

VOICE AS EMANCIPATION IN NORA ZEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* AND WHITNEY HOUSTON'S *TRY IT ON MY OWN*

Chimdiebube Oluchi Ucheonele

&

Barnabas Oluwatoyin

Abstract

Studies have been carried out on female emancipation and the attainment of self-realization, but it appears not much has been done with respect to the voice as an instrument against patriarchy. This paper therefore attempts to examine the deployment of the voice to attaining self-realization and validation. Significantly, in the various periods are political activism and engagements by African Americans geared towards emancipating themselves from the control of their enslavers. The period announces self-realization and the emergence of 'The New Negro'. Zora Neale Hurston's writings flourish in this period as well. In this perspective, the literary critical view, Womanism, which has as one of its primary aims is the quest to achieve in black women, self-definition, and actualization, becomes apt for this paper's investigation. Because African American literature has a way of linking the past to the present, Whitney Houston, a 21st Century pop and gospel singer reiterates the concern of self-assertion that Hurston presents in her novel. To this end, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Whitney Houston's Song "Try it on my Own" become germane to the issues raised and addressed in this paper. The Paper concludes that the voice is a veritable tool for emancipation.

Keywords: African American, Womanism, Voice, Harlem Renaissance, realization, actualization

The title of this paper is Voice as Emancipation in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Whitney Houston's "Try it on my Own". The paper looks at the voice as a veritable tool to emancipating the women. The voice should be functional and serve as a means for expressing desires or opinion. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Whitney Houston's song entitled "Try it on my Own" (2003) are representations of African American literature that seem to examine the transformation and evolution an individual attains in the process of growth: The two art forms for this paper are a novel and a song produced sixty years apart but find a nexus as the two art forms address issues that concern the black woman in peculiar ways. Significantly in Nora Zeale Hurston's *Their eyes were watching God* and Whitney Houston's *Try it on my Own* is a link that establishes the need for self-realization and validation for the black woman and by extension the African American individual in America. During the Harlem Renaissance Era, the black intelligentsia wrote to assert themselves first, as a way of reclaiming the ownership of themselves. By this unique pattern of writing, they were able to distinguish themselves from stereotypic imaging that until then, characterized them; hence presenting a fresh identity of their personality; the New Negro. Thus, the motif of presenting a new personality of the African American described the literary landscape of the epoch. This was the period when Hurston's work flourished. Her novel, *Their Eye Were Watching God*, is a narration that presents a typical self-actualized personality, Janie Mae Crawford, who distinguishes herself by tactfully deploying her voice to gain freedom from familial, marital, and societal stereotypic impediments.

In the same vein, Whitney Houston's Song, "Try it on my Own" invigorates Hurston's stance in the contemporary era through her

music. The title of the song first suggests a desire to do something by oneself without any form of assistance. This observation is raised especially as the song personae craves for independence in a transformed personality. Evaluating these issues through the literary approach of Womanism, becomes apt because the two works are being examined against the background of African American experiences where the two icons have their extraction. Secondly, the two literary art forms represent the African American literary landscape and more significantly both works espouse the importance of deploying 'the voice' for self-actualization. Peculiar to Womanism amongst other ideals is that the approach seeks to accomplish in black women the need for self-definition and acclamation and by extension, to the black race because of its complementary and accommodating perspective for the men.

The above being said, this paper therefore seeks to examine how well these two works of arts are representations of African American literature geared towards resonating the stance of self-validation in the black woman, particularly evincing how Whitney Houston's Song, "Try it on my Own", becomes a reaffirmation of Nora Zeale Hurston's position in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Through the conversation this paper engages in, the readership is challenged to see how the relationship in the two works becomes canonical in addressing the problem in the black woman space and by extension, the African American. These are concerns that this paper attempts to unravel. Whereas Hurston in her novel tries to establish the relevance of self-realization and affirmation by being able to speak out in *Their Eyes*, through the main character, Janie, Houston in her song "Try it on my Own" seeks to reinvent that position. Significantly also, this paper seeks to show the process of maturity that transforms a female from exhibiting girlish tendencies to becoming a woman as would be explicated in both works.

Theoretical Framework

Womanism is a critical approach that emerged on the grounds that feminism was not addressing the needs of Black women in America. It was Alice Walker that gave Womanism its name and this happened in the early 1980s. Womanism was not just about rights, it was about community, culture, and healing. Womanism proposes that the liberation of women cannot be separated from racial injustice, economic struggles, or spirituality. It embraces motherhood, storytelling, and the wisdom passed down through generations. It is not about rejecting men; it is all about lifting the community.

Today, Womanism is still evolving. It is now echoed in the voices of activists contending for reproductive rights, environmental justice, and Black mental health. Writers like Bell Hooks and Audre Lorde still remind us that feminism alone is not enough if it doesn't include all Women, especially those that are overlooked. Womanism fights in a way that it is not just restricted to the women.—However, it strengthens the entire community.

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Womanism fights in a way that it is not just restricted to the women. However, it strengthens the entire community. Womanism differs from feminism. It advocates the plight of African American women who have been neglected by feminism which fails to put into perspective the peculiarities of black females and other women of Colour. Womanism is a critical approach that was propounded by Alice Walker, a black Woman in the United States. In her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), She outlines four definitions that aid the explanation and understanding of Womanism. Amanda Davis quoted in Elisabeth Tores summarizes Walker's theory on Womanism as thus:

Through her four-part definition [Walker] draws her reader's attention to the importance of women's intellectual physical, emotional, and spiritual wholeness, and she stresses the need to create a global community where all members of society are encouraged to survive and survive whole. Madhu Dubey argues that Walker's womanist project seeks to "integrate the past and present, individual and community, personal and political change, into a unified whole." (Davis, 2004:33)

In the perspective of Feminism's negligence ~~to~~of the issues of Black women in America, Bell Hooks has criticized feminism for excluding black woman in its pursuit as a movement. She further accuses the white feminists for racism as reflected in their writings. However, an adaptation of Walker's Womanism is a perspective engineered by Chiwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson -Weems. Whereas Ogunyemi's perspective is called African Womanism, Hudson - Weem's orientation is known as Africana Womanism. The theory of Womanism is adopted in this study to evince how 'voice' is adopted in the reconstruction of identity in Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Houston's song "Try it on my Own".

Womanism is central to this paper because it provides a perfect framework in understanding the way Black women use their voice to self-assertion to break free from patriarchal and societal constructs. This study draws on this theory to show how the female in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the persona in Whitney Houston's 'Try it on my own' who is equally a female go through the process of self-discovery and ultimately take ownership of their lives. Unlike mainstream feminism which focuses on the struggles of white women, Womanism speaks directly to the experiences of Black women, by recognising their challenges and the need for self-definition.

This paper shows how Janie, despite being trapped in two oppressive marriages, eventually finds her voice and asserts her independence.

Similarly, Hurston's song captures that same spirit of self ownership, as the lyrics reflect a woman who refuses to live by some else's rules anymore.

Justification of Cross- Generic Data

This research adopts cross-generic data; the cross-generic data of a fictional narrative and the song lyrics are justified considering the similar issues explored in the art works. The fictional narrative is concerned with the voice as a veritable tool for emancipation and in a similar vein, the song lyrics demonstrates how the voice can be used as an instrument of emancipation thus justifying the cross-generic data. Both genres can be employed to address burning social issues. Singers often voice their concerns through songs and so do the writers of literary works. In the non-literate society, when oral literature thrived, a means of voicing man's problems was lyrics and with literacy, fictional narratives and songs are veritable genre used.

The Voice

It is pertinent to note that the voice has not been used in the narrow sense of 'instrument' for speaking, pronouncing, or uttering but as a tool for emancipation. The voice becomes relevant in the face of marginalisation and a means for emancipation. Keeping quiet in the face of injustice is akin to suppressing one's own voice. Hence, the authors of the chosen art works consider the importance of the voice in emancipating women. The use of the voice in this context precludes the ordinary sound (speech) that are made using our mouth or vocal cords. For instance, the voice of the female gender in the lyrics is one that has been used to condemn the marginalisation of the woman; the artists use the voice to speak for the woman; the voice should be functional and serve as a means for expressing desire or opinions.

Voice as Emancipation in Nora Zeale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Whitney Houston's 'Try it on my Own' *Their Eyes Were*

Watching God by Hurston is a narrative that addresses the challenge of identity construction in the Black Woman among many other concerns and in a broader perspective, the novel addresses the problems peculiar to African American race. Her work, *Their Eyes...* presents a typology of an African- American that reconstructs her identity and claims ownership of her personality and identity. Situating this premise in the narrative, Janie Mae Crawford, the protagonist in the novel is assessed from the point of view of that individual who did not only assert herself but gained freedom by tactfully deploying her voice in the pursuance of self-realization. In this direction, the novel captures the desire in her for change that is chronologically presented; as her life's journey reveal the transformational process that evolves her from an amateur individual to an experienced personality that is capable of confronting life challenges. Having found herself in the entanglement of two loveless marriages that shatter her dream as a young girl, she learns to live the life she has ever dreamt of, through the harsh and individualistic tendencies of her first two husbands, Logan Killicks and Joe Starks. Her marriage prunes her from being a naïve girl to becoming an experienced woman who is empowered to surmount the trials and challenges she encounters in the third union with the man she truly falls in love with, Tea cake Woods. Hurston's narrative, presented in a mixture of vernacular and flowing English constructions, told by her and at other times, her tale bearer to the community, Pheoby Watson, signifies independence and self-ownership, a source of inspiration to other individuals in the community.

Whitney Houston's Pop Ballad "Try it on my Own" structured in two stanzas with a bridge and a chorus was produced in 2002 but released in 2003. The pop song is a reinvigoration of the character perspective of Janie. In the similitude of the young girl, Janie is unable to challenge the 'suggested-forced' marriage Nanny, her grandma, imposes. Janie is also the character of the song personae in Houston's

song who becomes conscious of her personality and decides not to lead life by adhering to the dictates of another individual. Being under the control of another personality as portrayed in Houston's song is related to the enslavement evinced in *Their Eyes* especially in Nanny's experiences on the Savannah plantation with her White enslavers. In the lyrics of the song, "Try it on my Own", is the crave to be self-independent. Peculiar to the style of a pop music is the repetition of the chorus after each verse is sung. The refrain in the song announces the courageous step by the personae to navigate a pathway that is novel to the existing ones. This, for Houston in the song, is a means to gaining self-assertion. It is important to note that the song is foregrounded against the background of acquisition of knowledge. This knowledge is hereby acquired as a result of the lessons learnt from one's previous mistakes in life; hence the individual's rejection to be defined by previous rules and guiding systems. The decision to lead a life that is not precipitated by another person's directives leads to the self-ownership and independence which is traceable to the uniqueness of the Harlem Renaissance era in terms of the literary responses that characterize the era.

Self-Realisation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and "Try it on My Own".

The period in which Hurston wrote, the late Renaissance Era, is a period that African - Americans wrote to distinguish themselves as being capable of defining themselves in terms of re-imagining the Old Negro into a new one that is not beclouded by racial issues and enslavement prejudices but is distinguished to the level of acceptance in the mainstream American society. Using the character of a woman, in a moving narrative that is blended with the mixture of vernacular and English language, Hurston evaluates the process of self-assertion through the search for knowledge. In this perspective, we consider Janie Crawford's first marriage to this education, as she begins to ask

questions, she finds answers to, by unravelling the complexities of marriage through her misfortunes. Janie is not well guided by her grand- mother, Nanny, who represents the past, and a mirror the present. Janie's mother who is supposed to beam the search light for Janie runs away thus, leaving Janie grappling with the complexities of marriage. In the process, she learns and understands that "There are years that ask questions and years that answer. [She] had no chance to know things, so she had to ask. Did marriage end the cosmic loneliness of the unmated? Did marriage compel love like the day? (*Their Eyes*, 53). The yearning of this young Janie, to be with the man she sincerely desires, shatters when Nanny sees her kissing Johnny Taylor, a black. This becomes worrisome for Nanny who eventually decides to marry her off to Logan Killicks in what could be termed a 'suggested- forced' marriage. Having been denied of her life's goal and achievement as a result of the bondage of slavery, she attempts to fulfil that dream in Janie by dictating for her, the pattern she should lead her life. Janie's desires and future are not put into consideration as long as she lives her life through the directed script of Nanny, her grandmother. Nanny tells Janie:

"You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery.... Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox It sho wasn't mah will for things to happen lak they did. Ah even hated de way you was born. But, all the same Ah said thank God, Ah got another chance. Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me.... Ah knowed here you was in de world. So whilst Ah was tendin' you of nights Ah said Ah 'd save de text for you. Ah been waitin 'a long time, Janie, but nothin' Ah been through ain't

too much if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed.” (*Their Eyes*, 48-49)

Janie, against all odds, moves beyond the racial lines and enslavement mentality that characterize her birth and roots as she builds in herself, a rebranded image by defining her personality. This is captured when she tells her friend, Pheoby Watson, her decision to marry Tea Cake after the death of her second husband. When Pheoby questions Janie’s decision to do so in the expression of fear that Tea Cake, may end up, exhibiting unbecoming attributes just the way Jody Starks, her second husband, did, Janie becomes even more resolute in her decision and attempts to take a chance with Tea Cake against Pheoby’s views. In her response, she tells Pheoby:

“You Know dat. Maybe Tea Cake might turn out lak dat. Maybe not. Anyhow Ah’m ready and willin’ tuh try ‘im.”
Ah done lived Grandma’s way, now Ah means tuh live mine.”.... She was borned in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn’t sit down anytime dey felt lak it.... Dat’s whut she wanted for me- don’t have time tuh think whut to do after you got up on the de stool uh do nothin’. De object wuz tuh git dere . De object wuz tuh git dere. So Ah got up on de high stool lak she told me, but Pheoby, Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere. Ah felt like de world was cryin’ extry and ain’t read de common news yet.” (156)

In the same vein, there is the same reflection in Houston’s song “Try it on my Own”. In some of the lines of the second verse of the song, the lyrics reads:

Its over now

I can’t go back to living Through your eyes

Too many lies ...

I never had the chance To do things my way So now its time

For me to take control

“Whitney Houston’s song “Try it on my Own” is a reinvention of Houston’s first projection of Janie in respect to her naivety towards the issues of life and marriage. The lyric of the song above re-echoes the inexperienced amateurish individual in Janie that marries through the lures of her grandmother. However, the lyric of the song projects a female that establishes herself by refusing to step back into the era that enslaves an individual to live a life that is determined by another. The line that reads “too many lies...” can be attributed to the deception that Janie discovers in her union with Mr. Killicks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Although she is delivered from this delusion, she however realizes with a better understanding that “...marriage did not make love” (57). This was her first realization as a young adult in marriage. Again, the individual that Houston constructs in her music regrets that “[She] never had the chance to do things in [her] own way” echoing Janie’s denial to make the choice of whom to marry or even the personality to fall in love with. Having found Johnny Taylor kissing her granddaughter, Nanny considers that the best way to save her grandchild from being a victim of amorous lifestyle of some folks or being put in a family way while under her roof, is to marry her off to an elderly-coloured man, Mr. Killicks. This decision is made without considering the opinion of Janie. In this order, Nanny tells her “Ah can’t always be guidin’ yo’ feet from harm and danger. Ah wants to see you married right away.” (45). Significantly, the voice of Nanny overshadows that of Janie in deciding her fate in the place of marriage. As a result of Janie’s amateurish inclination and unexposed nature at this early stage of her life especially as it concerns the issues of life, she yields to the ‘shrouding ‘voice’ of the aged, represented in her grandmother. Janie’s subscription to yield to the dictates of her grandmother tactically leads her to the liberation she eventually encounters in her second union. In this perspective, the last two lines

of Houston's second verse that reads "So it's time for me to take control" reiterates Janie's courage to challenge Joe Starks, known as Mayor, in his imposing and overshadowing dispositions towards her. Following this order, Janie asserts herself to recognition and relevance.

Ideal to the theory of Womanism, is the ability for women to assert themselves through self-assertion and realization thereby liberating and emancipating themselves from negative stereotypical imaging. This is aptly foregrounded in the novel, especially in Janie's response to Joe Starks suppressive attitude towards Janie through his voice. Towards her exit from the first marriage and her involvement in the second, Joe Starks, an astute fellow, comes to take advantage of Janie. For her, living the life that reflects Nanny's ideology would be her widest dream, so she falls victim of Joe's shrewd tendency. In a conversation he engages with Janie, Starks condemns her involvement in the mule business of her then husband, Kilicks, by painting a picture of hardship and abuse of her person. In this regard, he tells her "You ain't got no business cuttin' up no seed p'tatters neither. A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you." (*Their Eyes*, 61).

However, her eloping with him to form another union does not fulfill her dreams but rather leads to further complication, suppression, and negative portrayal of her identity. Janie's marriage to Mr. Starks leads to further derogation of her personality until she realizes that she needs to regain her identity. On many occasions in the union, she is occupied with the feeling of coldness and loneliness as Starks denies her the right of expression even when she is endowed with the gift of speech that would have contributed in enhancing the community. In a community development ceremony where Starks' contribution of lighting the town is applauded, Janie ushered to give words of encouragement. Immediately, her husband cuts in by saying: "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 a woman and her place is in de home." (*Their Eyes*, 78). For Janie, the whole event was so uncomfortable, and she contemplated that "It must have been the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or the other that took the bloom off things.... He strode along invested with his new dignity, thought, and planned out loud, unconscious of her thoughts. (78).

Being the wife of the Mayor of the Maitland town, would in a way suggest that as the wife, she received a special treatment since her husband occupies an enviable position in the society. And by virtue of relevance, she is supposed to have a stake in the community by having her personality ably represented in contributing to the development of the community. This, however, becomes a nightmare for Janie because her husband's orientation about the woman is of that personality that should overshadowed and hidden away from relevance as well as quietened, hence Starks tells Janie "Ah told you in de very beginnin' dat Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice. You oughta be glad 'cause dat makes uh big woman outa you." (*TheirEyes* 82). So, in the actual sense, being the woman beside the Mayor meant nothing special other than subjugation and repression. The horror of being insulted by her husband about assumes centre stage in their marriage.

However, the turning point of changing her narrative emerges as she challenges her husband in the store when he insults her of looking old. In response to that humiliating speech, Janie responds: Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but aint no old woman neither. Ah reckon ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every nitch of me, 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 'taint nothing' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' about *me* lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change of life. (*Their Eyes* 119)

The statement above orchestrates her transformation and births the therapeutic process of establishing her trampled identity. Adroitly represented in the above excerpt, Janie crushes the masculinity of Joe to discovering her identity. She attains self-satisfaction and fulfilment and becomes a liberated individual. Janie makes the above statement in the company of Joe's fellows while they were in the store.

Significantly, she adopts her voice to elevate her status and revolt against the objectified woman Starks had reduced her to. The female voice becomes an instrument for emancipation in constructing identity. In Houston's song reflects Janie's position, as the song personae becomes more aware of her identity, thereby embracing wisdom for the abolition foolishness. The wisdom that Janie acquires because of her encounter with Starks is reinforced by Houston in the following lines of the first stanza:

*I m wiser now
 'I m not the foolish girl You used to Know
 I'm Stronger now*

The song personae's assertion and establishment of her personality becomes pivotal as it is suggestive of a drastic shift from ignorance to knowledge. This knowledge can be attributed to the Harlem Renaissance' feature which accounts for reawakening the period- age of renaissance witnessed. The departure of the motif of over flogging and eulogizing the problems of slavery on the African American to an emboldened status, the experiences of Harlem afforded the African American individual, marks the hallmark and the significance of the era. In this light, it is important to underscore that, it is the knowledge that Janie gains, that empowers her to challenge the domineering influence of Joe on her. This knowledge is attributed to awareness and consciousness of both herself and her husband. In one of the days in the store, her eyes suddenly open up to the fact that her husband was

not as young as he used to be. His physical appearance draws her attention to this fact, in that "...she noticed that Joe didn't sit down. He just stood in front of the chair and fell in it. That made her look at him all over. Joe wasn't so young as he used to be; there was already something dead about him". (117) As his physiology described an aging fellow, he begins to entertain fear since, he had noticed it before his wife becomes aware of it. To sustain his superiority over her and cover his feeling of inadequate perception of his personality, he taunts and despises her frequently while she carries out her store keeping duty. In the following lines, his attitude of subjugation is observed. Thus: "It got terrible in the store. The more his back ached and his muscle dissolved into fat and the fat melted off his bones, the more fractious he became especially in the store. The more people in there the more ridiculed he poured over her body to point attention away from his own." (*Their Eyes*117-8).

The period of Joe objectifying his wife is cut short as his health gradually deteriorates to his eventual death. His exit avails Janie to discover her true self as she embarks on the third marriage with Teacake. This union eventually ushers her into the love she had always envisioned in marriage. Although, Teacake eventually dies as a result of a bite from a mad dog, Janie is still able to pull through the challenge of being in and out of prison. She is able to conquer due to the love, comfort and shelter Teacake showered on her while the marriage lasted. The refrain of the chorus in "Try it on my Own" reinstates Janie's choice to marry Tea cake in *Their Eyes*.... The following lines in the chorus accentuates Janie's decision:

See I am not afraid To try it on my own I don't care

If I'm right or wrong

I'll live my life the way I feel No matter what

I'm gonna keep it real, you know Its time for me to do it on my own

The lines of the chorus in the above portrays a strong conviction

by the personae to venture into a path that she assumes ownership of; as she is mature bearing the consequences of her decision no matter people's judgment and opinion. This elevates her to the pedestal of recognition and significance in the society. This is however what Harlem Renaissance achieves in the African American individual. The flowering of the era paved way for the emergence of Black Arts Movements. These movements contributed in shaping the artistic life of African Americans. This epoch ushered a preponderance of creative works that saturated the American space so much that the whites became attracted to the works of the African American.

Conclusion

This paper shows a synergy between Hurston's novel *TEWWG* and Houston's Song "Try it on my Own" especially, in the assessment of the Woman when placed side by side the ideal of the Harlem Renaissance. In the two-art works, the woman asserts herself to a pedestal by using the voice as a tool for emancipation in a patriarchal society. The Harlem Renaissance contributed enormously to asserting the African American individual. The study finds out that the lyrics of the song can be used to project a person as seen in Houston's song. The study has shown that the voice is an important instrument for self-assertion or self-actualization; the voice can be adopted as a strategy to improving one's status and revolting against objectification in a bid to attaining fulfilment and liberation against the stereotypic imaging they had suffered prior the era. The study therefore discovers that the Houston's song is a re-echoing of Hurston's *TEWWG*. The paper finally demonstrates that the voice is an important instrument for self-actualization.

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