



AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMINIST ANALYSIS WITH REFERENCE TO BELL HOOKS' "AIN'T I A WOMAN" IN THE MOVIE *THE HELP* BY KATHRYN STOCKETT

A Mariamma Angel

Guest lecturer,

Department of English,

Tagore Govt. College of Education, Port Blair, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India.

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore the traces of racial segregation in the movie *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett where the African-American women are marginalized, oppressed and exploited as a slave. It also brings out the predicament of black women, their victimization by sexist and racist oppression and the role played by white women in maintenance and perpetuation of that victimization and their experience of misogyny, which is evident in the violent enforcement of the separation between races, and the lack of professional options for white women.

Key terms: marginalization, oppression, racial discrimination, slavery, subjugation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Help focuses on three women in 1960s in Jackson Mississippi: Aibileen, who work as a nanny and housekeeper for Leefolt family; Minny an outspoken maid ; and Skeeter, a recent college graduate. Skeeter longs to pursue a career as a writer and a journalist that will take her beyond the social construct. She is dismayed by the racist Home Help Sanitation initiative started by her childhood friend Hilly Holbrook. By consulting Elaine Stein, Harper and Row editor, Skeeter starts the dangerous task of interviewing the maids about their experience as a black maid for a white family. And she succeeds in publishing the novels with the dark secrets of the treatment of black maids in white society.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE MOVIE

The hypocritical nature of racial segregation prevails throughout the movie. It's difficult to believe that the black women are capable of taking care of household and watch over children but are not fit to use the bathrooms used by whites. The initiative by Hilly to have a separate bathroom for their black maids, as they believe that these maids carried incurable diseases reflects the extent of humiliation that a black maid suffered.

They were women in patriarchal society who were assigned to work as a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute, than to be a leisure class housewife. As slave women, they neither owned their bodies, nor had rights over their children, who could be sold away from them. “the offspring of a slave women regardless of the race of her mate would be legally slaves, and therefore the property of the owner to whom the female slave belonged”(Hooks 16). When Minny was fired from her work and was finding it very difficult to get a job, in order to support her family financially, she sent her daughter to work as a maid. Even while working, she was paid so less, that was insufficient for her family with four children for their survival. In Aibileen's life, her only son was taken away from her and was killed.

Through the interview conducted by Skeeter, it has been revealed that all the black women in the movie shared same background where all their ancestors were also a slave to the white masters. And Minny too had to drop her studies at fourteen to start her work due to low wages and her drunkard daddy who mostly didn't work and the same fate is passed on to her. “the subjugation of black women was essential to the black male's development of a positive self-concept, an idea that only served to support a sexist social order”(20). Minny, being a black woman was dominated by her drunkard husband who yell and beat her. This is the case of almost all the black women who are doubly oppressed. She was the victim of domestic violence.

The very condition of being oppressed creates a sense of emptiness, non-existence and nothingness in women. Masses of women like Minny and Aibileen is concerned about economic survival, ethnic and racial discrimination. And so they stood out of their margin as an oppressed and dared to share their heart aching experiences to Skeeter to have an impact on the whites. Being oppressed means the absence of choices, this is evident in the movie where the black women are not left with any choices of pursuing higher studies or living prestigious life rather, they are exposed only to work as a slave who are expected to be silent and to listen to their masters. Minny was expelled from job for speaking back to her mistress that infuriated her.

“Black females working in close contact with white mistresses were frequently abused for petty offences” (24). Constantine was the maid who brought up Skeeter. One day Skeeter's mom had an official guest's visit in her home. Surprisingly Constantine's daughter arrives on the same and in spite of being asked to come from the back door; she comes in through the front door that offends the guests. Just because she is black, she is not permitted to use the main door as it would offend the whites. Since she violated the norms created by stereotypical society, Constantine was sent out of home without even considered for her long service over there. In another instance, Aibileen is thrown out of her job as a caretaker for standing against racism and sharing her experiences being published by Skeeter. She was blamed of stealing silver crockery. Due to her restricted liberty, she was not able to defend herself.

The relationship between the blacks and the whites during the 1960s was extremely tensed. Blacks were considered to be inferior and unintelligent and were treated unfairly. This is conveyed through the fact that Aibileen says about the whites that they are waiting for the circumstance to beat them to death. It's not only the colored people who were the victims of this racist and oppressive society. Indeed, white people who encouraged equality on the basis of race were also endangered, as shown in the case of Skeeter, when she tells the reader that since she has writing stories of the vulnerability of the maids, she no longer feels protected in the society that threatens to punish those who try to safeguard the blacks.

Subsequently, colored people were also expected to follow certain rules to avoid putting their safety at risk. This is depicted through the seven rules concerning working as a maid for a white family which was imposed on Minny's daughter. This rules stated that the colored maids are expected to stay out of their master's business, avoid coming into direct contact with them, and always carry out their wishes. These unofficial laws governed their lives and relationship between the master and the slave and also implied that the whites are superior, dominant, and possibly dangerous if these laws are not followed by colored maids. This is illustrated that the colored people are subjugated to be content and accept everything that was passed on to them. To disagree or complain would mean being fired or something even worse than that. This fear of the masters prevails throughout the movie where the black maids kept their mouth shut and tolerated the indictments of racial prejudice upon her. This eventually lead to their loss of self-identity as well social identity and thus faces the problems of identity crisis.

It is the patriarchal society that makes everyone believe that black women were without dignity and self-respect due to which they feel no shame to do menial labor. “ By completely accepting the female role as defined by patriarchy, enslaved black women embraced and upheld an oppressive sexist social order and became both accomplices in the crimes perpetrated against women and the victims of those crimes”(49). If Skeeter not had approached the black maids, they would never had been able to cry out their pains. Before her arrival, these black women never questioned their oppression but through writing their story, they found a means of their survival as well an outlet of their emotions that could be heard by everyone throughout the world. All these women are in serious repercussions by telling their stories to bring it to the eye of the people. In the character of Hilly, the reader can witness that how she uses her social status to influence the court and business in the community to punish the black women whom she targets. All the black characters in the movie goes through injustice and violence, its only through the writing that they counteract all this. The fact that Minny baked a poo pie that Hilly ate is left intentionally in the book. It also reflects the anger of black maid upon her mistress.

3. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the above analysis was to explore the social issues faced by black females in the society. By mentioning the instances in the movie, this paper dealt with the experiences of the black women, who while working for white families, are often subjugated to rape, physical and verbal abuse, etc. It also reveals the sacrifices they had to make for their own children, while they spend their days working for the family of others. *The Help* hopes to influence white families, particularly white women, to be more sensitive towards the black women who serve them for low income.

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