

A STUDY OF BIOPOWER IN KATHRYN STOCKETT'S THE HELP

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ABSTRACT

Michel Foucault theorizes the concept of biopower which is the dominating force that shapes and leads people's lives in the society. This power operates according to certain rules that people are made to believe. This study discusses the connection between biopower and systemic racism in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*. Biopower controls and shapes the lives of black women domestic workers. The novel shows the oppression and resistance of servants while dealing with the impact of Jim Crow laws and organizations such as the Junior League. These institutions function as tools of biopower that create an illusion of order while keeping systemic racism. This paper argues that *The Help* shows how biopower works to create oppression and segregation in the society.

Keywords: Biopower, *The Help*, Power Dynamics, Jim Crow Laws.

1. INTRODUCTION

Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* depicts racial and social differences in Jackson, Mississippi, during the 1960s. The events take place during the civil rights era, as black domestic workers are used as main narrative voices. The novel opens with Aibileen who declares, "[t]aking care a white Babies, that's what I do, along with all the cooking and the cleaning. I done raised seventeen kids in my lifetime" (Stockett, 2009, p. 1). The novel is also narrated by the black servant Minny, and the journalist Skeeter. It discusses systemic racism and shows the workings of biopower in controlling black people.

The concept of biopower is important to understand the hierarchies in the novel. Foucault's concept of power refers to the mechanisms and strategies through which power is exercised over individual bodies, through indirect and generally hidden methods (Foucault, 2015, p. 15). The novel shows how power operates in terms of controlling society through authorities. The life and work of the maids is organized on both public and personal levels. This image shows how systemic inequality is kept and changed in the novel.

Foucault explains how politics and power take on a fundamentally different shape that is the biopower. It is "[a]n anatomo-politics of the human body" based on the body as a vehicle and its training (Foucault, 1975, p. 139). Regulatory controls are found at the population level. These controls are concerned with population biological processes such as reproduction, births, mixing of communities, and death, as well as health, life expectancy, and all the factors that can cause people to gather or to differ (p. 3).

Biopower is a system designed to control life in general. Biopower creates an illusion in the individual's mind which is that the system is built in a right way and it is people's job to follow the system. The laws and the authorities at that time were against the rights of the black people.

They focused on creating a line that the African Americans should not cross. The general citizens took it on themselves to enforce the application of these rules. Biopower was practiced in the novel to keep the segregation of the black people in the society.

The work of Foucault draws the attention to the role of language in the exercise and maintenance of power. According to Foucault, the modern western world is enslaved by so called discourses that regulate people's behavior because they have absorbed them and thus maintain them for all intents and purposes. The role of literary and other texts in the circulation and maintenance of social power is the focus of Foucauldian criticism (Hans bertens,2008,132-133).

Previously, governments tried to control life through intimidation and executions, which required military power and made it impossible to control the small details of daily life for people. Societies changed on economic and social levels. The Industrial Revolution and overpopulation made intimidation less effective. A deeper system of control was required to control labor and increase production. Michel Foucault describes this concept as a transformation of power in modern societies. According to Foucault, "[b]iopolitics deals with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power's problem" (Foucault, 2015, p. 105). Biopower aims to regulate and promote life, rather than simply controlling it. It works through quiet and widespread methods to standardize life on both individual and social levels. According to Foucault, biopower focuses on regulating life and allowing death, rather than the spectacle of death. This system is clearly seen in the novel with the characters suffering from biopower on a daily basis.

The biopower refers to the set of rules that are made by authority to separate and label people in order to arrange them into groups and distribute resources along with rights and opportunities among them. As an example on that the division between black and white people, men and women, native and immigrants, etc. biopower affects people's rights, treatment, and their perception of humanity itself. In the American context, black people suffered the most by the impact of government's biopower. Even after the end of slavery, the laws still marginalized black people and favored white ones. The black characters in *The Help* display how power is used systematically to oppress them and how this oppression leads to resistance (Atzert, 2006, p. 63).

The characters in the novel represent the era in which the story is set. Aibileen and Minny, through their stories, show how society was divided. Aibileen represents submission and wisdom in responding to racism, while Minny represents resistance and anger. She refuses to accept what is happening to her. These qualities reflect the experience of black women at the time. In contrast, Hilly is the epitome of a Southern socialite in 1960s Mississippi and the definition of manipulative white individual who abuses their race's power. Coming from a well-connected wealthy family, she has a significant advantage over her servants. Hilly is a perfect example of biopower. She uses her influence to pass laws and build foundations that serve her own interests and goals while oppressing black people.

This paper argues that biopower has a significant part in constructing and controlling racism in *The Help*. The difficult times that black servants had to face because of the continued racism in the country is well-clarified in the novel. Even though the main characters do their jobs perfectly and keep themselves out of troubles, white people still would find ways to target them and justify that with the power of law.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Help is a well-known novel and has been studied in significant articles and research papers. For instance, there is Giulia Lagona's "The Right to Tell a Story: The Case of *The Help* by Kathryn

Stockett" (2024). This thesis explores Kathryn Stockett's novel with a focus on cultural appropriation, the trope of the white savior, and the linguistic description of Black characters through non-standard English. The analysis refers to the reliability of Stockett's representation of Black accents. The paper suggests that her perspective as a white author influenced some problematic elements in the narrative.

Also, there is "Clashing Concepts of Freedom in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*" (2018) by Carolin M. Tampi, Clara Mamentu, and Nihta V. F. Liando. This research discusses the conflicted interpretations of freedom in *The Help*. The study uses a qualitative approach to analyze the racial inequality. It reveals how these clashes create a narrative tension that reflects broader social issues. Another important article is "The Acts of Racial Discrimination to the Blacks as Seen in Stockett's *The Help*" (2021) by Olivia Nanlohy, Olga Rorintulus, and Sarah Kamagi. This study identifies and analyzes acts of racism in *The Help*, contextualized within the Jim Crow era. The authors show the racism faced by Black characters to see how these experiences reflect the unjust politics at the time.

Finally, there is "Resistance to Marginalization in America as Reflected in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*" (2020) by Devita Normalisa and Mohamad Ikhwan Rosyidi. This paper focuses on the resistance to marginalization to both nonwhite people and to the poor ones as well.

By reviewing the above literature, the researcher concludes that the topic of this paper is unique because no other paper has tried to apply Foucault's theory of biopower to analyze Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*.

2.1 Biopower and Racism in *The Help*

Katharine Scott depicts racial segregation in terms of racism and slavery in a modern way. She focuses on the use of power that justifies those actions. From the 15th to 19th centuries, black women were transported from Africa to America and forced to labor in terrible conditions for human beings. Black women had to deal with the cruelty of white society and the oppression of their racist white masters. Although slavery ended in 1865, but racism continued. It thrived when Jim Crow laws and systemic racism emerged in the 1960s. This clearly affected the lives of black Americans, especially domestic workers (Deroues, 2020, p.39).

The Help successfully displays different types of racism like public racism, individual racism, and also institutional racism. Individual racism makes the individual biased towards a certain group of people. For example, an individual might feel that his group of people are more important and better than the other groups. racism creates policies that support the downfall of the other group in terms of education or status. Sometimes racism may appear subtly without awareness, and at other times it appears clearly without shame. Individual racism is nothing but an extension of social racism where society is influential enough to make the individual act in a certain way. Simply put, individual racism can be obvious and intentional or quiet and based on ideas deeply rooted in society (Simon, 2021, p. 173).

To understand the roots of racism, we must understand the factor of power in it. This is represented by Jim Crow laws. Jim Crow is a fictional character who is used as a stereotype for African Americans. These laws were made to oppress the black people of South America. Even though the constitution clearly ensures equality, but the Jim Crow laws stated that black people and White people are equal but separate which is contradictory. In reality there was none of the so-called equality, because the black people had less opportunities in everything. Racial segregation was only a part of something much bigger which is 'institutional racism'. It was not

just a normal racism between two groups of people. The root of racism reaches to the core of the government and the country itself; in things like education, politics, health, etc (Rosyidi, 2020, p.11).

In the late 1800s, Jim Crow laws were first passed in the Southern states of the United States. These laws backed and encouraged racial segregation. People of color were worried about their safety after the end of slavery. The thought of black people using the same public spaces as white people made the white angry. If black people can reach the same jobs, schools, and health care then the white ones might attack or even kill them. White people were already unhappy with the progress some black people after the end of slave (Deroues, 2020 p.7)

For the controlling power, racism is nothing but a tool to please the society that keeps them in charge. The real power lies in the hands of society itself. A society structured by a certain idea is unable to get rid of it except through itself. As long as the child enjoys candy, men and women can take their anger and frustration on marginalized groups, the authority can be left to enjoy the dominance and wealth it controls. American authorities work by the saying 'Give the people what they want just before they know they want it.'

Kathryn Stockett's novel is able to present the mixture of racism and biopower through characters with ideal qualities and positions to exercise power. The separation between whites and blacks on all levels is what creates racism and marginalization because white people constitute the dominant power and blacks are the ones over whom this power is used (Sutradhar, 2015, p. 2771).

Control over the basics of life is what biopower represents. Biopower is created to organize life and to control it. It is also used for improving, adjusting, and creating a certain individual routine on personal and social levels. According to Foucault, it is a technique that operates on a national level. Biopower focuses on how to improve life and how to make manage it instead of letting it die. Thus, "[b]eneath that great absolute power...sovereignty took life and let live. And now we have the emergence of a power...of regularization, and it, in contrast, consists in making live and letting die." (Foucault, 2003, p. 106).

Stockett discusses the polarity between white people as the dominating group and black people as the minority. This division makes black people feel left out and separated in every part of life in the United States. In the book, it is clear that white people are in charge of the government. Ross Barnett was governor of Mississippi, and the book shows that he had the power to make what are called "Jim Crow laws in Mississippi" legal (Stockett, 2009, p. 185).

To delve deeper into the concept of biopower and its relationship to racism, it is necessary to understand the perspective of the oppressed in the face of this power. Racism and the use of power are fully portrayed through the lenses of three important characters in the novel. Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter. These characters represent oppression and resistance at the same time. A character like Aibileen Clark Represents the real struggles faced by African American maids working in white households.

At the beginning of the book, readers are introduced to Aibileen, Minny, and Miss Skeeter Phelan and their lives as individuals. Aibileen Clark is a middle-aged woman who works as a domestic servant in white homes. She excels at raising children. Last child she raised is Mae Mobley, the daughter of a woman named Elizabeth Leefolt. Although Mae is neglected by her mother, she finds love and respect with her caretaker Aibileen. She tells Mae, "You is kind, you is smart, you is important" (Stockett, 2009, p. 521). Aibileen's character expresses the silence and submission of the black community at that time, as she tries to maintain her job and gain some respect.

The other character is Minny Jackson. She is strong, vulnerable, and brave all at the same time. All People in Jackson know her for how hard she works and how good her food is. She is married to a violent husband and has five kids with him. The white people who employ her are constantly mad at her because of her boldness. And also, she is Aibileen's best friend who discusses everything with her, from sadness to happiness and joy. Hilly is her employer. She instructs Minny clearly that she does not want to see her using the family bathroom. When she did not follow Hilly's instructions and use the main bathroom, she was fired from her job immediately.

Minny's character represents the resistance to superior's biopower. According to Foucault, power is distributed among people with different degrees. Thus, there is always a sort of power struggle between the superior and inferior. Everyone wants to affect everyone else and everyone fights against the effects of others as best as they can. Nobody can always fight against power. According to Foucault, power is everywhere, which means that all people are caught inside it and want to get rid of it completely (McWhorter, 2004, p. 42).

Despite the opposition and reluctance of the oppressed, having an ally capable of penetrating the power is a very important for the oppressed working class. For Aibileen and Minny that resistance came in the form of Miss. Skeeter. Miss Skeeter is a complicated person. She is from a rich white family who was well educated at school. Her parents own a cotton farm and are very wealthy. But she is not like the other Jackson ladies. Miss Hilly and Miss Leefolt are her best friends. Constantine, her family's maid, raised her most of the time. When Skeeter finished college, she came home to find that her family's maid was no longer working for them. Skeeter was upset because she thought Constantine had left her, but she did not know that her mother had fired her. Constantine was an important person in Skeeter's life. She taught her to embrace her beauty and difference and not to let other people mock her. Constantine was the only one who sometimes did what Mama said. "Ugly live up on the inside. Ugly be a hurtful, mean person. Is you one a them peoples?" (Stockett, 2009, p. 58). Thus, Skeeter grew up refusing how white people mistreated other races.

Kathryn Stockett's main characters display the social situation at that time. Abilene, the wise maid, tries to adapt to this society, Minny, who uses her own personality and humor to resist the society, and Skeeter, a spoiled girl who later understands the work of evil power and tries to change it with her pen. The difference between Minny and Abilene's culture and Skeeter's show the gap among classes and races in the united states. For instance, the maids' southern accent is different from Skeeter's elegant writing (Szulkowska, 2017, p.43).

Hilly Holbrook is the representative of biopower in *The Help*. Hilly is Skeeter's childhood friend, and she also serves as president of the Junior League in Jackson, Mississippi. Junior League is an organization founded for women who help improve the community. It is a non-profit organization that provides help to the poor and improves the community (Gusmanthi, 2017, p. 79). This institution symbolizes high class in society and only occupied by women from the wealthy families, such as Hilly, Skeeter, and Miss Leefolt.

This organization is nothing but a front used to impose influence and laws by Hilly. It is ironic that Hilly holds an annual charity event called 'The Benefit' in which she raises money to help the poor in Africa and forgets those who live in her own town. It is remarkable how she is mistreating the exact same people next to her while enjoys the privilege of being white. Her helping of the poor in Africa creates a shallow image of her as someone who cares for others.

Hilly has the power and approval in society to impose illogical and inhumane laws such as the "Home Help Sanitation Initiative". This is an initiative that Hilly puts forward to separate

bathrooms of black people from white people, especially domestic workers. The legitimate reason for this is her belief that people of color carry malignant diseases, and therefore cannot occupy the same bathrooms as the owners of the house. She states “It’s just plain dangerous. Everybody knows they carry different kinds of diseases than we do” (Stockett, 2009, p 184).

It is expected that the one who enjoys high social status must go along with the official in order to maintain his social status. The circle surrounding Hilly help to put her in the position of the decision making. They support her influential position and strengthen the sort of power in her hand and in return she rewards that with her special status and her family's influence in the country. It is natural for people to form resistance against authority. Resistance is an integral part of any event of power (Bazzul, 2023). This resistance is gradually increased among people and it can lead to the fall of any regime.

Skeeter is the voice of the authorial biopower in *The Help*. She is the editor and writer of the Junior League Magazine. When Skeeter hears Hilly’s discussion with other woman about separating the bathrooms in their houses for the colored people. Skeeter was shocked and thought that it was cruel idea. It was unexpected that she would respond to Hilly and say, “[m]aybe we ought to just build you a bathroom outside, Hilly” (Stockett, 2009, p 10).

The sudden challenge to power removes the mask of the identity it hides, Skeeter challenges authorial and communal power that Hilly has. This causes Hilly to turn to her oppressive behavior and threaten Skeeter that if she objected to her decisions, she would fire her from the Junior League at once. “I don’t think you ought to be joking around about the colored situation. Not if you want to stay on as editor of the League, Skeeter Phelan” (Stockett, 2009, p. 10). The Junior League is an important institution for high class women in the novel. Hilly is willing to make her friend suffer the consequences of firing her from the Magazine as long as that ensures her continuing dominance.

Skeeter decides to turn the table against the authorities and racist people by writing a book that documents the abuses against black people. She names the book *The Help*. Skeeter is able to convince Abene, Minny, and the other maids to tell their suffering stories and publish them in the book. It is not easy for Skeeter to convince the maids, who are hesitant and afraid, especially Aibileen. As she said to Skeeter, “[m]iss Skeeter, I do this with you, I might as well burn my own house down” (Stockett, 2009, p. 85). The maids choose silence as it is the only option given to them by the racist authorities. Complaining about racism means attacking the society of white people who can respond aggressively.

It is difficult for a single individual to openly resist the power that oppresses them. For Aibileen, it can cost her everything, not just her social status, like Skeeter. For example, being accused of stealing silver could send her to prison, lose her family, and any other future chance of employment. For Skeeter, it is a journalistic job and her duty is to resist through her pen. “Literature became a vehicle of human communion, a weapon of transcendence, and an act of defiance.” (Fine, 1986, p.79). writing a book to resist dominant powers is a significant way of fighting back according to Foucault. Foucault “brought to the discipline of literary studies an emphasis on the function and condition of texts within a network of power relations” (Wolfreys, 2001, p. 178).

After Skeeter convinces Aibileen to help her in writing the book, Aibileen becomes the link between Skeeter and the other maids, especially Minny. Abene is a close friend of Minny's who was initially reluctant to join them. However, her suffering from the former employer, Hilly, prompted her to join them. Hilly accused her of stealing and fired her. This led her jobless and live

under the mercy of a violent husband. The true reason for firing her is that Minny used the same bathroom as Hilly. She eventually joins them stating that “[w]hat I care about is, if in ten years, a white lady will call my girls dirty and accuse them of stealing the silver” (Stockett, 2009, p. 187). She wants to give the power of resistance to future generation hoping that they will not be oppressed like she was.

The white people of Mississippi Jackson believe every claim made against the black. They also believe that black people are thieves and untrustworthy. The novel shows how the people react when Hilly claimed that Minny stole from her. This situation makes it very difficult for her to find a job. Yet, this is not the worst she has to face. When black people resist the Jim Crow Laws, a group of white extremists follow them. They terrify the black people, beat them, shoot them, and burns their houses to the ground (Szulkowska, 2017, p.48).

Minny’s help in publishing the book with Abelin is nothing more than a natural reaction to power. Using the book to control Hilly through fear is just another form of power. “If we put the Terrible Awful in the book, then Miss Hilly can’t let anybody find out the book is about Jackson. She doesn’t want anybody to know that stories about her.” (Stockett, 2009, p.). This plan shows how fear can be used to counter face oppression.

The “Terrible Awful” incident, in which Minny serves Hilly a pie containing her own excrement, represents how Minny was able to avenge not only herself but the black community as a whole. This made Hilly unable to respond because Minny might use the story against her. As Minny explained, “That pie thing, it might’ve saved our lives” (Stockett, 2009, p. 443). This shows that power is in the possession of everyone and that everyone is capable of exploiting their influence, no matter how weak they seem.

Skeeter worked tirelessly with the maids to collect their stories and represent them authentically. The book becomes revolutionary in Jackson, Mississippi. It resulted in a shock waves by exposing the truths and hypocrisies of white rich people like Hilly. Minny’s view of the book changed completely after she read it in its entirety. She states that “[a]ll I care about is what the folks in Jackson, Mississippi, got to say about it” (Stockett, 2009, p. 421). This statement by Minny embodies the risk and reward they were willing to take.

The oppressive way in which the owners of the power determine what is right and wrong, always serves their own best interest. People always resist and rise up against biopower. Minny and the rest of the maids gather together to fight against racism by telling their stories. They do that after watching the new maid of Hilly being beaten in the streets at the hands of policemen. Hilly accuses her of stealing and reports that to the police who are already willing to exercise their power on the black people. The maids choose to resist and their bravery pays off. The book achieved remarkable success and sold copies all over Mississippi and New York as well (Deroues, 2020, p.23).

3. CONCLUSION

The Help is more than just a historical work of fiction in 1960s Mississippi. It is a deep view of power and resistance concerning racism. Foucault’s concept of biopower can shows how the power of control is run through everyday life. Aibileen and Minny represent the struggles of African American women. They show how the oppressors control the system and the resilience needed to resist them. Skeeter’s role as an ally to the maids shows the deep impact when the resistant use their privilege against authorities. *The Help* capture a society that operates within segregation regime. It also shows the hope that a group of oppressed people come together to create a new life for themselves. Even though authorial power is dominant, but it is not ultimate. It can

be resisted and changed. The battle against racism is difficult one but it can be won with hard work and cooperation against all forms of racial oppression .

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