

## Racism in the American Novel “The Help” การเหยียดเชื้อชาติในนวนิยายอเมริกันเรื่อง เดอะ เฮลป์

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze the representation of racism in the American novel *The Help* written by Kathryn Stockett. *The Help* was published in 2009. It depicts storytelling by two black maids who served white families living in Jackson, Mississippi during the 1960s. Throughout the novel, Stockett portrays relationships between the white and the black characters and shows how the black maids are treated by their white employers. The main purpose of this study was to identify out the types of racism that appear in the novel and how each type is portrayed. Carmichael and Hamilton’s 1967 framework on types of racism was adopted for the analysis. It was found that individual racism and institutional racism are portrayed most frequently in the novel.

### บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาเรื่องนี้มีเป้าหมายเพื่อวิเคราะห์การเหยียดเชื้อชาติที่ปรากฏในนวนิยายอเมริกันเรื่อง เดอะ เฮลป์ เขียนโดยแคทรีน สต็อกเก็ตต์ เดอะ เฮลป์ถูกตีพิมพ์ในปี 2009 เรื่องราวของคนรับใช้ผิวสีที่ต้องรับใช้ให้กับครอบครัวของคนผิวขาวที่อาศัยอยู่ใน เมืองแจ็กสัน รัฐมิสซิสซิปปี ในช่วงทศวรรษที่ 1960 สต็อกเก็ตต์ได้นำเสนอถึงความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างคนผิวขาวกับคนผิวสีและเล่าถึงวิธีที่นายจ้างผิวขาวปฏิบัติต่อลูกจ้างผิวสีในนวนิยายเรื่องนี้ จุดประสงค์ของการศึกษาเรื่องนี้คือการหาประเภทของการเหยียดเชื้อชาติที่ปรากฏในนวนิยายและหาว่าถูกถ่ายทอดออกมาอย่างไรผ่านนวนิยายเรื่องนี้โดยใช้กรอบของคาไมเคิลและแฮมิลตัน (1967) จากผลการศึกษาพบว่ามีกรการเหยียดเชื้อชาติในระดับบุคคล (Individual racism) และการเหยียดเชื้อชาติเชิงสถาบัน (Institutional racism) ปรากฏให้เห็นมากที่สุดไปในนวนิยายเรื่องนี้

**Keywords:** The Help, racism, black people

**คำสำคัญ:** เดอะ เฮลป์ การเหยียดเชื้อชาติ คนผิวสี

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## Introduction

Racism is a sensitive topic in the United States despite social and organizational efforts to reduce racial inequalities, segregation, and discrimination within the country. In US history, minority groups with darker skin have suffered significant obstacles, and their struggles have continued even after the abolition of slavery and the passing of a series of civil rights laws and the Civil Rights Act, which ended Jim Crow laws and segregation. The tension related to racism has recently, visibly escalated under President Donald J. Trump, as he has appealed to and encouraged white supremacist groups, a significant number of his supporters. Arrests of and charges against black people have risen drastically. The case of George Floyd, who was killed by police, severely impacted society and strengthened protests under the 'Black Lives Matter' Campaign. The incident brought to the forefront the inequalities between African Americans and white Americans and the mistreatment toward the former, rooted deeply in US history. *The Help* was selected as the subject of this study to gain more understanding of racism as it is represented in the novel.

*The Help* is Kathryn Stockett's debut book, published in 2009. The novel became a hit and remained on the New York Times Best Seller list for more than twenty-three months. It was translated into forty-two different languages and adapted into a film. *The Help* tells the story of an unlikely relationship between three women: a young white woman, Skeeter, who aspires to be a writer, and two black maids, Aibileen and Minny, who have both served white families for a long time. Due to her own background as a white girl raised by a black maid, Skeeter wants to write a book to tell people of how black maids are treated. After several attempts at begging, Skeeter gets Aibileen to agree to tell her stories, along with Minny who has had enough of being treated badly by white people. The two women secretly share their stories while continuing to work for their white families. After going through many hardships, they finally see the book get published, but it costs Aibileen her career. Aibileen looks at the bright side: the book sells well and it helps her to accept herself and overcome her own fears.

The setting of the story is Jackson, Mississippi in the early 1960s. Its setting is a powerful literary element in the narration. Stockett herself is a native of Jackson, and she is likely to have witnessed different kinds of oppression against black maids. Mississippi State during that time sustained racism, as evidenced in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech, "I Have a Dream." The speech was delivered on August 28, 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., where more than 250,000 people of different skin colors gathered to participate in the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." In one part of his speech, he singles out Mississippi:

"I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice." (Yale Law School, 2008)

This part of King's speech truly reflects the suffering born out of injustice, racial discrimination, and oppression that black people, particularly in Mississippi, suffered during the time.

Despite being criticized as being a white writer using the “black language” to portray the lives of domestic black maids, and of omitting certain points and events that really occurred in Jackson, Stockett “got a lot right” (Bush, 2011). A historian claims that Stockett is “a novelist, not a historian.... and her interpretation is what much of the general population of the U.S. will see.” Through the three main characters: Skeeter, Aibileen and Minny, the suffering in the town of Jackson, mainly caused by white racist employers, is revealed.

## **Racism**

According to Fredrickson (2002), “racism” is a term to explain the negative behavior and attitude of one race toward another. The term first appeared in the English lexicon in the 1930s. In 1932, ‘racism’ was first cited and later, in 1936, ‘racist’ appeared (Bonnett, 2000). Racism often also refers to citizenship laws, education laws, and court rulings that provide advantages to a certain group of people (Spring, 2009). When an individual performs any action that discriminates against others due to their race, that is ‘racism’. According to Milner (2008), racism is widespread or systemic mistreatment of a minority used directly to dominate over the members of that group, such as African Americans or Asians living in the US.

Fredrickson (2002) elaborates more on the term “racism,” saying that it not only manifests as set of beliefs but is perpetuated in inequalities reinforced by many factors such as institutions or practices as well. This kind of ideology has “strong continuities in the articulation of the images of the ‘other’ as well as in the we-images which are evident in the ways in which racist movements define the boundaries of race and nation” (Fredrickson, 2002: p. 8). He continues that there are two types of history of racism: general history of racism and history of particular racisms. He adds that it is essential to know these specific contexts to gain a better understanding of situations of racism that manifest in particular places and times.

## **Racism in American History**

Racism has been a part of American history since the country’s foundation. Evidence shows that racism was a defining aspect in the birth of slavery as a system in 1661 Virginia. Black people were forced to work under white Americans and suffered from injustices and violent treatment. At the end of the American Civil War, in 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the US constitution was passed by congress. This ended systems of slavery in America. African Americans soon purportedly gained their freedom, the right to vote, and the right to have their own land. However, their status was generally not fully accepted and was considered inferior to white Americans. They received lower pay relative to white people and it was more difficult for them to get jobs. In the southern states, feelings of resentment toward black people led to the forming of a white supremacist organization, the Ku Klux Klan, or KKK, members of which often inflicted violence on African Americans. KKK members would wander around the neighborhoods at night wearing masks and committing criminal acts, sometimes even killing black people.

In 1877, America's southern states introduced segregation laws, or Jim Crow laws. These laws forced white Americans and African Americans to use separate public facilities and were upheld due to the court case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896. The case was opened after a darker-skinned man, Homer Adolph Plessy, got on a train and sat in a 'whites-only' seat. He was asked to leave the seat, but he refused and was arrested. Hon. John H. Ferguson was the judge for this case, against whom Plessy filed a petition, which was denied. The Supreme Court stated that the Fourteenth Amendment only protected political and civil rights and did not apply to social rights. As a result, Jim Crow laws became stricter as the segregation of public facilities, education, housing, medical care, and other social services became legally covered under the law. The laws were enforced under the doctrine 'separate but equal.' White and black people were meant to have equal facilities, but they needed to be separated for each race. In other words, it was required that white and black people use separate public facilities, such as restrooms, water fountains, entrances, restaurants, or seat areas on buses and trains. Moreover, segregation laws forbade black people from using the same hospitals, schools, churches, or public pools as white people. These laws affected every aspect of black peoples' lives (Fisher, 2006). Under the strict enforcement of Jim Crow laws, many African Americans faced poor living conditions and lacked opportunity to get access to a proper education (Greenberg, 2009). It was extremely difficult to get a well-paid job, and black people were mostly forced to either take low-paid labor jobs or go unemployed.

In 1954, segregation within schools came to an end due to the *Brown v. Board of Education* court case. This was the first step toward equality in educational facilities among black and white students. The 1960s was marked by the use of nonviolent protest or civil disobedience and the belief that changing the laws could make a difference. The civil rights era is considered the climax of America's history of racism (Fredrickson, 2002). Black movements for justice, equality, and freedom reached a peak during this decade. That is, despite ongoing Jim Crow laws, young African Americans started to participate in the civil rights movement. They began 'sit-in protests' by visiting 'whites-only' public places. This was a clear sign showing that they would not take any more inequalities or mistreatment from white Americans. The protesters were led by a great black activist leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who gave one of the most inspirational speeches, 'I Have a Dream,' to encourage black people to fight for their rights. In 1964, segregation under Jim Crow Laws was ended by the Civil Rights Act, which was followed by the Voting Rights Act a year later, finally recognizing African Americans' right to vote.

While on the legal front tensions between white and black Americans have seemed to decline, the racial situation in the US continues to be problematic, as Stockett has put in her afterword to *The Help* (2009).

There is no trickier subject for a writer from the South than that of affection between a black person and a white one in the unequal world of segregation. For the dishonesty upon which such a society is founded makes every emotion suspect, makes it impossible to know whether what flowed between two people was honest feeling or pity or pragmatism. Indeed, for the black person, the feigning of an expected emotion could be the very coinage of survival. (p. 450)

### Types of racism

As previously mentioned, racism is negative behaviors against other race, and they believe that some races are inferior to others. Racism can be found in form of beliefs, attitudes, policies, and actions. According to Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), racism comes in different forms and can be mainly grouped into two types: individual racism and institutional racism.

*Individual racism* is a kind of racism that exists between person to person. A sign of this type of racism is rude behavior toward people of other races, rooted in the belief of one's race being superior to other races. This can lead to violent behavior, injury, and sometimes death.

Fred L. Pincus (1996) elaborates on individual racism, categorizing it into three forms, including verbal abuse, unequal treatment, and prejudice.

*Institutional racism* refers to institutional or cultural practices that lead to persistent racial inequality. This kind of racism is deeply rooted in an organization or society and is generally accepted as normal practices. Many issues within minority or oppressed groups can be caused by institutional racism, such as lack of opportunity to receive a good education, employment, or healthcare, disenfranchisement due to criminal injustice or other systemic injustices, and deprivation of the right to vote. Meanwhile, powerful groups receive benefits and gain the advantage. Jim Crow laws are one example of institutional racism.

### *The Help*

*The Help* is a novel that claims to depict racism in the southern region of American society as it manifested in the past. It highlights the struggles of African American maids, who worked for white families that harbored strong racial prejudices. The story is narrated by three characters, each with a different skin color, background, mindset, and dream. The novel shows the prejudicial treatment of black people by white people, which impacted many aspects of life, regardless of age, gender, or occupation. The setting of the novel is Mississippi in the early 1960s, at the peak of segregation under

Jim Crow laws. At that time, black people were restricted from using the same facilities as white people. Generally, those who worked for white people were mistreated by racist employers. This is the situation depicted in the stories of Aibileen and Minny, the two maids who share their experiences.

### Purposes of the study

This study adopted Carmichael and Hamilton's (1967) racism framework as a lens to understand issues of racism as they appear in the novel *The Help* (2009), by Kathryn Stockett. The study aimed to explore the types of racism and how they were portrayed in the novel.

### Findings and Discussion

This study focused on two types of racism proposed by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), individual and institutional, as they appeared in the novel *The Help*. The following sections present and discuss the findings on how racism is portrayed in the novel, particularly in terms of these two types of racism.

#### Individual racism

As mentioned, Fred L. Pincus (1996) suggests that there are three forms of individual racism: verbal abuse, unequal treatment, and prejudice.

Regarding verbal abuse in *The Help*, Maurilla (2015) suggests that this term may be used to characterize the racist names that white people in the novel call African Americans, such as 'Nigger,' 'Negro,' or 'Nigra.' Any of these names are derogatory words. They were used in the United States to show pejorative racist insult, especially during the 1950s-1960s. These words appear frequently in the stories told in *The Help*. For example, when Aibileen reminds Minny of how Mr. Charlie and his wife treated her, she says:

"Oh, and you remember that crazy Mister Charlie, the one who always call you nigger to your face like he think it's funny. And his wife, the one who make you eat lunch outside, even in the middle a January? Even when it snowed that time?" (p. 226)

Aibileen's reminiscing shows us that both of the women realize that the word 'nigger' is used beyond Mr. Charlie's sense of humor: it is actually a racist insult. It is used to separate black people from white people in a way that not only makes them feel different but looked down upon.

Another example of how the word 'nigger' is used pejoratively occurs when a white passenger sees a crowd of people gathered around a road block and asks the bus driver, "What's going on?" (p.192) The response from the driver is: "I don't know, some nigger got shot. Where you headed?" (p. 192) The driver's reply not only shows his indifference toward a tragedy inflicted on a black man, but also his racist attitude.

The second form of individual racism is unequal treatment. In the novel, unequal treatment is portrayed in such a way to emphasize the power the white characters hold and to show how superiority of white people over black people is constructed within society. The obvious example is that of the toilets, wherein the black maids must use separate toilets and are forbidden from sharing restrooms with their white employers.

In the first chapter of the book when the white female employers get together at Miss Leefolt's house for their bridge club day, they are talking about having separate toilets for the black maids. Miss Hilly, who is an extreme racist with strong negative feelings toward black people, encourages the club members to build the separate toilets: "She's upset cause the Nigra uses the inside bathroom and so do we" (p. 6). Miss Leefolt, Aibileen's employer, cannot manage a separate bathroom due to her family's financial situation. Yet, Miss Hilly tries to convince her to prioritize it. She points out that it is dangerous to share a toilet with a maid since black maids carry diseases. Miss Hilly insists on the necessity of having a separate toilet outside the house for black maids: it is "a disease-preventative measure" (p. 8).

Another example of unequal treatment is that which appears on the bus service. For example, a white bus driver says, "Colored people off, last stop for you... White people lemme know where y'all need to get to. I'll get you as close as I can" (p. 192). Both the message and the tone that the bus driver uses for the black passengers is completely opposite to that used in speaking to the white passengers. In this situation, the bus driver uses his power as a white man to force all of the black passengers off of the bus without expressing any sympathy. He knows very well that none of the black passengers would dare to stand up against him. This is an obvious example of racial segregation..

The last form of individual racism is prejudice. The novel shows that white people tend to assume that black people always need money (Maurilla, 2015). When something wrong happens, a black person instantly becomes the culprit. No interrogation is necessary, or if there is one, it appears to be only a pseudo-process to worsen the black person's situation, wherein it is difficult for them to defend themselves. This is true in Jackson. Moreover, if any black people are fired from their jobs, it will be hard for them to find new employment.

When Skeeter's book of anecdotes told by black maids working for white employers in Jackson has been publicized, Miss Hilly becomes furious, since her embarrassing stories appear in the book. Miss Hilly knows very well that Skeeter has gotten information from both Aibileen and Minny, so she wants to take revenge on Aibileen. The easiest way to fire a maid is to accuse them of theft. Miss Hilly forces Miss Leefolt to fire Aibileen by accusing the latter of stealing silverware from her employer's house. Aibileen tries hard to deny the allegation, but it is in vain:

"I ain't stole no silver service, Miss Leefolt," I say and just the words make me want a run.

Miss Leefolt whisper, "She says she doesn't have them, Hilly."

Miss Hilly don't even act like she heard. She raised her eyebrows at me and say, "Then it behooves me to inform you that you are fired, Aibileen." Miss Hilly sniff. "I'll be calling the police. They know me." (p. 440)

This dialogue shows that Aibileen was blamed for the missing silver. However, this is a set-up to get back at Aibileen for sharing about Miss Hilly and Miss Elizabeth for the book. Miss Hilly knows that the police would never believe Aibileen's denial.



In the novel, Aibileen has already mentioned the kind of theft framed in the above example because of her fear that a white woman would accuse her friends of stealing silver. It can be inferred that simple, made-up cases of felony are used from time to time to punish black people who have fallen out of favor with white people, and that the police or those who hold authority turn deaf ears to the defense due to their prejudice against black people.

#### **Institutional racism**

There are several events in *The Help* that represent institutional racism as it has been embedded within American institutions and organizations. Pincus (1996) states that discrimination is embedded in many institutions, such as courts of law, schools, government bodies, and more. *The Help* clearly shows unfair treatment toward African Americans. At the time, Jim Crow laws required that African Americans not use the same public facilities, such as water fountains or toilets, as white people. White Americans and African Americans had to go to different schools or libraries. For example, when Skeeter tells Aibileen to look for some books at the State Street Library, Aibileen directly says that they are not going to let her in, because she is black.

“You know colored folks ain’t allowed in that library.”

“I can’t believe I forgot that.” (p. 153)

Another clear example of institutional racism revolves around Aibileen’s son, Treelore. A study by Szulkowska (2017) revealed that the novel showed great limitations for black people related to finding work and earning money. Black people could not choose their own jobs and had to take any job they could find, even the dangerous ones. In *The Help*, it is related that Treelore went to work on a rainy day for white people at the Scanlon-Taylor Mill and accidentally slipped and fell from the loading dock. Treelore’s body was not noticed by the driver below, who “crushed his lungs.” Szulkowska (2017) mentions that this incident clearly shows that white employees were not bothered with the safety of their black employees.

Racial segregation appears in a hospital scene as well (Maurilla, 2015). In the novel, black and white people are shown to have separate hospitals with different quality tools, equipment, and services. Neither medical devices nor health services could be mingled between the two groups. For example, Aibileen once helped an injured white boy and took him to the black hospital, but the doctor refused to help him, as it went against policy.

“...I never seen that much red come out a person and I grab the boy, I grab them four fingers. Tote him to the colored hospital cause I didn’t know where the white one was. But when I got there, a colored man stop me and say, *Is this boy white?*” ....

“And I say, *Yessuh*, and he say, *Is them his white fingers?* And I say, *Yessuh*, and he say, *Well, you better tell em he your high yellow cause that colored doctor won’t operate on a white boy in a Negro hospital.* And then a white policeman grab me and he say, *Now you look a here—*” (p. 150)



Here, it is clear that segregation laws impacted both black and white people's lives. If the back hospital had taken the white boy in, he might have had a chance at survival. *The Help* shows other instances of segregation as well, from separated fountains and bus seats to separated marriage ceremonies and burial grounds. This novel thus clearly reflects American Society in the early 1960s, showing how people became accustomed to using separate facilities and services.

### Conclusion

*The Help*, by Kathryn Stockett, has been used previously as a subject of study to analyze racism. In this study, two types of racism were discussed in the context of the novel: individual racism and institutional racism. Individual racism found in the novel can be divided into three forms: verbal abuse, unequal treatment, and prejudice. Evidence of verbal abuse appears often in the novel, as it is used by the white characters to construct their superior power. However, unfair treatment could also be found quite often in the novel, as it was set in the 1960s at the peak of segregation laws. Prejudice is mostly manifested in the white characters, who were shown to always look down on African Americans. The novel's representation of the second type of racism, institutional racism, revealed how the majority has oppressed the minority by taking advantage of the privileges they enjoy due to their skin color. Laws in that time granted white people the advantage of using public facilities while African Americans needed to be careful to use the "correct" public services. From the beginning to the end of *The Help*, the novel successfully reflects racism in society in 1960s America.

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