

Away from Home Are Some and I—Homeplace in Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*: A Black Feminist Lens

Natthapol Boonyaoudomsart¹

¹ International Program in English Language Studies, Department of English, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand

Correspondence: Natthapol Boonyaoudomsart, Department of English, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand. E-mail: natthapol.boon@yahoo.com

Received: December 23, 2017 Accepted: January 13, 2018 Online Published: February 3, 2018

doi:10.5539/ells.v8n1p20 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v8n1p20>

Abstract

This article aims to explore the centrally essential notion of homeplace as a site of resistance presented in Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (1987). Close reading of the novel advances the argument that both the symbolic Whistle Stop and the cafe represent the counteractive force against sexist, classist and racist ideologies that basically undermine self-esteem and empowerment of literary characters in the text. Despite gender, class and race, the discussed characters, however they are marginalized, can safely take refuge, heal and recover themselves in the guarded icons connoting deep meanings. By directing a critical gaze at rootedness, the discussion is grounded in Black feminist criticism that, while largely exclusive to the experiences of women of color, values the significant role of homeplace and informs how the novel responds to this feminist perspective. In the collective effort to offset discrimination, it is stressed that one is to regain a sense of self in the marginal space by embracing Black feminism.

Keywords: black feminist criticism, classism, empowerment, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, homeplace, oppression, racism, resistance, self-esteem, sexism

1. Introduction

The feminist discourse merits conceptualization of private sphere since it usually connotes gendering and femininity of household preservation and maintenance undertaken by women. Social patterning thus renders visible gender binary in which men, according to McDowell (2003), are perceived in the public arena as workers and citizens while women, inescapably confined to homeplace, are socially relegated to “dependants, to be protected and kept close” (p. 12). Their sense of worth is measured against their loyal pledge to the creation of heaven at home, indefatigably equipping menfolk and children with nurturance and sustenance. Ruth Jamison, albeit profoundly anchored in her relationship with Idgie in Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1987), is obliged to leave Whistle Stop in order to fit gender stereotypes since for her “there was no answer except to go back home and marry Frank Bennett, the young man she was engaged to marry, and to try to be a good wife and mother” (p. 88). Obviously, Ruth's attempt to emulate the feminine mystique that, according to Friedan (2013), narrowly confines her to “marriage and children” (p. 16) reveals the invisible yet formidable string that binds women to the shackles of household, thereby limiting their possibilities beyond their own closed-off quarters. Though overwhelmingly pained and aggrieved, Ruth's impulsive longing for her own formation of domestic sphere with Frank in Georgia overcomes her desire to “stay put” (Sanders, n.d., para. 5) and settle in with Idgie and the Threadgoode family in Whistle Stop, Alabama. Following her decision to desert Whistle Stop, nevertheless, Ruth becomes physically and psychologically damaged as a result of failed marriage with her fiancé, which exposes her to constant domestic violence and abuse. Trying to be an obedient and “loving wife” (p. 195), Ruth is gripped by the consternation and suffering her marriage induces, describing “why it had been such a shock when he had taken her with so much violence—almost as if he were punishing her” (p. 195). McDowell argues that for many women “the home is a place dominated by fears of domestic violence and abuse, where women and children are the victims of male aggression” (p. 15). This feminist tenet of femininity, therefore, rightly informs the subjugation of literary character Ruth in her state of being oppressed and victimized, unavoidably relating women's protection of private domain to the resultant victimization.

Despite being a notorious breeding ground for domestic exploitation and abuse—a site of sexist tyranny—the re-conceptualization of homeplace in this article aims to capture an oppositional thinking that upholds rootedness in one's place of origin which, according to McDowell, embodies “a repository of memories and a prime agent of socialization” (p. 15). This thus serves to endow literary characters to be discussed with a sense of being, asserting that their subjectivity, within an expanse of the symbolic Whistle Stop Cafe, gains prominence thanks to the endeavor of the Threadgoodes to cultivate and maintain it. The title of this article, noteworthy, is an exact replication of Emily Dickinson's poem (1960) “*Away from Home are some and I*” in which she ponders the profound meanings attached to departure from one's root and homecoming. It resonates well, in my view, with the deep connection with homeplace fictional characters share in the focus text. Primarily grounded in bell hooks' feminist perspective on homeplace and culture of belonging (1990, 2013), I argue that Whistle Stop and the cafe itself symbolize a site of resistance, providing characters, besides nurturance and sustenance, with a sense of security, place and belonging. In the selected text, white characters—Ninny Threadgoode, Evelyn Couch and Smokey Phillips—exude a lingering longing for return to Whistle Stop where they seek to regain and fulfill their sense of being. The intersectional analysis on such non-white characters as Artis and Willie Boy, Big George and Onzell's sons, too sheds light on the fact that they are setting off homeward after being racially torn beyond Whistle Stop. Their journeys home justifiably account for exploitative social constructions that send the marginalized home; this loud call to home, hence, signifies a search for a sheltered domain where one's sense of boundary has the capacity to resist domination.

2. Theoretical Framework and Review of Primary Text

To capture the essence of feminist criticism, this section provides brief survey on—notably restricted to literary realm—definitions and concepts of feminist literary criticism. Subsequently, both applicable and relevant theoretical framework, mostly drawn from bell hooks as pointed out earlier, is presented in order to demonstrate the applicability toward *Fried Green Tomatoes*. Lastly, the section of review of primary text is also included to promote familiarity with the selected text.

First and foremost, it is noteworthy that, partially due to varying feminist thoughts, defining feminist criticism remains a great challenge. However, in literary study, the practice is encapsulated through a critical insight into representation of women in literature and their shifting roles in liberation from patriarchal structure. Tyson (2006) broadly defines feminist criticism as “the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (p. 83). Similarly, Dobie (2011) professes a difficulty in pinpointing the definition of feminist criticism since “it has not yet been codified into a single critical perspective” (p. 102). Feminist advocates, nevertheless, are united in their assumption that “Western culture is fundamentally patriarchal, creating an imbalance of power that marginalizes women and their work” (p. 102). These perspectives sufficiently inform us that adopting feminist literary criticism as a theoretical framework exposes the disturbing fact that women are marginalized as a result of sexist supremacy in which men control and women are subordinated; however, other aspects of women's lives and experiences remain largely undiscovered. And it is my intention, therefore, to further glean feminist thoughts from one of the most influential feminist critics of color bell hooks, illustrating how both female and male characters in the text respond to feminism—deeply and meaningfully.

2.1 Homeplace and Community

Given constant subjection to patriarchal oppression, feminist tenet holds that women are subjugated psychologically, socially, economically and politically etc. In the midst of oppressive structure, however, homeplace represents the counteractive force that undermines sexist, classist and racist ideologies, creating a site for individuals' subjectivity to materialize. Grounded in the experiences of Black women, the concept of homeplace acknowledges daily subjugation and oppression women encounter, both white and colored, and it substantiates the power of domestic sphere in repelling and remedying sexist, classist and racist wounds. Resistance, therefore, is characterized by women's expression of maternal and nurturing care permeating throughout the territory of homeplace, exuding a sense of comfort, warmth and protection despite the normalized sexism, classism and racism. Stressing women's act of resistance, hooks (1990) asserts, “I want to honor them, not because they suffer but because they continue to struggle in the midst of suffering, because they continue to resist” (p. 43). The holy sanctuary of homeplace embodies women's need to oppose the status quo, wrapping women, children and people of color afflicted by the brutal wounds around the embrace of motherly care and protection. Closely tied to the notion of homeplace as a site of resistance, one is to create a loving and caring community in which wholeness and integrity prevail. The mutual contribution entails one's responsibility for care and commitment that exposes “a life in community” (hooks, 2013, p. 140) into a sharp focus. A united community, much like homeplace, symbolizes “a place of reconciliation, a place to come together, a way to

return home” (p. 140), where relationships with one another are “governed by conviviality rather than suspicion, by praise rather than blame” (p. 140), where, built on this standpoint, sexist, classist and racist domination is not tolerated. In light of this, the conceptual notion of homeplace and community will be theorized in the focus text in which Whistle Stop and the cafe are simultaneously portrayed as homeplace and strong community, reflecting a stronghold of womanly care and protection which, in turn, downplays oppression.

2.2 Review of Primary Text

Fannie Flagg was born in Birmingham, Alabama on September 21, 1944. Although she attended the University of Alabama in 1962, she did not finish her education and resumed studying acting at the Pittsburgh Playhouse and the Town and Gown Theater. Her remarkable success as actress and author is characterized by her early passion for writing, directing and starring in her first play *The Whoopee Girls* in the fifth grade. The milestone for her writing profession, nonetheless, started in the 1960s when she co-hosted the local show and was subsequently hired as a writer there. In 1978, the short story she produced at Santa Barbara Writers Conference earned her the first prize, and later became her first novel *Daisy Fay and the Miracle Man* (1981). Following her parents' death in 1980, Flagg decided to pursue her writing career full-time, establishing her fame through the New York Times-bestselling *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (1987). The novel was also turned into a film *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), the script of which she also co-produced. The adaptation was nominated for two Academy Awards and gained wide popularity, well loved by people of all ages. Flagg spends her life in California and Alabama.

Fried Green Tomatoes is set largely between Whistle Stop and Birmingham, Alabama. It primarily narrates the lives of Idgie Threadgoode and Ruth Jamison who together run the Whistle Stop Cafe by the railroad tracks serving famous fried green tomatoes and barbecue. Back in Idgie's childhood, she dearly her brother Buddy he remains her close friend until his immature death in the railway accident. Her inclination toward an adventurous and rugged life is attributed to the time amply spent with her brother. Plagued by deep sadness following Buddy's passing, Idgie distances herself from her family, being totally immersed in the world of her own. Lost and displaced, Idgie, almost literally, revives thanks to Ruth's timely visit to teach in Whistle Stop, and there she becomes an integral part of Idgie and the Threadgoode family. Nevertheless, Ruth's departure to marry her abusive and violent fiancé, Frank Bennett, leaves Idgie emotionally distraught to an extent that she turns inconsolable, aggressive and hostile toward those around her.

Following the death of Ruth's mother and her hopeless marriage life with Frank, Idgie and Ruth reunite, together opening the Whistle Stop Cafe and raising Ruth and Frank's child Buddy Jr. (Stump). The complex layers of novel further lie in other characters that help sustain a sense of authenticity. Sipsey and Big George, colored servants working at the Whistle Stop Cafe, thwart Frank's attempt to reclaim Stump from Ruth. Toward the end of the novel, it reveals that Sipsey and Big George are involved in saving the baby child from his father and that Frank is killed in his futile attempt by Sipsey. His carcass, to evade accusations, is turned into a satisfying meal of barbecue prepared and served at the Whistle Stop Cafe by Big George.

The story weaved around Whistle Stop in the 1920s is retold by Ninny Threadgoode, Idgie's sister-in-law, to Evelyn Couch during weekly visits to her mother-in-law at the Rose Terrace nursing home. They become friends and establish an intimate friendship which keeps Evelyn coming back to relish the story Ninny has to tell. Largely through Ninny's voice, readers step into the Whistle Stop Cafe, sit down to enjoy the irresistible fried green tomatoes and brace themselves for the heart-warming, funny and slightly melancholy tone of messages.

3. Whistle Stop Cafe: A Site of Opposition

A frail yet feisty character, Mrs. Ninny Threadgoode, in the very beginning of novel, fondly voices her deep attachment to her home in Whistle Stop to her new friend Evelyn Couch, “You know, it's funny what you'll miss when you're away from home. Now me, I miss the smell of coffee ... and bacon frying in the morning” (p. 5). At the nursing home, while she cherishes the company of her friend Mrs. Otis, it is only at her homeplace is she able to counter subjugation and restore her subjectivity and sense of worth. Since the notion of home is usually interrelated with identity and socialization as compellingly observed by Gaston Bachelard (as cited in McDowell, 2003), Ninny's diminished contact with the larger world therefore implies her desire to dwell in Whistle Stop where “a container for many activities” (McDowell, 2003, p. 15) in life is readily accessible to her. Concurrently, seeking friendship with Evelyn on her weekly visits to the nursing home, Ninny confesses her detachment and loneliness through lively and rousing conversations about Whistle Stop, which helps assuage her feelings of entrapment and subjugation. In support of the feminist perspective on homeplace as a site of opposition, hooks (1990) boldly asserts in her essay titled “Homeplace” that Black women meaningfully create safe spheres—homeplaces—“where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the

feeding of our bodies, the nurturance of our souls” (p. 41). Although Black female figures, according to hooks, are accorded the primary role in establishing and guarding their dwellings, the white Threadgoode family in the selected text typifies a unified community that solemnly endorses an idea of togetherness and collectivity regardless of gender, class and race. In the midst of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 2013), the Threadgoodes’ embrace of differences tellingly transforms Whistle Stop into a firm secure nook in which the town residents’ subjectivity is preserved: “After it got dark, Poppa would hire these fireworks people to come and put on a show for the whole town ... and all the colored from Troutville would come” (p. 32). The propensity for collectivity and inclusion obviously obliterates the marginalization embedded in the American society the repercussions of which the oppressed seek to escape. Consequently, Whistle Stop and the cafe, situated right at the core of an entire locality, make for symbolic holding places whose thread of connection tightens a psychological bond across gender, class, and race categorization. Whereas hooks heartedly admires Black women for “making life happen” (p. 42) in their domestic spheres, the theoretical frame also critically reveals a commonality of the effort white characters exert on building a retreat where victims wounded by oppression can heal.

The entrapment and marginalization Ninny experiences undoubtedly prompt her to ache for the familial relationships and, in particular, the Whistle Stop Cafe where she is able to locate her sense of boundary. Her expressive desire for a homecoming, clearly through recounting of life and fond memories of her household in Whistle Stop, implies an aspiration for control over her self-worth the confinement suppresses. The potential of homeplace to negate the hegemonic structure is well articulated through Ninny’s reminiscences about Easter traditions at the Threadgoodes’ where, in her own words, “[Y]ou could see a miniature scene of a tiny little family: a mother, a father, and two little girls and a dog, standing in front of a house that looked just like ours” (p. 144) inside the family’s Easter egg. Vividly, the excerpt stresses how Poppa and Momma instill in their descent the value of togetherness, diversity and philanthropy—the legacies to which Idgie and Ruth are steadfastly committed, growing their cafe into a sturdy resistance site.

Ninny’s deep-rooted, almost intuitive, closeness to Whistle Stop, therefore, enables her to reunite with blessings of joy and happiness the family get-togethers evoke; the warmth, protection and security allow her to conquer suppression and attain subjectivity the nursing home fails to provide. Her yearning for the Whistle Stop soil—her intimate homeplace—patently leads her to the familiar source of resistance that sabotages the norms of gender. In line with hooks, Gieryn (as cited in Burton & Clark, 2005) puts forward the claim that “home, nested in a definable space, is the crucible from which a person’s social identity emerges, transforms, and is internalized and sustained over time” (p. 170). This focus on identity thereby shatters the perception that homeplace produces entrapment and oppression. Rather, it validates the claim, like Ninny does, that the departure from family rituals only intensifies cravings for subjectivity hoarded at home—that, on one’s journey home, the sense of belonging will be found there.

Evelyn Couch, a depressed overweight middle-aged character, too exemplifies the usual interdependence between household and women’s subjugation. Caught stuck in her marriage with her husband, Ed, Evelyn is socially controlled to mold into the feminine mystique, dutifully dedicating herself to pleasing Ed that “[s]he began to feel as if she were at the bottom of a well, screaming, no one to hear” (p. 61). The pitfall of patriarchal thinking restricts her to feminine roles, unwillingly burdened by the major responsibility for creating a haven for her husband in their private sphere. Rather similar to Ruth, Evelyn’s compliance with gender ideologies depletes her sense of worth, necessitating her need to replenish it. On her weekly visits to meet Ninny at the nursing home, Evelyn, giddy with excitement, collects flashes of Whistle Stop memories, gradually immunizing herself against an immense feeling of loss she confronts by way of her make-believe connection with the almost empty Whistle Stop town. Living by the fond words and memories of Ninny, she finds herself intact in dilapidated Whistle Stop and the cafe, still boisterously filled with people laughing and talking, “[S]he would close her eyes and force herself to hear Mrs. Threadgoode’s voice and if she breathed deep and concentrated she would soon see herself in Whistle Stop” (p. 133). Due to an apparent lack of subjectivity at home, Evelyn sets out on her quest for a new adoptive homeplace where, like Ninny, she can break free from sexism—where she can seek therapeutic remedy. hooks writes that, “I want to speak about the importance of homeplace in the midst of oppression and domination, of homeplace as a site of resistance and liberation struggle” (p. 43). In elaborating on both the ideas of “resistance” and “liberation”, this feminist tenet, while dealing exclusively with the experiences of Black women, informs the exploitative system that repeatedly produces alienation and the need to rectify it. Evelyn’s connection with the cafe rewards her with much self-esteem and self-assurance that permit her to recuperate from an emotional breakdown in the patriarchal world. Teetering on the brink of falling victim to oppression, she is steadied by relishing collages of Whistle Stop where she imaginarily enters the cafe and is heartily served a generous portion of warmth and

protection. Hence, Evelyn's friendship with Ninny epitomizes an unwavering search for a distant yet unyielding homeplace where they both can identify themselves. After Ninny's demise, nonetheless, Evelyn, having secured her career as Mary Kay cosmetics seller at Ninny's suggestion, expresses deep and inconsolable grief over her friend's passing and a familiar sense of loss and disorientation re-emerges. Since her journey into another state, Evelyn's evident disposal of feminine mystique is attributed to her sense of worth gained in Whistle Stop; thus, her affection for Ninny and the railroad town only escalates. Even if she profoundly mourns Ninny's decease, it soothes her somehow to learn that the door of Whistle Stop remains invitingly open. And she is more than a welcome sight in it:

Then she picked up a family portrait of the Threadgoode family, taken in 1919; Evelyn felt as if they were old friends. She recognized Buddy immediately, with those flashing eyes and big smile. There was Essie Rue and the twins, and Leona, posing like a queen ... and little Idgie, with her toy rooster. And there, way in the back, in a long white apron, was Sipsey, taking picture posing very seriously. (p. 378)

Ninny leaves a priceless legacy for Evelyn on which she can affectionately muse. Although she has never met the Threadgoodes, the portrait remains a point of access to Whistle Stop, thereby keeping their established ties close and unbreakable. Her instant remembrance of the family suggests the wholeness she perceives in her true place of belonging. It shovels a bucket of Whistle Stop memories into her fragmented and damaged self, urging her to counteract the hegemonic structure. Her sense of boundary makes peace with her discarded self of "Other" dictated by gender binary, echoing vehemently she is belonged. hooks asserts that economic and social structures are the culprits that "deprive many folks of the means to make homeplace" (p. 46); nevertheless, thanks to the collective tenacity of the Threadgoodes'—Poppa, Momma, Idgie and Ruth—in building a site of resistance, this claim is partially acknowledged since Whistle Stop, especially the timelessly symbolic cafe itself, too constitutes a homeplace for those fleeing oppression and searching for a solace of peaceful life. The closed-down and deserted Whistle Stop, as if revived by Evelyn's flood of memories, is again vibrant, calling the weary souls home: "The old trellis, leaning on the back of the house, was entirely covered with thousands of little pink sweetheart roses, blooming like they no idea that the people inside had left long ago" (p. 383).

Besides a critical gaze at female characters, Smokey Phillips, a roaming white male character, is also significantly shaped and defined by the conceptual notion of homeplace. Homeward, he develops his connection with the cafe through his intimate relationship with Idgie and Ruth, which over time deepens his ground in Whistle Stop. Wandering aimlessly from one place to another, his subjectivity is concretized once he is desperate for staying put in Whistle Stop. With no sense of definite boundary, he is humanized, valued and thus defined as "Subject" owing to his fondness for the cafe, resisting his temptation to "get the wanderlust every once in a while and take off two or three times a year" (p. 134). With this intricate interrelatedness between politics of place and identity, it is further revealed that a great divide exists in the capitalist system considered to be a cause for inequality. Smokey Phillips' incapacity to afford permanent housing is therefore attributed to the dire economic situations that generally produce marginalization. The fact that "he never owned a thing in his life" (p. 134) clearly explains the state of widespread destitution during the Great Depression, which is not uncommon to the minority in the United States. The overarching notion of economic and social structures hooks claims thereby constitutes "poverty, hardship, and deprivation" (p. 42) that impel a subordinate body like Smokey Phillips to lean on the cafe against this form of oppression. Considerably traumatized, he discloses negative consequences of discrimination that, clearly, rip him of sense of self and belonging; finding his homeplace in Whistle Stop is hence for him necessary, remedial and restorative. In line with hooks' argument, Young (2005) eloquently articulates that a man's "self-affirming subjectivity is possible because she supports and complements his existence as both an origin of his creativity and product in which he can see his self reflected" (p. 129). Whereas his sense of belonging and subjectivity, according to Young, hinges upon his intention to be settled in one marked territory, it is agreed that women's roles in ensuring nurturance and preservation of a private domain are indisputably essential. The character's dependence on Idgie and Ruth sharply reiterates the fact that women, based on conventional gender system, usually create a site of homeplace where people can become subjects (hooks, 1990). Drifting across the country most of his life, he restores his sense of worth by returning to "that shed out back" in Whistle Stop he calls home "and if it hadn't been for Ruth and Idgie, he might have starved to death" (p. 134). Smokey Phillips, doubtlessly, remains grateful a great deal to both female characters for their kindness, nurturance and protection against exploitation. His frequent return to Whistle Stop—his homeplace—therefore indicates his longing for a site of resistance where he becomes a whole subject. He, like Ninny, maintains rootedness in Whistle Stop until his last years of life, once the *Weems Weekly*, the local newspaper, reports, "The body of an as yet unidentified white male of about 75 was discovered early Wednesday morning beside the railroad tracks, one mile south of Whistle Stop" (p. 351). Following the cafe's closing, Smokey Phillips, again, starts to range through the country—his sense of boundary is completely lost.

Without such nurturance and sustenance dispensers as Idgie and Ruth, the exploitative culture tightens its grip on him beyond Whistle Stop, forcefully aggravating his sense of direction and self. In the last phase of his life, however, he is found sauntering homeward, intent on permanently residing in the old familiar spot where the lifelike recollection of Whistle Stop is buried. A man with no possessions, Smokey Phillips has his own home—snug and warm—behind the cafe, a firm site of opposition where his spirit runs high and rests in peace.

In recalling her childhood trip to her grandmother's homeplace, hooks (1990) heartily exclaims, "Oh! that feeling of safety, of arrival, of homecoming when we finally reached the edge of her yard, when we could see the soot black face of your grandfather ... and rest on his lap" (p. 41). This spirited affection for rootedness and appreciation for Black women lives frames an intersectional perspective on deep meanings of dwelling among the non-whites. As a colored character, Artis is bound for home following his contact with racism beyond the enclosure of Whistle Stop, underlining a central role of homeplace in providing physical and spiritual healing. Miles apart, he passionately reminisces about Whistle Stop, "As Artis stood there today in the doorway, he was hurting so bad, he thought he would die. He missed Birmingham and he wanted to go back" (p. 228). Growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, he was raised by Big George and Onzell, the loving and compassionate couple, while strictly disciplined to internalize the value of kinship, compassion and love that all transgresses the color line. The symbolic Whistle Stop Cafe, hence, is depicted as a resistance ground for those vulnerable to racism as articulated by hooks in her essay. Despite the normalized racial exploitation that dehumanizes the colored bodies, one that forces them to correspond to white standards and deprives them of their selfhood, she praises Black women for their determination in making "this life possible" (p. 42). It is Black women, however, who defiantly and boldly encounter such harsh and brutal realities through their dedication to homeplace construction, blanketing their family members with love, care and warmth. Artis, noticeably racially segregated, takes comfort in his fond home memories in Whistle Stop, realizing that racism will not be endured and he will be watchfully guarded there. Overjoyed, his contentment is almost indescribable: "If there is such a thing as complete happiness, it is knowing that you are in the right place, and Artis had been completely happy from the moment he hit Birmingham" (p. 229). The conceptual idea of homeplace is therefore crucial in situating one's selfhood in the context of dwelling that will foster one's nurturance and opposition—utterly blind to skin colors. Whereas the mentality of the non-whites is colonized, a literary character like Artis intends to return to his place of origin so that he can, according to Burton and Clark, regulate his family routines, build legacies and find his own sense of worth. His encounter with racial stigma out in the public world identifies his need to be settled in one place where racial discrimination is resisted. Like Smokey Phillips, his longing for homeplace is deeply emotional and almost heart-wrenching:

Artis tapped his foot on the floor three times and, magically, the movie changed. He is a little boy now, and his mommo is cooking in the back of the cafe ... *Oh, don't get in Mommo's way, she slap you out the door* ... There's Naughty Bird and Willie Boy ... And sweet Jasper ... Grandma Sipsey's there, dipping her cornbread in honey ... Miss Idgie and Miss Ruth ... *they treat you white* ... And Stump ... And Smokey Lonesome. (p. 372)

The above excerpt strongly captures his most familiar senses of joy and belonging the concept of homeplace evokes. Dying in a hotel, his mind flashes back to Whistle Stop childhood seamlessly merged by both black and white worlds. Against the racist socialization, his interracial mingling with the whites is regulated in Whistle Stop—his sense of dignity is kept intact. In the face of oppression, hooks comments on Black women's endeavor to model homeplaces "that has historically distinguished the lot of black women in patriarchal white supremacist society from that of black men" (p. 42). From this standpoint, she suggests an intersectional aspect of Black women who, despite sexism and racism, continue to ensure their family members joy, love and protection, reducing, if not entirely eradicating, that sense of otherness their loved ones have to cope with on a daily basis. While the patriarchal white supremacist society strips Black women of their opportunities to construct their resistance site, I argue that there is a great sense of collectivity in characters, both black and white, that makes it possible for them to share the common ground—the defensive holding place to foster togetherness, the one to combat exploitation of all kinds in Whistle Stop. While the fact that Idgie and Ruth "treat you white" (p. 372) sufficiently illustrates a blurred divide between races and maintained kin network as a strong foundation on which their shared homeplace is built, it also implicitly suggests the white supremacist thinking embedded in the American social fabric. hooks (1992), referring to the Whites as Other, writes that for Blacks an attempt to make sense of whiteness "is expressive of the desire to understand the mystery, to know intimately through imitation, as though as knowing worn like an amulet, a mask, will ward away the evil, the terror" (p. 166). It is apparent, from this viewpoint, that she is critical of white supremacy in the sense that it colonizes the minds of Blacks—forcing them to internalize whiteness to negate racial wounds. Drifting longingly in his dream, Artis' last yearning for home is fulfilled—he follows the insistent call to home his beloved land repeatedly makes, feeling warm and

secure in the embrace of Whistle Stop where his life is sustained.

Willie Boy, Artis' brother, exemplifies literary character's intent to embark on a search for homeplace following racial discrimination. Attempting to defend the dignity of the Blacks after being verbally abused, Willie Boy plunges into a brawl that leads to his immature death with Winston, the colored soldier, "But tonight, when Winston spoke, he thought of his daddy and crashed a beer bottle into the soldier's face and sent him sprawling on the floor, out like a light" (p. 246). This blatant misconception about the white-black relationship at the Whistle Stop Cafe triggers him into living up to the privilege of working for the Threadgoodes, placing his life in jeopardy in the racist world. Following his passing, Willie Boy's body, dismally, is headed homeward aboard the train where upon arrival there is "just a cardboard name tag on the box, with P.F.C. W.C. PEAHEY written on it" and a sign on the window of the cafe that reads "WELCOME HOME, WILLIE BOY" (p. 245). His permanent homecoming, arguably, is embedded into the feminist discourse that informs his intimate connection to place of origin where he can, at least, remain close to those who humanize him, sustaining him with love, protection and selfhood. Due to widespread racism, the community's inconsolable grief over his demise is understandable when Ninny recounts, "Why, you've never heard anything sadder than a colored funeral" (p. 300), reflecting the deep-seated exploitative system that constantly alienates the minority. The feminist perspective on homeplace, therefore, explicates the tendency for locating one's rootedness so as to escape and survive it. Both Artis and Willie Boy, racially afflicted, find theirs in Alabama hometown where they, since childhood, were treated with pride, dignity and value. Relevantly, hooks (2009) forcefully states in the beginning of her essay titled "Kentucky is My Fate" that, "If one has chosen to live mindfully, then choosing a place to die is as vital as choosing where and how to live" (p. 6), which, in my view, mirrors Artis and Willie Boy's wish for their shared rootedness cultivated in Whistle Stop. An opposition site in Whistle Stop enables them to live the grounded lives, surrounded by those who do not single them out.

The fact that the Threadgoode's household characterizes a close-knit community is stressed when the Weems Weekly reports on Momma's funeral which draws people, white and colored, together:

After the service, we all went over to the Threadgoode house, and everyone in town must have been there to pay their respects to Momma Threadgoode. Half the people here practically grew up over at the Threadgoode house with she and Popa. I can never forget the good times we had over there and how she always made us feel so welcome. (p. 218)

As a central gathering place, at Threadgoodes', everybody is pampered with a sense of home, having received the flow of generosity and kindness crafted by the family. With their clear expression of gratefulness, the Threadgoodes' is the heart of community that pumps life-giving legacy for any enervated soul. Whereas hooks cautions that "we are currently in danger of forgetting the powerful role black women have played in constructing for us homeplaces that are site for resistance" and that "this forgetfulness undermines our solidarity and the future of black liberation struggle" (p. 45), the depiction of the Threadgoodes is a great contrast owing to their determined effort in building a diverse community in which Whites and Blacks are equally accorded humanization and selfhood. This act stresses the family's culture Idgie and Ruth abidingly practice at the cafe:

It's odd, here the whole world was suffering so, but at the cafe, the Depression years come back to me now as the happy times, even though we were all struggling. We were happy and didn't know it. (p. 250)

Ninny's quoted statement above illustrates how Idgie and Ruth's kindness and perpetuation of goodwill serve to bind people together across racial differences. The two characters stand firm in their commitment to nurturance and sustenance of fellow human beings plagued by hunger, lack of selfhood, and companionship, transforming an ordinary eatery into a site swarmed with rich memories and assorted experiences. Their unwavering sense of togetherness, in turn, turns the cafe into a site of opposition against sexism, classism and racism. Within the realm of this shared homeplace, they gain control over subordination, guarding and protecting it with much solidarity. Clearly, once Whistle Stop is bereft of life, a pang of homelessness looms large over the entire community—a nostalgic loss of communal homeplace where congregation is usually forged. Saying goodbye to Whistle Stop, the Weems Weekly thoughtfully contemplates, "Now that I look back, it seems to me that after the cafe closed, the heart of the town just stopped beating. Funny how a little knockabout like that brought so many people together" (p. 384). It is worth reiterating that while hooks extols the dedication of Black women to building homeplace, the white characters' untiring effort in nursing the whole town is equally significant and commendable. They create a tiny railroad place that hosts and holds a mixture of people, knitting a web of love and care that blankets those inside—one that continues to bind and resist.

4. Conclusion

In this article, the principal argument is premised on the fact that the Black feminist perspective on homeplace

re-defines characters' form of resistance against the capitalist patriarchy in the text. Ninny Threadgoode, deeply entrapped at the nursing home, is desperate for her return to Whistle Stop where a host of family memories is held there. Her root to homeplace, therefore, signifies her discovery of selfhood in the cafe where socialization nurtures, nourishes and sustains life. Evelyn Couch, obviously through her intergenerational sisterhood and escape, yearns for meaningful presence and retreat in Whistle Stop where the kin network and sense of collectivity liberate her from feminine mystique. Her intimate and timeless relationship with Ninny helps situate her in the context of Whistle Stop and the cafe in which she is enabled to combat sexism fearlessly. Male character Smokey Phillips finds it possible to be settled in Whistle Stop—close to the heart of the lively and bustling cafe. Since economic downturns continue to breed repression, the oppressed are coerced to locate a refuge where they can recover and heal. The Whistle Stop Cafe, hence, epitomizes a site of resistance that restores his faith and redefines his subjectivity. Artis and Willie Boy, two colored characters, deeply grow their root to their homeplace in Whistle Stop which, after being racially segregated, calls them home. Out in the world where racial discrimination is standardized, they return home where their dignity and sense of worth are maintained and valued—where they will be greeted with old family rituals. Evidently, their inseparable attachment to Whistle Stop and the cafe is etched permanently, far beyond the afterlife. As the heart of community, both treasured sites knit intricate threads of love and care that tie people across gender, class and race together. They are sought-after homeplaces, the solid sites of resistance, where souls and spirits are filled up.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Asst. Prof. Dr. Suriyan Panlay, a faculty member at the Department of English, Thammasat University. His critical comments, kind words of advice, dedication and generosity in useful materials immensely satisfy my thirst for literature and thus enable me to produce this paper.

References

- Burton, M. B., & Clark L. S. (2005). Homeplace and housing in the lives of low-income urban African American families. In V. C. Mcloyd, N. E. Hill & K. A. Dodge (Eds.), *African American family life* (pp. 166-188). New York, NY: The Guildford Press.
- Dobie, A. B. (2011). *Theory into practice: An introduction to literary criticism*. Boston, MA: Wadsworth.
- Flagg, F. (1987). *Fried green tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Friedan, B. (2013). *The feminine mystique*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Good Reads. (2010). *Interview with Fannie Flagg*. Retrieved from http://www.goodreads.com/interviews/show/558.Fannie_Flagg
- hooks, B. (1990). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, B. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, B. (2009). *Belonging: A culture of place*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- hooks, B. (2013). *Writing beyond race*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- McDowell, L. (2003). Place and space. In M. Eagleton (Ed.), *A concise companion to feminist theory* (pp. 11-31). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470756683.ch1>
- Random House Books. (n. d.). *About Fannie Flagg*. Retrieved from <http://fannieflaggbooks.com/bios/fannie-flagg>
- Random House Books. (n. d.). *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*. Retrieved from <http://www.randomhousebooks.com/books/50177/>
- Sanders, R. S. (n. d.). *Homeplace*. Retrieved from <http://2014hebert110.qwriting.qc.cuny.edu/files/2014/07/Scott-Russell-Sanders-Homeplace.pdf>
- Tyson, L. (2006). Critical theory today: a user-friendly guide. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203479698>
- Young, M. I. (2005). On female body experience: "Throwing like a girl" and other essays. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195161920.001.0001>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).