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# Research Chronicler

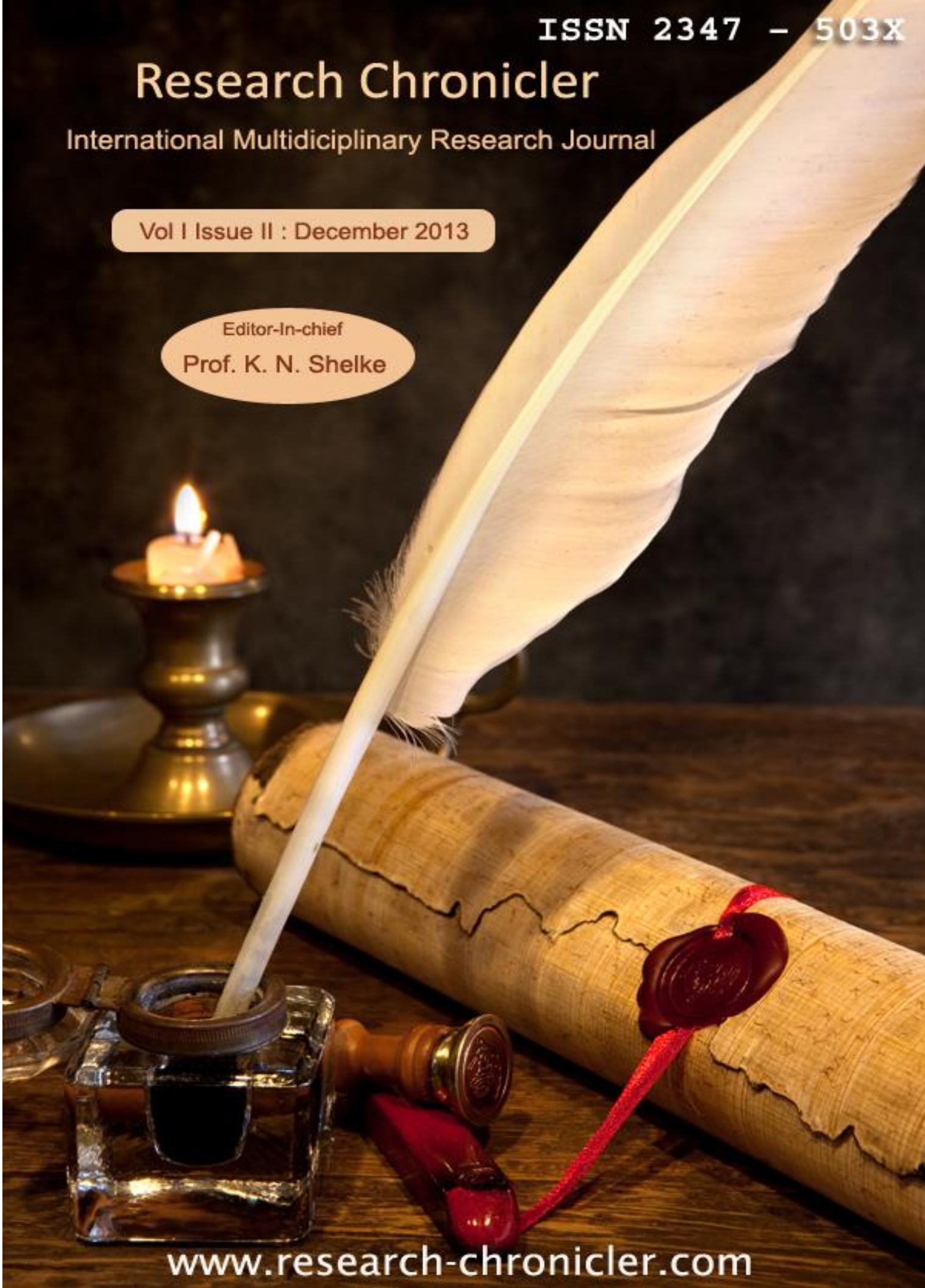
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# Research Chronicler

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## CONTENTS

Name of the Author	Title of the Paper	Download
Dr. Archana & Dr. Pooja Singh	Feminine Sensibility Vs. Sexuality: A New Dimension	1201PDF
Dr. Akhilesh Kumar Dwivedi	Interrogating Representations of History: A Study of Mukul Kesavan's <i>Looking Through Glass</i>	1202 PDF
Dr. A.P. Pandey	Problems and Promises in Translating Poetry	1203 PDF
Dr. Ketan K. Gediya	Generation Divide among Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri's <i>Unaccustomed Earth</i>	1204 PDF
Dr. Nisha Dahiya	Patriotic Urge in Sarojini Naidu's Poetry	1205 PDF
Md. Irshad	Shashi Deshpande's <i>That Long Silence</i> : A Study of Assertion and Emotional Explosion	1206 PDF
Dr. Shanti Tejawani ICT	: As an Effective Tool for Teacher Trainees	1207 PDF
Dr. Manoj Kumar Jain	Differences in Stock Price Reaction to Bond Rating Changes: With Special Ref from India	1208 PDF
Maushmi Thombare	Bahinabai Chaudhari – A Multidimensional Poet	1209 PDF
Prof. Deepak K. Nagarkar	Death as Redemption in Arthur Miller's <i>Death of a Salesman</i>	1210 PDF
Dr. Vijaykumar A. Patil	Zora Neale Hurston's Theory of Folklore	1211 PDF
Dr. Jaiprakash N. Singh	Dalitonki Vyatha-Katha: Dalitkatha	1212 PDF
Raj Kumar Mishra	Traces of Hindu Eco-Ethics in the Poetry of A.K. Ramanujan	1213 PDF
Dr. Nidhi Srivastava	A Comparative Study of Values and Adjustment of Secondary School Students With and Without Working Mothers	1214 PDF
Sanjeev Kumar Vishwakarma	<i>Pinjar</i> : From Verbal to Audio-visual Transmutation	1215 PDF
Swati Rani Debnath	W.B. Yeats: Transition from Romanticism to	1216 PDF

	Modernism	
Sushil Sarkar	Environment and Woman: Reflections on Exploitation through Eco-Feminism in Mahasweta Devi's <i>Imaginary Maps</i>	1217 PDF
<b>Book Review</b>		
Sangeeta Singh	Goddess in Exile: A Sad Tale of Female Existentialism	1218 PDF
<b>Poetry</b>		
Bhaskar Roy Barman	On The Marge	1219 PDF
Dr Seema P. Salgaonkar	Entrapped	1220 PDF
Jaydeep Sarangi	I Live for My Daughter / Writing Back	1221 PDF
<b>Interview</b>		
Prof. Masood Ahmed	Interview with Poet Arbind Kumar Choudhary	1222 PDF

## Zora Neale Hurston's Theory of Folklore

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### ABSTRACT

Three key innovators in the use of folk material in Afro-American fiction are Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, and Toni Morrison. These women writers forge a tradition in fiction writing which exhibits a particular interest in folk material i.e. ritual, legend, customs, folklore, myth, superstitions, etc. In their individual artistic visions and narrative techniques, they present their varied proposals for racial survival and notions of the Afro-American woman independent of material obsessions.

**Key Terms:** Afro-American fiction, folklore, material obsession.

Probably more than any other Black woman writer in her time, Zora Neale Hurston was aware of the strange mixture of fiction and folk traditions. Robert Hemenway, in his biography, aptly described her contribution to the Harlem Renaissance as one who articulated the race spirit by looking to the folk heritage as a source of art. He said (1977: 50) "She more than any other Renaissance artist struggled with the dangers of surveying the masses from the mountaintop, treating the folk material of the race as a landscape to be strip-minded in order to fuel the creative forge". As a writer, Hurston's place is secured because of her prolific work and unique sense of self; moreover, her imaginative (re)workings of folk materials

initiate a tradition among African-American women writers. As a significant forerunner and inspirational and textual source for many later twentieth century fiction writers, including Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison, Hurston is a pioneer in juxtaposing realistic detail and folk materials while dramatizing the significance of racial heritage and identity. Her role as a folklorist creating fiction is clearly seen in all her novels.

### Zora Neale Hurston's Works:

Zora Neale Hurston's work includes two collections folklore, *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938); an autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942); several short stories; and several novels including *Jonah's Gourd vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937),

*Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). Many of these work concentrate upon the romantic yet everyday features of life while making clear use of folk tales, rhymes, idioms, superstitions, games, and customs of her Eatonville experience. While Hurston's primary concern in her work was to "gather the folkways of her people," her skill with folklore and fiction provides the basis for a tradition in Black women's writing.

### **African American Literature and Folklore:**

Although many Black writers, both female and male acknowledge their dependence of Black folk traditions, few studies show the explicit relationship between these traditions and the novelist's imagination. This is regrettable for several reasons. First of all, from a literary point of view, one is hard put to distinguish between folk tradition or folklore as a pure literature and the novel as the singular creation of the imagination. If in Black literature these two dimensions are interdependent, the folkloric tradition might be illuminated by the insights of Black literary criticism.

A major concern, in this research paper, is the definition of folklore and other terms related to the folk tradition in literature. Several writers have offered illuminating definitions and others have provided enlightening critiques of creative literature which incorporates, through various means, folk elements. Selected definitions and a

review of literature led to the discovery of the concept of the folk ideas, a form which allows a means of analyzing basic cultural premises and folk elements found in the fiction of recent American writers. This study explores the significance of the folk idea as a unit of worldview and the tradition established by Zora Neale Hurston.

Folk ideas may be defined as Alan Dundes "traditional notions that a group of people have about the nature of man, of the world, and of man's life in the world." These notions are demonstrated in the actions, sayings, and stories of a group and reflect the underlying assumptions that are the building blocks of worldview.

An example of an American folk idea might be the idea that any object can be measured in monetary terms. We see this idea in the expression, "Anything or any person has his/her price." Another American folk idea is that "There is no limit as to how much of any one commodity can be produced." This idea is shown in such traditional phrases as "There's (plenty) more where that came from." Also, countless stories and legends such as the American buried treasure legends uphold his notion of unlimited goods. Another folk idea is the notion that "if something is good for you, it must taste bad." The converse to this folk idea is the notion that "if something tastes good-like candy - - it must be bad for your health." Alan Dundes notes that both of these ideas- - unlimited good and salvation through suffering - - share a commitment to progress. This is consistent with the future orientation of an American worldview

which is tied to a “bigger and better principle” (97-98).

While folklore as a literary genre has no precise definition, that folklore and folkloric materials inform the work of the novelist is readily observable in American and Afro-American literature. For me, “Exploiting passionately every aspect of life, folklore remains potential, and/or distinct based on various integral aspects of a particular human society. Exhibiting spiritual, traditional and contemporary life; folklore performs various functions. These functions are related to group identity, culture, entertainment, education, aesthetic sense, beliefs, faith, ethnic values and so on.” Further I would like to state that, “A study of folklore will lead to a better understanding and analysis of various communities, traditions, and human natures. Folklore exists in every community. Social, political, economic, cultural, and other changes are represented in it. Traditional art, craft, literature, different trends, lifestyle remain at its centre. It forms a bridge to one’s past generations. It also explains the need of interrelationship between different families, communities, and individuals to crystallize human life.”

Zora Neale Hurston’s Theory of Folklore:

Hurston has presented her theory of folklore in *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*. She (1990:09) says in *Mules and Men*, “...when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and standoff and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spyglass of Anthropology to look through at that...” Through this she stated

that a sense and a vision are required to detect and study folklore. When she looked at herself and her background from this perspective, she (Ibid) realized that “...I was new myself, so it looked sensible for me to choose familiar grounds.” “Folklore exists everywhere,” but according to her (Ibid: 10), “it is not as easy to collect as it sounds.” For her (Ibid), “The best source (to collect folklore) is where there are the least outside influences...” Thus, it requires special efforts to select the folk group and collect folklore. In this task, role of people is also important. “People being unprivileged,” according to Zora Neale Hurston (Ibid), “are the shyest... They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which soul lives by...” There are various resources for collecting folklore. Her experience at Joe Clarke’s store was more impressive in this regard. To reproduce her experience, she (Ibid) said, “...it was the habit of the men folks particularly to gather on the store porch of evenings and swap stories. Even women folks would stop and break a breadth with them at times...” Thus, for her a perfect and rewarding resource to collect folklore is a place where people gather impromptu or deliberately. She knew the psyche of people. No one entertains others to know the details of personal/social life easily. Though someone tries to do it, people use their tact to outsmart. In this regard, she presented the case of African American people. According to her (Ibid),

...the Negro...in particularly is evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, “Get out of here!” we smile and tell him or her something that satisfied the white person because, knowing

so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.

There is a reason behind this. She (Ibid) stated,

The theory behind our tactics: The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with the handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put thing play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song.

Thus, a familiar ground is required to collect the best folklore. She (Ibid) said, "I knew that even I was going to have some hindrance among strangers." To collect folklore, she prefers Eatonville as she knew everybody was going to help me. According to her, the stories narrated to children are also a useful resource to collect folklore. She (Ibid 11) said, "I thought about the tales I had heard as a child. How even the Bible was made over to suit our vivid imagination? How the devil always outsmarted God and how that over noble hero Jack or John- not *John Henry*, who occupies the same place in Negro folk lore that Casey Jones does in white lore and if anything is more recent –outsmarted the devil." Through following discussion, she (Ibid 14) indicated, through one of the discussions, that people (of any folk group) do have the material of folklore.

Plenty of people, George...They are a lot more valuable than you might think. We want to set them down before it's too late.

"Too late for what?"

"Before everything forgets all of 'em."

Hurston also believed that a mood is required to collect, narrate and listen folklore. This mood may be created by taking special efforts. To present one such mood, she (Ibid 24) said, "It was hilarious night with a pinch of everything social mixed with the story telling. Everybody ate ginger bread; some drank the buttermilk provided and some provided coon dick for themselves. Nobody guzzled it- just took it in social sips..." Impact of such a tempo is always rewarding. She (Ibid) said,

... they told stories enough for a volume by itself. Some of the stories were the familiar drummer-type of tale about two Irishman, Pat and Mike, or two Jews as the case might be. Some were the European folk-tales undiluted, like Jack and Beanstalk. Others had slight local variations, but Negro imagination is so facile that there was little need for outside help.

Thus, according to Hurston, the subject matter of folklore is vast. While writing for the Florida Federal Writers' Project, *The Florida Negro (unpublished)*, 1938, Hurston (Ibid: 875) said, "Folklore is the boiled-down juice of human living. It does not belong to any special time, place, nor people. No country is so primitive that it has no lore, and no country has yet become

so civilized that no folklore is being made within its boundaries.”

For Hurston, folklore is an ongoing and it takes various turns. To prove this, she (Ibid) cited an example of folklore in Florida. “Folklore in Florida is still in the making. Folk tunes, tales, and characters are still emerging from the lush glades of primitive imagination before they can be finally drained by formal education and mechanical inventions.” She (Ibid) believed, “In folklore, as in everything else that people create, the world is a great, big, old serving-platter, and all the local places are like eating-plates...” Folklorist attaches local flavor which is known as originality. She (Ibid: 875-76) also believed, “...folklore is the first thing that man makes out of the natural laws that he finds around him-beyond the necessity of making a living.” For her (Ibid: 876) “Folklore is an art,” and “... (it) is a discovery in itself... Folklore is the arts of the people before they find out that there is any such thing as art and they make it out of whatever they find at hand.” She (Ibid: 836) also believed, “Negro

folklore is not a thing of the past... Its great variety shows the adaptability of the black man...” Thus, the scope of African American folklore is wide.

#### **Conclusion:**

Zora Neale Hurston, the most prolific African American writer prior to the 1960s, broadens her objectives of “collecting the folkways” of her people by creating fiction which embodies folk materials. Hurston, through the romantic pastoral, incorporates in her stories of blacks in Florida, not only such folk customs as funeral observances and superstitions about death, but also her concern with romantic or supernatural elements outside the self. As a writer of the 1920s and 1930s, Hurston began a tradition which introduces the use of folkloric materials by African American women novelists to reveal the history and character of black life through varied dimensions. Her theory of folklore is genuine, perfect and professional. It must be used for various purposes from various perspectives. Study of Zora Neale Hurston’s theory of folklore will be rewarding.

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