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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Outsider-Within Representations in Zora Neale Hurston's and Georgia Douglas Johnson's Folk Drama

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| ABSTRACT
The study aims to explore the shared experiences of Georgia Douglas Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston, incorporating the elements of African-American folklore in American theatre to negotiate the circumstances of black women. In addition, it scrutinizes how Johnson and Hurston utilize folk drama to navigate the political and artistic conflicts in the early 20th century, delving into the intricate interplay of ethnicity, gender, politics, and aesthetics. The study examines two folk plays from the Harlem Renaissance era: Johnson's *Plumes* (1927) and Hurston's *Color Struck* (1926). Both plays illustrate that the African-American drama probes into the struggles of black women as outsiders-within, challenging the prevailing racism and classism faced by black women in the Southern states. By analyzing the construction of identity in the experiences of black women through Patricia Hill Collins's Black feminist theory, the study shows how Hurston and Johnson successfully depicted the position of women as 'outsiders' in their literary works, with their folk drama centering on women's experiences and culture, employing black folklore to highlight the social protest of Black feminist theatre.

| KEYWORDS
African-American drama, black feminism, *Color Struck*, Folk Drama, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Patricia Hill Collins, *Plumes*, Zora Neale Hurston

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1. Introduction

The playwrights Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880–1966) and Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) are widely recognized as pioneer African-American writers. Emerging from the Harlem Renaissance, both female playwrights left an indelible mark on African-American theatre, focusing the narrative on the struggles of black women within the realm of folk drama. Drawing upon the experiences of American Southern black women, Hurston and Johnson vividly depict the acute awareness of the pervasive impact of racism on their lives, shedding light on the social injustices rampant in their society.

Giorgia Douglas Johnson was a pioneer Harlem Renaissance playwright and an acclaimed prolific poet of the 1920s who employed an artistic voice to confront pressing social issues. She delved well into the emotional fabric of black lives, portraying the complexities of African-Americans' struggles and resilience interweaving the themes of race, equality, parenting, and sacrifice into poetry and drama. Navigating the social and political constraints at that time, Johnson's powerful voice challenged racial prejudices, mirroring black individuals' struggles during a pivotal period in American history. Her drama became a platform for protest, challenging white supremacist ideologies and advocating for a necessary change. Despite societal limitations, Johnson maintained her artistic integrity, refusing to conform her plays to conventional norms. On the other hand, Zora Neale Hurston donned multiple hats as a folklorist, a short-fiction writer, an essayist, a novelist, and a renowned dramatist. Her immersion in black communities

inspired her to create folk dramas that authentically portrayed the lives of ordinary people. Hurston's anthropological explorations of African American folklore were the cornerstone for much of her later writing.

This study focuses on the African-American female drama as represented in Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck* (1926), and Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Plumes* (1927). Employing the black feminist theory, the study showcases how Hurston and Johnson skillfully utilized the distinct elements of folk drama such as black people's traditions, rituals, dance, music, and local dialects to address the experiences of black Southern women within the racial hierarchy. The study seeks to expound the representational strategies employed by Hurston and Johnson who navigated political and artistic upheavals in the early 20th century, exploring the intricate nexus between ethnicity, gender, politics, and aesthetics. By delving into the political implications of black folklore in the dramatic works of the black feminist theatre by Hurston and Johnson, this study sheds light on the significance of these themes in the African-American drama. This research raises the question of how these playwrights portray women's 'outsider-within' status due to their experiences, how they tackle racial issues, and the problems ensuing economic and social ramifications. Furthermore, it examines how folklore is ingeniously incorporated into drama as an innovative theatrical technique. These themes bear substantial weight in black feminist studies as they probe the issues and voices of black women in the dramatic arts. Subsequently, the study employs the theoretical framework of black feminism, navigating the themes within the folk drama to understand better the playwrights' depiction of black women within the racial system.

2. Literature Review

During the vibrant cultural period of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, Black literature experienced a resurgence, drawing extensively from the rich tapestry of black folklore. Many literary works by the black playwrights were genuinely interested in integrating folktales into their narratives. Diepeveen (1986) highlighted two prevailing attitudes towards folklore observed during the Harlem Renaissance, both perpetuating the neglect of the folktale tradition, the inability to reconcile the demands of the past and literary tradition, and the campaign for desegregation. Diepeveen concluded that the acceptance of middle-class values further complicated these debates while affecting the language of upliftment, directing towards a more patronizing tone.

The significance of black folklore was highlighted and celebrated in theatrical productions. Zora Neale Hurston particularly incorporated black folklore into the American theatre with her ground-breaking work *Color Struck*, garnering critical acclaim for her portrayal of black women's experiences. Krasner (2002) emphasized Hurston's personal expressions of fragmentation as they relate to the play's protagonist and the African-American women during the great migration of the Negros from the South to the North. Hurston shifted the setting of her drama from the vibrant environment of the Harlem New Negro Renaissance in the North to the impoverished rural South, creating "a world made up of those who are "outside history," with her protagonist not as the New Negro but the "black, poor, disenfranchised, and rural, she epitomizes the outsider in every way" (p. 114). In addition, Mirmasoomin and Roshnavand (2014) examined colorism in their research, showcasing how Hurston emphasized racial prejudice and the dominance of White ideology, leading to stereotyping black people as culturally inferior. These studies collectively analyzed Hurston's depiction of black southern women, highlighting racism, white privilege, and colorism in folk drama.

Hurston's play has also garnered attention for portraying racism from a postcolonial perspective. Mishra (2016) argued that cultural hegemony and resistance were palpable in the play, in both the form and the content. Mishra contended that *Color Struck*'s attempt to culturally celebrate the ancestral roots of black people through activities like cakewalking was culturally insensitive. The study further referenced cultural resistance and assimilation, highlighting dialogues as fundamental components of indigenous culture. Several other studies have examined the portrayal of the female protagonist. For example, Ghani and Joody (2017) posited that the protagonist's skin color dictates her societal impact. Employing postcolonial theory to comprehend the inferiority complex, their study underscored Hurston's focus on the protagonist to protest racial discrimination and oppression against the black community in America. Moreover, Hurston's exploration of the obsession with skin color reveals its role in self-marginalization and the cultivation of an inferiority complex. Additionally, Akbar (2022) delved into the intricate connections between racial discrimination and colorism in African-American drama, contextualizing it within the terminology and historical perspectives. Akbar's examination of the play revealed how it challenges colorism and its deleterious impact on the protagonist's life, resulting in color-consciousness and a long-lasting entrenched sense of inferiority. These studies underscore the political implications of Hurston's drama utilizing black folklore to shed light on pertinent social issues.

In addition, Georgia Douglas Johnson's folk plays have been subjected to feminist critical studies, garnering acclaim for their portrayal of social resistance. Miller (1990) examined Georgia Douglas Johnson and May Miller, whose contributions significantly influenced the impactful black American dramas during the Harlem Renaissance. The study hypothesized that Johnson and Miller purposefully incorporated the experiences of black women as the central theme in their folk drama. Johnson's folk dramas, alongside her lynching plays, were analyzed in this study. Johnson adeptly interpreted authentic African-American experiences from a black perspective, driven by a commitment to foster artistic expression and to present genuine African-American portraits. Her works showcase themes of vanity and pride in mythology and historical drama, featuring heroic protagonists and authentic

black characters grappling with challenges. Miller identified protest as the second significant theme in Miller and Johnson's lynching plays, as these playwrights used political agendas to assert control over their lives and advocate for racial justice.

On the other hand, Johnson's folk play *Plumes* has been the subject of critical attention from feminist perspectives. Sullivan's study (1995) of the black folklore in Johnson's folk drama, alongside other African-American female dramatists, highlighted the agency and resilience of black women playwrights during the Harlem Renaissance. These women were particularly concerned about the dialects to discern the underlying discourse behind the idioms in Johnson's folk drama. Their discourse revealed a hegemonic culture against women, the solidarity of women's friendships, and the role of Black women's discourse in their lives. These Black women, in the face of struggles and oppression, confronted a hegemonic culture that intended to silence their voices.

In a similar context, Raynor (2001) focused on mother characters who sought to secure a rightful societal position in Johnson's plays. The narratives in the folklore delved into themes of sexual victimization, class struggles, death, destruction, poverty, loneliness, isolation, and marginalization. In Johnson's plays, the women served as a sanctuary, encompassing and shielding their children from tragedies threatening their dignity. Alexandre (2019) studied the symbolism of the 'feathers' in Johnson's play *Plumes*, highlighting the themes of slavery and the experiences of black Americans post-emancipation. Feathers are utilized as symbolic metaphors in *Plumes* to explore the intricate connections between the critical elements, such as the essence of motherhood, humanity, the long-lasting effects of trauma, and the complex mourning rites in black communities. Thus, *Plumes* has been scrutinized from various perspectives, offering insights into black women's multifaceted experiences and societal struggles.

Both black playwrights, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Zora Neale Hurston, have been examined from the perspective of postcolonial feminism within the domain of folk drama. This study seeks to expand upon the previous research by analyzing the political implications from a contemporary black feminist standpoint. This lens is crucial in investigating the incorporation of black folklore elements with feminist themes in the American theatre. It allows us to explore how Hurston and Johnson depicted the position of women as 'outsiders' in their literary works, with their folk drama centering on women's experiences and culture, employing black folklore to highlight the social protest of Black feminist theatre.

3. Methodology

This study examines the portrayals of female characters in Giorgia Douglas Johnson's *Plumes* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck* as representations of black women's outsider-within status, racial issues, and social ramifications. It analyzes them within Patricia Hill Collins's black feminist perspectives, emphasizing writing as a potent tool for expressing social and political dissent. In 1986, Collins introduced the concept of 'the outsider-within', analyzing the intersecting forms of oppression Black women suffer in the US: oppression of race, gender, class, sexuality, age, nation, and ethnicity (1986, p.4). Black feminists shift the investigative focus from isolating individual elements of oppression, such as race, gender, or class, to understanding the connections among these systems. Instead of prioritizing one form of oppression as primary, they recognize that these systems intersect and mutually reinforce each other, striving to create new theoretical interpretations encompassing the complex interplay of multiple oppressions (p. 20). Characterizing Black feminist thought, according to Collins, involves explaining and redefining the importance of Black women's culture. To clarify the Black women's standpoint, she discussed the three key themes essential to understanding Black feminist thought. These themes involve "the meaning of self-definition and self-valuation, the interlocking nature of oppression, and the importance of redefining culture" (1986, p.25). She stated that "a good deal of the Black female experience has been spent coping with, avoiding, subverting, and challenging the workings of this same white male insiderism" (p. 26). Black women were considered outsiders within a community that historically excluded them. (p.26).

In her 1990 book *Black Feminist Thought* and its subsequent editions, Collins developed the concept of the outsider-within, providing a lens to interpret the societal experiences of black women across history, society, and culture. To clarify Black women's experiences and ideas that lie at the core of Black feminist thought, she aimed to describe, discover, reinterpret, and analyze the works of individual American Black women thinkers and subgroups who "have been silenced" (2000, p. 13). As she explained, the mainstream scholarship of feminist, social, and political thought "all negate Black women's realities" (p.12). Thus, Black women, being prevented "from becoming full insiders in any of these areas of inquiry, they remained in outsider-within locations, individuals whose marginality provided a distinctive angle of vision on these intellectual and political entities" (p.12).

Female black writers responded to this marginalization by offering fresh insights into social, political, and intellectual realms. Their writings discussed the connections between race, class, and gender in the lived experiences of black women. By challenging the existent patriarchal norms, black women dramatists accentuated the potency of black folklore as a tool to express social dissent and political implications. Collins' perspectives illuminate the resilience and creativity of Black women writers who navigate the complexities of identity, exclusion, and empowerment within a society that often marginalizes their contributions, stressing at the same time fostering their empowerment and conventions of social justice. Therefore, these perspectives prove relevant for

analyzing Black women's folk drama, which addresses women's issues in American theatre. Her concept is employed to investigate how Johnson and Hurston portrayed the African American women's outsider-within position, focusing on their experiences and cultural contexts, serving as the focal points of their folk drama.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Georgia Douglas Johnson's Plumes: Nature of Oppression

Weaving through the rich tapestry of black women's experiences in the context of racial and gender struggles, Johnson's *Plumes* (1927) explored poverty and the enduring legacy of slavery. Johnson recognized the profound significance of folk drama in capturing authentic narratives and the nuanced languages of women of color from diverse backgrounds. Her poor southern black women confronted oppression and social injustices within the American context. Their harsh experiences shaped their subordinate statuses, resulting in dualities and societal marginalization. Johnson understood the importance of incorporating black dialect in drama to authentically depict the lives of women of color as a marginalized group. Among other playwrights, Johnson, in particular, discovered that writing folk drama provided a platform to unveil the genuine identities and relationships hidden beneath the layers of folk culture and black dialect. Johnson's portrayal of Tildy and Charity's conversation in an authentic dialect aligns with the character of the Harlem Renaissance to accurately represent the human experience. Johnson adeptly created an illusion on stage through a realistic setting, incorporating authentic black folklore elements and dialogue.

Johnson employed different theatrical techniques to convey elements of folklore. She focused on the plight of the black women in the South, oppressed by a system of race, class, and gender discrimination focusing particularly on the bond between Charity Brown and her friend Tildy. Set in a modest cottage in the South, the play revolves around the women's domestic spaces, such as the kitchen. Johnson's narrative deals with a black mother's confrontation with a harrowing decision concerning her critically ill daughter- whether to allocate her hard-earned money to potentially life-saving medical treatment for her daughter or an honorable funeral procession for the beloved child. While the mother's dilemma forms the crux of the play, Johnson deftly placed the black women's experiences and culture at the heart of her work. Throughout the play, she drew upon African-American folklore to vividly portray women's struggles and offer cultural repercussions from the perspective of the marginalized.

The title of *Plumes* is symbolic, resonating with the characters' plight and desires. In the play, 'plumes' are used as the essence of mourning attire. This motivates Charity, the desperate mother, to make pivotal decisions that drive the plot and later intertwine with the theme of motherhood. Charity strives to organize a dignified funeral procession for her deathly ill daughter, with the dress as an integral part of the funeral arrangements. Johnson skillfully highlighted the cultural significance of an African-American funeral procession that drives the protagonist's actions, thereby effectively directing the narrative trajectory. As Tildy examines the coffee cup, stage directions meticulously drive the story towards its climax. The scene shifts to the street, where the funeral procession unfolds when "the toll of a church bell is heard, followed by the steady and slow tramp, tramp of horses' hooves. Both women look at each other" (Johnson, 2006, p. 79). The elaboration of the funeral procession is not solely confined to the characters' dialogues; it is also conveyed through stage directions and silence when both "women's eyes follow the tail end of the procession as the horses' hooves die away. They turn away from the window, and the two women look at each other significantly" (p. 79). Both women count the plumes adorning the funeral, symbolizing the most cherished aspiration of the characters, resonating with the title's meaning, and underscoring the cultural significance of elaborate funeral rituals.

Moreover, Johnson's drama explores the role of rituals and superstitions in the communities of color in the southern region. Despite Dr. Scott's suggestion that surgery could benefit the daughter, Charity believes "It's no use, none at all", as read in the coffee ground (Johnson, 2006, p. 168). Tildy affirms the reliability of coffee ground readings, asserting, "Coffee grounds are always truthful" (p. 168). Beyond mundane activities like sewing, Tildy and Charity discuss funerals, followed by a shared cup of coffee. Charity desires to have her fortune read from the coffee grounds, prompting Tildy to offer her services. In Tildy's cup, she sees a vision of a large and growing group of people approaching an indistinct object in a lengthy line that stretches far beyond her sight. As the women decipher the meaning of this vision, a church bell tolls, coinciding with the funeral procession for Bell Gibson. Charity marvels at the grandeur of the procession, recounting the funeral's cost and emphasizing the significance of the 'plumes,' the most expensive element. In this scene, Johnson incorporates a supernatural element, the superstitions of fortune reading, allowing them to predict the future through coffee ground readings.

The dress also plays a significant role in the theatrical scene. With a symbolic dress at the centre stage, it becomes evident that the women of color have a subjugated relationship intertwined with the political economics of domination (Collins, 1986, p. 20). As the play unfolds, Charity attempts to adjust the hem of Emmerline's dress, expressing apprehension about her condition. Charity requests Tildy to baste the hem, as Emmerline prefers shorter dresses. Tildy discerns Charity's preference for a longer dress to cover Emmerline's feet in the event of her passing; she must be dressed up in a flowing gown for the funeral (Johnson, 2006, p. 164). During the play's denouement, following Emmerline's demise, Charity instructs Tildy to 'rip out the hem' of a dress, symbolizing mourning for Emmerline's funeral.

Although the sewing of the dress seemed prominent in the women's discussions, their conversations extended beyond it. Their dialogue sparks inquiries into the economic status within the American context. Charity and Tildy reminisce about a past death that Charity had witnessed. They recall that funeral as "that ugly pine coffin, just one shabby old hack and nothing about him" (Johnson, 2006, p. 165). Determined to avoid a similar situation, Charity endeavors to use up the funds for her daughter's funeral, which she had earned through her hard work as a washerwoman. Johnson highlights the poverty endured by black women, who are often forced to provide for their families single-handedly. Though Charity saves 50 dollars, she believes that her labor is worth more than the dollar and a half she earns (p. 166). The position of women within the American milieu emphasized the grappling with poverty and unemployment, owing to the prejudices of the racial system and economic exploitation (Collins, 1986, p. 20).

In *Plumes*, Johnson frequently employed domestic spaces and activities as literary devices, highlighting the inferior status of women within the prevailing white supremacist ideology. The depiction shifts inward to the kitchen of a two-room cottage. The setting includes a window overlooking the street, a door leading to the street, and another door leading to an adjoining room. Furnished with a rocking chair, a cane-bottom chair, a stove, a table with sewing supplies, and a wash tub, the room serves as a backdrop for the unfolding drama. Additionally, the groans from the inner room symbolize the protagonist's struggles in the modest cottage, especially concerning her ailing daughter. Johnson accentuated that within the realms associated with women's domestic work, women of color have accrued some money from all the hard work at the laundry to defray the expenses of an operation or a dignified funeral for the daughter. Yet, the script foregrounds the fact that within these confines, these women are powerless to change their circumstances.

Moreover, Johnson highlighted the strong bond between women of color in a male-dominated Harlem Renaissance. In *Plumes*, the deep bond shared by Charity and Tildy is portrayed as they courageously and unequivocally express their love and admiration for a family member in a manner true to their experiences. Despite this affirmation of their existence, when Charity interacts with Dr. Scott, who disregards their concerns yet accepts their money, it highlights black women's resolute to be heard and valued within society. She skillfully expended robust female friendships to depict women's compassion and kindness for each other, with Tildy assisting Charity in sewing the dress. Johnson used verbal echoes to portray Charity as a considerate mother tending to her daughter. Throughout the play, Johnson dramatized the mother's efforts in caring for her daughter, including stirring poultices, looking worried, going toward the inner room with the poultice, and shaking her head dejectedly (Johnson, 2006, p. 75). Johnson described Charity's work as a washer-woman, effectively capturing the daily struggles, responsibilities, and challenges black women encounter to earn a decent livelihood.

In addition to using the black dialects, Johnson effectively incorporated silence as a theatrical device to demonstrate that black women are constrained from affecting change or taking decisive actions due to their diminished social status and limited economic potential. "Both women sit tense in the silence. Tildy has commenced sewing again" with Charity's decision regarding Emmerline's surgery unresolved (Johnson, 2006, p. 84). The play's intense ending is created when "a strange, strangling noise comes from the inner room" (p. 84). The play concludes with the resolution at the time of Emmerline's demise, detailing the descriptions of Charity's domestic work and modest cottage, inviting reflection on the struggles of those helpless black women.

Understanding the transformative potential of Johnson's theatre, which masterfully depicted the real-life experiences of women of color on the theatrical stage, one cannot overlook Johnson's own encounters with racial prejudices. Following her husband's demise, Johnson anticipated various governmental positions and eventually worked as a substitute teacher in Washington, DC. In *Plumes*, Johnson skillfully portrayed the struggles of black southern families resisting the racial injustices perpetrated by a society influenced by white American supremacy. Drawing from her knowledge of folklore and black women's stories, she seamlessly integrated these themes into her theatrical scenes. Black identity and perceptions emerged through the submission and dialects of black women who built their humble yet considerate world, sharing experiences and affirming their existence.

The play masterfully highlights black women's struggles and their justified skepticism toward a system that frequently fails them purposely. As Collins mentions, the white man embodies the belief in the superiority of white-skinned individuals and denies black women their rightful identity, relegating them to an inferior group (1986, p. 20). That skepticism towards the medical profession mirrored the sentiments of many impoverished black women in doubting the efficacy of costly treatments for their loved ones' ailments. Charity's lament, "They take every cent you got, and then you die just the same," poignantly encapsulates this sentiment (Johnson, 2006, p. 16). Within this realism, Johnson highlighted a stark reality of her time- Black women facing oppression due to the toughened antagonistic relations between black and white communities. These relations perpetuated a system of racial hierarchy where white supremacy prevailed, both politically and economically at the least, establishing dominance and subordination (Collins, 1986, p. 20). Dr. Scott appears unwilling and unable to comprehend Tildy's and Charity's reliance on coffee grounds. He fails to understand Charity's eagerness to assist him in any way possible, instructing her to leave the bedroom, "to remain outside," claiming she 'can't possibly be of any service' (Johnson, 2006, p. 168). Dr. Scott then recommends an operation for 50 dollars that could save Emmerline's life. However, Charity and Tildy harbor little faith in the operation or Dr. Scott himself.

Charity recognizes the inadequate and inferior medical treatment provided to black individuals. Her shaken belief in the medical treatment is evident when she tends to her daughter and laments, "[we] don't have too much confidence in none of 'em" (p. 165). Later, she boldly states that she does not trust Dr. Scott (p. 168).

In the American context, the juxtaposition between black and white, as Collins states, symbolizes an inequitable and precarious relationship that has led to the denial of prevalent prejudices and marginalization (1986, p. 20). At the onset of the play, Charity concocts a remedy for her daughter, but when Dr. Scott arrives, he advises her to remain composed in the face of impending death. However, he fails to consider Charity's understanding of what comforts Emmerline and her emotional state. As a white doctor, he embodies white supremacy and appears to wield more authority when assessing knowledge while disregarding the identity of black individuals. Thus, Charity hesitates when he suggests an operation for her daughter, knowing he cannot guarantee her safety. The doctor's failure to comprehend Charity's perspective leads to him reprimanding her: "I did think you'd hesitate about it–I imagined your love for your child" (Johnson, 2006, p. 160). Dr. Scott, representing scientific reasoning, epitomizes white patriarchal America. In his interactions with Charity, he demonstrates dismissive and condescending behavior, overlooking her concern and implying that she lacks knowledge and understanding.

4.2. Zora Neale Hurston's Color Struck: Black Women's Self-Definition and Self-Valuation

Published in 1926 in the *Fire* magazine, *Color Struck* won the second prize in *Opportunity Magazine*'s literary contest for best play, though it remained unperformed during the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston utilized folk drama to explore the experiences of women of color in America in the early 1900s, employing African-American folklore in line with other theatrical techniques. She offered fresh perspectives on how black women define and value themselves, accentuating their oppression and the detrimental effects of control that follow, internalized in their self-esteem. *Color Struck* delves into the experiences of Emma, the poor black southern woman who believes that her skin color renders her unlovable. Protagonist Emma's jealousy of the fair-skinned serves as the primary catalyst for the play's events. Her struggles with overcoming colorism, fixating on her skin tone to the point of self-imposed isolation, and ongoing anxiety, eventually affect her ability to move forward.

The play's symbolic title focuses on colorism, the phenomenon by which people within the black community are judged based on skin color. According to Collins (1986), Black feminists argue that the negative image of black women's self-definition and self-valuation significantly contributes to their oppression within the prejudiced systems of dehumanization and domination (p. 18). North (1996) described *Color Struck* as a term that captures Emma's obsession and the retreat it provokes (p. 189). Hurston sought to justify the protagonist's actions through the writing by compassionately exploring Emma's fixation. Emma's obsession with colorism ultimately leads to the dissolution of her relationship as she becomes so preoccupied with the possibility of discrimination based on her skin tone that she drives away her boyfriend. Emma's narrative is gloomy, characterized by fear, anxiety, depression, and a sense of isolation stemming from the peculiar consciousness of her skin color.

The introductory incident confronts the issue of colorism within the black community, illuminating Emma's self-definition and valuation of her black identity. Emma grapples with colorism, leading to feelings of envy towards individuals with lighter skin tones and causing her to reject her own black identity. Emma insists that John takes the last coach because she suspects him of flirting with Effie, the mulatto girl. When Effie boards the Jim Crow train, she is promptly greeted by a peer of the opposite sex, who remarks, "Howdy do, Miss Effie, you look just like a rose. In fact, if you weren't walking, I'd think you were a rose" (Hurston, 1926, p. 7). Effie, the light-skinned, keenly understands her appearance and value, expressing her self-worth in sexual terms: "A man who doesn't bring me anything to put in my basket won't be accompanying me to any cakewalk." (p. 7). Struggling with low self-esteem, Emma fears that John will leave her for a light-skinned woman, and she justifies her jealousy by saying, "Jealous love is the only kind I've got." (p. 7).

In scene two, Hurston delved into the ramifications of colorism in the lives of black women. The play unfolds in the anteroom of the dance hall, where contestants entertain themselves before the contest. Emma's jealousy and suspicion resurface when she spots John with Effie. She pleads with John to forsake the competition and leave with her, but he staunchly refuses, entering the dance hall alone and leaving Emma behind. This incident links to an introductory moment from scene one—the crucial point of Emma's engagement—where her jealousy takes root. The cakewalk scene heightens the drama, depicting John and Effie as a couple, reinforcing Emma's awareness of her racial inferiority and John's preference for light-skinned women. As the dance progresses, Emma shifts to an outsider's position within her racial and social circles, while the bond between John and Effie becomes stronger. Hurston employed silence as a theatrical device, accentuating Emma's bitterness and loneliness on stage after John and Effie's exhibitionist departure from the crowd.

In Hurston's portrayal, women of color grapple with the multifaceted aspects of oppression. When John returns after 20 years in scene four, a reconciliation between Emma and John seems impossible. The description explains that Emma appears motionless, silent, surrounded by darkness, and virtually alone, caring for an ill daughter in a modest home. To Emma, social values seem to

outweigh her child's health. She rejects John's offer to bring medicine for her daughter and declines assistance from a colored doctor. John realizes that Emma harbors negative feelings about her skin color and refuses to trust the people who claim to care for her. Emma sits in darkness—a symbolic representation of her alienation due to colorism and sense of inferiority due to color consciousness. Her environment makes way for the audience to understand the cultural dilemma and its long-lasting effects on the overall American society.

Throughout the play, Hurston skillfully wove black folklore elements, capturing the essence of African-American culture during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The portrayal of the 'Old Negro' conforms to prevailing stereotypes, portraying black individuals as ever-smiling, frequently laughing, and seemingly carefree or irresponsible (Lemons, 1977, p. 111). However, Hurston sought to demonstrate that African-American communication is as sophisticated as that of white Americans. By crafting characters such as John and Emma, Hurston elevated their dialogue to a respectful perception and raised sophistication that mirrors the prevalent African-American thought processes. Authentic dialects and vivid characterizations purposely build the narrative and represent the people of color and their marginalized experiences. The final two scenes, reminiscent of genteel authors like Johnson's *Plumes*, share a familiar storyline. Hurston subtly merged traditional folk drama with societal dissent, which plays within this blend of comic and tragic elements. Emma, who grapples with the inferiority complex of color consciousness, uses a 'Negro dialect,' a part of her black identity that she paradoxically denies. As an embodiment of the 'Old Negro', Emma confronts the notion that intelligence is exclusively disassociated with the skin-color. This linguistic sophistication becomes integral to the black American culture, as Hurston adeptly employed dialect in her folk drama to illuminate the everyday stories of the lives of the people of color.

In Hurston's *Color Struck*, the rich cultural traditions of dancing and music within the black American folklore take center stage. The opening scene unfolds inside a 'Jim Crow' railway coach, where some witty bantering among the passengers sets the tone. Music and dancing enhance the passengers' enjoyment as the train journey progresses. When the curtain falls, Emma and John find themselves alone on stage, and Emma delivers a foreboding line: "Just for myself alone is the only way I know how to love" (Hurston, 1926, p. 9). Emma's jealousy, rooted in valid reasons, becomes apparent as she explains her feelings to John. The second scene exudes festivity, with people reveling in a cakewalk dance and music. Amidst this joyful atmosphere, Emma and John grapple with a heated argument in the background. As the other characters leave the stage, John is left alone. Bitter and sorrowful, Emma watches as John joins the dance with Effie. Hurston adeptly employed the theatrical device of a curtain fall to punctuate two scenes with Emma's poignant dialogue. Through this production, the curtain falls, and the illusion of the stage becomes a canvas for exploring colorism—a central theme in the play.

Hurston skillfully employed various theatrical devices to underscore the play's themes, thus paving the way for understanding the socio-political implications of women's oppression. Rooted in the rich folk culture celebrated during the Harlem Renaissance and hailing from the southern rural all-black community, Hurston spoke authentically from her personal experiences. In *Color Struck*, Hurston defied conventions by introducing a dark-skinned protagonist who challenged bourgeois sensibilities and shattered the stereotype of the tragic mulatto. Rather than being desexualized, Emma emerges as a flirtatious, alluring woman—physically attractive even to John. However, the impact of internalized complex about skin-color consciousness is devastating, leaving black women oppressed and with diminished self-esteem (Collins, 1986, p. 19). Emma's inability to trust John with her light-skinned daughter ultimately leads to the child's tragic demise. Through this heartbreaking loss, Hurston vividly dramatized the ferocity of institutionalized colorism at the societal level.

The struggles of black women Hurston created in her folk drama parallel her own circumstances. Hurston herself experienced a cultural shock when she moved to a city that discriminated against people of color because she was raised in a black neighborhood. Hurston described her experiences of becoming colored in her article "How It Feels To Be Coloured Me" saying:

> I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville … as Zora. When I disembarked from the riverboat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little coloured girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown—warranted not to rub nor run (Hurston, 1928, p. 215).

Here, Hurston reflects on the psychological tension between her early reinforcement of her black identity and her subsequent experiences in Eatonville. Hemenway (1980) described her as "a woman who rejoiced in print about the beauty of being black," thinking "she retreated into privacy that protected her sense of self; publicly, she avoided confrontation by announcing that she didn't look at a person's color, only one's worth" (p. 6). This complexity allowed Hurston to empathize with Emma's struggles while simultaneously critiquing bourgeois colorism and celebrating black beauty.

In *Color Struck*, symbolic critiques emerge, challenging the notion of defining and evaluating one's consciousness. Black women grapple with conforming to negative stereotypes while risking the erosion of respect for black culture. After a 20-year absence,

light-skinned John reunites with Emma. Their contrasting perspectives reveal the deep divisions within the black community. As Collins (1986) states, black women emphasize self-valuation, recognizing their exclusion from mainstream society and economic exploitation (p. 20). Emma's experiences position her as an 'outsider-within', navigating the complexities of social status. She defines herself candidly: "Ah ain't got a whole lot lak you. Nobody don't git rich in no white-folks kitchen, nor in de washtub. You know Ah ain't no school-teacher an nothin lak dat" (Hurston, 1926, p. 13). Emma's social and economic distance from John underscores the disparities within their community.

Color Struck masterfully navigates the complexities of colorism, identity, and societal expectations, inviting audiences to confront the lasting impact of racial biases. The theme of color consciousness takes centre stage, emphasizing the high price paid by the underprivileged and uninformed in pursuing racial justice. The dominant perception perpetuated by white supremacy portrays black women as unworthy and undesirable, perpetuating a cycle of racial injustice. The play underscores the concept of the 'outsider-within' experienced by black women after the Civil War. Emma, the poor black woman, grapples with her social and economic status, while Effie, the lighter-skinned woman, may have had an easier path to employment or education among the white communities during that era. According to Russell et al. (1992), racial color discrimination favored those with lighter skin, granting them greater privileges and more opportunities for social and economic advancement. The dominant ideology prevailing in the society reinforced the notion of a color caste (p. 20).

As scene two unfolds, Emma's violent outbursts of rage toward the light-skinned women reveal her internal struggle and strong self-hatred:

> Oh—them yaller wenches! How I hate em! They gets everything they wants—. … Oh, them half-whites, they get everything, they get everything everybody else wants! The men, the jobs—everything! The whole world has got a sign on it. Wanted: Light Coloured. Us blacks were made from cobblestones. (Hurston, 1926, p. 96–97)

As a Southern woman, Emma perseveres injustice and the burden of stereotypical images imposed upon black women. She denies her black identity, dismissing her feelings as irrational or mere envy. Emma's expression of pain resonates with the experiences endured by dark-skinned Black women throughout history (Okazawa-Rey et al., 1986, p. 16).

The self-definition of black womanhood and the discriminatory social practices against individuals based on skin color are often intertwined with underlying racial prejudices. These practices result in racial injustice and oppression in the American context. Recognizing and addressing these issues is essential to creating a more equitable and just world. In the opening scene, the theme of racism is vividly presented in the name of the Jim Crow, the railroad car. Emma's light-skinned daughter also suggested the presence of a white or partially white-skinned man. Emma is unmarried, so a white or almost white-skinned man may have sexually assaulted her, or she may have purposefully sought out a white ancestry for her offspring to protect them from the 'curse' of having dark skin. In the last scene, John advises Emma to call a 'coloured' doctor, saying, 'There must be some good coloured ones around here now' Emma replies, 'I would not let one of 'em tend my cat if I had one!' (Hurston, 1926, p. 14). Emma's contempt for everything black-colored, including herself, is once again made clear by the appearance of the white-skinned doctor. Emma had more faith in a white-skinned doctor to treat her ill daughter, although he could not save her.

The play concludes by highlighting the oppression black women faced, emphasizing that the white supremacist system has internalized power over their esteem and image (Collins, 1986, p. 19). The narrative reveals the complexities of identity, self-worth, and societal expectations within the context of colorism.

4.3 Discussion

Collins posited that black women were oppressed through institutional practices collaborating to establish an unjust system. With this unjust system, black women writers contributed to shaping the African-American culture within a black context. The constructed identity of black women writers, derived from their position as 'outsiders-within' domestic work, forms the material backdrop for a distinct black women's standpoint (Collins, 2000, pp. 9,11). Collins emphasized that the oppression and marginalization experienced by black women are interconnected, shaping their unique experiences confronting a dominant system that forced them to remain silent (Collins, 2000, p. 20). The folk dramas portray racism as the blatant manifestation of unequal power dynamics stemming from the sociopolitical dominance of white Americans, as portrayed in Johnson's *Plumes* and Hurston's *Color Struck*. Consequently, systematic discrimination arises, including the outright and bold domination of certain groups followed by the denial of opportunities based on justified qualifications.

This research illustrates how black women transition from being the 'insiders within a society' to the 'outsiders experiencing exploitation.' They deeply internalize a low truncated self-definition and deficient self-valuation, experiencing the forceful nature of mighty oppression. Johnson and Hurston pioneered in intentionally combining aesthetics with social dissent. They strongly and

courageously raised issues of persecution of women of color and openly challenged the discriminatory system of domination. Both utilized distinct theatrical techniques to explore women's oppression in their folk drama, incorporating rural poverty, neglect, black dialects, women losing children and lovers, racial discrimination, political implications, and folk idioms on various occasions. Their effective use of black dialects distinguishes between the identities of women of color and portrays complex personalities and political themes.

Both Johnson and Hurston employed a literary strategy that placed their female protagonists and their experiences at the center stage. In *Plumes*, Johnson deftly combined sophisticated theatrical devices with an authentic exploration of women's oppression. Her play navigates women's domestic spaces, revealing black women's social positions within the American context and emphasizing at the same time the importance of the relationships between black women. Johnson's style incorporates folklore elements, including the black dialects and supernatural elements that connect black women, underscoring the experience of women's oppression and their struggle against willful subordination within the racial system. Meanwhile, in *Color Struck*, Hurston employed complex elements of black folklore, including dancing in a cakewalk with certain tragic undertones. The folk elements in her play primarily emphasize the aesthetics of the black communities and women's oppression, shaping their self-identifying consciousness. Hurston portrayed her protagonist as a black female who grapples with poor self-esteem and confronts the impact of negative stereotypes related to black womanhood.

Johnson and Hurston effectively utilized folklore to portray the authentic stories of black women's experiences, expressing their profound indignation and justified resentment towards the deep-rooted racism in their lives. In Johnson's play *Plumes*, the theme foregrounds her protagonist, Charity, who harbors an intense animosity towards Dr. Scott, who declines her assistance and disregards her expressed preferences regarding coffee grounds. In Hurston's play *Color Struck*, the protagonist, Emma, endures mistreatment and disregard from her significant other, John, when he abandons her during the dance to partner with a light-skinned woman. Emma expresses concerns about feeling excluded from society due to her dark skin color observing a trend where individuals with lighter skin tones are more likely to secure desirable partners and the most sought-after professional opportunities. Emma's self-definition leaves her feeling marginalized and disconnected from certain aspects of society. Both protagonists are impoverished black women whose identities drive the play's narratives. These folk plays prominently explore the most prevalent themes of race, gender, and class, which are strongly evident in the texts and are exceptionally emphasized in the performances.

5. Conclusion

In the context of Collins' black feminist perspectives, this study has analyzed Giorgina Douglas Johnson's and Zora Neale Hurston's folk drama and how they portrayed black women as the 'outsiders-within' in the American context. In *Plumes*, Johnson skillfully employed tragic and deplorable themes using folklore elements to illustrate the challenging experiences of black women within a prejudiced and racially unjust system. Her playwriting style seamlessly blended the desolate and unfortunate components, black folklore, and various complying theatrical devices. Johnson delved into the nuances of black women's oppression through oppositional relationships, emphasizing the fluid dynamics between the inferior and dominant within the white-skinned dominated system. Meanwhile, in *Color Struck*, Hurston crafted the character of her female protagonist as someone innately oppressed by low self-esteem and negative self-definition—a stereotypical image of black womanhood. While Emma grappled with denying her black identity, Hurston's style emphasized black aesthetics, including songs and dancing cakewalks. Notably, Hurston did not shy away from addressing staunch racial injustices faced by black women. Her character confronted racism within the American context, exposing the dehumanizing effects of the resilient, white-skinned domination system.

Both Johnson and Hurston adeptly highlighted the theme of women's oppression in their texts, a theme that resonated powerfully and wholeheartedly in their performances. By drawing on folklore, Johnson and Hurston effectively portrayed the authentic experiences of black women and persuasively expressed their political implications utilizing American theatre. Johnson and Hurston, the adroit black playwrights from Harlem, significantly impacted the American theatre with their estimable works. Both playwrights well understood the significance of acknowledging and employing black folk elements in their dramas. They revolutionized American theatre and significantly contributed to American theatre during the Harlem Renaissance by crafting dynamic characters and compelling dialogues while emphasizing the deferred experiences of black American women within the socio-political context. Their folk dramas depicted the diverse forms and faces of oppression and discrimination faced by black Americans in society. They skillfully utilized the black South as a backdrop, specifically focusing on the southern black women's lives, experiences, and cultural expressions and emotions. Johnson's and Hurston's folk plays engage deeply with the meaning of the black culture, providing a thoughtful and rich literary exploration. Through their writing, Johnson and Hurston lent a voice to the ubiquitous issues black women encountered in society.

Though this research provides insight into the implementation of folk elements in Zora Neale Hurston's and Georgia Douglas Johnson's folk drama, the analysis and discussion of this study are limited to two texts: Hurston's *Color Struck* and Johnson's *Plumes* in light of the black feminist perspectives of Patricia Hill Collins. Therefore, this study recommends future research of Hurston's

and Johnson's folk drama in their different texts using other theories and comparing them with other women writers to provide deeper insight into the contribution of these two prominent playwrights to the Harlem Renaissance and American theatre.

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