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When Language Fails: A Critical Analysis Essay of Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*:

During the 1960s, one of the greatest wars in American history was fought: a war that continues to plague our society to this day. This ongoing battle has been the struggle to end terror, violence, and legal inequality following the Jim Crow era. But, in a country built on the backs of slaves and with an ingrained hatred towards African-Americans and Black people, is it really possible to eradicate racism? Writer and activist Elif Shafak once said that "stories cannot demolish frontiers, but they can punch holes in our mental walls. And through those holes, we can get a glimpse of the other, and sometimes even like what we see..." adding "...[that] in the end, stories move like whirling dervishes, drawing circles beyond circles. They connect all humanity, regardless of identity politics...". Set in Jackson, Mississippi, the heart of southern white resistance to integration and racial equality, *The Help* centers around three main characters: Aibileen Clark, a poised, grieving mother and maid who has succumbed herself to the morality of the bourgeois society of the sixties; Minny Jackson, an outspoken, loving mother of five, hailed for her culinary skills, who suffers abuse from her husband; and Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan, an ambitious young writer who finds the compassion and the courage to tell the stories of the Black maids of Jackson. With the uptake in public awareness and an amplified global outcry for racial equality following several murders of Black people at the hands of officers, Kathryn Stockett's *New York Times* Bestseller debut novel, *The Help*, and its subsequent film adaptation,

have seen an uptake in reading and viewership. While many people see this story as an educational resource for understanding racism, white privilege, and what it means to be Black—one of the “glimpses” that Shafak talks about—for many reasons, including its use of the white savior trope, its misrepresentation of what it meant to be a Black female domestic worker during such a tumultuous time in human rights history, it should not be taught in schools.

Within the story, there are only subtle examples of racism and violence. Given that the first Civil Rights Movement was flourishing across the country, especially in the deep South, the lack of historical context and mention of the Civil Rights Movement (with the brief exception of Medgar Evers and Rosa Parks), coupled with the foregoing of everyday racism and violence, offers a sugar-coated, or censored example of what life was like then for an African-American. Because of this, *The Help*, nor its film adaptation are reliable resources for understanding racism. Similar to how textbooks in a history class only skim over the realities of racism, and the perils that Black people face on a daily basis, Stockett’s attempt to connect humanity within the pages of her novel is unsuitable for educational purposes.

Additionally, *The Help*, and more so its film adaptation, perpetuates stereotypes about Black and African-American people. Subtly, in the movie adaptation, Octavia Spencer’s Minny is seen repetitively throughout the film eating fried chicken—not all of which are present in the book— or talking about how much she loves it. I believe that this is a nod influenced by the stereotype that all Black people really love or only eat certain foods, which is an example of racism. Furthermore, the film misuses African-American Vernacular English: notably in the repeated phrase “you is kind, you is smart, you is important.” The book, however, does display a more accurate use of AAVE. To quote Kathleen Yamane, author of “A Semantic Analysis of

African American Female Discourse in *The Help*”, “Having established a frame of reference, the study turned to the representation of AAVE in *The Help*, focusing on the phonological and grammatical features of AAVE represented in the character's speech...” adding “...It was found that throughout the novel, Stockett in fact makes authentic use of a wide variety of phonological, morphological, and syntactic features of African American Vernacular English.” Another stereotype that the film and book promote is the Mammy caricature: a Black woman who merrily worked as a nursemaid or a servant to white people, in spite of the degrading and demeaning culture. While there is certainly no doubt that Aibileen and Mae Mobley have a genuine connection that traverses the boundaries of race, she, nor any of the other maids, hardly express abhor with their life, despite the exploitation and emotional turmoil they faced in the cruel society. The white savior trope is also arguably the entire plot of the book. Despite a talent for writing, Aibileen doesn't have the courage to tell her own story, but instead relies on Skeeter. Furthermore, all of the maids depend on Skeeter to tell their stories to change the racist social structure. In addition, Minny, who is written as fearless, doesn't leave her abusive marriage to Leroy until after Skeeter sends her money for her contribution to the book.

Another emetic theme present throughout *The Help* is sexism: throughout the story (both film and book), nearly all the men are written as violent, absent, cowardly, or imperceptive to the toxicity of the culture. While there are few examples of decent men present throughout the story, Black men seem to particularly suffer from this depiction. Aibileen's and Constantine's husbands abandon them and their children, Minny's husband is abusive and she has nothing but negative accounts of her father. Even though Carlton Phelan and William Holbrook allow their maids to be mistreated by their wives (Carlton by allowing Charlotte to fire Constantine, and

William for allowing Hilly to bully Minny and taunt Yule May) and in spite of having a position of power, Senator Whitworth claims to be against racial inequities, but still blocked James Meredith from attending Ole Miss when he could've been an advocate for Civil Rights. Stockett writes matter-of-factly, "Plenty of Black men leave their families behind like trash in a dump, but it's not something the colored women do. We got kids to think about" (311). Similar to the Mammy stereotype, this misrepresentation of African-American men follows a long-enforced stereotype called the Black Brute, an equally dehumanizing caricature.

While there are many flaws, *The Help*, and its movie are great sources of entertainment, showcasing immense and versatile performances by its actors, namely Octavia Spencer (as Minny Jackson)—with the scene of her tensing up as Mr. Foote pulls up behind her really embodies the fear many Black people feel just walking in the street. The trinity of characters, along with others like Celia and Johnny, Constantine, Preacher Green, and Robert are so beautifully created and help tell a good story. It does not capture the experience of what it means to be Black—past or present—but it does give a glimpse into what life was like back then, especially through the wicked actions of Hilly.

Nearly six decades after *The Help* is set, our country and beyond are continuing the war against racism. Regardless of Stockett's attempt at creating a bridge for readers to understand racism, *The Help* may only **help** strengthen the divide. Writing a narrative where the Black women, no matter how strong-willed, rely on a white woman to ameliorate their lives and the society is robbing these characters of the chance to be the hero of their own stories, as well as discrediting all that Black women did to create racial reform. Also, following racist and sexist patterns of storytelling by following degrading character outlines further misrepresents the rich

culture of African-Americans. Finally, its blatant evading of racism and violence doesn't give readers an authentic perspective of what it means to be Black. Author and poet, Margaret Atwood, once said, "War is what happens when language fails."". Unfortunately, in this case, language has failed, giving way for the war to thrive. Conclusively, *The Help* should not be taught in schools. While works of fiction are meant to explore the world through someone else's perspective, perhaps there are some boundaries—like race—that a white author or screenwriter could never accurately cross, particularly when language fails, such as in the case of *The Help*.

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