

Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*: The Progress of Black Women

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Abstract

This paper explores the representations of women in Kathryn Stockett's book *The Help*. This novel is exceptional since it is written from the perspective of a white American author about the hardships of Black people. The experiences of black maids in Jackson, Mississippi in the 1960s, who encountered racial discrimination from white people, are shown in this story. The empowerment of black women is the main objective of this study. Discrimination against female characters is taken up in the study. Because of racial injustice, black women suffer more than white women. Because of the town's rules and widespread racial discrimination, some women are motivated to take action to improve their community. A few strong female personalities are empowered to improve their own lives. The study demonstrates how the female characters in the Jackson community deal with dominance and how they are empowered in society.

Keywords: Racial Discrimination, White Supremacy, Segregation, Domination, empowerment.

Racial prejudice is one of the social issues that has endured throughout American history. This problem initially began during the colonial period and has resulted in many hardships and brutal treatment of black people. Although black and white people have bargained many times to balance the uneven standing between these two racial groups, the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s was a pivotal event in the fight to remove segregation. It can be noted that many social aspects have been influenced by the presence of racial discrimination including the literary world, in which African American literature is the particular genre.

It's worth noting that numerous literary works dealing with racial inequality are produced not just by black but also by white authors. *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Life Among the Lowly* is the most popular cross-race literary masterpiece of the nineteenth century that has had a significant impact. Harriet Beecher Stowe, a white novelist, wrote and published this classic book in 1852. This best-selling 19th-century novel exposes the realities of slavery in the Southern United States via the figure of Uncle Tom, a black slave. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by white American author Mark Twain, is another controversial and provocative novel. This anti-racist story follows *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a poor white boy, and his black

playmate, Jim.

It's troubling to observe how the topic of racial prejudice is addressed in the literature, particularly in novels created by white authors. Many white authors claim to have written a novel based on current racial prejudice in the United States. To demonstrate the concept, in 1967, William Styron, a white novelist, released *The Confession of Nat Turner*. William Styron is renowned for being one of the first white authors to attempt to create the voice of the racial Other in his writings. Styron claims that his work was historically accurate since it is based on the experience of Nat Turner, a slave uprising leader in Virginia. This work earned the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1968 as a result of its immense popularity and recognition.

Dingemans (2015) argued that although women's actions are vital for the Civil Rights Movement, their contributions are largely neglected in the history books. *The Help*, a novel by Kathryn Stockett, is regarded as a unique novel since it depicts the lives of black maids while being written by a white American author. Because of her experiences living in Jackson, Mississippi, her understanding of the South, and the historical legacy of slavery and racism, Stockett is inspired to create a novel on racial prejudice in the region. "Life in poverty-stricken Mississippi for much of the 20th century was harsh and oppressive, especially for the black population"(Joanne). This story delves into the lives of black women who spend their days caring for white children. Every morning, the black maids leave their homes and entrust their children to someone else's care. They spend their days at the white people's residence, caring for and playing with the white children. The black maids, according to Stockett, are the ones who look after and watch the white children grow up. When white children grow up, they will become the oppressors and dehumanizers of black maids, as if they have forgotten about the maids who have reared them since they were babies. "Black women who worked as domestics during the 1950s and 1960s were generally treated as poor, uneducated, child-like creatures" (Spender, 88).

This novel, entitled *The Help*, depicts the lives of black maids who assist a white family in doing their housework. When white moms are too preoccupied with themselves, black individuals step in to assist white families in raising their children. This novel also underlines the need for white people to assist black people in their battle against racial prejudice. Stockett establishes the white character as the story's key role, assisting the black maids in expressing their thoughts and feelings. That white character is comparable to Stockett, who is attempting to create a cross-racial novel to illustrate the unequal lives of black people and to encourage anti-racist attitudes.

Stockett claims that she not only writes her fascinating narrative but also strives to teach readers about the lives of black maids in Jackson, Mississippi, by drawing on her own experiences as a child growing up in the city. By depicting segregation in public places, Stockett vividly exposes the misconception that black maids face.

The Help becomes a best-selling novel in the United States, and its film adaptation is nominated for an Academy Award in 2012. For the readers, this novel depicts the lives of Black Americans who serve as maids in white families. Stockett's real-life experience of being raised by a black maid inspired this narrative. She may also go further into the social situation in Mississippi, the cultural tradition, and racial prejudice as a result of her background. The racial inequality faced by black women in Jackson, Mississippi, is vividly depicted in this novel. The problem is further compounded by the fact that racial prejudice is depicted in the eyes of a

white author.

The Help is set in Mississippi and depicts racial prejudice against black women, particularly those who serve as maids for white households. The novel's female protagonists struggle with issues of segregation and racism in Jackson, Mississippi. Three characters, Aibileen Clark, Minny Jackson, and Eugenia Skeeter Phelan, tell the story. Eugenia Skeeter Phelan is an ambitious yet affectionate white lady who attempts to chronicle their tales and assist black people in achieving equality.

The interaction between a white lady, Skeeter Phelan, and the black servants is the focus of this story. Skeeter decides to return to her hometown after finishing her studies to meet her beloved maid, Constantine, who shares memorable memories with Skeeter. Skeeter works as a reporter for the Jackson Journal, where she writes about housekeeping and meets Aibileen, Minny, and other black maids in town. Aibileen is a black maid who works as a nanny for the Leefolt family. Skeeter is Mae Mobley's mother's friend. Minny works in the same field as Aibileen. She works for Hilly Holbrook and is dismissed for refusing to use the black maids' restroom.

Hilly, Skeeter's childhood friend, is another influential character among Skeeter's friends. Despite growing up together, they have drastically different perspectives on race in Mississippi. Hilly is the president of the Junior League and a prominent figure among the town's white ladies.

The concept of black maids as mammies is a strong stereotype that is developed throughout the narrative. In her portrayal of African women, Stockett explores extensively the character of mamma. The image of Mammy serves as an intersection for oppression of race, gender, sexuality, and class. By showing the sad existence of the black maids, Stockett presents the image of Mamma throughout her story. Because black maids are the ones who are oppressed by white people, especially women, the figure of black maids described in her story becomes the dominant tone of prejudice. However, show genuine concern for the white family and continue to assist them.

Stockett presents black maids as loyal and devoted servants to the white household for whom they work. As black maids, they face several challenges they must sacrifice their time, care, and energy for their own families to work for the white household. Though they lose fundamental things in life, black maids continue to care for and love the white family. Aibileen's actions in caring for Mae Mobley depict this situation,

I go on to the back, so mad I'm stomping. Baby Girl has been in that bed since eight o'clock last night, a course she need changing! Miss Leefolt try to sit in twelve hours worth a bathroom mess without getting up! I lay Baby Girl on the changing table, try to keep my mad inside. Baby Girl stare up at me while I take off her diaper. Then she reach out her little hand. She touch my mouth real soft. "Mae Mo been bad," she say. "No, baby, you ain't been bad," I say, smoothing her hair back. "You been good. Real good." (Stockett, 16)

Mae Mobley has been in bed since eight o'clock last night, while her mother and father were arguing. This irritates Aibileen since the family is used to forgetting their child. Aibileen changes the diaper and looks after the infant with her love and care. Aibileen, as the

mammy figure, is dutiful, devoted, and compassionate to the Leefolt family, particularly Mae Mobley. Mae Mobley constantly looks forward to Aibileen arriving at the house and hugging her. Aibileen genuinely cares about Mae Mobley; she is the one who can soothe the infant and look after it when the mother is away.

As members of black households, black mothers are well-versed in the abilities required of a black maid. They are encouraged to pass on the skills required of a maid to their children. Minny's mother teaches her the skills required of a black maid. Minny also teaches her children the necessary skills for working as a maid. Minny has a large family and attempts to prepare her by teaching her the skills required of a maid. Sugar, Minny's oldest kid, is being trained to be a maid. Sugar is used to cleaning at home, and she even babysits for her late-working neighbor Tallulah. "Sugar, my oldest girl, in tenth grade, babysits for our neighbor Tallulah who works late." (Stockett, 224)

Being a black woman has a negative perception since they are stereotyped as breeder women who can readily produce children. Minny is characterized as a black woman with five children in the story. The result of having too many children while working as a maid for a white household is that she is unable to adequately educate her children. The black maid will always work for a white home for most of her time. As a result, they have very little time to look after their own families. The black woman is quite busy with the white family's duties.

Stockett portrays it vividly in her story through the character of Minny. Minny's attention is divided between her family and the white family. Minny is unable to govern and raise her children due to a lack of time. As a result, the children treat Minny in an unfriendly manner. When her daughter claims she dislikes her mother, Minny confesses her feelings. When Minny hears that, it truly tears her heart. "The day your child says she hates you, and every child will go through the phase, it kicks like a foot in the stomach. But Kindra, Lord. It's not just a phase I'm seeing. That girl is turning out just like me." (Stockett, 52). Minny's terrible condition causes the kids to blame her. Minny is blamed by their children for trapping them in poverty. Black mothers are often regarded as having failed to raise their children due to racial stereotypes. Aside from the fact that they have little time for their own family, there is no masculine figure to assist them in caring for the children.

Being a mother in a black household is not the same as being a mother in a white one. Being a mother in a black society mandates a woman to spend too much time away from her family, preventing her from properly raising her children. Being a black mother, according to Stockett, is a really difficult task that is extremely different from being a mother in a white household. Furthermore, no one will assist black moms since their husbands want their wives to continue seeking for themselves and their children even inside their own families. Black moms are torn between working to meet the family's needs and staying at home to raise and accompany their children.

Stockett illustrates segregation between black and white people in terms of area, bathrooms, working space, and even food through the eyes of Aibileen. White people will constantly keep their distance from black people because they believe they are suffering from ailments that are visible through their skin. White people are unconcerned with the unfair treatment of black people. From Aibileen's point of view, Stockett tells how the black maid feels when she is treated unfairly. Miss Leefolt informs Aibileen that she is constructing a new

toilet for her to use instead of the guest toilet. When Aibileen is treated unfairly, she recalls her son's death. Aibileen's son has died, and no one seems to care because he isn't protected by any laws. White people appear unconcerned about the personal lives and feelings of black people. They simply put on a happy front and act as though everything is fine.

White people stigmatize black maids as carriers of various illnesses. Ironically, it is the black maids who raise white people's children, clean their homes, and prepare their meals. Ironically, the white children in the story spend the majority of their time with their maids since their moms are quite busy. It appears that white people are unconcerned about illnesses being spread by black people.

In the United States, black people do not have the right to live as free men. Even though the United States has previously declared black people free, they continue to face racial prejudice in the 1960s. This novel, set in the 1960s, depicts how black women continue to face discrimination. "Race, class, and gender inequality in the South during the early 1960's were extensive and deep-seated" (Hayes). As black maids, Aibileen and Minny face prejudice in their workplace, according to Stockett. It has already been asserted that the government has already made unequal treatment legal by enacting the segregation regulation for black women. They must follow all of the rules exactly as they are written. The government treats black people unequally under the law.

In the work, Stockett attempts to intertwine the plot with historical facts from the time when black people were subjected to the Jim Crow laws. The Jim Crow law, which proclaims "separate but equal," governs the lives of African-Americans. The black people must follow this rule. Separation in many parts of public facilities under Jim Crow Law promotes equality because black people are supplied with the same facilities, but they are segregated. That law should be followed by black people. If they do not cooperate, they will face the penalties of being prosecuted and maybe being sentenced to prison.

Stockett portrays the lives of black people through the eyes of frustrated black women. She discusses a large number of public facilities that are kept segregated to prevent disease outbreaks. According to Jim Crow Laws, black people are not permitted to access public facilities such as the library, burial grounds, or hospitals with white people. In the story, Stockett goes into great depth on the unfair treatment that occurs. Stockett also discusses the prejudice that occurs in hospitals. When Aibileen wants to assist a white guy who has cut his fingers, she wants to take him to the black hospital. However, it is impossible to do so; a black doctor and nurse cannot assist an emergency patient. He must be sent to the white hospital. Even in an emergency, it is nearly hard to eliminate prejudice.

In the story, some white women also experience discrimination against other female characters. After being born into a lower social class, Celia married a wealthy man and relocated to Jackson. She wants to socialise with the Jackson Society, but because of her poor upbringing, she is not accepted by other women. She becomes heartbroken and stays in her home. She starts to show respect for her maid, Minny.

In the book, the black women fight against the prejudice that society has placed upon them. After leaving Leefolt's home, Aibileen started writing a book about the injustice that

black women experience. Through her works, she began to question the oppressors. In a similar vein, Minny moved away from her inebriated husband, bringing her kids with her. She began leading a self-sufficient existence.

Stockett presents the white people who oppress the blacks with a scornful attitude. Skeeter, on the other hand, positions herself as the one who helps black women overcome discrimination. As a result, Stockett is secure in promoting her work as an anti-racist statement. She is a firm believer in equal rights for white and black women. However, certain doubts remain as to whether Skeeter's narrative is truly free of anti-black prejudice and the existing white supremacist worldview.

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