

‘White guilt’: a new excuse for another colonialist move? ‘First World Feminism’ and ‘Third World Women’ in *The Help*

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Introduction

The great success achieved by Tate Taylor’s film *The Help* (2011) is not surprising given that, once again, the opinions that reach the public audience seem to be those of white North American film critics or similar personalities, opinions ultimately represented by the four Academy Award nominations that the film received. The story has been praised for its feminist and anti-racist approach through its supposed portrayal of female bonding across racial boundaries. However, other opinions about this film are rarely taken into account, mostly when they disagree with this main-stream opinion of the film. Voices like that of the Association of Black Women Historians (ABWH), which should have more to say about a film of this kind, usually remain unheard. Tiffany Gill, Daina Berry, Kalli Gross, Janice Sumler-Edmond, and Ida Jones, on behalf of the ABWH, comment on how ‘*The Help* distorts, ignores, and trivializes the experiences of black domestic workers.’¹

Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* (2009), the novel upon which the film is based, is a metafictional prose narrative. The plot seems to be related to the author’s life, her view on the racial relationships in her country, and her ethical intentions (which she states in the essay ‘Too little, too late’²). Stockett explains that she feels embarrassed about the naïveté of her youth and wants to make up for it now. This ‘white guilt’ that she describes is represented in the novel by Skeeter, the main white character. *The Help* tells the story of a group of women who get together to write a book about the experiences of African-American maids working for white families during the early 1960s in Jackson, Mississippi. This is a complicated and dangerous task given the historical context of racial segregation and the African-American Civil Rights movement. The main characters are:

Miss Skeeter, Aibileen and Minny, and the novel is narrated by each of them in alternate chapters. Skeeter, the young white woman, is in charge of writing and compiling in a book (titled ‘Help’) of the stories told to her by the black maids. Aibileen and Minny are two maids who start this project with Skeeter, and subsequently they mediate with the rest of the maids, who finally participate.

The Help (novel) provides a deeper insight into the situation but falls into the same trap as the film, which is a close but hyperbolic rendition of the novel. As the ABWH further states, both the novel

¹ Tiffany Gill, Daina Bery, Kalli N. Gross, Janice Sumler-Edmond, and Ida B. Jones, ‘An Open Statement to Fans of *The Help*’, *Turning the Tide* 24 (4) (2011), p. 1.

² Kathryn Stockett, ‘Too little, too late’ in *The Help* (New York: Berkley Books, 2010), pp. 457-461.

and its filmic adaptation 'strip black women's lives of historical accuracy for the sake of entertainment.'³ This article focuses on the problems that arise in the novel because of its treatment of the black female characters and how the white women strip them of their subject position. *The Help* demonstrates how white women may worsen the condition of subalternity evinced by the black women, principally because of their effort to 'help' these women change their situation by silencing them and trying to speak for them. The relationship between 'First World Feminism' and 'Third World Women' has always been a difficult one, in part due to the problems that arise when helping subaltern subjects to speak up. This novel is an example of the complete failure that can result from an attempt of this kind, a failure that could be described, in this case, as a new type of colonialist move of white women over black women.

The first part of this essay deals with the situations of the main characters and their reasons for participation in the book. It shows how Skeeter's disregard for both her privileged position and the black maids' condition of double colonisation, coupled with the way in which the book deprives black characters of their own voices, prevents the book from being a successful feminist and racial response to the racial segregation in the US at the time. The second part of the paper identifies the ways in which Skeeter's project perpetuates racial and (racialised) gender stereotypes, in order to position the character as protector and mother figure. Finally, the essay draws to a conclusion by answering the main questions that have been raised throughout the paper.

'First World Feminism' and 'Third World Women'

In colonial and postcolonial contexts, black women have not only been victims of colonialist oppression, that is racist oppression, but also of the gender oppression coming from the patriarchal structures and values on which their societies are based, something known as 'the double colonisation of black women.'⁴ In the case of *The Help*, the relationship between the white ladies and the black maids is taken as a mere case of women's interaction, there is no mention of the historical reasons that led to the situation of the black women's double colonisation. Both the colonising (white women) and the colonised (black women) in once-colonised countries are affected by gender oppression. Due to patriarchy, white women are responsible for the children and the household issues; and, due to the traces left by colonialism and slavery, they are in charge of supervising the black help in the household context of the novel. Here, white women become the oppressors, although they remain subaltern under the patriarchal social structure. As John McLeod states, 'western women's relationships with the dual workings of colonialism and patriarchy is often particularly complicated as members of the 'civilised' colonising nation, yet disempowered under a Western patriarchal rubric.'⁵ Likewise, *The Help* portrays a context of the postcolonial USA (the 1960s) in which white women simultaneously remain oppressed under the 'Western patriarchal rubric', and yet help to perpetuate the situation of racial oppression.

³ Tiffany Gill, Daina Bery, Kalli N. Gross, Janice Sumler-Edmond, and Ida B. Jones, p. 2.

⁴ John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2nd edition, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 200.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

Skeeter is a twenty-four year-old educated woman who has just finished her liberal studies in journalism at the university. Initially, it seems that she is a freethinker and a self-assertive person simply because she wants to be a working woman. However, after a deeper analysis of the novel, we see that she is shy, quiet and ashamed of her physical appearance, and it seems that her position towards issues such as marriage have more to do with this than any personal or political decisions. Skeeter represents the postfeminist mentality, just because she studied and is now a working woman she believes that she is free from any kind of patriarchal oppression.

Chandra T. Mohanty, in the context of the tension between what she denominates First World Feminism and Third World Women⁶, describes herself in the following way:

I am for the Two-Thirds World, but with the privileges of the One Third World. I speak as a person situated in the One-Third World, but from the space and vision of, and in solidarity with, communities in struggle in the Two-Thirds World.⁷

Although Skeeter pretends to have a similar position, does she really speak from the same perspective and in total support of the black maids? As we shall see, this does not seem to be the case. There is no excuse for Skeeter's ignorance of the black women's situation. As an example, it is worth looking at bell hooks' [sic] explanation of what she felt when she encountered white feminists:

I did not feel sympathetic to white peers who maintained that I could not expect them to have knowledge of or understand the life experiences of black women. Despite my background (living in racially segregated communities), I knew about the lives of white women, and certainly no white women lived in our neighbourhood, attended our schools, or worked in our homes.⁸

The main reason why Skeeter wants to write this book is because she wants to become a writer. She gets the idea from Aibileen's son and his plan to write about 'what it was like to be colored [sic] working for a white man in Mississippi.'⁹ Even though Skeeter approached Aibileen because she needed help with a cleaning column for a newspaper, they seem to establish a friendship. However, it is never clear whether this is due to their personal interests (Skeeter is a writer and Aibileen is someone who wants to speak up) or to a social responsibility, as Aibileen would have felt forced to help her anyway because of her subaltern position. While Skeeter thinks that writing about 'The Help' is going to be both groundbreaking and meaningful in the current context of the African-American Civil Rights Movement, her final or true goal is to become a writer, she wants to find an issue that is 'worthy journalism material'¹⁰. She uses this topic to get what she wants, not to make a political claim. Skeeter does change throughout the

6 One-Third World and Two-Thirds World are Mohanty's terms to refer to the more commonly known as First World and Third World, respectively, denoting access to property and riches.

7 Chandra T. Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28 (2003), pp. 499-535 (p. 507).

8 bell hooks, "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory" in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. by Joy James and Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 131-145 (p. 141).

9 Kathryn Stockett, *The Help* (New York: Berkley Books, 2010), p. 86.

10 Stockett, p. 74.

story, but one should wonder whether she does so consciously, because she realises that what is happening around her is not right; or whether such a change is simply an inevitable consequence of narrative events, because her friends abandon her. This is demonstrated by the fact that she does not include Constantine's story in the book.¹¹ The only thing that Skeeter could do for the black maids, to demonstrate her good intentions, would be to publish this story. Skeeter is incredibly ashamed about the incident with Constantine,¹² it made her realise that her story is much like the stories told by the other black maids and not the idealised relationship that she remembers. Yet, she does not arouse overt suspicion over her motivations for writing the book, nor does she clarify her position towards the racist climate in the outset.

Aibileen, the black servant who gives Skeeter the idea for the book, works for Miss Leefolt (one of Skeeter's best friends). Eventually, she accepts Skeeter's proposal: 'and I think about all my friends, what they done for me. What they do every day for the white women they waiting on [...] Law help me, but something's gone have to be done.'¹³ Aibileen is willing to do it because she will not lose anything, but she is truly aware of what it means for the rest of the maids, unlike Skeeter. Before her son died, she epitomised female acceptance in the face of adversity and she coped with her situation without saying a word, but after this event she does not want to be silent anymore: 'I feel that bitter seed growing inside a me, the one planted after Treelore died.'¹⁴ Aibileen is an intelligent woman, she has strong and clear ideas and values.¹⁵ In fact, she insists on writing her stories, which makes her the only black maid who is awarded a voice of her own, unmediated by the white journalist.

The second black maid, Minny, is the character who represents the hardest side of life in the novel's Jackson setting. Her life is a circle of violence both within and outside of the home. At first, Minny does not yield to Aibileen's proposition because she sees that Skeeter only wants to write the book for her own benefit: 'She crazy if she think we do something dangerous as that. For *her*.'¹⁶ But still, it is obvious that she sees how it would be a good opportunity for her to speak up: 'I've been trying to tell white women the truth about working for them since I was fourteen years old.'¹⁷ She is one of the most active and revolutionary black characters because she pronounces some of the clearest statements about racial issues. We see that she is very frustrated by the situation, yet she does not do anything to change things as she is aware of the high risk she would run if she spoke.¹⁸ Minny gets exasperated because she wanted more from the book and she sees that they are just including everyday-life events that 'don't have nothing to do with colored rights.'¹⁹ This shows how, from the maids' perspective, this book should be a political act.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 368.

12 Constantine was fired for racist reasons.

13 Stockett, p. 28.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 98.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 319.

16 Stockett, p. 131.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

As Gayatri C. Spivak suggests, living in the same social context does not imply sharing common experiences. What Skeeter does not understand is that ‘beyond sisterhood there is still racism, colonialism and imperialism.’¹⁹ Skeeter seems to be quite naïve and might believe that her relationship with Constantine is the common one to have with the black help, which does not mean that her relationship with her maid was free from racism. ‘Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political praxis’²⁰ and part of these ‘concrete historical and political praxis’ are the other interlocking oppressions (such as race, class, sexuality, etc.), something that Skeeter does not seem to see or want to see, at least in the beginning. Sisterhood, understood as the bonding among women who share similar experiences, only exists between the black maids because they share common experiences and are therefore able to understand and support each other. Skeeter’s reluctance to face the problem of racial segregation prevents her from participating in this bonding with the black maids. As hooks explains, ‘racism abounds in the writing of white feminists, reinforcing white supremacy and negating the possibility that women will bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries.’²¹

McLeod explains that ‘Spivak has consistently advocated that critics must always look to the specifics of their own positions and recognise the political, cultural and institutional contexts in which they work.’²² Critics and scholars do not have to be black in order to speak about black issues. They need to learn from black people or other subaltern groups; then they may be able to speak in their defence without depriving these groups of their own voice, although it is unclear whether this is an impossible aspiration. This is similar to what Uma Narayan claims when she states that no person can speak for the whole range of Third World Women, as there are many third-world contexts and times. The idea that someone may belong to one of them does not give them the right to speak for any other third-world context.²³ Therefore, in the case of *The Help*, it is not necessarily a problem that Skeeter is white and does not share the same experiences as the black maids, as this could equally apply to a black person coming from another country, for example. The problem in this novel, as well as in the world in general, is the system of representation in which the subaltern voices are not properly heard. It is a failure of interpretation and not of articulation: subaltern groups do talk, the problem is the system of representation where subaltern subjects do not represent themselves but are represented by those in power, the same people who are responsible for silencing the subaltern. Therefore, intellectuals must learn to listen to the oppressed groups and stop speaking for them; and Skeeter, as a white intellectual, is no exception.

In relation to this last point, it is important to consider the possible reasons why Skeeter wants to show both the good and bad stories. On the one hand, it might be a way to make it easier for white people to see the situation and change, as they would not feel as if they were being directly accused. This

¹⁹ Chandra T. Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses’, *Feminist Review*, 30 (1988), pp. 61-88 (p. 77).

²⁰ Mohanty 1998, p. 67.

²¹ hooks, p. 133.

²² McLeod, p. 213.

²³ Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 5.

is analogous to discourses in Masculinity Studies, where commentators such as Harry Brod propose that: by looking at the superordinate instead of the subordinate individual, it may make it easier for the oppressing groups to acknowledge their structural power because they would not feel attacked as individuals.²⁴ On the other hand, it may be that Skeeter just wants to excuse white people such as herself, a kind of personal approach to feel good because she does not understand (or does not like the reason) why Constantine left. As hooks explains, ‘we [black women] could be heard only if our statements echoed the sentiments of the dominant discourse.’²⁵ A third possibility may be that, as ‘privilege nurtures blindness to those without the same privileges,’²⁶ she simply does not see what the situation truly is for the black help.

It should be noted that Skeeter does not approach the situation of the black help with regard to their oppression as women, but rather their oppression as *black* women. That is, it is not a case of white women saving black women from patriarchal oppression, but of white women saving black women from racist oppression, which is carried out by the white women themselves. Therefore, even though Skeeter is also a woman, she belongs to the oppressors’ side of the racist structure. As McLeod states, ‘white women have failed to see themselves as the potential oppressors of black and Asian women, even when adopting benevolent positions towards them.’²⁷ We can easily apply this statement to Skeeter’s relationship with the black help, as she fails to see (or does not want to see) herself as part of the structure that helps oppress the black maids that she wants to help. As a solution to these problems, McLeod summarises Helen Carby’s proposal:

Carby asks us to recognise the ways in which white women have oppressed black and Asian women in the past, and explore how Western feminism excludes black and Asian women in the present. White women must listen and learn from black and Asian women, and be willing to transform their prevailing attitudes.²⁸

However, a question that arises from this is whether Skeeter is willing to do this or not. Mohanty claims that we should ‘read up’ power structures in order to learn how they work. We already know how and why oppressed groups are oppressed, what we need to do is learn how the oppressing groups oppress, so that we can know how to fight it. Through the book, Skeeter compiles the different personal accounts that the black maids tell her, but she does not seem to see beyond these particular stories. This prevents her from properly understanding how the whole social structure functions, which in turn prevents her from truly fighting it.

Decolonising feminism... achieved?

²⁴ Harry Brod, ‘Studying Masculinities as Superordinate Studies’ in *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 161-175.

²⁵ hooks, p. 141.

²⁶ Mohanty 2003, p. 510.

²⁷ McLeod, p. 208.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

It is worth noting the way in which Stockett represents the black maids and how this is made in comparison to the portrayal of the white ladies. Mohanty talks about 'five specific ways in which 'women' as a category of analysis is used in Western feminist discourse on women in the Third World to construct 'third-world women' as a homogeneous 'powerless' group often located as implicit victims of particular cultural and socio-economic systems.'²⁹ Some of these 'ways' are used in *The Help* to characterise the black community: women as victims of male violence; women as universal dependants; or women simply defined as part of familial systems.

As Mohanty suggests, 'without the overdetermined discourse that creates the third world, there would be no (singular privileged) first world.'³⁰ Skeeter is not a character free from racism or the influence of patriarchy, even if the author tries to define her in a more sympathetic way. In other words, it can be seen, as Mohanty claims, that these 'ways' of categorising Third World Women could be easily applied to First World Women. A feminist reading of *The Help* shows that the white women's relationship with men is not that different from those of the black maid's, as all of these women suffer from gender expectations and oppression, even though it may be at different levels. Skeeter, for example, is continuously pressed by her mother and friends to get married.³² By undervaluing a black woman's position, the First World liberal feminist woman (in this case, Skeeter) tries to place herself in a superior and more important position.

Skeeter's patronising attitude towards the maids is also quite egocentric: firstly, because she assumes that they have participated in the book for her; and secondly, because she thinks of herself as their protector and does not see that they can take care of themselves, as they have done for their entire lives.³¹ As hooks states:

Some of these [white] women place themselves in the position of 'authorities' who must mediate communication between racist white women (naturally they see themselves as having come to terms with their racism) and angry black women whom they believe are incapable of rational discourse.³²

In the same way, the black maids' concern about Skeeter, and the consequences that writing this book could have had for her, at times seems a little excessive: 'I wonder what Miss Skeeter would do if she was here and it kind a makes me sad. I know ain't nobody in town gone sign a book for her and tell her she brave. Ain't nobody gone tell her they look after her.'³³ This could simply be gratitude, but it could also be seen as an example of Skeeter's maternal function and her portrayal as the white saviour:

29 Mohanty 1988, p. 66.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

32 Stockett, p. 56.

31 Stockett, p. 444.

32 hooks, p. 142.

33 Stockett, p. 405.

Often the white women [...] remain patronizing and condescending when they relate to black women. This is not surprising given that frequently their discourse is aimed solely in the direction of a white audience and the focus solely on changing attitudes rather than addressing racism in a historical and political context.³⁴

Skeeter behaves in a rather hypocritical way: she is allegedly writing a book to help black women, but she does not do anything in her private life to change their situation. She does not question how her behaviour towards the black people at her home might have been, except in the case of Constantine.

Furthermore, another issue that needs to be addressed is the anonymity of the book they write collectively: is it published anonymously to protect the identities of its sources, or because Skeeter does not want to speak for the black women and deprive them of their own subject position? In her aforementioned essay, we can see that Stockett is aware of the problems that speaking for black people can present.³⁵ This is made explicit in the novel through the character of Minny, when she states that ‘it’s a sorry fact that it’s a white woman doing this.’³⁶ Consequently, one could think that the anonymity Skeeter’s book has more to do with Stockett’s own concern about depriving oppressed groups of their own voice: ‘I was scared, a lot of the time, that I was crossing a terrible line, writing in the voice of a black person.’³⁷

However, in the fictional story, it seems that the first possibility is more accurate as we know from the beginning that Skeeter wants to become a writer, and that she would have had no problem to publish something using her own name. Moreover, at the end of the novel, it is Minny who makes a somewhat controversial confession, which supports the idea of the black woman’s need of white help: ‘I didn’t want Aibileen to know that. I don’t want anybody to know how much I need those Skeeter stories.’³⁸ Therefore, when Skeeter speaks for these women, she oppresses them further. Once again, they do not only remain silenced, but it is ‘made evident’ that they would never be able to speak up for themselves. Furthermore, even though it may seem that the three women are given equal importance in this story, Skeeter is given 204 pages, whereas Aibileen and Minny have only 130 and 108 respectively.

Conclusion

The Help is a story that demonstrates that, as Audre Lorde states, ‘without community there is no liberation.’³⁹ Racism is one more way of ‘dividing and conquering’; if Skeeter wants to create unity and truly show that ‘they are just the same’, then she needs to seriously confront her racism and see that she was wrong to state that ‘nothing separates [them].’⁴⁰ Nevertheless, her view of the situation changes towards the end of the novel, where she starts to understand that ‘even though so many of the stories are

34 hooks, p. 141.

35 Stockett, p. 461.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 460.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

39 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2013), p. 99.

40 Stockett, p. 263.

good, celebrating the bonds of women and family, the bad stories will be the ones that catch the white people's attention.⁴¹

Spivak explains that 'it is the slippage from rendering visible the mechanism to rendering vocal the individual [...] that is consistently troublesome.'⁴² Skeeter does make visible the mechanism, however, the black women in this story do not really have a voice of their own. Therefore, it should also be asked whether they should have said *no* to Skeeter's proposal. They were aware of both the advantages and disadvantages that the book's publication implied. They knew that it would have been very difficult to speak up on their own, yet they also knew that it was not right that they needed Skeeter's help in order to do it. One should wonder whether the end justifies the means in this case: even though they needed Skeeter to do it, it was still a personal decision. One may also question how helpful the book could be as an attempt to change the situation of racist segregation. It may not be able to initiate a big change, but *The Help* shows how its novel-within-a-novel changes the situations of various characters, such as Skeeter's view of the world and Aibileen's position in it – the latter gains strength and self-assertiveness, as the final talk with Miss Hilly demonstrates.⁴³

Concerning the idea that Stockett has failed to fulfil her intentions with the novel, it is significant to consider the following quotation that she takes from Howell Raine's Pulitzer Prize-Winning article - 'Grady's Gift' - which she uses to explain the difficulty of dealing with the issues raised: 'For the dishonesty upon which 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.'⁴⁴ In this essay, Stockett makes an effort to avoid accusations of appropriating someone else's voice, however, it is difficult for the reader not raise such concerns:

What I am sure about is this: I don't presume to think that I know what it really felt like to be a black woman in Mississippi, especially in the 1960s. I don't think it is something any white woman on the other end of a black woman's paycheck could ever truly understand. But trying to understand is vital to our humanity.⁴⁵

Is really the privilege of the postcolonial intellectuals also their loss, as Spivak suggests?⁴⁶ Through Skeeter in the novel's narrative, Stockett might have failed with her objective, but the fact that she has tried may be a starting point. Nevertheless, we should never forget about the importance of Edward W. Said's claim about 'the critic's institutional responsibility,'⁴⁷ as Spivak reminds us. As previously noted critics and scholars play a key role in developing the systems of representation that 'shape' our world. For this reason, they should be careful in the way they carry out this task, as the living conditions of many

41 *Ibid.*, p. 285.

42 Gayatri C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313 (p. 285).

43 Stockett, p. 450.

44 Stockett, p. 460.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 461.

46 Spivak, p. 287.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 280.

groups of (subaltern) people depend on or are directly affected by them, as they are talking from a privileged position of power. Stockett's failure, even though it may not have been intentional, may be a colonialist move working from an imperial feminist position. Through her attempt to make up for past personal mistakes and the history of racism in US society, Stockett ultimately oppresses the people she wants to help. This is emphasised through the conditions set out in the novel's plot: in order to leave behind their condition as subaltern subjects, the black maids must accept help from the white writer. The "white guilt" that Stockett feels and wants to be liberated from becomes, in this case, one more instance of colonisation of an oppressed group through the appropriation of their voice.

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