



ISSN: 0976-3031

Available Online at <http://www.recentscientific.com>

*International Journal of Recent Scientific Research*  
Vol. 6, Issue, 7, pp.5288-5290, July, 2015

**International Journal  
of Recent Scientific  
Research**

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# LANGSTON HUGHES' *THANK YOU MA'AM* AS A FEMINIST LITERATURE

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received 21<sup>th</sup>, July, 2015  
Received in revised form 22<sup>th</sup>,  
July, 2015  
Accepted 24<sup>th</sup>, July, 2015  
Published online 29<sup>th</sup>,  
July, 2015

#### Key words:

Gender, Self, Black, Patriarchy,  
Womanism etc.

### ABSTRACT

“Ira Singhal first in UPSC exam, top four positions secured by women.” This forms one of today’s newspaper headlines (on 5<sup>th</sup> July, 2015) following the result of Civil Service Exam conducted for India’s best minds. The emphasis on gender is quite significant here. Had the toppers been men, there would have been no such special mention of the gender role. This is essentially connected with feminism. A complex and broad concept, feminism can hardly be put into a single definition that would justify all feminist theories. There are lots of ways to approach this ideology, including liberal, radical and black feminism. While the liberal approach seeks to expand the opportunities and rights of the women; and the radical movement focuses on eliminating patriarchy; the black feminism blames racial biasness. Whatever the feminist goal may be, however, when represented in literary text, explicit or implied, it is fundamentally a feminist literature. This paper tries to view Langston Hughes’ *Thank You Ma’am* through the lens of feminism.

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### INTRODUCTION

The story of Langston Hughes’ *Thank You Ma’am* centres round two characters- one male and the other female. By the end of the story, the former thanks the later by addressing her as ‘Ma’am’ which is a polite term originally used to a woman of rank or authority. Thus the very title of the text bears the stamp of feminism. Traditionally, women have been taught in different cultures across the world to speak politely before men, respect male authority, and be thankful to them. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir says:

Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth.

The radical feminists, however, call for a “radical reordering of society in which male supremacy is eliminated in all social and economic contexts” and “seek to abolish patriarchy by challenging existing social norms and institutions, rather than through a purely political process.” This sense of woman authority is very cleverly hinted at the title of the text.

Hughes’s feminist ideology is reflected in the text through the character named Mrs Luella Bates Washington Jones. ‘Mrs’ is “a title that comes before a married woman’s family name or before her first and family names together”. (OALD) But

nowhere in the text her husband, i.e. the male figure is mentioned. The traditional influence of the husband on the wife, i.e. the dominance of the men over the women is denied here. Luella Bates is presented as a self-sufficient, self-sustaining and self-motivated human being. It echoes the words of Germaine Greer:

Every human body has its optimum weight and contour, which only health and efficiency can establish.

Thus the feminist notion of the woman as a human being is suggested by the very name of the character.

Mrs Jones is the representative of the modern or deconstructive feminism focusing on the power of women: “She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it” and “she always carried it slung across her shoulder”. When the boy tries to snatch her purse, “the large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter”. Then she is found ‘dragging the frightened boy’ through the street. And when he starts struggling to free himself, she becomes even more powerful and dominating:

Mrs Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half-nelson about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street.

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In spite of his repeated attempts, the boy fails to get away from the clutches of the formidable lady. Quite aware of her own power and confidence, Mrs Jones declares:

If you think that the contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs Luella Bates Washington Jones.

This image of a ghastly woman treating a male figure like a puppet clearly brings out the feminist approach of challenging the traditional gender roles.

A woman triggering off the liberal approach to feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft opines, "I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves." The feminist writers like John Stuart Mill, Helen Taylor, Betty Frieden and Rebecca Walker also hold the selfsame view of woman's own power and ability to determine their equality by means of their own considerations, own choices and own actions. This outlook towards feminism finds remarkable expression in the character of Mrs Jones. She is a self dependent lady. She has an identity of her own. She has her own job. She earns money by working in 'a hotel beauty-shop' where 'all kinds of women came in and out, blonds, red-heads and Spanish'. As it stays open late, often she has to return home alone late at night. But she never hesitates. She has the ability to face and handle any untoward incident on the street, if there is any. She lives alone in a 'large kitchenette-furnished room' of her own. She cooks there only to feed herself. Thus she can single-handedly manage both the home and the world. She needs no protection from her 'husband' or any other assistance of men. Interestingly, Hughes describes the inmates of the other rooms of the large house where Mrs Jones lives, as 'roomers', without any mention of their genders.

Feminism is internally connected with 'womanism', a term coined by Alice Walker. According to Walker, "Womanism is to feminist as purple to lavender." She explains the term 'womanist' thus:

...a woman who loves another woman, sexually and/ or non sexually. She appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility... [she] is committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health... loves the spirit.... loves struggle. Loves herself. Regardless.

Walker's thought of 'womanism' is deeply rooted in the racial and gender oppression of the black woman, giving birth to 'black feminism'. Patricia Hill Collins defines the expression 'black feminism', in *Black Feminist Thought*(1991), as including "women who theorize the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary black women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society". Other black feminists like Angela Davis and bell hooks also highlight the disadvantages of class and race along with gender, shaping the experiences of the nonwhite women. All these find superb expression in the character of Mrs Jones. Let us have a look.

Set in the backdrop of Harlem, a major African-American residential and cultural centre in New York Hughes' story

relates to the racial experiences of a black woman, her struggle for survival and her contribution to the community, or rather the society as a whole. Like many urban areas, Harlem also experienced rapid population growth early in the twentieth century. Many single family buildings were converted into small apartments. Mrs Jones lives in one of these apartments- a large room with a small kitchen at the corner. She works hard to earn money. She returns home late at night. One day a black boy comes in contact with her:

It was about eleven o'clock at night, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse.

As a result, she kicks the boy, picks him up, catches hold of him and drags him to her home. But she is not as strict and stern a lady as she appears to be. Her essential womanliness is expressed very soon. No sooner does Mrs Jones see the dirt on the face of the 'frail and willow-wild' boy than she utters, "I got a great mind to wash your face for you". When she comes to learn that the poor boy has nobody at home to look after or guide him, she says:

You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. The mother in her also knows how much hungry or rather starved her 'son' is. So, adding half of her 'ten-cent cake', she says, "Eat some more, son." However, herself a black woman, Mrs Jones is quite aware of the socio-economical condition of the black people. Hence, "the woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that would embarrass him". She knows what may lead the innocent black to the path of wrongdoing:

I were young once and I wanted things I could not get ... I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son-- neither tell God.

But she wants the boy to live a straight life. She does not appreciate the boy's act of snatching: if he is in need of some shoes, she advises, he had better have asked her for money, which she later gives him:

...take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto my pocketbook nor nobody else's — because shoes come by devilish like that will burn your feet.

Thus the character of Mrs Jones embodies struggle and survival as well as commitment to herself, to the community and to the society.

Any study on feminism, black or white, includes its outcomes either. In other words, the changes that occur in the society due to the 'waves' of feminist ideologies are also incorporated in the subsequent studies on the same. Hughes' text may also be read as a triumph of feminism, or rather 'black feminism' or 'womanism'. It is the story of a black snatcher transformed into a good boy under the impact of 'womanism'. Initially, the 'frightened' boy Roger seeks nothing but to flee away from the 'large woman': "I just want you to turn me loose". But Mrs Jones' motherly treatment of the snatcher gradually generates in him a feeling of togetherness or oneness with her. This

accounts for why Roger does not run away even when he has a chance:

The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse which she left behind her on the day-bed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room where he thought she could easily see him out of the corner of the other eye, if she wanted to. He did not trust the woman not to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

Now the changed boy can hardly find words to express his gratitude to the lady: "He barely managed to say 'Thank You'". To conclude, Thank You Ma'am provides a brilliant study on feminism. A number of feminist ideologies are blended in the text making it as complex as feminism itself. As there are liberal, radical and deconstructive approaches, the concepts of 'womanism' and black feminism have also got manifested in the portrayal of the character of Mrs Luella Bates Washington Jones. In short, Hughes' short story embodies a long story of feminism.

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#### **How to cite this article:**

Chandi Mandal., Langstone Hughes' Thank You Ma'am As A Feminist Literature. *International Journal of Recent Scientific* Vol. 6, Issue, 7, pp.5288-5290, July, 2015

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