

## Racist Contextualization of the N-Word in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Rizwan Aftab\*

Asim Aqeel†

Mumtaz Ahmad‡

Vol. V, No. I (Winter 2020)

Pages: 594 – 603

p-ISSN: 2616-955X

e-ISSN: 2663-7030

ISSN-L: 2616-955X



### Abstract

*With Roger Fowler's theory of 'linguistic construction', this study specifically analyses the use of the N-word (nigger) within Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, its contextual use and the function it plays within the context and sequence of events in the delimited fiction. The N-word, which is considered highly sensitive in American society, especially in the context of African Americans, is analyzed within the immediate context of event and situation in which characters are engaged, depending on who is talking to whom, when and where, and with what purpose in mind. The entire communicative event of the N-word is also placed within the global context to fully situate the event and locate the function of the N-word within and outside the literary text and its use and interpretation in global contexts. This contextual study of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* argues how the highly sensitive racist words are euphemized through N-word. For this purpose, this study employs linguistic analysis by focusing on delimited text form, meaning, and use within the local and global contexts.*

**Key Words:** African American Fiction, Contextualization, Language, Linguistics, N-Word

## Introduction

Language is socially constructed. It is an effective means of communication at different levels. It is socially constructed in the sense that it deals with linguistics choices and their organization, which perform certain social functions. The purposes or functions of a text or discourse depend on many factors, including choice of language or selection of vocabulary items, which carry certain meanings. Another important factor is the syntactic or grammatical construction, pattern or organization of the linguistic choices in the form of sentences to communicate specific meanings. In addition to these, it also depends on the organization of the text, as the particular organization builds a certain situation or context in which an event takes place. Moreover, although the medium of communication is responsible for the kind of impact it creates, the context of utterance, the context of situation and context of culture also play significant roles in interpreting and determining the function and meaning of a language. It is the language that is functional where being functional is doing something in a particular context (Halliday & Hassan, 1989).

A fiction writer also uses language to communicate different meanings and functions depending on the theme, social or historical background or the culture they live in. The purpose of literature is to not only entertain but also construct and reflect an aspect of reality in fictionalized form. In literature, language is used in its manipulative form(s) to communicate the best-suited ideas conceived by the writer. An author writes using the society prism and picks up a specific shade to communicate, adding imaginative coloring to a piece of literature. Everyday discourse has its own impact. Literature is fabricated in its own domains to communicate implicit or explicit directions through discourse. The discourse of historical fiction communicates the subjective or the objective truth directly, whereas the discourse of different genres of literature conveys its own truth about

\*PhD Candidate, Department of English National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: [rizmeo@gmail.com](mailto:rizmeo@gmail.com)

†Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities & Linguistics, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

‡Assistant Professor-Principal, Department of English, Government Guru Nanak Postgraduate College, Nankana Sahib, Punjab, Pakistan.

different aspects of life, and the reader is left to interpret the truth or constructed reality independently and in a different way within different contexts. This study argues the effort, conscious or unconscious, of Zora Neale Hurston about the problems of social, cultural, and ethnic nature and how he uses language in line with the nature of the subject and theme of the narrative.

## **Literature Review**

[Florian Coulmas \(2013\)](#) argues that language as the most effective and creative tool for human communication is subject to both natural and social objects of study. It is so because human behaviour is subject to change according to the social, economic, political, historical and psychological conditions of their environment and individual experiences. These external factors and individual experiences color their thought patterns to a greater extent and restrict them from acting as “free agents”. [Coulmas \(2013\)](#), the German sociolinguist, refers to the idea of being “free agents” as “fundamental to our self-deception” (p. 1). According to him, whatever we say and write “reinforces this conviction” as “whenever we speak, we make choices”, which is “basic to intelligent life” (p. 1). But this ability to consider choices is restricted by physical nature as being limited to choose the colour of our eyes, our intelligent quotient, or whether we are beautiful or ugly. Language, both spoken and written, is the reflection of many external factors and individual experiences through lexical choices and syntactic structures. “Language”, says Coulmas, “plays a peculiar role” in making choices suitable to a specific speech community, time and place. He further says that “the exploration of language, therefore, is indispensable if we want to understand our own nature” (p. 1). Coulmas contradicts [Steven Pinker \(2007\)](#), a cognitive scientist, who holds that language “is a distinct piece of the biological makeup of our brains” (p. 18). Despite the biological nature of the language phenomenon existing in the brain, it is “the society” that makes one learn the language of the same community ([Coulmas, 2013, p. 1](#)).

The language used in relation to society strengthens the idea of [Coulmas \(2013\)](#) that “the language has two sides, the biological and the social” (p. 2). Humans are “genetically equipped” to acquire language. Human offspring are born with a “special capacity for language”. It is “innate, no other creature seems to have it, and it isn’t tied to a specific variety of language” ([Yule, 2010, p. 6](#)). [Noam Chomsky \(2006\)](#) refers to it as “the innate capability of a child” (p. 6). He also suggests that the underground rules are “universal and innate”. Coulmas echoes the same when he says that “All babies acquire language quickly because they have the ability to do so and because all societies use language” ([Coulmas, 2013, p. 2](#)). This innateness hypothesis points to human genetics, which is biological. All infants come into the world with “linguistic skills” ([Pinker, 2007, p. 263](#)). But it is the society that puts this innate capability into practice. R. A. [Hudson \(2001\)](#), a sociolinguist, says socialization of a child occurs when he/she interacts with parents, peers, teachers, his/her age mates, and adults in a social environment and different settings. Hudson refers to these as different stages of socialization—babyhood, childhood, adolescence and adulthood ([Hudson, 2001, p. 15](#)). But this socialization of a child occurs within a specific “speech community—a community based on language” ([Hudson, 2001, p. 24](#)). “Every language”, says Coulmas, “must be learnt, and it is the society that teaches its new members how to use it properly, how to conform with established conventions” ([Coulmas, 2013, p. 5](#)).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The overall framework for the present study is the linguist Roger Fowler’s linguistic critique and his assertion that literature is a well-crafted creative piece of work by the writer. He further states that the novelty of literature is due not only to its themes but also to the way the same themes are presented differently using different linguistic techniques and choices. Using different linguistic techniques and choices in different situations and contexts communicates different functions, and the text serves different purposes depending on the sensitivity of the subject in a specific context. What Roger Fowler thus asserts is that linguistic critique can very appropriately and revealingly be applied to literature but that, for this application to work, a model must be capable of dealing with the text within the literary and social contexts it is produced. The procedure is to theorize literature as language using the richest and most suitable model. [Roger Fowler \(1996\)](#) states,

A linguistic model should possess the following broad characteristics. It should be comprehensive in accounting for the whole range of dimensions of linguistic structure, particularly pragmatic dimensions. It should

be capable of providing an account of the functions of given linguistic constructions (in real texts), particularly the thought-shaping (Halliday's 'ideational') function. It should acknowledge the **social** basis of the formation of meanings (Halliday's social semiotic') (p. 16).

Being comprehensive in all respects, the model must be capable of encompassing all the dimensions of linguistic structures, particularly pragmatic dimensions. Being capable of focusing on the functionality of 'linguistics construction', a linguistic model requires an in-depth analysis of the lexical choices and syntactic construction and their function within a given social, historical and psychological context where meanings are interpreted and conclusions are drawn.

[Paul Baker \(2010\)](#) also talks about the limitations of any method for complete and comprehensive language analysis. He argues, "No method of linguistic analysis is ever 'complete' in that it alone can provide the answer to every research question about language that is asked. Instead, This study believes that it is useful to be aware of the benefits and limitations of a range of methodologies so that we are equipped with a good sense of when a method should be utilized (alone or in conjunction with others) or abandoned for the moment" ([Baker, 2010, p. 12](#)). [Jonathan Culpeper \(2001\)](#) talks about different linguistic approaches for the analysis of literary texts and says that it is an interdisciplinary research and "obviously, the particular combination of disciplines for anyone approach lends it its particular flavor" (p. 12). He argues that "Language attitude research has combined language research with social and cognitive psychological research" (p. 12). Therefore, specific features of different methods are selected in order to suit the framework of this study. A model comprising all the relevant areas is not available. Therefore, a collage work of different methods has been used and adapted to the nature of the present study.

The linguistic model which this study plans to use for this study makes a serious attempt to include "pragmatic, social, and historical dimensions of language". Pragmatics is the study of language use in context; society provides that context and meanings of a text are interpreted in their historical settings. This interplay of three aspects of linguistic analysis becomes effective for meaning-making and making sense of the use of N-word within a literary text. According to [Roger Fowler \(1996\)](#), "the significance of linguistic structures in literature is a function of the relationships between textual construction and the social, institutional, and ideological conditions of its production and reception. Thus history, social structure, and ideology are major sources of knowledge and hypotheses in the framework of linguistic criticism" (p. 16).

### **Racist Contextualization of N-Word in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)**

This study deals with the context of the novel, the use and functions of each N-word linguistic choice and its contextual discussion in *Their Eyes were Watching God*. In this delimited Afro-American fiction, different linguistic choices are used for communicating different themes, create an artistic plot, and evoke the historical and cultural background and settings of the narrative. In this approximately 62,971-word novel, certain words appear or recur consistently over the canvas of the narrative to reflect the author's use of linguistic techniques to communicate certain ideas and prefer some over others. It is believed that this has been done keeping in mind the socio-economic and political situations of the characters and their place within the society they belong to and live in. The broader cultural setting of the plot also reflects the key traits of the Eatonville community. People sitting in the porches of their houses and shops and discussing the domestic chores and politics reflect the behaviour of the town people. Black women talking about Janie when she returns to Eatonville after the death of Tea Cake also reflects the social and cultural traditions they were engaged in.

### **N-Word Occurrences in *their Eyes Were Watching God***

**Table 1.** N-Word (Nigger\*) Frequency and Concordance in *their Eyes were Watching God*

1	for me, honey, Ah don't want any trashy	nigger,	no breath-and-britches, lak Johnny Taylor
2	white man throws down de load and tells de	nigger	man, tuh pick it up. He picks it up
3	tote it. He hands it to his womenfolks. De	nigger	the woman is de mule uh de world so fur
4	enough for her to see de head and face.	"Nigger,	whut's yo' baby doin' wid grey eyes and
5	tuh do, 'cause Ah ain't nothin' but uh	nigger	and uh slave.' "Instead of pacifyin' her I
6	fussin'? Lawd, Ah know dat grassgut, liver-lypted	nigger	ain't done took and beat mah baby already!

N-word: nigger\*

Frequency: 6

## N-Word Concordances in *Their Eyes were Watching God*

Hit	KWIC
1	, Ah don't want no trashy nigger, no breath-and-britches, lak Johnny
2	down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He
3	hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de
4	to see de head and face. " Nigger, whut's yo' baby doin' wid
5	Ah ain't nothin' but uh nigger and uh slave: "Instead of pacifyin'
6	I" Dave: "See? Ah told yuh dat nigger didn't love yuh. Me, Ah'

Figure 1: N-Word Concordances in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

### Use and Function of N-Word in *their Eyes were Watching God*

**Utterance 1:** “Whut Ah seen just now is plenty for me, honey, Ah don’t want no trashy nigger, no breath-and-britches, lak Johnny Taylor usin’ yo’ body to wipe his feet on.” (p.

### Analysis/Critique

**Race:** A black woman (Nanny) to a black woman (Janie) about another black man

**Relationship:** Grandmother - granddaughter

**Setting:** Nanny’s home

**Context:** Johnny Taylor is a passer-by and stops to see Janie in the garden under a blossom tree. Janie is living with her grandmother. Both come closer to each other and kiss passionately. At the moment, Janie’s grandmother sees her granddaughter with a stranger. She shouts at her and calls her inside the house. Both converse on the incident, and during this talk, the N-word is used by Nanny for a passer-by like Johnny Taylor.

**Discussion:** After Johnny Taylor and Janie’s incident under a blossom tree, Janie’s grandmother couldn’t stop herself to intervene and teach Janie the lessons of her life. Nanny, Janie’s grandmother and a former slave, is presented as a strong and seasoned black lady who reflects the social and historical changes of her time and the lurking danger in any action similar to Jonny Taylor and Janie’s being under the tree. Being a black woman slave, she knows her and her granddaughter’s position in the white-dominated society. She also knows the danger for a young black woman in a society dominated by free black male’s chauvinistic behaviour. Her past compels her to come up with a strong argument by using N-word for any black passer-by who tries to indulge in any sort of relationship with Janie, her real beloved child. “Ah, don’t want no trashy nigger” says Nanny to Janie. The whole context of the situation can be seen and interpreted within the overall context of the text where it appears and who speaks to whom. Nanny utters the N-word to generalize the kind of behavior black men like Johnny Taylor adopt to advance their relationship. She scolds her granddaughter for her trivial action. The anger in the words of Nanny could be seen as a social reflection. She tries to refrain her granddaughter from the prevailing danger and her position in relation to a society where whites dominate and black men exercise more power over black women.

She represents the social and cultural harsh realities of black women even at the hands of black men. Nanny knows the harsh realities, and her use of the N-word reflects her strong worldview. However, she did not use the N-word for racial purposes but for a person who has no social and economic position and could be of no worth to society.

The latter half of the sentence reflects the overall context of the use of the N-word. She is in a strong love for Janie and is reprimanding her for her social action and lurking danger in being involved in love for a passer-by. Her use of the word *trashy* with the head noun *nigger*, refers to any kind of black man who doesn’t have any roots and stable family background. For Nanny, any black man like Johnny Taylor can use any black woman for his momentary pleasure and will bear no responsibility for anything toward her, her child and family. She must stay cautious about these “trashy niggers”, who are seeking momentary pleasure.

Nanny has a particular referent in her mind when she uses the referring expression “no trashy nigger” in a generalized way. But towards the end of the clause, she compares Johnny Taylor as one of the referents of the

referring expression. The overall function of the N-word utterance appears more social and historical than being racial and political. The usual tendency in American society during the 1930s seems more similar to the conditions in which Nanny and Janie lived and were living.

**Utterances 2 & 3:** “Come to yo’ Grandma, honey. Set in her lap lak yo’ use tuh. Yo’ Nanny wouldn’t harm a hair uh yo’ head. She don’t want anybody else to do it, neither if she kin helps it. Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s someplace way off in de ocean where a de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He picks it up because he has to, but he doesn’t tote it. He hands it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin’ fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!” (p. 19)

### Analysis/Critique

**Race:** a black woman (Nanny) to a black woman (Janie)

**Relationship:** Grandmother - granddaughter

**Setting:** Nanny’s home

**Context:** Nanny’s love for her granddaughter, Janie, is quite visible in these lines. Nanny is consoling her granddaughter after the pear tree incident. They are talking about the incident with the blossom tree. The conversation then turns to Janie’s marriage with Killicks, who is an old man and hangs around for Janie as he owns sixty acres of land. Sitting together, they both are reflecting on the harsh realities of slavery and racial attitude towards blacks, especially for black women. Nanny being an old woman, talks about her experience and lifelong lessons of her life. She tells Janie the bitter realities of black people’s lives in white America, where only the white man is in power. Throughout her life, what she has been able to find out is that the white man is in power everywhere. It is in this situation she describes the poor, pathetic and dilapidated conditions of blacks and uses N-word as an adjective to refer to the general traits of blacks and their socio-economic and political conditions of the time.

**Discussion:** Use of N-word phrase in the sentence “So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up” reflects the social and political place of a black man in American society. Socially and economically, a black man is subservient to white folks. He works for white people and is considered a slave or a servant. Using the word ‘load’ also reflects on the kind of treatment black men used to face at the hands of their masters. In general, the phrase “the black man” collocates with “the white man”. The use of the highly racial N-word in the context reflects Hurston’s worldviews on the highly sensitive relations of black and white and their social, economic and political positions of the time.

On the other hand, the N-word phrase, “De nigger woman,” in the sentence “De nigger woman is de mule uf de world so far as Ah can see,” is an extension of the discussion between Nanny and Janie. The phrase is used as an active and definite noun phrase and reflects the social reality of the world to the extent of universal truth. Nanny’s viewpoint reflects her age-old experience and the hardships she underwent throughout her life. She knows what it costs to be a woman and what it takes to be a black woman. She could have used the term “black” with a woman but using “nigger” instead reflects the more social and economic conditions of blacks and their role in American society and history. Comparing a woman with a mule not only shows the type of work usually associated with a woman but also the treatment black women face at home and their social position.

Explaining the universal truth by reflecting on the social and cultural position of whites (men and women), black men and women show Hurston’s command over language and especially the selection of the use of N-word choice. Nanny’s N-word utterances used in the above instances reflect the social position and economic conditions of blacks and their relationship with each other. The white man is the incharge or ruler of the world who “throws down the load” and commands the black man “to pick it up”. The whole sentence is reflective of the social positions and hierarchal structures of both whites and blacks. Moreover, the use of the N-word as an adjective also adds pragmatic meaning to the text. The N-word choice is reflective of the social position of black men and their relationship with the whites. The hierarchal structure does not stop here; it goes on to another level. In Nanny’s words, the black man hands the load to his woman. Here Nanny reflects the treatment black

women receive even from their male counterparts of black origin. She is pointing out the fact that black women are double marginalized – first by their white masters and then by their own black men. Nanny uses N-word with the head noun “woman” to describe the situation and condition of a black woman in American society. Being herself a seasoned black woman, Nanny served as a slave servant to a white family. Here the use of the N-word is not directed towards anyone present in the context, but she is talking to her granddaughter about the harsh realities of the black-white dichotomy and the vulnerability of a black woman. Nanny’s use of N-word is not directed to any particular referent but reflects her experience in a generalized statement. So, the perlocutionary effect could be sensed from the context of the utterance. It depends on the reader, who reads the text from the position he/she is situated.

**Utterances 4 & 5:** ‘Nigger, whut’s yo’ baby doin’ wid grey eyes and yaller hair?’ She begins tuh slap mah jaws ever which a’way. Ah never felt the fust ones ’cause Ah wuz too busy gittin’ de kivver back over mah chile. But dem last lick burnt me lak fire. Ah had too many feelin’s tuh tell which one tuh follow so Ah didn’t cry and Ah didn’t do nothin’ else. But then she kept on astin me how come mah baby look white. She asted me dat maybe twenty-five or thirty times, lak she got tuh sayin’ dat and couldn’t help herself. So Ah told her, ‘Ah don’t know nothin’ but what Ah’m told tuh do, ’cause Ah ain’t nothin’ but uh nigger and uh slave.’ (pp. 23-24)

### **Analysis/Critique**

**Race:** a white mistress to a black woman (slave) and vice versa

**Relationship:** Master-slave

**Setting:** Master’s land but slave’s home or place

**Context:** Describing her past experience to her granddaughter, Nanny says that she spent a difficult life during her slave days. Nanny describes her past by talking about Janie’s mother and how come she became so loving for her. She gave birth to a child with “grey eyes and yallar hair”. This could have made her mistress angry, and she visits her to express her feelings about the relationship between her husband and Nanny.

In the utterance, the mistress is inquiring about the child’s birth and about her expected father despite the fact that the mistress (the white woman) knows that her husband could have sex with the black woman slave or raped her to fulfil his lust. She cannot do anything but take revenge on the black slave woman for the sin she was forced to do. Besides social and economic conditions, there could be other reasons for Nanny’s survival, which could have forced her to remain silent about the sins done against her. This is what she later says in the same paragraph that she is “nothin’ but uh nigger and uh slave.”

**Discussion:** The N-word used in the above instance reflects the derogatory and racial attitude of the white mistress towards Nanny, a black woman slave. N-word is used by the mistress as an address term for Nanny to ventilate her anger in a highly derogatory and humiliating manner. Out of her sheer hatred, disgust and anger, the mistress addresses the black woman by calling her “Nigger” as if she has done something very bad or committed an irreparable offence that she cannot undo. The mistress is sceptical about the birth of the child and its parentage due to its grey eyes and yellow hairs. Although, it appears from the mistress's attitude that she knows that her husband might have had sex with this black slave woman or raped her to satisfy his lustful desire.

Instead of taking the name of the black woman or calling her by any other generic name, she is addressed with N-word as a slur, which is considered highly offensive. Nanny’s social position as a slave, her economic condition as poor and her psychological condition after being raped or giving birth to her master’s child are all reflected in the above instance. She seems helpless at that moment, and the only thing she could do was to protect her child from the mistress. So she did.

The use of the N-word by the white mistress clearly reflects the racial nature of the utterance which Nanny felt and the only reaction she could do to protect her child. She even didn’t care for the first slap that her mistress planted on her as she was trying to cover her baby.

Nanny believes that black women were double sinned both by whites and black men and that they were so miserable to change their plight. Nanny’s case was no exception either. She was not even allowed to complain or speak aloud against the sins she braved. She gives birth to her white Master’s daughter and is forced to remain silent against her will to satisfy the lustful desires of her master.

Nanny's final remarks clearly represent the socio-economic position and conditions of black woman slaves. She would always confide her ordeal in her granddaughter. Once, she relayed to her that on one occasion, she verbatim told her mistress that she was nothing but what she was asked to be. She was a slave and a nigger. Her final remarks clearly reflect her position as a slave and a nigger, which means she is "nothing". Her use of the N-word for her situation reflects the state of mind she was in, and narrating the event to her granddaughter makes her feel the same again.

The word "nigger" used in the fifth utterance communicates a state of helplessness and nothingness. Nanny's position as "a slave and a nigger" was nothing but an entity against what different sins were committed. The N-words used in the fourth and fifth instance reflect the socio-economic conditions of black and their place in society as a slave and also as a black woman slave who is victimized and marginalized not only by Whites but men of their own race. It further reflects that she cannot protect herself against them and has to submit even her body against her wish and will. These socio-economic conditions of Hurston's time are reflected in the character of Nanny.

The functions of the N-word in both instances are different. In the first, it is used as a racial slur, while in the second, it is used to describe the conditions of a black woman, especially a slave black woman, especially a black woman slave in those times. In the first instance, the N-word is uttered by the mistress for a black slave woman in anger. The perlocutionary effect could be seen in her later comment about blacks and especially about black women and their conditions. In the second instance, the perlocutionary effect could be felt by the reader of the text as Nanny narrates what it costs to be a slave and a nigger.

**Utterance 6:** "You and Logan been fussin'? Lawd, ah know dat grassgut, liver-lipted nigger ain't done took and beat mah, baby, already! Ah'll take a stick and salivate 'im!" (p. 30)

### Analysis/Critique

**Race:** A black woman (Nanny) to a black woman (Janie)

**Relationship:** Grandmother - granddaughter

**Setting:** Nanny's home

**Context:** Janie visits her grandmother after a few months of her marriage and remains silent for quite some time. Her grandmother inquires about the situation and the reason for her silence. Janie then comes up with a complaint about her husband, Killicks, and his behaviour towards her. Janie's grandmother consoles her and utters the aforementioned words, which reflect not a trace of racism but her artificial anger towards Janie's husband as she knows her granddaughter and her complaining attitude. Janie is not happy with Killicks and demands love and affection from her aged husband than domestic chores and field-work.

**Discussion:** Nanny's utterance not only shows her anger towards Janie's husband but also her love for her granddaughter. She loves her granddaughter so much that she cannot even listen to any of the complaints about her married life. Moreover, she knows what she has done by getting Janie married to an aged person but consoles herself as she has tried to secure her future. The economic conditions of blacks and their role in America is quite visible from her words and concerns. Nanny is more concerned about the socio-economic conditions of her granddaughter than the love that Janie desires. In Nanny's views, social and economic conditions can be improved further by working hard as she did in her life than by simply making love but nothing to eat. It is for this reason that she married her beloved granddaughter off to a man who is old enough to be of her father's age. Calling Logan a "liver-lipted nigger" by a black woman does not reflect racial drive against him, but out of Janie's love, she comes up with such a strong word. Her use of the negative adjective "liver-lipted", which also reflects the social and economic conditions of blacks, makes the effect of the N-word more negative and socially low. It further debases and humiliates the character of Logan. In addition to using "liver-lipted" adjective with the noun "nigger", Nanny uses another adjective "grassgut" and separates it with a comma from "liver-lipted". This compound adjective contributes to the image of Logan in a more negative and socially devalued way. Logan is the kind of man who always seems to complain about his social conditions and bowed back. It appears that Nanny is referring to his bowed back as "grassgrut" and his poor physical health as "liver-lipted" with the social condition of a black man as "nigger".

Here the N-word functions not as a racial slur but to show anger towards a fellow black person of some association. The setting of the utterance is family, and during the family talk between a grandmother and a granddaughter, there could be a talk on family issues. The N-word is used for a person who is not present at the time of utterance but is associated with one character in a husband relationship. Hence, there could not be any perlocutionary effect on Logan but could be sensed through Janie's behaviour. Calling Logan as "a liver-lypted nigger" besides other social slur consoles Janie and her inner desire that her grandmother listened to her complaint against Logan. It could also be interpreted that the N-word is seen here as a replacement for any other social slur used just to devalue, demean or humiliate others. So, the function of the N-word in this instance is more social than racial.

**Instances of the N-Word and its Context of use in *their Eyes were Watching God***

**Table 2.** N-Word Instances and its Contextual use and Function in *their Eyes were Watching God*

S. No	N-word Utterance	Race	Relationship	Contexts	Remarks/ Function
1	...no trashy nigger (p.17)	A black woman (Nanny) to a black woman (Janie) about a black man (Taylor)	Grandmother-granddaughter	Janie and Jonny Taylor's kiss under a pear tree. A family setting	Not racial but having social significance. Socio-economically poor and without roots.
2	...de nigger man (p.19)	A black woman (Nanny) to a black woman (Janie)	Grandmother-granddaughter	Nanny is talking about her life experience and somewhat universal truth about racism. A family setting but the social context	Not a remark to anybody but explaining the general phenomenon of a slave black man and a poor black woman's position where the white man is the ruler.
4	Nigger, (p.23)	A white mistress to a black woman slave	Mistress - slave woman (Nanny)	The context is about a white baby girl born to a black woman, Nanny, as an illegitimate child. A family setting but the social and racial context	Highly racial as a white and black relationship. Not Racial, but more of slang for the poor socio-economic condition.
5	...uh nigger and uh slave (p.24)	a black woman slave to a white mistress	And A Slave woman (Nanny) - Mistress		
6	...liver-lypted nigger (p.30)	A black woman to a black woman about a black man (Logan)	Grandmother-granddaughter about granddaughter's husband	Janie is visiting her grandmother's home after marriage and talks about love after marriage. A family setting	Not racial but used as an address term towards fellow black men within the family setting

**Conclusion**

In the linguistic critique of African-American fiction, this study has demonstrated the interdependence of literary and linguistic studies. It has been elucidated how pragmatics and sociolinguistics can inform the reading of African American fiction: this study explored the use and function of N-word utterances within the context of situation, culture and reference, the sequences and patterns of N-word lexical choices in the narrative, and expressions of themes of race in its prose. At the same time, this study argued persuasively that literature is linguistic data and explored the contribution of literary data (African-America fiction in my case) to linguistic research, particularly to the sociocultural, historical and psychological perspectives and effects on linguistic choices of the writers. In



*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston's use of dialectal language tells the story of each character, which characterizes their behaviour and position within the text. Different men, women, slaves, free blacks, mulattos, wealthy white slave owners, and others pass comments of racial nature by using N-word. They make N-word choice in the context of their respective life experiences. Janie, the protagonist and central character of the novel, speaks the language of her time and her use of lexical choices reflects the broader social and political setup and scenario of Hurston's time. It is also interesting to note that she uses the N-word only once within the twenty-third utterance when she survives the flood with Tea Cake. Her use of the N-word might have been the result of her characterization in contrast to other mulatto women (e.g., Mrs. Turner). They have milky features but quite different in their use of language and social and economical approach to life.

Hence, certain linguistic choices are more common and are preferred over others to reflect the true picture of a society. They also reflect a deeper aspect of social life the writers consciously engage in and are not aware of. In general, the N-word is used as a tag-term to demean and degrade the rational faculty of an individual or a group of people. The use of the N-word in literature reflects the best possible social life of the individuals and the society in which it is written. It also bears the mark of the author's life and experiences. The usual associative and connotative meanings of the N-word are highly racial and considered highly derogatory, especially in American society. However, in fiction, it is used to serve multiple purposes depending on the situation – who utters it, to whom and with what purpose. It argues that linguistic choices are more common and are preferred over others to reflect the true picture of a society. They also reflect a deeper aspect of social life the writers consciously engage in and are not aware of.

## References

- Baker, P. (2010). Corpus methods in linguistics. In L. Litosseliti, *Research methods in linguistics*. London: Continuum.
- Baker, P. (2010). Sociolinguistics and corpus linguistics. Edinburgh: *Edinburgh University Press*.
- Chomsky, N. (2006). *Language and mind* (3rd ed.). England: *Cambridge University Press*
- Coulmas, F. (2013). *Sociolinguistics: The study of speakers' choices* (Second ed.). New York: *Cambridge University Press*.
- Culpeper, J. (2001). *Language and characterization*. Singapore: *Pearson Education*.
- Fowler, R. (1996). On critical linguistics. In C. R. Caldas-Coulthard, & M. Coulthard, *Texts and practices*. London: *Routledge*.
- Halliday, M. A., & Hasan, R. (1989). *Language, context, and text: aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective*. Hong Kong: *Oxford University Press*.
- Hudson, R. A. (2001). *Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: *Cambridge University Press*.
- Hurston, Z. N. (2011). *Their eyes were watching God*. New York: *Virago Press*.
- Pinker, S. (2007). *The language instinct: The new science of language and mind* (Modern Classics ed.). New York: *Harper Perennial*.
- Yule, G. (2010). *The study of language* (Fourth ed.). New York: *Cambridge University Press*.