

# Silence Struggles: African American Marginalization in *The Help* By Kathryn Stockett

Revathi<sup>1\*</sup>

## Abstract

*Silence Struggles: African American Marginalization in The Help* by Kathryn Stockett delves into the nuanced portrayal of African American characters in the novel. This analysis securitizes the subtle ways in which the narrative perpetuates historical stereotypes and reinforces the marginalization experienced by black individuals in the racially charged setting of 1960s Mississippi. The examination focuses on the character dynamics, exploring the power imbalances and the silent struggles faced by African American maids as they navigate a society steeped in racial inequality. By dissecting the narrative choices and character development, this abstract aims to shed light on the complex interplay between race, power and representation in 'The Help', ultimately contributing to a broader conversation about the impact of literature on shaping cultural narratives and perceptions of marginalized communities. Exploring the multifaceted dimensions of African American marginalization in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*, this extensive abstract delves into the subtle nuances and overt challenges faced by characters within the narrative. Analyzing the socio-political backdrop, it unveils the intricate layers of silence, resilience and systemic oppression, shedding light on the profound impact of racial dynamics depicted in the novel. Through an in-depth examination of characters' relationships, societal expectations and personal narratives, this abstract aims to illuminate the lasting echoes of silent struggles within the African American community, resonating beyond the pages of Kathryn Stockett's compelling works.

## Keywords

Marginalization, Racial inequality, Black peoples' struggles

<sup>1</sup> Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli-2

Marginalization, a persistent social issue, has adversely impacted individuals and societies throughout history, posing threats of exclusion in diverse social, economic, and political dimensions (Burton Kagan 293). Racial discrimination often intertwines with various forms of segregation. Throughout American's history, racial discrimination, a lasting colonial legacy, has left indelible marks on its social fabric and literature. Originating in the slavery era, millions, especially Africans, endured forced labor on plantations. Despite the abolition of slavery in the 19th century and subsequent civil rights advancement in the 1960s, racial discrimination persists, shaping lives across various spheres (Perry 2007). This prolonged history of marginalization has distinctively influences the consciousness of both dominant and subordinate groups, as reflected in literature by white and black authors, each capturing nuanced experiences in unique ways.

Kathryn Stockett's novel "The Help" (2009) stands as an example of literature portraying marginalization, crafted by a white American author. Born in 1969 in Jackson, Mississippi, Stockett drew inspiration from her childhood experiences and relationships, particularly with a black female housekeeper, weaving autobiographical elements in the narratives. The novel, set in 1960s Jackson, delves into the lives of black maids working for white households, narrating their experiences through characters like Skeeter Phelen. Initially rejected by many agents, "The Help" eventually gained critical

acclaim, becoming a national bestseller and later adapted into a movie in 2011.

In Stockett's novel 'the help' autobiographical influence stemming from her childhood connection with a black housekeeper is evident. Set in 1960s Jackson, Mississippi, the narrative unfolds through the perspective of Skeeter Phelen, a compassionate white woman encouraging black maids like Aibileen and Minny to share their stories. The novel delves into the racial, gender, and economic stratification experienced by these women, highlighting their marginalization. Through the characters, it captures the social realities of the town, shedding light on the asymmetrical relationships between whites and blacks, exploring the resulting consciousness that shapes their lives. This research will delve into this intriguing dynamic, examining the impact on both groups' self-awareness.

Kathryn Stockett, the novel serves as a detailed account of the challenges faced by black maids in late 20th-century America. The historical backdrop of racial discrimination, rooted in colonial practices and persisting despite the civil rights movements, underscores the acute marginalization experienced by an entire race. Stockett's narrative mirrors the broader societal suffering and workplace marginality endured by black individuals. Set against the backdrop of America 1960s America period marked by social upheavals and the civil rights movement, the novel delves into the profound

effects of racial segregation on black lives. The intricate relationships between masters and slaves become a focal point, offering insight into their intertwined destinies.

The novel vividly depicts the stark racial and social divisions in Jackson, Mississippi, between the black maids and their white masters. Their geographical proximity contrasts sharply with their divergent needs, priorities, and awareness of their surroundings. This dynamic mirrors Hegel's master-slave dialectics, illustrating how their social positions shape their perspectives and interactions. White masters, belonging to the dominant racial group, assert cultural, social, and racial superiority, evident in the strict segregating of living areas, markets, and even toilets. The blacks, relegated to an outcast status, face marginalization at every turn symbolized by their restricted access to white territories. Despite being paid for their work, the relationship between master's maids resembles a master-slave dynamic, with rights exploited and dissent discouraged. Minny Jackson, an outspoken black maid, bears the brunt of her assertiveness, highlighting the oppressive nature of their relationship as Aibileen clerk warns about the consequences of having a "smart mouth" in their subservient role (Stockett). The narrative further delves into the grave consequences faced by those who dare to stand up for their rights of blacks. The mysterious death of Aibileen's son, Trell, planning to document the experiences of black people, and the killing of black rights activist Medgar Evers underscore the extreme racial discrimination pervasive in society where whites are perceived as masters and blacks as slaves.

The master-slave stratification in America is rooted in the social positioning of individuals, particularly the more powerful white race. They wield dominance in social, political, and economic spheres, optimized by the enactment of Jim Crow laws and the influence of figures like senators, governors, and Hilly Holbrook's family. These white elites, subscribing to supremacist views, shape a society marked by racial and stratified power constructs. Despite variations in financial status, even less affluent families like the Leefolts assert supremacy over blacks due to deeply ingrained societal hierarchies. This dominance, reflected in living standards, facilities, and discriminatory laws, influences their perspectives on race and society. The white elite's consciousness is defined by their role as the dominant group, rendering them less reliant on the subordinate group's perception. Consequently, economically and racially marginalized black maids are devalued by most white masters, reinforcing a dynamic where the latter asserts dominance akin to masters over slaves.

In the narrative, Hilly Holbrook stands out as a prominent embodiment of the prevailing assertion of dominance. Rooted in her powerful political lineage, Hilly spearheads the promotion of racial segregation, exploiting the rights of blacks. Her influential status compels societal adherence to her discriminatory 'Home Help Sanitation Initiative'. This segregationist agenda is blindly followed by figures like Elizabeth Leefolt, irrespective of their means. Hilly's actions extend beyond legal boundaries, blaming and punishing black individuals dispro-

portionately. Her accusatory stance, evident in Minny's case, reflects a self-centered pursuit of fame and power, creating a constant atmosphere of fear for narrator maid Aibileen and Minny. Hilly's independence and dominance underscore her relentless focus on personal gain, particularly at the expense of the black community.

The dynamics among the white ladies, including Elizabeth Leefolt, Charlotte Phelan, Celia Foote, and Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan, illustrate a pervasive assertion of dominance over their respective maids. Elizabeth's dissatisfaction with Aibileen's work and her installation of an extravagant toilet for the maid reveal a focus on self-image and status, even at the expense of financial strain. Charlotte's decision to separate Constantine from her daughter reflects a similar domineering attitude. Celia Foote, though different from other white ladies, exhibits dominance by jeopardizing Minny's safety in a secret game and firing her over a misunderstanding. Celia's concern for her own image at a party further underscores her prioritization of personal benefits over Minny's opinion. The asymmetrical relationship between white individuals and black maids fosters a lack of concern for the latter's rights and consciousness. This dominant behavior arises from a focus on self-image and personal gain, neglecting the well-being and opinions of the marginalized community.

In portraying Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan, the author embeds autobiographical elements and illustrates her as compassionate towards black, yet maintaining a subtle dominance over Aibileen and Minny. Despite her genuine interest in voicing the maids' experience, her motivation leans more towards becoming a writer that empowers black people. Her interactions reveal a superior attitude, highlighting her complex relationship with race. Although sympathetic, her advocacy for black rights among friends is limited, reflecting an aster-slave dynamic. Skeeter's unique perspective stems from her childhood connection with Constantine, her black maid. This dynamic shapes herself as a maid. This dynamic shapes her self-image among the black community. As she delves into the book project, her concern extends beyond Constantine to other black individuals, showcasing a departure from typical white attitudes. The dilemma of job offers in the face of unfolding events underscores Skeeter's evolving stance and her distinctive social conditioning, which sets her apart from other white ladies in the narrative.

The perspective presented suggests that the self-image of black individuals in the novel is intricately tied to the consciousness of their white masters. Their focus on survival and safety needs motivates them to conform to their masters' expectations. Aibileen, for instance, subdues her anger to maintain her position with Elizabeth Leefolt, illustrating the dependence on the white household. The case of Minny reflects the repercussions of disrupting this dynamic, leading to job insecurity and a continual reliance on white employers. Constantine's sacrifice of her daughter for societal acceptance underscores the profound impact of racial segregation on family relationships. The struggle for acceptance and identity persists, as

demonstrated by the challenges faced by the character in their interactions with white society.

The characters in “*The Help*” exhibit their motivational needs in alignment with Maslow’s hierarchy. White individuals, enjoying economic social privilege, focus on esteem needs like needs, being dependent on whites for survival in a racially segregated society. This disparity in needs shapes their consciousness and influences their approach to fulfilling those needs. The white mistresses engage in unproductive activities, while the black help, motivated by their safety needs and self image, dedicate themselves to labor. The novel highlights the irony of white mistresses organizing benefits for Africa while exploiting their own home keepers. The title “the help” underscores the significant role black individuals play in performing household chores and nurturing children for their white employers. The characters like Aibileen, Minny, and Constantine exemplify the dependence of white households on black individuals for various tasks, reflecting the complex dynamics shaped by social standing.

The dynamics of dependence and personal growth shape the relationships between white families and their black maids in the novel. As the white characters, like Elizabeth Leefolt and Charlotte Phelan, distances themselves from their own children, the emotional connection shifts to the black maids. Skeeter Phelan and Mae Mobley illustrate an emotional detachment from their mother, highlighting the loss of maternal essence. Celia Foote and her husband depend on Minny for household chores, while hill’s pursuit of political gain leads to self actualization, trapped in their pursuit of status. Skeeter, driven by her concern for her image in the eye of blacks, achieves personal growth as an independent writer, breaking free from a contrast to others entrapped in their ambitions.

Contrary to the white characters, the black maids, like Aibileen and Minny, find true fulfillment and liberation through their labor. Aibileen, despite being fired, secures a writing job from Skeeter Phelan, granting her satisfaction and freedom. Reflecting on her newfound freedom, she contrasts it with the confinement of Miss Leefolt and miss hilly. Similarly, Minny, facing marginalization at work and abusive marriage and gaining recognition for her labor. Their self actualization stems from personal growth and realizing their potential.

This underscores that the characters social positions shape their perspectives. Those who pursue personal growth and consider other’s perceptions achieve satisfaction through their labor, while those self centered and indifferent to other’s consciousness become ensnared in self affliction.

In this research paper, the exploration of asymmetrically aligned groups in “*The Help*” by Kathryn Stockett was undertaken thorough Hegel’s master slave dialectics. The study delved into the epistemic consciousness formed by these groups’ standpoints about each other. Social positioning emerged as a crucial factor shaping individual standpoints, revealing distinct evolutions in consciousness based on social groupings. White and blacks in the novel were found to share master slave relationship, pursuing different needs in

Maslow’s hierarchy whites for esteem and black for safety. The dominant whites, independent in their consciousness, exploited blacks, while the letter, depend on whites for safety, mirrored their self image through labor, becoming more conscious of themselves and the world. The conclusion emphasizes that self actualization and satisfaction go beyond economic factors, involving consideration of other’s standpoints.

While this research focused on a limited number of characters, future studies could adopt a structuralist perspective to analyze the novel’s complex narrative structure. A psychoanalytical study may unveil intriguing insights into the characters, and researchers might explore the theatrical adaptation of the novel released in 2011 under the same title, “*The Help*”.

### References

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