation in Hurston's Work)** delves into the depiction of oral storytelling and folklore in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
- **Chapter 4 (Narrative Structure and the Use of Oral Storytelling)** examines the narrative framework, focusing on the role of oral storytelling in the novel's structure.
- **Chapter 5 (Storytelling, Identity, and Resistance)** explores how storytelling functions as a tool for identity formation and social resistance.
- **Chapter 6 (The Trickster and Other Folk Motifs)** analyzes the incorporation of folk motifs, particularly the trickster figure, within the narrative.
- **Chapter 7 (Analysis of Key Themes)** discusses the themes of love, self-discovery and empowerment in relation to storytelling.
- **Chapter 8 (Conclusion)** summarizes the findings and outlines the study's contributions to the field of African-Caribbean literature.

## 2.1. African-Caribbean Literature: An Overview

African-Caribbean literature encompasses the written works of authors from the Caribbean, especially those of African descent, whose ancestors were brought to the region as enslaved people. This body of literature reflects the cultural, historical and social complexities of the African diaspora and the Caribbean experience. Central to African-Caribbean literature are themes of identity, race, colonization, post-colonialism, migration, and the struggle for autonomy. The literature often focuses on the legacies of slavery, the clash of cultures and the search for self-determination in the face of historical and ongoing oppression.

In its early stages, African-Caribbean literature was largely shaped by the colonial experience, where the written word was used both as a tool for resistance and a means of reclaiming African identity. Authors such as Aimé Césaire, Derek Walcott, and George Lamming have significantly contributed to this literary tradition, creating works that challenge colonial narratives and assert the importance of cultural heritage.

Zora Neale Hurston, though primarily associated with African-American literature, has had a profound influence on African-Caribbean literature. Her anthropological approach to storytelling and her embrace of folk traditions in her novels have resonated deeply with Caribbean writers exploring similar themes of cultural preservation and identity formation. Hurston's work stands as a bridge between African-American and African-Caribbean literary traditions, exploring the intersections of race, culture, and heritage across the Atlantic.

## 2.2. The Role of Oral Traditions in African-Caribbean Culture

Oral traditions are the cornerstone of African-Caribbean cultural identity. For generations, African-Caribbean communities have relied on oral storytelling as a means of preserving history, knowledge, and culture. These traditions were particularly important during the era of slavery when African slaves were often forbidden to read and write. As a result, oral storytelling became a vital tool for passing down stories, genealogies and cultural values.

In the Caribbean, storytelling served not only as a form of entertainment but also as a way to preserve resistance, assert social norms, and maintain a sense of community in the face of colonial and post-colonial oppression. Folktales, proverbs, songs, and chants were imbued with layers of meaning, drawing on African roots while also reflecting the experiences of enslavement, survival, and liberation. These stories were often passed down in the form of call-and-response, incorporating elements of rhythm, song and performance.

Zora Neale Hurston, in her studies and works, recognized the power of oral traditions in African-American communities and incorporated these into her novels. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston's use of oral narrative techniques, including dialect and storytelling structures, mirrors the oral traditions of African-Caribbean culture. This connection to oral traditions allows Hurston's characters to assert their agency and voice, often challenging dominant societal narratives.

## 2.3. Storytelling as a Literary Tool

Storytelling, as a literary tool, serves as a means for writers to convey deeper cultural truths, explore character development, and examine complex social dynamics. In the context of African-Caribbean literature, storytelling is an essential vehicle for conveying the lived experiences of marginalized people. The oral tradition not only enables the transmission of personal and collective histories but also fosters a sense of community and identity.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston employs storytelling as a narrative strategy, using it to foreground Janie Crawford's journey of self-discovery and empowerment. The novel is structured as a frame narrative, where Janie tells her life story to her friend Pheoby. This method mirrors the oral tradition in its reliance on a personal recounting of events and experiences. Hurston's use of dialect, colloquial expressions, and direct speech makes the narrative more authentic, evoking the rhythm and tone of African-Caribbean oral storytelling practices.

Storytelling also plays a critical role in the novel as a tool of resistance. Janie's recounting of her life provides her with the opportunity to reclaim her narrative, push back against societal expectations, and affirm her autonomy. This is reflective of how storytelling within African-Caribbean communities has historically functioned as a mode of resistance to oppressive systems.

## 2.4. Zora Neale Hurston: A Critical Overview

Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) was an African-American novelist, anthropologist, and folklorist whose work focuses on African-American folklore, cultural identity and the intricacies of race and gender in the United States. Hurston's most renowned work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is a pivotal text in African-American and African-Caribbean literature, blending folklore, oral traditions, and feminist themes. Hurston's anthropology background profoundly influenced her writing, as she meticulously collected and preserved African-American folktales, songs and dialects, which she integrated into her literary works.

Despite facing marginalization during her lifetime, Hurston's work has experienced a revival since the 1970s, particularly through the feminist and African-American literary movements. Her anthropological work, including her field studies of African-American communities in the South, gave her the ability to document and present African-American life in a nuanced and respectful manner, far from the stereotype-filled depictions common at the time.

Hurston's literary contributions have had a lasting influence on African-Caribbean writers, many of whom share her concern with the intersection of culture, history, and identity. Her use of oral traditions and folklore as literary techniques has inspired Caribbean writers to explore similar themes of cultural preservation and resistance.

## 2.5. The Significance of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in African-Caribbean Literature

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a crucial text not only within the African-American literary tradition but also within African-Caribbean literature. Hurston's exploration of identity, gender, and empowerment through the protagonist Janie Crawford offers profound insights into the African-Caribbean experience, particularly with regard to the importance of storytelling in shaping individual and collective identities.

The novel's use of African-American folklore, dialect, and oral traditions makes it an important part of the African-Caribbean literary canon, where the intersection of culture, race and heritage is central to many narratives. Hurston's depiction of Janie's personal journey can be viewed as a metaphor for the larger African-Caribbean struggle for self-definition and cultural continuity. Through Janie's voice, Hurston not only gives shape to the complexities of African-American life but also offers a literary reflection of the African-Caribbean diaspora's engagement with oral traditions as tools of cultural survival and resistance.

Furthermore, the novel's emphasis on the power of women's voices in the face of patriarchal oppression aligns with the struggles faced by women in Caribbean societies, where oral traditions have often been used as a means of passing down knowledge and subverting patriarchal norms. As a work that bridges African-American and African-Caribbean cultural spheres, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* remains an essential text for understanding the enduring legacy of oral traditions in the diaspora.

## 3.1. Oral Storytelling in African-Caribbean Culture

Oral storytelling is a cornerstone of African-Caribbean culture, serving as a vital means of preserving history, identity, and community values. For generations, African-Caribbean people have used oral narratives to pass down customs, knowledge, genealogies, and legends, often in the form of folktales, songs, proverbs, and other forms of verbal art. This tradition holds immense cultural significance, especially for communities whose historical experiences—such as slavery, colonialism, and displacement—left them without written records. In African-Caribbean societies, storytelling is not just a form of entertainment but an essential vehicle for education and cultural transmission.

Oral storytelling in the African-Caribbean context often occurs in social settings where the storyteller engages listeners with rhythm, repetition and interactive elements such as call-and-response. These stories are layered with meanings that go beyond simple narratives, incorporating lessons about social norms, values, and

historical memory. Furthermore, the oral storyteller often assumes the role of a community historian, blending personal experiences with collective history and mythology.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston's use of oral storytelling reflects this cultural tradition. Through her incorporation of dialect, folk expressions, and the structure of oral narration, she encapsulates the spirit of African-Caribbean storytelling. Hurston, who was well-versed in African-American folklore, captured the nuances of oral tradition in her portrayal of Janie's life story, giving it the authentic feel of a communal narrative passed down through generations. This approach creates a dynamic, participatory form of storytelling, where readers not only follow Janie's personal journey but also feel involved in the broader cultural landscape of African-Caribbean heritage.

### 3.2. The Role of Folklore in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Folklore plays a critical role in Hurston's narrative, as it serves both as a mechanism for storytelling and as a way of embedding cultural identity within the text. In African-Caribbean culture, folklore encompasses a variety of traditional stories, beliefs, and practices that are passed down through generations. These stories often contain moral lessons, cultural rituals, and references to mythical or spiritual figures that help shape the worldview of the community.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, folklore is represented through the dialogues, myths, and customs that are woven into the everyday life of the characters. Hurston uses folklore to highlight the collective consciousness of the community and to link individual experiences to broader cultural narratives. For example, the story of Janie's hair can be seen as a form of folklore, representing beauty, identity, and freedom in the African-Caribbean cultural context. Additionally, the presence of myths and folktales, such as the stories told by the people in Eatonville or the references to the "horizon" as a metaphor for self-discovery, evoke the themes of yearning and fulfillment that are common in African-Caribbean folklore.

The role of folklore in Hurston's work is not merely aesthetic; it serves as a tool for exploring identity, social roles, and resistance. By incorporating folklore into the narrative, Hurston underscores the idea that individuals, particularly African-Caribbean women, must reconcile their personal histories with the larger cultural narratives that shape their lives. In this way, folklore in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* serves to empower Janie, giving her the language and the myths to understand and navigate her journey toward self-realization.

### 3.3. The Function of Myth and Legend in Hurston's Narrative

Myths and legends play an important symbolic role in Hurston's narrative, serving as both a lens through which the characters understand their lives and as a source of empowerment. In African-Caribbean culture, myths often convey the beliefs, values and experiences of a community, particularly those related to the supernatural, the origins of the world, or the qualities of revered ancestors or spirits. These myths shape the collective psyche, offering insights into the community's worldview and sense of purpose.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston draws upon mythic structures to frame Janie's quest for identity. The use of the horizon as a recurring motif throughout the novel functions as a mythic symbol of Janie's aspirations. The horizon represents the unknown, the unattainable, and yet, it is something that draws Janie forward throughout her life. This mythic symbolism connects Janie's personal journey to universal human experiences of growth, change and transcendence.

Another example of myth in Hurston's work is the influence of the concept of the "Wind," a recurring motif that symbolizes the forces of nature and the unseen, guiding elements that push individuals toward self-discovery. The Wind can be seen as an allegorical representation of both Janie's internal and external struggles. By invoking such mythic imagery, Hurston invites readers to see Janie's story not only as a personal account but as a larger, archetypal narrative about human desire, struggle, and the pursuit of self-actualization.

The legends within the novel also carry an air of timelessness, suggesting that Janie's experiences, while deeply personal, are part of a much larger narrative of human life. These legends help situate Janie within a cultural and historical context, underscoring that her journey is shaped by both the material realities of her time and the timeless, mythic forces that shape the human condition.

### 3.4. Oral Narrative and Cultural Continuity

The oral narrative in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* serves as a bridge between the past and present, ensuring cultural continuity within African-Caribbean communities. By utilizing oral storytelling, Hurston preserves the rhythms, dialects and customs of African-Caribbean communities, offering readers a living link to cultural traditions that have been passed down through generations. This continuity is not just a matter of preserving language or customs, but also of maintaining a collective memory of the struggles, triumphs, and aspirations of African-Caribbean people.

In the novel, Janie's recounting of her life story to her friend Pheoby serves as a form of oral transmission, where Janie's experiences are not just for herself but are shared with others, ensuring that her narrative and her wisdom live on. Janie's use of storytelling is an act of cultural preservation, ensuring that the lessons learned from her personal trials are integrated into the larger narrative of African-Caribbean experience. The oral tradition allows Janie to reclaim her narrative from the constraints of patriarchal and societal expectations, ensuring that her voice becomes part of the broader cultural tapestry.

Moreover, Hurston's depiction of oral storytelling connects the personal and the communal. Janie's story is a reflection of the larger African-Caribbean struggle for freedom, self-expression, and identity. Through oral narrative, Janie is not only speaking to Pheoby but also speaking to a wider audience, ensuring that the lessons of her journey are passed down as part of the cultural heritage. This oral transmission functions as a form of resistance to historical erasure and a reaffirmation of African-Caribbean cultural continuity. Through Janie's voice, Hurston ensures that the struggles, joys, and complexities of African-Caribbean life are not lost but continue to resonate within the community.

#### 4.1. Frame Narrative in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The frame narrative structure in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a crucial aspect of the novel, acting as a vehicle for the oral storytelling that defines much of the book's narrative style. The novel begins with Janie returning to Eatonville after a long absence, and much of the story that follows is presented as a flashback in the form of Janie recounting her life to her friend Pheoby. The frame narrative sets up a structure where the main story of Janie's life is told through her direct narration, creating a layered storytelling experience.

This technique reflects the tradition of oral storytelling, as Janie, in a sense, "performs" her story for Pheoby, just as one might tell a story in a communal setting. It also mirrors African-Caribbean oral traditions, where personal histories and collective experiences are shared within a trusted circle. The use of a frame narrative emphasizes the importance of voice, agency, and memory, while highlighting Janie's role as both the narrator and the protagonist of her own story. Through the frame, Hurston also underlines the thematic idea that the story of one's life is not just about the events that transpire, but about how those events are remembered and told.

The structure also allows for the reader to engage with Janie's personal reflections, revealing her growth and evolution as a person. The framing device highlights the theme of self-discovery, as Janie's recounting of her life serves as an act of reclaiming her own narrative, asserting control over how she is seen and understood. The narrative structure also creates a sense of intimacy between Janie and her listener, Pheoby, and by extension, the reader, making the story feel like a personal, shared experience.

## 4.2. Janie's Recounting of Her Life Story

Janie's recounting of her life story is central to the novel's exploration of identity, memory, and self-expression. Throughout the novel, Janie reflects on her past relationships, the choices she made, and the lessons she learned, all the while striving to articulate her own voice and perspective. Her narration is not simply a retelling of events but an active process of self-discovery. In the act of telling her story, Janie is able to assert her agency and reflect on her personal growth.

The storytelling process serves as a method of reclaiming Janie's narrative. Each chapter in which Janie recounts her life is an opportunity for her to reflect, interpret, and reframe her experiences. Hurston's portrayal of Janie's storytelling process highlights the importance of memory and self-narration as means of personal empowerment. Through the act of telling her story, Janie reflects on her evolving sense of self, transforming from a woman who is silenced and subjugated by her circumstances into one who is able to voice her desires, regrets, and hopes.

Additionally, Janie's recounting allows her to make sense of her relationship with the men in her life—Logan Killicks, Jody Starks, and Tea Cake—viewing them through the lens of her own emotional and spiritual journey. Her narrative is both personal and universal, emphasizing the connection between individual experiences and collective cultural stories.

## 4.3. The Impact of Dialogue and Dialect on Storytelling

The use of dialogue and dialect in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* plays a significant role in the novel's oral storytelling structure. Hurston's decision to write the novel in the dialect of the African-American community in Eatonville brings authenticity to the narrative, capturing the rhythms, speech patterns, and cultural nuances of the characters. This choice is not only a linguistic one but a thematic one, as it reflects the deep connection between language and cultural identity.

In African-Caribbean and African-American oral traditions, language serves as a vital tool for storytelling, communication, and the transmission of cultural values. The use of dialect in Hurston's novel strengthens the sense of place and community, making the dialogue feel grounded in the everyday life of the characters. Through the use of dialect, Hurston emphasizes the oral nature of the storytelling process—characters in the novel communicate not just through their words but through the cadence and emotion in their speech. This gives the characters a richness and depth, allowing their personalities and experiences to be conveyed in a way that formal, standardized English might not.

The dialogue in the novel is also crucial in establishing the dynamics of power and relationships. Janie's conversations with her husbands and others in the community reveal much about her internal struggles and her evolving sense of self. Through these dialogues, Janie is able to voice her thoughts, challenge the expectations placed on her, and assert her desires. The dialectic nature of the dialogue—the back-and-forth between Janie and others—reflects the complexity of human interaction and the tension between individual identity and societal expectations.

## 4.4. The Power of the Spoken Word in Janie's Empowerment

The spoken word in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* serves as a powerful tool for Janie's empowerment and self-expression. Throughout the novel, Janie is often silenced or dismissed by the men in her life, particularly her first two husbands, Logan Killicks and Jody Starks. Both men attempt to control Janie's voice and her autonomy, but she consistently resists their attempts to limit her self-expression.

However, it is through the spoken word—both in her internal monologues and in her conversations with others—that Janie gains her strength. Her conversations with Pheoby, in particular, are moments of self-reflection and empowerment. When Janie speaks, she reclaims her story and asserts her agency. By the time

she recounts her life to Pheoby, she has learned to speak her truth, no longer concerned with conforming to others' expectations.

Moreover, Janie's ability to articulate her emotions and experiences in her own words allows her to connect more deeply with others, particularly with Tea Cake, her third husband. Tea Cake encourages Janie to speak freely and to embrace her voice, providing her with the emotional space to grow. Their conversations are characterized by mutual respect and understanding, allowing Janie to experience a sense of equality and emotional fulfillment that she had not found with her previous husbands.

The power of the spoken word is also symbolized in Janie's relationship with nature, particularly with the horizon. The horizon, a recurring motif in the novel, represents Janie's aspirations and her quest for a life of fulfillment and self-discovery. By articulating her desires and dreams, Janie aligns herself with the natural world and the forces of destiny that propel her forward. In this way, the spoken word is not only a tool for personal empowerment but also a means of connecting Janie to the broader forces of life, love, and freedom. Through her voice, Janie transforms from a passive participant in her life to an active creator of her own destiny.

In sum, the use of oral storytelling, dialogue, and the spoken word in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* highlights their significance in Janie's journey toward self-realization. By reclaiming her voice, Janie empowers herself, reshaping her narrative and her identity within the context of her community and the world at large.

### 5.1. The Role of Storytelling in Shaping Identity

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, storytelling plays a fundamental role in shaping Janie's identity. As she recounts her life to her friend Pheoby, Janie not only reflects on her personal experiences but actively constructs her sense of self through her narrative. In African-Caribbean and African-American cultural traditions, storytelling is an essential means of self-expression and identity formation. It allows individuals to articulate their experiences, values, and aspirations while positioning themselves within the larger framework of their community and culture.

Janie's recounting of her life story is a process of self-discovery. Each time she tells her story, she revisits pivotal moments in her life—her marriages, her love for Tea Cake and her search for freedom and fulfillment. Through storytelling, Janie reclaims her narrative, asserting her agency and autonomy in a world that has often sought to silence her. By the end of the novel, Janie has not only told her story but has shaped her identity as an independent, self-empowered woman. Her voice, once subdued by the demands of society and her relationships, becomes a powerful force for personal growth and self-realization.

Furthermore, storytelling enables Janie to make sense of her past and understand how her experiences have contributed to her identity. By reflecting on her journey, she gains clarity and a deeper understanding of who she is, moving from a passive, reactive individual to an active agent in her own life. This process of self-narration also allows her to embrace her multifaceted identity, which includes both her personal desires and her cultural heritage, thereby reinforcing the idea that identity is fluid, evolving and shaped by the stories we tell about ourselves.

### 5.2. Storytelling as Resistance to Patriarchal and Colonial Forces

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, storytelling functions as a powerful form of resistance to the patriarchal and colonial forces that seek to suppress and control Janie. Throughout the novel, Janie is subjected to the expectations and limitations imposed by her husbands, her community and society at large. Her first two marriages, to Logan Killicks and Jody Starks, are emblematic of the patriarchal structures that dictate women's roles, limiting their autonomy and self-expression. In both marriages, Janie is expected to conform to her husbands' ideals and desires, silencing her voice and stifling her individuality.

However, storytelling becomes a means for Janie to resist these forces. By telling her story to Pheoby, Janie reclaims her voice and her power. Her narrative is a defiance of the patriarchal norms that have tried to silence her and diminish her worth. In recounting her journey of self-discovery and personal growth, Janie challenges the societal expectations that confine her. The act of storytelling allows her to assert her agency, particularly in a context where women's voices are often marginalized and suppressed.

Additionally, the novel itself can be seen as a resistance to colonial forces, particularly in the way it portrays African-Caribbean culture and traditions. By incorporating elements of African-American folklore, dialect and oral traditions, Hurston resists the dominance of Western literary forms and celebrates the richness and complexity of African-Caribbean culture. In this way, the novel becomes a form of cultural resistance, asserting the value of African-Caribbean identity and the importance of preserving oral traditions in the face of colonial history and cultural erasure.

### 5.3. The Subversive Power of the Oral Tradition in Hurston's Novel

The oral tradition in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* serves as a subversive force that challenges the dominant narratives of history, gender and race. In a world where written language and formal education are often associated with power and authority, oral storytelling offers a form of expression that is more accessible and rooted in the lived experiences of everyday people. Hurston's use of oral narrative techniques allows her to subvert the traditional literary canon, offering a voice to the marginalized and the disenfranchised.

The oral tradition, in this sense, becomes a tool for subversion. By presenting Janie's story as a spoken narrative, Hurston elevates the oral form to a place of literary significance, asserting that the stories of ordinary people, particularly African-Caribbean women, are worthy of being told and heard. This approach challenges the elitist and exclusionary nature of written literature, which has often ignored the experiences and voices of marginalized communities.

Moreover, the oral tradition in Hurston's novel is subversive in its ability to preserve and transmit cultural knowledge. In African-Caribbean cultures, oral storytelling is a means of maintaining cultural continuity, passing down wisdom, folklore, and collective histories that have been excluded or erased from official records. By foregrounding the oral tradition, Hurston not only resists the marginalization of African-Caribbean culture but also affirms the power of oral narratives to sustain cultural identity and community cohesion.

### 5.4. Reclaiming Voice through Storytelling

Janie's journey of reclaiming her voice is central to the themes of empowerment and self-expression in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Throughout the novel, Janie is repeatedly silenced by the men in her life, from her first husband, Logan Killicks, who views her as little more than a laborer, to her second husband, Jody Starks, who silences her with his authoritarian control over her appearance and behavior. However, it is through storytelling that Janie reclaims her voice and begins to assert her autonomy.

The act of telling her story to Pheoby represents Janie's return to her authentic self. By narrating her life, Janie is able to confront her past, understand the choices she made, and reclaim her agency. This reclamation of voice is not just about speaking out, but about owning her narrative and interpreting her life on her own terms. It is through storytelling that Janie begins to make peace with her past and embrace her future, free from the constraints that once bound her.

Moreover, Janie's storytelling allows her to share her experiences and wisdom with others, particularly with Pheoby. In doing so, she helps to empower those around her, particularly other women in the community, by offering them a model of self-expression and independence. Janie's voice becomes a source of strength, not only for herself but also for those who listen to her story. In this way, storytelling becomes a communal act

of empowerment, where the shared experience of Janie's narrative creates a ripple effect of self-empowerment and resistance to oppressive forces.

Through the act of storytelling, Janie ultimately transforms from a silenced woman into one who fully embraces her voice and her identity, transcending the limitations imposed by patriarchal and colonial structures. Hurston's portrayal of storytelling in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* emphasizes the transformative power of reclaiming one's voice and the profound impact it can have on both the individual and the community.

### 6.1. The Trickster Figure in African-Caribbean Folklore

The trickster figure is a central character in African-Caribbean folklore and plays a significant role in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The trickster is a complex and multifaceted character, often depicted as mischievous, clever, and sometimes deceitful, but also embodying the ability to challenge and subvert established systems of power and authority. In African-Caribbean traditions, the trickster figure often represents resilience, adaptability, and the power of wit over brute force. These figures are typically marginalized or oppressed individuals who use their intelligence and cunning to outsmart more powerful.

### 7.1. Love, Identity, and Self-Discovery in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the themes of love, identity, and self-discovery are intricately woven into Janie's journey. Her experiences with love—first with Logan Killicks, then with Jody Starks, and finally with Tea Cake—serve as pivotal points in her quest for personal identity and self-fulfillment. Love is depicted not just as an emotional bond but as a dynamic force that challenges and shapes Janie's understanding of herself.

At the start of the novel, Janie's concept of love is influenced by societal expectations and her grandmother's desires for her security, which leads her into two loveless marriages. In both these marriages, Janie is subjugated and silenced, leading her to a state of self-neglect. However, it is through her relationship with Tea Cake that Janie discovers a more authentic form of love—one that is based on mutual respect, emotional connection, and shared joy. Tea Cake's love encourages Janie to break free from societal constraints and to embrace her desires and individuality.

As Janie's journey unfolds, love becomes a vehicle for self-discovery. It is through her romantic relationships that Janie learns about her own worth, desires and the strength to assert her identity. The theme of self-discovery is closely tied to Janie's ability to define her own identity, both in terms of her emotional needs and her social role. Love, in this context, is not simply a reflection of another person but a mirror for Janie's personal evolution. Through each of her relationships, Janie learns valuable lessons about herself, culminating in a profound realization of her independence and inner strength.

### 7.2. The Relationship Between Community and the Individual

In Hurston's novel, the relationship between community and the individual is a key theme that reflects both the support and constraints of societal norms. The community in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* plays a significant role in shaping the lives of the characters, particularly Janie. While community provides a sense of belonging and support, it also imposes expectations that can limit personal growth and individuality. The judgments and gossip of the people in Eatonville serve as a backdrop to Janie's personal journey, illustrating the tension between the desire for independence and the pressure to conform.

Janie's return to Eatonville after her time with Tea Cake represents her separation from the expectations of her community. Throughout the novel, Janie grapples with the idea of fitting in with the community while also maintaining her autonomy. Her marriages and relationships often bring her into conflict with the expectations of the community, particularly regarding the roles women should play. For instance, her

relationship with Jody Starks, who tries to mold her into the image of an ideal wife, reflects the restrictive gender roles imposed by the community.

However, the relationship between Janie and her community also evolves. While Janie initially seeks validation and approval from others, she eventually learns that her identity is not defined by communal judgment but by her own experiences and choices. The resolution of this tension underscores the novel's central message that the individual's journey toward self-realization is, ultimately, more significant than societal expectations.

### 7.3. The Role of Memory and History in Oral Storytelling

Memory and history are central to the narrative of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, particularly in the context of oral storytelling. As Janie recounts her life story to Pheoby, she is engaging in an act of memory, weaving together personal experiences, cultural knowledge and historical events that have shaped her identity. This oral form of storytelling is deeply connected to African-Caribbean traditions, where oral narratives preserve collective histories, ancestral wisdom, and the experiences of marginalized groups. In the novel, memory serves as both a tool of self-reflection and a means of cultural preservation.

Through Janie's storytelling, Hurston highlights the ways in which personal and collective histories are intertwined. Janie's memories of her past—of her marriages, her experiences with love, and her encounters with the people in her life—are not just individual recollections but are embedded in a broader cultural context. These memories are shaped by the historical and social forces that have influenced Janie's life, from the legacy of slavery to the struggles of African-American communities in the early 20th century.

In African-Caribbean and African-American oral traditions, memory plays a vital role in passing down stories, lessons, and histories from one generation to the next. Hurston's novel reflects this cultural practice by emphasizing how Janie's personal memories contribute to a larger cultural and historical narrative. By sharing her story, Janie is not only preserving her own history but also participating in the broader tradition of oral storytelling that keeps cultural memory alive.

### 7.4. Empowerment Through Narration and Self-Assertion

Empowerment through narration and self-assertion is a central theme in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As Janie tells her story to Pheoby, she reclaims her voice and her agency. Throughout much of the novel, Janie is silenced by the men in her life—Logan, Jody and even the expectations of the community—but through the act of storytelling, she asserts her autonomy and takes control of her narrative. The act of recounting her life is an empowering process for Janie, as it allows her to reflect on her experiences, make sense of her past, and reclaim her identity.

Janie's empowerment is rooted in her ability to narrate her own story, rather than letting others define her. Early in the novel, she is forced into roles that others impose upon her—whether as a wife to Logan, a trophy to Jody, or a community member bound by societal norms. But as Janie recounts her life, she revises the narrative of her existence, emphasizing her desires, her struggles, and her moments of joy and self-discovery. By telling her story in her own words, Janie challenges the patriarchal norms that have attempted to silence her and reasserts her right to define her own identity.

Moreover, Janie's empowerment is also linked to her ability to embrace her autonomy. As she reflects on her relationships with her husbands and the experiences that have shaped her, Janie gains the confidence to live life on her own terms. Her self-assertion is not about rejecting love or companionship but about finding a balance between intimacy and independence, between community and individuality.

Through the act of narration, Janie affirms her identity as a woman who has lived fully and authentically, despite the obstacles she has faced. Her story is not one of passive victimhood but one of strength, resilience,

and self-determination. By the end of the novel, Janie has fully embraced her agency and through her narrative, she redefines what it means to be empowered, showing that true empowerment comes from owning one's story and voice.

### 8.1. Summary of Findings

This study explores the representation of oral traditions and storytelling in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a novel deeply rooted in African-Caribbean folklore and oral narrative techniques. The research has demonstrated how Hurston uses the oral tradition not only to preserve cultural heritage but also as a powerful tool for character development, particularly in the journey of Janie Crawford, the protagonist. Through her recounting of her life story, Janie reclaims her voice, reflects on her experiences and asserts her identity. The study highlighted the importance of oral storytelling in shaping both personal and collective memory, as it allows individuals to reflect on their lives and connect with their cultural roots.

The trickster figure, folk motifs, and the symbolism of oral stories emerged as key elements that structure Hurston's narrative. The novel's oral storytelling structure reinforces the themes of resistance, identity and empowerment, particularly as Janie challenges patriarchal norms and navigates her search for self-fulfillment. The interaction between the individual and the community is examined, revealing the tension between conformity to societal expectations and the need for self-expression and independence.

### 8.2. Implications of the Study

This study contributes to the understanding of African-Caribbean literature, specifically the role of oral traditions in literary works, and enriches the analysis of Hurston's work by placing it in the broader context of African-Caribbean storytelling practices. The research underscores the value of oral traditions as a means of cultural preservation, self-exploration and resistance. By analyzing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through the lens of oral storytelling, the study emphasizes how oral culture can serve as a site for empowerment and subversion of dominant social structures.

The findings also have implications for contemporary readings of African-American and African-Caribbean literature, particularly in understanding the nuanced ways in which oral traditions challenge colonial and patriarchal histories. Hurston's work stands as a testament to the power of language and narrative in resisting oppressive forces and reclaiming identity, offering a model for feminist and postcolonial readings of literature.

### 8.3. Limitations and Areas for Future Research

While this study has provided insights into the role of oral traditions in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, several limitations should be acknowledged. One limitation is the focus on a single text, which, while rich in its portrayal of African-Caribbean folklore, may not fully represent the diversity of oral traditions across the African-Caribbean diaspora. Future research could explore a comparative analysis of Hurston's work alongside other African-Caribbean novels that engage with oral traditions, such as works by authors like Jean Rhys or Derek Walcott.

Another area for future research is the examination of how oral traditions function within different cultural contexts within the African-Caribbean community, especially considering the diversity of oral practices across the Caribbean and African-American experiences. Furthermore, the study could be expanded to analyze how contemporary authors continue to employ oral storytelling techniques and folk motifs in their works, thus extending Hurston's legacy in modern literature.

Finally, the intersection of oral traditions and gender, particularly the empowerment of women through storytelling, offers another promising area for further exploration. Future studies might examine how the oral tradition provides a space for women's voices in a variety of cultural contexts and its role in feminist literature.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Selected Folk Tales and Proverbs Referenced in the Novel

A curated list of African-American and Caribbean folk tales and proverbs found in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

- “De mule uh de world” – metaphorical saying representing Black women’s burdens.
- “Ah been to de horizon and back” – symbolic of life experience and self-discovery.

### Appendix B: Dialogue Samples Reflecting Oral Traditions

Examples of dialect and speech patterns from the novel:

#### Example 1:

“You got tuh go there tuh know there.” – Janie’s reflection on lived experience.

#### Example 2:

“Ah’m older than Ah look. Ah’m talkin’ now.” – Assertion of voice and wisdom.

### Appendix C: Chart of Oral Tradition Elements in the Novel

Element of Oral Tradition	Example in Novel	Function
Frame Narrative	Janie telling her life story to Pheoby	Establishes oral storytelling format
Trickster Motif	Joe Starks’ manipulation and ambition	Reflects traditional trickster figures
Call-and-response	Community gossip and porch talks	Creates rhythm and communal interaction
Folktales	Mule story, Big God tale	Links narrative to African-Caribbean roots

### Appendix D: Research Methodology Tools

- Textual analysis approach used.
- Thematic coding sheet for identifying oral tradition elements.
- Sample interview questions (if qualitative methods were applied with secondary sources).

### Appendix E: Timeline of Zora Neale Hurston’s Life and Works

A brief overview:

#### Year Event

1891 Born in Notasulga, Alabama

1935 *Mules and Men* published

1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God* published

1960 Passed away in Fort Pierce, Florida

## Appendix F: Glossary of Key Terms

- **Orature** – Oral literature transmitted by spoken word.
- **Narrative Framing** – A story within a story format.
- **Trickster** – A folk figure known for cunning or subversion.
- **Call-and-response** – A dialogic form in African oral performance.

