

# The Struggle for Feminine Identity: A Comparative Study

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**Abstract.** The suffering of women in patriarchal societies has often been raised in works of fiction. Their quest for finding their identity has been an important issue. It has always attracted the attention of both writers and critics because it touches on the pain of the most suppressed element in society, the female. Both Naguib Mahfouz and Zora Neale Hurston are a part of this tradition. Although they represent two completely different societies, Naguib Mahfouz's *Zahira* and Hurston's *Janie* are a stark representation of the struggle of women to find their voice in a society ruled by men. This paper focuses on the four stages that both women go through to gain their identity and the resulting aftermath of their discovery.

**Keywords:** Suffering, Struggle, Identity, Power, Voice, Femininity VS Masculinity, Independence.

## 1. Introduction

The suffering of women in patriarchal societies has often been raised in works of fiction. Their quest for finding their lost voices has been an important issue. It has always attracted the attention of both writers and critics because it touches on the pain of the most suppressed element in society, the female. Both Naguib Mahfouz and Zora Neale Hurston are a part of this tradition. Although they represent two completely different societies, Naguib Mahfouz's *Zahira* and Hurston's *Janie* are a stark representation of the struggle of women to find their voice in a society ruled by men. Michael Awkward states that the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* "gives a voice to the voiceless and is encouraging as well as awakening because it was against the traditional black literature of the time"<sup>1</sup>.

*Zahira* is one of the characters of Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Alharafeesh*. The novel takes place in the 1930s. It is set in Algammaliah, Egypt which is a part of the old city of Cairo. The novel is not centered on the life of *Zahira*. Her story is merely a part of the tale of the extended family of her great grandfather who seek power and control over the whole area of Algammaliah. *Janie*, on the other hand, is a character in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*. It is set in the 1920s in the Everglades and Eatonville in the state of Florida. The novel revolves around the life of *Janie* and her struggle to find her voice and power.

## 2. First Stage

Both characters' quest to find their voices is comprised of 4 stages. The first stage is when they are unaware of the need to have a voice. Both characters were raised in a patriarchal society. However, in their childhood and early adolescence they hardly had any contact with the male members of their society. For instance, *Zahira*'s father died while transporting a load of cereal when she was six and *Janie* does not know her father either. He raped her mother and fled leaving her to be raised by her grandmother (as her own mother was too terrorized by the incident that she herself lost the energy to live, started to drink and take drugs, then disappeared). Moreover, *Janie* lived a life of slavery where a Negro was not allowed to speak out and *Zahira* was taken into Mrs. Aziza's household to work as a maid and who would not even dream of jeopardizing her situation by speaking out. "For the first time her natural color appeared, as she benefited from good food and proper clothes"<sup>2</sup>.

In their first stage of unawareness, both characters are content with the limited power that beauty gives them. *Zahira* has a striking beauty that attracts every man she meets. Even the sensible Aziz is stricken by her beauty and her body. He even compares her posture to a belly dancer's body when he says it is "too graceful, even for a dancer"<sup>3</sup>. In addition to *Zahira*'s beauty, *Janie* is considered to be a beauty in her society.

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She bears features that are not typical of the African-American race which sets her apart from her peers. For instance, she has "long braids of hair [that] swung low" on her back"<sup>4</sup>. She also has a "coffee -and -cream complexion"<sup>5</sup>. These features allow her to be considered superior to others in her race.

Both characters have their first confrontation with the loss of their voice when they are married off for the first time in their lives. No one asks them for their opinion because it does not matter in their society. As females, they are considered to be incompetent to make a decision about life and love, therefore they need a man to take care of these decisions. Zahira's mother marries her off to Abd Rabbihi, the baker, because "he earns enough to support her"<sup>6</sup>, while Janie's grandmother marries her off to the old Logan Kellicks because she states "You ain't got nobody but me. And mah head is ole and tilted towards de grave. Neither can you stand alone by yo'self. De thought uh you bein' kicked around from pillar tuh post is uh hurtin' thing"<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, Janie is optimistic enough to believe that with marriage she can find love. But unfortunately, as much as she tries, she realizes that "marriage did not make love." Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman<sup>8</sup>. Zahira, on the other hand, lamented the previous paradise she had lived in but her instinct told her that she had been a visitor passing through, not a permanent resident there. Therefore, she tried to make as much as she could from this new life. "Here she possessed a man, and would realize her dreams and find peace of mind"<sup>9</sup>.

## 2.1. Second Stage

The second stage in their journey to find their voice is when they are struggling to find it. Both characters are aware of their beauty that makes them distinct from others. "By being free to wander the streets, Zahira discovered who she was. She became aware of her power and charm...and her self-confidence grew"<sup>10</sup>. Thus, they perceive it as a source of power that is destined to attract men. Both women decide to leave their first husbands in order to try their luck in finding their voice with someone else. Zahira, for instance, gets divorced from Abd Rabbihi, by manipulative means, and marries the richer Mohammad Anwar. Janie flees with Joe Starks, her second husband, hoping to find herself and add meaning to her life.

However, this strategy of finding their voice does not work because they are substituting one male with another equal male. They do not affect the control of these males. Their struggle continues with their second husbands. For instance, when Zahira wants to leave the house to shop, her husband forbids her because he is afraid that the clan chief will see her and want her for a wife, stating "you owe me obedience!"<sup>11</sup> But she refuses. He stands in her way in the street and orders her to go back home. She decides to obey because of the prying eyes in the street and Anwar's remarks such as "think what I have made of you!"<sup>12</sup> This is a result of the social pressure of the patriarchal society in her life. Janie's struggle to find her voice continues as well. She is astounded by her husband's reply when the town folk meet and ask for a few words of encouragement from the new Mayor Stark's wife. Starks steps in and exclaims "mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home"<sup>13</sup>. She discovers that she still did not find her voice and that by marrying Starks she "is giving away what she didn't value...and prostrating herself in front of Jody"<sup>14</sup>. Starks even prevents her from engaging in any social activity with the townfolk, even on the porch of their shop. He tells her that she is only there to work and not socialize and arrogantly states that "he didn't want her talking after such trashy people"<sup>15</sup>. Starks constantly kills Janie's struggle to have a voice with the excuse that she is the mayor's wife and should thank him for protecting her from the common people. "Here he was just pouring honor all over her, building a high chair for her to sit in and overlooking the world and she there pouting over it!"<sup>16</sup> Janie's sense of confidence is shattered by many incidents. Once, after misplacing a store receipt, Starks exclaims "somebody got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't think none theirselves"<sup>17</sup>. When Janie tries to defend women by telling him that women *can* think for themselves, Starks retaliates with "Aw naw they don't. They just think they's thinkin'. When Ah see one thing Ah understands ten. You see ten things and don't understand one"<sup>18</sup>. Times and scenes like these made Janie think about the true state of their marriage. "Time came when she fought back with her tongue as best she could, but it didn't do her any good...he wanted her submission and he'd keep on fighting until he felt he had it"<sup>19</sup>. Gradually, she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush. No matter what Joe did to her, she said nothing. She states "the years took all the fight out of her [Janie's] face...She was a rut in the road.

Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down by the wheels"<sup>20</sup>. Starks gave her whatever she needed materialistically but what she truly valued emotionally was lost.

## 2.2. Third Stage

The third stage in the journey starts when both characters successfully find their voice. Both characters resort to the sources of power that they always had -their beauty and youth. They discover that the existence of their husband's male power is closely relevant to their female power. Zahira is encouraged even more when she hears that a woman has become the local chief in a nearby village. Both realize that the assertion of their feminine power and the existence of their voice can only be achieved by emasculating their husbands. So, the only strategy that makes them find their voice is by stifling their husbands' masculine voice. For instance, Zahira challenges and undermines the masculinity of her husband by refusing to run away with him especially when she has just discovered her "newborn power, her new existence"<sup>21</sup> and attracting the local chief, Nuh Al-Ghurab, who is a much more powerful man. He has four wives, rules the whole area and has become very rich. She reasons that one cannot "do without power or money. One created the other"<sup>22</sup>. So, Nuh forces her husband to divorce her so that he can marry her himself. Thus, he steals the beautiful Zahira and renders Anwar as incapable to satisfy such a beauty. Janie also boldly emasculates her husband when she tells him in front of the townsfolk "When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life"<sup>23</sup>. Frances Bartkowski declares "Janie shows that she has power over her life through the language that she uses"<sup>24</sup>. Thus, "She robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish"<sup>25</sup>. Starks humiliation is unbearable. He thinks that when "he paraded his possessions hereafter, they [the men] would not consider the two together. They'd look at envy at the things and pity the man that owned them"<sup>26</sup>.

As a result of finding their voice both women are turned into powerful women. For instance, Zahira inherits a great sum of money from her husband, Nuh, who is killed on their wedding night by another suitor of hers. Janie also inherits a lot of money when her husband dies after a fatal illness resulting from his humiliation. This newfound power and voice make the two women finally be able to decide for themselves and marry for love. Zahira marries Aziz and Janie marries Tea Cake. Harold Bloom states that "both Janie and Zahira are the 'paradigm' for all women, black or white, who try to break free from the bonds of society and men to become independent women"<sup>27</sup>.

## 2.3. Fourth Stage

Finally, the fourth stage is where the two characters differ in the aftermath of finding their voice. The Eastern male of the 1930s reveals in Mahfouz's novel that he is unwilling to surrender his power to a woman. He refuses to grant her a voice. Zahira's second husband, Anwar, bashes her head with a stick. As a result, her voice is silenced forever. Janie, on the other hand, is faced with the same obstacle. The male tries, yet again, to take her voice away from her. Once after being tremendously jealous of a man whom he thought Janie might prefer, he had whipped her senseless "not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession"<sup>28</sup>. Since she truly loves Tea Cake, she accepts the beating willingly. "She is drawn to Tea Cake because he embodies the freedom that she desires"<sup>29</sup>. However, she refuses to surrender her voice in other situations and takes command of her destiny. When Tea Cake is bitten by a dog, he contracts the rabies. He turns delusional and tries to kill her. But, she shoots him first in order to maintain her life. So, she refuses to lose her voice again and be weakened by a man even if it was someone she loves. ""It is only after he has been killed that her voice finally becomes strong and assertive"<sup>30</sup>. The scene in which Janie shoots Tea cake is crucial to her development because, instead of sacrificing herself for him, she decides to save her own life by ending his. "Janie finds gender color and sexual freedom with Tea Cake but Hurston allows her to kill him so she can be free from any outside influences of obstacles that might get in the way of her independence"<sup>31</sup>.

## 3. Conclusion

So, in both patriarchal Egyptian and African-American communities of the 1920s and 30s, the two characters experienced the absence of their female voices. They are rebellious and yet they are still dependent on men. Their dreams are actually based on the very same cultural values that they are trying to transcend. However, they regain their voices as soon as they discover their powers of beauty and youth.

Thus, they use them to retaliate rendering their husbands into being weaker than they are as females. They refract the power into being theirs so they can gain control of deciding their destiny and marry for love. Crabtree states that "Janie is like the hero of a folktale who comes away from her experience richer and wiser. With each marriage she encounters more opportunities for freedom surface"<sup>32</sup>. The same can be said for Zahira, however, in the case of the Egyptian Zahira the patriarchal law wins and gives power back to the male member of society.

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