

Folklore and Mythology in Bachtyar Ali's The Last Pomegranate Tree and Zora Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God



الفولكلور والأساطير في رواية بختيار علي شجرة الرمان الأخيرة ورواية زورا هيرستون كانت
عيونهم تحدق في الله

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المخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة كيفية عمل الفولكلور والأساطير في الأدب كأوعية للهوية الثقافية والإحساس بالانتماء، من خلال تحليل مقارن لرواية كردية معاصرة ورواية إفريقية-أمريكية. بالتركيز على رواية بختيار علي شجرة الرمان الأخيرة (٢٠٠٣) ورواية زورا نيل هيرستون كانت عيونهم تحرق في الله (١٩٣٧)، يستكشف البحث الطرق التي يدمج بها كل عمل السرديات الشعبية والأساطير والتقاليد الشفوية للتعبير عن القيم والتاريخ والهوية الخاصة بمجتمعاتهم. ويُستخدم نهج مقارن نوعي يستند إلى دراسات الفولكلور ونظرية الهوية الثقافية لتحليل كيفية مساهمة السرد وصناعة الأسطورة في الحفاظ على الهوية الجماعية في ظل الصدمات التاريخية

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والتهميش. وتتوصل الدراسة إلى أنه في كل من السياقين الكردي والإفريقي-الأمريكي، فإن دمج الفولكلور والأسطورة في الأدب يعزز الإرث المشترك والقدرة على الصمود، مما يوفر للشخصيات والقراء على حدٍ سواء مرساة لجذورهم الثقافية وتأكيداً على الانتماء. هذه التقاليد السردية، على الرغم من خصوصيتها الثقافية، تؤدي أدواراً متوازنة في صون الهوية الجماعية والذاكرة الجماعية عبر تجارب ثقافية متباينة. يسعى هذا البحث إلى إثراء الدراسات الأدبية المقارنة من خلال إظهار كيف تُشكّل الفولكلور والأساطير استراتيجيات حيوية للبقاء الثقافي وبناء الهوية في تراثين مهمشين متميزين. وبمقارنة رواية "شجرة الرمان الأخيرة" لبختيار علي برواية "عيونهم ترقب الله" لزورا نيل هيرستون، تهدف الدراسة إلى إثبات أنه على الرغم من اختلاف الجغرافيا واللغة والتاريخ، فإن كلا الكاتبين يوظفان السرديات التقليدية والأساطير والحكايات الشعبية والتقاليد الشفوية والنماذج الرمزية، لا كعناصر تزيينية، بل كأدوات أساسية لحفظ الذاكرة الجماعية، ومقاومة طمس الهوية الثقافية، وتأكيد الهوية الفردية والجماعية. وبذلك، يُبرز البحث عالمية الفولكلور والأساطير كأدوات أدبية للتعبير عن الصمود والانتماء.

Abstract

This study examines how folklore and mythology function in literature as vessels for cultural identity and a sense of belonging, through a comparative analysis of a modern Iraqi Kurdish novel and an African American novel. Focusing on Bachtyar Ali's *The Last Pomegranate Tree* (2003) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), the research explores the ways in which each work interweaves folk narratives, myths, and oral traditions to articulate the values, history, and identity of their respective communities. A qualitative comparative approach is employed, drawing on folklore studies and cultural identity theory to analyze how storytelling and myth-making help preserve communal identity amid historical trauma and marginalization. The study finds that in both Iraqi Kurdish and African American contexts, integrating folklore and myth into literature reinforces a shared heritage and resilience, providing characters and readers alike with an anchor to their cultural roots and an affirmation of belonging. These narrative traditions, while culturally specific, perform parallel roles in sustaining group identity and collective memory across disparate cultural experiences. This research seeks to contribute to comparative literary scholarship by demonstrating how folklore and mythology function as vital strategies of cultural survival and identity-making across two distinct marginalized traditions. By placing Bachtyar Ali's *The Last Pomegranate Tree* alongside Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were*



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Watching God, the study aims to prove that, despite differences of geography, language, and history, both authors employ traditional narratives, myths, folktales, oral traditions, and symbolic archetypes, not as decorative elements but as foundational tools for preserving communal memory, resisting cultural erasure, and affirming both personal and collective identity. In doing so, the research underscores the universality of folklore and myth as literary vehicles of resilience and belonging.

1. Introduction

Folklore and mythology are more than mere stories; they serve as vessels of cultural memory that help define a community's cultural identity and foster a sense of belonging. In marginalized or historically oppressed communities, these traditional narratives have been crucial lifelines for preserving heritage and unity when a nation's genuine culture was suppressed. For instance, Kurdish culture has depended on its oral traditions, legends, and songs to preserve its identity. Similarly, African Americans, enduring the trauma of slavery and segregation, preserved their heritage and resisted erasure through folklore forms such as spirituals, folktales, and vernacular storytelling. These shared narratives passed down through generations provided hope, continuity, and a collective identity even in the face of oppression.

This comparative study explores how such folkloric and mythic elements are woven into literature to express and uphold cultural identity. It focuses on a modern Iraqi Kurdish novel Bachtyar Ali's *The Last Pomegranate Tree* (2003) and an African American novel Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). This text analyzes how each author weaves folk motifs, oral storytelling techniques, and mythological symbolism into the narrative to articulate the values, history, and struggles of their communities. By juxtaposing a Middle Eastern (Kurdish) context with an African American one, the analysis illuminates both parallels and distinctions in how storytelling fortifies cultural identity amid adversity. In doing so, the research contributes to comparative literary scholarship on marginalized voices, demonstrating that storytelling functions as a means of cultural survival and pride across different traditions.

This research seeks to contribute to comparative literary scholarship by demonstrating how folklore and mythology function as vital strategies of cultural survival and identity-making across two distinct marginalized traditions. By placing Bachtyar Ali's *The Last Pomegranate Tree* alongside Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the study aims to prove that, despite differences of geography, language, and history, both authors employ traditional narratives, myths, folktales, oral

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traditions, and symbolic archetypes, not as decorative elements but as foundational tools for preserving communal memory, resisting cultural erasure, and affirming both personal and collective identity. In doing so, the research underscores the universality of folklore and myth as literary vehicles of resilience and belonging.

2. Rationale of the Study

This study examines the narrative and symbolic roles of folklore and mythology in both texts. Central to this inquiry is an exploration of how each novel incorporates folkloric and mythic elements, whether through folktales, legends, oral histories, proverbs, or mythic allusions and the distinct forms these traditions take within their respective cultural contexts.

On other hand, this study undertakes a comparative analysis of both novels to explore the enduring role of folklore and mythology in shaping cultural identity and belonging. Both works, though separated by geography, history, and language, share a reliance on oral traditions and mythic structures as central narrative strategies. Ali's Kurdish novel, written in the aftermath of political upheaval, fuses allegory with myth to preserve memory and reimagine resilience in the face of displacement. Hurston's African American narrative, rooted in the vernacular traditions of the South, elevates oral culture and folk practices into literature that safeguards communal heritage. In this sense, each novel exemplifies folklore not as embellishment but as the foundation of cultural continuity. The rationale for selecting these texts lies in their shared ability to illuminate how marginalized cultures weave folklore into literature as a strategy of survival, identity-making, and resistance. Ali's narrative mythologizes Kurdish struggles, transforming trauma into allegorical remembrance, while Hurston's novel enshrines Black folk speech and communal storytelling as expressions of dignity and selfhood. Together, they testify to the universality of folklore as cultural memory, revealing how traditional narratives transcend temporal and geographical boundaries to affirm belonging. Within a cross-cultural literary framework, their juxtaposition highlights convergences such as the use of myth to resist erasure and divergences shaped by their distinct cultural milieus.

3. Critical Methodology and Research Design

This study adopts the method of close reading and detailed literary analysis to Bachtyar Ali's *The Last Pomegranate Tree* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The analysis carefully examines language, imagery, symbolic scenes, and storytelling techniques that reveal elements of folklore and mythology. Attention is





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directed toward specific features such as proverbial expressions in dialogue, depictions of ritual practices, and myth-inspired motifs, all of which contribute to a deeper understanding of the thematic and cultural layers within the novels. Each text is explored not only on the level of its narrative but also within the broader context of the traditions it draws upon. Selected passages from both novels are therefore studied in dialogue with secondary materials such as accounts of Kurdish folklore or African American oral traditions to clarify cultural resonances and strengthen interpretive claims.

The guiding framework for this analysis is mythological criticism which interprets literature through universal mythic structures and symbolic motifs. This method provides a lens for recognizing the enduring myths and archetypes that surface in both texts. According to Campbell (2004), myths perform four essential roles mystical, cosmological, sociological, and psychological that supply individuals and societies with frameworks of meaning that literature often reproduce.

Similarly, Frye (1957) emphasizes that archetypal forms and recurring story patterns constitute the fundamental grammar of literature. Building on this, Jung (1964) highlights the psychological dimension of archetypes, noting that figures such as the hero, the quest, or the wise guide emerge from the collective unconscious and recur across cultures. Drawing from these insights, the study identifies mythic and folkloric archetypes within the novels such as the quest for identity, mythic landscapes, or generational archetypes and examines their role in shaping narrative meaning. Combining mythological criticism with comparative close reading allows the analysis to remain attentive to the texts themselves while situating them within wider cultural and symbolic traditions. Ultimately, this approach demonstrates how both authors employ myth and folklore to reinforce cultural memory and affirm collective identity.

4. Literature Review

This section reviews the relevant scholarship and clarifies how the present study builds upon and extends existing work. In keeping with the aims of a literature review, it develops the research idea, summarizes core findings, and identifies the gap the current project will address. Across the studies considered here, folklore, mythology, and oral tradition emerge as central resources for articulating identity and cultural belonging in marginalized communities. In the African American context, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been read as a foundational text that fuses vernacular speech with folk knowledge to empower a Black female voice. In the Kurdish context, Bachtyar Ali's



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novels have been approached as literary responses to collective trauma and as expressions of a shared social consciousness. The following review considers four key contributions to these conversations, moving from Hurston to Ali in a clear sequence.

Beginning with Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Sawsan Qashgari's 2017 study argues that the novel presents the pressures on Black women with a quiet yet incisive force, avoiding overt polemic while bringing race, gender, and class into a single field of vision. Centering on Hurston's extensive use of African American vernacular, Qashgari shows how Janie's speech becomes a means of self-definition and cultural validation, and how vernacular language counters a presumed hierarchy that privileges the dominant tongue. By situating the novel's reception history, including Richard Wright's early criticism, and then reading closely against that reception, the paper reframes the book as a nuanced social critique rather than a simple love story. The article's approach is informed by feminist literary analysis and historical contextualization, and it concludes that Hurston's innovation in narrative voice and folk speech secures the novel's standing as a foundational Black feminist work, even if the brevity of the study leaves little room for sustained engagement with later intersectional theory.

In a complementary manner, Gamze Ar's 2023 article reads Hurston's novel as a journey of Black female self-making, linking that journey to Hurston's background as an anthropologist and collector of African American and Afro Caribbean folklore. Ar underscores Hurston's status as a pioneering writer of folk fiction whose ethnographic work permeates the novel's symbols, scenes, and voices. Framing Janie's development across three marriages, the article presents the book as an early landmark of Black feminism that centers women's desire, voice, and agency. It emphasizes the enabling role of vernacular language and traces Hurston's influence on later writers, notably Alice Walker. While the piece synthesizes well established interpretations rather than advancing a radically new thesis, its breadth usefully demonstrates how folklore, oral performance, and community speech nourish both the aesthetic shape and the political force of Hurston's narrative.

Turning to the Kurdish corpus, Halmat Rasool's 2022 study applies Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism to a Bachtyar Ali novel referenced in translation as *Occupation of Darkness*. The analysis treats the narrative not as a purely individual vision but as a literary form that encodes class and social consciousness. By relating the novel's internal structures of character, theme, and plot to external social structures, the study argues that Ali's fiction articulates a communal worldview





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grounded in Kurdish historical experience. This structural constructivist lens invites readers to see characters and symbols as collectively meaningful and to read the text as a meeting point of literary form and social history. Although such a theoretical frame can underplay individual artistry and the imaginative textures of Ali's prose, it offers a rigorous way to register how collective identity and cultural memory can be carried by narrative structure and, by implication, how mythic and folkloric patterns may inform that consciousness even when not named explicitly.

Complementing the structural perspective, Ashti Hussein and Diar Mardan's 2025 article examines *The Angel's Ship* through the concept of alienation, showing how characters experience estrangement from self and society amid the legacies of upheaval in Iraqi Kurdistan. Defining alienation in terms of powerlessness and dislocation, the authors outline the phenomenon conceptually and then demonstrate how it manifests within the novel, linking specific scenes and figures to broader historical pressures. Their analysis portrays the narrative world as a traumatized society in which internal and external factors fracture identity and belonging. The study's strength lies in connecting philosophical ideas to textual detail while keeping the historical context of conflict clearly in view. Although its scope is intentionally narrow and does not explore Ali's magical realist or mythic elements in depth, it clarifies the existential dimension of Ali's fiction and illuminates how social crisis impresses itself upon the inner lives of his characters.

Together these studies foreground identity, language, and social context in the works of Hurston and Ali, yet none offers a cross cultural comparison focused specifically on folklore and mythology. Scholarship on Hurston shows how vernacular speech, folk wisdom, and oral performance shape a Black feminist vision, while work on Ali emphasizes structural social meaning and existential alienation. What remains missing is a comparative account of how both authors draw on mythic and folkloric resources to sustain cultural memory, articulate resilience, and form character and community. The present research fills this gap by placing Hurston's and Ali's narrative uses of oral tradition and myth in dialogue, identifying shared functions such as identity making and communal affirmation alongside culturally specific motifs and symbols, and thereby offering new cross-cultural insight into how literature from marginalized communities mobilizes folklore and mythology to resist erasure and imagine belonging.



5. Defining Folklore: Between Oral Heritage and Modern Cultural Practice

Folklore refers to the traditional beliefs, customs, stories, songs, and practices of a community – essentially the lore of the folk. The term was coined in 1846 by British antiquarian William J. Thoms to describe the traditions of ordinary people (Thoms, 1846). Nineteenth-century scholars viewed folklore as surviving oral traditions of rural, uneducated classes – relics of an earlier era preserved outside written culture (Newell, 1890).

By the early 20th century, however, this perspective evolved. Folklorists like Benjamin Botkin argued that folklore is not merely a remnant of the past but a living, dynamic cultural force that adapts to contemporary needs (Botkin, 1937). Richard Dorson (1968) likewise emphasized that the culture of the people persists in modern societies alongside formal institutions.

Alan Dundes broaden the definition of folk to include any group with a common factor (such as occupation, ethnicity, region, etc.) that shares traditions (Dundes, 1965). In this modern view, folklore is universal and ongoing: even in cities and digital spaces, people create folklore in the form of urban legends, office jokes, internet memes. Dan Ben-Amos succinctly defined folklore as artistic communication in small groups (Ben-Amos, 1971), highlighting expressive, creative interaction within communities. Whether it is a fairy tale told in a family, a proverb in local slang, or a joke shared online, folklore remains a vital way for communities to transmit values, wisdom, and collective identity.

6.1 Cultural Dimensions of Mythological Narratives

Mythology is the collection of sacred narratives (myths) that a culture uses to explain the world, human origins, and its own values. In scholarly terms, a myth is not a false story but a revered narrative that a community holds to be symbolically true (Dundes, 1984). Myths typically unfold in primordial times and feature gods or supernatural beings, which sets them apart from folktales (ordinary secular stories told for entertainment) and legends (stories of human heroes, often with some historical basis) (Bascom, 1965).

Scholars have long examined what myths do for society. Anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski argued that myths function as social charters – they legitimize beliefs, values, and customs by linking them to sacred origins. Early societies, in his view, used myths to justify their rules and rituals by portraying them as established by gods or ancestral figures, thus ensuring people's obedience.

Conversely, other theorists focus on myths' symbolic and psychological roles. For instance, Joseph Campbell observed recurring patterns in myths





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across many cultures and noted that they often share what he called the Hero's Journey archetype. Campbell (2004) proposed that myths fulfill multiple functions at once: they instill a sense of awe before the mystery of existence (mystical function), provide a framework for understanding the universe (cosmological function), support the social order by affirming values and norms (sociological function), and guide individuals through life stages and trials (psychological function). Because myths operate on these several levels simultaneously, they remain powerful and meaningful across generations.

In contrast, mythology also helps shape collective identity. Foundational myths give communities a shared story about where they came from and what they stand for. For instance, the Kurdish myth of Kawa the Blacksmith – central to the Newroz festival – symbolizes liberation from tyranny and reinforces Kurdish cultural identity. Similarly, African American folklore about enslaved people flying back to Africa encodes a spirit of resistance and hope. In essence, myths are among the core narratives through which cultures define themselves and their worldview.

6.2 Identity

Identity refers to the qualities, affiliations, and characteristics that define who a person or a group is. It has both a personal dimension (one's self-concept) and a social dimension (how one is perceived and categorized by others) (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Jenkins, 1996). Rather than being fixed, identity is now widely understood as fluid and continually shaped by context and experience.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1990) argued that identity is not a stable essence but a positioning – a constant process of becoming. Identities are constructed through narratives, memories, and interactions; they evolve over time and often encompass multiple facets (for instance, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, and profession), which may be emphasized differently depending on the situation.

Cultural identity, in particular, is one's sense of belonging to a distinct cultural group, sharing common language, traditions, and history. This provides a feeling of continuity and community, although individuals (especially in diasporic or multicultural contexts) often negotiate hybrid identities. National identity is a related form of collective identity an imagined community of people (Anderson, 1983) who feel connected through shared history and national myths, even if they have never met. For groups that have experienced marginalization or oppression, forging a strong collective identity can be crucial for resilience and resistance.

The Kurds, who have not yet achieved independent statehood, maintained their identity largely through language and oral tradition

passing down legends, songs, and celebrations that kept a sense of Kurdish peoplehood alive (Hussain, 2020). African Americans, descended from diverse African ethnicities but united by the shared experience of slavery and racism in the United States, developed a communal cultural identity by blending African traditions with new creations like spirituals, folktales, and Black vernacular speech (Al-Halbosy, 2020). In both cases, cultural narratives and folklore provided a foundation for solidarity (who we are as a people) when official society was hostile or attempted erasure. In sum, identity links the personal and the collective, and it is continually shaped (and reshaped) by the stories, traditions, and historical contexts that surround individuals and groups.

6.3 Plot Summary of *The Last Pomegranate Tree*

The Last Pomegranate Tree by Bachtyar Ali is a Kurdish allegorical novel set in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's rule, chronicling the journey of Muzafar Subhdam, a former peshmerga fighter imprisoned for 21 years in a southern Iraqi desert jail. Released after the 1991 Kurdish uprising, Muzafar is taken by his old commander, Yaqub Sanubar, to a secluded castle under the false pretext of a plague ravaging the outside world symbolically marked by birds fleeing whenever Yaqub lies. According to Ahmadzadeh (2011), Muzafar soon recognizes the deception and escapes to learn the fate of his newborn son, Saryas, left in Yaqub's care before his capture.

Muzafar discovers that Yaqub had also fathered twin boys around the same time and, to protect all three infants during the post-uprising chaos, entrusted them to Sayid Jalal Shams. As Hama (2023) notes, each boy was given the name Saryas and a talismanic glass pomegranate before being placed with a different family, severing ties to conceal their origins. Muzafar's odyssey to find his Saryas reveals the distinct lives of the three young men: the first, a child laborer turned protest leader, killed by police; the second, a guerrilla hero imprisoned during the Kurdish civil war; the third, disfigured by burns and sent to London for treatment. These figures, as Fathi (2024) explains, collectively embody facets of late 20th-century Kurdish history: oppression under dictatorship, fratricidal conflict, and diaspora.

The novel integrates mystical allegory and magical realism into its realist frame. Muzafar narrates tales such as the white sisters, Lawlawi Spi and Shadaryai Spi, whose shift from joy in white garments to silence in black mirrors the grief of Kurdish women widowed by the Anfal campaign. Ahmadzadeh (2011) emphasizes that this tale encapsulates the mourning and resilience of Kurdish women.





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Similarly, the legend of the last pomegranate tree promises to grant the deepest wish of anyone who sleeps beneath it; yet, as Hama (2023) records, one Saryas's failed quest for the tree reflects the elusive search for healing in a fractured land. Another allegorical figure, Mihammadi Dilshusha, Muhammad the Glass-Hearted, who can see hidden truths, underscores the theme that concealed realities inevitably emerge. These fables, blending oral tradition with allegorical commentary, function as cultural memory of hope, loss, and endurance.

Through his search, Muzafar confronts personal and political betrayal. The concealment of his son's fate mirrors the corruption of post-revolutionary Kurdish leadership, where, as Fathi (2024) observes, the revolutionaries of yesterday became the tyrants of the future. Yaqub's transformation from comrade to secretive ruler embodies the decay of revolutionary ideals, and Muzafar's ultimate realization links fatherhood to national trauma.

By the conclusion, Muzafar accepts that the three Saryases collectively represent his son's lost generation, scarred by tyranny, internal strife, and displacement. His journey ends not with reunion but with tragic freedom, as Fathi (2024) points out gaining truth without solace, yet fulfilling a duty to bear witness. This dual narrative of a father's search and a nation's reckoning uses the interplay of realism and folklore to expose the collapse of ideals while affirming the enduring human drive for meaning.

6.4 Folklore, Myth, and Identity in Bachtyar Ali's *The Last Pomegranate Tree*

The Last Pomegranate Tree by Bachtyar Ali is a novel that richly intertwines folkloric myth with a poignant exploration of personal and collective identity. The five quotes provided from the novel each highlight these themes, showing how Ali uses magical storytelling elements to reflect the realities of Kurdish history and the search for self. The narrative blends the fantastical with the real in an academic analysis, revealing deeper truths about memory, heritage, and the power of stories.

Ali's novel employs elements of folklore and myth as integral parts of its storytelling. The text hovers on the divide between realism and fable, as one reviewer observes. For instance, when the protagonist notes "Whenever he told lies, the birds would fly away. It had been that way since he was a child." (p. 3), the image feels like a proverb or folk belief. This magical realism – nature reacting to a moral act – illustrates how truth and falsehood carry almost supernatural weight. Such mythic touches are not mere decoration; Ali himself has stated that the mythical and magical dimension in the novel has a strong link to the dimension of reality, as pure realism cannot express all the hidden places... of reality.



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In other words, imagination and folklore are used to revive the unspoken aspects of lived experience.

Later in the novel, the narrator references legendary figures and miracles, saying: “I’m not going to tell you about Muhammad the Glass-Hearted, Saryas-i Subhdam, Nadim-i Shazada, and their connection to a pomegranate tree that heals the blind... It’s too early to reach the heart of our story... This ferry marks the very end of the story.” (p. 256). Here, Ali deliberately invokes an internal folktale – a pomegranate tree with healing powers – yet withholds it until the appropriate moment. The mythical pomegranate tree itself carries symbolic weight, described by the author as a symbol of the desired world the normal life that seems very hard for the characters to achieve. By embedding such folklore within the plot, the novel suggests that understanding the characters’ reality requires understanding their myths.

Finally, the novel directly emphasizes the continuity of storytelling as a folkloric act. One character muses that “every story is like a small stream that eventually spills into the broad sea of thousands of other tales... if a storyteller dies... another must replace him and carry on the story” (p. 314). This metafictional reflection likens personal stories to streams feeding a vast sea – a metaphor for the oral tradition and collective memory. Indeed, in the book’s climactic scene on a ferry, the narrator insists that as long as someone remains, the story will continue to be told. Folklore here becomes a living, ever-flowing force, ensuring that individual experiences merge into a greater human narrative.

Alongside myth, *The Last Pomegranate Tree* deeply explores identity – how it is shaped, lost, and preserved. The ravages of time and trauma erode personal identity, as captured in the line “Year by year, all my memories turned to sand.” (p. 19). This poignant metaphor suggests the disintegration of the protagonist’s past: memories, the very grains of one’s identity, slowly crumble away like sand in an hourglass. Having spent 21 years in prison, Muzafar (the protagonist) finds his sense of self unmoored, illustrating how war and isolation can wear down one’s personal history. The sand imagery also resonates with the novel’s landscape (deserts feature in the story) and underscores the fragility of cultural memory in unstable times.

Identity is also examined through fractured family and community ties. The quote “In these unusual times, fathers have become estranged from their sons.” (p. 115) speaks to the generational rifts caused by political turmoil. In the story, Muzafar emerges from prison to search for his lost son, only to discover three different young men named Saryas who might be his child. The three Saryas-i Subhdam – one dead, one imprisoned,





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one disfigured – collectively represent a broken generation of Kurdish youth.

As a literary critic notes, Ali toys with the singularity of both personhood and narrative by splitting one identity into three, and the fate of the three Saryases echoes the fate of a generation buried, burnt, or behind bars. This narrative device uses identity confusion and duplication to comment on collective trauma: an entire generation's identity has been shattered and scattered by war. The estrangement between fathers and sons thus symbolizes a broader loss of continuity between past and future a cultural identity crisis where the usual lineage and mentorship are disrupted.

Yet, the novel suggests that identity can be sustained and reclaimed through storytelling and shared myth. Even if individuals are lost or separated, their stories survive to connect with others. The flowing stream of tales (as in quote 5) implies that personal identity finds immortality in cultural memory. Each storyteller who carries on the story keeps alive not only the tale but also the identity and lessons of those who came before. In this way, folklore and myth in *The Last Pomegranate Tree* act as vessels for identity preserving the hopes, sorrows, and values of a people amid upheaval. The intergenerational narrative, from a father's memories to a son's fate, ultimately feeds into the broad sea of collective experience, ensuring that the Kurdish community's identity endures through legend and story.

6.5 Plot Summary of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* follows the life journey of Janie Crawford, a Black woman in early 20th-century Florida, as she recounts her story to her friend Pheoby upon returning to Eatonville. Her narrative unfolds in three distinct stages, each defined by a marriage that shapes her growth toward independence and self-awareness. As Racine (1994) observes, Janie's first marriage occurs in her teens, when her grandmother, Nanny seeking to secure Janie's safety and respectability after a life marked by slavery and abuse pressures her to wed Logan Killicks, a financially stable farmer. This practical arrangement provides security but no love or emotional fulfillment. Inspired by an earlier vision of natural harmony beneath a blooming pear tree, Janie longs for romantic partnership. Logan's expectation that she labor like a mule deepens her dissatisfaction, eventually prompting her to leave him for the ambitious Joe (Jody) Starks.

With Joe, Janie moves to the all-Black town of Eatonville, where he becomes mayor and a leading businessman. Initially captivated by his charisma, she soon discovers that Joe's ambitions extend to controlling her appearance, speech, and social presence. According to Crabtree

(1985), Janie gains social status as the mayor's wife but loses her voice; Joe forbids her from joining the town's vibrant porch conversations and insists she wear head-rags to subdue her beauty. This second marriage lasts two decades until Janie, after years of silencing, publicly challenges Joe's belittlement. That act of defiance marks the first step in reclaiming her self-respect. Joe dies shortly afterward, leaving Janie financially secure and socially independent for the first time.

In her forties, Janie meets Vergible Tea Cake Woods, a younger man whose playful spirit and respect for her autonomy rekindle her longing for love. They marry and move to the Everglades (the muck), joining a community of migrant workers where Janie experiences companionship, equality, and belonging. As Nordhoff-Beard (2020) explains, Tea Cake teaches her to fish, play checkers, and shoot, expanding her sense of self. Yet their love is tested by hardship, culminating in a catastrophic hurricane. In the chaos, Tea Cake saves Janie from a rabid dog but is bitten in the process, setting the stage for tragedy.

Rabies slowly erodes Tea Cake's mind, and when he turns violently against her, Janie is forced to shoot him in self-defense. She is tried for murder before an all-white jury, but as Racine (1994) recounts her testimony and character earn her acquittal. The loss of Tea Cake devastates her, but it also strengthens her; she emerges with a fuller, more complete sense of self. Returning to Eatonville, she no longer seeks validation from others, carrying Tea Cake's memory as a cherished part of her life rather than its defining purpose.

By the end, Janie has lived through love, loss, oppression, and liberation. Crabtree (1985) emphasizes that her storytelling to Pheoby symbolizes the final claiming of her voice—once stifled by others, now freely expressed. In pulling in her horizon, Janie achieves a hard-won peace, embodying Hurston's vision of a Black woman who has reached self-realization through experience, resilience, and the courage to live for herself.

6.6 Mythic and Folkloric Dimensions of Identity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is renowned for its rich interweaving of African American folklore, mythic imagery, and the protagonist Janie's quest for identity. Hurston was both a novelist and a trained anthropologist-folklorist, and her masterpiece sings with the sounds, songs, and stories of the Southern black folk tradition. Through key passages in the novel, Hurston uses folk wisdom and mythical symbolism to illuminate Janie's journey toward self-discovery and voice.





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Folklore and Folk Wisdom: One of the most explicit examples of folklore in the novel is Nanny's famous metaphor in Chapter 2: "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (Hurston, 1937). In this earthy proverb, delivered in authentic black Southern dialect, Janie's grandmother draws on folk imagery to convey the double burden carried by Black women. This crude comparison of women to mules reflects how society heaps its heaviest loads on Black women, expressing racism, gender [inequity] and colloquial language in one line. Hurston's use of such folk idioms exemplifies the novel's harmonious blend of folklore and black idiom that validates Black cultural wisdom. Similarly, at the novel's end Janie imparts folk wisdom to her friend Pheoby: "You got tuh go there tuh know there... Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves." (Hurston, 1937, p. 192). In this quote, rich with vernacular phrasing, Janie asserts a core piece of folk philosophy – that personal experience and faith are the only way to truly understand life. The term go there tuh know there sounds like a traditional proverb, stressing that one must live something to really know it.

Janie's reference to "meatskins... rattl[ing] to make out they's alive" (Hurston, 1937, p. 192) derisively describes the gossipy townsfolk as empty noise-makers, another colorful folk image. Through these sayings, Hurston not only grounds the novel in the oral folk culture of Eatonville but also highlights Janie's hard-won wisdom. As one analysis notes, Janie's final counsel encapsulates one of the most powerful takeaways of the novel that an individual must actively seek their own life and relationship with God, rather than be swayed by idle chatter.

Hurston also infuses the novel with mythic and spiritual imagery drawn from nature. A pivotal moment is Janie's awakening under the pear tree in Chapter 2: "She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace... So this was a marriage!" (Hurston, 1937, p. 11). This sensuous, almost sacred description of a bee pollinating a blossom is presented in reverent language – words like sanctum, ecstatic shiver, and revelation lend the scene a divine weight.

Hurston deliberately infuses the natural imagery with the spiritual, portraying Janie's sexual and emotional awakening as a kind of Edenic myth or vision of ideal love. The pear tree becomes Janie's personal mythic symbol of harmony and fulfillment, an image she carries in her soul thereafter. In this way, nature functions as a mythological guide for Janie's identity: the eternal blooming of the pear tree and the tiny dust-

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bearing bee together symbolize her yearning for a life of productive love and freedom.

Later in the novel, Hurston invokes biblical-scale myth when Janie and her third husband Tea Cake face the great Okeechobee hurricane. As they huddle in the storm, “They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God.” (Hurston, 1937, p. 160). This climactic quote furnishes the book’s title and situates the characters within a cosmic, spiritual drama. In the howling darkness of the hurricane – a natural force depicted like an act of God – Janie and the others are reduced to mere mortals gazing upon an overpowering divine will. The moment underscores how human beings, regardless of their individual identities or struggles, are ultimately subject to forces greater than themselves. Indeed, in this scene the usual power imbalances of race or gender are eclipsed in the face of the ultimate deciding powers: God, fate, and nature. Hurston thus uses mythic imagery to convey both humility and universality: the storm is a trial by God/nature that equalizes everyone and profoundly influences Janie’s outlook on life and love.

Folklore and myth in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are not mere ornament; they serve the deeper purpose of charting Janie’s identity formation.

The novel’s famous opening lines already frame a contrast in how men and women pursue dreams – “Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board... That is the life of men. Now, women... The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.” (Hurston, 1937, p. 1). This metaphor of distant ships and reachable dreams, delivered in a proverbial tone, introduces the theme of gender and identity. It foreshadows Janie’s trajectory as a woman who will act... accordingly to her own truth. Throughout the story, Janie struggles against others’ expectations – first as the obedient granddaughter, then as Logan’s domestic mule and later as Joe Starks’s silenced trophy wife – to find her own voice and selfhood. Each of the quotes above represents a step in that journey.

Nanny’s mule of the world warning instills in Janie an awareness of her oppressed position and a desire for a different life. The pear-tree revelation gives Janie an inner ideal to strive for – a vision of love and identity defined on her own terms, not by societal duty. The hurricane ordeal strips life to its essence, teaching Janie which values truly matter for her existence. And finally, Janie’s return to Eatonville in Chapter 20, armed with hard-earned wisdom “you got tuh go there tuh know there... find out about livin’ fuh theyselves”, marks the completion of her spiritual and personal quest (Hurston, 1937, p. 192). By insisting that





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Pheoby and others must go to God and live for themselves, Janie asserts her individual agency and spiritual identity outside of others' judgment.

In the end, Janie pulls in her horizon – a metaphorical image of reeling in her dreams – and drapes it over her shoulders as she returns home, symbolizing that she has internalized her life's experiences and found peace within herself (Hurston, 1937, p. 193). Janie's story thus illustrates the novel's overarching message: true fulfillment comes from embracing one's own folklore (cultural roots and wisdom), pursuing one's own myths or dreams, and ultimately forging one's own identity. Hurston's blending of these elements not only celebrates Black folk culture but also produces a powerful Black feminist bildungsroman in which a woman finds her voice and selfhood against all odds.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this comparative analysis of Bachtyar Ali's *The Last Pomegranate Tree* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* demonstrates that folklore and mythology serve as powerful conduits for cultural identity and a sense of belonging in literature. In both the Iraqi Kurdish and African American contexts, integrating folk narratives, mythic motifs, and oral traditions into modern novels performs multiple functions. These elements bridge the gap between generations, reinforce communal values, and assert the presence of a distinct cultural voice in the face of historical oppression.

Ali's novel, for instance, employs Kurdish legends, mystical imagery, and storytelling frames to mirror a community's trauma and resilience, thereby keeping Kurdish collective memory alive under conditions of war and exile.

Hurston's novel, on the other hand, embeds African American folk speech, songs, and mythic symbolism (from Janie's pear tree vision to the communal power of storytelling on the porch) to celebrate Black cultural life and chart one woman's journey to self-realization. Despite differences in cultural detail, a striking similarity emerges: both authors use the power of story – drawn from their respective heritage – as a form of resistance against marginalization and an affirmation of identity.

Folklore and myth in these novels provide what might be described as a narrative home for their communities: a shared imaginative space where cultural experiences are validated and collective memories are preserved. Thus, literature enriched with folklore and mythology is shown to be more than artistic expression; it is an act of cultural continuity and empowerment. By threading ancient lore and folk wisdom into their narratives, Ali and Hurston give their communities a voice and a source



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of pride, illustrating how storytelling can sustain communal identity and belonging even amid trauma and change.

Despite their distinct cultural contexts, both Bachtyar Ali's *The Last Pomegranate Tree* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* use folklore and mythology as narrative vehicles to preserve cultural identity and affirm a collective voice. Ali's Kurdish allegories and Hurston's African American folk idioms serve similar functions: they root each story in communal heritage, converting oral traditions into literary affirmations of belonging and resilience. Through mythic symbolism and storytelling, both novels underscore the power of shared narratives to uphold communal memory and values, ultimately highlighting a universal role for folklore in sustaining identity amid adversity.

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