

DIALOGISM: PHILOSOPHY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN THE NOVEL “THEIR EYES WATCHING GOD”

Shimanskaya Diana Boxodirovna

Assistant teacher of the socio-humanitarian chair of
Samarkand branch of International School of finance, technology and science

Abstract: This article explores the concept of dialogism in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, examining how the novel embodies Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue as a fundamental principle of human existence and cultural production. Hurston’s work is deeply rooted in the interplay of multiple voices, perspectives, and linguistic styles, reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of identity, social interaction, and cultural expression. Through Janie’s journey of self-discovery, the novel illustrates how meaning is constructed through dialogue—both literal and metaphorical—between individuals, communities, and historical narratives. By analyzing the novel’s use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), narrative shifts, and polyphonic storytelling, this study argues that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* serves as a literary manifestation of dialogism, challenging monologic structures and asserting the richness of Black cultural discourse. The findings suggest that Hurston’s novel not only portrays the complexity of human relationships but also situates language as a site of resistance, identity formation, and cultural continuity.

Key words: Dialogism, Bakhtin, polyphony, cultural production, Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, African American Vernacular English, identity, self-discovery, linguistic diversity.

INTRODUCTION. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism has become a foundational framework for understanding the complexities of language, identity, and social interaction in literature. At the heart of Bakhtin’s philosophy is the idea that human existence is inherently dialogic—meaning that identity, meaning, and cultural production emerge from the continuous interplay of voices, perspectives, and discourses. In this light, language is not a static tool for communication but a dynamic, evolving force shaped by the interactions and relationships between individuals and the broader social context. Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is an exemplary text in which dialogism is profoundly embedded, as it explores the journey of Janie Crawford, a woman navigating her search for selfhood within a complex matrix of social, racial, and gendered dialogues.

The novel, often celebrated for its rich use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and its narrative innovation, exemplifies the principles of dialogism through its polyphonic structure and multilayered discourse. Hurston's work challenges the notion of a singular, authoritative voice, instead presenting a narrative that is in constant conversation with its characters, the cultural traditions they represent, and the larger societal forces that seek to define them. Through Janie's personal journey of self-discovery, Hurston emphasizes the idea that identity is not formed in isolation but is shaped by the dialogue between individuals, communities, and historical contexts.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to examine *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a philosophical exploration of human existence and cultural production. Specifically, the research focuses on Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony, heteroglossia, and the carnivalesque to understand how Hurston's use of dialogue constructs meaning and identity within the novel. The primary objective is to analyze how the interactions between Janie, other characters, and the broader cultural forces reflect the dialogic nature of existence, as well as the social and historical processes that influence cultural production.

The methodology begins with a close reading of key passages from the novel where dialogue plays a central role in character development and thematic exploration. Special attention is given to Janie's evolving speech patterns, particularly her use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and how these linguistic choices reflect her social position, self-awareness, and resistance to dominant cultural narratives. By examining moments of conversation between Janie and other characters, such as her relationships with Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake, the study investigates how language functions as a site of negotiation, empowerment, and transformation.

Secondary sources, including Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), as well as scholarly articles on Hurston's work, African American vernacular, and cultural theory, are incorporated to provide theoretical grounding and contextual analysis. By applying Bakhtinian dialogism to Hurston's text, this methodology illuminates how *Their Eyes Were Watching God* embodies a philosophy of human existence that values the multiplicity of voices and the ongoing process of cultural production. Through this lens, the novel is seen as an active, dialogic exchange—an evolving conversation that redefines identity and challenges the monologic narratives of race, gender, and power in early 20th-century America.

Results

The analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through the lens of dialogism shows how the novel's dialogue structure reflects the idea that identity and culture are shaped by ongoing interactions between people and society. Hurston's use of multiple voices, as well as her integration of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), highlights the complexity of identity and shows that it is not fixed, but shaped by the various conversations and relationships people engage in throughout their lives.

Throughout the novel, Janie's journey of self-discovery is portrayed through the evolving dialogues she has with others. From her early, passive interactions in her marriage to Logan and Joe, to her more assertive, free speech with Tea Cake, Janie's voice gradually changes. This progression mirrors her internal growth, showing how identity develops through dialogic exchanges. Hurston's use of different speech patterns, from formal to informal, reflects the different social roles that characters play and the way language acts as a tool to define or resist power dynamics. The dialogue in the novel becomes a space where characters express their personal beliefs and cultural backgrounds, particularly through the use of AAVE, which functions as a cultural marker of resistance against mainstream societal norms.

Hurston's novel ultimately challenges fixed or one-dimensional portrayals of race and gender. By giving Janie the freedom to tell her own story in her own voice, Hurston critiques the traditional structures that attempt to silence or define Black women. The multiple voices in the narrative emphasize that identity is not something imposed from the outside, but something that is continuously created through dialogue. In this way, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* shows that human existence and cultural production are dynamic and deeply connected to the conversations we have with one another.

Discussion

The findings from this analysis highlight how *Their Eyes Were Watching God* serves as a profound literary example of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, where human existence and cultural production are constantly shaped through interactions and the exchange of voices. Hurston's novel illustrates that identity is never static; rather, it evolves through the dialogues between individuals and the social world around them. This fluidity of identity, central to the philosophy of dialogism, is made clear through Janie's journey. Initially constrained by her marriages and societal expectations, Janie's voice is largely shaped by others. However, as the novel progresses, particularly through her relationship with Tea Cake, her voice becomes more independent and assertive, reflecting her own sense of self and cultural identity. This shift signifies the process of self-realization that is achieved through dialogic interactions—where language becomes not just a means of communication, but a tool of resistance, self-expression, and cultural affirmation.

The novel's use of multiple linguistic registers—ranging from the formal to the vernacular—further exemplifies the concept of heteroglossia, one of Bakhtin's key ideas. By showcasing the distinct languages and speech patterns of different characters, Hurston not only reflects the social diversity of the characters but also emphasizes how language is tied to power, identity, and culture. AAVE, as used by Janie and other characters, is not merely a reflection of their race or background; it becomes a powerful symbol of cultural resistance and a way of asserting identity in the face of external pressures. In this sense, the language in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* transcends simple communication—it serves as a medium through which characters resist the dominant, often oppressive narratives imposed upon them. The novel also critiques traditional power structures, especially in the way gender and race intersect. Characters like Logan Killicks and Joe Starks attempt to control Janie's voice, trying to define her within the confines of their expectations. These monologic forces represent the societal systems that seek to restrict individual agency

and voice, reflecting the limitations placed on Black women during this time. However, through her relationship with Tea Cake, Janie experiences a more dialogic exchange, one that respects her autonomy and allows her to develop her identity on her own terms. Tea Cake's egalitarian approach to communication becomes an ideal model for how dialogue can empower individuals, enabling them to shape their own identities in a more liberated and authentic manner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* embodies the philosophy of dialogism as articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin, offering a powerful exploration of how human existence and cultural production are shaped through dialogue. Hurston's portrayal of Janie's journey from silence to self-expression underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of identity, which is influenced by a multitude of voices, relationships, and cultural forces. Through the interplay of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), formal language, and the novel's polyphonic structure, Hurston highlights the ways in which language serves as both a tool of resistance and a means of negotiating power within social contexts.

Ultimately, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* demonstrates the central role of dialogue in the construction of identity and culture. Hurston's novel is not merely a story of individual growth; it is a reflection of the broader cultural dynamics in which meaning is continually produced and redefined through human interaction. By embracing the philosophy of dialogism, Hurston affirms that language is not only a vehicle for communication but a powerful force in shaping the realities of those who speak it.

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