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POLITICS OF RACISM IN MOVIE AND NOVEL: A STUDY BASED ON KATHRYN STOCKETT'S "THE HELP"

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Abstract

African-American literature has had a long trajectory since its first appearance in the 18th century. Starting out with the slave narratives, its principal objective was to show the immorality of slavery as an institution. The concepts of beauty and blackness are central in African-American literature. This project reveals the representation of black people in the novel entitled *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett. This novel is notable as it is the first novel from this white American author. This novel portrays the life of black maids who suffer racial discrimination conducted by white people in Jackson Mississippi during the 1960's. This novel has so many appreciations but also criticisms regarding the presence of the white American author who practices cross-race writing. This research is an attempt to portray the ill-effects of racism faced by the Afro-American in *Jim Crow, Mississippi*.

Keywords: *The Help*, racism, black people, Africans and segregation.

Introduction

Racism has also been defined as a "system of advantage based on race" (David Wellman). The term racism usually denotes race-based prejudice, violence, dislike, discrimination or oppression. As an ideology, racism existed during the Nineteenth century as scientific racism, which attempted to provide a racial classification of humanity. Such racist ideologies have been widely discredited after World War II.

The doctrine upholds the view that race is the basic determinant of human abilities and that various racial groups constitute a hierarchy in which one group is regarded as superior to others. The consciousness of the difference in races especially the whites as superior is ubiquitous in world history and literature. Biological factors, especially the skin colour, have been used as a primary sign of racial difference with which the African Americans have always been targeted by the whites. The whites have since time immemorial considered themselves the most civilized, the progressive -culturally, morally, religiously, and intellectually

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superior to all ‘Other’ races. This idea won proliferation with the colonization of the Europeans especially the British and later the Americans. The global of populations during the plantations in the American South, promoting slave trade from Africa, and trade in India leading to indentured laborers and domestic servants to West Indian plantations resulted not only in racial mix but enabled the colonizers to invent a “variety of techniques and patterns of dominations.” (Loomba, 9) And the idea of the superiority of the whites sank into the “psyche” of the colonized.

Racism was introduced in the new world, as a system in 1619 with the first group of twenty Africans who were brought to Jamestown marking the starting point of slavery in America. With the introduction of slavery as a system in 1661 in Virginia, American history of racism has been fraught with series of ups and downs in relationship between white Americans and African Americans. African Americans were treated as if they were inferior. They were made to work for a long time, sometimes from sunset to sunup. The system of oppression lasted until it was abolished with the American Civil War in 1865. The introduction of the Thirteen Amendment to the United States Constitution changed the lives of African Americans completely. From this moment on African Americans, who were former slaves, were considered human beings and also given the right to vote. They started to

educate themselves and, what was more important for them, were allowed to possess their own land. Furthermore, a year later, in 1866 the first Civil Rights Act was enacted. It strengthened the position of African Americans by giving them American citizenship and therefore equal treatment before the law. Nonetheless, racial discrimination did not disappear as African Americans still were considered inferior and subservient.

Representation of Racism in the novel The Help

Racism cannot be limited as an American phenomenon, but a human phenomenon. It manifests a “binary” thinking, the nearly universal proclivity for self-definition by contrast: we - they, us - them, insiders - outsiders, Greeks - barbarians, all perceived more in terms of differences than commonalities. People of the most widely varied cultures practice invidious comparison, finding fault and pointing out the deficiencies of others. Some American Indians even named themselves with terms which meant “human beings” in their respective languages, suggesting that outsiders were different, lesser beings. In such a scenario, self-inflation and self-celebration seem inevitable; and the efforts to establish the worth, dignity and importance invariably led to claims of superiority. In itself such a human disposition toward racism might be only a harmless defect of the species, and its

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comical puffery regarded as an interesting version of “original sin” or “innate depravity”, meaning unseemly self-regard and lack of humility.

Afro-American women were subjected more to the pain of discrimination in employment, education, segregation, the terror of white violence and verbal abuse. They also felt the need to liberate themselves from social oppression just as deeply as African American men. In the Civil Rights Movement, women practiced the legacy of activism as a continuation of the anti-racist struggle that began during American slavery. *The Help* sheds light on three Afro-American women who lead very difficult lives while working as maids and nannies for the privileged white families in Jackson, Mississippi.

The novel *The Help* highlights instances of different types of racism like institutional racism, overt racism, and structural racism. According to Jones (1997), Individual racism is closely affiliated with racial prejudice. Although prejudice generally has been conceptualized as an attitude, prejudice scales often include items concerning the defining elements of racism. An example is endorsement of statements about innate group differences, the relative inferiority of the other group, and policies that reinforce group differences in fundamental resources (e.g.,

education or wealth) (Brigham,1993). According to Brigham, individual racism can be expressed both overtly and covertly. Sometimes individual racism is expressed openly to fulfill one’s personal needs and desires. Much of the traditional work on personality and prejudice was based on a Freudian psychoanalytic model that assumed that prejudice was an indicator of an underlying intra-psychic conflict. Many contemporary approaches to individual racism acknowledge the persistence of overt, intentional forms of racism but also consider the role of automatic or unconscious processes and indirect expressions of bias. Devine and Monteith (1993), for example, proposed that through common socialization experiences Caucasian Americans in general develop knowledge of cultural stereotypes of African Americans.

There are two planes of racism appearing in the novel. The prime is at an individual plane. At this level, bigotry involves beliefs, attitudes and the behavior of a given person toward people of a different racial group. Through the perspective of Aibileen, Stockett sheds light on the segregation which separates black people and white people in terms of area - toilets, work space and even food. White people are very particular that they maintain a distance with the black people. They believe that their black skin is an indication of some kind of disease that they suffer

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from. They are not bothered about the unequal treatment meted out to the blacks. There are many examples of individual racism in *The Help*. For instance, when Hilly comes to Leefolt's house to play bridge, this is what happens:

Ms. Leefolt : Hilly, I wish you'd just go use the bathroom
Ms. Hilly: I'm fine

Ms. Walters : Oh she's just upset because the Nigger uses the guest bath and so do we.

Ms. Leefolt : Aibileen, go check on Maer Mobly.
Aibileen : Yes, ma'am

Ms. Leefolt : Just go use mine and Raleigh's.

Ms. Hilly : If Aibileen uses the guest bath, I'm sure she uses yours too.
Ms. Leefolt : she does not. The dialect which the white women use in their conversation exhibits their racist inclinations. Aibileen uses courtesy titles like Madam or Miss to refer to white women whereas the white women just call her by her name, Aibileen. This shows the divide in class and social status. To the whites. Black maids belong to a lower class. The above dialogue also reflects the prejudiced mind set of Hilly to Aibileen, especially when Hilly denies using Leefolt's bathroom. Hilly considers blacks to be the carriers of diseases. In the conversation that follows she says that African-Americans carry dangerous diseases and so that it does not spread to them, she uses separate bathroom. The building of separate bathrooms again indicates Hilly's

prejudice which is then manifested as racial discrimination.

At the institutional plane, racism is the exclusion of certain people from equal participation in the society's institutions solely on the basis of their race. It is built into such social structures such as the government, schools, the media and industry practices. The institutional level can be seen throughout the book. Institutional racism expresses itself in unfair treatment of people who do not belong to the white race in institutions such as schools, media systems, and the government. The mistreatment is observable when some people in control of institutional power use it to restrict people belonging to a different race of availing equal opportunities. The book clearly reveals the situations by means of racist treatment of black maids who work for white American families. It is important to note is the fact that the white people in control of institutional power often mistreat their employees, which is shown by the example of relations between Elizabeth Leefolt the white woman and Aibileen Clark, the black maid who works for her. The detailed descriptions of Elizabeth's behaviour clearly reveal that her black maid is discriminated against in her workplace.

The next example portraying institutional racism is the way in which the Whites had treated Aibileen's son, Treelore, who dies two years before the novel opens

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(when he was 24). One rainy night as he had been working at the Scanlon-Taylor mill “lugging two-by-fours to the truck, splinters slicing all the way through the glove” (Stockett 2009: 2) he had slipped off the loading dock and fallen down the drive. The person who operated a tractor-trailer did not notice Treelore and crushed his lungs. Then “his broken body [is] thrown on the back of a pickup by the white foreman” (Stockett 2009: 153). By the time Aibileen finds out about the accident Treelore had died. As the maid states, Treelore was “too small for that kind of work, too skinny, but he needed a job” (Stockett 2009: 2). Treelore’s case indicates that white employers did not consider their black employees’ safety as an important issue. African Americans were given the most physically demanding jobs which often were also the most dangerous. This situation clearly indicates that Treelore, like other young black men, had no other option to earn money for his family but to take up a low-paid, menial job.

Only Aibileen words shed light on her sorrow at her son’s death. Her sorrow that white people seem do not care of the black’s personal life and feeling is made poignant by the word: I put the iron down real slow, feel that bitter seed grow in my chest, the one planted after Treelore died. My face goes hot, my tongue twitchy. I don’t know what to say to her. All I know is, I ain’t saying it. And I know she ain’t saying what she want a say either and it’s a strange

thing happening here cause nobody saying nothing and we still managing to have us a conversation. (The Help,30).

Stockett also cites the incident where some Whites burnt the house of Aibileen’s cousin, Shinelle, in Cauter Country. The reason for this is that the blacks were not allowed voting rights in Cauter Country and Shinelle had dared to vote defying the laws of the land. The fact that many blacks were unaware of this rule had no bearing on the inhuman punishment meted out to them. Another incident mentioned in passing when some whites cut off the tongue of Aibileen’s husband’s cousin just because she talked with somebody from Washington about the Ku Klux Klan.

Structural racism in *The Help* can be seen in the deeply-rooted beliefs held by white inhabitants of Jackson that the Blacks are thieves and liars. The novel clearly portrays the negative attitude of the Whites towards African Americans when Minny, the black maid who works for the Holbrooks, is unjustifiably accused by Hilly of stealing her silver. The false accusation ruins Minny’s reputation and creates an enormous problem for her to find a job as the white residents of Jackson consider the Whites to be honest and trustworthy while maintaining that the Blacks do not deserve to be trusted. The white Mississippians completely believe in the rightness of Hilly’s accusation. They do not realise that

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it is a part of her plan to get revenge on Minny for using the Holbrooks' toilet during a brutal storm.

Stockett also illustrates structural racism by the fact that the Blacks have to obey rigid Jim Crow laws which maintain the racial hierarchy showing the white supremacy and control over African Americans. The humiliating set of rules prevents them from living approved lives as the Blacks are deprived of even basic facilities. For example, black inhabitants of Jackson cannot use shops, restaurants, swimming pools, and libraries reserved for whites.

Stockett throws light on the plight of the black inhabitants of Jackson who can hardly make ends meet due to the racial discrimination meted out to them in terms of employment. They are given menial jobs such as maids, charwomen and fast-food workers which are, low- paid. Yet another stereotype is the figure of black maids as 'mammy'. As stated by Collins the mammy image is the centre to intersect oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. The stereotype of the 'mammy' was prominent especially in the South and used to refer to a black woman who worked in a white family and nursed the family's children. Stockett portrays the image of mammy throughout her novel by presenting the unfortunate life of the black maids. It becomes the pivot of discrimination as the black maids are the ones who are dominated by the white people

especially women. However, they really care and remain helpful to the white family.

Besides portraying the segregation issues perpetrated by the white, Stockett also shows another discrimination that is displayed in language Stockett highlights the use of "Nigra" word to call black maids. Bennett (1970) states that the term "negro" was preferred by civil war freedmen while the term "coloured" was frequently used by the community of Black emancipation before the thirteenth amendment. Roland A. Barlon states that the term "negro" is considered as a white man's word to make black people feel inferior. The word negro or nigra is considered as a very rude word for calling the black people. Stockett depicts Hilly Holbrook as the white woman who uses this word to show her anger to the black maid. Hilly finds it difficult accept the fact that Minny is able to find a job after getting fired and so accuses Minny of being involved in criminal activity. Hilly calls her a thief and does not hesitate to call her a nigra. Furthermore, this incident shows how the white people cast aspersions on the character of the black people and unflinchingly label them thereby brand them criminals. Minny is upset when Hilly rejects the offer to become Hilly's maid again and decides to look for a job elsewhere. Minny go on to work for Celia Foote who is Hilly's rival. She has strong influence as she is the chairman in a white community. Therefore, Hilly tries to convince everyone that Minny

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is a thief. She wants that no one will hire her as a maid. Minny realizes that Hilly has a secret mission behind offering her work in her house. Therefore, she decides to work for Celia and refuse Hilly's offer.

Visualisation of Racism in The Movie The Help

The film has been more successful in depicting the ugliness of Jim Crow and fixates on the goodness of its white protagonist. While Stockett's novel presents a vision of segregation in service of a feel-good story, the film version of *The Help* illustrates the virulence of American realism. So also in the film highlights the idea that whether you are black or white, liberation is just a matter of improving your self-esteem. In recent decades, white authored and directed narratives presumably focused upon the struggles of people of colour like *Mississippi Burning*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Crash* (Haggis, 2004), and *The Blind Side*, gaining immense popularity. *The Help* earned extensive acclaim first as a fictional novel authored by a white woman, Kathryn Stockett, and then as a screenplay written and directed by a white man, Tate Taylor.

Set in 1962, Jim Crow Jackson, Mississippi, *The Help* chronicles the lived experiences of two black women, Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, and one white woman, Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan. Aibileen and Minny are black maids while Skeeter, a recent Ole Miss graduate and socialite, is

living on her family's plantation and troubled by the sudden absence of their black maid, Constantine Jefferson. Aibileen is Elizabeth Leefolt's maid, while Minny, at first, is Missus Walters' maid. However, she is fired by Missus Walters' daughter, Hilly Holbrook, and then becomes Celia Foote's maid. Linking all of the women together, Hilly, Elizabeth, and Skeeter are best friends and members of the elite Jackson Junior League that Celia, unsuccessfully, tries to join. Aibileen and Minny, also close friends, are the so-called "the help" in white households and at league functions. *The Help* cinematically influences public understandings of racial histories, racial equality, and interracial coalitions from a pedagogical stance invested in the production of white power, dominance, and superiority.

The film presents a biased attitude of the government and police who have no qualm about prosecuting the blacks and defending whites. This causes unrest amongst the blacks as are denied the same legal protection as white people. The film also shows the modern technology which had become popular in America during the 60's, like transportation where cars and buses were being used. In this film, the advancement of communication technology is shown with Celia using telephone to call Elizabeth. Television is yet another technological device that is shown to be gaining popularity to access information or

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news. There is a scene where Skeeter is showing her maids the news on the murder of a black activist Medgar Evers on the television. But Skeeter's mom gets angry and turns it off. She is of the opinion that the news is not important especially because it concerns the murder of a black man.

Referred to as the “commoditization of Otherness” by hooks (1992, p. 21), Skeeter can be further understood as the cultivated [white] subject of the film while Aibileen and Minny are the [black] objects of her desire— developed only insofar as Skeeter's needs require. The film's use of motifs, defined as details that acquire significance in the plotline through repetition (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2011), strengthens the interpretation of Skeeter as subject versus

Aibileen and Minny as objects. For example, Skeeter often returns to a willow tree in her yard to remember the validation she received from Constantine as a young girl. Sitting together under the tree, Constantine reminds her of her beauty and potential despite not having been asked to a school dance. Later on, Skeeter returns to the same tree with Stuart (her soon to be first boyfriend) where he asks her out on a date, which symbolizes her growth and vindicates past romantic rejections.

Bolstering her interpretation of Skeeter as Stockett's surrogate (i.e.,

Stockett's pathway to securing the center) are stark similarities including their dreams of becoming writers, memories of a close relationship with their black maids, books entitled *The Help*, and decisions to move to New York from Mississippi in their 20s. Additionally, Stockett wrote her memories of Demetrie into Aibileen, Minny, and Constantine's characters. For instance, Aibileen validates Mae Mobley, Elizabeth Leefolt and Constantine validates Skeeter similarly to how Stockett remembers being validated by Demetrie as a little girl (Stockett, 2009). Also Minny, like Demetrie, is famous for her cooking and married to “a mean, abusive drinker” (Stockett, 2009, p. 525), and Aibileen and Minny, like Demetrie, had coloured bathrooms outside of the white homes they worked in (Couric, 2011). Perhaps most indicative of Stockett's desire to centre herself, alongside the immortalization of her memories, is the appearance of her daughter Lila in the film as a young Skeeter.

It is interesting to note that *The Help*'s focuses on women and leave white men blameless for any of Mississippi's ills. White male bigots have terrorized black people in the South for generations; a recent example is the revolting story of a mob of white teenagers caught on video beating and killing a black man for sport. This happened in, of all places, Jackson, Mississippi — in 2011, in the so-called “post-racial” era. But the movie relegates Jackson's white men to

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the background, never linking any of its affable husbands to such menacing and well-documented behaviour. A white male character is never seen donning a Klansman's robe, or making unwanted sexual advances (or worse) toward a black maid. Scenes like that would have been too heavy for the film's persistently positive message, which is that black women and white women, even in 1963, can come together and form unlikely sisterhoods that will help them all, and that they can share a lot of laughter and good times in the process.

Conclusion

Although it is the twenty first century, the issue of racism issue still persists. People have been dealing with these issues for centuries yet continue to be racists. And it is hightime that a resolution is reached for this. The first step towards this is to admit that racism is an issue and that it is a psycho-social problem. The over usage of the term "black" becomes a racial micro- aggression because it can condition the mind to associate the word with negative connotation. If racism is to be eliminated as an active ideology of the time it is pertinent that an awareness of the terrain is done with due seriousness. Through analysing shameful living and working conditions faced especially by black maids, whose lives are always under threat due to their colour of skin, The Help makes people aware of the

problem of white supremacy and the damaging consequences of racist behaviour towards the Blacks.

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