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## Acknowledging the "Forgotten" Contributions of Black Female Authors: A Review of *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* by Cheryl Wall

Emily M. Allmond  
GCSU

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**BOOK REVIEW**

Wall, Cheryl A. *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. 246 pages.

Emily Allmond

Dr. Beauty Bragg

Faculty Mentor

For many years, contributions of female Harlem Renaissance era writers went largely unnoticed by critics and popular culture. Cheryl Wall addresses this fact, and aims to correct it, in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. This book is a part of the *Women of Letters* collection by acclaimed feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Wall's book examines select female artists of the Harlem Renaissance in the greater scope of the contributions to the movement made by women as a whole. Working closely with her contemporaries in the field of African American studies and reaching out to individuals who experienced the Harlem Renaissance firsthand, Wall provides an extensive account of the careers of several key female characters of the Harlem Renaissance. Drawing on real life examples to exemplify the struggles and contributions of female authors to the Harlem Renaissance as a whole, Wall aims to highlight the importance of the roles of these women and how they contributed to the greater conversations of the era. Focusing on the journeys taken by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston and examining them alongside the experiences of other African American female artists, Wall examines the contributions these texts made to the movement and how they deserve recognition in the studies of African American and American writing.

Chapter one of Wall's narrative, "On Being Young – A Woman – and Colored," charts the exclusion of women in the narrative of the Harlem Renaissance via the emphasis on the masculine. It is noted that women were acknowledged, but mostly as a midwife or mother figure. Wall examines the ways in which women struggled to be heard alongside male contemporaries, and notes that questions of sex and gender often gave way to the bigger questions surrounding race at the time. The lack of criticism surrounding Harlem Renaissance-era texts authored by females is acknowledged by Wall in this chapter. She

notes that critical dismissal of these women comes from a place of sexist thinking. Wall establishes more flexible parameters than what is generally given to the Harlem Renaissance to acknowledge the contributions made by these women, who often didn't live in Harlem and published influential works after the movement "ended." Wall counters the notion that women did not explore common themes and therefore were not players in the HR when, Wall argues, they modified these forms in ways that reflected the constraints of their genders. A need to examine the lives and works of female HR era authors and artists and their biographies, use of common themes and metaphors, and how they interacted with each other is articulated in this chapter. This chapter frames the argument Wall makes that women in the Harlem Renaissance had to navigate something that was not designed for them, using themes that were not usual or sometimes acceptable for them to explore. These women had to manipulate themes to be able to confidently create content that would contribute to the overall conversation, which they did despite the protestations of critics who fail to understand the multi-layered struggles with which these women dealt.

Chapters two, three, and four focus largely on the biographies of three well-known (by contemporary culture) women authors: Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston. This choice sometimes works against Wall's argument, as the biographical information takes up much of the chapter in each case and does not leave much room for analysis. However, as the biographies of these women relate directly to her overall argument, one can see why Wall felt that she should spare no detail. Each chapter chronicles the beginnings from which these women came and the respective "journeys" they each embarked upon as adults that led to their roles in the Harlem Renaissance. In the second chapter, "Jessie Redmon Fauset: Traveling in Place," Wall delves into the specifics of Fauset's upbringing to show how deeply ingrained cultural ideals affected her life, as they affected the lives of many women in this time. Fauset's close relationship to W.E.B. DuBois is given much attention in the chapter, as it should, because this relationship helped Fauset cement her important (if forgotten) role in the Harlem Renaissance via her role in *The Crisis* and the Pan African Congress. Wall's examination of Fauset's use of form and the ways in which the constraints of gender affected Fauset's subject matter sets the tone for the larger argument of the book, which analyzes the effect on art and acclaim that outside forces had on the works of Fauset's female Harlem Renaissance contemporaries.

While Wall focuses on issues of class and gender constraints when discussing Fauset, her narrative about Nella Larsen takes on a different tone. Wall notes the similarities between Larsen's biography and that of her novel's subjects, building on the same observation made regarding Fauset's works. This reviewer believes Wall makes the curious choice of providing lots of unnecessary setup to her chapter about Larsen to set up a discussion about passing novels. Wall notes that Larsen found it easy to fall into the "passing" and "tragic mulatto" genres because of her own experiences, but acknowledges that Larsen was sometimes able to subvert these genres in ways that made her novels meritable. Because of Larsen's identity as a woman of mixed race who came from a background that was not wholly "normal," Wall asserts that Larsen's own psychological dilemmas translated into her novels as she explored the theme of the "psychic dilemmas confronting black women" of the day. While Wall gives a generous overview of the biographies of these women, she does not ignore their misgivings. In this instance, Wall is sure to address the fact that Larsen shied away from subversive themes.

In the chapter focusing on Zora Neale Hurston, Wall finds a completely different subject matter to deal with than that of Larsen or Fauset. Wall jumps right into the conversation about Hurston. As with the other chapters, much attention is paid to the significance of Hurston's humble beginnings and charts her career and personal life from beginning to end. Wall notes the vast differences between Larsen and Fauset's formal narrative style versus Hurston's storytelling style. Very close attention is also paid to the ways in which Hurston, driven by anthropological interests, learned about black culture and incorporated that knowledge into her works. In a genre that focuses so much on origins, Wall notes that Hurston used her knowledge to create a mythic figure for herself that contributed to her role as an author of the Harlem Renaissance. Wall perhaps goes too far in a full summary of Hurston's famous play, "Sweat." While the significance of the play should not be diminished, Wall spends a hearty amount of time on summarizing (rather than analyzing) the plot. It's noted that Hurston's creation of form that existed outside the bounds of what had already been created by women in the era did not happen overnight, as it took Hurston a considerable amount of time to find her footing in that respect. Wall uses the Fauset chapter to show why women's contributions were disregarded and how their contributions were ignored by critics. Wall uses the Larsen chapter to show how women

were forced to thematically adjust their works to be accepted. Hurston, on the other hand, is used to show that not all female Harlem Renaissance contributors were the same, in addition to exploring the significance of focus on folk culture.

The epilogue of *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* takes on a dark tone at first, telling a sad story about Hurston's efforts to publish stories at the end of her life. This story mirrors the somewhat dejected tone that Wall takes when describing what happened to Fauset and Larsen's careers after a time. When the success of writing diminished, it seems as though Wall feels these women took on the stereotypical female roles expected of them: teacher, mother, nurse. There's a particularly dark paragraph that discusses the deaths of Larsen, Fauset, and Hurston; all of these women died alone as a result of old age. However, the tone shifts a bit as Wall acknowledges the great lengths these women had to take to create spaces for themselves when the Harlem Renaissance did not provide avenues for them. Wall's narrative ends on a very positive note, attributing the resurgence of attention paid to these texts to the tireless efforts of black women writers like Alice Walker. The final words of this book indicate that Wall recognizes that, as these women created a space for themselves in the Harlem Renaissance, space is being created for the appreciation and study of their contributions.