



## Resistance to marginalization in America as reflected in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*

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### Abstract

Slavery and racial segregation are two important events that shaped American history. Although slavery had been abolished constitutionally by the Thirteenth Amendment, racial segregation remained existing in some southern states of the US until the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Racial segregation in the US was regulated by Jim Crow laws which promoted "separate but equal" rules. This situation is reflected in Kathryn Stockett's novel entitled *The Help* which mostly portrays the life of black maids under Jim Crow laws in Jackson, Mississippi during the 1960s. This study aims to find resistance to the marginalization that is caused by racial discrimination, as well as the factors that underlie the resistance. The method of this study is a qualitative study. The data is analyzed by Gramsci's hegemony theory and scooped by sociology of literature. Then, the method of data analysis is based on the conflicts of characters in the novel; white and black characters. *The Help* shows that marginalization of African Americans is created from the opposition that occur because of racial hegemony; the ruling class and the ruled class, the controlling and the controlled, the free ones and the restricted ones, the strong ones and the weak ones, or the voiced ones and the silenced ones. *The Help* also shows that the resistance to marginalization can be done by producing literature. The resistance of the African Americans happens as a result of oppression and inhumane treatment. It also happens as a result of black people's consciousness that sees racial discrimination as a system that is full of flaws.

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## INTRODUCTION

Slavery and racial segregation are two important events that shaped American history. Slavery in the United States (US) existed from around 1776 until the establishment of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. Although the Thirteenth Amendment was set to abolish slavery, racial segregation remained existing mainly in the southern US until Civil Right Movement.

Racial segregation was supported by white supremacist. Then, it gained political support and became so-called institutionalized racism. Institutionalized racism refers to the incorporation of racist policies and practices in institutions by which society operates, for example; education, federal, state, and local governments (Tyson, 2006). Institutionalized racism in the US was regulated by Jim Crow Laws - a collection of laws that were formed after the Civil War until 1968 - which aimed to restore the states of southern America to antebellum conditions by marginalizing African-American groups. Jim Crow Laws was realized by physical segregation in public facilities such as schools, entertainment venues, and public transportation. This form of segregation was based on the term "separate but equal" which was popularized by the law itself.

One of literary works that reflects this condition is a novel entitled *The Help* written by an American author, Kathryn Stockett. Stockett was born and raised in Mississippi. The intimate relationship between her and her black maid, Demetrie is the reason why she wrote *The Help* (2009). The novel itself is set in Jackson, Mississippi during 1960s. The story in the novel is narrated by three characters, Aibileen and Minny, two black maids, and Skeeter, a white woman who is obsessed with being a writer. The novel mostly is a depiction of black maid's life in Jackson, Mississippi in 1960s under the regulation of Jim Crow laws and they finally have courage to speak up about the situation.

Several research studies have been done to analyze Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*. Those studies were done by Radwan (2010), and Hawasi & Meida (2015). In his paper entitled "Exploring Aversive Racism in Stockett's *The Help*", Radwan (2010) examined the novel using Gaertner's and Dovidio's concept of aversive racism. Radwan (2010) found that one of the white characters in the novel, Sketeer, has ambivalent feeling towards the black maids. Her feeling is between being faithful of her egalitarian values and racist feeling. Character Skeeter is a reflection of Stockett who hold an implicit negative feeling which convey the oppositions of white people as a superior society and black people as an inferior society. In a different perspective, Hawasi & Meida (2015) in "Postcoloniality in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*" used postcolonial theory of Hommi K. Bhabha to examine the hybrid culture in the novel. The author found that there is a process of hybridity which forms a new identity called hybrid culture between white and black characters; Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minny.

According to those research studies, the researcher conducted a deeper analysis about embodiment of racial hegemony and its resistance as reflected in Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help*. A research about an embodiment of hegemony has been conducted by Zen & Hetami (2019) in "'Sameness" as A Form of Hegemony to Create Utopian Society in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*". In their research, they found that the hegemony in *The Giver* is embodied in the system of "Sameness" which is manifested in various rules concerning the life of the society. Zen & Hetami (2019) also categorized the hegemony into three kinds, based on the level of domination and resistance. There are integral hegemony which is seen from the full obedience of the citizens towards the authority of the Committee of Elders, decadent hegemony which is portrayed by the citizens' disrespect and boredom towards the rules, and minimal hegemony which occurs due to the resistance from the Receiver of Memory against the Committee of Elders despite the *transformismo*. Based on the previous

studies, the researcher believes that it is very important to do a study in such topic in order to deepen the understanding of how hegemony is embodied in the society that it then marginalizes the subordinate group and how subordinate group responds to it, especially as reflected in a literary work that carries out racial issue.

“The conflict of ideologies in literary work needs to be analyzed deeper using the perspective of Gramsci’s hegemony theory in order to identify what factors carried out by the author to resist the dominant ideology” (Muzakka, 2017, p. 3). The term hegemony was popularized by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci. The starting point of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony is that a class and its members perform their power over the lower classes by means of violence and persuasion. (Simon, 2004). The violence on the context of hegemony is a way of embedding dominant power over the subordinate group by force through legal system, and/or violent apparatus such as the police, army, etc. Meanwhile, persuasion or agreement in the context of hegemony is a way of hegemony by achieving agreement of sincere acceptance of the subordinate class. The agreement or consent is achieved through civil society’s idea, values, or norms.

Then, in order to support the analysis of resistance in the novel, the researcher used sociological of literature because this approach sees literary work as a reflection of the real society as well as offering the solution of social problems through the author’s ideology reflected in the literary work. There are some points of sociology of literature according to Ian Watts (as cited in Faruk, 2010, p. 5). First, sociology of literature is an approach that pays attention to the author’s social context. Second, sociology of literature is an approach that sees literature as a mirror of society. In this approach, the researcher must look at how far literary work reflects the society at the time the literary work was written. Third, sociology of literature pays attention to the social function of literature. The researchers must pay attention to how literature can function as a remodel of society, or merely as an entertainer.

Therefore, according to the related theories above, the researcher uses Gramsci’s hegemony theory in analyzing the conflict of characters in *The Help* because the data contains the opposition of dominant (white) and subordinate (black) group. This study then describes the oppositions between the dominant and subordinate group that generalizes marginalization.

Furthermore, those points of sociology of literature would also help the researcher to do an analysis of the resistance as justified in the novel, as well as the factors underlie it. Consequently, this study will also reveal the kinds of resistance to marginalization as reflected in the novel and also the factors underlie the resistance.

## METHODS

The study is designed as qualitative descriptive research applying Gramsci’s hegemony theory. The material object of this study is Kathryn Stockett’s novel entitled *The Help*, with the formal object is the oppositions between dominant group (whites) and subordinate group (blacks), as well as the kinds of resistance as justified in the novel. The data is taken from primary and secondary data. The primary data is novel *The Help* and the secondary data is taken from related books, journal articles, and online articles. The data analysis is taken by some procedures: (1) examining some aspects of the text to differ the dominant and subordinate group’s opposition that generates marginalization. (2) examining the comparison of events happen in the text and the real history and culture reflected in the text using sociology of literature and explaining the comparison with viewing the aspects of Gramsci’s hegemony theory, such as hegemony and resistance.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### **The Oppositions between Whites and Blacks that Create Marginalization as Reflected in Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help***

“The process of marginalization arises because of the polar relationship of two groups of people, the marginalized and the dominant group” (Sutradhar, 2015, p. 2771). This phenomenon is reflected in the novel *The Help* written by Kathryn Stockett. Stockett outlined some of the polarity that occurred between whites as a dominant group and blacks as a subordinate or group, in which the polarity made black people marginalized and segregated in all aspects of life in the United States.

In the novel, it clearly seen that white people dominate their role as state apparatus. For instance, the novel shows that Ross Barnett served as the governor of Mississippi and he had the right to legalize a system called “Jim Crow laws in Mississippi” (Stockett, 2009, p. 185) which was ultimately used to marginalize blacks. Therefore, white people in here are the ruler and black people are the ruled one.

Because white people become the ruler, then they have the power to control the black people. Even blacks are controlled by how they should see things and how they should react about things. In *The Help*, there is the following quote, ““But Aibileen”—Miss Hilly smile real cold “colored people and white people are just so...different.” She wrinkle up her nose.” (Stockett, 2009, p. 186). Hilly tried to convince Aibileen that black people and white people are different naturally and in various aspects.

Furthermore, other opposition in the novel that arises is white people are protected and black people are not protected, both in security and law. Blacks had little legal recourse against these assaults because the Jim Crow criminal justice system was all-white: police, prosecutors, judges, juries, and prison official (Pilgrim, 2012). This situation is reflected in *The Help* through the following quote, ““It’s all them white peoples that breaks me, standin around the colored neighborhood. White peoples with guns, pointed at colored peoples. Cause who gone protect our peoples? Ain’t no colored policemen.”” (Stockett, 2009, p. 196). Minny states that there are no colored policemen that protect them from intimidation or the threat of white supremacists

because the state apparatus including the police consist only of white people.

There are other ways to segregate black people, namely through stereotypes or assumptions that are circulating in the community. These assumptions or stereotypes might be the foundation for creating regulations that would ultimately marginalize black people. In *The Help*, black people were stereotyped as criminal, dirty, foolish, and ignorant. Meanwhile white people saw themselves as well-mannered, clean, smart, and careful. The opposition clearly shows that the black people are no better than the white people. They are assumed to be criminal, dirty, foolish, and careless so that white people can marginalize them in various aspects of life.

Besides, black people were also marginalized through some norms that was established. There were many norms or rules of society that must be followed by black people in interacting with white people. Consequently, black people must maintain their attitude, while white people can act however they want. These norms and etiquette is portrayed in the novel, as when Minny’s mother explains the rules she needs to follow in white houses,

“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—you can’t pay the light bill? Your feet are too sore? Remember one thing: white people are not your friends.” “Rule Number Two: don’t you ever let that White Lady find you sitting on her toilet.” (Stockett, 2009, p. 38)

What Minny’s mother explains to her daughter is that some of the norms on how they are supposed to behave when they work in white family’s houses. For example, they are not allowed to use their white employers’ bathroom. Minny’s mother also explains that they have to have a distance in having a relationship or an interaction with their white employers.

The racial discrimination that was manifested in the legal system (Jim Crow laws), and norms became stronger with terror, intimidation, and control of white supremacists. Such effort to maintain dominant ideology is a kind of hegemony process through coercion. *The*

*Help* portrays some incident where black people experience violence when they try to protest inequality or just simply tell the truth about the situation in the South. Like what happen to Medgar Evers who murdered by one of the white supremacists in the South, or a man who is lynched for telling the truth about what he feels to be a black man in Mississippi, as quoted below,

Carl Roberts, a colored School teacher from Pelahatchie, forty miles from here. "In April, Carl Roberts told Washington reporters what it means to be a black man in Mississippi, calling the governor 'a pathetic man with the morals of a streetwalker.' Roberts was found cattle-branded and hung from a pecan tree." (Stockett, 2009, p. 239)

Through these portrayals, Stockett emphasizes that white supremacists had the power and control to threaten lives and commit violence against every black person who talked about segregation in the South or participated in the Civil Rights Movement. This method of violence also became terror and intimidation for black people so that they were afraid to speak. Therefore, black people remain silenced.

The practice of terror, violence, and intimidation performed by white people is an attempt to maintain black people following the law and norms. Besides, this practice causes black people to be silenced. It also causes black to be weak and threatened because of the terror and intimidation, and they simply cannot fight back the violence they get. Therefore, this practice also causes black people to be submissive, because they finally always need to follow the law and norms.

The oppositions which the writer has mentioned above clearly show that blacks feel powerless. They don't have the power to change the situation and they also believe that the ruling class will not change the situation either. Nevertheless, black people feel restricted, because they cannot control or change their situation or destiny. Meanwhile, the white people are free to determine how the situation should occur. As described in the discussion above, the oppositions show the polarity of the relationship between white people and black people reflected in Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help*. The

oppositions obtained through the episodes above are interconnected and influence each other. The dominant group has a ruling function because they act as state apparatuses who have the authority to create a legal system. With the position as ruler, they can control the subordinate group, feel free to do anything, then get protection of course. In addition, they get the benefits or privilege for being the dominant in all aspects of life in the United States such as politics, economics, and also social. On the other hand, it is unfortunate for the subordinate group. They are not rulers or have the authority to regulate. Thus, they become a controlled, limited, disadvantaged, and even silenced group. So they are marginalized from various aspects of life in the United States such as the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects.

### **The Resistance of Black People to Marginalization in *The Help***

According to the previous discussion, it has explained that *The Help* reflects the life of black maids in Jackson, Mississippi during segregation era. They have to deal with sort of legal regulation under racial discrimination. The practice of racial discrimination experienced by those black maids is followed by humiliation, exploitation, and inhumane treatments by their white employers. Besides, they have to deal with the law that is contrary to humanity and justice, and it makes them marginalized in various field of life in the United States. Therefore, the practice of racial discrimination as explained before generates resistance in *The Help* as it will be explained below.

Along with the improvement of the quality of the intellectuals of black people in the US, the consciousness of being oppressed is raised, as well as the consciousness of doing a resistance. The resistance in *The Help* is done by actual and textual practice. One of the actual practice of resistance is done by caring and teaching the values of not judging people by their color. As reflected in the novel, Aibileen takes care of Mae Mobley, a white baby of her employer, with love, kindness, and tenderness.

Aibileen also teaches Mae Mobley to not judge people by the color of their skin. "After all the time I spent teaching Mae Mobley how to love all people, not judge by color." (Stockett, 2009, p. 409).

The way Aibileen teaches Mae Mobley is done by telling some stories which consist of good moral values. As Mae Mobley's mother, Elizabeth, doesn't really spend her time with her daughter, Aibileen can freely babysit Mae Mobley and tell her some stories. This practice of resistance is done to prevent Mae Mobley, as a new generation, to become a segregationist like her mother. Moreover, by giving all her love to Mae Mobley, Aibileen wishes that little girl will grow up as a person who doesn't judge people by their races.

Another resistance is done by failing the stereotypes. It is shown in the novel when Skeeter offers Aibileen a help to fetch some books from a white library. Instead of refusing it, Aibileen shows Skeeter the list of books she wants to read. Even Skeeter is amazed that Aibileen wants to read a book by Sigmund Freud (Stockett, 2009, p. 154). Aibileen clearly shows her interest of literacy here. Therefore, she instantly fails the stereotype that black people aren't interested in literacy. Reading book also increases the personal quality of Aibileen. Consequently, Aibileen also fails the stereotype that sees black people as foolish and ignorant people.

The resistance of black people to marginalization is also done by pursuing higher education. Black people were seen as uneducated group of people because of lack of education received by them. Even though it was not easy to pursue higher education, some African Americans in 1960s had received higher education. They were, for example, Charles Anderson who earned a doctorate in meteorology, James Meredith who graduated from University of Mississippi. There were also African Americans who managed to pursue higher education as well as becoming Civil Rights activists, such as Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King Jr.

According to Gramsci (as cited in Simon, 2004, p. 26), "the resistance towards racial hegemony and marginalization can occur by changing the awareness, mindset, understanding, conception about the world, as well as the moral of those who are oppressed". It can be done by pursuing higher education. Some black people in Aibileen's church community have had a higher education. Some of them become doctors, lawyers, and even the owner of a colored newspaper. Even one of colored maids, Yule May, has gone to college. Sadly she cannot finish her study because she has to get married. However, the education she has ever received makes her aware of the importance of her children's education, so she plans to send her children to college.

Furthermore, actual practice of resistance also can be done by protesting inequality. Black resistance in the US was also done in a massive and radical way. It is also known as Civil Rights Movement. The most prominent event of Civil Rights Movement was the March of Washington in August 28, 1963. More than 200,000 people, including black and white, went down the street in demands of forcing civil rights legislation and job equality. This march was led by civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr. In *The Help*, some of black people in the church community is portrayed joining the march,

Deacon got a stern look on his face like he done talked with Jessup before.

"Tonight, we are going to lift our prayers to God. We will march peacefully down the streets of Jackson next Tuesday. And in August, I will see you in Washington to march with Doctor King." (Stockett, 2009, p. 209)

Deacon persuades the people in the black church to pray together and to join the March of Washington to protest on segregation and racial inequality.

The novel also portrayed the resistance of black people to marginalization by producing texts or literature. The rise of African American literature was pioneered by a 1920s cultural movement called Harlem Renaissance. The literature offered a new way to view what it meant to be black from African American's

perspective (Bolarinwa, 2013). Besides, the literature also shows off the oppression done by white segregationist towards African Americans. As portrayed in the novel, some black maids in Jackson, Mississippi conduct a resistance to marginalization by writing how those black maids feel in working with white family in Jackson, Mississippi. Besides, the book also reveals white people's treatment towards their colored maids which is contrary to a sense of justice and humanity.

### **The Factors Underlying the Resistance to Marginalization in *The Help***

The dominant form of resistance in *The Help* is the textual practice. It means, *The Help* mostly shows the process of Aibileen, Minny, and other maids writing the book about how it feels like to be colored maids in Jackson, Mississippi, by the help of Skeeter. Moreover, Skeeter, Aibileen and Minny also become the narrators in *The Help*. Therefore, the figures of resistance in here are the colored maids, including Aibileen and Minny, and Skeeter.

Black maid figures in the novel are described as controlled, restricted, worthless, exploited, and humiliated. Meanwhile, Skeeter, is described as an educated white woman, who is raised by the love of her black maid, Constantine. In the novel, those black maids often experience exploitation and humiliation. For instance, Minny, a black maid, is forced to pay more for the glass she broke accidentally (Stockett, 2009, p. 227). And there is Annabelle who also experiences being disadvantaged economically when she is fired and Miss Sinclair, her employer, also takes her car away (Stockett, 2009, p. 412). Besides being disadvantaged economically, the black maids were also disadvantaged physically. In the novel, Flora has a burn scar on her hands because her employer asks her to use a "hand wash" that is actually a bleach (Stockett, 2009, p. 433). Besides being treated inhumanely, black maids were also experienced being treated inappropriately. In the novel, Minny is treated badly by Mister and Missus Charlie, like being called a nigger or forced to eat lunch in the

outside in the snow (Stockett, 2009, p. 227). The oppression experienced directly by the black maids triggers a resistance.

Moreover, when Stockett interviewed some of her readers, she was told that they treated their maid like she was a member of their family. But Stockett wondered how their maid's perspective on that; about separated bathroom, separated plate and cup. Stockett thought that's not how you treat your member of the family (Time, 2009). Stockett stated that she had the most intimate relationship with Demetrie, a colored help who raised her. Yet, as much as Stockett loved Demetrie, she had to use separated bathroom located on the outside of the house (Daily Mail, 2009). This concern is reflected in the novel, in the voice of Aibileen,

"They raise a white child and then twenty years later the child becomes the employer. It's that irony, that we love them and they love us, yet..." I swallowed, my voice trembling. "We don't even allow them to use the toilet in the house." (Stockett, 2009, p. 105)

This quotation shows that there was an irony in the relationship between black maids and their white employers. Therefore, the humiliation and exploitation, as well as the irony experience by those black maids trigger them to do a resistance.

Furthermore, as an educated white woman who feels to have moral duty to her black maid who raised her, Skeeter feels that the oppression to the colored maid is something inhuman, and she feels like to do a resistance. Besides, the awareness to equality also triggers the resistance to racial discrimination. Stockett wrote "We are just two people. Not that much separates us. Not nearly as much as I'd thought" (Stockett, 2009, p. 451). This quote referred to her idea that white and black people are the same. There is actually nothing that separated them. This idea is reflected in the novel through the consciousness of black characters, Aibileen and Minny,

"You talking about something that don't exist." ...

"Not only is they lines, but you know good as I do where them lines be drawn."

Aibileen shakes her head. "I used to believe in em. I don't anymore. They in our heads.

People like Miss Hilly is always trying to make us believe they there. But they ain't." ...

Lines between black and white ain't there neither. Some folks just made those up, long time ago..." (Stockett, 2009, p. 312)

This idea emphasizes that there were some people who made boundaries between black and white people. The boundaries were those that differentiated black and white people, and white supremacists tried to make both white and black people that there is something different between those two races. In the novel, Aibileen and Minny believes that there are no boundaries which separated black and white people. this consciousness triggers black maids to do a resistance by writing down about what they experience and what they feel when working for white families in Jackson, Mississippi.

Although those black maids did not make a huge change in Mississippi, at least it has made change in the way people in the town think about segregation. Racial discrimination had viewed black people as different beings and marginalized them in several aspects of American life, such as politics, economy, social, and culture. Therefore, Stockett who saw the relationship of black maid and white people as an irony and repugnant relationship, she presented her awareness underlying the resistance in her novel, *The Help*. Her awareness presented in the novel is meant to resist the racial discrimination, which sees white people as superior human beings and black people as inferior and different human beings. The act of racial discrimination established to maintain the power and the superiority of white supremacists, and disadvantage black people in many aspects of life. It surely did not bring the idea of equality among races. The hole of the racial discrimination ideology triggered a resistance from those who were disadvantaged, as well as those who had the idea that all human beings are just the same and should be treated equally.

The resistance in *The Help* is based on the idea that every person, no matter what color of their skin, should be treated equally in many aspects of life. Basically, Stockett believes that there is nothing that distinguishes black and white

people. The *Help* presented that idea through the characters, Skeeter (a white character), and Aibileen and Minny (black characters). The bond of women from two different skin colors shares the same idea that the lines which separated blacks and whites should be abolished. In the novel, the resistance towards racial discrimination mainly is done by telling stories about what it feels like to be a black maid in Jackson, Mississippi in a book. This effort is conducted so that people, mainly white people in Jackson know and understand what it feels like to be black maids. It is believed by some characters that the book will change people's perspective on racial discrimination, and make Jackson a better town. This idea is in line with Stockett's idea that people should imagine themselves what it feels like to be in someone else's shoes. Consequently, by imagining being in someone else's situation, people will be able to see something in different perspective, and they will become better. In addition, the intimate relationship with a black maid who raised her makes Stockett decide to portray the demands of black maid characters in the novel. Besides being treated equally, those black maids wish to be respected and treated as human beings should be treated.

## CONCLUSION

Obtained from the discussion on opposition, Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* structurally illustrates the relationship of white and black people in Jackson, Mississippi during 1960s. In the novel, relationship between white and black people is a relationship between the ruling class and the ruled class; the controlling and the controlled; the free ones and the restricted ones; the strong ones and the weak ones; or the voiced ones and the silenced ones. The oppositions seen in the relationship always put black people in inferior position. Eventually, they are marginalized from various aspects of life in the United States.

Furthermore, *The Help* shows that the resistance to marginalization can be done either practically or textually. Practically, resistance to

racial discrimination can be done by educating people to not judge by colors or spreading love to all over human beings. Actual practice of resistance can be done also by failing the stereotypes in the society and pursuing higher education as a means to develop the quality of individuals and even social. Furthermore, resistance can be done by producing text, literature, or arts which reveals the oppression of subordinate group that is caused by abomination.

From the last discussion, it can be concluded that *The Help* shows that resistance can occur if the subordinate group can view the phenomenon of racial discrimination in a different perspective, so that they can gain consciousness that this dominant ideology has some flaws. Besides, they also have to be dauntless to express that racial discrimination brings forth a repugnant system controlling the society that causes them to be disadvantaged, exploited, disrespected, or even marginalized. Those actions must be accompanied by the idea that there is no superior or inferior race, and that there is no line separating two races. Eventually, racial discrimination can be abolished and the more complete system can dominate.

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