

EXPLORING THE ASPECT OF 'HOME' IN KATHRYN STOCKETT'S *THE HELP* (2009) AND THE ADAPTED MOVIE (2011)

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ABSTRACT

Discussions about the significance of the realms of space has increasingly been carried out in literature and the study of 'Space' and 'Spatial Criticism' now holds the pedestal when textual analysis takes place. The dynamics of Space being too large to entirely discuss in this research article, the researcher has chosen the specific aspect of the 'Home' which falls within the category of Space and constitutes a major part of the space vis-à-vis females, upon whom the argument will be based. The theory of the house which is discussed by Gaston Bachelard in his famous work, *The Poetics of Space* (1964) will be kept in mind while shaping the argument. Also, since the discussion will encompass women's identity which is shaped by her presence and existence inside the house, a feminist outlook into the theory of the Home will have to be incorporated for which the critical works done by three female critics namely, Bell Hooks and Minnie Bruce Pratt, will be consulted. Kathryn Stockett's debut novel *The Help* (2009) provides ample scope to explore the issues women face with their identity which has always been associated with the 'Home'. The novel also provides the opportunity to explore the ambiguous identity of the black women working in the homes of white people. Aspects from the adapted movie (2011), directed by Tate Taylor, which further support the argument are considered.

Keywords: Black Identity; Black Women, Female Identity; Home; Spatiality, Inhabited Space

Introduction

Kathryn Stockett released her debut novel in the year 2009 called *The Help*, which is based around the year of 1960s in Jackson, Mississippi where all the evils of racism had been practiced predominantly. The novel tells the life of black women, through the characters of Aibileen and Minny, who work as full time house helps at the whites' homes. What makes this novel interesting is that the perspective of the blacks is narrated by themselves. The narration is shared by three protagonists, two black house helps, Aibileen and Minny, and one white girl who empathizes with them, Skeeter. The first hand experience shared by the two black protagonists presents all the emotions and feelings of them working for a white family and rendering motherly love to white children who eventually grow up to become their masters. The movie, which was released in the year 2011, is directed by Tate Taylor and finely presents most of the elements of the novel considering the limitation of limited time availability on screen. The novel being based in Jackson, Mississippi, most parts of the movie is also shot in Greenwood, Mississippi which had to itself a look from the 60s with modern dwellings. Kathryn is herself from Jackson, Mississippi so she knew that the location of Mississippi was extremely

important for the completion of the picture with its essence not lost and its meaning intact. The director, a childhood friend of the author and hence himself a Jackson native, Tate Taylor says, "I wanted Mississippi to be a character in the film." (Locations Hub, 2011) He himself travelled to Greenwood, clicked photographs of potential filming spots and presented it to the production company who were then convinced and gave him a heads up for filming the majority of the movie in Greenwood which was apt for representing the 60s era.

In the discourse of the two mediums, the novel and the film, space/location/territory/home/city needs to be analyzed in different and the best suited ways. For example, space when studied in a movie is a dependant variable, the selection of a location is done suiting the plot so it can be said that the location/space is aids the whole scene and presentation but when space is studies in the context of a novel it acts as an independent variable because the location depends upon the formation of the character and also the idea of space is given birth inside the imagination of the reader, so different readers perceive a different idea of space. In the studies of Humanities and Social Sciences, the concept of Space is studied in the context of social, geographical and most importantly

psychological phenomenon. There have been many critical thinkers who have studied Space critically and come up with various interjections into the theory, to name a few, Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974), Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), Edward Soja, Paul Carter, Edward Said's *Literature and Society* (1978), Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) and Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1964). These critics have propounded various interpretations of Space and have used phrases like, "cognitive space", "narrative space", "social space", "ritual space", "heterotopias" and "heterochronias", "historical space", "chronotopes" to describe the many possibilities of analysis.

Women critics have also had their say in Spatial Criticism. The effects of the Western Enlightenment upon the development of the social order of the twentieth and nineteenth century established some sexist and essentialist gender norms. The outside world, the space outside the home, the work space was in a way allotted to the men and the women were confined to the homes making the 'home' the sole influence in the shaping of a woman's life. Her first experiences and the majority of them would take place inside the home; it was their first cosmos. Ironically, the woman being the one spending most of her time at home was still bound by the rules and social order of the outside world which influenced her life inside as well.

"The mapping of a place or location onto gender identities has been a key part of the establishment and maintenance of women's position and is reflected in both the materiality and the symbolic representation of women's lives." (Eagleton, Mary, ed. Linda McDowell, 2003)

In the recent times, female critics have started resonating with the themes of Spatial Criticism which have an effect on feminism. The increasing use of language embedded with ideas about space, location and the effect it has on feminist issues and values are coming to the forefront. Many female theorists have been

talking about this matter now, for example, Chandra Talpade Mohanty discusses the cartographies of political struggle; Adrienne Rich has long insisted on the importance and role of a politics of location. Other critics include, Griselda Pollock, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Kathleen Kirby.

The aspect which will be focused in this research article is that of the home, for which the critics who have based their work entirely on this aspect will be considered who are, Minnie Bruce Pratt and Bell Hooks. Both the scholars have taken up a unique path which explores different dimensions of the aspect of the home.

Results and Discussion

Gaston Bachelard published his magnum opus, *The Poetics of Space*, in the year 1964 where he talks about the home being the identity of a person. It plays the first role in framing the identity of a person, it acts as a container of various memories, experiences that people have had over the period of time. The dynamics of the home presented by the author in the book, *The Help*, and the filmmaker in the movie are various. The space of the Home seems to be emanating a different story and perspective about the different characters lending the readers and audience ample opportunity to explore upon close reading of the movie and text. The houses of all the characters in the movie are crucially selected and prepared in accordance with their personalities and the kind of representation that is essential to the audience on screen for better evaluating the characters. The production designer of the movie, Mark Ricker says,

It was my challenge to give each house its own personality that supported the characters in the film. Skeeter's house is a classic white-columned antebellum Southern mansion, while Celia's house is a pre-Civil War luxurious inn converted into a private residence, and Elizabeth's is a middle-class ranch house. (Locations Hub, 2011)

The meaning of Home for the black helps

The houses of the black characters are in contrast with the lush and tidy houses of the whites. Even though the caretakers of the

whites' houses are the blacks, the people behind making the whites' houses tidy, organized and well-maintained are the blacks still their own houses are not as organized as they keep their masters'.

Analyzing the case of Aibileen; she had devoted her entire life bringing up white kids and rendering to them the motherly love which they deserve to get from their mothers but don't. She says,

I done raised seventeen kids in my lifetime. I know how to get them babies to sleep, stop crying, and go in the toilet bowl before they mamas even get out a bed in the morning. (Stockett, 2009)

When the book and the movie starts, Aibileen is working for the Leefolts taking care of Mae Mobley who is her "special baby" (Stockett, 2009) as she calls her. After taking care of Baby Girl's (as Aibileen likes to call Mae Mobley) morning chores, Aibileen is ordered by Miss Leefolt to quickly arrange the dishes and the living room for the guests as it was bridge day that day. Aibileen notices and narrates in detail about every inch of the Leefolt residence, explicitly talking about the faults and damages in the furniture which Miss Leefolt tries too hard to cover up with her help making it evident that the Leefolt's weren't "rich folk,... Rich folks don't try so hard." (Stockett, 2009) Aibileen was the caretaker of the Leefolt residence; she made that house a home with her efforts, nurture and care and yet she did not receive that same feeling of belongingness from her employers.

These women who labored in other women's homes, caring for other women's children and cleaning their homes, had to try to maintain a version of long-distance mothering and a sense of belonging at home from another place, often in another country. (Pratt, 1997)

There can be seen two very intense instances of a black help extending motherly love to the child they are appointed to take care of in *The Help*. In these two instances the black help is seen rendering motherly nurture and care which the mother is unable to provide and yet

both the black women knew that in spite of all the care and nurturance they provide they would still be an 'object' at the whites' homes. The black women created the essence of home for the white people, specially their children, but they could never receive the mere sense of belongingness for themselves. Hooks, in her book, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* writes,

Since sexism delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination. (1991)

Aibileen knew exactly what babies like and she would create a comfortable and accepting environment for babies to grow up to. Miss Leefolt never loved or cared for Mae Mobley but Aibileen compensated for her ignorance towards Mae Mobley. Aibileen sensed that something was not right since her first day at work when Miss Leefolt addressed Mae Mobley as "it". Aibileen created a 'homeplace' for Mae Mobley where she was accepted as she was, where she felt belonged. The presence of Aibileen was 'homeplace' for Mae Mobley. Aibileen created that, she made Mae Mobley confident about herself by making her repeat affirmations every day. Mae is two years old when the movie starts and in the subsequent scenes with Aibileen she acknowledges her by saying, "You my real mama, Aibee." (Taylor, 2011)

In the second instance (which is better illustrated in depth in the book), Constantine (black maid) cares and nurtures for Skeeter just like Aibileen does for Mae, the only difference being that the relational aspect between Skeeter and Constantine goes beyond childhood into teenage and adulthood. Constantine not just brought up Skeeter when she was a child but also renders to her the confidence and assurance which her mother totally lacks to provide for her. Constantine acts as Skeeter's confidant and best friend, making Skeeter feel confident about herself while Skeeter's mother cares about the conventional achievements of a

girl like getting a date for prom, getting married and the like. Constantine, in the real sense, lends the motherly care and nurturance to Skeeter despite which she doesn't feel belonged by Skeeter's family (apart from Skeeter). In fact, Constantine is fired from her job (the reason of which varies in the book and the movie). So, the black help may bring homeliness with them but still they fail to receive the sense of being at a safe place vis-à-vis home.

As Hooks writes, black women are never able to feel at home at the whites' houses instead they felt bitterly oppressed as they are doubly jeopardized for being black and a woman. The black women are only able to create a safe haven for themselves and their family at their own home, however small, untidy, unorganized they might be; their homes are the spaces where they can truly be themselves. This can be noted in the movie, *The Help*, directed by Tate Taylor. The movie begins with Skeeter interviewing Aibileen at Aibileen's home where she seems in her own demeanour as she not in her uniform, there is no sense of alertness on her face rather she is calm and relaxed. The colour scheme used by the cinematographer to depict this calmness is Analogous where yellow-green colours are used.



Figure 1

Nothing about this colour scheme is too vibrant and/or repulsive rather it portrays a feeling of blending in. Aibileen doesn't stand out, she is a part of the house as much the house is a part of her. Here, Aibileen was the 'subject' not the 'object'. The black women, especially those under white supremacist societies, have always strived to create their own personal space, a place where they can resist the oppression they face in the outside world. So, however tired and drained they would be from their daily jobs

at the whites' houses they would still retain the energy to build up their own houses as homes, or as Bell Hooks calls it, "homeplace". This homeplace would be there site of resistance. As Hooks says,

Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. (to be contd...) (1991)

Aibileen's small house would still provide her with the fulfillment at the end of the day.



Figure 2

(contd...) Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. (1991)

Aibileen created a homeplace for her where she affirmed in her mind and heart despite the dignity that was denied to her in the public world. This aspect is resonated with the audience by the cinematographer when the scene depicts Aibileen at her home having a bath without her wig which depicts that she is completely being herself both physically and emotionally. That scene depicts the absolute raw face of Aibileen, the face of Aibileen which nobody sees, which only was confined into the safe spaces of her home. Hooks says,

“... [Homeplace] it was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racial domination.” (1991)



Figure 3

As described, in the scene above, Aibileen is her raw, vulnerable self where she is reconnecting with herself on a Sunday, recollecting herself and emerging out stronger to get back to the racist world she has to face on the rest of the week. Irrespective of the fact, which Aibileen herself says, that she had spent her entire life taking care of white children still she could only find and create for herself a homeplace at her own home. To the outside world she was only and always the object but in her home she was the subject. This scene embodies perfectly this notion of the importance of a homeplace for black people which Bell Hooks has emphasized in her book chapter.

Unraveling the White help

Usage of the word Help in the title of the novel and the film bears two contexts. It has been used as a noun when it refers to the domestic black servants working in the whites' homes and the second context (the one used by the researcher in the sub-topic) is its referring it to a verb signifying Skeeter's help which she bestowed upon the black servants by bringing out their perspective in an all white racist environment and giving words to their experience. Skeeter's help in the tough and extreme racist times of the 1960s in the American South can be viewed as utopian because she envisioned a world where everybody would be equal; this deduction has come through because of Skeeter's sympathy and empathy with the black servants in her town. Amongst all the white privileged

families and people, she was the only one who felt for the blacks and sought to uplift their confidence by bringing out their suppressed voices. Skeeter did not view the blacks as objects, she knew they had a voice which was waiting to come out, and she knew they had ears which were listening to their white employers talking ill about them. Skeeter acknowledged their presence and most importantly she made them felt seen and heard. Jackson was a town shared by both black and white families but because of the racial discrimination and oppression which blacks faced daily, Jackson could never be a safe, free and independent space for the blacks. The black maids, everyday, would cross the boundary setting both the races apart, and instill a black presence at every whites homes, nourishing their houses to be homes which would be further breeding ground for more hatred and disgust towards the next generation of blacks. Skeeter noticed this dilemma which every black felt and made this her mission to bring about radical changes which would make Jackson a safe space for the blacks and they could also live in the town like it's their own. The character of Skeeter resonates with Minnie Bruce Pratt describing about her experiences in her essay *Identity: Skin, Blood and Heart* (1984). Pratt talks about her own experience of living in a black dominated society and constantly feeling like the white, privileged oppressor whose ancestors had enslaved the blacks' ancestors. Pratt continuously carries with her the guilt and wants to be able to talk to her black neighbours without receiving scared or reserved glances from them. She even talks about some of them not even daring to make eye contact with her. She says, “And I hate my white womanhood that drags between us the long bitter history of our region.” (1984) Pratt was also brought up by a black maid in her childhood; she acknowledges the privilege she has enjoyed without realizing what it meant for the weaker race at that time but when she writes this essay she talks about her experience of living in a black majority neighbourhood with a conscience that now thinks rationally and feels accountable for, unknowingly, being a part of the oppressor in the past. She wants to have a relationship with her locales without the baggage of the past lingering over them. She

says, "I think how I just want to feel at home, where people know me. Instead I remember, . . . , that home was a place of forced subservience." (1984) Skeeter, in the novel, feels the same way, her conscience biting away at her as she witnesses' racial slurs been thrown so casually at the blacks. In the movie, Skeeter notices Aibileen feeling awkward while Hilly discusses blatantly about her Home Help Sanitation Initiative focusing on its importance which solely laid emphasis on how unhygienic and "plain dangerous" it is for the helps to use the same bathroom as them. Skeeter makes an effort (but in vain) to try changing the topic so that Aibileen wouldn't have to listen to the disgust which Hilly was ensuing. Just like Pratt, Skeeter wanted the blacks to feel comfortable around her without the aspect of race and class hovering around them but the experience was for Skeeter, like it was for Pratt, "an exhausting process, this moving from the experience of the "unknowing majority" (as Maya Angelou has called it) into consciousness." (1984) Pratt elaborates about her experience,

...I recognize, when I walk out in my neighborhood, that each speaking-to-another person has become fraught, for me, with the history of race and sex and class. As I walk I have a constant interior discussion with myself, questioning how I acknowledge the presence of another, what I know or don't know about them, and what how they acknowledge me means. (1984)

Skeeter also faced the same feelings when she visited the black part of the town; she recognized the look of terror on the faces of the locales,

I guess I thought it would be like visiting Constantine, where friendly colored people waved and smiled, happy to see the little white girl whose daddy owned the big farm. But here narrow eyes watch me pass by. When my car gets close to him, the little colored boy turns and scats behind a house a few down from Aibileen's. (Stockett, 2009)

Skeeter had always felt this divide and dreaded it. She was earlier a part of the unknowing majority but when she returns to Jackson, after being away for school, she comes into consciousness and finds things in distortion. She feels the difference between her and the rest of the town, "I think about how things are different between Hilly and me, since I came home from school. But who is the different person, her or me?" (Stockett, 2009) This change inside her bringing out the alteration in her perspective did not be an easy process, but the drive to make Jackson as much a safe and free space for blacks as it was for the whites kept her going. By the end of the movie, by publishing the book called 'The Help' consisting of the firsthand account of black maids working at whites' homes, Skeeter is able to earn her mother's respect and provide the blacks with the confidence and edge upon the whites so that they could no longer be objectified and ostracized.

Conclusion

At the end of the movie and the novel, different characters end up being in a space which was safe and imparted free will.

Minnie's efforts are acknowledged and appreciated by Celia Foote and her husband as they cook her a whole meal and make her sit on their dining table serving her food themselves. After the success of the book, Minny finally gathers the courage to leave her husband, who indulged in domestic violence often, and go on to live in her own Home she could live freely and happily in.

Aibileen is fired by Miss Leefolt in the last scene (instigated by Hilly) and as she leaves the house, she feels free, content and happy looking forward to doing things which she liked doing. She narrates in the last scene, "No one had ever asked me what it felt like to be me. Once I told the truth about that, I felt free. My boy, Treelore, always said we going to have a writer in the family one day. I guess it's going to be me." (Taylor, 2011)

Skeeter finds her own space where she could flourish and nurture her writing skills; she lands up a job at Harper and Row, New York. Hesitant to take it up at first she is later convinced by Aibileen and Minny.

The idea of 'Home' is not just the place where one is born and brought up, rather it resembles all those places which make a person feel at 'home', feel safe, welcomed, where one can flourish and live freely. Minnie Bruce Pratt describes about the various places where she has felt at home during her life, apart from her home where she was born. McDowell says, "...personal experiences and developing political beliefs challenge conventional ways of thinking or long-held beliefs about home." (2003) At the end of the novel and the movie, all the three protagonists find themselves free spaces where they can confirm to their own identities. Aibileen finds freedom to express herself which makes her feel belonged. Bell Hooks in her book, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1991), states similar experiences of hers when she was a child and for going to her grandmother's place they had

to cross the white town in between which was a dreadful experience for them. She writes,

When I was a young girl the journey across town to my grandmother's house was one of the most intriguing experiences... because we would have to pass that terrifying whiteness – those whites faces on the porches staring us down with hate. (Hooks, 1991)

Hooks describes the relieving feeling of finally reaching her grandmother's place, a place of safety, a place emanating belongingness, care and nurturing and calls that feeling as homecoming. "Oh! That feeling of safety, of arrival, of homecoming when we finally reached the edges of her yard,..." (Hooks, 1991) Aibileen found peace within herself which made her house a home.

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