



## RACIAL AGONIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MAIDS IN KATHRYN STOCKETT'S *THE HELP*

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### ABSTRACT

This project examines the novel *The Help* on the basis of race. It discovers the unsympathetic attitude of the white masters and adversity of the coloured maids who worked against racism. The starvation for self dignity and equality is the major issue in every coloured's mind. The protagonist Aibileen and Minny are the representation of coloured maids, who lost their self respect in the beginning and later crave for equal rights. This project presents African American maids' depressed mindset and their quest for equality. It also exposes the pathetic conditions of coloured maids socially, physically, psychologically and economically. This project not only speaks about the racist, but also focuses on the whites who helped the coloured to achieve their aspiration. The coloured maids quest for equality and the atrocities of the white racists is the major theme spoken in this project.

Keywords: Racial Discrimination, Black Feminism, Marxism, Oppression.

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Kathryn Stockett's first novel *The Help* is a portrayal of African American maids' life in Jackson, Mississippi. The novel *The Help* begins with the narration of Aibileen one of the protagonist of the novel. Her job is to clean, cook and to take care of white babies. She had raised seventeen kids on her life time. She knows how to get the babies sleep, stop crying and to go in the toilet bowls. Aibileen works in Miss Elizabeth Leefolt's house; there she takes care of Mae Mobley Leefolt. Aibileen lost her son Treelore in an accident. She started her job in Leefolt's residence after the fifth month of her son's funeral. Aibileen's best friend Minny is the only soul who checked in daily to see whether Aibileen is alive. Minny is a coloured maid like Aibileen. She worked in Miss Hilly Holbrook's house. Miss Hilly

Holbrook and Miss Skeeter are the closest friends of Miss Elizabeth Leefolt.

In a month, every fourth Wednesday they call a bridge club day at Miss Leefolt's residence. The ladies of the Junior Benefit League gather there and have their own time by playing cards, gossiping and eating. Miss Skeeter, Miss Hilly and Miss Walter came one by one. During the bridge game, Hilly's mother Miss Walter explained that "She's upset cause the Nigra uses the inside bathroom and so do we"(7). They are not even considering the maids as a human. Miss Hilly advised Miss Elizabeth Leefolt to build a separate bathroom outside for the coloured stating that "All these houses they're building without maid's quarters? It's just plain dangerous. Everybody knows that they carry different kinds of diseases than we do"(8). Aibileen

was ashamed to serve them at that juncture. Then they spoke about Minny Jackson that she is not feeding Miss Walter properly. Hilly told that if she continues it, she would be fired. Minny is the best cook of Mississippi. The Junior League Benefit wants her to prepare ten caramel cakes to auction off. Problem is, Minny got a big mouth.

When Aibileen went back to work after a weekend, she thought that the bathroom talk would have been over. Unfortunately she can't see two coloured men started their process of building a coloured bathroom. A week later, Hilly and Elizabeth enquired Aibileen whether she liked her coloured bathroom. They also asked her silly questions like whether she like or dislike to go for a school full of white people, Aibileen answered them that "Not a school full a just white people. But where the colored and the white folk is together" (186). Hilly is unable to accept the concept of togetherness so she replied "colored people and white people are just so... different" (186).

Minny started searching for jobs when she came to know that Miss Walter is moving for Old age Home. She tried to get a job under Miss Renfroe at Sycamore, the lady chased her out of the property because Miss Hilly informed her Minny is a smart mouthed Criminal Maid. When she went for work at Miss Walter's residence Miss Hilly handed her twenty Dollars. She shares about her loss of job with Aibileen alone, but not with her husband.

Minny got selected in Miss Celia's house and when she told her willingness to work there, Miss Celia came forward to hug her "but I step back a little, let her know that's not the kind of thing I do"(35). It shows that the coloured have not been treated like this before, so they feel everything strange. Though the master behaves friendly and moved closer, the maids are aware of their boundary. Minny was shocked to hear when Miss Celia plans to hide her husband about bringing a maid. She is frightened when Mister Johnny is going to shoot her with his pistol. Celia assured that she would pay double, because she wants her husband to believe that she can do everything.

Minny leaps back to her childhood days, when she dropped out from school because of her sister's heart problem and drunkard father who

does not support the family. She also reminds about the seven rules taught by her mother, to work in white's house. Rule Number One is not to interfere in whites' family matters. Rule Number Two "don't you ever let that White lady find you sitting on her toilet"(38). Rule Number Three is while cooking white people's food, different spoon should be used to taste the dish and to throw it away. Rule Number Four: a separate cup, plate, fork used by the coloured help should be placed in a separate cupboard. Rule Number Five is to eat in the kitchen. Rule Number Six is not to hit any white child. Rule Number Seven is no sass-mouthing. For example, the white lady told Minny to wash all the clothes by hand first and then to put them in an electric machine, when Minny questioned the white lady why she need to handwash when there is a washer machine. "That White Lady smiled at me, and five minutes later, I was out on the street."(40)

Miss Skeeter, Miss Hilly and Miss Elizabeth are close friends from Elementary School. Hilly and Skeeter stayed in same hostel room. Skeeter's real name is Eugenia Phelan. Her ambition is to become a writer. Skeeter was raised up by her coloured maid Constantine. They both had a good relationship in between them. Skeeter finds herself so close to Constantine from childhood rather than her mother. They talk and share a lot. Even though Skeeter stayed up in hostel, their affection did not decrease. Their care and concern on each other remained stable through sending and receiving letters. She was shocked to find the absence of Constantine, when she returned home after graduation. Whenever Skeeter meets Hilly's maid Pascagoula, she remembered Constantine.

Skeeter received a letter from Harper & Row Publishers' Senior Editor Elaine Stein, the lady offered her some advice to take up a job in a local newspaper and to write about what disturbs her, particularly if it bothers no one. As per the senior editor's instruction, Skeeter takes up a job at Jackson Journal and started to write Miss Myrna column. It was about cleaning and household work. Since, she did not know any housekeeping work, Skeeter asked help from Elizabeth's maid Aibileen. Skeeter was not like other white ladies who treat their maids like slaves. It was the main reason,

Aibileen became friend of her. So she revealed that her son too had a desire to write. He did not had a peaceful job under his white master and this made him to write about "what it was like to be colored working for a white man in Mississippi" (85).

When Mae Mobley ran to use the coloured bathroom at garage, Miss Elizabeth Leefolt scolded and beaten the child. Those words pricked the heart of Aibileen than the baby. It created an incurable wound in her. Elizabeth shouted at Mae Mobley that "I did not raise you to use the colored bathroom! This is dirty out here, May Mobley. You'll catch diseases!" (95)

Skeeter at last decided what to write. So she asked the help of Aibileen and told her that it was not like Miss Myrna column. The stories about what it feels to work under a white family, how much the whites pay, how they are treated, the bathrooms, the babies and everything they experience. Skeeter wants to interview some African America maids. She had a hope that one day or the other, Aibileen would accept for the interview, so she left her telephone number in her hands and left. Aibileen tried to convince before Skeeter leaves, that these activities were highly dangerous to both of them. She even explained about her cousin in Shinelle in Cauter County, who faced a terrible threat from the whites, "They burn up her car cause she went down to the voting station" (103).

Sunday afternoon, Aibileen called Skeeter and conveyed her acceptance for the interview. When Skeeter enquired her what changed her mind, Aibileen answered that Hilly is major reason for it. Hilly's chisel like words forced Aibileen to accept Skeeter's offer. She mocked her while serving coffee at Leefolt's residence. "I tell you, you make the best colored coffee in town" (110).

As days passed, Minny feared about the day Miss Celia would reveal her secrecy to Mister Johnny and what he would do. So Minny kept on reminding Celia to inform Mister Johnny. Minny worked three months without the knowledge of Mister Johnny. Minny was shocked to see Mister Johnny's presence and Miss Celia's absence. She thought that it would be the last day of her life, but Mister Johnny comforted her and erased all those

fears from her mind. She was amused when he praised her cooking. He even told her that the taste of her cooking reminded his old maid Cora Blue. Later Mister Johnny provided his office telephone number to her. He told Minny not to inform Celia about this meeting and let her open up this matter when she feels good. Minny refused to give an interview for Miss Skeeter, though Aibileen requested her. Minny does not believe white ladies, especially Hilly's friends. She worried that Aibileen committed a big mistake by indulging in white lady's activities.

Skeeter found Aibileen's home would be a safer place to carry out their interview. Aibileen answered for few questions raised by Skeeter. Aibileen knew very well that she would be a maid, because her mother was a maid and grandmother was a house slave. Being a maid, she loved to raise small kids. When she became a Help, Aibileen understood what was shame and its colour from her mother. "Shame ain't black, like dirt, like I always thought it was. Shame be the color of a new white uniform your mother ironed all night to pay for, white without a smudge or a speck a work-dirt on it" (151).

Aibileen shares her experiences to Skeeter that once a white kid cuts his finger on the window fan, so Aibileen took him to the coloured hospital since she did not know where the whites' hospital located. The moment she got in there, a coloured man stopped her and enquired, "Is this boy white? Is them his white fingers?... that colored doctor won't operate on a white boy in a Negro hospital" (151). It reflects the contemporary set up in the society, that each race had their own separate hospitals. The coloured doctors were terrified to treat a white in their coloured hospital. Aibileen not only spoke about her old white employers, but also about Miss Elizabeth Leefolt. When Aibileen expressed her love and interest towards reading, Skeeter suggested her to get books from State Street Library. For that, Aibileen told her that the coloured folks are not allowed inside that library. They were not even allowed to gain their knowledge through reading. They were completely blocked to access their rights. "When the colored crowd show up for the sit-in trial, the police department simply

stepped back and turned the German shepherds loose" (154).

Skeeter decided to lend some books in State Street Library, to give Aibileen. Skeeter had stolen a book from the library entitled 'Compilation of Jim Crow Laws of the South'. This book is simply a list of laws stating what coloured people can and cannot do in Southern states.

No person shall require any white female to nurse in wards or rooms in which negro are placed.

It shall be unlawful for a white person to marry anyone except a white person. Any marriage in violation of this section shall be void.

No colored barber shall serve as a barber to white women or girls.

The officer in charge shall not bury any colored persons upon ground used for the burial of white persons.

Books shall not be interchangeable between the white and colored schools, but shall continue to be used by the race first using them. (173)

Unfortunately Hilly discovered the book from Skeeter's satchel and took it away from her. She threatened her for reading this sort of books. The cold war started between Hilly and Skeeter after this incident.

When Celia and Minny had a slight misunderstanding, Aibileen advised Minny to recall the ill treatment done to her by the employers. Miss Walter made her to pay ten dollars for the breakage of a crystal glass which originally cost three dollars. Mister Charlie, the one who always called nigger and his wife instructs to eat lunch outside, even when it snowed. Miss Roberta, who try out her new hair dye solution on her, which took three weeks and twenty dollars to get her hair black again. Aibileen made Minny to realize that comparing to all those employers, Celia pay double the salary she received before and did not bring any ladies and their children. So Aibileen convinced Minny to go ahead for work as usual and to confess. Minny earned even more good name by helping Celia when she fall sick due to abortion.

Skeeter's help Pascagoula informed her that her cousin Yule May, was ready to help out with stories. She handed over a letter from Yule May, which dealt about how it feels to work under the whites. By reading the letter Skeeter came to know that Yule May was in prison for stealing Hilly's ring. In that letter Yule May confess that she had stolen the ring because she did not have money to join her twin sons in Tougaloo College. Since she did not receive any monetary help from Miss Hilly, she had stolen the ring. When Yule May asked for a loan and assured Hilly that she would pay her back every week. Hilly answered her, that a true Christian will never give charity for those who are well and able. Skeeter was disgusted by her friend's racist attitude. After Yule May's imprisonment, nearly a dozen of maids agreed to do the interview stories. They carried out their secret mission of stories at Aibileen's home. Skeeter consoled Pascagoula that she would make arrangement for a lawyer to bring out Yule May. Pascagoula told her, "Yule May had her a real good lawyer, But everybody saying the judge wife be good friends with Miss Holbrook and how a regular sentence be six months for pretty stealing, but Miss Holbrook, she get it pushed up to four years. That trial was done fore it even started" (251).

After this incident, Skeeter met Hilly in the League meeting. There she could not behave as usual with Hilly. Her mind was fully filled in with Yule May's imprisonment. When Skeeter showed her disinterest to print about the coloured bathroom initiative; Hilly threatened her to print it in the newsletter,

Hilly Holbrook introduces the Home Help Sanitation Initiative. A disease preventative measure. Low-cost bathroom installation in your garage or shed, for homes without such an important fixture...

- 99% of all colored diseases are carried in the urine
- Whites can become permanently disabled by nearly all of these diseases because we lack immunities coloreds carry in their darker pigmentation.
- Some germs carried by whites can also be harmful to coloreds too

Protect yourself. Protect your children.  
Protect your help.

From the Holbrooks, we say, You're welcome! (158)

Hilly's idea increased the hatred feeling in Skeeter. Next day morning, Hilly's front yard as filled with toilet pots, because of the vengeful news by Skeeter. She cautiously changed the matter and printed. Instead of 'old coats' she typed it as 'old pots'. After this incident, Hilly removed Skeeter from the post of Editor at League. Mister Leefolt warned Aibileen not to have any sort of conversation with Skeeter. Here, the writer reflects the dominance of the master race who decides, to whom their helps could and could not talk. "I don't want you talking to that woman anymore, nor for cleaning tips, not to say hello you hear?" (291).

Skeeter connected with Harper and Row Publishers and discussed about her project work with Elaine Stein. In that conversation Elaine Stein advised Skeeter to add the story of her maid Constantine. Aibileen helped Skeeter by telling whatever she knew about Constantine. She came to know that Constantine had a child. The baby Lulabelle was white like her grandfather, though her father was white. So Constantine left the child in an orphanage. When she went to the train station with Lulabelle, the white folks on the platform were staring at them. They wanted to know why a little white girl was going in a coloured car. Lulabelle was four years old when her mother Constantine left her in the Chicago orphanage. Constantine was informed that her daughter had been adopted, when she went to bring her back. After few years, Lulabelle came back to her mother as a grown up girl and even changed her name as Lulabelle Bates.

Since Aibileen knew only this much information, Skeeter enquired her mother about Constantine and her daughter. Skeeter's mother revealed her bitter experience about Lulabelle with anger. Lulabelle came on a party day and mingled with other white guests. Skeeter's mother chased her out when she came to know Lulabelle was daughter of Constantine and not a white. "I say, you go out the back door, not the front with the white guests" (363). Skeeter's mother does not want Lulabelle to use the front door also, so she ordered

to get out through the back door. Before leaving the house Lulabelle spit on the white lady's face. Later, Constantine also moved out of the house as well as the city. Skeeter's mother heard the only news about her was that she is dead. After adding up all these information about Constantine, Skeeter sent it for publication, luckily it got approved. The Harper and Row Publishers agreed to publish the work. Aibileen and Minny was the first person whom Skeeter informed about the book. They felt happy but at the same time they feared what might happen to them if they find out who is who.

Mae Mobley asked Aibileen to clear her doubt that how she became a coloured. So Aibileen told her, God made her coloured without any reason. Mae Mobley conveyed what her teacher Miss Taylor said about the coloured. "Kids that are colored can't go to my school cause they're not smart enough" (392). As a teacher Miss Taylor failed to teach the equality among students. She created a wrong path to the small buds. Instead of breaking the discrimination from the society, she planted the seeds of racial discrimination in the little hearts. Aibileen convinced Mae Mobley that Miss Taylor is not correct always. A week after the book came out and spreads all over the town and the white ladies guessed who is who.

Hilly tempted Miss Sinclair to fire Annabelle. "So Miss Sinclair fired her and then took her car keys away cause she loaned her half the money to buy the car. Annabelle already paid most of it back but it's gone" (412). Hilly persuaded Miss Lou Anne to fire her maid Louvenia. "Your Louvenia's in here. I know she is and you need to fire her. You ought to send that Nigra to jail" (412). Stockett not only deals with the racist white women, but also about the other whites who treats the coloured equally. Miss Lou Anne was not ready to dismiss Louvenia. Louvenia's story was about Lou Anne's good nature and her helping tendency.

Minny told Aibileen that her husband Leroy was dismissed by his boss, because of William Holbrook. He said that "it's Leroy's nigger wife the reason and Leroy come home and try to kill me with his bare hands!" (437) Leroy tried to murder his wife Minny by locking her inside and to light the house. Fortunately, Minny escaped and settled in

her sister's house. From there she went to work at Miss Celia's residence. It is evident that the African American women are facing the double oppression; Minny is dominated by her husband at home and suppressed by her white employers at work. Throughout American history, African American women have been discriminated on the basis of social, political and economic level.

At last Hilly recognized Aibileen's part in the book, with the hint of 'L' shaped crack in Elizabeth's table. Hilly blamed her that she had stolen few silver fork and spoons, so Elizabeth dismissed Aibileen as per Hilly's advice. Miss Skeeter received a job offer at Harper's Magazine in New York as a copy editor's assistant, before moving out of town, she handed over her Miss Myrna column job to Aibileen. The Jackson Journal editor Mister Golden also agreed to pay ten dollars. In the end, three protagonists settled in their life with a self contentment that they had played their role for the welfare of the society.

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