



FANNIE FLAGG'S *FRIED GREEN TOMATOES AT THE WHISTLE STOP*
CAFE: GENDER, CLASS, RACE AND WHITE SUPREMACY

BY

MR. NATTHAPOL BOONYAOUDOMSART

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS (ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDIES)

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LINGUISTICS

FACULTY OF LIBERAL ARTS

THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY

ACADEMIC YEAR 2017

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ENTITLED

FANNIE FLAGG'S *FRIED GREEN TOMATOES AT THE WHISTLE STOP CAFE*: GENDER,
CLASS, RACE AND WHITE SUPREMACY

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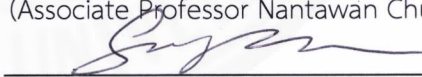
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ABSTRACT

Deploying Black feminist criticism as a theoretical framework, this thesis essentially presents literary characters' encounter with manifestations of oppression and their struggles for liberation in Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*. First, it sets out to explore sexist, classist and racist ideologies that, through a lens of intersectionality, give rise to a complication of subordination that needs to be contested. Next, my close reading of the novel reveals that the expression of intense rootedness translates into fictional characters' collective effort in affirming their resistance, thereby retaining a deep meaning of homeplace as a site of opposition. Finally, premised on a feminist tenet of love politics, my argument suggests that in order for the exploited—regardless of gender, class and race—to escape domination, it is necessary that their commitment to love ethics be preserved. Through the transformative and remedial properties of love, it is demonstrated that the agency and empowerment feminism strongly advocates are eventually attained.

Keywords: Fannie Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, Black feminist criticism, intersectionality, homeplace, love ethics, empowerment

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Dear Papa, you are part and parcel of me. Thank you for your faith in me. Dear Mom (1971 - 2001), I owe you life. Across time and space, you continue to be my guiding star. For eternity. Dear Grandmother, Aunties and Stepmom—all those amazing ladies in my life—thank you for wrapping me in the blanket of love, care and support in the unbearable absence of Mom. Dear Best, thank you for your sacrifice. You are my life, a morning light that breaks out a smile to me. Shining.

Mr. Natthapol Boonyaoudomsart

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Whistle Stop Cafe opened up last week, right next door to me at the post office, and owners Iddie Threadgoode and Ruth Jamison said business has been good ever since. Iddie says that for people who know her not to worry about getting poisoned, she is not cooking. All the cooking is being done by two colored women, Sipsy and Onzell, and the barbecue is being cooked by Big George, who is Onzell's husband. (Flagg, 1987, p. 1)

1.1 Introduction

The news clipping featured in *The Weems Weekly* on the first page of Fannie Flagg's novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (1987) clearly evokes a sense of warmth permeating through the crowded Whistle Stop Cafe serving prized southern foods fried green tomatoes and barbecue set in the 1920s in Whistle Stop, Alabama. The novel sets out to chart the lives of protagonist Iddie Threadgoode and her intimate friend Ruth Jamison who together run the joint restaurant business until Ruth's immature death. Largely thanks to the famous cuisine and deep affection the Whistle Stop residents feel toward the cafe, the place comes to represent the close-knit community united by their mutual emotional attachment, prompting Flagg to roundly and richly depict other characters in the focus text mostly through the voice of Ninny Threadgoode, Iddie's sister-in-law who resides in the nursing home in 1985. Infused with the power of friendship, love and loss, lively and vivid accounts of Whistle Stop magically heal the depressed middle-aged Evelyn Couch who befriends Ninny on her weekly visits to the nursing home; they permit rediscovery of self-assertion and sense of value that meaningfully serve to sustain lives.

Fannie Flagg (1944), who started her early careers as a comedian and actress, is the New York Times best-selling author of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* published in 1987, and it has ever since enormously garnered wide readership from the public as well as university literature syllabi. The door of Whistle Stop Cafe is opened in a small town of Whistle Stop, Alabama in the 1900s, the complex narration of which is woven into the fabric of heartwarming, slightly tragic and

inspirational stories centering on its residents who frequent the place and thus come to enliven well-crafted story lines. Stressing the power of women, the text challenges deep-rooted patriarchal thinking and establishes women-identified experiences through such characters as Idgie and Ruth who, after Ruth's unsuccessful marriage life, together start the local eatery and bask in the glory of its tremendous success, strengthening their intimate bond of friendship until Ruth's early death. Classist ideology also conceals the manifestation of daily struggles for fictional character like Smokey Phillips who, socially privileged as a white male, is economically exploited. Sitting by the railroad track, the cafe is a usually packed gathering place for those seeking delectable fried green tomatoes and barbecue prepared by the colored servants, Sipsey, Onzell and Big George. Countering the stereotypical perception toward racial segregation in Alabama, Flagg's novel further endeavors to reserve and create a safe haven for non-white characters whose racial subjection and oppression are perceived to be normalized in the racist society. Critical gazes at issues of gender, class and race in the selected text this thesis aims to adopt, therefore, will uncover how the power and self-assertion of women and men, regardless of class and race, are sustained and how the conceptual notion of *intersectionality* paves way for theorizing that shapes the premise of literary study.

Close reading of the novel reveals a great emphasis on lives and experiences of the following female characters: Idgie Threadgoode, Ruth Jamison, Ninny Threadgoode and Evelyn Couch, who enrich and revive the shut-down Whistle Stop Cafe. Thus, it is fitting to utilize a theoretical frame of feminism as a primary analytical tool to discuss these female figures in order to enable various perspectives about gender relations each character entails as well as to interrogate feminist issues and experiences inherent in the text that will contribute to the current debate on male-dominated literature landscape. Dobie (2012) admits the difficulty in defining feminist criticism due to the lack of "single critical perspective" (p. 102); however, the assumption that Western culture is fundamentally patriarchal and that it creates an imbalance that marginalizes women and their career choices is clearly in line with what this study aims to investigate. Intimidated by his sister's insecurity in life and livelihood,

Ildgie's brother Cleo, tries to dissuade her from supplying foods to the colored, "[Y]ou don't need to feed everybody that shows up at your door. You've got a business to run here" (p. 28). Although Cleo implies the trouble the colored might cause for patronizing the cafe and his harbored agitation over the community's active racial segregation, his reasons work to disclose how Ildgie's role, culturally imposed, is deviant from one dimension of patriarchal structures in which women are typically excluded from employment opportunities. Not only is Ildgie's self-assertion determined by her access to careerism, but her empowerment is also heightened through her ability to establish ownership of the business, rendering the marginalization of women in the public sphere utterly irrelevant.

Gender is considered a relentless problem that spells ripple effects on unequal treatment due to sexual binary, as evidenced in the rampant existence of discrimination against women in terms of career advancement, workplaces, wages, intellectual capability, education and freedom etc. Needless to say, women are constant victims of subjugation and oppression virtually at every social and personal level, surrendering themselves to the power of patriarchal ideology that perpetually regards women as inferiors. In her oft-cited quote, Virginia Woolf neatly puts, "As long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects a woman thinking". This succinct statement alone emphatically suggests her pressing concern over the limit of rights women must endure since their survival obviously entails the need to conform to male-oriented thinking and substantial dependence on binary poles. Woolf has arguably spoken on behalf of millions of women whose voices have been silenced, yet their passion for equity is indomitable. The preservation of this deep-rooted sexism, nonetheless, has in recent decades received sufficient attention among advocates and scholars, pushing them to take actions against inequality and gender discrimination. It is therefore my intention, built on these insightful perspectives, to reexamine the roles of women reflected in *Fried Green Tomatoes* by grounding the interpretation in a conceptual framework of feminism. While the theoretical frame justifiably merits an investigation into sexist socialization, as pointed out, it relevantly unveils the uneven distribution of power that generates other forms of oppression. Hence, the literary discussion in this

study, besides sexism, also aims to explore the prevalent classist thinking feminism intends to eliminate.

With respect to gender issues, it is also significant to highlight the fact that historically situating the novel against the backdrop of Civil Rights Movement, specifically in the setting of southern Alabama, offers a lens into contextual richness and thus adds a sense of authenticity to the text. Arguably, it provides ample opportunities to further investigate the profound racial segregation that continues to afflict millions of non-whites. The watershed in an end to slavery is deemed triumphant with the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment (1865) that decrees the abolition of slavery in the United States following the Civil War (1861-1865) between the sectarian Union and Confederate in which the former demands eradication of slaves while the latter advocates the ongoing segregation. The Fourteenth Amendment (1868) is subsequently introduced to accord African-Americans their full U.S. citizenship; their dominance in the political arena does not emerge until the passing of Fifteenth Amendment (1870) that extends to non-whites the rights to vote.

In persistent and determined efforts to uproot slavery and racial segregation from the American culture tainted with white supremacy, countering the norm not only invites adversity from the majority of white Americans who do not tolerate a shift in social hierarchy, it also intensifies the hardship already experienced by African-Americans on a daily basis. Despite the Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves in 1863, ironically, Jim Crow Laws are later in place in the 1890s in most southern states that continue to exert the affliction of segregation in, for instance, public parks, cemeteries, theaters, restaurants and transport etc. Relevantly, the separate but equal standard, one that continues to segregate both races, takes effect in such certain states as Louisiana and Tennessee etc., restricting access to public transport and facilities provided to non-whites. This, hence, leads to blacks' sentimental outrage over the equality in rights and forceful segregationist policies in America. With the establishment of anti-black organization Klu Klux Klan in the state of Alabama in the 1920s, African-Americans live in constant fear, being exposed to life-threatening assault due to the sect's devotion to white supremacy and its strong adversity toward the colored. The

arrest of Rosa Parks in 1955 for her unwillingness to desert the seat reserved for the whites on a public bus exemplifies the ongoing existence of racial discrimination that leads to Montgomery bus boycott a year later in which innumerable African-Americans discontinue their ridership. It is noteworthy that these historical events in the American history have partially yet significantly contributed to the larger movements of African-Americans whose primary goal is to attain equality in both private and public spheres regardless of race. Although the Civil Rights Act (1964) is signed by President Lyndon Johnson to outlaw segregation as well as Jim Crow Laws, the issues of race, predictably, are not entirely erased and they will likely to continue establishing significance in literary realm.

The setting of text alternates largely between Whistle Stop and Birmingham, Alabama spanning from the 1920s to 1980s. It is worth mentioning that, historically important, the novel's beginning marks first wave of women's movement during 1848s – 1920s with the inception of Women's Rights Convention, held in Seneca Falls in 1848 (Madsen, 2000). As part of the larger Civil Rights Movement, the attainment of this particular women organization is characterized by the passing of Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920, granting women the rights to vote and wider access to political sphere. Regardless of its central focus on eradication of inequity in politics, the first uprising provides a platform for the following waves of movement which call to attention the issues of gender discrimination in public and private spaces, namely women's full participation in professional arena and rights to intellectual development. Set against the backdrop of first and second waves of movement, the novel with its focal point for women's experiences and self-assertion will yield meaningful interpretations, imbuing Flagg's fiction with a sense of authenticity. In writing this novel, the author professes she is inspired by her deep affection for her great aunt who hands her a shoebox and owns a railroad restaurant, "This was all that was left of the sixty-nine years of my Aunt Bess, who had been such a vital and loving giving person while she had been alive. I wanted to recreate a life from that shoebox" (Passafiume, n.d., para. 3).

Intriguingly, bell hooks (1982), the prominent feminist of color, takes a firm stand on multiple dimensions of feminist criticism in her effort to take racism into consideration in the feminist platform. She makes a strong claim that past women's movements were organized to serve the needs of white middle-class American women who attempt to shrink social hierarchy and acquire the same level of status and recognition with that of white men who exert oppressive power on them, breeding victimization in terms of gender dichotomy. The organized movements are therefore espoused and attended by women of white background who seek an escape from the boredom of household domain and challenges in the professional world. Most participants are, doubtless, the well-educated housewives who perceive they are prevented from realizing their sense of self-fulfillment due to patriarchal constructs imposed on them. Even though this represents the principal concern of most white American women then, the presence and voices of non-white women, placed at the lower rank in social hierarchy, are largely overlooked, leading to further perpetuation of racial inequity. In other words, while advocacy for intolerance toward gender is gaining momentum and yielding benefits, the seed of discrimination again starts to grow among both groups of women—white and colored—urging women of color to question the movements' far-reaching success. The term *intersectionality* is introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to problematize the tendency “to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (as cited in Cooper, 2016, p. 385). Consistent with hooks' conceptual framework, intersectional approach brings into light “the multidimensionality of Black women's experiences” (p. 385), asserting that erasure of black women's experiences needs to be rectified through an intersectional analysis. Largely thanks to its “expansive academic reach” (p. 385), an analytic frame of intersectionality, alongside hooks', will be deployed, thereby representing my attempt at critically investigating the interconnectedness between gender, class and race framed by the premise of feminist criticism.

Ninny Threadgoode's reminiscences of Sipseey, the colored servant working at the Whistle Stop Cafe, unveil, almost automatically, the suffering and hardship she must endure as a result of her race and subsequent discriminatory treatment: “I don't

have any idea where Sipsey came from . . . you never know where colored people come from” (p. 45). As a colored woman, Sipsey is subject to the notion of double jeopardy prevalent in the sexist and racist American society—she is dehumanized in the lowest social hierarchy. Although white American women publicize they are excluded from the public sphere due to the notorious oppressive patriarchal thinking, black American women are further alienated because of their skin color. hooks (1982) asserts, “American society is one in which racial imperialism supersedes sexual imperialism” (p. 122). There is a need to reiterate that, built on this notion, gender and race are intertwined and this interconnection is inseparable. It is acknowledged that internal conflicts between white and non-white American women stir a great divide; however, the relationship between female characters portrayed in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, irrespective of racial backgrounds, reverses this stereotypical social practice. In one of Ninny’s accounts of Whistle Stop, she confesses, “When I get to heaven, with all my people, I hope Sister and Cookie the raccoon is gonna be there. I know old Sipsey’s gonna be there” (p. 45). The intermingling, close kinship and indiscernible marginalization the narrator Ninny exudes blur the color line that normally segregates the colored from whites, failing to render the former as “Other”. Theoretically sound, feminist theory in which the interpretation of gender and race is considered makes it possible to contend that the novel is well positioned to unite and reinforce the bond of women across racial boundaries, going against the tide of intense Civil Rights Movement.

Such literary productions as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) or Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) etc. have been interlinked with feminist movements, whose main effort is to advocate intolerance for gender discrimination (Barry, 2009). This close association, therefore, greatly reflects feminist thinking embedded in *Fried Green Tomatoes*. The literary merit of this research, arguably, is paramount in three primary aspects. First, it will offer a critical glimpse into, through a feminist lens, sexist, classist and racist ideologies that subsequently permit self-assertion, empowerment and liberation. Citing Mary Ellmann’s *Thinking about Women* (1968), Abrams and Harpham (2012) highlight issues

of gender discrimination presented in literary productions in which “the derogatory stereotypes of women in literature written by men” (p. 121) are inherent. Taking this perspective into account, it is important that the findings of this study serve to adjust our perception of literary conventions and heighten women’s power in the text. Next, the analysis will affirm the applicability of feminist thinking in undermining the oppressive forces. Although the practice substantially deals with unraveling dominance and authority, the interpretation is enriched and refined when contextually placed and theorized in the novel, expanding a focus on characters’ enlarged collective subjectivity. And finally, since women’s movements have, to a certain extent, altered the projection of women’s roles in literary productions, this thesis will suggest further areas of research in order to consolidate our understanding about this distinctive voice in literary study.

1.2 Research Questions

Warm, funny and irresistible, *Fried Green Tomatoes* stresses that the intersectionality of gender, class and race is foundational in establishing bonding, empowerment, and liberation of fictional characters in the text. Utilizing feminist criticism as its principal theoretical framework, this study therefore aims to address the following research questions:

1. How do gender, class and race intersect in the selected text?
2. What are some of the significant measures literary characters take against counteracting manifestations of oppression?
3. Are self-assertion, empowerment and liberation realized in the end?

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This is for every woman
 That has loved another freely
 That shows how much she cares
 That accepts others for who they are
 You are beautiful.
 Everything will be okay
 If you can believe in yourself.
 But most of all, please love yourself.

—Angela Davis, *For Every Woman*

Thematically arranged, this chapter presents previous studies on text analyses of the selected novel *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1987) deploying varying theoretical frames and approaches. Literature on certain themes of cinematic adaptation of *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991) will also be covered in order to reveal commonalities and relevance in terms of interpretations. This, by extension, will be followed by a survey of social movement and research pertaining to the topic of racial segregation confronted by women of color, substantiating the interconnectedness between gender and race. Although feminist criticism has been widely practiced in literary study, a paucity of its applicability toward Flagg’s novel allows for further investigation in myriad aspects, particularly around the issues of gender and race.

2.1 Text Analyses of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*

A comparative study between Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) and Fannie Flagg’s *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (1987) is conducted by Westmoreland (2006). Seeking to explore topics of oppression, racial discrimination and lesbianism presented in both texts, her dissertation chapter titled “*Sewing Subjectivity, Cooking Communities*” also illustrates formations of sisterhood established by female characters—Celie and Evelyn—deploying feminist criticism as a theoretical framework. Rescued from her abusive husband Mr. ___, Celie’s sisterhood is bonded by her impassioned sewing that provides an outlet for her sense of loyalty

and gratefulness she expresses toward Shug Avery to grow. Unlike Celie, Evelyn, a depressed middle-aged wife focus novel, is able to establish hers with Idgie and Ruth through Ninny's inspiring accounts of Whistle Stop, apparently transgressing space and time. This form of "cross-generational" sisterhood, in turn, further grants Evelyn subjectivity that counters the prescriptive and heterosexist ideology she encounters. It is captivatingly observed that Evelyn's generous food sharing with Ninny at the nursing home indicates food and cooking constitute a primary medium through which the sisterhood materializes. In pursuit of emotional comfort, Evelyn is able to fill that empty void with a torrent of warm Whistle Stop memories unleashed by Ninny Threadgoode; the cooking and foods thus wield a transformative power in imbuing her with a sense of subjectivity. In addition, Evelyn's ability to identify with Idgie, Ruth and the colored servant Sipsy allows her to become part of a larger sisterhood in which she unlearns the oppression of sex, race and heterogeneity, intently endeavoring to dismantle it. Struggling in her married life, Evelyn refuses to, obviously thanks to her gained subjectivity, submit to subjugation exerted by her husband Ed and the world she inhabits. Besides the commonalities revealed in both texts, this thesis further commits to an exploration beyond the intimate bond shared by women, which will enrich aspects of study feminist underpinning brings to the foreground.

One of the most comprehensive studies on *Fried Green Tomatoes* is undertaken in Rohrer-Walsh's dissertation (2008), covering a range of varying topics. Psychologically grounded in Marlow's "Theory of Self-Actualization", the study aims to discover the manner in which characters in Flagg's novel develop "growth of an individual" manifested in their fulfillment of highest needs. According to the research, form of informal education in *Fried Green Tomatoes* influences the attainment of self-actualization. It stresses that through counseling and infusing didactic messages, Idgie and Evelyn march toward the notion of Marlow's self-actualization as students, carefully guided by their mentors Ruth and Ninny, respectively. Detached and lost, the two former characters gain confidence and start to realize the meaning of life, and this achievement of self-actualization is attributed to the efforts of the second pair of figures. Further, text interpretation discloses that friendship also constitutes Marlow's

theory. It is obvious that intimate relationship is one of the main themes in Flagg's novel; therefore, the connection between Idgie and Ruth suggests their reliance on reciprocal support that will, in turn, reward them with self-fulfillment. Evelyn too, besides Ninny, socializes with her wider circle of friends who will help her exit an unhappy marriage with her husband Ed. Friendship as well as well-established connection with a larger community, according to the study, promises individuals the possibility of their highest potential and in the text it is through cooking that comes to signify the tie. The Whistle Stop Cafe symbolizes a merged unit in which its members afford a platform to socialize and mingle, fortifying their bond that is sufficiently strong to permit self-actualization and dismantle the wall of racial discrimination. Next, careerism of Idgie and Ruth at the Whistle Stop Cafe entails social responsibility which, according to Marlow, nurtures self-actualization since besides hard work, altruism and social contribution are also demanded. The portrayal of Idgie and Ruth as industrious and charitable restaurant owners is consistent with the adopted theoretical framework in this study and thus reinforces the fact that they have control over self-attainment. Evelyn's glory in her role as a salesperson toward the end of the novel is parallel to the success Idgie and Ruth have shared. The clear message of love and care has been heightened throughout the text and mutual expression of these feelings between two characters reveals significant components of self-esteem and respect necessary for the path to self-actualization. This, based on the scholar's interpretation, brings into light that fact that Ruth, in pursuit of self-esteem and respect, endeavors to fulfill her sense of self when leaving her abusive husband Frank. Expanding beyond the wider Whistle community, Idgie and Ruth's ability in loving and caring is perceived among the less privileged who metaphorically feed on their generosity, enabling the couple's self-actualization to thrive. It is acknowledged that the research comprehensively investigates Flagg's novel touching on a number of aspects and levels of experiences; it offers a lens, through Marlow's self-actualization theory, into how each character revolves around their struggle for the fulfillment of highest potential. Guided by the principle of feminist thinking, the literary analysis in this present study will prompt

further interpretations, disclosing consistencies while adding new dimensions to the text analysis.

The interrelation between women and cooking has been well illustrated in Niewiadomska-Flis' study (2011). *Fried Green Tomatoes* places a great emphasis on foods which permits Whistle Stop residents to depend on the cafe for sustenance and this, consequently, discloses the dynamic of gender. Idgie and Ruth, to begin with, are economically independent by virtue of their interest in cooking. Opening the Whistle Stop Cafe, their lives, traditionally confined to private sphere, have been exposed to the heart of community and their career holding thus equips them with a sense of self-reliance conventionally deprived of by men. Cooking in the text also allows for opposition in gender roles between Idgie and Ruth. Inconsolable and unsociable after Buddy's demise, Ruth exerts maternally nurturing influence on Idgie, successfully arranging her reunion with family around food. On the other hand, Ruth, hopelessly stuck in relationship with her cruel husband Frank Bennett, is constantly protected by Idgie who discards a shield of femininity but instead endorses masculine protection to dismantle gender dichotomy, therefore strengthening the notion of gender opposition in which gender-induced roles translate into mutual dependence. Further, while it is suggested that women are empowered by their roles as a food provider confined to the kitchen, they are also enslaved through their submission to gender stereotype which locks them behind the kitchen door. Beyond domesticity, Idgie earnestly refuses to be marginalized through her expression of toughness and masculinity, escaping patriarchal thinking that oppresses women. Although kitchen is the quarter reserved for women, laughter and humor can serve to undermine the force of patriarchy. In the novel, the food-fight between Idgie and Ruth in the kitchen of Whistle Stop exemplifies how Hélène Cixous' term "emancipating potential" (as cited in Niewiadomska-Flis, p. 172) of laughter and humor can mitigate and defy detective Grady's power who visits the cafe to investigate Frank's mysterious disappearance and attempt to restore calm in the kitchen. Even though this research, framed by French feminist principle, informs how negotiated gender roles empower women through their own selection of choices,

it is my intention to adopt an American feminist criticism lens to interrogate roles and empowerment of women in the text.

The notion of negotiated gender roles in Niewiadomska-Flis' analysis is in line with Idgie's apparent non-conformity to sexist oppression in Graham-Bertolini's study (2011). The female bandit/outlaw is coined to describe the audacity of female character Idgie possesses in an attempt to break law in capitalist society. The role of Rail Road Bill she assumes, in which she is intent on unloading foods and coals from the government train to the poor, demonstrates her intention to stealthily rectify the flawed law that largely overlooks the livelihood of the unprivileged. Set against the backdrop of the Great Depression when foods and supplies are scarce to come by, a number of people suffer starvation, great difficulty and insecurity. With her deep sense of empathy, generosity and intolerance toward the unfair treatment, Idgie, replicated from Robin Hood, performs a feat through her role of Rail Road Bill who remains largely elusive throughout the text despite several arrest warrants. This thorough analysis of female bandit/ outlaw deepens our understanding about gender and race from a fresh perspective. First, it confirms Idgie's escape from sexist ideology in which she takes on the role of Rail Road Bill culturally reserved for men; beneficiaries still falsely idolize the male figure and attributes their survival to "his" generosity and empathy. Further, Idgie manipulates her biological gender over her acts of goodwill; no one suspects that Rail Road Bill is a female who owns the cafe, suggesting the stereotypical perception toward gender differences. Besides a critical look into issues of gender, the discussion of female bandit/ outlaw emphatically stresses that problems of gender and race are mutually inclusive. Idgie's struggle for equal distribution of supplies to the disadvantaged uncovers the fact that America is not a land of equal opportunities for people of color. While Rail Road Bill is admired for restoring peace and order temporarily, his furtiveness fails to address the roots of all problems but instead continues to exacerbate them since it only breeds constant dependence in the imperialist and capitalist society. With regard to race, Sipsey, the colored servant working for the Threadgoode's family, is depicted as a vigilante woman who fearlessly confronts threats and dangers enforced by racism. When Frank Bennett attempts to

steal his baby infant from Ruth, Sipsy, although recognizant of the adverse segregation in the American South, risks her life saving the child from his father, killing Frank Bennett with a skillet. In brief, this study allows a connection between gender and role to be established, illuminating the faulty perception of gender in the text while asserting the interconnectedness between gender and race which constitutes a platform for further investigation in my research.

2.2 Cinematic Analyses of *Fried Green Tomatoes*

As cinematic adaptations have become more widespread and accessible, novels have thus been increasingly transformed into the visual form of art so that films can easily reach the audience and attract more attention. *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), the film based on the novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (1987), is a testament to the tremendous success of the novel, being nominated for two Academy Awards. Considering the close connection between novels and films, Rockler (2001) explores the notion of lesbian continuum in which the effect of lesbianism is diminished in film. The study involves the discussion of strategic ambiguity and textual and interview analysis which enable plural interpretations of close friendship between Idgie and Ruth. As *Fried Green Tomatoes* places an intense emphasis on portraying the lives of Idgie and Ruth to such an extent that readers tend to conceptualize the romantic relationship between the two, the scholar therefore argues that the film version adopts the polysemy or strategic ambiguity in order to divert audience from viewing Idgie and Ruth as a couple. Despite the fact that the novel sporadically contains explicit romantic scenes, strategic ambiguity is situated in countering the assumption that Idgie and Ruth maintain homosexual relationship. It instead advances the idea of multiple interpretations in terms of identifying woman-identified experiences, looking at it from an angle of women who merely share love and bond. To strengthen the claim that both novel and film are beyond the possibility of homosexual relationship, Rockler conducts the textual analysis and interview among university students who viewed the film prior to the interview sessions. They comprise

ten participants, aged between 18 - 25 with a combination of males and females. Unsurprisingly, the results reveal that Idgie and Ruth exhibit no explicit sexuality toward each other, as apart from the kiss, no overt sexual representation and body contact are obvious. The study concludes that, through strategic ambiguity, perspectives about close relationship between women should extend beyond the wall of lesbianism and the embrace of women-identified experiences is encouraged.

Consistent with Rockler's findings is Whitt's close examination (2005) into the idea of apparitional lesbians, the term coined to refer to homophobia and its intentional removal, in American films. Since *Fried Green Tomatoes* is based on the novel, the study thus aims to critically look at the representation of Idgie and Ruth on the screen. Contrary to the stereotyped notion that the film will appeal to the taste of homosexuals, it receives a good reception among heterosexuals who cherish the blossoming friendship between Idgie and Ruth. Similar to Rockler's study, lines of argument contend that while relationship between Idgie and Ruth is ambiguous, an attempt is made to downplay the representation of lesbianism and a few reasons account for the abolition of sexuality. First and importantly, *Fried Green Tomatoes* is especially intended for people of all ages as the form of home entertainment, so in order to evade criticism, exclusion of sexuality is necessary. And next, considering the setting of the novel in the 1920s when gender equity remains a pressing concern for women, the acceptance of same-sex relationship is likely to meet resistance as it is considered a sin in Christianity. In consideration of this, a look at apparitional lesbians is brought into focus and thus closely examined to explain the disappearance of intense romantic relationship from the screen. Therefore, two studies strengthen novel's stress on theme of close friendship through the utilization of strategic ambiguity and historical contexts which aid the interpretation. Although results reveal the lack of women sexuality and women-identified experiences are mentioned in passing, they are ignored to be discussed in detail, identifying the areas feminist criticism will be able to further investigate. And due to the chief focus on the visual adaptations, the practice of feminist theory has the potential to shift a critical gaze at the text and expose inherently intriguing dimensions.

The interconnection between women and food is closely linked; cooking in *Fried Green Tomatoes* therefore symbolizes liberation achieved by female characters. Lindenfeld's work titled "Resistance" (2005), through close film viewing, complements interpretations of text built on feminist criticism, extending its practicality into visual arts. Occupying a central role in the novel, foods encompass a remedial power in healing emotionally damaged Evelyn. Listening to narrations of Whistle Stop, Evelyn revisits the cafe through Ninny's retelling, locating her empowerment through characters Ildgie and Ruth. Moreover, finely prepared dishes served at the Whistle Stop allow Evelyn to curb her desire for unhealthy foods, nurturing her mentally and physically. Foods primarily transport Evelyn to the cafe and fulfill her pursuit of empowerment, manifested in her development of Tawanda the Avenger to which she resorts in order to cope with the prejudiced status quo. The Whistle Stop Cafe further represents a wholly united community where people delightedly share stories and delectable dishes. During the Great Depression, owners Ildgie and Ruth are portrayed as economically independent since whereas the number of starving people is large, they have plenty to eat and share with others. Their acts of resistance, apparent in the cafe, therefore enable them to gain empowerment and fight against patriarchy. Naturally considered as feminine, kitchen represents Ildgie and Ruth's ability to create a safe sphere for women who oppose sexist biases, extending its power well beyond the boundary of race. Their immersion and confinement to the enclosed kitchen allow them, in other words, to restrict men and foster womanly bond to defy sexism, turning kitchen into a stronghold against patriarchy. Parallel to text interpretation, film analysis in the study also indicates a political tone as evidenced in Ruth's disguised role as Rail Road Bill, illuminating fact that capitalist system is the culprit for a class divide in the face of difficult time. Transgressing racial barrier, the relationship between the whites and non-whites is strengthened when Sipsey kills Frank Bennett. Bound by kinship rather than the mistress-servant loyalty, the secret of Frank's death is kept between Ildgie and Sipsey family in the form of kinship, gaining prominence over time. Implicitly, the film interpretation is grounded in feminist underpinning that unravels how female characters are empowered and work to

weaken patriarchy in their own designated sphere. Text analysis in this thesis, through a feminist literary lens, will yield richer and more insightful interpretations and reiterate the utility of selected theoretical framework toward the novel.

2.3 Women's Liberation Movement, Women of Color and Racism

Social movements and historical contexts play a role in influencing the shaping of feminist criticism. Prominent scholars participate in mobilizing the masses and fanning the flames of feminism; their crucial tones of messages and demands have contributed to the construction of feminist principles in the realm of literary study. Agitated by their concern over economic oppression in social hierarchy, for instance, women's roles are juxtaposed against their exposure to economy in literary landscape. In other words, literary feminist interpretations are gleaned from the efforts of past women's movements to theorize their crucial ideas, asserting the notion that women's movements and feminism are intrinsically relevant. In view of this, the focused attention will thus be paid to the historical background of second-wave feminism, subsequently leading to the dissent among the alienated Black women and analyses of racial issues in the text.

The rampant oppression of women, both in the public and private spheres, calls to attention the alarming issues of gender equality and quest for liberation. This uprising represents a watershed in the second-wave movement (1960s-1970s) that stems from women's protest against President's Commission on the Status of Women in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy, which solely restricts women's roles to domesticity. Although the concern of first-wave feminism largely rests on the suffrage reforms, women in the second-wave movement express their intolerance toward the widespread career discrimination, unequal pay, legal equality, education, and restraint to domestic domain. While professional roles of teachers, nurses, and secretaries are exclusively reserved for women, they are also in pursuit of careers in the field of science with the firm belief in their intellectual capabilities and further contribution to the nation. The movement is partially mobilized by such key figures as Betty Friedan

whose book *"The Feminine Mystique"* (1963) attempts to challenge the stereotyped images of American women in the 1960s; she also founds the National Organization for Women (NOW) to lobby against the unequal treatment on behalf of millions of women. At a larger scale, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) continues the heated discussion about women's oppression in terms of the power-structured connection between women and society on the whole. Through their quest for gender equality, women further seek to locate their sense of self-fulfillment, characterized by their desire for education and careers which will liberate them from the chain of domesticity. Three distinct voices emerge in the second-wave movement—liberal feminism, radical feminism and cultural or "difference" feminism—and they differ in many significant aspects. To illustrate, liberal feminism encourages the greater inclusion of women into the domain from which they are traditionally barred. Radical feminism, however, expresses their need for the eradication of patriarchal ideology which continues to afflict women socially and personally. The cultural or "difference" feminism, largely mediated, aims to celebrate the differences between men and women and thus associate each gender's characteristics with appropriate social roles.

Described by Toni Morrison as one "sinking in a sea of close-quartered affluence where one's world is one's house, one's peers, one's children, and one's employer, one's husband" (as cited in Giddings, 2008, p. 303), women of color apparently express their frustration over women's liberation movement dominated by the white middle-class women. Their rise to prominence, while black women are left struggling with racism, creates sense of great adversity, failing to elicit, in the words of Nobel laureate, "abiding admiration of white women as competent, complete people" (p. 303) from women of color being part of the movement. Their devotion to the white-oriented movement further dissipates when the black movement, mutually inclusive of men and women, is overshadowed by the wide recognition White women's movement receives, leading the non-whites to conclude that whites will "reap the benefits that the Black movement had sown" (p. 304). White women's plea for the special favor granted to "niggers" in the face of the Black movement is not justified since it represents "an effort to become Black without the responsibilities of being

Black” (p. 304), implying that racism, besides sexism, afflicts colored people with painful racial wounds in the American culture. The misleading notion that sexism is the culprit for deep-rooted inequity prevalent in society, therefore, acutely disturbs women of color victimized and marginalized by racist ideology since their oppression is sustained by both sexism and racism.

In *“Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female”*, Frances Beale (1970), relevantly encapsulates the lives of colored women, exposing the fact that capitalism breeds racism which subsequently aggravates the sufferings of non-white women. Black men, due to the capitalist system, are deprived of employment opportunities, forcing their partners to financially help support the family. Contrary to Friedan’s image of *“Feminine Mystique”*, black women are constantly subject to both domestic and social oppression, sometimes rendering themselves as “a slave of a slave” (Beale, p. 112). Further, the economic exploitation is not uncommon among women of color entering the labor market to make ends meet. The lowest wages they earn coupled with the least desirable roles assigned, when compared to their white and male counterparts, are the primary indicator that white supremacy is operating at its best. Black women’s struggle, unlike White women’s movement, equals their attempt to support anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideologies. In addition to surveying the status of colored women in America, Beale’s study emphasizes the need for re-examining how racial boundaries are blurred in Flagg’s text, signaling a shift in relationship that challenges the status quo.

In *Race, Class and Intimacy in Southern Households*, Kousha (1999) presents an interview-based study that discloses an intimate relationship between colored servants and white mistresses in southern America, permitting a unique glimpse into how this sense of connection across racial boundaries flourishes in the novel. Responses and comments are gleaned from one group of colored servants who identify themselves as a “complaint department” (p. 82) but confess their psychologically satisfying kind of relationship with their white mistresses. In describing the term, they admit that, apart from their commitment to assigned chores, their racial and occupational statuses compel them to be passive listeners in the presence of their

mistresses. White mistresses have a tendency and authority to openly talk and whine about, for instance, their husbands, children and unhappy marriages etc., allowing colored servants a privileged access to intimate knowledge of each family for which they work either through their mistresses' free discussions or first-hand observations. Working and mingling with their white employers for a long period of time, the help begin to form their attachment to their mistresses, claiming separation demands hard work. Although the departure is emotional, the fruits of better opportunities are sweeter. Another group of interviewees concedes that besides working for their mistresses, they too have an exchange of life stories and hardships to further tighten their bond that would later transform into a long-lasting friendship. Both servants and mistresses, lonesome after an end of employment, will make time for each other and reunion. The article concludes that while servants, thanks to their close-knit sense of connection, tend to address their mistresses as a "friend" or "sister" following their servant-mistress relationship, their mistresses nonetheless avoid adopting the similar terms, resorting to words such as "my right hand", "the best domestic" and "the ideal help" (p. 88) etc. to perpetuate hierarchies of race and class white supremacists refuse to relinquish. In *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the portrayal of relationship between the whites and non-whites, especially in the Threadgoode's household, invites further investigation in terms of bond defined by race. Although Kousha's research offers a fresh outlook on how race defines a sense of alliance between people of different backgrounds, the practice of feminist criticism will prominently illustrate how this connection determines and leads to self-assertion of women—white and colored—in the text.

Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes*, although replete with women-identified experiences, also revolves around the issues of race. In *"Eating with Negroes": Food and Racial Taboo in the Twentieth-Century South*, Cooley conducts research (2015) on segregated eating rituals in the American South, exemplifying how objection to social order constitutes the greatest sin. Although Sipsey, Onzell and Big George have maintained close rapport with the Threadgoode family and worked at the Whistle Stop Cafe, the text does not portray the equal status of dining in which people of different

racism and classes share meals and dining places, strictly outlawing mutual eating across racial lines. Although charitable and kind-hearted, Idgie and Ruth's selling foods to African-Americans through the back door of the cafe is regularly practiced and policed by the community unwilling to share the place with people of color. The impression that African-Americans are "dirty and diseased" (p. 70) preserves white supremacy and thus makes it appropriate for them to only prepare and serve foods to their white counterparts. The racial issues presented, captivatingly, are also linked with the consumption of particular foods which serves to designate social statuses; for example, white bread is exclusive to the whites who possess the privileged standing in society. Discrimination against eating rituals in the South, however mentally challenging it is, paradoxically tightens the bond of Black community through the home-cooked meals. Due to the rampant prejudice, traveling demands meticulous planning in which foods are involved. Restricted from dining in white restaurants, meals cooked by mothers and grandmothers represent home comfort and familial unity, assuaging the force of racial oppression. In the context of American South in which the novel is set, the study well demystifies how racist ideology exists in the social order that heightens dehumanization and subjugation as a result of racial differences. Despite the passing of Fourteenth Amendment guaranteeing all African-Americans full U.S. citizenship in 1868, segregation is still largely active, maintained and even reflected in the novel. It demonstrates the fact that middle-class white American people continually deny the judiciary by claiming their skin color to gain privileges. Focusing on racial aspects of the novel, this study richly adds a new facet to the interpretation, and by so doing, it also generates a further enquiry, through feminist criticism, into the negotiation of gender and race in the text, bringing into light the materialization of bond across sexist and racist border control.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF PRIMARY TEXT

People didn't call blacks names anymore, at least not to their faces. Italians weren't wops or dagos, and there were no more kikes, Japs, chinks, or spics in polite conversation. Everybody had a group to protest and stick up for them. But women were still being called names by men. Why? Where was our group? It's not fair. (Flagg, 1987, p. 239)

To capture the essence of feminist criticism, this chapter initially sets out to survey, strictly restricted to literary realm, definitions and concepts of feminist literary criticism. Subsequently, both applicable and relevant theoretical framework, mostly drawn from bell hooks, is presented in order to demonstrate the applicability toward Flagg's novel. 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 (2012) 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, however, 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. Even so, 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 bell hooks, illustrating how women and men in the text respond to feminism—deeply and meaningfully.

3.1 Theoretical/ Methodological Framework: *Feminist Literary Criticism*

3.1.1 *Patriarchy: A Breeding Ground for Imperialism*

By nature, Western world (Anglo-European) is patriarchal, constantly suppressing women economically, politically, socially and psychologically. The influence of sexist social structure perpetuates the prevalent oppression in both private and public domains, leading to perpetuated marginalization and objectification encountered by women. Stripped of rights to education and professional world, women belong to the domestic sphere in which they are labeled as “Other”, resigning to husbands’ domination. It is worth recapitulating that whereas sexes (male or female) are biologically determined, genders are culturally defined, implying individuals’ needs to conform to appropriate gender roles.

3.1.2 *Gender, Class and Race: Intersectionality that Dominates*

The women’s rights movement unravels a fact that it fails to unite women across different racial backgrounds, substantiating hooks’ assertion that white women are unwilling to “relinquish their support of white supremacy to support the interests of all women” (p. 185). White women, seeking their social equality for all women, largely overlook the lives and experiences of women of color suffering both sexist and racist socialization. Theoretically, black feminism looks at how colored women face oppression due to their gender, class and race, sufficiently offering a critical lens into lives of women of varying backgrounds. By acknowledging the interlocking between gender and race, one is able to interrogate and approach feminist concerns deeply and insightfully. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a feminist legal scholar of color, introduced the term “*intersectionality*” in the late 1980s to describe the interrelation between gender and race that is restricted, specifically, to “the particular positionality of black women and other women of color both in civil rights law and within civil rights

movement” (Cooper, p. 385). The analytic frame of “*intersectionality*”, however, transcends the boundary of law and gains prominence in literary study, exposing “the multidimensionality of Black women’s experiences” (p. 385) in literary works. It situates the text within theoretical concept that, in the words of Cooper, “maps the manner in which power dynamics interact to make black women marginalized by social systems like incarceration invisible” (p. 389).

3.1.3 Homeplace and Community: A Site of Resistance

Constantly subject to 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 subjectivity of women and men 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 the 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, exposing “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. The conceptual notion of homeplace and community will be utilized in the selected text in which the Whistle Stop Cafe is simultaneously portrayed as a homeplace and community, reflecting a sense of womanly care and protection which, in turn, downplays oppression.

3.1.4 Love: An End to Oppression

The oppression women experience is partially caused by their heterosexual relationships with men in which they are controlled and subdued; love and care women express toward their partners are unjustly reciprocated by protection based on domination and subordination. bell hooks (2000) emphatically states that in patriarchal structure “heterosexist bonds were formed on the basis that women being the gender in touch with caring emotions would give men love, and in return men, being in touch with power and aggression, would provide and protect” (p. 101), highlighting the status quo of exploitation in sexist social order. Creating balanced bonds, while not limited to heterosexuality, constitutes a central tenet of feminism since “love can never take root in a relationship based on domination and coercion” (p. 103). True love therefore demands recognition and acceptance, a kind that “combines acknowledgement, care, responsibility, commitment and knowledge” (p. 104). Since *Fried Green Tomatoes* revolves around the dynamic of established bonds, this conceptual framework will be deployed to demonstrate how love stands at the heart of feminism and guides the interpretation.

3.2 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 Flagg 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 was written in 1987, 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 loves her brother Buddy to such an extent that 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 until she turns inconsolable, aggressive and hostile toward those around her.

Following the death of Ruth's mother and her unsuccessful 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, we step into the Whistle Stop Cafe, sit down to enjoy the irresistible fried green tomatoes and brace ourselves for the heart-warming, funny and sad tone of messages.

Since issues of gender, class and race are inherently weaved into particular social fabrics, it remains a great challenge to understand them comprehensively without our exposure to the real contexts. Considering the fact that literary productions, to a certain extent, represent cultural values and stereotypes in certain settings, *Fried Green Tomatoes* thus proves an insightful engagement for a number of valid reasons—copious story lines, diversity in characters and themes, distinct voice of the Southern author and clear portrayal of life in the South etc. More specific to the realm of literary study, Flagg's novel greatly contributes to feminist criticism where it provides a platform for re-examining and identifying women experiences together with serious consideration of class and race issues against the rampant force of domination in the West. The text therefore serves to merge issues of gender, class and race, promoting appropriate cultural awareness through text appreciation and interpretation. Lauded as the New York Times bestseller, the novel remains highly popular among readers who relish complex narrations of the Whistle Stop Café—deeply touched and moved by the intimate friendship between Idgie and Ruth. Light-hearted, *Fried Green Tomatoes* is elegantly crafted with masterly selection of words to ensure readers of joy, sorrow and friendship. Both critical readers and public readership will find it irresistible not to relish the story of Whistle Stop and Whistle Stoppers.

CHAPTER 4

A CAGED BIRD SINGS—INTERSECTIONALITY

There's something in our world that makes men lose their heads—they couldn't be fair if they tried. In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins. They're ugly, but those are the facts of life.

—Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

4.1 Introduction

A picture of racially segregated Maycomb, Alabama is lucidly painted through Atticus Finch's line of teachings contemplatively directed at his son, Jem in Harper Lee's classic *"To Kill a Mockingbird"* (1982). A white lawyer defending the wrongfully convicted black rapist Tom Robinson, Finch critiques the unquestioned, if not blind, embrace of whiteness, mirroring the unjust social structures fractured by racial segregation. Audre Lorde (1984), a feminist of color, defines racism as "the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance" (p. 115). The trial of Tom Robinson, hence, delineates how the course of his life is unjustifiably determined by skin color, rendering him vulnerable to dehumanizing treatment that masks the spirit of humanity. His powerlessness to defend his innocence underlines the existence of perpetuated mainstream white culture that jeopardizes his life following the groundless accusation. This literary character reiterates that racism is a breeding ground for hatred, contempt, alienation and suppression that, beyond himself, continues to afflict lives of non-white bodies. While revisiting Lee's fictional piece, particularly regarding its racial theme, appropriately serves as a pointer for discussion of racial oppression reflected in literary works, it also marks a point of departure from a single critical gaze at the experiences of black male victim, which, central to this study, orients toward multidimensional oppressions each character in the selected text informs based on gender, class and race categorization.

Core to this chapter is the interpretation of characters grounded in the conceptualization of intersectionality first introduced in the late 1980 by legal scholar

Kimberlé Crenshaw who, besides sexism, aims to examine interlocking oppressions black women encounter. As a tenet of Black feminist criticism, the suppression of women of color, based on their gender and race, is pronounced more visibly, aiming to rectify, to borrow Beale's words (1970), "double jeopardy" containing both sexism and racism. This intersectional approach to delve into subordination, however, invites criticism surrounding its narrow focus on lives of non-white women. By countering this notion, May (2015) states, "Intersectionality is not predetermined in focus or only relevant to one group: it is open-ended and particular and requires attending to simultaneous privilege and oppression *and* working within and across differences for change" (p. 31). Not only does this enlarged scope of intersectionality sharpen a critical lens at such black female character as Sipsey, it is also fittingly deployed to unravel forms of suppression white female characters like Evelyn and Ninny entail in the text. The fact that Evelyn "knew how she would kill herself" (p. 61) accounts for an apparent loss of self-control caused by her conformity to feminine mystique that dictates particulars of femininity. As further suggested by May that "Everyone has intersecting identities and all of us live within interlocking structures of raced and gendered social stratification" (p. 25), Evelyn consents to social norms, preserving gender relations in which men exercise patriarchal force over women. Pertinently capturing the essence of this chapter, Maya Angelou (1994), in her partial lines of poetry entitled "*Caged Bird*", beautifully composes: "for the caged bird/ sings of freedom" (p. 194), musing over the sense of entrapment that prompts longing for flight to freedom. Tyranny and subjugation of gender, class and race thus well replicate those feelings of being entrapped, oppressed and victimized each character exudes, longing, like a caged bird, to escape and feel free. As such, the concept of intersectionality will be utilized as an instrument of analysis, unveiling how gender, class and race are intertwined to spell inequality. My discussion of both male and female characters with intersecting identities will be performed intersectionally, which, according to May, is "oriented toward dismantling oppressive practices and forging a more just world for us all" (p. 21). Distinguishing oppression of white women from that of women of color, hooks (1982) comments: "Theoretically, the white women's legal status under

patriarchy may have been that of property, but she was in no way subjected to the de-humanization and brutal oppression that was the lot of the slave” (p. 126). Whereas the pain and suppression experienced by non-white women are understandably compounded by both oppressive forces of sexism and racism, it is also my intention to interpret white female characters through relevant framework in an intersectional manner, dismissing Black women as “intersectionality archetypes” (May, p. 27).

4.2 Intersectionality: Gender, Class, Race and White Supremacy

Gender polarization is clearly established through the conjugal life of Frank Bennett and Ruth Jamison. Ruth’s ascent to her marriage ushers her into the locked world of femininity in which she is oppressed, subordinated and victimized by patriarchal thinking. Tyson (2006) notes that “[t]raditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing and submissive” (p. 85), affirming that biological differences connote social constructions that mold one’s functioning role. Through the words of Mrs. Puckett who runs the store in Georgia, Ildgie, filled with anger, learns that Frank “blackened her eye and knocked her down the stairs, and once he broke her arm” (p. 189). The gender relation informs that Frank, as a male, justifies his acts of violence for he is superior in physical strength while Ruth, as a female, is prone to domestic abuse, submitting herself to the debilitating sexism. Embedded in this statement is the fact that Ruth’s subordination is socially constructed since as a wife, she is to acquiesce to her partner’s power. Frank, on the contrary, conforms to patriarchal manhood when “on their wedding night, he got drunk and forced her” (p. 193). Therefore, it is evident that he is socialized to perpetuate patriarchy that, in turn, creates gender inequity. Tyson (2006) relevantly observes that “men are not permitted to fail at anything they try because failure in any domain implies failure in one’s manhood” (p. 87). By exercising his control over Ruth, he is adamant in fulfilling his role as a husband, giving rise to the oppression that marks Ruth’s decision to leave. Elaborating on the socially constructed power, hooks (2015) persuasively writes, “When he beats or rapes women,

he is not exercising privilege or reaping positive rewards; he may feel satisfied in exercising the only form of domination allowed him” (p. 75), stressing, like Tyson, that Frank’s authority is magnified by his desire to rule. Pressed for an answer when asked, “Why are you gonna marry that man?” (p. 90), Ruth hesitantly utters, “Idgie, I love him and I’m going to marry him” (p. 91). This exchanged conversation relevantly discloses the feminine roles women are socially disciplined to assume. It is necessary for Ruth, to fulfill her gender obligations, that she start her own family with a man of her choice despite her protesting inner voice that repeats she wishes to stay and hold Idgie “as tight as she could” (p. 91), unable to imagine the day she must walk away from the Threadgoodes. Friedan (2013) expresses her view on women’s aspiration to marry ideal men, stating, “All they had to do was devoting their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children” (p. 2). Ruth, from this standpoint, is unwavering in her belief that it is essential for her to be confined socially, unmindful of the fact that the path to her romantic relationship is a launching pad for a site of oppression she later experiences in life. By clinging to the feminine mystique, she subsequently yields to patriarchal power and subordination, being engulfed by such an abusive force that “she bled for three days, and after that, she never could relax and enjoy herself” (p. 193). Tyson (2006), firm in her stance on cultural product of subordination, encapsulates that “the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically produced” (p. 86). It is in sense that Ruth’s loyalty to femininity, culturally fostered, undermines her self-command, revealing that patriarchy—the embodiment of sexism, oppression and discrimination—is not biologically produced to respond to male dominance. Locating her protective shield against excessive force, Ruth returns to Whistle Stop in pursuit of homeplace and love (see Chapters 5 & 6), releasing herself from patriarchal exertion and nestling in the comfort of warmth and love.

The midlife crises torturing Evelyn Couch conceal her adherence to the notion of femininity. The lack of self-esteem, life purposes and confidence in her physical look is apparently indicative of her commitment to painting an image of feminine mystique that hinders her personal growth as a female. Like most other

women revering femininity, “she had been a good girl, had always acted like lady, never raised her voice, always deferred to everybody and everything” (p. 39 – 40), unveiling how sexist socialization is etched in the psyche of women. Besides, Evelyn, preserving her celibacy “until her wedding night” (p. 39), maintains subtle yet insidious power relations in the private sphere. By conforming to feminine standards, feelings of oppression and marginalization are increasingly being inculcated in her, which is in alignment with hooks’ (n.d.) claim that patriarchy is “the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (para. 3). In addition, it also unveils how power relation is maintained in domesticity, further suggesting that by complying women desert rights to their own selves. From a feminist perspective, Evelyn’s emotional breakdown over her heterogeneous relationship with her husband Ed, like Ruth’s, is linked with her submission to patriarchal structures, thereby portraying forms of oppression, domination and suppression she is to cope with as a dutiful wife. Stereotypical of oppressive force, Ed is domineering as Evelyn regretfully admits, “Lately, he had started acting more and more like his daddy, trying to behave like he thought the man of the house should” (p. 42). Referring to her father-in-law, Evelyn implicitly acknowledges gender polarization that produces inequality, maintaining male authority over the lives of women. Although unlike Ruth who is both physically and psychologically maltreated, Evelyn is sufficiently wounded by her encounter with Ed’s dominance, causing her to think, “I wish I could kill myself” (p. 66). Emotionally crushed, she only senses that, as Simone de Beauvoir (1953) puts it, “reality is concentrated inside the house, while outer space seems to collapse” (p. 437). Her confinement to the private sphere, according to de Beauvoir, merely serves to define her sense of self and worth, while her whole life is dedicated to nurturing her husband’s independence. Despite evident subjugation, Evelyn’s attempt to “save her marriage” (p. 40) is characterized by a set of feminine values, for by her attending the women’s club, “the organization believed that women could find happiness if they, in turn, would dedicate their entire lives to just making their man happy” (p. 41). This credence coerces Evelyn into endorsing the idea that as a wife her femininity is

preserved by Ed's physical and emotional well-being provided at home. Social constructs of gender, therefore, lock women behind the household door, necessitating constant dependence on male counterparts that it is almost impossible for them to live their own lives—to gain agency that liberates them from feminine mystique. Evelyn's unattained equality in professional arena, when compared to her husband Ed, is suggestive of how gender dichotomy is firmly established in the American social fabric. Despite her good educational background, the image of Evelyn being a housewife is juxtaposed against that of Ed being a breadwinner at the insurance company. It is the endorsement of femininity, therefore, that continues to assert the continuation of patriarchy while subduing Evelyn's empowerment in terms of her career move.

Evelyn's eating disorder pertinently indicates her obsession with physical look which, grounded in feminist criticism, shapes an image of femininity that correspondingly leads to another form of oppression, "I just wish I had the guts to get really fat and be done with it, or to have the willpower to lose weight and be really thin. I just feel stuck . . . stuck right in the middle" (p. 66). Her confession informs that she is socially restricted to look her best, that it is essential for her, as a female, to stay thin and attractive. Relating this beauty image to male dominance, Naomi Wolf (2002) notes that, "The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power" (p. 13). Women's behavior is hence prescribed and curbed by men's vision of beauty; their self-control over their bodies is supplanted by men's desire for thinness which, in turn, validly interlinks the notion of femininity with subordination. Wolf further argues that a huge investment in advertising industry and media help construct an image of beauty that embodies a set of feminine ideals. For Evelyn, therefore, her failure to maintain it is likely to constitute a breach of gender etiquette and this serves to perpetuate the notion that her rigid conformity is culturally imposed.

Like Evelyn, the theorizing of feminine mystique captures how another literary character Ninny Threadgoode is obliged to uphold femininity. Cleo, intent on wedding her at a young age, professes his love to Momma and Poppa Threadgoode,

“I’m going to marry that big girl out in the kitchen cuttin’ biscuits” (p. 145), which, as previously discussed, significantly situates male dominance over female bodies and thus gives way to domestic entrapment. The fear lurking in Ninny that “Cleo wasn’t the right one” and that, assured by Momma and Poppa, she “would learn to love him” (p. 145) unmasks patriarchal patterns that entail the need to seek a partner who will later become the world to her. Like Ruth and Evelyn, Ninny’s agreement to marriage is to realize her sense of worth, obligatorily conforming to the continuation of sexism. While she glories in “the years of happiness” (p. 145) they together share, her healthy relationship obscures the repetitive cycle of gender relations in which women’s self-valuation is contingent on their male counterparts. Consenting to marriage, she is willing to negotiate her subjectivity, revolving her life around domesticity. de Beauvoir (1953) asserts that “Woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home—that is to say, to immanence” (p. 419). By immanence, she clarifies that women are socialized to mainly support their husbands’ growth out in the public world while they are stagnantly and strictly enclosed in the territory of home. The transcendence of men—their aspiration for advancement—therefore is built on the ground of women’s immanence, promoting and nurturing their independence. Women’s oppressions, according to de Beauvoir, stem from their unwillingness to transcend immanence reserved for them. While Cleo secures his career as a chiropractor, Ninny is preoccupied with rearing their underdeveloped child, Albert, and sharing her intimate time with Idgie, Ruth and Stump: “*Whooo-ooo*, it’s me . . . Me and Albert, come to visit . . .” (p. 223), centering her life around family’s gathering and well-being. Ninny, through this feminist lens, is totally submerged in domesticity, being disengaged from the outside world—from reaching transcendence like her husband Cleo does. Immanence and transcendence are intertwined as de Beauvoir writes, “At evening he restores his soul in the home, where his wife looks after his children and guards the things of the past that she has amassed” (p. 419), reiterating that Ninny’s submissive role is to protect and support Cleo’s growth. She, as a wife, in the exact words of de Beauvoir, “has no other job than to maintain and provide for everyday life in an orderly way . . . Seeing to it that the doors are locked”

(p. 419), merely conserving sexism and strengthening an ideal image of femininity. Her feminine role as a mother is satisfied when her life is devoted to looking after Albert, the apple of her eye, lovingly reflecting: “I truly believe in my heart that he was an angel that God sent down to me, and sometimes I can’t wait to get to heaven to see him again” (p. 148). The motherly task she performs, while naturally anchored in her deep affection and connection for the child, undeniably illuminates mask of femininity women wear to blur their vision beyond household. Not only does her intense yearning for homeplace (see Chapter 5), as she confesses “I’ve been stranded most all my life. Always stayed close to home” (p. 4), carries the heavy message of a need for resistance, it also unsurprisingly reveals women’s usual confinement to their isolated domain, selflessly sacrificing their lives for the collective contentment in which their families revel.

An image of femininity seems to be resisted by Ildgie Threadgoode when, as Ninny recalls, it “seems like Ildgie was always in overalls and barefooted” (p. 32). Unlike Ruth, Evelyn and Ninny, Ildgie is not inclined toward fitting gender norms to an extent that “she would have ruined any nice dresses, going up and down trees like she did, and she was always going hunting or fishing with Buddy and her brothers” (p. 32). She represents, in other words, a great contrast to an ideal portrayal of female. However, a turn is marked when her femininity becomes visible through her tender care of Stump, Ruth’s son. Ninny narrates that Ildgie and Stump “were special” and that “they’d take off hunting or fishing and leave us all behind” (p. 111), establishing their close mother-and-son relationship. Ildgie, taking on a feminine role, would “walk Stump to school” (p. 128), fulfilling her role as a mother. de Beauvoir (1953) notes that “[w]oman is doomed to immorality, because for her to be moral would mean that she must incarnate a being of superhuman qualities: the ‘virtuous woman’ of Proverbs, the ‘perfect mother’, the ‘honest woman’, and so on” (p. 458). Ildgie, as a female, tirelessly tries to become an immaculate mother—embodying selflessness, sacrifice and strength to justify her feminine acts of raising and protecting the child from Frank’s patriarchal power. Losing his one arm, Stump is usually an object of ridicule and bully which leads Ildgie to assure him of her motherly love, “Now, you’re my son and I love

you no matter what. You know that, don't you? (p. 116), suggesting how she is determined in realizing her social role as a female by providing Stump with the necessity of love a child may need. Iddie's self-assertiveness is affirmed when "Cleo said she stood right up to Ku Klux Klan all by herself" (p. 49). The exertion of power, nonetheless, is mitigated in the presence of sheriff Grady who disperses the Ku Klux Klan that congregates at the cafe, "They didn't want nothing. They was [*sic*] just a bunch of old boys out to throw a little scare in you, that's all" (p. 205). Iddie, although persistent in her sense of assertion, submits to her male counterpart in re-balancing gender relations she usually challenges, strengthening the claim that, as Tyson (2006) notes, women are weak and hence need to be protected by men. Her subordination is stressed when sheriff Grady cautions her against selling foods to the colored, "Nobody wants to eat in the same place that niggers come, it's not right and you just ought not be doin' it" (p. 51). Compelled to submissively negotiate her power as a female, Iddie agrees to serve the non-whites through the back door when the sheriff commands, "But you make sure you keep them at the back door, you hear me?" (p. 53). Her refusal to replicate the feminine image—her clear stance on defying sexism—is countered by patriarchal thinking, somehow resigning itself to male dominance. Similarly, male control over women is augmented when Iddie, together with Big George, stands trial in court against the mysterious case of Frank. In the middle of questioning, Reverend Herbert Scroggins, the preacher, turns up at the scene to testify to the whereabouts of Iddie and Big George, refuting their involvement in Frank's murder, "Sister Threadgoode holds a perfect attendance record at all our church activities and is the lead singer in our church choir" (p. 342), thus dismissing the accusation against her and Big George. It is striking that, despite her obvious opposition to gender norms, Iddie is socially subordinated—ideally seen to be protected, supplanting her self-assertiveness with male dominance to sustain inequity.

As a white male, Frank Bennett personifies a domineering figure of patriarchy when Ruth admits, "he had come from a nice family, but just had a mean streak where women were concerned" (p. 193). Frank exacerbates sexism by, apart from beating Ruth, "forcing himself on the poor colored girls he had working for him"

(p. 193). However, Smokey Phillips, while equal to Frank in gender status beliefs, discloses his untapped power of patriarchy, surrendering himself instead to class oppression. Hardship, food scarcity and homelessness are his daily struggles when ‘that cold nip in the night air’ and ‘raw, heartless winter’ (p. 14) force him to seek constant help to survive. His incapacity to settle himself in permanent housing is evidently a result of classism that generates forms of oppression and exploitation. He, separated from his sister Bernice, is determined that, ‘he’d look her up one of these days, if he ever got back on his feet’ (p. 16), bringing the role of economy in designating one’s standing at the societal level into sharp focus. While racism, which will be later discussed in this chapter, terrorizes the non-whites through dehumanizing acts, hooks (2000) believes that ‘the hidden face of poverty in the United States is the untold stories of millions of poor white people’ (p. 117). This emphasis on the population of destitute whites helps shatter the stereotypical perception about oppression usually associated with notions of sexism and racism, lifting classism as a cause of subordination out of obscurity. Thickly covered in dirt, Smokey ‘took the big bar of brown Oxydol soap and tried to scrub all the grime and coal dust off his face and hands’ (p. 18), which is suggestive of how economic oppression is prevalent—how it knows no boundary across races. hooks (2000) further suggests that an effort to end classism is ‘fundamentally antiracist, one that recognizes that the experiences of underprivileged white folks are as important as those of people of color’ (p. 118). This connection is sufficiently grounded to assert that classism, like racism, is the root of subordination—that it needs to be eradicated. Smokey therefore echoes an oppressed voice in the world where money is a means to survive. Low-spirited and hopeless, he urges a nameless kid, the roaming acquaintance he meets, ‘Go home now, kid, while you can. Get away from this life, ’cause once you piss out of a boxcar, you’re hooked’ (p. 136). His line of suggestion much conveys a disturbing message of class divide where power is unevenly distributed to the minority. Classism, with its destructive power, erases Smokey’s patriarchal thinking, re-defining how men too fall into an abyss of exploitation. His conversation with the kid relevantly reveals how the conceptual idea of classism is interlinked with his lack of education and dangerous jobs he does

afterward. When asked about his worst job, Smokey Phillips replies: “I’ve done a lot of things a decent man wouldn’t do, but I guess the worst was back in ’twenty-eight, when I took that job in the turpentine mill, down at Vinegar Bend, Alabama” (p. 138). The unpleasant work environment he describes, however subtle it is, paradoxically indicates the severely limited choices reserved for him as a white uneducated male who, when compared to his educated counterparts, is socially oppressed.

Racial diversity in the novel forms a core theme of harmony that, according to hooks (2013), shrinks the “us/ them binaries” (p. 11). Racism, however, remains deeply engrained in American social discourse that lives of non-whites are still in jeopardy. They are racially exploited by racialized contempt and hatred. As a sore reminder of slavery, Sipsey’s incapacity to disentangle herself from shackles of dehumanization and oppression is clearly sustained by white supremacy. The depiction of her nomadic life early in the text justifies her longing for homeplace (see Chapter 5) where, as a slave, her sense of self is realized—where she can at least resist everyday racial struggles. Her undocumented root, through Ninny’s words, lays bare an apparent lack of sense of being that torments the non-whites, “I don’t have any idea where Sipsey came from . . . you never know where colored people come from” (p. 46). White supremacist thinking vehemently denies her the possession of foundational self-esteem essential for one’s existence. Her skin color is a wall preventing her from attaining equality with her counterparts, forcing her to surrender to the dominator culture. Her level of racial suppression, fortunately, is minimized when she gratefully seeks help from the Threadgoodes, “Momma just kept her” and by helping “raise all the Threadgoode children” (p. 46), she becomes a part and parcel of Whistle Stop. Her intense connection and affection for the Threadgoodes lead her into a circle of love and care—the antithesis of hatred and alienation racism normally provokes. Even so, it is almost impossible for her, as a non-white female, to entirely escape racial discrimination, for her confrontation with control becomes pronounced when she confronts Frank. Seizing the baby Stump, he threatens, beats and insults Sipsey when “he pointed his gun at Sipsey and headed toward the crib”, verbally abusing, “get away from me, nigger” (p. 362). Through a lens of intersectionality, Frank,

affirmed in his standing as a white male, justifies his acts of aggression by exerting patriarchal and white supremacist thinking which, in turn, exploits Sipsey. As a colored woman, the combined forces of sexism and racism are her daily plight. hooks (2013), specifically commenting on the social fabric of America, writes: “As long as this nation absolutely refuses to accurately name white supremacy then the roots of racism will remain strong” (p. 13). By “white supremacy”, the deep-seated cause of racism, undergirded by the normalized whiteness, is articulated. Frank, from this standpoint, is empowered with his privileges, believing that the mask of his whiteness serves as a protective shield against the plausible charges of sexism and racism—that Sipsey’s existence is in hazard, not his. Cognizant of the impending harm in murdering Frank, Sipsey is paralyzed by fear, commanding her grandson Artis, “Go get Big George. I done kilt me a white man, I done kilt him daid” (p. 363). This accounts for, to borrow Beale’s words, “double jeopardy” she feels as a colored woman when Big George rightly admits, “There was no defense for a black who killed a white man in Alabama” (p. 364).

Big George’s racial wound starts early when, since birth, his own mother ditches him, cozily tucked in the towel that reads, “HOTEL DIXIE, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE” (p. 47)—the only possible trace to his origin. His sense of being is, therefore, marred by worthlessness, objectification and ignorance. Thanks to the flow of love and care that nourishes his spirit in Whistle Stop, he has the capacity to cultivate his self-esteem and combat racism that undermines it. Even so, like Sipsey, his endeavor is partially accomplished. Delivering Stump to the hospital following a train accident, he is barred from entering a white hospital when the nurse directs to Idgie, “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to have your man wait outside, this is a white hospital” (p. 106). Big George, although greatly disappointed, is careful not to cross racial boundaries, patiently waiting out in the designated area. He, nevertheless, later becomes a target of ridicule and contempt for passersby: “Look, there’s another nigger that’s got hisself all cut up in a knife fight”, while the other one chirps in, “Hey! You better get yourself over to the nigger hospital, boy” (p. 107). These utterances, clearly influenced by white supremacy, are infused with contempt, hatred, and intolerance

for non-whiteness. They compound racial polarization that separates—rather than unifies—while escalating dehumanizing acts toward non-whites. In the presence of whiteness, he senses threat, fear and insecurity. Likewise, the federal law practice against non-whites, as Tyson (2006) notes, is also supported by white supremacist thinking. Charges are severely pressed against the colored when Big George, suspect of Frank's murder case, could possibly “wind up in the electric chair, just like Mr. Pinto” (p. 335) if found guilty. W.E.B. Dubois (2007), on double-consciousness, writes, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eye of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 8). It is demanding, therefore, for Big George, as an African-American, to preserve his sense of being without being discriminated against in the world where a sense of self is gauged by whiteness. It is even agonizing for him to trivialize the disdain and denigration his skin color conceals. Racial injustices, upheld by white supremacy, are deeply ingrained in American social context—for African-Americans, they mean struggles, wounds, dangers or sometimes lives.

A bright lawyer-to-be, Willie Boy, Big George and Onzell's son, is killed in the brawl with the colored soldier Winston Lewis after he racially insults him, “any man working for whites, especially in Alabama, was nothing but a low-down, ignorant, stupid shuffling Uncle Tom” (p. 246). Willie Boy's head-on attack at Lewis tragically leads to his throat being “cut from ear to ear” (p. 246). His resolute move to preserve his self-esteem stems from racial stigmas directed at non-white bodies. It is hence essential for him to counter discrimination, contempt and worthlessness whiteness imprints on the minds of the non-whites. There is no justice taken when his soulless body is sent home in a box when it is stated that “the knife fights among the colored” (p. 246) are not unusual. Willie Boy's insistence on defining his sense of worth is rooted in, according to Malcolm X (as cited in hooks, 2013), “a bold and defiant rejection of Black degradation” (p. 18) while “the decolonization of the mind, body, and souls” (p. 18) equally serves to significantly counter white supremacy. Despite his futile effort, his defense at least helps enforce his Black affirmation, refuting the claim that white

supremacy denigrates the lives of non-whites—that the presence of Black matters. In addition, the arrest of Artis, Willie Boy’s brother, is a glimpse into how racism is part of American social discourse. Saving his friend’s dog from being removed from the state, he resists officials by slicing “the rope holding the dog in half” (p. 273) and with gaiety, watches “the grateful dog scamper around the corner” (p. 273). His well-intended deed paradoxically results in his arrest and imprisonment when abruptly “the blackjack hit him behind his left ear” (p. 273). The excessive accusation “TEN YEARS OF THE ATTEMPTED MURDER OF A CITY OFFICIAL WITH A DEADLY WEAPON” (p. 273) is groundlessly imposed on him, which, to repeat, is again upheld by white supremacist thinking. Threat and danger of non-white lives are highlighted when Martin Luther King, Jr. (1967) asserts, “We Negroes, who have dreamed for so long of freedom, are still confined in a prison of segregation and discrimination” (p. 47). White supremacy makes African-Americans an easy target of racial oppression and exploitation. It intensifies a sense of subordination and alienation that, as intersectionality informs, marginalizes non-white bodies. Woven into the American social context, white supremacist thinking magnifies when Artis meets his niece Clarissa, Jasper’s daughter, who passes for white. Determined in assuring their kinship, he reaches her, saying, “It’s me, your Uncle Artis, honey . . . don’t you know me?” (p. 294). Clearly breaching racial etiquettes, Artis is disapproved by the salesperson waiting on Clarissa, shouting, “THIS NIGGER WAS PAWING MY CUSTOMER! HE WAS GRABBING AT HER! I SAW HIM!” (p. 295). While racism normalizes hardship and plight African-Americans experience daily, it is observed that Clarissa’s unwillingness to identify with her uncle subtly reveals how the ideal white image is etched on her psyche—how her insistence on whiteness entails privileges and assimilation.

Jasper, Willie Boy’s and Artis’ brother, too defies racism, rejecting Black degradation by committing to hard work to prove his sense of worth. Although successfully launching his career as a Pullman porter, he is unable to completely free himself from racism, yielding still to the doctrine of white supremacy. An excerpt below, worth quoting in length, demonstrates how he is confined, entrapped and subordinated by white supremacist thinking, despite his proud self-esteem:

He had “yes sirred” and “yes ma'amed” and smiled and brought loud-mouthed salesmen liquor in the middle of the night, had taken abuse from arrogant white women and been called nigger by children, had been treated like dirt by some of the white conductors, and had had his tips stolen by other porters. He had cleaned up after sick passengers and passed through Cullman County a hundred times, with the sign that warned, NIGGER . . . DON'T LET THE SUN ON YOUR HEAD. (p. 317)

The passage essentially captures racial etiquettes that need to be persistently observed. Although Jasper loyally and passionately serves countless passengers, his encounter with racial discrimination is inescapable. His skin color is a source of disdain, a contrast to the normalized white supremacy. While hooks (2013) suggests that gaining racial equity embodies “decolonizing their minds, challenging and changing white supremacy” (p. 16), an end to white supremacist ideologies remains a challenge before the social context is wholly transfigured—before racism is seriously unlearned. Registering this message, Dubois (2007) contemplates the lives of non-whites, “He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (p. 9). The fact that Jasper still “bowed and scraped to white people” (p. 318) only stresses that submission to whiteness is an only justified means to survive—that inside he only “wished it could have been different” (p. 318), silently. Schiele (2005) interestingly observes that African-Americans are prone to cultural estrangement in which the dominator culture attempts to erase the rich heritage of their past. This observation is hence consistent with the colored characters’ experiences in their struggles to downplay racism. In light of this, Kambon (2005, as cited in Schiele) further states, “European American traditions and customs are not culturally different from that of African Americans but they also denigrate African American traditions and customs” (p. 806). From this standpoint, it is obviously pointed out that apart from being labelled as second-class citizens, the non-whites encounter damaging psychological wounds that coerce them into internalizing the status of “Other”. It is arguable, therefore, that besides racialized contempt and hatred, the

whites oppress the colored through this self-depreciation, multiplying their degrees of being oppressed.

Final Words

This chapter touches on various aspects and forms of exploitation. By grounding the discussion in a feminist tenet of intersectionality, I have delimited the scope of the analytical tool, taking into consideration rich dimensions of oppression each character, with their intersecting identities and statuses, shares. By entering marriage, Ruth is domestically abused by Frank who is socially constructed to be assertive and powerful. Likewise, the established romantic relationship between Evelyn and Ed reveals the functioning of gender relations that prompt her to doubt her sense of worth. Ninny, as an obedient housewife, is entirely devoted to the well-being of her husband and son. Her sense of self is, therefore, diminished beyond Whistle Stop—her homeplace. Idgie, while clearly opposing patriarchal thinking, conforms to femininity as a mother and female—at times resigning herself to motherly role and male dominance. Classism is demonstrated to constitute another site of oppression—it economically aggravates Smokey Phillips to such an extent that he refrains from exerting patriarchal power. Racism is a breeding ground for contempt, hatred, fear and alienation. Sipse, as a colored woman, during her confrontation with Frank, is to cope with both sexism and racism while early racial discrimination marks daily struggles for Big George. Willie Boy's Black assertion, however praiseworthy it is, sadly results in his death, strengthening the claim that white supremacy reigns. Correspondingly, racialized contempt and hatred force Artis and Jasper to submit to the white supremacist thinking, underlining that it is only through serious and collective decolonization of mind that will at least pave way for a more just society. A theoretical frame of intersectionality utilized in this chapter hence uncovers how multidimensional forms of oppression and subordination, no matter how subtle they are, remain prevalent. By understanding the intersecting oppressions of gender, class and race, we

are being led to an enlightened path—one that promises sweet fruit of freedom and liberation.



CHAPTER 5
AWAY FROM HOME ARE SOME AND I—HOMEPLACE AS A SITE OF
RESISTANCE

My childhood home I see again,
And sadden with the view;
And still, as memory crowds my brain,
There's pleasure in it too.

—Abraham Lincoln, *My Childhood Home I See Again*

5.1 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, 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, the feminine mystique (see Chapter 4) Ruth attempts to emulate 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 chapter 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 chapter’s title is an exact replication of Emily Dickinson’s poem “*Away from Home are some and I*” (1960) 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 for homeplace fictional characters share in the focus text. Primarily grounded in bell hooks’ feminist perspective on homeplace and culture of belonging (1990, 2011), 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.

5.2 Homeplace: 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, “[y]ou 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 assuages 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, 2011), 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 in 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, “you 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 familial 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, “she 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 (1990) 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”, the feminist tenet, although 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 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 successfully 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—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 Sipse, 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 that no idea that the people inside had left long ago" (p. 383).

Besides offering 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 there is a great divide 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 Ildgie and Ruth sharply reiterates the fact that women, based on conventional gender system, usually create homes 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 Ildgie, 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 habitual 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 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 completely lost. Without such nurturance and sustenance dispensers as Ildgie 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.

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 being 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 spot for those vulnerable to racism as pointed out by hooks in her essay. Despite the normalized racial exploitation that dehumanizes 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 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 on the outside in the public world (see Chapter 4), identifies his need to be settled in one place where racial discrimination is resisted. Like Smokey Phillips, his longing for homeplace is deeply emotional—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 Sipseys 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 of his, 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 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 sites, 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” 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 (see Chapter 4) embedded in the American social fabric. hooks (1992), referring to Whites as the 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 blacks after being verbally abused, Willie Boy plunges into a brawl that leads to his immature death with Winston, the colored soldier, "[T]onight, 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 out in the public world where racism is still prevalent. 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 "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, are treated with respect, dignity and value. Relevantly, hooks (2011) 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, I believe, 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 Threadgoode family 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 a 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 homeplaces, 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.

Final Words

In this chapter, the principal argument is premised on the fact that the 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 help situate her in the context of Whistle Stop and the cafe where 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, redefining his subjectivity. Artis and Willie Boy, two colored characters, deeply grow their roots 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 familial 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, solid sites of resistance, where souls and spirits are filled up.



CHAPTER 6

THOU SHALT LOVE—HOLDING HANDS

Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time.

—Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

6.1 Introduction

A pitiable, powerless and Black girl, Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (2007) emphatically echoes a disturbing message of self-loathing and self-image as discerned from the excerpt quoted above. She despises herself for not possessing the ideal beauty idolized in the mainstream white culture and therefore struggles to imitate it through her earnest desire for blue eyes, longing to escape the stigma racism provokes. Her prayers, she believes, if answered at all, will demystify “the secret of ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised” (p. 45). The appalling confrontation with incest by her father Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove's domestic violence intensifies her yearning for white beauty, magnifying, according to Morrison, the “racial self-loathing” lurking inside. Countering the notion of self-loathing, Black feminist criticism accentuates the necessity for self-love that serves to alter the perception about one's selfhood and identity, endorsing love ethics that is entrenched in differences. The significance of feminist tenet of self-love, while at core dealing with the experiences of non-white female bodies such as Pecola in Morrison's literary work, is greater in unveiling love politics that prevails in Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes*, encompassing the manifestation of self-love, circulation of love, empowerment and creation of loving community. The concept of self-love, as hooks (2001, 2013) eloquently voices, bolsters self-assertiveness and self-esteem that invalidate etiquettes of sexism, classism and racism, for “anytime we do the work of love we are doing the work of ending domination” (p. 195). This notion of self-value, therefore, enables women to overcome oppression through self-affirmation, negating the hegemonic system considered to be a cause for their subjugation. Idgie and Ruth's

careerism, their visibility in the public sphere, is exemplary of how love is capable of liberating women from feminine mystique, which, as Friedan (2013) articulates, merely relegates them to the role of housewives and produces dependence on male counterparts. Their undertaking of responsibility at the Whistle Stop Cafe constitutes a gesture of self-love that, in hooks' words, equips women with "the capacity to invent our lives, to shape our destinies in ways that maximize our well-being" (p. 57). From this standpoint, their commitment to gaining self-assertiveness, socially and economically, overshadows the dominator culture of patriarchy. Despite the sheriff's warn against colored patrons at the cafe, Idgie and Ruth, resolved in their love politics, are intent on feeding those "niggers" (p. 51) through the back door and, thanks to their sense of compassion, "the only thing that changed was on the menu that hung on the back door; everything was a nickle or a dime cheaper" (p. 54). These characters, clearly opposing power relations, value their self-esteem over social constructs, alleviating, if not entirely erasing, the racial wounds suffered by the marginalized.

The title of this chapter, *Thou Shalt Love*, is drawn from the Bible verse in Gospel of Matthew that, as its first and great commandment, preaches, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" ("Matthew 22:37-39," n.d., para. 1). Relevant to this study, it propagates the recurring theme of love—placing a central focus on love ethics. For the practice of love plays a pivotal role in denoting the transformative and remedial power that shapes literary characters in the selected text, this chapter centers on the key discussion of self-love, radiation of love and construction of loving community each character attempts and performs. Through the lens of Black feminist criticism, the conceptualization of radical love will also shed light on the empowerment and domination annihilation it entails, proclaiming that love conquers all.

6.2 Love Politics: Self-Love, Radiation of Love and Loving Community

Jordan, in her oft-cited essay titled "Where is the Love?" (n.d.), writes that power relation "is evil, is diseased, is illegitimate, and deserves nothing from us". She,

therefore, advocates “a clear-minded resolve” to assuage the combined forces of sexist and racist thinking that colonizes the minds of Black women. While the scholar, like hooks, suggests that sexism and racism account for the marginalization of women, she voices that it is essential that they preserve their self-love for it will eradicate “the hatred and the contempt” (p. 270) marring their identity. As a feminist of color, her focus is indisputably on the experiences of Black women who, vulnerable to both sexism and racism in an intersectional manner, tend to devalue self-love; however, its notion is also illuminatingly conceptualized through white female characters Idgie and Ruth, which inspires them to meaningfully and constructively extend to others a gesture of love in the novel. Idgie and her brother Buddy have been intimate childhood friends, affectionately inseparable that he even “took her down to the football game and let her sit right on the bench with the rest of the players” (p. 33). It comes as no surprise that after he dies in the train accident, Idgie becomes so wretched and inconsolable that, as Ninny reflects, “you never saw anybody hurt so much”. After Buddy’s funeral, she estranges herself from the family and rest of the world, retreating into an utter state of solitude since she just “couldn’t bear to be home any longer” (p. 35). hooks states that women’s response to love, wounded by sexism and racism, is seen merely as “a waste of time” (p. 101) and it is crucial for Black women to contain their expression of self-love, allowing “that internalized racism and self-hate stand in the way of love” (p. 98). The concept of self-love, while rooted in the intersectional perspective (see Chapter 4), sufficiently suggests that Idgie’s immense loss of her brother, almost like black women’s “forced separation of family and kin” in slavery (p. 98), too damages her sense of self-love, making it necessary for Idgie “to keep certain emotional barriers intact” (p. 100). It is the soothing arrival of Ruth to Whistle Stop, nonetheless, that marks a key turn and feeds into her the transformative power of love that permits the replenishment of self-love so contagious it rapidly spreads to others, establishing a loving community which will be discussed toward the end of this chapter.

The intimacy between Idgie and Ruth is grown, clearly, by the seed of love and care they cultivate in Whistle Stop. When Ruth is obliged to marry her fiancé Frank

Bennett and confesses, in Iddie's disbelief, that she loves him, Iddie is overwhelmingly upset, swearing, "YOU'RE A LIAR AND I HATE YOU! I HOPE YOU DIE!" (p. 91). Isolating herself from family after Ruth's departure, Iddie continually observes Ruth's welfare after she has been married in Georgia, apparently unable to sever their tie. Her unpromising new life with Frank, worsened by the domestic abuse she endures, prompts her to ask Iddie to rescue her from her husband. Momma, having studied the letter Ruth sends, affirmatively directs, "I think tomorrow you and your brothers and Big George better go over there and get that girl, don't you?" (p. 192). Ruth's intention to ditch her husband obviously counteracts the gender relation that imposes subjugation upon her, depriving Frank of his will to further exercise patriarchal power. Affirming the ethics of self-love, Jordan declares: "I must undertake to love myself and to respect myself as though my very life depends upon self-love and self-respect" (p. 269-270). While skin colors, appearance and social statuses of non-white women usually produce racial stigmas, it is necessary that their source of self-love and self-respect remain full and reachable, poised to combat oppression and inspire social changes. Ruth's affirmation in self-value, arguably, serves to release her from the suppression sexism produces, placing self-respect over the social norm. Her resolute departure from feminine mystique to her quest for self-love downright denies the patriarchal thinking, unlocking her potential to regain and establish self-assertiveness. According to hooks (2013), the force of love ends domination, "If we are self-loving, we do not allow ourselves to be dominated" (p. 195). Hence, Ruth's retreat into Whistle Stop, from this standpoint, provides a site for her "healthy self-affirmation and self-esteem" (p. 195) to flourish—to resist.

The ethics of love is glorified and reiterated through Ninny's faithfulness to unconditional love on which her family subsists and the progressing friendship she cherishes with Evelyn. Not only does her yearning for homeplace (see Chapter 5) signify her move to reclaim the center of Whistle Stop memories, it also transports her to the wellspring of family's love and care that keeps trickling, sustaining and empowering her. The depiction of warm and loving family—Ninny, Cleo and Albert—amplifies the transcending power of love standing as a firm ground on which lives are nurtured and

enriched. Ninny's family circle, quite rather contrary to Ruth's and Evelyn's, is a tight, promising and joyous one as she recalls, "there was never an unkind word passed between us", indicating the blissful romantic relationship she maintains with her husband Cleo, whom she appreciatively admires as "my mother, father, husband, teacher" (p. 145). Although their mentally challenged child Albert might be a cause for concern for the couple, Ninny's motherly love defies the humiliation and unsurprisingly guards the child more protectively:

A lot of people might have been sad to have a birth-injured child, but I think the good Lord made him like that so he wouldn't have to suffer. He never even knew there were mean people on this earth. He just loved everybody and everybody loved him. (p. 148)

Ninny's apparent and vigorous profession of love for Albert heightens the venerable place of love that enhances her spiritual growth—manifested through the gesture of motherly love that sustains others. Concerned with the extensive care and ignominy the child may provoke, Cleo suggests accommodating Albert in a special nursing unit, to which Ninny rigidly objects, asking: "How could that precious, sweet baby ever be a burden? How could anybody ever think such a thing?" (p. 148). Ninny's staunch commitment to family unity, according to hooks (2001), makes it feasible for her to create a "blissful household" (p. 66) where love prevails and thrives. While the capitalist system inclines toward attainment in material well-being, Ninny's foundational love is so formidable that it refuses to allow material gains to "take precedence over valuing and nurturing human life and well-being" (hooks, p. 88). Vigilantly, she watches over her source of love and care, one that, she believes, warmly and securely enfolds them.

Ninny's sustained relationship with Evelyn reconnects her with the comforting and soothing presence of love. Through their weekly schedules and exchange of compassion and care, they diligently contribute to knitting the web of love that eventually shields and empowers Evelyn. Coping with her midlife crisis, Evelyn is advised to consult a psychiatrist by her husband Ed, which somehow irks Ninny and triggers her reaction, "Honey, you don't need to go and do that. Anytime you want to talk to someone, you just come and see me. I'd be happy to talk to you"

(p. 68). Feeling dejected and hopeless, Evelyn begins to live on Ninny's flow of love, delighting in the unfolding warm Whistle Stop memories and life lessons. By deeply understanding the nature of love, Peck (1978) captures that "love, as we shall see again and again, is invariably a two-way street, a reciprocal phenomenon whereby the receiver also gives and the giver also receives" (p. 123). The strengthened tie between Ninny and Evelyn well situates them at each end, bartering bits of love that serve to reciprocally fulfill each other. Whereas Ninny, intent on listening to Evelyn's situations, opens her heart as a receiver, she, in turn, is also rewarded with contentment in recounting a treasure trove of Whistle Stop collages. Likewise, Evelyn, initially as a giver, gleans sense of fulfillment and self-assertiveness by reliving Ninny's storytelling, thus keeping their relationship close. For sexist socialization limits women's possibility of fully developing their self-esteem, at Ninny's love-filled suggestion, Evelyn impressively launches her career as a Mary Kay cosmetics seller—her confidence in self-love eclipses the force of patriarchal thinking. Her assimilation into Whistle Stop, facilitated by the foundational love she shares with Ninny, later gives rise to the construction of self-defense code TOWANDA THE AVENGER placed at her disposal to sabotage the cruel world of oppression and exploitation. Evelyn's self-esteem, however, is meaningfully and spiritually re-defined when she witnesses the religious services at the colored church, realizing the need to discard her fear and respect differences. The beauty of love, beheld through the eyes of Ninny, taps into her inner self, penetrating her heart with a will to forgive:

Evelyn took a deep breath and the heavy burden of resentment and hate released itself into thin air, taking Towanda along with them. She was free! And in that moment she forgave the boy at the supermarket, her mother's doctor, and the girls in the parking lot . . . and she forgave herself. She was free. *Free*; just like these people here today, who had come through all that suffering and had not let hate and fear kill the spirit of love. (p. 311)

Evelyn's seed of self-love, sown by her amity with Ninny, is therefore insusceptible to fright of differences and alienation, rather engaging her with blessings of love. Not only does the power of love renew her fractured low-esteemed self, it also pleads with her to forgive enemies, pacifying the destructive Towanda. Martin

Luther King Jr. (1957), in his widely received piece “Loving Your Enemies”, poetically conveys the core message of differences, hatred and forgiveness, movingly enunciating that feeling of hatred distorts reality. His speech is worth quoting in length as follows:

For the person who hates, you can stand up and see a person and that person can be beautiful, and you will call them ugly. For the person who hates, the beautiful becomes ugly and the ugly becomes beautiful. For the person who hates, the good becomes bad and the bad becomes good. For the person who hates, the true becomes false and the false becomes true. That’s what hate does. You can’t see right. The symbol of objectivity is lost. Hate destroys the very structure of the personality of the hater. (p. 321)

It is in this sense that the basic need of love enters Evelyn’s heart, urging her to terminate dread and hatred against enemies and differences. It is essential that, by the practice of love, her self-love and objectivity remain intact, giving way to the circulation of love to stream down to others. While Evelyn, like “the majority of middle-class whites” (p. 305), is representative of the white supremacist vulnerable to desegregation, her reception of love derived from Ninny and Whistle Stop accounts greatly transform her, tending the seed of diversity that grows in every shade.

Concurrently, another critical gaze is directed at Flag’s move toward the politics of love that downplays racism in the novel. “A skinny little thing” (p. 46), Sipsey symbolizes a dispenser of love, compassion, courage and loyalty. Forsaken by his biological mother at birth, Big George, literally and figuratively, feeds on Sipsey’s motherly love, who, in a rush to claim the baby, excitedly tells to Momma Threadgoode, “I don’t have time, Miz Threadgoode. I got to get me that baby”. That “blackest little baby boy”, as his name suggests, is reared up to be “a six-foot-four, two-hundred fifty-pounder” whom Sipsey loves and cares intensely, “Honey, just ‘cause we ain’t no kin don’ mean you don’ belong to me’ (p. 47). This exchange of fond and comforting words is nestled in mother’s unconditional love that intends to cultivate self-love and self-esteem in non-white bodies. hooks voices that black women’s special domain (see Chapter 5) is “where that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding on bodies, the nurturing of our souls” (p. 41). It is the context of racism that necessitates the creation of homeplace

where the souls of blacks experience joy and pleasure of loving kinship, mustering up their courage to fight against repression. The bond of foundational love between Sipsey and Big George, therefore, epitomizes the collective will and force against dehumanization, ushering them “away from domination toward new lives of optimal well-being” (hooks, 2013, p. 199). Further, while racism rationalizes the blacks’ widespread employment discrimination, the participation of Sipsey, Big George and Onzell in the cafe business contrarily represents their main source of pride and self-esteem which, according to hooks, “can strengthen self-love, ensuring peace and contentment in the lives we lead beyond work” (p. 64). Sheriff Grady’s praise “that nigger makes the best goddamned barbecue in the state” (p. 209), hence, stands as a sufficient proof of his standing in the public world—of his capacity to preserve and defend self-love in the face of racism.

Sipsey’s gesture of love extended toward the Threadgoodes is exceptional when she risks her life to save baby Stump from his brutal father Frank. Her self-assertiveness even amplifies when she smashes his head open with a “five-pound skillet” that kills him instantly, saying, “ain’t nobody gonna get dis baby, no suh, not while I’s alive” (p. 363). Anna Julia Cooper, another influential black feminist voice, captivatingly observes that love is “a balm and a pedagogy—an instructional approach to equitable relationality—that can be employed to counteract the force of lovelessness . . . [that results] in the subjugation of various bodies throughout the world” (as cited in May, 2017, p. 49). Sipsey’s defense of the baby, while indisputably rooted in her sense of love and loyalty toward the Threadgoodes, is also viewed, according to Cooper, as an attempt at eradicating patriarchal domination, precluding Frank from exerting his power over Ruth and Stump—from injecting the lovelessness into them. Onzell’s affection for the whites, like Sipsey’s, is apparently reinforced by her sense of kinship and only heightened when Ruth is dying, for it is Onzell who constantly keeps an eye on her until she is gone:

She had packed Ruth’s gown and makeup and did not leave the funeral parlor that night until she thought Ruth looked like she wanted her to look. So there’s not a person alive that can tell me that colored people hate white people. No sir! I’ve seen too many sweet ones in my life to believe that. (p. 284)

Ninny's reminiscences about Onzell's dedication to nurturing the weak body insightfully reveals that the healing property of love, besides conquering racism and domination, "brings sustained peace" (hooks, p. 220); by performing an act of love, Onzell and Ruth demonstrate that racism is defeated—that love is possible, healing and triumphant across races. Elsewhere in his speech, King (1957) asserts that "when you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems" (p. 319). His firm standing on the politics of love is in alignment with non-conformity to oppressive structures but rather consent to tie of love that "never entails subservience or supremacy" (Cooper, as cited in May, 2017, p. 49). It is, to recite hooks, the moral of love that overthrows the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the interlocking oppressions that perpetuate injustices against gender, class and race.

Reciprocally, Idgie proffers an act of love and care to the colored. To recuperate from her illness, Naughty Bird, Big George and Onzell's daughter, wishes to see and pet Miss Fancy the Elephant kept at the Avondale Park. Realizing her condition is worsening, Idgie, together with Stump, goes to great lengths to drive over to the park, surprisingly fulfilling Naughty Bird's desire by bringing the animal to Troutville where "doors started flying open and the air became filled with the sounds of children screaming with delight" (p. 154). Onzell, too delighted at the sight of Miss Fancy, appreciates Idgie a great deal, saying, "Thank ya, Miss Idgie. Thank ya" (p. 155). Idgie's control over her spreadable self-love, as previously discussed, prompts her to share and circulate the remedial power of love to others. The fact that Idgie "had as many friends over in Troutville as she did in Whistle Stop" and that "she preferred them to some of the whites she knew" (p. 282) intimates that ethics of love the character endorses outweighs racial injustice that breeds domination. This "sweet communion", hooks asserts (1990), "was rooted in love, relational love, the care we had towards one another" (p. 35), and it is thanks to this harmony, regardless of differences, that helps create and expand a wider circle of loving community—that wields the collective force to sustain and nurture.

The infusion of love and sympathy deeply pervades the established circle of kinship, too unfurling its power to roaming, economically oppressed Smokey Phillips. Socially and financially marginalized, he lives off the reservoir of love and kindness that cleanses him of wounds and lack of self-esteem. The economic hardship he faces, due to the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that produces inequality, not only underlines the necessity of loving bond that heals, it also does suggest the strength of love in ending domination. The comfort of shelter and nourishment he gratefully receives from Idgie and Ruth provides a firm ground out of which his self-esteem re-emerges, renewing the existence of self-love. Smokey Phillips's desperate search for the source of self-esteem is intensified by the fact that, in his forlorn words, he "had a run of some bad luck, lately", that his appearance in the "worn-out dirty jacket, frayed brown shirt, and cracked leather laceless shoes" (p. 17) adequately indicates his cache of self-esteem is exhausted. Idgie and Ruth, having scrutinized him, is swept through by an urge of love and compassion, responding promptly to his call of nourishment: "Idgie and Ruth had set a place for him at a table. He sat down to a plate of fried chicken, black-eyed peas, turnip greens, fried green tomatoes, cornbread, and iced tea" (p. 18). Therefore, it is vital that the idea of love retain one's self-value, steeped in the feminist discourse that purposefully cures and ends marginalization. Defining love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" (p. 81), Peck (1978) stresses, alongside preservation of self-love, the obligation of love circulation which, in alignment with hooks', is meant to co-exist to mitigate oppression, tyranny and control. With their profuse provision of fundamental self-love, as already pointed out, Idgie and Ruth are accountable for Smokey Phillips' physical and mental wellness that restores his self-love, self-esteem and spiritual growth necessary for shattering social injustices.

By utilizing the feminist tenet of self-love, the discussion of character Smokey Phillips serves as a catalyst for another critical look at the Railroad Bill, the mysterious good doer in the chosen text. While there is a shortage of food and supplies during the Great Depression, Railroad Bill, believed to be "a colored man that would sneak on the trains and throw food and coal off the government supply trains" (p.

123), is praiseworthy for his deeds of goodwill suffused with the politics of love that elicits from Ruth support and commendation, “These poor people are almost starving to death, and if it hadn’t been for him throwing coal off, a lot of them would have frozen to death” (p. 326). Although capitalism perpetuates social hierarchy that creates a huge divide, Railroad Bill typifies a silent yet firm voice of resistance echoed by his resolute faithfulness to love and compassion for fellow humans. hooks (2015) pertinently argues that “we must recognize that attending to our emotional well-being is just as important as taking care of our material needs” (p. 102); Railroad Bill’s concern over the sustenance of the unprivileged amid the crisis of food scarcity deepens their sense of affection for the puzzling figure. Stumbling upon the canned food distributed by Railroad Bill during their snowy stroll, Idgie commands Stump to “put it back where you found it, so the folks that are supposed to find it will” (p. 129). Railroad Bill, thereby, touches the heart of the needy who subsist on his giveaway serving of love, stealthily rectifying social and economic disparity that imprints trails of love and repels domination. Similarly, at the cafe, Idgie and Ruth perform an act of love by selling foods to the colored through the back door. Pestered by sheriff’s objection, Ruth asks, “Oh Grady, what harm can it be to sell a few sandwiches out a back door? It’s not like they are coming in and sitting down” (p. 53). The couple’s relaxed maintenance of racial etiquettes is saturated with a message of thoughtfulness and compassion granted to the racially suppressed. By loving, the desegregation is taking shape, relieving them of the will to hate. By loving, to repeat King (1957), they attempt to destroy the evil system that segregates, working the wonder of love that heals and binds.

The fabric of love each literary character weaves, grounded in the conceptualization of self-love and love for others, constructs the tight-knit community around which their lives revolve. Their unfaltering belief in love ethics, hence, inculcates in individuals a sense and significance of self-love. At the heart of the community, the Threadgoodes symbolizes the communal fount of love that continues to pump life and blood despite all the oppression and difficulties Whistle Stop members, white and colored, encounter. It is in this sense that, as Ninny contemplates, Idgie and Ruth’s practice of love is transcending and transformative:

Come to think of it, Iddie and Ruth bought the cafe in 1929, right in the height of the Depression, but I don't think we ever had margarine there. Leastways, I cain't recall if we did. It's odd, here the whole world was suffering so, but at the cafe, those Depression years come to me now as the happy times, even though we were all struggling. We were happy and didn't know it. (p. 250)

By giving and receiving, the circle of Whistle Stop is tellingly fortified and filled with the moral of love that sustains close kinship, mending and transforming their lives in numerous ways. Their sense of collectivity, built on the immense weight of love, carries an emphatic tone of compassion, understanding, respect, resilience and the determination to end domination, gaily marching toward an ideally loving and caring goal of solidarity. hooks (2001) utters warmly that “loving friendship provides us with a space to experience the joy of community in a relationship where we learn to process all the issues, to cope with differences and conflict while staying connected” (p. 134). It is, thereby, through the unswerving effort in championing love that translates differences into celebration and unity rather than hatred and alienation. Stump's joyful remembrance of the cafe further brings into light the conceptualization of love ethics:

My momma and Aunt Iddie ran a cafe. It wasn't nothing more than a little pine-knot affair, but I'll tell you one thing: We always ate and so did everybody else who ever came around there asking for food . . . and that was black and white. I never saw Aunt Iddie turn down a soul, and she was known to give a man a little drink if he needed it . . . (p. 328)

The spirit of love, care and compassion at the cafe upholds a sense of humanity that, I believe, is sorely needed in the present world plagued by rampant discrimination, oppression and tyranny, aligning the loveless selves toward the sweet communion where their merged spiritual growth escalates. “When we see love as the will to nurture one's own or another's spiritual growth revealed through acts of care, respect, knowing, and assuming responsibility”, hooks highlights (2001), “the foundation of all love in our life is the same” (p. 136). Love, thus, is life itself—it cures, enriches and sustains our existence. When love withers, one knows that it is in full blossom in Whistle Stop—that there is a hope and joy in living.

Final Words

This chapter sets out to critically examine the conceptualization of love politics. Deploying Black feminist criticism, it also delineates the feminist tenets of self-love, self-assertiveness, empowerment and circulation of love that inspire the establishment of loving circle. Idgie, recovering from the massive loss of his brother, regains her self-love through the intimate connection with Ruth which, in turn, reciprocally unlocks Ruth from patriarchal oppression robbing her of self-assertiveness. Ninny's motherly affection for Cleo and Albert exemplifies the unconditional love undergirded by the foundation of understanding, compassion and sacrifice in family. Coping with her midlife crises, Evelyn, like Ruth, is empowered to dismiss her fear, hatred, and patriarchal forces through bond of love she fortifies with Ninny, allowing her to witness how the beauty of love lies in differences. The potency of love redefines her sense of self-value, projecting her into the public sphere previously invisible to her. The Peaveys—Sipsey, Big George, and Onzell, adamantly practices love ethics that, amid racism, upholds their selfhood, identity, unity and their inner voices to love. Their healthy family gathering and source of pride in culinary expertise at the cafe are rooted in the love moral that nurtures self-esteem. Smokey Phillips, marginalized by the capitalist system, enters the comfort zone of love that rewards him with self-esteem, detaching himself from dehumanizing treatments. Pertinently, while materialism tends to undermine the central notion of love, Railroad Bill commits surreptitious acts of goodwill to enforce it, inspiring social changes driven by the discourse of love. At the community level, Idgie and Ruth's depiction of love, taking root in the love circulation, creates a ripple effect, ushering the entire Whistle Stop into a renewed sense of differences, unity, respect and loving community that heals, uplifts and sustains humanity. Standing the test of time, the Whistle Stop's rich spring of love is a testament for them—and us—that they are capable of love—that we too are holding hands, entering a paradise of love.

Conclusion

Then you rose into my life
 Like a promised sunrise.
 Brightening my days with the light in your eyes.
 I've never been so strong,
 Now I'm where I belong.

—Maya Angelou, *Where We Belong, A Duet*

Foreshadowing the notable themes of intimate relations, love, empowerment and sense of belonging, Maya Angelou's well-crafted verse "*Where We Belong, A Duet*" (1994) in retrospect serves as a backdrop to the warm setting of Whistle Stop Cafe where the spirit of love and care is, still, created and preserved. Notwithstanding all manifestations of oppression, the fundamental entities of unity, harmony and collectivity are the firm ground from which one's sense of self emerges and thrives. The discussion in this study, underpinned by theoretical frame of feminist criticism, straightforwardly exposes an opposition between oppression and liberation. It asserts that in the presence of domination equality cannot be achieved—that it is essential for literary characters—and us—to supplant the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2013) with serious endorsement of feminist thinking.

In chapter four, I have extensively examined patriarchal, classist, and white supremacist ideologies. In so doing, a theoretical lens of intersectionality is deployed to delve into multidimensional aspects of subordination. The narrow scope of the analytical tool, as I have noted from the outset, is stretched to discuss literary characters sharing common oppressive experiences, laying bare a site of intersecting subordination that, too, needs to be dismantled. Regardless of gender, class and race, it reveals there is the commonality of exploitation that renders equality imperceptible—unable to be seized. Consistent with hooks' definition of feminism (2015) as "a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels" (p. 26), this study delineates the unbalanced power relations that later give rise to a sense of being marginalized. It mirrors an unjust social fabric governed by patriarchal, classist and white supremacist thinking that correspondingly asserts our stance on feminist voice.

My discussion, in the following chapter, is strictly concerned with the conceptualization of homeplace as a defense against oppressive forces. Whistle Stop and the cafe are portrayed as a space of remedial power carved out to heal the oppressed—to restore their weary souls and self-esteem. The theorizing, premised on Black feminist criticism, is delimited to critically engage an in-depth analysis of both white and non-white characters, describing why the reliance on homeplace is indispensable—why it needs to be protected and reserved for the exploited after all their journey out in the public world. Despite intersecting wounds and oppressions, literary characters, no matter where they are, set off homeward, inching closer toward the warmth of family and familiar sense of togetherness. hooks (1990) states that resistance materializes in the marginal space, that one can gain subjectivity in the context of homeplace. In line with this conceptual notion, I thus argue that Whistle Stop and the cafe constitute the powerhouse of opposition where individuals and the entire community are encircled by a sense of security and protection. There, they can feed on understanding, compassion and care. Without these comfort zones, an act of countering dominance, as suggested, would be a futile attempt.

Similarly, in the last chapter of this study, the analysis is principally informed by Black feminist criticism. I have demonstrated that, as a tenet of feminist theory, the theorizing of self-love is obviously presented—that it is necessary for fictional characters to counteract suppression through their commitment to love ethics. By internalizing self-love, it is plausible for them to mend, however damaged it is, their fragmented psyche and glean a renewed sense of being out of the shackles of exploitation and subordination, marching toward a wellspring of love that transforms and resists. To recapitulate hooks (2013), she writes that by loving, “we are free to take the path that leads us away from domination toward new lives of optimal well-being” (p. 199). The depiction of solid gathering in Whistle Stop, thus, is propelled by their unwavering belief in love—by their resolute effort in attaining liberation. Throughout the chapter, I have also emphasized that self-love is foundational since it not only leads to the fulfillment of self-esteem but also to the circulation of love to others, contending that love opposes domination—that love heals.

While theoretical frame of feminist criticism is deployed throughout, it is pointed out that the discussion is not rigidly limited to the lives and experiences of women. Rich narrative of the text makes it plausible to undertake literary interpretation of assorted characters—regardless of gender, class and race—within the common theorizing. Knowing they are intersectionally exploited, literary characters bind together to jointly assemble at the homeplace where they can seek relief and remedy. By practicing feminist thinking, they ignite a flame of love and care that disperses domination, asserting that there is beauty in living and loving—that they are not bereft of hope. Embedded in this significant message is Emily Dickinson’s poem “*If I can stop one heart from breaking*” (1960) that I intend to include here as an afterthought, again for us, to recite, ponder and sing that love conquers all:

If I can stop one Heart from breaking,
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain
Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again
I shall not live in Vain.

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