

THE OPPRESSION TOWARDS BLACK FEMALE CHARACTERS AS MAID IN *THE HELP* NOVEL BY KATHRYN STOCKETT

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzed the oppression issue that happened in *The Help* novel. The oppression mostly happened to the two main black female characters in the novel, namely Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson. The purpose of this research is to analyze how the kinds of oppression happened through the postcolonial feminism perspective. To provide deeper analysis, qualitative research is used as the research method. By the analysis, it was found that Aibileen got four kinds of oppression, which are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism. Whereas Minny Jackson got all the kinds of oppression towards her. These oppressions can be seen through the narration, dialogue, action, thoughts, and physical appearance of the characters. Both of them got the oppression because as the third world women, they were shaped to be inferior towards Miss Hilly, Miss Leefolt as their masters and Leroy as Minny's husband. Based on the analysis, the researchers concluded that black women experienced double oppression than the first world women, considering not only through their gender but also race and class.

Keywords: Black Women, Third World Women, First World Women, Oppression, Postcolonial Feminism

ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini menganalisis masalah penindasan yang terjadi dalam novel *The Help*. Penindasan sebagian besar terjadi pada dua karakter perempuan kulit hitam utama dalam novel, bernama Aibileen Clark dan Minny Jackson. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisa bagaimana jenis – jenis penindasan terjadi melalui sudut pandang feminism poskolonial. Untuk memberikan analisa yang lebih dalam, penelitian kualitatif digunakan sebagai metode penelitian. Melalui analisa, telah ditemukan bahwa Aibileen mendapatkan empat jenis penindasan, yakni eksploitasi, marginalisasi, ketidakberdayaan, dan imperialisme budaya. Sedangkan Minny Jackson mendapatkan semua jenis penindasan disebabkan. Penindasan ini dapat dilihat melalui narasi, dialog, aksi, pikiran, dan penampilan fisik karakter. Keduanya*

mendapatkan penindasan karena sebagai perempuan negara ketiga, mereka ditentukan untuk menjadi bawahan terhadap Miss Hilly dan Miss Leefolt sebagai majikan mereka dan Leroy sebagai suami Minny. Berdasarkan analisa, peneliti menyimpulkan bahwa perempuan kulit hitam mengalami penindasan ganda daripada perempuan negara pertama, menimbang tidak hanya melalui jenis kelamin tetapi juga melalui ras dan kelas mereka.

Kata Kunci: *Perempuan kulit hitam, Perempuan negara ketiga, perempuan negara pertama, poskolonial feminism*

A. INTRODUCTION

The third world women or the women from the colonized believe that they experienced the unequal treatment because of many social factors, such as race, ethnicity, religion, profession, level of education, and others (Tong 215). The third world women tend to have more complex identity than the first world women (the colonizer country) which leads them to double colonization. The modest example is the black women. Being one part of the people of the third world countries, they seem to be familiar with oppression due to the days of slavery. Oppression is the condition when people suffer in developing their capacities and expressing their needs, thoughts, and feelings (Young 40). In this case, black women cannot be able to be free in developing and expressing what they experience, whether they are being oppressed or not (Tong 215). The oppression happened towards black women has been attached to society even until now (Soundarya and Nagarathinam 751).

Literary works used as a device by some women authors to portray that phenomenon, in order to make their voice become heard by people and to make people know how they feel. Therefore, it influenced Kathryn Stockett, who is an American author, to write her famous novel entitled *The Help*. It tells about the oppression towards black women who worked as the maid for white families for generation in 1960s in Jackson, Mississippi. These black women maids are represented through the black female characters named Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson. Aibileen is the black woman who has worked as the maid for her entire life. She has to go to the different bathroom because she is believed to carry harmful diseases. Meanwhile, Minny Jackson was fired by her master's daughter, Miss Hilly, who spread the lie to everyone that she stole silver. No one in town wants to hire her. She lives in fear for she knows if she got no job, her abusive husband, Leroy, would kill her (Stockett).

The researchers decided to choose *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett to be analyzed because it has the values about the third world women, especially black women who were oppressed more. In addition, it is because this novel was written by a white person, Kathryn Stockett, which is rare and brave in order to make people know,

understand more about the story of black women. Based on that idea, there is a question raised which concerned about how the kinds of oppression happen towards the black female characters through the postcolonial feminism perspective. The purpose of this research is to analyze how the kinds of oppression happened through the postcolonial feminism perspective.

B. RELATED LITERATURE

1. Character and Characterization

When we read a literary work, we can find the things that take role in the story. It is called the characters. According to Abrams, characters are the persons represented in a dramatic or narrative work, who are interpreted by the reader as possessing particular moral, intellectual, emotional qualities by inferences from 'what the persons say and their distinctive ways of saying it (the dialogue) and from what they do (Abrams and Harpham 46).

Character has sort of identity that being made up by the appearance, conversation, action, and thought that is going on in the head of it. The identity of the character can be said as the characterization. Characterization is how the character is made up by the author through words of each character to define who they are (Gill 127).

2. Oppression

The concept of oppression has been formed by the condition where the society believes that one group is more inferior than others. It is caused by the differences of social aspects such as class, race, and gender. Ursula Egidius discussed that oppression is an enclosing structure that, by way of institutional practice, harms members of a social groups, while members of another or other, corresponding social groups benefit from the harm suffered by those oppressed (Egidius 8). Similar with Egidius, Young stated that oppression is the condition when people suffer in developing their capacities and expressing their needs, thoughts, and feelings (Young 40).

The researchers concluded that the oppression is the injustice practice that happened towards the inferior group in particularly black women, where they cannot be free in building their capacities and expressing their ideas, feelings, and needs because of the stereotypes that society believe. The concept of oppression has been divided into five faces, the categories that reflected by the oppressed group that oppression could not be define in one exact definition (Young 48). These are the faces; exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

3. Five Faces of Oppression

There are five faces of oppression, which are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young 40).

a. Exploitation

Exploitation consists of the injustice practice of capitalist society that some people exercise their capacities under the control, according to purposes, and for the benefit of another especially about work and the wages.

b. Marginalization

Marginalization is the injustice practice that excluded the lower group of society from important life participation, differentiate them because of their gender, class, or race and limited the capacities in any social aspects.

c. Powerlessness

Powerlessness is the injustice condition where people have no voice and no power to fight against the unequal treatment that happened to them and have no right in participating in social aspects because of their powerlessness.

d. Cultural Imperialism

The injustice condition where the society is controlled by dominant group's culture which became the social standard and the inferior group are unseen because of it is called cultural imperialism.

e. Violence

The intentional practice that caused harmed or injured mentally or psychically or even death to someone in a group of people, and another member are somewhat possible to get the same practice as well is called violence.

4. Postcolonial Feminism

As explained in the introduction, double colonization is faced by the third world women where they are inferior not only towards men but also towards the first world women as the consequences of their race, gender, and class (qtd. Chambers 5). Therefore, the third world women came up with the idea of postcolonial feminism. It focuses on disempowers and disadvantages of the third world women in particular where they are not just concern about the gender issues (Tong 216). It can be concluded that postcolonial feminism is the voice of the third world women, where they experience more complex

oppression in a different way than the first world women due to their race, gender, and class status, which shaped the stereotypes or image to label them.

C. RESEARCH METHOD

1. Research Design

Research design used in this research is qualitative research. Snape and Spencer stated in their book, “qualitative research is naturalistic, interpretative approach concerned with understanding the meaning which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values, etc.)” (Snape and Spencer 15). Thus, the researchers provided a deeper understanding of social phenomenon, the actions, beliefs, values of the black female characters in the *The Help* novel. The researchers used the qualitative research because the data are taken from the text which how the kinds of oppression that happened towards the black female characters through postcolonial feminism perspective.

2. Data and Data Source

The object of this research is the novel by Kathryn Stockett, entitled *The Help*. It was written in thirty-four chapters, published by the Penguin Books with 444 pages. The data of this research contain all of the words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and dialogues that related to the kinds of oppression of the black female characters and the postcolonial feminism perspectives.

3. Data Collection

In collecting the data, the researchers did a close reading first to get detail meaning and understanding of the novel. Next, the researchers wrote all of the data that has been found in the novel, in the notebook. The chapter and the page of the novel were inserted in the note in order to find the data easier. This step aims to make the sorting of data become easier.

4. Data Analysis

In qualitative research, Given stated that there are four steps used to analyze the data, which are gathering, memo, coding or categorizing, and analyzing the data (Given 186-187). The first step is gathering the data, which means the researchers gathered all the information that related to the research questions. The second step is memoing the data, which means the researchers took a personal note, included the thoughts, guesses, and first hypotheses. The third step is coding or categorizing the data, which means the researchers classified the data by using some forms of code. Analyzing the data is the final step, which means that the researchers interpreted the data that have been categorized using the theories to answer how do the kinds of oppression happen towards black female characters.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Oppression towards Aibileen Clark

The data show that there are four kinds of oppression happened towards Aibileen Clark. The analysis is shown below.

a. Exploitation

(Data 1: 1E004)

Miss Leefolt **don't pay but ninety-five cents an hour, less than I been paid in years.** (Stockett 4)

It was the narration about Aibileen's thought. She thought about the paid, that she only got paid for **ninety-five cents an hour**. It was less than she had been paid, considering the work she had to do. It was also under the minimum wage for workers at that time. According to 1938 Act and 1961 Amendments, minimum wage for worker on Sep 3, 1961 was \$1.15 and \$1.00 an hour (U.S. Department of Labor). Young stated that exploitation can be caused due to the racial background (see in page 15). Aibileen's status as a black woman influenced the way Miss Leefolt paid her because black people tend to be paid less for they used to be a slave with poor wages. This condition proves Aibileen is exploited by Miss Leefolt.

b. Marginalization

(Data 3: 1M022)

When I tell my seventh-grade teacher **I ain't coming back to school cause I got to help out my mama.** (Stockett 22)

Marginalization happened towards Aibileen can be seen in the narration above that showed Aibileen's thought. She **had to quit school because she had to help her mama**, being a maid. Until then, she keeps being a maid for many white families, and at that time she was working for the Leefolts. As a black woman, she had to live in a poor condition. Moreover, she had to follow the tradition in her family to not continue her school. She had to be the maid as said that they only worth to be domestic servant. As well as Young said, that marginalization happened when someone's capacities in being limited to participate in social life. Aibileen was being limited by the fact she cannot be able to continue her study like others especially those who were dominant like white people, where they had more opportunity to continue education.

c. Powerlessness

(Data 7: 1P024)

Which reminds me a what **I don't want a think about** that Miss Leefolt's building me a bathroom **cause she think I'm diseased**. And Miss Skeeter asking don't I want to change things, like changing Jackson, Mississippi, **gone be like changing a lightbulb**. (Stockett 24)

From this narration, it can be seen how Aibileen felt. She did not want to remember how her master, Miss Leefolt who believed that black people did carry diseases and dangerous. She also believed that things cannot be changed, especially in Mississippi. It was never easy, and not the same as changing the light bulb that you can just unplug the old one that no longer function and change it with the new one. Things are not easy for someone like Aibileen, who has no power considering her status, race, and gender. She cannot even say that she is not diseases like what is believed, thus it can be impossible for her to change things.

d. Cultural Imperialism

Cultural imperialism happened towards Aibileen can be seen from the dialog between Aibileen and Miss Leefolt below,

(Data 19: 1C029)

"Mister Leefolt and I have decided to build you your very own bathroom." She clap her hands together, drop her chin at me. "It's right out there in the garage."

"Yes, ma'am." Where she think I been all this time?

"So, from now on, instead of using the guest bathroom, you can use your own right out there. Won't that be nice?"
(Stockett 29)

From the previous bathroom talk, Miss Hilly then suggested Miss Leefolt to build a special bathroom for Aibileen outside the house. Then Miss Leefolt agreed to build one also in order to increase the value of her house, for it has a bathroom for black people. Miss Leefolt said that Aibileen must use her own bathroom now not the guest bathroom because it would be nice. Aibileen as the black woman has to follow the decision made by Miss Leefolt for she was white. Aibileen did not ask them to build her that bathroom, but because of the law inquires black people to go to the different bathroom.

e. Violence

The fifth kind of oppression is violence. However, violence happened towards Aibileen does not emerge in this novel.

2. The Oppression towards Minny Jackson

a. Exploitation

(Data 23: 2E227)

“Ain’t they? Remember that time **Miss Walter make you pay for the crystal glass you broke? Ten dollars out a your pay?** Then you find out them glasses only cost three dollars apiece down at Carter’s?”

“Mm-hmm.” (Stockett 227)

This is the conversation between Minny and Aibileen that shows Miss Walter action. It portrays the exploitation happened towards Minny. Minny were asked to pay ten dollars for the glass she broke and will be taken out from her pay. But later she found out that the glass only costs three dollars. Exploitation is an injustice practice that benefits others, as white people used to take the benefit of black people. Minny as the black maid had to pay more than she should and the payment went to Miss Walter who is white.

b. Marginalization

(Data 25: 2M227)

“Oh, and you remember that crazy Mister Charlie, the one who always call you nigger to your face like he think it’s funny. And his wife, the one who **make you eat lunch outside, even in the middle a January? Even when it snowed that time?**” (Stockett 227)

This datum above was taken from the dialogue between Minny and Aibileen. Minny is marginalized in a way that her previous master, Mister Charlie and his wife, told her to eat outside even if it is snowed. She has to eat outside because of the segregation between white and black, where they are not allowed to sit on the same table together. And because she was only their maid, she became in the lowest position that she was not worthy more than domestic worker.

c. Powerlessness

(Data 28: 2P021)

“She telling everybody in town I’m stealing! **That’s why I can’t get no work!** That witch done turned me into the Smart-Mouthed Criminal Maid a Hinds County!” (Stockett 21)

This datum was taken by the conversation between Minny and Aibileen through phone. Minny told Aibileen that she could not find any job. Miss Hilly accused her stealing silver and spread the news to everyone. Because

Miss Hilly was the one that has power, everyone believes her. No one in town wants to hire Minny ever since. She cannot do anything about it, the truth is she had been a good maid, who did nothing but take care of Miss Walters. Due to her position as a black woman and as a maid, she is not able to prove herself not guilty. She has to receive and become a victim which has no power to fight.

d. Cultural Imperialism

(Data 34: 2C032)

I've never in my life had a white woman tell me **to sit down** so she can **serve me a cold drink**. (Stockett 32)

The narration above shows the cultural imperialism that happened towards Minny Jackson. Minny was looking for a new job after Miss Hilly fired her and spread the lie. Luckily, she got the information about Miss Celia from Aibileen. Miss Celia lives outside the town. Minny come to Miss Celia's house. Rather than asked Minny to look around and see the house, Miss Celia asked her to have a sit and offered her a drink. Minny got shocked because as seen above, no white people has ever served her anything and told her to sit down. In culture, white people are not supposed to treat black people nicely. They should be the one who got served, not the one who serves. It has become the norm, that superior should be served by the inferior. It has become the norm in society and is believed by Minny, as a black woman, that should serve Miss Celia.

e. Violence

(Data 40: 2V304)

Leroy screamed at me all night, **threw the sugar bowl upside my head**, threw my clothes out on the porch. I mean, when he's drinking the Thunderbird, it's one thing, but. Oh. The shame is so heavy I think I might pull me to the floor. Leroy, he wasn't on the Thunderbird this time. This time **he beat me** stone cold sober. (Stockett 304)

Violence happened towards Minny still can be seen from the narration above. Minny remembered what happened last night, that she has not slept at all. Leroy came home not drinking at all and he screamed at her all night. He even threw a bowl towards Minny causing her to have the cut on her eyebrow. Moreover, he threw all of her clothes on the porch. This time Leroy is not drunk, he is fully conscious. Minny thought that it was because Leroy has found out that she is working with Miss Skeeter, but this time it was only for his pleasure.

The findings revealed that Aibileen only got four kinds of oppression, which are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism. Powerlessness is the most frequent oppression that happened towards Aibileen. Being a black woman, she is believed to carry different and dangerous diseases which is why she cannot go to the same bathroom as white people. She got to hear these talk a lot ever since, yet she can do nothing about that. She cannot express her feelings without restriction for she would be punished by the white people. Being fired was the punishment she got if she tried to speak up. Minny also got powerlessness happened towards her. She was powerless to fight back and lived in fear if she spoke up. She got herself fired and defamed by Miss Hilly so she would get any job in town. She also felt powerless towards Leroy, her husband. She was afraid that he will kill her and if he knows about her problem. As the black woman, she had to suffer the culture of silence, where she cannot voice the condition she got. In contrast to Aibileen, Minny received powerlessness where not only from white woman yet also from black man.

Violence did not happen towards Aibileen. There was no data found that indicates Aibileen got violence by another characters, not even from Miss Leefolt and Miss Hilly. She did not have any interaction with others that have the intention to attack or harm herself. On the other hand, violence was the most frequent oppression that happened towards Minny. It was mostly done by her husband, Leroy. It frequently happened through the narration about Minny. Leroy also loves to push Minny that caused bruises and wounds all over her body. He loves to do violence consciously and unconsciously. He did these somehow to release his stress and not want Minny to be a burden. He also did that only for his pleasure. Even so, Minny was too afraid to fight back and she always becomes weak when it comes to Leroy. As a black woman, she was liable to get violence by the men and women from the first world country and the men from their race. She also experienced the domestic violence because of her status as women and black. She often got beat up by the men to let go the anger and stress due to tough life condition.

From the explanation above, it can be seen that both Aibileen and Minny got the oppression towards them. They got the oppression caused by another character mostly seen from the narrations that reflected their thoughts to the surroundings and their physical appearance as the black woman. It was also seen from the conversations that show the action of another characters towards Aibileen and Minny. They are oppressed by the stereotypes that shaped due to their status as the black women. These stereotypes were possessed by another character like Miss Leefolt and Miss Hilly which are white women and Leroy as the black man. Both Aibileen and Minny were oppressed by the first world women and their condition as black women. Otherwise, it was only Minny who got double oppression.

E. CONCLUSION

After analyzing the oppression towards black female characters in *The Help* novel, using the theory of Five Faces of Oppression by Iris Marion Young, the researchers concluded that Aibileen Clark, only got four kind of oppressions. Powerlessness was the most frequent oppression that happened towards Aibileen and violence did not happen because she has no interaction with another character that has potential to violate her. Meanwhile, Minny Jackson got all the kinds of oppression towards her. Different from Aibileen, violence is the most frequent oppression that happened towards Minny.

Based on the analysis, Aibileen got oppressed by Miss Leefolt, her master, and Miss Hilly, while Minny by Leroy, Miss Hilly, Miss Walters, and the strange white man. They got the oppression because of the stereotypes as the third world women that were shaped by the first world women. Both of them were considered as the inferior towards men and white from another class and race, and also men from their own race. These oppressions were shown through the characterization seen in the narrations and dialogues that represented the actions, thoughts, and physical appearance of these characters. Given these points, black women as the third world women received more oppression than the first world women due their race, gender, and class.

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