

## The Agonies and the Sufferings Encountered by the Black Maids in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*

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### Abstract

*The Help* is a wonderful novel written by **Kathryn Stockett**, the nostalgic American novelist. The story is constructed based on African Americans working in white households in Jackson, Mississippi, during the early 1960s. **Aibileen** Clark, **Minnie** Jackson, and Eugenia "**Skeeter**" Phelan are the three major characters that the novel revolves around.

The aim of this paper is to say that how the black maids encounter the sufferings and the racial discriminations caused by the white households in America. The violent and the cruel treatment of the whites upon the African maids is rather rude, unholy and uncivilized.

The colour complex, racial discriminations and identity crisis become the major issue for Aibileen and Minny and they are unable to face the consequences brought to them by the whites. They felt ashamed and ill treated cruelly. They do not even have the freedom of their own especially in using the lavatory, bathroom, and utensils for eating. The white people think that they will be affected by contagious diseases if they use the black used toilets and edible utensils.

Life as a maid is precarious and difficult. One can easily feel the sufferings and agonies that the black maids face among the white employers. There are a lot of conflicts, hurt, frustrations, angry, and defeat that the black maids tend to face each and every day. Albeit the black maids do work at white house holds they need to take care of their own family too. **Who is to bell the cat? When will the blacks be resuscitated from their long stupor? Who is to really understand the blacks' suppressions? Who cares for them? Will Skeeter the white redeem Minny and Aibileen at last?** are the queries for which the explorations are to be sought in our psyche.

### The Agonies and the Sufferings

*The Help* is set in the early 1960s in Jackson, Mississippi, which is otherwise called an abode of

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the black maids. This emotional and sensational novel is told and narrated primarily from the first-person perspectives of three women: Aibileen Clark, Minny Jackson, and Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan. They are the central characters under which the novel is knitted with well candour.

Twenty-two-year-old Skeeter has just returned home after graduating from Old Mississippi University. She may have a degree, but it is 1962, Mississippi, and her mother will not be happy till Skeeter has a ring on her finger. Skeeter is an one such example who always hates, ignores, and neglects her own mother. Skeeter will normally find solace and comfort only with her beloved maid Constantine, the woman who has raised her up and fed her since from her childhood, but within a short span of her college years. Constantine is disappeared and Skeeter search her throughout the house but her search ends in fiasco and in total bust. No one will tell Skeeter where she has gone and settled.

Aibileen feels very proud and confident. As she is a black maid, a wise and regal woman has raised her seventeenth white child Mae Mobley with much love and affection as usual.,

**“a church baby we like to cal it. Taking care white babies,  
that’s what I do, along with all the cooking and the cleaning.  
I done raised seventeen kids in my life time. I know how to get  
them babies to sleep, stop, crying and go in the toilet bowel  
before they mamas even get outa bed in the morning.”  
(Pg 1. 2-5, TH)**

There is a transition in Aibileen’s behavior and attitude. Something has shifted inside her after the loss of her own son, who died while his bosses looked the other way. According to Aibileen her son is a gifted child rendered by god almighty. With much frustration, disappointment, disillusionment and dissipation she leads her doleful and panic life journey as she is as a child lost mother destined to live in this discriminated universe. She is out and out devoted her entire life for the little girl she looks after, albeit she knows both their hearts may be broken.

**“Harper Lee’s classic novel “To kill a mockingbird” has  
changed many lives in the society especially in  
1960s.similarly it’s direct descendent is The Help Which has  
encountered in fiction for years.”**

**(Daily Express. USA)**

Minny, Aibileen’s best friend, is short, fat, and perhaps the sassiest woman in Mississippi. She can cook like nobody’s business, but she can’t mind her tongue, so she’s lost yet another job. Minny finally finds a position working for someone too new to town to know her reputation. But her new boss has secrets of her own.

Seemingly as different from one another as can be, these women will nonetheless come together for a clandestine project that will put them all at risk. This is because they are suffocating within the lines that define their town and their times. And sometimes lines are made to be crossed.

In pitch-perfect voices, Kathryn Stockett creates three extraordinary women whose determination to start a movement of their own forever changes a town, and the way women—mothers, daughters, caregivers, friends -view one another. Readers of the opinion that it is

**“A deeply moving novel, a wise, filled with  
poignancy, humor, and hope ...  
you will catch yourself cheering out loud”**

Skeeter is the daughter of a white family who owns a cotton farm outside Jackson. Many of the field hands and household help are African Americans. Skeeter has just returned home after graduating from the University of Mississippi and wants to become a writer. Skeeter's mother wants her to get married, and thinks her degree is just a pretty piece of paper. Skeeter is curious about the disappearance of Constantine, her maid who brought her up and cared for her. Constantine had written to Skeeter while she was away from home in college saying what a great surprise she had awaiting her when she came home.

Skeeter's mother tells her that Constantine quit and went to live with relatives in Chicago. Skeeter does not believe that Constantine would leave her like this; she knows something is wrong and believes that information will eventually come out. Everyone Skeeter asks about the unexpected disappearance of Constantine pretends it never happened and avoids giving her any real answers.

The life that Constantine led at the Phelan family is more miserable, her sufferings and agonies can't be eroded out from her heart and mind. Such an insult and ill treatment that she has received from Phelan family. Even in terms of using the toilet, bathrooms, and as well the utensils that they use them for a regular routine. Miss. Hilly gives the black maids a lot of lawful acts. She says:

**“That’s exactly why I have designed the home help sanitation  
initiative,” (page. 8 TH)**

A lot of terms and conditions are to be adhered by the black maids supposing they want to continue their business as maids. According to my opinion there is no such liberation, freedom of rights and freedom of taking decision by their own are not in regular practice especially in the land of Jackson, Mississippi.

**“Jackson, Mississippi – 1962 is like a vanished world enter and find the black maids lamentations.”**

So during the short span of Skeeter’s university years, something has happened to Constantine and that makes Skeeter is curious to know what has really happened and she also came to know that her friends' maids are also treated very differently from the way the white employees are treated. She decides that she wants to reveal the truth about being a colored maid in Mississippi. Skeeter struggles to communicate with the maids and gain their trust. The dangers of writing a book about African Americans is challenging and like a do or die battlefield. Speaking out in the South during the early 1960s hover constantly over the three women.

They feel like

**"Write about what disturbs you, particularly if it bothers no one else." Pg. 74**

Eventually Skeeter wins Aibileen’s trust through a friendship which develops while Aibileen helps Skeeter write a household tips column for the local newspaper. Skeeter accepted the job to write the column as a stepping stone to becoming a writer and editor, as was suggested by Elaine Stein, editor at Harper & Row, even though she knows nothing about cleaning or taking care of a household, since that is the exclusive domain of ‘the help.’ The irony of this is not lost on Skeeter, and she eventually offers to pay Aibileen for the time and expertise she received from her.

Elaine Stein had also suggested to Skeeter that she finds a subject to write about which she can be dedicated to and passionate about. Skeeter realizes that she wants to expose to the world in the form of a book the deplorable conditions the maids in the South endure in order to barely survive. Unfortunately, such an exposé is a dangerous proposition, not just for Skeeter, but for any maids who agree to help her. Aibileen finally agrees to tell her story. Minny, despite her distrust of whites, eventually agrees as well, but she and Aibileen are unable to convince others to tell their stories. Skeeter researches several laws governing what blacks still can and cannot do in Mississippi, and her growing opposition to the racial order results in her being shunned by her social circle.

Even after writing the novel Skeeter is not able to leave them to go. She feels rather worried and embarrassed. Both Aibileen and Minny are very much care taking people. They tend to advise her

**Your mom wants to see your better life at Jackson and they say “are you sure it’s all right? If I leave you, with everything so... Go to New Yark, Miss Skeeter, Go and find your life,” (chapter 34, pg 436, TH)**

Skeeter reacts to the situation as

**“She smile, blinking back the tears, and say, thank you,”**  
(chapter 34, pg 437, TH )

Yule May, Hilly's maid, is arrested for stealing one of Hilly's rings to pay her twin sons' college tuition after Hilly refused to lend the money. The other maids decide that they are willing to take a chance with their jobs, and their safety, and join the book project.

On the whole, we learn that the thrust of the collaborative project between the white Skeeter and the struggling, exploited “colored” help, who together have the courage to cross the boundaries to write about a book of true stories (something extraordinary) about their experiences as the ‘help’ to the white women of Jackson.

“The Help” could be one of the most important pieces of fiction since **“To Kill A Mockingbird”**.

Kathryn Stockett masterfully “captures both black and white voices with astonishing believability, and all three main characters ... are complex, admirable women. The author has put us in the shoes of three ordinary women at an extraordinary point in a American history, if you read only one book this summer, let this be it”.

Not all the stories are negative, and some describe beautiful and generous, loving and kind events; while others are cruel and even brutal. The book, entitled “Help” is finally published, and the final chapters of “The Help” describes the aftermath of the books’ appearance in Jackson.

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