

## **A Study of Kathryn Stockett's the Help from Patricia Hill Collins' View: a Black Feminist Study**

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### **Introduction**

From the very beginning of formation of family as a social institution, women were always considered as an inferior gender. In fact, the families were the first agents that oppressed women because of different ideologies of the time as Walter claims that "For centuries, and all over Europe, there were families who disposed of 'unnecessary' or unmarried daughters by shutting them away in convents" (Walter 1). Not only has been this idea dominant among uneducated people, but also literary people suffer from this ideology as Selden et al. remind that "Aristotle declared that 'the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities', and St Thomas Aquinas believed that woman is an 'imperfect man'" (Selden et al. 115). Also women did not have any rights in politics and they were regarded inferior as Arneil suggests that "Examining the dualistic nature of western political thought provide us with the tool to uncover the profound, but often silent, role of gender in politics" (Arneil 7).

The tension among women to demand their rights in different terms from nineteenth century as Schmitz imposes that "Women's struggle for equal rights in the Western world began in the nineteenth century" (Schmitz 176). However this approach started to establish formally and female equality was considered important in twentieth century as Schmitz continues that "However, it was not until the first half of the twentieth century that the main demands of women were fulfilled in most Western countries,..." (Schmitz 166). In fact feminism has challenged all the ideologies regarding the stereotypes about women. Wilfred et al. mentions that "feminism is an overtly political approach and can attack other approaches for their false assumptions about women" (Wilfred et al. 223). The feministic thought started to affect different fields particularly literature and literary criticism based on feminism was formed in which political, social, economic and psychological oppression of women were analyzed. Tyson claims that "Broadly defined, feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions)

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reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” (Tyson 83).

Among females, women of colors are marginalized not only by their own male society, but also by the white community because their race. So it can be said that these women are ‘double marginalized’. Hence the need for a feminist movement which is related to their own community and serves their needs was felt. This need was considered as serious once black feminism was introduced. This movement was effective in a way that it could provide social support for them; “African-American Women in Defense of Ourselves, a self-described grassroots initiative of 1,603 women from the academy, the arts and the community, serves as an example of Black women challenging external/internal oppressions” (Stanlie 1993). In 1960s alongside with other feminist movements, black feminism started to shape in which different forces were considered important and issues of black females were addressed. Harris claims:

Womanist theology and ethics made its initial break into academic discourse in 1985 with the publication of an article by Katie G. Cannon entitled “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness,” where in she described how black women scholars in the fields of theology, ethics, biblical studies, and the history and sociology of religion had begun problematizing and critiquing the ways racist, sexist, and classist ideologies were sewn into dominant Christian, feminist, and black liberation theological perspectives. (Harris 143)

There have been different philosophers in black feminist movements who contributed to this movement a big deal. One of the most important socialists is Patricia Hill Collins (1948) whose work is a cross field of race, class and gender and the effects on these issues in society. Stolley claims that “Her work on the intersections of race, social class, and gender has expanded sociological and feminist analysis to show how these systems have complex and interlocking effects” (Stolley 3). In her idea oppression can be felt individually, within a group and in different systems in society. “To Collins, oppression is experienced and resisted at three levels: personal biography, group or community (within the cultural context created by race, class, and gender), and social institutions (2000)” (Stolley 33). Her works reflect the importance of whole people to reach a thorough image of society.

In her view, black females are stereotyped in society and they are associated with different and negative characteristics. Harris and Watson quotes from Plamer and Meht that “Collins presents several prevailing stereotypes that have contributed to the continued oppression of African American women in the United States: mammy, black matriarch, welfare mother, black lady, and jezebel” (69). By these stereotypes and conceptions by which black females are presented, they are oppressed; “Collins maps out five predominant controlling images that have functioned to objectify and oppress African American women” (Harris and Watson 69). In the following part of this research paper, the stereotyped images of black women in the novel of *The Help*

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by Kathryn Stockett based on Collin's ideas will be provided but first there would be a brief overview about the author.

Kathryn Stockett who was born in 1969 in America wrote one of the bestselling books called *The Help* (2009). This novel from the very beginning was so impressive that it was adapted for a movie in Hollywood. Martin claims that "Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* has been a popular sensation since its initial publication. The book was a national bestseller and was quickly turned into a critically acclaimed film" (Martin 2). Also like the novel, the movie was so dramatic that it was appreciated by critics. Sládková claims that "Given the fact that *The Help* has become an American best-seller, and a movie was based upon it (which was not only successful, but also nominated for Academy Awards 2012)" (Sládková 5).

Kathryn Stockett was raised by an African maid after her parents' divorce. It can be said that her obsession with black females is reflected in her novels. "Growing up, Kathryn Stockett was raised with a black maid, Demetrie. *The Help* grew out of a question that Stockett was never able to ask Demetrie regarding her treatment and her experiences working as a maid for a white family in Mississippi during the tumultuous decade of the 1960s." (Martin 2).

Stockett's feelings about her hometown are contradictory; embarrassment and pride at the same time and these could be felt in her novel. "In interviews, Stockett describes her feelings about her native state of Mississippi as being characterized by both pride and shame, but mostly pride. These attitudes are fully reflected in the text of *The Help*" (Martin 2). Different subjects are being presented in the novel some of which are the focus of the study. "A number of sensitive and controversial subjects are presented in *The Help*, though they do not become the focus of the text. In addition to racism, the novel has instances of domestic abuse, a Peeping Tom, and miscarriage. There are several uses of profanity in the novel as well" (Martin 2).

So it can be said that in this novel, different aspects of black females are presented; their social, cultural and economic status and the way they are oppressed by society are reflected throughout the novel. Suastife claims that "Suastife In the novel of *The Help* written by Kathryn Stockett in 2009, the writer shows the representation of racial discrimination in America" (Suastife 33). Also the stereotypes of the black people as lower and inferior group of people are reflected in the novel and that is the reason of their oppression. "The black people get the racial discrimination because they are regarded as diseases, because they are black and dirty" (Suastife 33).

## **Discussion**

The image of mammy refers to the image of black woman as a faithful and obedient woman who devotes herself utterly to life of the white family for whom she is working. She can change into an ideal symbol of devotion "By loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and "family" better than her own" (Collins 72), so she

remains dominant and submissive forever. In order for a black woman to be a good one, she should be a 'mammy' which means she should be "the faithful, obedient domestic servant" (Collins 72). The ideology tries to make the black woman the way the dominant group wants. To do so, she tries so hard and maybe considered as respectable however "the mammy still knows her "place" as obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination" (Collin 72-73). Actually it can be said it is the mammy who transmit the ideology of dominant group directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously so she is the agent of oppression since "Black mothers are encouraged to transmit to their own children the deference behavior that many are forced to exhibit in their mammified jobs" and hence "The mammy image is central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class" (Collins 73).

The picture of mammy is an omni present picture throughout the novel and this image is associated with almost all the helps in the novel particularly Aibileen as she says that, "You already up, Baby Girl? Why you didn't holler for me?" She laugh, dance a little happy jig waiting on me to get her out. I give her a good hug. I reckon she don't get too many good hugs like this after I go home" (Stockett 13). Having read the novel, it could be understood that Aibileen's son has been killed by white people however she could find comfort raising white children and they can fulfill the role of her son for her as she narrates that "Five months after the funeral, I lifted myself up out a bed. I put on my white uniform and put my little gold cross back around my neck and I went to wait on Miss Leefolt cause she just have her baby girl" (Stockett 10-1).

It has been argued that the image of mammy is transferred mostly by the black women to their own daughters so this negative image which is necessary for suppression of black women would never disappear since "By teaching Black children their assigned place in White power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression" (Collins 73). In the novel the training of the children particularly daughters can be realized so that the transferring image of mammy from one generation to another generation survives as in case of Minny and her daughter as "Last week, Minny started bringing Sugar to work. She getting her trained for when Minny have her baby and Sugar gone have to fill in for her. Tonight Miss Celia ask Sugar to work late, say she drive her Home" (Stockett 692).

The second image that has been developed by white dominant group refers to the issue of being mother in black family which is in sharp contrast with the image of being mother for the children of white people and mostly these black females are to be blamed for the social problems of black society since "Spending too much time away from home, these working mothers ostensibly could not properly supervise their children and thus were a major contributing factor to their children's failure at..." (Collins 75) different social segments of the society. Under such condition, the image of black woman has been distorted and they are portrayed as negative mothers at home.

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Therefore the social problems arisen from black society are not due to the improper situation created by white society but by the poor training which is result of absence of black mothers and spending time at white people. In the novel the image of matriarch is associated with Minny as she knows that she is ignoring her own children and life because she has to work. So she thinks with herself:

I try to concentrate on the week. Tomorrow's heavy cooking and I've got the church supper Saturday night and the service on Sunday. When am I going to clean my own house? Wash my own kids' clothes? My oldest girl, Sugar, is sixteen and pretty good about keeping things neat, but I like to help her out on the weekends the way my mama never helped me. (Stockett 241)

This suppressing image of black woman accounts for poor manner of black children in the society and later the economic and social problems that they are to confront so that society and mostly white people should not be blamed because "dominant ideology suggests that Black children lack the attention and care allegedly lavished on White, middle-class children" (Collins 76). This image in the novel is confirmed when Skeeter asks following question from Aibileen: "Alright. Then ... what does it feel like, to raise a white child when your own child's at home, being ..." I swallow, embarrassed by the question, "... looked after by someone else?" (Stockett 257) and when Aibileen answers that "I-I spec I like looking after the kids best" (Stockett 257) shows that the black females accept the image of matriarch.

This image is in opposite to what has been said above; the images of mammy and matriarch which complete each other are related to activity and being active of black females in working for white people so they do not have time to spend for their own family however this image does not hold true for welfare mother. This image creates some issues for black females and stereotypes them. It makes them needy who are not able to "pass on the work ethic..." (Collins 79) to their children. They produce a lot of children but since they are lazy and are not living with men who support them they remain economically weak. In the novel mostly the case of Minny and her husband implies the image of welfare. In one incident, the behavior of her husband as a dominant person justifies this image as Minny says that "Shoot. He strut around the kitchen like a plumed rooster cause he in front a the kids," I say. "Act like he the only one supporting the family and I'm just doing this to keep my poor self-entertained" (Collins 85).

This negative image is so wide spread that dominates among black society. It results into hatred of the children of their mothers since they regard them as the responsible for the situation that they are facing and even if they have social problems, the black welfare mothers are to blames because they could not pass the moral disciplines and ethics to their own children as in case of Minny and her children in which Minny is the one who produces a lot of children and could not provide a proper training for them;

she says:

Mama, fix me something to eat. I'm hungry." That's what my youngest girl, Kindra, who's five, said to me last night. With a hand on her hip and her foot stuck out. I have five kids and I take pride that I taught them yes ma'am and please before they could even say cookie. All except one. "You ain't having nothing till supper," I told her. "Why you so mean to me? I hate you," she yelled and ran out the door. I set my eyes on the ceiling because that's a shock I will never get used to, even with four before her. The day your child says she hates you, and every child will go through the phase, it kicks like a foot in the stomach. But Kindra, Lord. It's not just a phase I'm seeing. That girl is turning out just like me. (Stockett 95)

Superficially this image should be much neater than those three images that have been presented above. This image refers to the social status of black women as successful subjects in their social life. In this image, black lady is not a slave or economically exploited. She is not lazy and she is not taking care of white children. Even she is not to raise her own children she is not a woman anymore. She is hardworking not in domestic and field jobs but in respected jobs in the society and because they want to abolish the images of mammy, matriarch and welfare, she would be stripped of every quality which is associated with being a female and "they become less feminine" (Collins 81). Although they try to be an ideal and symbol in their society, they fail hence "black women are responsible for the disadvantaged status of African Americans" (Lubiano 335). Accordingly it can be concluded that black females do not prosper in their private life when they are married because they are deprived of the trickiest weapon of a woman which is femininity and being gentle.

In the novel there is no image of a black female as a black lady since almost none of them had the opportunity to study. However Skeeter, the white woman who is helping them to gather their experiences and share them can be associated with the role of a black lady since she has always been into studying and working and she fails at making relation with opposite sex. There are different incidents regarding Skeeter that shows this white woman who wants to help the black females is looking her femininity gradually. While she has a date, she says that "I sigh. I guess it's because I'm a big person and have never felt petite or particularly feminine or girly, but that tractor. It just seems to sum up so much" (Stockett 214). In another incident her mother teaches her how to behave before men. She says:

"And don't forget to smile. Men don't want a girl who's moping around all night, and don't sit like some squaw Indian, cross your -" "Wait, my legs or my ank -" "Your ankles. Don't you remember anything from Missus Rheimer's etiquette class? And just go ahead and lie and tell him you go to church every Sunday, and whatever you do, do not

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crunch your ice at the table, it's awful. Oh, and if the conversation starts to lag, you tell him about our second cousin who's a city councilman in Kosciusko ...” (Stockett 302)

It has been discussed that one of the most important ways of oppression of black people by white society is to assign stereotypes to black people in different forms. These stereotypes become accusation against black people and public always regard them by such pictures that are mostly negative. One of these pictures which are always associated with black people is their sexual deviation. So most of the black men are categorized as rapist and black women are labeled as whores so when a black woman is raped by a white male is not a crime “ Because efforts to control Black women's sexuality lie at the heart of Black women's oppression, historical jezebels and contemporary “hoochies” represent a deviant Black female sexuality” (Collins 81). This image aims to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women so it could justify the wide spread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women. Also another function of this image accounts for the high rate of reproduction in black society so it is the black woman who is to blame for economic problems. To summarize this image, Collins believes:

Taken together, these prevailing images of Black womanhood represent elite White male interests in defining Black women's sexuality and fertility. Moreover, by meshing smoothly with intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, they help justify the social practices that characterize the matrix of domination in the United States. (Collins 84)

This image can be found in the novel when Skeeter and her mom are talking about black females particularly Constantine and her mother says that “They're different that way, you know. Those people have children and don't think about the consequences until it's too late.” (Stockett 633). In another incident of the book, it could be understood that black females are always target of being harassed by white male but the question remains; who should be blamed? “Angry stories come out, of white men who've tried to touch them. Winnie said she was forced over and over.” (Collins 454)

## **Conclusion**

Having read the story, different ways of oppression could be found in the novel based on the proposed model by Collins. The most important form that was discussed was the work of ideology and stereotypes. These stereotypes were like infectious diseases that could take over the minds of people and could be transferred from one generation to another generation. It means that the children of white people from the very beginning were subject to such images and their minds were occupied by the racist ideas. Also it was understood that the black people were always oppressed by economic situation in which they have to do the most of the works and get the least

payment. It could be seen that the black maids were forced to do the most difficult jobs and in return they get the money that was not enough. This economic situation make them always work as it has been claimed that “We never was lazy cause we used to really work. We used to work like mens. Oh, fight sometime, fuss sometime, but worked on” (Simonsen 39).

The other important way of oppression that was discussed throughout the thesis and it was based on Collins vie was the law of marriage in racist American society in which interracial marriages were forbidden by state law. The law in that time stated that white men could not marry black men because they are not from the same class and race in society. Therefore the white men were not worried about getting married with black women since “Propertied White men have exploited, objectified, and refused to marry African- American women and have held out trappings of power to their poorer brothers who endorse this ideology” (Collins 162). This injustice against colored women make them the most victimized subject in both societies and when they give birth to children, their own children are not treated as usual and they have to give their own children up since it is against the norms of both societies. It is the law here which gives advantage to white men of society in which there would be no responsibility and consequence to follow.

To finish this paper, however it can be claimed that black women are responsible for their own situation. On one hand, they are obedient servants that they do not demand their rights so that they can be manipulated easily by white and black male society. On the other hand, white children from the very beginning of their birth are trained and raised by black females and the way that they are brought up and treated by them, the ideology is transferred throughout this generation and even they black women advertise the propaganda of white people and become the proponents of white people’s ideology.

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## Summary

### **A Study of Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* from Patricia Hill Collins' View: a Black Feminist Study**

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Kathryn Stockett (1948) is an American writer whose book called *The Help* (2008) became so popular and famous in that time. She has not written many books yet this book has so much to tell about a permanent problem even in modern era. The oppression of black females, sexism, racism and social differences are reflected in her book. Actually she dramatizes the difficulties that black females undergo throughout their life. *The Help* shows the life experience of different black maids from their own perspective. Since the world view of black females is different from white females', looking at world through the characters' point of view makes reader feel that experience and observation. The relationship of black females with each other and the way they are treated in male and white society are reflected in this story. There have been different philosophers in black feminist movements who contributed to this movement a big deal. One of the most important socialists is Patricia Hill Collins (1948) whose work is a cross field of race, class and gender and the effects on these issues in society. Patricia Hill Collins explains practices that oppress the gender and sex which is related to an especial race and determine the way different sexes are treated in that community. To do so she introduces different images that shape in a racist society and people customize them and consider them real that are associated with black females. These stereotypes persist in such society so that black women can be oppressed. The aim of this paper is to show these ideas that are prevalent throughout the novel by Kathryn Stockett.

**Key Words:** Oppression, Mammy, Matriarch, Welfare, Black Lady, Jezebel