

**ACCEPTANCE OF BLACK CULTURE THROUGH
AFRO- AMERICAN FOLKTALES: THE VOICE OF ENSLAVED FOLK**

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ABSTRACT:

This is a short, precise, and aphoristic article about the cultural and social worlds of Afro-Americans which I will examine through the lens of Afro-American folktales. Zora Neale Hurston was one of the most gifted authors of twentieth-century Afro-American Literature who empowered and acknowledged black arts by giving it a unique identity. The best thing about Hurston's literary works is that she allows her readers to visualize and investigate the true meaning of their individuality and personality. Hurston was like a true preacher who taught Afro-Americans that it is better to play with words than with the emotions and feelings of people. Through her writings, she unveiled White Americans who believed in controlling the lives of Black folk through slavery. She protests this propaganda in her literary works which have the essence of folktales.

Keywords: *Afro-American Folktales, Cultural Conflicts, Zora Neale Hurston, Racial Issues.*

INTRODUCTION:

During the 18th and 19th centuries when Africans were enslaved by White Americans and they were brought to America, Africans had no freedom to live their life according to their own choice nor did their written language. The only thing that was left for them was communication. They used to sit together, gather together, and talk delightfully because that was the only option for them. During those days people were very enthusiastic about sharing and talking about their personal lives, dreams, aspirations, and what was going on in society. Now, when we talk about communication the very first thing that is important for it is a common language in which two people can understand each other. Language acts as a very powerful tool to sustain in the society.

This paper is an attempt to focus on several social contemporary problems that created hindrances in the personal development and social welfare of Afro-Americans by White Americans. Afro-American folktales are one such medium through which writers incorporated

these problems. Zora Neale Hurston, an Afro-American folktale woman writer examines the hypocrisies of Americans. The acceptance of Afro-American folktales in the late twentieth century was not a cakewalk for the Negroes. It was a difficult task for them to pen down their own stories on a piece of paper

Once Mayo Angelou said: “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel,” such kind of glimpses can be seen in the folktales that incorporate all the cultural, traditional, ethical backgrounds. According to me the term “Folktales” is a bittersweet memory for it entertains and sometimes can make people cry by forming an emotional connection with two different communities and sometimes with their haunting pasts. It is an important sub-division of prose narratives that constitutes the major area of folklore. Generally, the term 'folktale' refers to all kinds of traditional and oldest narratives that were told orally from generation to generation. They are the literary creations of a society that connect the people and may be taken as the customary property shared by each individual. It is a record that folktales are one of the important assets of mankind. Sometimes, it is with the help of folktales that we come across with so many interesting facts. It mainly deals with people, society, time, and memory.

For Afro-Americans, it has emerged as one of the vital mediums for their personal expression. For them, it was a bittersweet experience. The main objective of this research paper is to:

- ❧ To discuss folktales as a language of oppressed Black slaves including women who had to face both racism and sexism.
- ❧ How Afro-American writers had used folktales for the preservation of culture and traditional beliefs.
- ❧ To examine various themes such as fear of acceptance, hatred, and sense of marginalization.
- ❧ To focus on how folktales helped Negroes to resolve those issues which they suffered in their mundane life.

Zora Neale Hurston also known as “Queen of the Niggeratti” was one of the revolutionary figures during the Harlem Renaissance who wrote about contemporary racial struggles of the black community and how black arts were underrated and made insignificant. She was uniquely associated with exploring the critical possibilities of marginality. Hurston’s character presents the full spectrum and complexities of Afro-Americans with intricate histories and cultures. While investigating Hurston’s Afro-American folktales, I have assumed that they are the transformation of real incidents into hallucinated ideas or thoughts which was earlier presented orally by a group of people and later on occupied a place as an important literary genre. Hurston’s folktales are like a kaleidoscope for the Afro-Americans which can be seen from the given statement:

“If you don’t speak about your pain, they’ll make you weak and say you enjoyed it”. Therefore, sometimes you have to behave like a lively spirit instead of thinking of yourself as a coward and a fool. For them, the reality of life was based on now or never, and finally, they took action by coming forward and talking about their problems.”¹

While investigating Afro-American folktales of Zora Neale Hurston scientifically, It can be assumed that they are the flashbacks of real incidents into hallucinated ideas and thoughts that were earlier presented orally by the group of people and later entered into the literary world. She had the potential to read people’s minds, deal with mental processes, and heal pains. Most of her literary works act like a panacea for Black people and they have helped them resolve their problems and make them believe in an autonomous body. Her works were unrecognized in the literary world but later on, it was acknowledged by the most famous woman Afro-American author Toni Morrison in her article “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston”. Most of Hurston’s literary works are autobiographical and based on her own experiences she faced in her life. She too was a great sufferer and was discriminated against based on her race, color, and sex by White supremacy. Thus, she writes in her famous essay *Every Tongue Got To Confess*:

“I do not always feel colored, Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.”²

In her folktales, she argues that Afro-American language and folktales must attain a place like Creolized language and tradition. That is why she, preserved folktales in her works. With the help of her folktales, she proved that black art is full of beauty and wisdom. About Hurston, it is said that when other Harlem artists were busy spending their own comfortable time in New York City, Hurston was endlessly collecting her anthropological data on Afro-American folktales. Hurston was also very fond of Afro-American folktales. In her writings, she investigates the true meaning of individuality and personality, through anecdotes, imagery, tone, and figurative language. Writing about her community was so mind-relaxing for her as it was the only way to acknowledge her culture and arts. In one of his essays that appeared in *The New Masses in October of 1937 (Between Laughter and Tears)*, Richard Wright remarks:

“Miss Hurston can write, but her literary works are concealed with facile sensuality that has changed the meaning of Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley, the first African- American woman to publish a book of poetry. Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk mind in their pure simplicity, but that’s as far as it goes”.³

Robert Hemenway defines the talent of Zora Neale Hurston as “autonomous imagination” which means that Hurston lived as she pleased. More importantly, it means that she focused on a way of questioning that would satisfy her need to be both a folktale writer and

a creative artist. She succeeded magnificently and her literary works truly show that she loved her black culture. She believed wholeheartedly in the beauty of black cultures and traditions and the psychological wholeness of black life. With little to guide her, except believing in her own experiences, she incorporated the survival of love, loyalty, joy, humor, and affirmation, as well as tragedy, into black life. We should be grateful for the work she did and we should be grateful for her survival.

She thinks without folktales people will be disconnected from the rural and true life which is completely true. In most of her folktales, she uses black vernacular language using the idioms and proverbs of black culture, showing metaphors that lacked rules and regulations. Initially, she wrote about the southern rural setting for black folk traditions. Her Afro-American folktales are fascinating and breath-taking for they deal with the black landscapes, culture, and arts. Her folktales deal with the past life of people's consciousness and the survival of Afro-Americans in the most difficult and painful situations. She also believed that folktale is one of the natural ways of preserving black life.

While studying the Afro-American folktales of Zora Neale Hurston deeply, it can be found that it is completely associated with the unconscious mind which needs to be treated well and to be understood properly. It was only due to the fact that they were deprived and restricted of their basic rights such as education, identity crisis, and several racial issues. Such restrictions and deprivations included a rebel nature in Afro-Americans which resulted in fighting for their basic rights. They had to fight against so many battles such as racism and sexism.

Many Afro-American authors have mentioned that folktales deal with the unconscious needs and demands of people's minds which they cannot achieve in their real life. Thus, the unexpressed thoughts which they were carrying in their mind were a burden for them. Afro-American folktales were the product of external and internal conflicts that people used to carry in their unconscious minds with the hope that one day they would be allowed to be heard, appreciated, and empowered. Consequently, many writers have sought the means through which they gave voice to their unique experiences by making them more developed, autonomous, competent, and creative selves. The goal of writing this paper is to develop a multidimensional way of thinking for educational purposes. Cognitive psychology in the literary works of Hurston affirms that the self develops through the cognitive study of people's minds.

Zora Neale Hurston once said, "The game of keeping what one has in their heart and mind is never so exciting as the game of revealing". In her essay *How It Feels to be Colored Me*, Hurston argues that her skin color never caused any obstacles in her life. She took it as an opportunity to succeed in her life. No doubt, Afro-Americans were experts in storytelling and their history has a reservoir of folktales. It was a challenging task for them to find their own identity and freedom in a society that was ruled by the most elite classes or White Americans.

Zora Neale Hurston's literary works are the true examples of bildungsroman or the "coming-of-age" kind of novels that focus on the psychological and moral growth of its protagonist. They depict the sensible human beings who have been quenching for years to answer their questions back. The journey of their life is more often psychological, emotional, and spiritual and through this way, they discover their self-identity which was once overshadowed and orchestrated by White people. I have analyzed that the theme of the subsequent journey toward freedom plays an important role in her literary works of her.

CONCLUSION:

Hurston's greatness lies in the fact that she comes in the category of those authors, who is not afraid of being thrown stones and pebbles at her rather she collects them and loves to make her own empire which is full of hardships, sweat and drops of blood in a very decent manner. Her outrageous nature and her respectful gesture towards black community simply make her a lovable writer. Many of her literary and anthropological texts reveal her interest in promoting the oral tradition among Afro-Americans. Categorising and placing Zora Neale Hurston's literary works in a particular genre, limits her talent. Her literary pieces are marked for its cultural importance and explorations of social issues like gender oppression, class conflicts and racial dehumanization. Her unique celebration of Afro-American folktales has left indestructible footprints on Black people's life.

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