

# Acceptance of Black Culture Through Afro-American Folktales: The Voice of Enslaved Folk

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## Abstract:

Every culture has its own beauty, truth, customs, laws, and history and sometimes most of them are expressed through folktales. 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. These tales are not human beings and yet they are alive for they contain the most unforgettable memories, emotions, and feelings of mankind. 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 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> 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 writer examines the brutish rules that were propagated by White Americans. The acceptance of Afro-American folktales in the late twentieth century was not a cakewalk for the African-Americans. It was a challenging task for the Afro-Americans to pen down their own stories on a piece of paper. It is a known fact that the life which they were living in the past years was full of chaos and traumas. They were recognized as a "White man's burden" which is also one of the titles of a poem by Rudyard Kipling. Afro-Americans were pushed back by White people who thought of them as less prestigious human beings due to their dark color and race.

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.

It was a sense of relief for those folks who were once taken as illiterate and rustic people. Long ago when people had no written language, folktales were the only medium to know about tradition and culture and brought two peoples and communities closer without any poking and prying in their personal life. Folktales contain the culture’s belief system and fundamental human truths which were passed down orally through generations and centuries. Through this paper, I would also like to bring my opinions and points about folktales when their aura of power in the literary world created a milestone for numerous unknown people and answered many unanswered questions in the past they are given below:

- How folktales became the language of voiceless people.
- How it occupied a place in the paper and pen world with a thumping success.
- To show how different communities used folktales for the preservation of their tradition, culture, and ethical beliefs.
- To examine various themes such as fear of acceptance, hatred, happiness, and a sense of marginalization in their literary works.
- To examine how folktales helped them to resolve those issues which they confront in their day-to-day life.
- To highlight the importance of folktales for maintaining the welfare of society.
- To understand the significance of various literary and psychological theories that dwell in the folktales.

Afro-American folktales can be said as a faithful mirror human life because it enabled people to think critically and express axioms and views about what was happening in their lives. It made them realize that they were not born to enslave and serve the white people and it was only going to stop when they could discover their self-worth it was realized because of those opinionated and subjective epistemologist authors who raised their voices and Zora Neale Hurston in one such example. 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.”*

In her novels, Zora Neale Hurston conveys the message that when you fight for your rights, your freedom, or even for your acceptance in society there are passive ways in which you can present your arguments and there are stronger and better ways. She was able to use both techniques throughout her

time to bring changes against racial inequality. Hurston was an inspiration and also a successful representative member of several movements that were meant for the goodwill of black people.

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.

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.”*

The above line shows that she was very fond of her birthplace Eatonville, “an all-black town,” and most of her works are based on this place. She began her writing career when racism had proven relentless and oppression undaunting. She was raised against the cruelties of a racialistic world. In her essay, *How it feels to be colored Me* (1928), Hurston gives an autobiographical account of “the very day that she became colored and uses it as a medium to describe the expressions of her self-discovery.

She had a deep interest in arts, humanity, and folktales and many of her works have the glimpses of African American folktales and Negro characterization that were so true to reality, which made her an excellent anthropologist. 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”.*

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. It seems as if Hurston was the counsellor for not only the black community but also for those who were discriminated against and abandoned of their rights by the ruling class people. She became one of the gallant Afro-American authors through her vibrant, vivid, and sharp statements. While studying Hurston it can be said that her literary works deal with cognitive psychology and act as a

pedagogy to break the stereotypical barriers of cultural and racial differences based on the following evidence:

- Folktales, she used in her literary works involve intense, anxious, and fearful feelings connected to the past of an individual.
- Through her Folktales, she tries to acknowledge the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Afro-American community.
- Her folktales form a relationship between one's internal (psychic) and external (physical) worlds.
- They act as a drug for the overburdened brain. It possesses the power of healing and relaxing properties.
- Her works involve that African-Americans were not white man's burden rather they were half devil and half child.

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.

They fought against the harsh bigotry, racism, and barbarity of white people. From their origins as an oral tradition, Afro-American Folktales are now easily traceable in the literary world which provides a lot of interesting and new facts about the cultures and traditions of Afro-Americans. It also leaves a lot of impact on the readers and provides opportunities for the researchers. Afro-American folktales are like a boon for them as it provides them with both the knowledge of humanity and wisdom that are morally good for their life.

For the proper understanding of a society and people's minds cognitive and psychoanalytical study of folktales may be considered essential. Cognitive psychology involves the study of internal mental processes including perception, thinking, memory, attention, language, problem-solving, and learning. There are numerous facts associated with cognitive psychology in the folktales of Zora Neale Hurston such as healing with racial issues, identity crisis, increasing self-assessment, and finding ways to recover from mental disorders. The research on her literary works was the product of personality structure and developing brains.

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

From the above statements, It can be said that this paper is a step-by-step metamorphosis of the length and breadth of Afro-American folktales which enlightens on the development of cultural and traditional values of African-Americans. Writing about the Afro-American folktales was like bizarre rational thoughts and beliefs for the African-American writers which were very difficult to convince because the pain they carried in their heart had a hidden motive of making people aware of their pains. African-American folktales are colossal in their style for it provides a plethora of cultures and traditions. As a great folktale writer, Hurston's writing skills had the power to touch the nerves of readers by acknowledging them with the truth of life. To quote Richard Wright, he says that, Hurston's own will and potential continue in her literary works and this tradition was forced upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the White folk laugh. Her characters eat, laugh, cry, work, and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negroes life." The most prolific Afro-American woman author of her time or earlier, the power of her imagery and the richness of the culture that she brings to life through her writings have found her enthusiastic new audiences in recent years. It offers researchers an invaluable framework for insight into the history and worldview of the Black community. The cultural and social world of Afro-Americans are the two faces of the same coin which gives a plethora of emotions and feelings about African-Americans, who went through so many hardships in their life. It answers the why, what, and how of silenced and horrifying pasts of enslaved people. Afro-American folktales had overpowered the gloomy and apocalyptic vision of the Caucasians who discouraged the talents of Afro-Americans. If culture and tradition are the skeletons of Afro-American society then folktales must be seen as the brave soul that helped recreate the self-identity of miserable enslaved Black folk.

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