



## FEMINIST THEORY APPLIED IN THE NOVEL “THE HELP” BY KATHRYN STOCKETT

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### ABSTRACT

In order to examine Kathryn Stockett’s novel “The Help,” this paper utilises feminist theory. It focuses on how women are portrayed in the book and how they defy repressive systems in 1960s Mississippi. The paper examines how figures like Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minny overcome the interconnected oppressions of race, class, and gender while questioning conventional gender norms through the lens of feminist theory. The analysis looks at the novel’s female characters’ power relationships, intersectionality, and sense of solidarity to show the complexity of their experiences and how they exercise agency in a patriarchal and racist society. This analysis highlights how “The Help” presents a story that both celebrates and opposes the limited roles available to women and the strength of female solidarity and collective action in the face of systemic oppression. It does this by looking at the actions and interactions of the characters. This investigation helps readers better understand feminist themes and viewpoints in the context of the South during the civil rights movement, as it is portrayed in Stockett’s book.

**Keywords:** Feminist Theory, Kathryn Stockett, Racism, Sexism, and Gender Roles.

## **Introduction**

### **Feminist Theory**

“The Help” by Kathryn Stockett received enormous praise for examining power relations, gender roles, and race in 1960s Mississippi. A feminist lens provides more layers of analysis addressing the difficulties and agency of the female characters, even though the narrative largely focuses on the lives of African American maids and their white employers. This paper uses feminist theory to investigate how the repressive systems of sexism and racism that the ladies in “The Help” must contend with while navigating their communities.

Women in Mississippi’s 1960s patriarchal society are expected to fit into restrictive gender norms that restrict their freedom and uphold inequity. Kathryn Stockett offers a complex representation of women’s experiences in the Jim Crow South by presenting diverse female characters who subvert these expectations differently. This analysis looks at the novel’s multifaceted female agency and gender dynamics through the lens of feminist theory.

The idea of power dynamics is one of the main topics in “The Help” examined from a feminist angle. Despite occupying distinct positions in the social hierarchy, the female characters in the novel—both white

and black—are all impacted by patriarchy. Skeeter is a young white woman who wants to be a writer. She opposes gender stereotypes by choosing to pursue her career over marriage, which is expected of her. Her choice to write a book on African American maids’ experiences is a brave declaration of agency in a culture that actively suppresses women’s voices.

In addition, the maids—Aibileen and Minny in particular—show agency by standing up to injustice and remaining strong. Aibileen and Minny choose to express their autonomy and dignity rather than becoming passive victims of the systematic racism and sexism they experience. These ladies represent the bravery and tenacity of oppressed people living in harsh regimes, whether by quietly questioning their employers’ authority or engaging in covert acts of revolt.

Our knowledge of gender dynamics in “The Help” is further enhanced by an intersectional analysis, which emphasises how gender, race, and class interact to influence women’s experiences. The experiences of the female protagonists are influenced by their ethnic and social backgrounds, in addition to the gender-based oppression they all endure. The fight against racism and sexism for African American maids like Aibileen and Minny intertwines, posing particular difficulties



and inspiring different kinds of resistance. On the other hand, Skeeter and other white women have to face their role in the continuation of racist structures, which makes their fight for gender equality more difficult.

Furthermore, “The Help” emphasises how crucial female unity is in combating structural injustice. The female protagonists in the book connect despite their disparate racial and socioeconomic backgrounds because they have both experienced marginalisation. Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minny create sisterhood relationships through their work on the book project that goes beyond social boundaries and shows the strength of women’s unity in pursuing justice and equality.

“The Help” presents an engaging story that allows feminist theory to be used to examine the intricate relationships between race, gender, and power in Mississippi in the 1960s. We can better comprehend how women negotiate and oppose repressive systems in their culture by applying a feminist perspective to the experiences of the female protagonists. These women defy social norms and affirm their humanity in the midst of hardship by acting with agency, unity, and fortitude.

### **Gender Equality**

This concept refers to the idea that individuals of all genders should get equal treatment and access to the same opportunities and rights. It means ensuring that everyone, regardless of gender identity, has equal access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making processes in all areas of life, including social interactions, politics, the workplace, and education. Systems of oppression and discrimination, such as patriarchy, must be contested and abolished to achieve gender equality. It is also necessary to advance practices and policies that value and acknowledge the diversity of gender identities and experiences. Patriarchy is criticised by feminist philosophy as being based on male supremacy and power structures that oppress women. It examines how laws, cultural norms, and social conventions are impacted by patriarchy on both an individual and institutional level. Feminism challenges patriarchal attitudes and actions intending to dismantle systems of gender-based oppression.

**Gender Socialization:** Cultural practices, media representations, and socialisation processes all contribute to creating and reinforcing gender norms and stereotypes. These mechanisms are examined by feminist theory. By raising awareness of the limitations and negative effects of rigid gender norms, feminism

promotes greater freedom and flexibility for individuals, regardless of gender, to express themselves and pursue their interests.

**Advocacy for Law and Policy:** Feminist philosophy informs advocacy for changes to laws and policies that address violence and discrimination against women and promote gender equality. This could mean advocating for reproductive rights, fair pay, access to healthcare, and legal protections against harassment and violence motivated by gender.

**Empowerment and Representation:** Feminist theory holds that women's viewpoints, experiences, and contributions must be valued more highly in all sectors of society, including politics, the media, the arts, and academia. By promoting gender diversity and representation, feminism breaks down barriers to bias and misconceptions. It also provides opportunities for success and leadership and role models for girls and women.

**Intersectional Solidarity:** Feminist philosophy encourages coalition building and solidarity between diverse communities to combat intersecting forms of oppression. Feminism links the struggles for economic, racial, environmental, and gender justice, which promotes collective action and advocacy for systemic change. When considered, feminist theory provides

a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the root causes of gender inequality. It also provides strategies for promoting social change and building a more just and equitable society that benefits individuals of all genders.

### **Intersectionality**

The intersection of gender with social identities, such as ability, sexual orientation, racism, and class, is highly valued in feminist theory. By recognising the interconnectedness of oppressions, feminism highlights the unique experiences and challenges faced by people with overlapping identities and encourages inclusive methods to reduce injustice. The idea of intersectionality emphasises the connections between oppressive organisations and social identities within feminist and critical race theories. The concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, refers to how people encounter various forms of privilege and discrimination that intersect with one another due to their diverse social identities. These identities include race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, religion, and nationality. Divya, T. J et al. (2023) also discussed intersectionality in their book, which talks about the sufferings of Afro-American women, as evident in the songs of Tracy Chapman.

### **Important aspects of intersectionality**



**Complexity of Identity:** Intersectionality recognises that individuals have a range of social identities that interact and cross paths to shape their opportunities and experiences in society. A black woman may experience prejudice in different ways than a white woman or a black woman due to the combined effects of race and gender.

**Interlocking Systems of Oppression:** Intricate and overlapping forms of privilege and disadvantage are created by the interaction and reinforcement of oppressive systems such as ableism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and racism. This is the subject of the study of intersectionality. Because of these intersecting systems of oppression, people with intersecting identities experience marginalisation in diverse ways. **Marginalisation and Invisibility:** Intersectionality highlights how dominant ideologies and societal structures diminish or conceal specific individual groups. For example, the experiences of marginalised groups may be ignored or downplayed in mainstream feminism or anti-racist efforts that prioritise the concerns of more privileged groups.

**Intersectional Analysis:** When understanding and addressing social issues, intersectionality urges academics, activists, and decision-makers to adopt an intersecting perspective. Intersectional

analysis is the term used for this. This means considering the larger structural and systemic factors that contribute to inequality and how many axes of identity interact to affect how people perceive privilege and oppression. **Social Justice and Liberation:** Intersectionality provides a paradigm for furthering social justice and liberation by recognising the links between the equality movements in many places. Intersectionality elevates the experiences and perspectives of oppressed groups and fosters solidarity and coalition building, offering important insights into efforts to challenge oppressive structures and advance collective freedom for all.

When everything is said and done, intersectionality is a powerful analytical tool for understanding the complexity of social identities and inequality, as well as for guiding efforts to create societies that are more inclusive and democratic.

### **Social Justice**

Feminist philosophy is used in Kathryn Stockett's novel "The Help," which in the 1960s Mississippi highlights themes of social justice, particularly those related to race and gender. The story examines how gender dynamics and structural oppression interact to cause injustices that affect women who are

African-American and white women equally.

The book illustrates the nuances of social justice regarding women's rights and racial equality from a feminist viewpoint. Because of their gender and colour, African American women like Aibileen and Minny are subjected to discrimination and have fewer prospects for progress in the domestic sphere. Their stories highlight the necessity of intersectional approaches to social justice, which acknowledge the interdependence of oppression based on gender, racism, and class.

Furthermore, the book emphasises how white women's participation in racially oppressive structures and adherence to social standards contribute to the continuation of social inequality. Skeeter and other characters question the established quo and give voice to underrepresented women, challenging social standards. Skeeter's work on the book project with Aibileen and Minny exemplifies allyship and solidarity to address societal inequalities and push for change.

"The Help" highlights the value of grassroots activism and group efforts in fighting social justice. The female protagonists in the book oppose the power structures that uphold injustice and fight for more chances and rights for

underrepresented groups through their actions of resistance and solidarity. Their initiatives testify to the revolutionary power of feminist action in bringing about social change and tackling systemic injustices.

The book also highlights the need for empathy and comprehension in promoting social justice. Skeeter's empathy and compassion grow as she discovers more about the maids' hardships, motivating her to take action to stop the injustices they encounter. This subject emphasises how crucial it is to value and acknowledge the experiences of marginalised people in the fight for social justice.

All things considered, "The Help" presents a compelling picture of social justice issues through the lens of feminist ideology. By analysing the interlocking dynamics of race, gender, and power in the book, readers can better understand the complexity of social injustice and the value of group action in opposing systems of oppression. Reflection and discussion on the continuous fight for social justice in society are encouraged by the novel's characters' experiences and acts of kindness.

### **Social Injustice**

Social injustice runs throughout Kathryn Stockett's book "The Help," where it meets with feminist theory. The story



illuminates the intersections of race, gender, and class by exposing the systematic injustices and inequalities experienced by both white and black women in Mississippi in the 1960s.

When feminist theory is applied to the book, it becomes clear how social injustice appears in many ways, especially when viewed through the lenses of gender and race. Racial prejudice in the home sphere, harsh working conditions, and economic exploitation are all faced by African American women like Aibileen and Minny. Their experiences serve as a stark reminder of the intersectionality of oppression since they deal with several facets of discrimination based on both gender and race.

The book shows how white women who participate in racially oppressive systems, like Skeeter, help to perpetuate social injustice. Skeeter decides to oppose the established quo and form an alliance with the oppressed black maids after realising her privilege as a white lady. By working together on the book project with Aibileen and Minny, Skeeter addresses the social inequities in her community and works to give voice to those whose voices have been hindered.

“The Help” also examines how institutionalised prejudice and discrimination contribute to social

injustice. Black women in Mississippi during the 1960s were denied access to economic and educational possibilities and were instead forced into subservient roles as domestic workers due to segregationist regulations. These structural disparities perpetuate the power dynamics that marginalise black women and privilege white women.

The book also emphasises how societal injustice affects the relationships and lives of the female characters. Many of the maids are too afraid of social rejection and retaliation to report their abuse, which highlights the systematic oppression’s silencing impact. Similarly, the white women in the book are limited in their autonomy and behaviour by social conventions and expectations.

Applying feminist theory to “The Help” reveals how racial and gender contexts influence social injustice. We can better understand the various types of oppression that cross and influence the lives of female characters by applying a feminist lens to their experiences. The women in the book fight social injustice and work to build a more just society via acts of resistance, solidarity, and group effort.

### **Black Feminism**

In “The Help,” by Kathryn Stockett, the intersectional oppressions experienced by African American women in the 1960s

Mississippi are examined using a critical lens by applying black feminism within feminist theory. Black feminism highlights how race, gender, and class connect to celebrate the distinctive experiences of black women.

Aibileen and Minny, two African American maids, are examined in “The Help” as examples of the agency and experiences of black feminism. These characters traverse the repressive domestic institutions of sexism and racism, where they face dehumanisation, exploitation, and discrimination. Black feminism places a strong emphasis on elevating the experiences and voices of the underprivileged and stresses the tenacity and fight of black women against several forms of oppression.

Furthermore, classic feminist narratives that emphasise the experiences of white women while ignoring the problems of women of colour are challenged by black feminism. In “The Help,” Skeeter, a white lady, and the black maids’ cooperation in writing the book symbolises a kind of alliance and solidarity based on respect and understanding. The characters’ alliance forces them to face the shortcomings of mainstream feminism and strive for an integrated and inclusive definition of gender-based oppression. Furthermore, the novel’s black feminism

emphasises the significance of intersectionality in analysing social injustices and power relationships. How race and gender intersect to define identities and experiences are highlighted by Aibileen and Minny’s lives as black women, which are different from those of their white counterparts. “The Help” underscores the nuances of power and privilege in the context of race and class and contradicts oversimplified notions of gender equality by emphasising the experiences of black women.

Black feminism also highlights the value of community organising and group action in combating structural inequalities. The female characters in the book exhibit acts of solidarity and resistance, highlighting the effectiveness of group action in fighting injustice. Their initiatives to question the status quo and promote social change align with black feminism’s core beliefs, emphasising community empowerment and grassroots engagement as vital instruments of liberation.

Ultimately, the integration of black feminism into feminist theory provides a sophisticated examination of the challenges and tenacity faced by African American women in “The Help.” The novel explores the interlocking oppressions suffered by marginalised people and undermines popular narratives of feminism by





emphasising the voices and experiences of black women. The novel's characters embody black feminism through resistance, solidarity, and collective action, aiming for a more equal and just society.

### **Structural Inequalities**

Feminist philosophy offers a lens through which to view the systemic injustices woven across the social fabric of 1960s Mississippi in Kathryn Stockett's book "The Help." The story reveals how privilege and power structures uphold racial, gender, and class-based inequities, profoundly influencing the lives of both Black and White women. The inflexible social order that controls the interactions between white employers and black domestic workers is a clear example of structural inequality. African American maids like Aibileen and Minny are at the bottom of the hierarchy, assigned to menial jobs with no financial prospects and little autonomy. These disparities are institutionalised by the segregation system, which prevents black women from pursuing further education or finding work, thereby sustaining cycles of poverty and marginalisation.

The book also emphasises how gender dynamics and structural injustices interact to marginalise women in society further. Although white women like Skeeter are entitled to some privileges

because of their race, patriarchal standards nevertheless place restrictions on their freedom of choice and behaviour. White women's reliance on black maids for domestic work is reinforced by expectations that they will adhere to idealised ideas of femininity and domesticity, which feeds the cycle of exploitation and inequality. Applying feminist theory to "The Help" reveals how structural injustices impact the experiences and lives of the female characters. Readers can better understand the intricate power dynamics that shape the relationships in the book by looking at the intersections of race, gender, and class. Structural inequality refers to deeply ingrained oppressive structures that control society rather than just isolated instances of discrimination.

The book also emphasises unity and group efforts in combating systemic injustices. Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minny take on the structural inequities that control their lives and challenge the status quo by working together on the book project. They are demonstrating agency in the face of oppression and resisting structural injustices by working to elevate the voices of underrepresented women and reveal systemic inequities. In summary, "The Help" presents a moving depiction of systemic injustices via the prism of feminist ideology. Through an analysis of the

interplay between race, gender, and class, the novel exposes how privileged power structures sustain social inequalities. The novel stimulates readers' thoughts on the systemic injustices that mould our society. It motivates discussion and action toward building a more just and equitable society through the experiences of its characters.

### **Conclusion**

Feminist theory is applied in Kathryn Stockett's "The Help," offering a comprehensive framework for comprehending the intricacies of gender, racism, power relations, and social justice in 1960s Mississippi. The book provides a sophisticated examination of the overlapping oppressions that African American women, in particular, experience in a highly stratified society when viewed through the lens of feminist philosophy.

"The Help" emphasises how solidarity, resistance, and group efforts may overcome structural injustices and inequalities. The book is a potent reminder of how critical it is to give voice to the voiceless and acknowledge the multifaceted nature of injustice.

The story challenges readers to consider how power functions in society and how gender and race interact to affect personal identities and experiences by emphasising the perspectives of black and white women. "The Help" acknowledges

the restrictions and restraints imposed by systemic inequality while simultaneously highlighting the agency and tenacity of women in the face of adversity through characters like Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter.

The book analyses the need for empathy, comprehension, and allyship to promote feminist ideals and social change. Skeeter's transition from complicity to activism exemplifies the significance of confronting oppressive structures, especially when doing so puts oneself in danger and the transformational power of empathy. Finally, "The Help" presents a fascinating story that challenges readers to consider feminist theory and consider how gender, race, and power interact to influence both societal structures and personal experiences. Readers are challenged to reflect on their roles in supporting or opposing systematic injustices and to work toward establishing a fairer and inclusive society by exploring the complexity of oppression and resistance inside the book.

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