

The Help: A Voice for Stifled Heroes

In the midst of the Civil Rights of the radical 1960s, segregation persisted very strongly in the South. While a few prominent Civil Rights activists, such as the marches of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the bus protests of Rosa Parks, made their mark on public television and national sentiment, the story of the more common, silent, domestic workers — the “help” — goes largely untold until the publication of Kathryn Stockett’s book and the subsequent movie, *The Help*. These maids made up a large portion of Southern blacks, and the movie portrays the prejudice and shame that they felt in deeply segregated Jackson, Mississippi. While the exact plot is fictional, the movie accurately shows the occupational limitations, segregational measures, and social lack of control that the Southern maids felt during this time period.

All of the black women in the movie were portrayed as maids, except perhaps Constantine’s daughter, who lived in the North. While this may seem an outrageous exaggeration of the African American population, this is mostly accurate. Estimates of the maid percentage of the total African American women population in the South range from 65% (“Domestic Work in the South: Maids are no Longer Servants”) to 90% (Armstrong) during the mid-20th century (1940-1960). This was especially true of the deep South, such as the scene of the story in Jackson. While blacks in the North had already been incorporated deeply into culture (e.g., the Harlem Renaissance) and states in the upper South had slowly been gaining rights (such as the introduction of intellectual jobs in Virginia to black women at NASA, as shown in the movie *Hidden Figures*), the lower part of the South remained *very* conservative. Being a maid was one of the only available occupations to the black women amongst the deeply-prejudiced Southern population, and still a measly one at that: maids earned on average only \$139 (inflation-adjusted) per week (“Domestic Work in the South: Maids are no Longer Servants”), and there were no labor unions or regulations to help them against mental, verbal, or physical abuse by their employers (Cassanello). The main sense of despair for African Americans begins here in the lack of economic opportunity, which causes the maids to live in their own, poorer neighborhood: the lack of available occupations with any resemblance of equality to white women.

Ironically, their employers such as Hilly and Elizabeth head charity foundations that help kids in Africa, without noticing the poverty that exists in the maids around them, all the while hosting bridge gatherings and extravagant charity dinners. This detail indicates that the women had a sense of indignance against low-welfare people (as then-President LBJ's "War on Poverty" initiative was a major point in his "Great Society" policy), but simultaneously failed to regard the domestic social inequality as poverty. This again demonstrates the strict conservatism of the Southerners, which masks their ability to see the level of hardship of their overworked, underpaid maids. This is much like the Confederate conservatism that limited 19th-century Southerners from seeing their slaves as nothing more than chattel or animals, as evidenced from the movie *12 Years a Slave* in which Master Epps compares his slaves to baboons.

This conservatism also was evident in the movie because the more radical-minded, tolerant people in the movie were shunned by their more socially-involved counterparts. Skeeter, for example, was dismissed by her mother several times for showing concern about Constantine's firing and whereabouts, until her mother was also overcome with regret about the loss of Constantine. Skeeter's mother was in turn shunned by Hilly, for protecting Skeeter's defense of her book on the maids. Celia was also labeled as a social outcast, in part because of her disregard for social norms of segregation: Celia wholeheartedly welcomed Minny into her home and appreciated her work, an act that was condemned by Hilly.

Another astonishing fact that was shown in the movie was the white people's "scientific" evidence to support segregation. A report on the supposedly-scientific studies of germs specific to African Americans states:

"Scientists, bolstered by **scientific racism**, undertook unethical studies that would never have been allowed with white subjects. While many emphasize the horrors of Nazi-supported science, white supremacists in the U.S. **conducted their research and published their findings with impunity**. While working as the Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote a controversial report in 1965 (*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*) using sociological methods to define a **"pathology" inherent to families of African-Americans — that black mothers caused their own**

poverty and destroyed their own progress toward economic and political equality”
(emphasis added) (Hollingsworth).

Other historical evidence mentioned in the report stated that sometimes diseased blacks were denied medical treatment and that lower-quality, poorer facilities for blacks often fostered more diseases than cleaner white-only facilities (Hollingsworth), both of which caused a vicious cycle that increased pathogen growth among blacks that further supplemented this “scientific racism.” The segregated bathrooms illustrated in the movie were just one aspect of this segregation, both as a result of the conception that African Americans carried different, more dangerous germs, and resulting in more dirty conditions among African Americans. The movie does not even mention separate-but-equal facilities outside of the domicile, such as in education or in public restrooms.

Finally, and perhaps most potently, was the fear incited amongst subordinate African Americans in a white-dominated society. Even though *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* had ruled segregated facilities unconstitutional a decade earlier, implementing the law was not easy. Vivian Malone, the first black student to attend the University of Alabama, was held back by the governor from entering the university before Eisenhower ordered National Guard troops to uphold the *Brown* ruling by allowing her admission; even after her admission, a fellow student at the university recalled that guarding National Guard members had said, “‘I hope you have a gun,’ or, ‘I hope you have a bomb’” (Davey) — indicating that they too wanted Vivian *dead* despite their orders to protect her. In the movie, the murder of Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers by KKK members in Jackson was portrayed as a night of chaos, confusion, and fear, rightfully so. At that point, Minny says to Aibileen, “Things ain’t never gone change in this town, Aibileen. We living in hell, we trapped. Our kids is trapped” (Stockett). Intimidation methods such as murder still controlled the South stronger than the law did, and as a result Jim Crow laws effectively held priority over Civil Rights rulings.

One of the few positive aspects of the movie, which actually occurred between many Southerners and their maids, was an inseparable friendship between child and caregiver. The relationship between Skeeter and Constantine, or between baby Mae Mobley and Aibileen, was

one that existed for thousands of children, mediated by their parents and by social norms. In a real-life person's memory, "[her maid] Elisabeth was chosen to look after me, and I had no idea that I was her job — I thought she was my friend who came to play" (Davey). Before these children grew up there was no distinction between skin color because they don't understand racial relations; after they grew up, however, relationships often became strict and work-based.

Despite all of these realities displayed in the movie, the actual, historical accuracy of the events may be entirely fictional. Stockett herself claims that the story is entirely fictional (Bremner). However, there has been a legal dispute over whether or not many of the stories, especially those of Aibileen, were stolen from a former maid that worked for Stockett's brother, Ablene Cooper ("Based On True Story? 'The Help' Author Battles Family Maid In Court"). The publication of an anonymous book titled *The Help* in the 1960s is fictional, however, and the stories within are geared towards the readers of the 2009 novel and movie adaptation. However fictional it may be, the movie was very effective in determining the realities of maid hardships — I did not even know that the story was fictional until researching it after watching it.

On a scale of one to ten for historical accuracy and relevance, I would rank this movie a nine. The only issue is that it is not entirely nonfictional, even if the basis of its stories may have been. However, this was not the focus of the movie, which was meant to convey the idea of Southern segregation from the perspective of the segregated holistically rather than provide an actual, factual record. The perceived reality demonstrated in the movie — in the historical references (such as building separate restrooms within a house), shock value (such as the death of Medgar Evers), and comical moments (such as the "terrible awful") — give a powerful voice to the silent help of the 1960s South. They were very much heroes in their own right: with no chance to speak out for themselves, they kept their heads low and fostered so many children indignantly, selflessly, having nothing but hope in their hearts.

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