



## Breaking the Stereotypes: A Feminist Analysis of Unconventional Female Representation in Langston Hughes' *Thank You, Ma'am*

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to analyze *Thank You, Ma'am* (1958) which is based on an unconventional representation of woman defying societal notion regarding women. The short story by Langston Hughes with its non-stereotypical manifestation of woman has challenged the long-established viewpoint over woman. In different literary and feminist discourse, this story has been evaluated textually in distinct way. The existing textual and contextual analyses have responded to the text in terms of stylistics, art of characterization and moral standpoint. The reason for analyzing the text is to examine unconventional representation of woman in *Thank You, Ma'am* through feministic lens. The feminist analysis of the study discloses a new and significant portrayal of woman unlike historical narrative regarding woman as weak gender. Using comparative analysis of classical manifestation of woman with Hughes' portrayal of Mrs. Jones, the study creates a specific notion to understand the essential worth of woman considering both representations respectively.

### 1. Introduction

This research article attempts to analyze the text of the short story *Thank You, Ma'am* by Langston Hughes in feminist context. Feminism is a literary and social theory that deals with the belief that claims the worth of woman in the society while negating all stereotypical anti-women perspectives. As well as, in social regard, feminism claims the natural rights for the women including gender equality, independence and other rights for existence such as education, politics, finance and other social rights. Feminism brings forth a radical attitude not only critiques the taboo of social construction devaluing women but also negates the literary judgments on women and their nature. This study utilizes a profound analysis of the text, exploring the powerful woman character in the story and her role altering the plot of the story unexpectedly. As in general, when it comes to woman character, all the writers from ages tried to represent physical appearance of the women or limited the women in domestic affairs in the literary works. An unjust stereotypical notion has been portrayed in the literary works which have been challenged in this short story of Hughes. However, taking this juxtaposed manifestation of woman into consideration, the study attempts to analyze the text of this story and its difference from other literary pieces in term of representing woman.

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## 1.2. Research Questions

1. How does Langston Hughes challenge traditional gender stereotypes and build a strong woman character in *Thank You Ma'am*?
2. How does Langston Hughes use ordinary dialogue and simple narrative structure to portray a woman character who holds moral and social power, despite common gender expectations?

## 1.3. Research Objectives

- To explore how *Thank You Ma'am* challenges traditional gender stereotypes and constructs female agency, strength, and moral authority.
- To examine the use of simple narrative structure to portray a woman character who possess moral and social power in *Thank You Ma'am*.

## 2. Literature Review

The central focus of feminist theory is the examination of power dynamics that often-subordinate women. Hughes portrays Mrs. Jones as a character who subverts traditional gender expectations. In comparison to the societal ideal of women as passive or dependent, Mrs. Jones is strong, assertive, and exerts control over Roger when he tries to rob her. Rather than reacting with fear or anger, she physically restrains him and takes him into her house, where she not only confronts him but also shows him compassion.

From a feminist point of view, this depiction of Mrs. Jones defies traditional ideas of femininity. Judith Butler (1990) argues that gender is not a fixed identity, but a social construct shaped by performance and cultural expectations. Mrs. Jones' physical strength, self-confidence, and authoritative engagements challenge the gender norms of her time. Feminist scholar like Bell Hooks (2000) has critiqued the ways in which women's roles are often confined to passive, nurturing roles, and Mrs. Jones' actions defy this stereotype, presenting that women can embody strength and assertiveness while also providing care.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) emphasizes the need to understand how multiple axes of identity, such as race, class, and gender, intersect to shape individuals' experiences of suppression. *Thank You, Ma'am* provides a captivating example of intersectionality. Mrs. Jones, a Black woman from a proletariat background, practices her position of strength and power to teach Roger a moral lesson about self-worth and respect. Her racial and class identity influences how she deals with the boy, peculiarly because she distinguishes his individual social and economic struggles. Feminist scholar, like Patricia Hill Collins (2000), argues that Black women must navigate the intersection of racism and sexism, which often results in downgrading both within the feminist movement and in broader social frameworks. Mrs. Jones' empowerment in this context challenges these layered practices of oppression, as she not only proclaims her authority over Roger but also gives him empathy and understanding, drawing from her own experience of hardship.

The perception of maternal care is often discussed within feminist theory, specifically in terms of whether women's roles as caregivers contribute to or challenge their oppression. While conventional views of femininity often confine women to the character of the selfless mother, feminist scholars have pointed out that care can also be a form of power (Nussbaum, 1999). Mrs. Jones does not embody the conventional, passive mother; rather, she determines deep love by taking Roger into her home, serving him, and teaching him a lesson. Mrs. Jones' actions suggest that care can be an empowering, transformative energy. This echoes Joan Tronto's (1993) idea of "care ethics," where care is not just an act of nurturing but also an interchange of authority, accountability, and respect. Mrs. Jones uses care to convey moral guidance, not to depreciate Roger but to empower him to make better choices. Through her motherly consultant, she does not reinforce subordination but instead challenges Roger to reflect on his actions and reconsider his attitude to life.

Gender roles shape both individual characteristics and societal beliefs. In *Thank You, Ma'am*, Mrs. Jones undermines these gender expectations by exercising her power as a woman. Rather than deteriorating into a stereotype of the frail or passive woman, she represents a form of maternal influence that commands respect. Feminist scholars have long argued that women can, and should, use their positions to challenge male-controlled social structures (Scott, 1986). Mrs. Jones' ability to care for Roger breaks with conventional gender roles, illuminating how maternal authority can be a foundation of authorization. In addition, Mrs. Jones' choice to prolong compassion and guidance to Roger defies the idea that women's maternal labor is always unreciprocated or devalued. Feminist ethics of care, as discussed by authors like Tronto (1993), suggests that care must be

mutual and transformative, not simply a means of ensuring the existence of others. Mrs. Jones demonstrates this type of care, which not only helps Roger but also challenges him to oppose his personal behavior and future judgements.

Moreover, since the story defies and challenges conventional portrayal of woman, provides an insight supporting postfeminist framework. "The post-feminist masquerade and its various incarnations, the well-educated working girl, the swearing and boozing phallic girl, and the racialized global girl, are adopted freely and self-consciously as statements of personal choice and female empowerment" (Butler, 2009). Far and aware, Hughes followed McRobbie's notion of strong woman character and experimenting it in an unconventional narrative. She argues (2004), post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be considered, to suggest that equality is achieved, to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasizes that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force.

Angela McRobbie has emerged as one of the most influential voices in feminist theory, particularly in her exploration of post feminism and its cultural implications. In both her 2004 article *Post-Feminism and Popular Culture* and her 2009 book *The Aftermath of Feminism*, she outlines how feminist achievements are being subtly reversed through contemporary media and consumer culture. This review aims to discuss McRobbie's central arguments and explore how her ideas can be applied to literary analysis, especially in exploring female characters, narratives of empowerment, and the commodification of feminism.

McRobbie (2004) introduced the concept of post feminism as a complex and contradictory cultural discourse. Rather than seeing it as a historical phase following feminism, she defines post feminism as a reactionary framework that both acknowledges and dismisses feminism. One of her most enduring contributions is the notion of a "double entanglement"—where feminism is "taken into account" in public discourse only to be rejected as no longer necessary. This, she argues, enables the reinforcement of traditional gender roles under the guise of progress (McRobbie, 2004).

In her later composition, McRobbie (2009) expands this argument by highlighting how feminist values are absorbed into neoliberal ideology. Terms like "empowerment," "choice," and "independence" are no longer rooted in collective political action but are instead reframed within individualistic narratives. This shift is essential when analyzing female protagonists in contemporary literature. While many such characters are portrayed as autonomous and successful, closer reading often reveals how their sense of empowerment is tied to consumerism, romantic achievement, or bodily discipline rather than any broader societal transformation.

For example, literature classified under the "chick-lit" genre often centers on self-self-contained women navigating modern life. On the surface, these characters may appear to reflect feminist standards, but as McRobbie (2009) notes, they often reinforce a narrow form of femininity centered on self-improvement and personal success. Characters from novels like *Bridget Jones's Diary* exemplify this paradox, where the protagonist's empowerment is linked more to physical manifestation and relationship status than to genuine agency.

This narrative model reflects what Gill (2007) calls the postfeminist sensibility a cultural style marked by self-surveillance, makeover logic, and the illusion of choice. Literature adopting this sensibility presents women as responsible for their own happiness and progress, even as they face systemic obstacles. McRobbie's framework uncovers the tension between visible independence and underlying compliance with patriarchal norms.

A key concept in McRobbie's theory is the "undoing" of feminism. She argues that feminist gains are being systematically dismantled not through overt opposition but by being rendered obsolete (McRobbie, 2009). This is particularly visible in literary descriptions that mock feminist characters or depict them as irrelevant. Novels with such portrayals subtly convey the message that feminism is outdated, implying that women today no longer require combined resistance or political awareness. Negra (2009) supports this by showing how contemporary narratives celebrate individual achievements while ignoring structural inequalities.

McRobbie also examines the creation of what she calls the "subject of capacity" a female individual encouraged to flourish within neoliberal conditions by being self-reliant, flexible, and marketable. In literature, this is often seen in characters who successfully balance careers, relationships, and aesthetics. Yet these protagonists often carry the hidden burden of emotional labor and social expectations. Literary texts like Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* subtly critique these pressures, aligning with McRobbie's insights about the hidden costs of neoliberal empowerment (Smith, 2005).

Remarkably, postfeminist critique is not only limited to modern fiction but also extends to speculative and dystopian literature. In novels such as Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, the illusion of gender equality is shattered through the reversal of established

hierarchies. Such storylines suggest that despite claims of progress, power structures remain entrenched. These works echo McRobbie's warning that society's postfeminist posture may be more regressive than it seems (Alderman, 2016).

McRobbie's theory also induces readers to question the role of literary style and tone in shaping observations of gender. Her emphasis on cultural text magazines, advertisements, and reality TV translates well to literary forms, especially when examining irony and satire. Authors like Margaret Atwood employ these techniques to expose how female autonomy is manipulated and policed, thus reinforcing the urgency of feminist thought (Atwood, 2019).

The marketability of feminism is another concern McRobbie highlights. Her focus of how feminist language is commodified finds clear parallels in books promoted as "feminist", but which offer little more than surface-level affirmations. Literature that presents empowerment as a shopping choice or self-help strategy often aligns with the neoliberal repackaging of feminism, a phenomenon McRobbie sees as deeply problematic (McRobbie, 2009; Gill & Scharff, 2011).

In conclusion, McRobbie's theory of post feminism provides a rich investigative tool for literary criticism. Her insights help unleash how contemporary literature may both mirror and critique dominant gender ideologies. By underlining the contradictions between empowerment and conformity, between choice and coercion, her work advocates readers to look beyond the surface of cultural tales. In doing so, McRobbie not only redefines feminist study but also emphasizes the importance of keeping feminism socially active in the face of its cultural adaptation.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study employs Allan McKee's approach to *textual analysis*, which investigates texts as cultural compositions that mirror and replicate social discourse. Basically, it is to perceive how meaning is created in the text and what that text denotes about the society in which it is produced. Similarly, the short story *Thank You Ma'am* by Langston Hughes is thoroughly observed to explore its fixed messages about gender, power, and female agency. The text defies cultural standpoint in the representation of women, peculiarly in how the character of Mrs. Jones challenges conventional, patriarchal portrayals of women as weak or passive. Through a detailed reading of language, character behavior, and narrative structure, the analysis emphasizes how Hughes builds a substitute image of womanhood, one that is bodily robust, morally sound, and socially active. Such portrayal challenges historic literary portrayals, that often marginalize or downgrade the female voice.

Applying McKee's method, the story is not examined for authorial intent but instead analyzed for what it shows about collective attitudes toward women and gender roles. By interpreting Mrs. Jones' assertiveness, maternal compassion, and independent action, the study highlights how Hughes employs narrative elements to experiment with established gender stereotypes.

#### 3.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is rooted in feminist theory, but more specifically it draws from Postfeminist Theory as articulated by Angela McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009). Feminism, over time, has evolved through multiple waves and interpretations, with each offering different views on how women are represented in literature and society. This study, however, is concerned primarily with the representation of the woman's character and her role within the narrative, especially in the context of agency and power.

Traditionally, feminist theory has critiqued the ways in which patriarchal structures have marginalized women. Power, in feminist context, play a major role in the society. Owing to authoritative rule of male dominance, women have suffered in each period over the course of history. In fact, supremacy has different courses of influences relying on the authoritarian's intentions and nature. As Mohajan (2022) rightly observes, "*Women all over the world are seen lacking access to opportunities, knowledge, skill and even some basic human rights. In every nation women are victim of oppression, suppression; and consequently, they are highly marginalized.*"

While early feminist theory often framed women as victims of these structures, postfeminist thought complicates this view. Angela McRobbie critiques the idea that feminism has "already done its work," and instead focuses on how popular culture repackages empowerment in ways that can still reinforce traditional gender roles. She calls this process a "double entanglement", where women are offered choices and freedoms, but within a narrow and market-driven framework. That is, women appear empowered on the surface, but their independence is often tied to consumerism or self-surveillance.

In literature, this shift is significant. Rather than only depicting women as repressed or passive figures, postfeminist study reinforces to see them as agents of their own stories, characters who play their roles with awareness, purpose, and a degree of self-reliance. A significant trait of feminist theory is the idea of women's agency, which implies to women's ability to act autonomously, make decisions, and exercise control over their lives and bodies. Judith Butler (1990), in her work mentions; agency is not just about individual choice but is deeply influenced by the social norms and expectations imposed on women.

In the story *Thank You, Ma'am*, for example, we see an unexpected reversal of power. Feminism discussed the evil outcomes of power for women, unlike the stereotypical perspective, in *Thank You, Ma'am*, the authority is in woman's hand who uses it for other's benefit rather than oppressing the others. This kind of portrayal aligns more closely with postfeminist ideas, where power can be reimaged, and female characters are seen guiding, shaping, and nurturing in active roles—not just reacting to male-dominated systems but redefining them.

Feminism emphasizes women can better build a peaceful community. Traditionally, women were considered as domestic property whose existence was only a matter of domestic concerns. Feminist scholars like Wollstonecraft significantly focused on women's role for creating a peaceful society. Much the same, the feminist framework highlights the significance of women's contributions in various areas. Post feminism extends this by suggesting that women can claim space in both public and private domains, without having to reject traditional femininity, they can lead, nurture, and make choices that are not dictated solely by resistance to patriarchy, but by personal values and goals.

Therefore, the theoretical lens of Post feminism as offered by McRobbie not only allows a nuanced reading of female characters but also calls attention to how modern portrayals of women might mask deeper power imbalances, even when appearing progressive. It urges us to question not just whether women are shown as empowered, but how and why that empowerment is framed. The feminist framework thus posits that empowering women to take on guidance roles, make decisions, and contribute to societal development is vital for building a more reasonable and sustainable community. By recognizing and supporting women's roles in community building, feminist theory works to challenge systems of domination and encourage collaborative efforts toward a more just and inclusive world.

#### 4. Critical Discussion and Findings

Women are kept marginalized over the course of human civilization throughout the history. They were always judged biologically, emotionally and intellectually. Suppression of centuries has grim societal impacts on women as weak being. They were always compared to the superior sex which put down their separate worth time and again. The identical judgment from the time of stone age till globalized human universe, women could have never achieved their societal worth which is embodied within her sensitive, caring, pacifist and affective nature. No doubt, man has achieved an advancement in term of globalization and technology but have failed to understand the contribution and worthy existence of his counterpart.

According to Psychology, one can be controlled over what one can make him/herself believe in. In term of religion, it is not code of conduct or heavenly revelations which control man and his essence but faith over them. Same case is with the societal Psychology where women intentionally were suppressed spreading an irrational judgement over their gender. Such taboo evolved later in time to cling human understanding toward women as weak creature. But, what every society from past till now believes is never justified in any sense. Neither religion has claimed this baseless thought nor science came up with any logical justification. Indeed, women have justified and proved their worth in a society themselves participating in each sphere of life.

In recent era, few of the global corners hardly possess the taboo of women's imprisonment in guise of multiple social constructed yet illogical reasoning. But the mentioned storyline defies all those constructions and judgment over women and portrays woman not only a strong character in physical term but also a moral being who can direct the society in a better pathway.

Among other obstacles in society women were always underestimated. And each perspective, portrays women as fail band fragile beings. Conventionally, in the literature women characters were represented fallen and feeble handling the situations. For instance, Alexander Pope, in his Rape of the Lock parodies women and the society where women were the central characters. In that satire, Pope declares women as trivial along with their pointless actions. In that same intensity, prior to Pope's manifestation, Sophocles characterizes women (mother) central cause of evil that followed by fate. Even though, Shakespeare literally, in Hamlet, states "Frailty the name is woman" and Milton devalues the faithfulness of women in his poem. Thus, literature is rich in such misogynistic descriptions in each period of history.

#### 4.1. Physical Strength

In fact, the so-called stereotypical judgement came to an end, when writers like Langston Hughes have broken that societal status quo of women's representation. In the story, Thank You Ma'am, he represents woman independent, strong and active being in the society. In the story, Hughes manifests woman as moral, caretaker, strong, independent, just and flawless who deals the things in right order.

The text begins with an unconventional statement.

*"She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but hammer and nails."*

The term "Large woman" defies all those stereotypes, of emphasizing women is strong. Further, the absence of 'hammer and nails' among other tools represents her assertiveness. Without that protective equipment she can protect herself. Further, Hughes mentions.

*"It was about eleven O'clock at night and she was walking alone."*

A woman at night, alone wandering without man for protection shows bravery of woman that she is no more dependent on man but has acquired that physical strength to look after her in any favorable situation. Even though, she faces that unfavorable situation, where she proves her strength respectively.

*"The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right, square in his blue-jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt, front and shook him until his teeth rattled"*

Traditionally, when the topic of woman is discussed, where woman is shown physically weak who is shown physically weak who is always dependent on man to be protect. Hence, feminism is what always challenges stereotypical representation of woman and encourages the discussion to consider women beyond beauty and body image. This is how Hughes justified the position regardless of traditional manifestation.

Like when a boy attempts to snatch her purse, she does not stay passive to wait for a superhero or knight to come for her. She confronts the boy actively, kicking him and shaking him forcefully to break the stereotypical concept of women's dependency and weaknesses. One more thing to add, feminist notion critiques the constructed societal thoughts of woman as victim of violence. Here, in the initial scenery of the story, Hughes challenged that expectation effectively.

#### 4.2. Representation of Women Agency

Mrs. Jones is not a passive character, but a character of high individual agency. When the boy confronts her and snatched her purse despite being a woman takes control over situation in her favor. The story is led by her decision and choices she made onward.

*"Um-hum! And your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wish your face for you, Ain't you got nobody home to tell you wash your face?"*

The above-mentioned lines are truly shocking and unexpected. Universally, a crime is always followed by a punishment. But, in the case of Hughes' narration, punishment is not the only solution to crimes. So, in this regard, to justify this very nation, Hughes characterized a female character to deal this issue intellectually, this act of female Characterization for such a radical step of defying universal phenomenon of crime and punishment is not something common. Comparing to man, who always deals the things with aggression, woman in this story, comes forward for an effective solution peacefully. She demonstrates maternal care and compassion by treating Roger as a child rather than a criminal.

*"The woman said, you ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least can do right now is to wash your face. Are you hungry?"*

Regarding the story, Mrs. Jones is in power. As a woman who utilizes the power in her hand. Unlike man she does not use that power to dominant herself but amalgams that power with woman agency to deal the situation peacefully.

As in the book, *A vindication of the Rights* (1792) Mary Wollstonecraft argues the role of woman for nurturing not only their children but a future generation effectively. The way Mrs. Jones deals with the child with motherly care that was presented in the first phase of Feminism. Above mentioned text justifies identical situation which was once imagined in eighteenth century considering the role of woman in a society. As Wollstonecraft argued, Hughes also describes the woman as game changer considering the society.

*"I would teach you the right from wrong"* cannot be a common statement for a society considering the woman's role. Contribution of the woman for building a peaceful community cannot be surpassed. As Wollstonecraft mentions in initial phase of Feminism, woman is the first teacher for a child who can shape not only a life of an individual, but the fate of the society. Hughes, using woman agency in societal context, demonstrates that she uses her authority to shape the society for betterment. Thus, power utilization has multiple forms, but women use her agency to develop the society. As Hughes uses Mrs. Jones, who in her own choice decides to teach morality to the child to make him understand right and wrong.

*"The next time, do not make mistakes of latching onto my pocketbook nor nobody else's, because shoes come by devilish like that will burn your feet.....I wish you would behave yourself, son."*

Peculiarly, the way Hughes portrayed women Agency in a positive way is a truly unexpected description defying social constructed notion that woman is neither able to achieve power nor to use it in a better way.

#### 4.3. Empathy as Strength

After catching Roger while stealing her purse, Mrs. Jones makes an unexpected decision to take him home instead of handling him to the police. The action shows significance of her character which is quite eccentric. Traditionally women were typically misconceived considering their emotional state. But in this story, the sensitive nature of woman is manifested unprecedentedly. As Hughes mentions:

*"She didn't ask him anything about where he lived or anything else. She just wanted him to eat"*

This line demonstrates Mrs. Jones' empathetic nature that she uses her sensitivity to understand the genuine reason for the boy's action rather than judging him immoral. The empathetic concern of the Mrs. Jones defies stereotypical women role as a passive or highly emotional. However, Hughes emphasizes the identical tradition notion of sensitive nature of woman, but he aligns their emotional state actively contributing to deeper understanding of others struggle.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Langston Hughes' *Thank You, Ma'am* breaks away from traditional stereotypes of women, using the personality of Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones to present an unconventional, multifaceted image of womanhood. Through the lens of feminist theory, Hughes represents women as strong, independent, and morally grounded individuals who can transcend societal restrictions. Mrs. Jones, unlike conventional female characters in literature, is not depicted as a passive or dependent figure. Instead, she takes control of the situation when Roger attempts to steal her purse, demonstrating physical strength and agency. Her actions challenge the stereotype of women as weak and in need of male protection, highlighting the importance of women's autonomy and decision-making power in shaping their lives and communities. Hughes redefines the role of women by positioning Mrs. Jones as a character of authority who combines strength with compassion and understanding, qualities that are vital for social change and moral guidance. Another thing that makes Mrs. Jones stand out is how she mixes compassion with hardness, which a lot of female individuals do not manifest in conventional stories. In conventional literature, women are either too soft or made to seem hard just to survive, but here, she's both simultaneously. Her strength holding Roger represents traditional defense strategy but her later attitude to the kid justifies the multifaceted women empowerment as an independent and active individual. It seems that her actions and decision in the story manifest prominent contribution of women building balanced and peaceful society. Such characterization of woman portrays a totally different side that what it means to be a woman.

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