

Viewing racial discrimination in Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* through Postcolonial Lens

J Sahana Fathima¹, P. Johanna Jenifer^{1*}

Abstract

This study provides a spotlight on racial prejudice and discrimination through postcolonial perspective with the lens of changing trends. In the novel "The Help" Kathryn Stockett reflected on the life aspects of multicultural South American society. Though the black maids and white people are living under the same roof, the postcolonial element of white people's superiority is expressed by the characters like Hilly Holbrook, Elizabeth Leefolt. Aibileen Clark, Skeeter and Minny Jackson are characters that changed the trend by bravely exposing their struggles of racial segregation and inequality by publishing a book "The help" at the stake of risking their lives. This made crystal clear that if the differences are not appreciated and accepted, the social gap between different races will create social deviation in the society and that can lead to extreme discriminations among people.

Keywords

Gender roles, Cultural Identity, Survival and Faith and Religion

¹ PG & Research Department of English, Jamal Mohamed College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli – 620020

Kathryn Stockett was born in 1969 in the US. Stockett was a prominent American novelist. She is known for her debut novel, "The Help." It is known that she wrote partly from her own life experience of growing up in her post-colonial community with a close connection to her family's maid. Before publishing her first novel, she worked for a magazine in New York City. This novel took five years to complete. It was rejected by 60 literary agents. The 61st attempt was a success for her. It went on to become one of the international best-selling books.

Post-colonialism is a period following the decline of colonialism. As one of its characteristics, this novel refers to the social, political, economic, and cultural practices that were raised in response to and resistance to colonialism. It articulates the colonized people's identity and helps to reclaim their past. It also focuses on how colonizing culture distorts the experiences and realities and how it inscribes the inferiority of colonized people. Postcolonialism makes use of culture as a strategy of survival. The author has rightly incorporated elements of marginalization, identity, multiculturalism, hybridity, migration, etc. in this novel.

Through this novel, Kathryn Stockett reflects on the racial discrimination that prevailed in America among Afro-Americans in working households. African Americans are descendants of enslaved people within the boundaries of the present United States. After the United States was founded in 1783, most black people continued to be enslaved and liberated until the end of the Civil War in 1865. Then they continued to settle there among white people.

This novel, "The Help," is set in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1962. It revolves around three prominent characters, namely Aibileen, Skeeter, and Minny. Aibileen and Minny are two

black maids working under white people in a domestic household. Skeeter is a young white college graduate with a degree in English and journalism, and she comes from a wealthy Southern family. She exposed the racial discrimination by collaborating with Aibileen and Minny that is prevailing in her community by publishing a book named "The Help." Through these characters, the author, Kathryn Stockett, showcased the discrimination in the Jackson community during the post-colonial era. Those maids take care of white people's children and the whole household. They spend most of their time together with white families. Yet black people are not considered equals by white people. They experienced very harsh discrimination only because they were not of the same race and color as them. Because of colonization, two cultures are made to mix and mingle to live there. But it becomes a tragedy for them.

Aibileen Clark, a black woman, has been working in the house of the Leefolt family for the past two years as a caretaker of their beloved daughter Mae Mobley and also as a maid for their family. They live under the same roof. But they are not considered equals. Aibileen is not allowed to eat at the same table as them and share the dishes with them. One day, the group of ladies—Leefolt and her friends Hilly Holbrook, Skeeter Phelan, Hilly Holbrook, and Hilly's mother, Miss Walters—are having a conversation. Hilly urges Elizabeth Leefolt to build a separate bathroom for Aibileen because of her belief that black people carry different diseases than white people. Believing the thought, Elizabeth and her husband have built a bathroom for Aibileen in the garage, even though they can't afford it. Here, the author expressed how strongly racism has been rooted in the minds of white people. Elizabeth is not the one who started this idea of building separate bathrooms

for maids, yet she pressed herself to implement this racist task.

On the other hand, Aibileen's friend Minny was fired from her maid job by Hilly Holbrook because she didn't use her separate bathroom. After firing Minny, she started spreading rumors that she was a thief. So that no other people in the Jackson community would hire her. This act proves to us that their sense of superiority is extended to very bad heights. It didn't stop with her. She encouraged all other white people to build a separate bathroom for their housemaids. Due to postcolonial racial thinking, the other white people also couldn't think right. They got used to the racial thinking. They believed the fact that black people spread more diseases.

Celia Foote hired Minny as her maid. She's given the opposite treatment in her household. Celia considered Minny as an equal individual as herself. There is no superiority in her mind although she is a white lady. She finds no issue with using the same table while eating and sharing the dishes. Both become so friendly regardless of their differences in class and race. It's the complete opposite of how other white people are. The author subtly conveyed the truth that the reason for Celia's friendliness is the fact that she is not mentally strong, and she is insecure about the fact that she had several miscarriages recently. She may not be able to give her husband a child. She hid this fact from her husband. Another reason for her friendliness is that she comes from a rural area and is desperately trying to fit into the Jackson community. The author conveyed that even the friendliness of white people is not because of their non-racist mindset. It's because of her personal state of being.

Besides these racists, Skeeter, a college graduate, exposed the challenges faced by African-Americans. She secured a job at the local newspaper company in the role of writing a column. She interviewed Aibileen, Minny, and other black maids to learn about the issues they were facing. First, they hesitated to give information as they would be in danger. Also, they didn't trust Skeeter first, as she is one of the white folks. Then they got convinced and worked together to get the novel completed. Skeeter got distanced from her own friends, but the African American community embraced her with love and respect.

The reason for Skeeter's thought of equality sprouted from her childhood caretaker, Constantine, a black woman. Constantine taught her self-love, equality, etc. They both shared a close bond. But Constantine disappeared out of the blue when Skeeter left for university. She wants to know what happened to her. But nobody would tell her. So she started writing the novel to know it, and she also wants to help all the black maids and give voice to their experiences.

After finding Jim Crow's law book in Skeeter's bag, Hilly starts to suspect that Skeeter is sympathetic towards the civil rights movement. The law book itself disturbed Hilly. This shows how valueless these people are. Hilly eventually forces Skeeter to publish the Home Health Sanitation initiative, encouraging separate bathrooms for maids at home. Skeeter

accepted and tricked her. She did the same and added a note below the column. In the note, she directed people to leave their toilet waste in front of Hilly's house instead of their own place. Hilly saw the dozens of toilets in her front yard, got furious, and expelled Skeeter.

As an effect of colonialism, the white people hold the authority. And it feels like a privilege to befriend them. Celia also tried to be accepted by Hilly, but she didn't. She hired the maid whom Hilly had fired. The reason why she hates Minny is that, while Minny worked for Hilly's household, for revenge, Minny made a chocolate pie by mixing it with her feces. Hilly ate two pieces of it. Ever since, they both haven't gotten along with each other. To protect all the black maids who worked together to publish the novel, Minny suggested to Skeeter that the pie story be told so that Hilly would insist that the book not take place in their community.

After the publication of the book, some people suspect that it's about the Jackson community. But none want to admit their mistakes and their worst behaviors that are described in the book. And so they can't fire their maids either. The white people know what they did is not right. That's the reason they are afraid of admitting the characters as themselves. But they don't realize it's wrong to treat somebody this way. And it's hurtful to black people. They don't realize that both are equal. Through this, the author conveys the consequences of decolonization, stereotypes, and historical fallacies.

From all these narratives, it is evident that only black people are serving as maids, and not even a single white person is a maid in the story. As literature is a reflection of life, it's crystal clear that the real postcolonial American society also has the same setting. Kathryn Stockett viewed and portrayed subtly the racial discrimination in the novel through the post colonial lens.

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