



IRAQI  
Academic Scientific Journals



العراقية  
المجلات الأكاديمية العلمية



ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)

**Journal of Language Studies**

Contents available at: <https://jls.tu.edu.iq/index.php/JLS>

## White Authorship of Black Narratives in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*

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Received: 1\11\2024, Accepted: 9\12\2024, Online Published: 31 / 12/ 2024

### ABSTRACT

This current research aims to explore diverse motivation factors of learning English language among Raparin University students and the degree of these factors as well. The data was collected from 100 learners of English through a derived questionnaire which was designed on Likert Scale. The two methods of quantitative and qualitative have been used. The data is analyzed by SPSS software which provides accurate statistical analysis. According to the findings, intrinsic interest, Integrative Orientation, and instrumental motivation are the main factors that encouraged learners to learn English as a worldwide spoken language. Recognizing and understanding these main motivational factors help the English language instructors to be more effective and make their students as active as possible.

**Key words:** English language learning, motivation, Intrinsic interest ,Raparin University students.

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الكاتب الابيض في الكتابة عن السود في رواية كاثرين ستوكيت "يد العون"

شيماء عبدالعالي جاسم

جامعة الموصل

المستخلص

لقد أثار كتاب كاثرين ستوكيت "يد العون" جدلاً كبيراً بشأن أخلاقيات كتابة المؤلفين البيض لقصص السود. يبحث هذا البحث في الطرق التي تتحدى وتتماشى بها معتقدات ستوكيت للنساء السود في ولاية ميسيسيبي في ستينيات القرن الماضي مع الصور النمطية العرقية السائدة، مقترحاً أن كتابات المؤلفين البيض في قصص السود يجب أن تُفحص نقدياً من خلال عدسة التحيز اللاواعي. من خلال التفاعل مع "التحول الأقليمي"، يسلط البحث الضوء على كيفية انعكاس عمل ستوكيت، رغم الجدل حوله، كمحاولة حقيقية، وإن كانت ساذجة، للتعامل مع تعقيدات علاقات العرق أثناء حركة الحقوق المدنية. يؤكد البحث أن المؤلفين البيض يجب أن يواجهوا موقعهم الاجتماعي لتجنب تمثيلات مبسطة لحياة السود. كما يبرز ضرورة تفكيك العمليات التاريخية للاستعمار والعنصرية في الخطاب الأكاديمي، مع تعزيز أصوات الجماعات المهمشة. في النهاية، يدعو هذا البحث إلى نهج أكثر نقداً وشمولاً لدراسة قصص السود، نهج يُمكن كل من النساء السود والنسويين البيض من المشاركة في الكفاح المستمر ضد عدم المساواة العرقية. الإطار النظري لهذا البحث يعتمد على كتابات المؤلفين البيض والتحيز اللاواعي. هذا الإطار يفحص نقدياً دور الكتاب البيض في تمثيل قصص السود. يعتمد على نظريات التحيز اللاواعي، التي تستكشف كيف يمكن أن تؤثر وجهات نظر المؤلفين الشخصية، وخلفياتهم، وامتيازاتهم على تصويرهم للجماعات المهمشة. يدعو هذا النهج المؤلفين البيض إلى التأمل الذاتي، حاثاً إياهم على إدراك كيف يشكل تحيزهم تصوراتهم لحياة وتجارب السود. كيف يشكل تحيزهم تصوراتهم لحياة وتجارب السود. كما يعتمد على نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار، حيث يستكشف العمليات التاريخية للاستعمار والعنصرية التي لا تزال تشكل تمثيل السود، وبالأخص النساء السود، في الأدب. يبرز هذا النهج النظري الحاجة إلى تفكيك هذه الإرثيات التاريخية وتحدي السرديات السائدة، التي غالباً ما تكون استعمارية، والتي تواصل تعريف كيفية تمثيل المجتمعات السوداء في الأدب والدور الأكاديمي.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Analyzing the Help* raises a subject about the authenticity of literary representations and the role of narrative in reinforcing or challenging social norms. The research engages the concept of “the white gaze” and its effect on the portrayal of marginalized characters, which remains a central concern in literary criticism. Furthermore, by integrating postcolonial theory, critical race theory, and feminist perspectives, the study enhances scholarly conversations on power dynamics within literature, focusing on how race and gender intersect in the literary construction of identity. The novel is deeply connected to the historical context of the Civil Rights Movement, racial segregation, and the enduring legacies of slavery and colonialism in the American South. *The Help* is set in the 1960s, a time of significant social and political change, yet it portrays a period still marked by deeply entrenched racism, inequality, and systemic oppression. By analyzing how a contemporary white author portrays this history, the research sheds light on how historical events are reimagined in popular culture and the ways in which such representations may distort or simplify complex realities. It invites reflection on how historical memory is shaped by those in positions of power often white voices and how these narratives influence public understanding of the past, particularly regarding the lives of Black women. Moreover, the study highlights the continuing struggles for racial justice, showing how historical inequities in the South are still relevant in discussions of modern-day racial inequality and the representation of Black women in society. There are several critical perspectives and prior research studies that are relevant to this topic of white authorship and Black narratives, it would be appropriate to mention a couple. For instance, **Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992)* in which** Morrison examines how white authors portray Black characters and how these depictions are often shaped by racial stereotypes (Jakubowicz and Perchard, 2017). Her analysis of American literature highlights the racial dynamics at play when white writers engage with Black narratives, making it a crucial reference for understanding the implications of white authorship. Another encounter would be **Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism (1981)***. Hooks critiques the erasure of Black women's voices in both mainstream and feminist discourses (Hooks, 2014). Her work is important for understanding how white feminist narratives, like those in *The Help*, often fail to fully capture or address the unique experiences and struggles of Black women.

## 2. THE HELP NOVEL

Stockett's novel is a polyphonic historical fiction novel written from the intersecting first-person perspectives of two black women and one white woman from Jackson, Mississippi, in 1962 (Stockett, 2009). Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson are two black maids employed by white families to care for their children and perform housekeeping duties. While Aibileen is 53 years old and believes in the necessity of consistent employment, Minny is the much younger and more outspoken best friend of the former often terminated engaging in practices like “backtalking” (Jay, 2017). Conversely, Eugenia “Skeeter” Phelan is the white daughter of a cotton plantation owner

who recently graduated from the University of Mississippi and wishes to pursue a writing career.

While Skeeter's mother adheres to the patriarchal view that women should not pursue creative or intellectual interests, the young woman expresses concern over the sudden disappearance of Constantine, a black maid who regularly performed caregiving activities (Stockett, 2009). Skeeter enquires into the whereabouts of Constantine after hearing her mother state that the former maid left for Chicago. However, Skeeter infers that the care received by Constantine while younger reflects sharp differences between the treatment received by other maids employed by white families in and near Jackson. Skeeter also discovers the reality of racial discrimination and segregation enforced by Jim Crow laws.

After she locates a publisher, Skeeter proposes to write about life as a black maid in Mississippi. Although Skeeter finds it difficult to gain the trust of Aibileen and Minny, she eventually succeeds in having Aibileen help her write household tips to the local newspaper. As Skeeter's editor suggested that she write on a passionate subject of interest, the distrust of whites by Aibileen and Minny becomes apparent. Since the two black women feel convinced that no readers will believe their story, Skeeter researches segregation laws in Mississippi. When Skeeter exposes the cruelty of systemic racism, her white peers express dismay over perceived attempts to subvert the dominant racial order. However, the arrest of Yule May, a black maid employed by Hilly Holbrook, over stealing a ring to pay for the college tuition of her twin sons, encourages other black women to join the collaborative book project (Stockett, 2009). Considering how the black maids accounted for both positive and negative experiences of having white bosses, they each were responsible for Skeeter achieving success as a writer.

As explained in the following section, white authorship can provide some form of literary resistance to black objection (Jay, 2017). Given that Stockett's novel was adapted into a feature-length film two years after publication, the impacts of white authorship on black narratives are such that prevailing literary discourse extols affluence without recommending systemic change (Lopez and Bucholtz, 2017; Rezek, 2020). Accordingly, white authors feel equipped to communicate the experiences of abjection by situating their history as one inscribed by suddenly discovering that racism is real. Upon observing that Skeeter hesitatingly wishes that things would change, analyzing white authorship is imperative to unpacking how Eurocentrism shapes nearly every cultural expression in Western society to date.

### **3. WHITE AUTHORSHIP OF BLACK NARRATIVES**

The critical feedback received by Stockett after having *The Help* finally published after five years and 60 rejection letters from publishers attests to how white authorship is palatable for mainstream reading audiences. While Stockett received laudatory praise, she faced critical backlash not limited to a lawsuit filed by Abilene Cooper, a former black maid claiming that the narrative of Aibileen strikingly resembles her experience (Lumumba, 2015). Stockett acknowledged that she may have overstepped an unwritten boundary concerning how to account for the experiences of black women in the 1960s

American South. Yet, the fact that Stockett relied extensively on her whiteness to ground *The Help*'s narrative is more indicative of how abjection falsely inspires change in readers. Such a high degree of reliance points to the white liberal feminist discourse anchored in tropes of niceness suggesting that black women may succeed only by overcoming their blackness. By encouraging her reading audience to transcend history, Stockett obfuscates the tragic elements of civil rights history by treating them as little more than headlines.

One noticeable example is how Stockett drew from the linguistic practices of Aibileen and Minny to write an authentic narrative describing the black domestic experience (Stockett, 2009, (Jay, 2017; Lumumba, 2015). Notwithstanding how the author noticed variances in speech patterns between white and black English speakers in Mississippi, she assumed that letting the narratives of black women speak for themselves was enough to foster systemic change. Perhaps, Stockett naively assumed that linguistic practices reflected attempts to communicate needs and experiences (Lumumba, 2015). By casting Aibileen, Minny, Yule May, and many other black women as helpful, Stockett practiced an idiosyncratic version of colorblind racism grounded in dispassionate academia. Writing as Skeeter, the author may have assumed her subjects would close gaps in representation (Lopez and Bucholtz, 2017; Rezek, 2020). Little did the white female author understand that her narrative experiences were almost entirely devoid of legal and historical contexts shaping linguistic practices. Granted, Stockett was only seven years old when civil rights issues events briefly documented in *The Help* took place. The brutal attack and murder of Medgar Evers, along with failed attempts to racially Ole Miss, received some attention from Skeeter (Jay, 2017; Stockett, 2009). However, these events were only glimpses into how Jim Crow laws impacted black women in the South. Aibileen and Minny occupied a doubly abject social position as racialized subjects with limited agency. As the two black women initially distrusted Skeeter's intention, they gradually internalized the white savior narrative in hoping and praying that change would come. Meanwhile, Stockett cast Aibileen as physically but not mentally embodying the mammy stereotype (Stockett, 2009). The author may have portrayed Aibileen as an unconscious representation of how Skeeter viewed her relationships with Constantine. Yet, such a representation demands an inquiry into how much the prevailing literary discourse has changed in the past 50 years.

White scholars of literature believe that white supremacist narratives remain grounded in colonialism yet insist on applying a deconstructionist lens to situate abjection. The same scholars may call for black liberation without issuing any recommendations for transforming political discourse (Chakravartty, Kuo, Grubbs, and McIlwain, 2018). Instead, the discourse remains insular to academics and critics deriding *The Help* as yet another feel-good novel written by idealist white women. Mainstream academics believe in turn that the counternarratives provided by women like Aibileen and Minny are anecdotal to the black experience. As white academics continue to dismiss historical memory as lacking in scientific merit, they unwittingly perpetuate the circulation of feel-good narratives (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Helton, 2019). White readers of best-selling novels like *The Help* will continue leading privileged lives without feeling inspired to create lasting systemic change. Concomitantly, white readers will cast doubt on the authenticity of black experiences while professing their lives matter.

In essence, Stockett's white liberal feminist narrative reeks like the fecal matter used by Minny when she baked a chocolate pie for her maid, Hilly Holbrook (Stockett, 2009). One scholar confirmed this critical assertion by stating, "As the book shows, the unconscious, like Minny's pie, is full of shit" (Jay, 2017). Recalling the pseudo-mammy stereotype of Aibileen, the preceding criticism is not unwarranted when situated within the prevailing discourse of race equality. As white liberal feminists simply believe that talking about justice and equality will suffice, they cannot fathom how some actions reinforce the historical legacies of colonialism and systemic racism. More precisely, *The Help* does little more than deprioritize calls made by civil rights leaders to end segregation in the South (Peters, 2018; Stockett, 2009). Civil rights activism barely registered on the radar of broader political consciousness until Martin Luther King, Jr. gained notoriety and was assassinated.

Yet, white narratives of racism typically advance the notion that celebrating diversity will improve matters (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Peters, 2018). These narratives encourage white scholars and mainstream audiences consuming popular novels to endorse gradualism in announcing that they too shall overcome someday. By paying lip service to race equality, Stockett composed her exposé by unconsciously framing it as an ethnography that unlikely would have turned into a bestseller if it remained exclusively in academic libraries (Helton, 2019). Doing so allowed the white author to rely on her unconsciously racist assumptions that she is equally oppressed as the black women who described their experiences of abjection. Here, whiteness alone prevents black and other racial minority narratives from naming the cause of systemic oppression. Especially as whiteness defined history in the South, its status is one Stockett that transcends and defies expectations.

Stockett's (2009) novel places the experiences of Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter in the present tense. One example comes from Minny stating, "It's really starting to irritate me how she [her employer] never leaves the house, how she smiles like the maid walking in every morning is the best part of her day [sic]" (Stockett, 2009). The present-tense narrative described here represents how Skeeter collected Minny's narrative while the black woman was employed, albeit temporarily, by a white family. Similarly, Minny's first-person narrative makes readers aware of the cognitive and emotional processes associated with everyday racism. While Skeeter remains unconscious of how her upbringing contributed to this ongoing problem, Minny and Aibileen rightfully chastise white folks as ungrateful individuals unwilling to sacrifice beliefs of how society must ideally function (Jay, 2017; Lumumba, 2015; Rogers-Cooper, 2016). Yet, Aibileen's narratives of abjection reportedly gave white readers opportunities to relinquish doubts concerning how black women could articulate their experiences with dignity. Regardless of how strongly Aibileen and Minny condemned modern-day slavery, Skeeter unconsciously portrayed herself as an innocent white woman believing that race relations should change without endorsing race equality (Rogers-Cooper, 2016). Skeeter's status as a white woman from a wealthy slave-owning family is equally as incredulous as the political narratives of segregationists. In this context, the separate but equal doctrine made Skeeter vaguely conscious of racism but did not cause any radical changes to her political views.

While *The Help* includes three sets of narratives, it privileges white narratives by relegating black linguistic practices to mere historical facts. Stockett engages in this practice by narrating for 13 chapters, giving Aibileen 11 chapters, and letting Minny speak for nine chapters (Stockett, 2009). On its surface, the novel does not give short shrift to how two black women reluctantly participated in what resembled an ethnographic project. Since the novel is set in early 1960s era Jackson, Mississippi, it permits Aibileen and Minny to speak separately but equally. However, a deeper dive reveals how white authors dismiss black linguistic practices as irreverent (Jay, 2017; Lopez and Bucholtz, 2017). As Skeeter highlights moments of progress when relating to Aibileen and Minny, she also provides a grand narrative of historical experience. Because race equality was an impossible and unrealized idea in the Jim Crow South, its nascence defined how Stockett depicts Skeeter. Yet, Skeeter progresses with her ethnography by not altering the linguistic contents of meaningful narratives. More astonishing is how Aibileen and Milly describe how black maids in Jackson regularly suffered abuse from white women.

Civil rights activism during the early 1960s had not yet provided opportunities for women to express how sexism and patriarchy informed daily practices. Yet, white women in the South often expressed racial superiority based on their upbringing (Jay, 2017; Lumumba, 2015; Rezek, 2020). Victorian norms allowed narratives of racial superiority to flourish while black women could not speak for themselves. Scholars may contend that Stockett aimed to depict Skeeter as someone interested in subverting tradition. However, caution is necessary when assuming that any form of “black writing” would somehow become detached from racial identification (Helton, 2019). The 1920s Harlem Renaissance aside, literary movements focusing on the lives of black Americans often had scholars internalizing upward mobility narratives. Black writers often produced knowledge appealing to white readers without challenging their views of race. Harlem Renaissance figures were often resigned to offer their socially constructed interpretations of lived reality. In turn, white audiences celebrated these literary decisions as shaping discursive frameworks of diversity and inclusion (Chakravarty et al., 2018; Helton, 2019; Peters, 2018). As novelists like Stockett reveled in how quickly *The Help* achieved bestseller status after its publication, she unconsciously perceived herself as someone capable of providing blanket remedies to deeper structural issues plaguing black women and men today. Yet, Stockett could not outwardly proclaim herself as the white savior.

Of course, the white narrative Stockett provides does a disservice to how white audiences learn from the experiences of black women employed as servants for white families (Stockett, 2009). Academics may continue lambasting *The Help* for reasons stretching beyond racism and sexism. As a rebuttal, it suffices to imply that white scholars critical of the intersecting relationship between capitalism and oppression will have variable opinions concerning how novelists should frame proverbially controversial topics like everyday racism. White scholars critiquing *The Help* may further assume they are participating in a liberators project to denounce privilege in all its pernicious form (Peters, 2018). Still, readers appreciative of Stockett’s novel remain subject to their naivete by diminishing linguistic practices used by women like Aibileen and Minny as culturally endemic (Lopez and Bucholtz, 2017; Rezek, 2020). The same readers will maintain the belief that black women overcoming racism and oppression possess enough

literacy skills to speak articulately. Unfortunately, interrogating the status of white authorship remains a dangerous task accompanied by incredulity. Advancing future scholarship in this area will, therefore, require a turn toward practices like minoritarian criticism to unsettle tradition (Rogers-Cooper, 2016). Acting on this suggestion will likely improve how scholars critique white authorship as a literary practice guided by everyday racism. Because racism in academia is part and parcel of systemic issues, its placement in critiques of white authorship is vital to subverting the master-slave relationship while interrogating the role of unconscious bias.

Future scholarship addressing white authorship of black narratives should capture the relationship between literature and history. While Stockett's novel offers a first-person, present-tense narrative of the past, it provides only the most superficial details of historical events unfolding in Mississippi (Stockett, 2009). Surely, the author may have expressed shock at criticisms alleging blatant racism (Jay, 2017; Lumumba, 2015). Given that *The Help* often reads like an ethnography, its autobiographical elements do not allude to recordings of authentic linguistic practices used among black women employed as maids to white women. Turning toward minoritarian criticism will demonstrate the potential of scholars to engage in multidisciplinary conversations with succumbing to unconscious biases defining literary and academic discourse (Rogers-Cooper, 2016). However, proceeding with the minoritarian turn must involve a process of acknowledging why black women are subjects of scholarship (Lopez and Bucholtz, 2017; Rezek, 2020). Academics and critics must contend with how representations of linguistic practices among black women consistently make white audiences feel better about their privilege. In doing so, they must locate the sources of unconscious biases reinforcing negative stereotypes tied to illiteracy and poverty (Lopez and Bucholtz, 2017). One example to consider is how white audiences appreciate the "sassy" quality of Minny as authentic yet internalize dominant social codes grounded in racism and patriarchy (Jay, 2017). The example provided here may guide minoritarian turns by situating whiteness as an epistemological reference point from which all social problems emerge.

By treating whiteness as responsible for producing knowledge considered palatable to mainstream audiences, scholars integrating the minoritarian turn into practice may effectively promote cross-racial dialogue while deconstructing identity categories (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Jay, 2017; Peters, 2018). Yet, lauding the discursive turn as inspiring discussions of diversity and inclusion is foolhardy when racism is a historical process shaping daily life. The same logic extends to how white scholars treat colonialism as a historical fact. Scholars may also improve academic discourse by situating race equality as more than an ethnographic project allowing black women to feel represented. While condemnations of how racism and patriarchy intersect are popular, they must also provide clearer directions for promoting cross-racial dialogue (Peters, 2018; Rezek, 2020). Similarly, future scholarship evaluating the role of authenticity cannot reinforce unconscious biases caricaturing black women as embodying historically based stereotypes (Jay, 2017; Lopez and Bucholtz, 2017; Rezek, 2020). Upon acknowledging further how white liberal feminism typically undergirds the discourse of mainstream liberator projects, framing race equality within the minoritarian turn means knowing where the intentions of scholars lie (Lumumba, 2015). The implications for promoting cross-racial dialogue in academia are far-reaching when individual scholars



draw from authentic experiences of racism or oppression to inform their views. However, these implications must extend to the literary world in which novelists believe they must sanitize narratives to achieve bestseller status. Notwithstanding how Stockett maintains her privileged white author status, scholars critiquing white authorship must continuously address the limitations of remaining in one's comfort zone.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

While scholars and critics of *The Help* may argue that its author depended on white authorship to reinforce negative racial stereotypes, they must also consider how the minoritarian turn can promote cross-racial dialogue in academic circles. Ethnographic and autobiographical features of Stockett's novel aside, the narratives contained within imply a sincere yet naïve attempt to promote diversity and inclusion while civil rights activism in 1960s Mississippi was nascent. That said, white authors may include black narratives but should consider accounting for the sources of unconscious biases. Only then may critics refrain from deriding white narratives as feel-good narratives inspired by white liberal feminism. By integrating the minoritarian turn into a discursive practice, academics may press forward with deconstructing historical processes of colonialism and racism before embracing ideas like equality. Still, future scholarly investigations may stress how white supremacy controls the narrative of how black women in the South live today. Although many black women are becoming increasingly successful, they remain subject to more subtle forms of oppression requiring the denial of economic and human autonomy. In the end, allowing white narratives to control how black women behave will only result in justified revolt. Notwithstanding how black women narratives also remain ghettoized in academic circles, they may continue empowering white liberal feminists to do better.

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