

Psychological Wounds: Homeplace and Self-Recovery in Langston Hughes's Short Stories [In English]

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to encourage the black community to discover their ideal homeplace, since they can only experience humanity at their homes; as soon as they walk out to the streets, they are mistreated by the white population. In order to respond to the research question which is “how does having a homeplace help the black community to indicate their subjectivity?”, this paper seeks to examine the selected stories from the collection of *The Ways of White Folks* (1934) by James Mercer Langston Hughes in the light of one of bell hooks' main key terms which is “homeplace”. For black people a safe place is required where they could heal the wounds inflicted by the white supremacist society and recharge their powers to make a revolution happen. Home for marginalized population is where they could resist, where all of them could be subjects, and where they could return to their lost dignity in the public. Homeplace is a place free of white oppression but full of love.

Key words: Homeplace, Wounds, Recovery, Black Community, White Supremacist, bell hooks, Langston Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*.

1. Introduction

Langston Hughes is considered as one of the most prominent figures in the mid-twentieth century. In his art Hughes tried his best to fight against the maltreatment of blacks by whites. He is a postcolonial writer who has devoted much of his life writing about black community and proposing solutions to help them to lead a better life. Hence, the main purpose of this paper is to scrutinize two stories chosen from Langston Hughes's first short story collection *The Ways of White Folks* (1934) which are *One Christmas Eve* and *Poor Little Black Fellow* in the light of bell hooks' ideas of “homeplace”. Such an adaptation means searching the stories to delineate the places where black characters could heal their psychological wounds and the moments when they have gained the power to fight for their rights. The aim is to bring

up the idea that by acknowledging the reasons by the force of which black people are under pressure, and by trying to solve the problems arisen because of them and to recover their strength at the homeplaces, black people can gain the opportunity to fight for the same rights as their white peers.

2. Theoretical Background

Gloria Jean Watkins, borrowed her pen name “bell hooks”, from her maternal great-grandmother, Bell Blair Hooks, whom she greatly admired. The unconventional lowercasing of her pen name shows that she believes her ideas are more important than herself. She has published numerous books and articles and one of the main notions of her writings and works is “homeplace”.

To white people, blacks are nothing but a pair of hands that are responsible for different acts such as “offering drink on a silver tray”. Whites want blacks to do everything but in an invisible way; they should appear before whites, as if they are zombies or animals; they should walk behind their masters and always look downward, because to look directly means to appear uppity, it is a way to assert subjectivity or equality. It is safer for white folks to make blacks invisible in a way that blacks themselves also believe that they are truly invisible (hooks, *Belonging* 93-94).

The first and the most important step of each revolution is awareness. It is the process of making people aware of their conditions and bringing their deepest wounds to the surface. They should face the ways they are affected by racism and sexism. Therefore, black people should react against the maltreatments imposed on them, however, before any kind of revolution or reacting, they need to heal the hurts they have tolerated; and for doing so, a safe place is required for them.

Homeplace is a place where one could forget the racial domination, poverty, hardship, and the loss of dignity which exists in the society outside the home, and freely confront the issue of humanization and resistance. The resistance of black women is to make their homes, a place for the family to behave as subjects, not objects, a place for them to heal their wounds inflicted by the racist domination. Home for black people is where they could resist, where all of them could be subjects, and where they could return to their lost dignity in the public. Homeplace is a place free of white oppression but full of love.

Homeplace can be the first site where wounded people could begin to love themselves, to respect themselves. It is in homeplace where people could gain the opportunity to grow, develop, and nurture their spirits (hooks, *Yearning* 42-43).

Black women as the leaders of homeplaces, teach their children the notion of civility. To them, “each and every human being — you, every friend, every stranger, every foreigner is precious.” The notion of civility includes an understanding of “the deeper psychoanalytic relationship to recognition as that which makes us subjects to one another rather than objects” (hooks, *Belonging* 148). Accepting the idea of civility, hooks and her sisters often sit on the porches of their homes, and wave at all the people who pass by, mostly whites who do not even acknowledge their presence. As King’s mentions in his essay “Loving Your Enemies”, the basis and the groundwork for true community is to love each other. The only way to get rid of an enemy is to get rid of enmity and start to love (hooks, *Belonging* 151). hooks believes that it is mandatory for black people to behave as subjects at least at their homes, since it is the base of resistance against objectivity, no matter whether the white population respond with good manners or not.

“No matter how many white women turn their gaze away, we look, and by looking we claim our subjectivity. We speak, offering the southern hospitality, the civility, taught by our parents so that we would be responsible citizens. We speak to everyone. In King’s famous essay “Loving Your Enemies,” he reminded us that this reaching out in love is the only gesture of civility that can begin to lay the groundwork for true community. He offers the insight, “Love is the only force that can turn an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up. Love transforms with redemptive power.” (hooks, *Belonging* 148-151)

3. *Poor Little Black Fellow*

Poor Little Black Fellow is about a black handmaid who dies and the white family she worked for, raise her son as if he was their own child. This boy

grows up and discovers a world where his race and being black does not matter. By seeing this case, his white parents become so controlling and want to make him to turn back to blacks' college, but he refuses. It seems that by using the theme of rebelliousness, Hughes aims to convey the message that whenever a black person finds his/her own safe place and wherever he/she could heal the wounds inflicted by white people, he/she gains the power to fight for his/her rights. Here in this story, the white family have caused psychological pain for the black boy unconsciously, but it does not matter whether it was done deliberately or not, the matter is that black people are wounded anyway, and it is their right to rebel against what hurts them; therefore, the black boy in the story does rebel as soon as he finds his own homeplace where he could empowers his self-esteem.

Amanda Lee had been a perfect servant. And her husband Arnold likewise. That the Lord had taken them both so soon was a little beyond understanding. But then, of course, the Lord was just. And He had left the Pembertons poor little black Arnie as their Christian duty. There was no other way to consider the little colored boy whom they were raising as their own, *their very own*, except as a Christian duty. After all, they were white. It was no easy thing to raise a white child, even when it belonged to one, whereas this child was black, and had belonged to their servants, Amanda and Arnold. ... Sometimes they spoke about the two beautiful Negro servants they once had, Amanda and Arnold. They liked to tell poor little Arnie how faithful and lovely his parents had been in life. It would encourage the boy. At present, of course, all their servants were white. Negroes were getting so unsteady. You couldn't keep them in the villages any more. In fact, there were none in Mapleton now. They all went running off to Boston or New York, sporting their money away in the towns. Well, Amanda and Arnold were never like that. They had been simple, true, honest, and hardworking. Their qualities had caused the Pembertons to give, over a space of time, more than ten thousand dollars to a school for Negroes at Hampton, Va. Because they thought they saw in Amanda and Arnold the real qualities of a humble and gentle race. That, too, was why they had decided to keep Arnie, poor little black fellow. (Hughes 90)

The very first paragraph of the story makes the readers suppose that this white family vary completely from all the presuppositions of a white supremacist society that people have in mind. It seems that there was a strong bonding between the white family and their servants, and that the white family were deeply fond of their nice black servants, so that they decide to raise their child after the servants' death. The fact is that they admired and loved their black servants because they were totally obedient. If they have wanted to change their status and not to be a servant anymore, the white family would have definitely reacted harshly. The white family recognize their servants as good people due to the fact that they were "the real qualities of a humble and gentle race"; it means that only if black people are "simple; true, honest, and hardworking", then they are called by positive adjectives. Nevertheless, the mere notion of love that exists between these two races could be regarded as a good beginning for further good and real relationships.

According to hooks, if a society has its foundation in love ethic, then all the members of the society, regardless of their class, sex, and race, can have the right to be free and to live fully and well. Believing in love ethic makes the society and its members change by offering a different set of values to live by. In this kind of society all the members should admire and respect each other, they should embrace "a global vision wherein they see their lives and their fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet". If a society wants to be based on love ethic, then people should utilize all the dimension of love in their everyday life – the dimensions are: care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. "Being aware enables us to critically examine our actions to see what is needed so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn" (hooks, *All about Love* 87-93).

The church and the Pembertons were really a little proud of Arnie. Did they not all accept him as their own? And did they not go out of their way to be nice to him—a poor little black fellow whom they, through Christ, had taken in? Throughout the years the whole of Mapleton began to preen itself on its charity and kindness to Arnie. One would think that nobody in the town need ever again do a good deed: that this acceptance of a black boy was quite enough. ... Arnie realized how

they felt, but he didn't know what to do about it. He kept himself quiet and inconspicuous, and studied hard. He was very grateful, and very lonely. There were no other colored children in the town. But all the grown-up white people made their children be very nice to him, always very nice. "Poor little black boy," they said. "An orphan, and colored. And the Pembertons are so good to him. You be nice to him, too, do you hear? Share your lunch with him. And don't fight him. Or hurt his feelings. He's only a poor little Negro who has no parents." So even the children were over-kind to Arnie. (92)

The white family are kind to the black child in an extremely odd manner; hence, the black child becomes uncomfortable for their pathos toward him. The fact that all the white society feel pity for Arnie, bothers him; however, he does not have the power to admit his discomfort. It seems that white people think that improving black folks' lives, can only occur by romanticizing their poor life; in other words they believe that by romanticizing black people's hard life and low status, all of their problems would be solved. However, it is this romanticizing that hurts black people even more than the hardships they are tolerating, because by having this behavior, not only black people do not feel better, but also their self-esteem would be lowered. Therefore, it is appropriate that the white society put aside feeling pity for other races and instead give them the same opportunities as their own, which are all people's basic rights.

As hooks believes, self-esteem is needed for everyone, especially black people who do not have any experience of self-esteem due to their life in a racist society, because it makes them confident and helps them to feel that they are worthy of living and appropriate to life. "Self-esteem is the confidence in our ability to think, confidence in our ability to cope with the basic challenges of life, and confidence in our right to be successful and happy." Therefore, white people should not devastate their self-esteem by romanticizing their life (hooks, *We Real Cool* 134).

Arnie had only one more year in the high-school. Then, of course, he would go to college. But to one of the nicer Negro colleges like Fisk, they decided, where those dear Jubilee singers sang so beautifully, and where he would be with his own people, and wouldn't be embarrassed. No, Fisk wasn't as good as Harvard, they knew, but then Arnie had to

find his own world after all. They'd have to let him go, poor black fellow! Certainly, he was their very own! But in Mapleton, what could he do, how could he live, whom could he marry? The Pembertons were a bit worried, even, about this one more year. So they decided to be extra nice to him. Indeed, everybody in Mapleton decided to be extra nice to him. ... The Pembertons were awfully sorry, of course. They were one of New England's oldest families, and they were raising Arnie as their son. But he was an African, a nice Christian African, and he ought to move among his own people. There he could be a good influence and have a place. (93-94)

When the black boy grows older, the white family who had adopted him decide to send him to a college which is like a camp for black students. They believe that it is for the advantage of the boy himself; because he can make friends there, and find his own people with whom he can share a better life. He is definitely different from his other white classmates which has made him feel that he is alone; thus, in this case it is good for the boy to find a homeplace for himself, where he could feel happy. However, by the way Hughes describes the situation, it seems that in fact this family are somehow uncomfortable for the boy's presence at their home; because he is grown up now and his black appearance and identity has become more apparent, therefore, they decide to send him away.

As previously discussed, homeplace is a place where one could forget the racial domination, poverty, hardship, and the loss of dignity, which exists in the society outside the home, and freely confront the issue of humanization and resistance. hooks believes that homeplace can be the first site where wounded people could begin to love themselves, to respect themselves. It is in homeplace where people could gain the opportunity to grow, develop, and nurture their spirits (hooks, *Yearning* 42-43). The black boy in this story, has been given the opportunity to grow like all the other white children; however, when he grew up, everything changed and the problem of race started to show up in the family. It is noteworthy to remind that even as a kid, he was never totally happy for the white people's favor and odd kindness toward him.

A lot of young Negroes, men and women, shiny and well-dressed, with good and sophisticated manners, came at all hours to see Claudina.

Arnie and the Pembertons would meet them in the hall. They were a little too well dressed to suit the Pembertons. They came with white people among them, too—very pretty French girls. And they were terribly lively and gay and didn't seem dependent on anybody. Their music floated out of the windows on the summer night. The Pembertons hoped they wouldn't get hold of Arnie. They would be a bad influence. (96)

“Separate, segregated, shut-off! Black people kept away from everybody else. I go to Fisk; my classmates, Harvard and Amherst and Yale . . . I sleep in the garage, you sleep in the house.” (103)

The family travel to Paris to make a good memory for the son, before sending him to the mentioned college; there, he meets several black youths for whom the race does not mean anything. There, it seems that the boy has found his safe homeplace. A place where he could be happy and lively. As a result, he becomes courageous to challenge and transform his status. In fact, by finding his homeplace, he gains the strength to stand up for what he believes in, and to shout out the issues which had always bothered him. In other words, finding his appropriate homeplace helped him to talk back to the white family.

Talking back can be regarded as an important step of resistance. All the people simply know that they should not talk back to a person in a higher rank or position, or black people have learnt that they should not talk back to white supremacists. The notion of talking back implicitly signifies the relation between the authorized and unauthorized. “Talking back suggests rebelliousness and resistance on the part of the unauthorized. Just as importantly, talking back can mark the act of transformation of the unauthorized in the discovery of their authority, their coming to voice.” By resisting and by talking back, black people can at least show that they also have their own thoughts, beliefs, mind, and perspectives that must be noticed and respected (Marcano 112-115).

4. *One Christmas Eve*

This story is about a black woman who is kept late by her unthinking white employers and what is worse is that she is underpaid. She tolerates the hard job she is occupied outside her home, so that she could be able to create a safe homeplace for her son. By applying the theme of black women's self-sacrifice

in order to create a homeplace for their families, Hughes tries to represent the idea that in order to heal the wounds inflicted by the white racist sexist society, a real homeplace is needed for all the black people; and they are mainly the black women who try to create the mentioned atmosphere.

Black women are the first teachers and guides of their children, even without noticing it. They work all day long, outside their homes, serving for white society to make their ends meet. After all those tough and tiring jobs, they return to their homes to make life happen there, to make their homes a safe homeplace for their family.

Near the ten-cent store they passed a moving picture theatre. Joe said he wanted to go in and see the movies.

Arcie said, “Ump-un! No, child! This ain’t Baltimore where they have shows for colored, too. In these here small towns, they don’t let colored folks in. We can’t go in there.”

“Oh,” said little Joe.

In the lobby of the moving picture show, behind the plate glass doors, it was all warm and glowing and awful pretty. Joe stood looking in, and as he looked his eyes began to make out, in there blazing beneath holly and colored streamers and the electric stars of the lobby, a marvelous Christmas tree. A group of children and grown-ups, white, of course, were standing around a big jovial man in red beside the tree. Or was it a man? Little Joe’s eyes opened wide. No, it was not a man at all. It was Santa Claus! (125)

After work the black woman goes shopping with her son to buy some stuffs to create a memorable Christmas for the child at their homeplace. However, they are the victim of segregation and she has to explain the situation sadly for her curious son. In this sense they truly need a homeplace, and the reason is that they do not have the chance to be free and happy in the society, and that they cannot freely confront the issue of humanization. In order to gain the power to fight for the basic rights a child can have – going to the movies or visiting Santa Claus can be the simplest of those rights – they should at first heal the imposed wounds on them at the homeplace which is mainly created by black women.

Why is it that lots of white people always grin when they see a Negro child? Santa Claus grinned. Everybody else grinned, too, looking at little black Joe—who had no business in the lobby of a white theatre. Then Santa Claus stooped down and slyly picked up one of his lucky number rattles, a great big loud tin-pan rattle such as they use in cabarets. And he shook it fiercely right at Joe. That was funny. The white people laughed, kids and all. But little Joe didn't laugh. He was scared. To the shaking of the big rattle, he turned and fled out of the warm lobby of the theatre, out into the street where the snow was and the people. Frightened by laughter, he had begun to cry. He went looking for his mama. In his heart he never thought Santa Claus shook great rattles at children like that—and then laughed. ... When little Joe got his breath back, on the way home, he told his mama he had been in the moving picture show. ... "But Santa Claus didn't give me nothin'," Joe said tearfully. "He made a big noise at me and I runned out." (127)

These parts of the story represent to the reader the sad situation a black mother could get stuck in. The white community does not even show mercy to a black *child*; they do not even pay attention to the fact that they are hurting a child's psyche, which causes him/her to suffer from lack of self-esteem in the future. The experience of this little black kid is very similar to hooks' journey to her grandmother's house. She describes the journey by having the feelings of fear and unsafety all the way long; the reason was that she was interrupted by many white folks on the way, from whose faces she could understand what they wanted to say: "danger", "you do not belong here", "you are not safe". Anyhow, after passing all those gazes which connoted hate, reaching to grandmother's house gave her senses of safety, pleasure, and love. Such a contrast in the sweetness of arrival, of homecoming, and the bitterness of that journey, is a constant reminder of white power and control; it is also a reminder of the necessity of having a homeplace to be healed there (hooks, *Yearning* 41-42).

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this research was to use bell hooks' ideas and writings to apply the concept of homeplace on two of the short stories of Hughes's short story collection *The Ways of White Folks* which were *Poor Little Black Fellow* and *One Christmas Eve*. Homeplace could be the first place for the black people to heal the psychological wounds imposed on them by the white supremacist society and to reach self-recovery. Hence, they would find themselves worthy of living properly and this fact encourages them to find for their rights. As a result, marginalized people can begin to have a revolutionary act from the margins they have always been kept.

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