

The Sufferings Of Afro-American Maids in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*

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Abstract

This research deals with the color bias and its effect on maids in Mississippi in Kathryn Stockett's (2003) *The Help*. The ill-treatment and negligence of Afro-American maids received from the white women who employed them in Mississippi that must have affected directly or indirectly on their personality and may eventually lead to suffering. They live in an atmosphere of struggle to free themselves from the complicated relationships between black and white. Afro-American maids pledged to liberate themselves from social oppression by protesting through writing a book which chronicles their stories in slave masters' homes to make their presence felt as human being equal to their white masters.

الام الخادماوات الامريكيات من اصل افريقي في رواية كاثرين ستوكيت "المساعدة"

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الخلاصة

يتناول هذا البحث التمييز على اساس اللون وتأثير ذلك على الخادماوات في الميسيسيبي في رواية كاثرين ستوكيت "المساعدة" (٢٠٠٣). ان سوء المعاملة والاهمال الذي تعرضت له الخادماوات الامريكيات من اصل افريقي جراء استخدام النساء البيض لهن في الميسيسيبي لابد وانه اثر بشكل مباشر او غير مباشر على شخصياتهن ليسبب في النهاية لهن الاما. فهن يعيشن في جو من الصراع كي يتسنى لهن حل العلاقات المعقدة بين النساء السود والنساء البيض. وهكذا تعهدت النساء الامريكيات من اصل افريقي ان يحررن انفسهن من الاضطهاد الاجتماعي من خلال التعبير عن احتجاجهن في كتاب يؤرخ قصص الاضطهاد الذي عانين منه في بيوت اسيادهن الذين استعبدهن في بيوتهم. والهدف النهائي من جهدهن هذا هو ليثبتن انهن متساويات مع اسيادهن.

After the end of the American civil war(1861-1865) and the abolition of slavery, little had changed for the black people. Slavery was merely replaced by racial discrimination and injustice. Racial discrimination is one of the major issues that had affected the United States of America since the early years of its establishment. Racists believe that certain people are superior, or inferior, to others in light of racial differences. They approve of segregation, or the social and physical separation of classes of people. Tim McNesse states:

These racist laws made blacks feel inferior because they were denied basic human rights. Even toilets and drinking fountains were marked 'White only' and 'Colored'. It was evident to black citizens that their separate places to eat, sleep, or travel were in much worse shape than those reserved for whites. But the southern whites who had regained power pretended that the separate services for blacks were equal to those of white.¹

The black were unable to shake hands with white, black men couldn't make an eye contact with white women or else they would be accused of highly inappropriate sexual advances. When speaking , blacks were expected to address whites as "Sir" or "Ma'am" .These laws strictly enforced racial segregation in almost every aspect of southern life. 2

Afro-American women experienced bitter life of being black and female in America. They lived in different world from that of people who are not black and female. They were oppressed by White community, and due to their gender, they were vulnerable to black male abuse. Afro-American women were slaves who often looked after their masters' children, took care of the housework, and some worked in the fields. Women slaves returned home to do more housework after finishing working for their white masters. Due to the slave trade, black families were usually separated; therefore most slaves did not have real families. During that period of their slavery Afro-American women were placed in difficult positions. Although they were delicate and fragile, they ought to perform an exhausting physical labor in the fields, and work in slave masters' homes.³

Afro-American women had barely tolerated the pain of the discrimination in employment and education, segregation, the terror of white violence, and verbal abuse. They had also felt the need to liberate themselves from the social oppression just as deeply as African American men did. 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 hard lives while working as maids and nannies for privileged white families in Jackson, Mississippi. Those maids lived in separate parts of the town and were segregated from whites in so many aspects.⁴

The first narrator is a white woman, Skeeter Phelan, who rejects racialism. She is isolated more and more from her friends because they believe she supports the Civil Rights Movement. She is blamed and punished for her beliefs when her friends stop talking to her in public and refuse to answer her phone calls. At first she is confused and decides to confront Hilly rather than accept the rejection, but as the scene unfolds, she sees clearly that her new view of the black maids is incompatible with Hilly's views of segregation. She encourages herself to write about the black maids because of the mysterious disappearance of her warm-hearted Nanny Constantine. Therefore, she writes about black women who tolerate racialism and raise white children. The whites frequently accuse their black maids of stealing and the maids are often helpless to defend themselves. Their personal lives are secondary to the demands of the white family. A white woman can fire the help and employ her friends and influence to destroy a black maid's professional reputation. Skeeter is motivated to try to convince the local maids to be interviewed for a book that will show their suffering as black women. Stockett introduces Skeeter by saying⁵:

Skeeter was the hardest to write because she was constantly stepping across that line I was taught not to cross. Growing up, there was a hard and firm rule that you did not discuss issues of color. You changed the subject if someone brought it up, and you changed the channel when it was on television. That said, I think I enjoyed writing Skeeter's memories of Constantine more than any other part of the book.⁶

Skeeter's alienation clarifies her role within the isolated community, which shocks her and stimulates her talent of writing. Her writing project leads her to make a friendship with Aibileen that never would have been possible. Skeeter had not chosen to break from her own community⁷. Skeeter refuses (senator's son) Stuart's relationship although she loves him, but they have no future together because their views on race are dissonant. Stuart represents the institutionalised "Old" South, and Skeeter represents a more progressive "New" South⁸. Eventually, Skeeter decides to leave her community and move to New York City to achieve her dream of writing. Her decision is built on the unjust circumstances that happen to Constantine⁹. Constantine teaches Skeeter lessons about love, kindness, and self-worth that gives her the courage to fight the injustices: "All my life I'd been told what to believe about politics, coloreds, being a girl. But with Constantine's thumb pressed in my hand, I realized I actually had a choice about what to believe". (Ch. 5, p.84) Skeeter's insists to write a book

about black maids but many maids are afraid to step up: “We aren't... we aren't doing civil rights here. We are just telling stories like they really happen”. (Ch. 14, p. 169). Initially Skeeter writes only the stories of Aibileen and Minny. By the time, the black maids decide to tell Skeeter their stories and she promises them of anonymity¹⁰.

The best friend of Skeeter is Aibileen, an African- American woman in her forties, who works as a maid for her entire life, raising seventeen white children in the process. She is the sympathetic character in the novel. Although she has suffered the early death of her only son, Treelore, she is still able to love both white and black people. Actually, she is the mature and respected maid, bringing up white children and watching them call her “Mama” more often than they would call their mothers. Her opinions, fears and wishes have been shaped by years of experience as a housemaid.¹¹ She speaks in a distinctive dialect: “Taking care white babies, that’s what I do, along with all the cooking and the cleaning. I done raised seventeen kids in my lifetime”¹². She usually leaves the families whom she works for as soon as the child starts to see her in a different light. In fact she “wants to stop that moment from coming – and it come in ever white child’s life – when they start to think that colored folks aren't as good as whites” (Ch.2, p.34). After months of her son's death, she finds solace in her maternal role raising white children. Obviously, Aibileen gets humor through hard times, and it is clear that she must hide her real self-inside in order to appear as the subservient, obedient maid.¹³

Another maid is Minny, an African- American woman in her thirties, and is Aibileen’s best friend despite the fact that the two women are quite different. . Seemingly, Minny is a complicated character mixing extreme strength with extreme vulnerability. One evening, Aibileen and Minny are on a bus to go home, Aibileen thinks, “Minny could probably lift this bus up over her head if she wanted to, old lady like me lucky to have her as a friend” (Ch. 2, p. 26). Minny enters in a constant struggle against society and her inner nature. She is neither quiet nor submissive as expected of a black maid. She speaks frankly against the injustice she experiences and witnesses. Minny remembers what her grandmother and mother say to her when she was young about the whites:

Rule Number One for working for a white lady, Minny: it is nobody’s business. You keep your nose out of your White Lady’s problems, you don’t go crying to her with yours... Remember one thing: white people are not your friends. They don’t want to hear about it. And when Miss White Lady catches her man with the lady next door, you keep out of it, you hear me? (Ch. 4, p. 52)

Minny speaks her mind and says things that can and do get her into trouble. Unlike Aibileen, who stays out of trouble, Minny refuses to be treated like an object¹⁴. This attitude clashes with what her mother tried to teach her. Minny’s individualism leads to a friendship with her employer, Celia Rae, who becomes devoted to her. Celia and Minny gain strength from each other, leading them to take control of their own lives.¹⁵ Minny believes, she must not tell her story to Skeeter at the beginning, she thinks:

And I know there are plenty of other “colored” things I could do besides telling my stories or going to...the marches in Birmingham, the voting rallies upstate. But truth is, I don’t care that much about voting. I don't care about eating at a counter with white people. What I care about is, if in ten years, a white lady will call my girls dirty and accuse them of stealing the silver. (Ch. 17, p. 269)

Ultimately Minny grasps that Skeeter's book is the utmost work of speaking out, her opportunity to let it all out¹⁶.

Hilly is one raciest white women who believes that the African- Americans in Jackson are poor because they are lazy and do not spend money wisely. She is Skeeter’s childhood friend who is a wealthy Jackson socialite. Hilly is simply using the charity work to try to paint a picture of herself as an anti-racist person. As a wealthy white woman in the South, she tries to

control the white women in Jackson, and makes herself the nemesis of each of the novel's black characters and many of its white ones.

No, white women like to keep their hands clean. They got a shiny little set of tools they use, sharp as witches fingernails, tidy and laid out neat, like the picks on a dentist tray. They have gone take the time with them. (Ch. 14, p. 163)

Desperately Hilly tries to maintain the social division between blacks and whites in Jackson. Her power is eventually diffused as the women she tries to control.

Another white racist women, is Elizabeth Leefolt who has the ideas of discrimination. She cares about appearances and will do anything to protect her reputation.¹⁷ Elizabeth is unable to dedicate time and attention to Mae Mobley, Elizabeth's daughter. So, her daughter turns to Aibileen who treats her with love and kindness. As Mae Mobley becomes older, she is confused by what she sees in her loving Aibileen and what she is told by her raciest teacher Miss Taylor, who says black people are beneath white people.¹⁸ Aibileen says:

I want to yell so loud that Baby Girl can hear me that dirty am not a color, disease aren't the Negro side a town. I want to stop that moment from coming - and it come in ever white child's life - when they start to think that colored folks aren't as good as whites. ... I pray that wasn't her moment, (Ch. 7, p. 80)

she tries her best to protect Mae Mobley from the ideas of being racist like the other white children whom Aibileen has brought up through her whole life. In fact, Mae Mobley does not like her community's notions of racialism. She has a close relationship with her nanny. Apparently from birth, she lives alienated from the community she is born in. Aibileen instills the ideas of rejecting discrimination through stories, games, and plain talk¹⁹:

"Little colored girl say 'I got a nose, you got a nose.'"I gives her little snout a tweak. She got to reach up and do the same to me. "Little white girl say, 'I got toes, you got toes.' And I do the little thing with her toes, but she can't get to mine cause I got my white work shoes on. "'So we's the same. Just a different color', say that little colored girl. The little white girl she agreed and they was friends. (Ch. 31, p. 355)

But Miss Taylor (Mae Mobley's racist teacher) continues conveying her racism towards black people. She punishes Mae Mobley for drawing herself as a girl with dark skin. She gives messages to the children about the struggles between black and white within their community are clearly confusing, conflicting, and hurtful. Aibileen feels that Miss Taylor might be discoloring all the positive ideas that she has been trying to teach Mae Mobley about loving all people and not judging someone by the color of his skin. Aibileen believes that people are not born with racist ideas. These ideas are taught, passed from generation to generation. Aibileen is trying to end this suffering by presenting Mae Mobley with alternative ways of thinking about race.

Another white woman, Celia, who has a different philosophy in life. She rejects racialism and class distinction, embraces her black maid Rae Foote. The white women in the community reject and isolate Celia; this rejection creates sympathy in Minny. Due to Celia's loneliness and confusion, she clings to Minny as her only friend²⁰. By the time a strong relationship gathers Celia and Minny, especially when Celia becomes poor and socially outcasted like Minny.²¹

In this novel, the whites build social barriers between themselves and the blacks which are mainly based upon their fears. They refer to blacks in general as "us" and "them" as if they are inherent enemies, or by referring to the maids in descriptive terms that usually apply to animals, suggesting that blacks have more in common with animals than humans. In fact there is no real communication between them. Another issue is that all the white characters in

the novel, with the exception of Skeeter and Celia, are racist, even though many are not aware of it. They treat the black maids poorly because they believe that they are stupid and poor. However, as the story unfolds, there are changes; a couple of relationships between the white employers and black maids open up and become more equal, for example, between Celia and Minny.²²

Skeeter manages to write and publish the book, thanks to the thirteen brave souls that jeopardize their jobs and lives. In fact, none of the women regret telling their stories and their participation. Skeeter publishes the book anonymously. It is set in the fictional town called Niceville. The white women of Jackson discover themselves as the major characters of these books. The maids tell stories of raising white children who later turn on them, of white men who assault them, and of white women who blame them. Actually some maids grow to love the families they serve, too, and are just as emotionally hurt when they are rejected as a family member especially by the white women.²³

The novel aims to bridge the differences between the white women and the black maids; and they all work together to dissolve that line between “us and them.” At the end of the novel, Skeeter comments that they are not so different at all, the black maids and the white employers, when it is evident that they (a few of them) are starting to get along better. Eventually, Aibileen understands that the barriers of the society are created by the higher social class snobs who think they are better than anyone who is not in their social circle. This explains why Celia relates to Minny so easily. They are both outside the circle of society that has been deemed acceptable, therefore similar. Higher social classes put lower class and black all on the same level beneath them²⁴ Aibileen says:

I used to believe in [the barriers]. I don't anymore. They in our heads. People like Miss Hilly is always trying to make us believe they there... Lines between black and white aren't there neither. Some folks just made those up, long time ago. And that go for the white trash and the society ladies too. (Ch.30, p. 367)

The fact that Aibileen does not see the lines anymore shows that she is growing. This shows how she does not fear so much about the consequences of her actions anymore²⁵.

Afro-American women in the novel are living testimony that no matter how hard the life situations can be, they can conquer them all. These women are denied the right speak out freely or even write about the racist society they live in, but they never surrender or give up. They have the chance to express their true hearts, souls, and identities through disclosing their stories with white community . Skeeter comments that they are not so different at all, the black maids and the white employers, when it is evident that they (a few of them) are starting to get along better. The writing of the book helps to bridge the differences between the white women and the black maids; and they all work together to dissolve that line between “us and them.” Stockett's message seems to be that sisterhoods are definitely possible between black and white women; the best way to weed out racial issues is to be colorblind. Interracial sisterhood is possible today, but it was not possible in the early 1960s.

Notes

¹ Tim MicNeese, *The Civil Rights Movement: Striving for Justice*, (United States of America, Infobase:2008), p. 31

² Wyatt Williams, [“Kathryn Stockett: Life in the Belle Jar”](#), *Creative Loafing Atlanta*, February 2015

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid .

- ⁵ Karen Valby, "Review of *The Help*, by Kathryn Stockett", *Entertainment Weekly*, February 2015.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Val Kingston, *Sister Citizen: For Colored Girls who've Considered Politics When Being Strong Isn't Enough* (New Haven: Yale Press, 2011), p.34.
- ⁸ Ibid, p.34.
- ⁹ Ibid, p.35.
- ¹⁰ <http://www.worldette.com/life-style/2012/kathryn-stockett-book-review/March> 2015
- ¹¹ Mackay Collins, "The Novel of Kathryn Stockett's Tells a Number of Stories of the Lives of Women Living in Segregation- Era Mississippi", *The Daily Mercury* , February 2015
- ¹² All citations of the novel are taken from Kathryn Stockett, *The Help* (New York: Penguin, 2009).
- ¹³ Isabel Wilkerson, ed., *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Random House, 2010), p.132.
- ¹⁴ Summer Hunter, "The Real Aibileen?", *Essence Magazine* [August 2011]: p.33.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. p. 34
- ¹⁶ Ibid.p.35
- ¹⁷ Sally Loftis, "Biblical Themes in *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett", *Caroline Trent-Gurbuz*, February12,2015.
- ¹⁸ Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After The Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 127
- ¹⁹ Ibid. p. 128
- ²⁰ Heller McAlpin, "Classic Review: *The Help*", *The Christian Science Monitor*, February12,2015.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Wales Cardiff, "Justread", *Western Mail*, ,March 2015, p.15.
- ²³ [Maura Lynch](http://litstack.com/kathryn-stocketts-the-help-the-past-sheds-light-on-the-present/), "Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*: The Past Sheds Light on the Present", <http://litstack.com/kathryn-stocketts-the-help-the-past-sheds-light-on-the-present/>, accessed on February 15, 2013.
- ²⁴ Unknown, A Lesson Before Dying vs. The Help (URL:<http://kelsey-helpwanted.blogspot.com>. Thursday, July 28, 2011)
- ²⁵ Ibid.

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