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Gendered Agency in *the Help* (2011): A Subaltern Reading

Abstract

The double marginalization of black-American women has been a concern widely depicted and actively debated in literature across the world, films being no exception. This research paper is an inquiry into how Tate Taylor's film *The Help* (2011) - an adaptation of the novel by the same name (2009) by Kathryn Stockett - represents the agency of black-

American housemaids through an anonymously published book recounting their marginalizing experiences with their white masters. The paper scrutinizes how gendered agency is channelized through certain filters that seem to endorse the racist ideology rather than subverting it superficially. The theoretical framework is built on the ideas of subaltern theory suggested by Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak with interventions from theories of gender and agency. The major findings of the paper focus on how Skeeter (a white journalist) is an inevitable presence for the agency of the black-American housemaids – primarily Aibileen and Minny – to find its complete expression. The paper holds up Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" The scope of the research lies in exploring how art and literature that try to subvert colonial narratives unconsciously become proponents of the same, as a result of their interpellation in the dominant ideologies.

Keywords: Gender, Agency, Subaltern, Marginalization, Ideology, Racism

Full Text

“Take up the White Man’s burden-
Send forth the best ye breed-
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives’ need.”

(Kipling 1-4)

One community constantly subjected to multifarious means of marginalization has been the Afro-American women, especially during the United States’ centuries of colonization and slavery. Long after its abolition and disappearance from the political sphere, thanks to stalwarts like Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln, and others, slavery still remains a prominent theme in literature and historiography. Among the fiction that enlightened the world about the generations of housemaids that Afro-American women were to the white households, *The Help* (2009) by Kathryn Stockett remains a significant work. So does the film adapted from the book, bearing the same name, and directed by Tate Taylor in 2011.

The Help tells the story of how a young white woman (Ms. Eugenia Phelan, popularly known in her social circles as Skeeter) tries to publish a book that narrates the life stories of coloured housemaids in 1960s Mississippi. The film earned commendable appreciation and accolades for its representation of the segregated life in Mississippi during the years of Civil Rights Movement. Xan Brooks wrote in the review of the film that was published in *The Guardian*, “*The Help* is a broad southern melodrama that implicitly frames the push for racial equality as the tale of oppressed African-Americans who are given their voice by a lone white do-gooder.” Thus, the film was lauded internationally for the anti-racist stances it held with regard to the past centuries of oppression that the United States witnessed.

But a few months back, Viola Davis, who enacted the lead role of Aibileen in the film, made a shocking revelation in an interview with *The New York Times*, saying that she regretted the role in *The Help*. She was quoted as saying, “I just felt that at the end of the day that it was not the voices of the maids that were heard” (Shoard). Taking cue from this statement, this research paper explores how the Afro-American housemaids are denied their agency and autonomy in the true sense of the term, even when the film boasts of adopting a favourable stance about them. The paper tries to link the Gramscian concept of the subaltern to identify the black housemaids in *The Help*; it interrogates Spivak’s famous question “Can the subaltern speak?” in the context of the film.

There are two major characters, who serve to unravel the basic thread of the plot and keep it going: Aibileen (a middle-aged black housemaid), and Skeeter (a young white woman). Though Aibileen seems to be the center point of the story, and her experiences as a slave maid are foregrounded, there are many black maids like her, including her friend Minny Jackson, Yule Mae, and Constantine. But there is no one (not even whites) like Skeeter. She is introduced as an aspiring and ambitious journalist and writer, very unlike the white society ladies of her times, groomed to be homemakers and nothing else. She wears plain clothes, is practical, and in Aibileen’s words, has “no man, and no babies” (*The Help* 00:04:28). Skeeter is also noteworthy for her broad-mindedness inclusive of coloured people, her pronounced sympathy emerging from her attachment to Constantine, the maid who brought her up. And instances from the film prove that her attitude to blacks is not a mask, but genuine.

The ‘representation’ of whites and blacks does not seem to run proportionate throughout the narrative, true to the regret echoed by Viola Davis. The agency exercised by Aibileen, Minny, and other black housemaids who team with them to courageously bring out their stories, is not comparable with that of Skeeter. While tracing the feminist approaches to describe the concept of agency, Lois McNay defines agency as “the capacity of a person to

intervene in the world in a manner that is deemed, according to some criterion or another, to be independent or relatively autonomous” (40). But she also observes that “although agency is a universal capacity, it is realized in a variable and unequal fashion” (McNay 39). *The Help* portrays how the Afro-American housemaids in Mississippi find their agency through the publishing of their life stories; but this independence and autonomy does not look as if attained personally, instead it has the aura of a benefaction from Skeeter. Skeeter’s determination overrides the valor exhibited by the black housemaids, hence making their agency mediated- which is further explored in the analysis of the film.

One of the major concepts to be understood along with “agency” for a complete comprehension of the forthcoming analysis of the film is that of the “subaltern”. The subaltern classes refer fundamentally in Gramsci’s words to any “low rank” person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation. (qtd. in Louai 5). Gramsci also discusses the importance of making “their voice heard instead of relying on the historical narrative of the state which is, by the end, the history of the dominant and ruling classes” (Louai 5). Popularly adopted into the Indian academia, and developed in the South Asian context, Subaltern Studies has gained wide acclaim in the post-modern critical scenario. *The Help*, when analyzed in the light of the subaltern studies, considers the black housemaids as the subaltern class, and Skeeter as their savior who lends them voice.

Skeeter’s intention when she begins her career is only an exciting area to work upon to establish herself as a writer. She is in contact with Ms. Stein, the editor of a publishing company in New York, named *Harper and Row* (who once rejected her application, due to lack of experience). She keeps communicating with Ms. Stein, trying to convince her of her idea, and after much deliberation Ms. Stein gives her an affirmative nod. Skeeter approaches

Aibileen to help her with a household column to be published in *The Jackson Journal* where she works. Under the façade of this professional assistance, Skeeter tries to lure Aibileen into her plan of drafting a book that speaks from the perspective of the (black) help. Aibileen refuses this suggestion, out of fear for her life. However, Skeeter leaves her phone number with her so that if Aibileen could think it over and feel otherwise, Skeeter would still be waiting.

Though the idea that Skeeter suggests is quite revolutionary and transformative for the blacks, it is neatly bound in the patronage and security that a white offers. Skeeter also suggests that they will have to keep the whole affair a secret, whereby she plays the role of sponsor and protector of the black housemaids' stories. Skeeter exercises her agency to bring about a change, both at the personal and the social level. But how far Skeeter has internalized the mental trauma experienced by Aibileen and others remains unanswered, probably due to which she casually asks her to maintain the secret, and compel other maids to do the same. Skeeter introduces the book as her own dream to which Aibileen and others can contribute if they are willing; their stories being disseminated in the mainstream society is an added advantage that they would procure. The black women's agency is censored, and subject to conditions. They become the subaltern who are in need of a voice, which Skeeter very conveniently offers.

Aibileen's choices are open, and she chooses to refuse; but the fact that they are offered by a white (then considered a superior race, and sanctioned so by law) puts blacks at the receiving end of the others' agency, thus rendering their agency to be "variable and unequal" as McNay notes. Anyhow, luckily for Skeeter, things work out in her favour. Minny's partner Leroy's physical torture meted out on Minny, and the church sermon change Aibileen's mind. The particular scene where Aibileen listens to Minny's screams at the hands of Leroy and cuts her call abruptly is significant. After she cuts the call, she stares for a few

moments at Skeeter's phone number plainly kept next to the phone wires (*The Help* 00:3:17-00:39:25). Though Aibileen is only making up her mind, and Skeeter does not seem imposing on her, Skeeter is portrayed as the only way out from the trauma their lives have been through. Aibileen is further moved by the church sermon where the pastor says, "courage is about doing what is right in spite of the weaknesses of our flesh" (*The Help* 00:40:04), and "Love, as exemplified by our Lord Jesus Christ, is to be prepared to put yourself in harm's way for your fellow man" (*The Help* 00:40:19- 00:40:27). Later, when Skeeter calls at her house and asks what changed her mind, she answers, "God" (*The Help* 00:46:00).

The scene when Aibileen invites Skeeter to her house is significant in the film. Extending to around six minutes, it speaks aloud of the difference in agency of a black housemaid and a white educated woman in 1960s Mississippi. Before they begin to discuss the book, Aibileen tells Skeeter, "I ain't never had no white person in my house before" (*The Help* 00:42:03), which is spoken in a tone of being privileged by her visit, that silently gratifies the superiority of Skeeter's race and glorifies her benevolence. Aibileen proceeds to ask Skeeter's personal feelings on listening to stories that reveal an evil side of her (Skeeter's) own race. This worry from Aibileen (who dreams of becoming a writer herself) is grounded in a black woman's agency being channelized by the intervention of a white mediator without whom she does not have an independent means of expression. Skeeter's reassurance gives Aibileen the courage to trust her own decision. She also assures Aibileen that she doesn't have to call Skeeter "Ma'am" on unofficial occasions.

The mode of question and answer interviews that Skeeter does with Aibileen is striking. It not only establishes the lesser agency that Aibileen would get to exercise in the course of the writing; moreover, there also stands the case of the original stories that Aibileen intends to say ending up being edited by a superior educated white woman. Moreover, a person who questions ought to fall on a superior side, whereas answering signifies the very

process of still being answerable, even when Aibileen's stories are ultimately an alternate history in itself. Aibileen is, in fact, caught in an intermediary position: between the white society who is oppressive, and Skeeter who appears before her like a savior (in spite of being white). Gayathri Spivak's observation is quite relevant in her case, "There is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak" (103).

However, Aibileen tries to find a voice for herself when she tells Skeeter, "I thought I might write my stories down and read them to you" (*The Help* 00:43:55), to which Skeeter agrees. She is seen reading out from her prayer book in which she had written down a couple of her stories the previous night. At a later meeting, Aibileen grows more convinced of Skeeter's 'innocent' intentions, and even makes commands to Skeeter, asking her to write in particular ways. She even says that if her son was alive, he would definitely have loved her writing. Ironically, almost all her stories are manually written down by Skeeter, which makes Aibileen a writer, but not in the literal sense. "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (Spivak 104). Editing becomes a job/privilege/burden of the white educated Skeeter, and Skeeter transforms to be an inevitable presence in the path to Aibileen's free expression.

It is Minny, in her instinctual behavior, who asks Skeeter "Just what makes you think coloured people need your help?" (*The Help* 00:57:46). She is skeptical of Skeeter's intentions, to which Skeeter replies that she was trying to show Aibileen's perspective so that people might understand the blacks' perception too. Though she makes a lot of flurry, Minny returns to join the secret story-telling sessions to add her stories to them. But Skeeter does not accept Minny's suggestion of adding more stories with fake names, when the other maids refuse to help them. She acts as a moralizing agent who tries to channelize Aibileen's and Minny's agency towards ethically oriented decision-making. A similar situation happens when Skeeter refuses to put the "terrible awful" that Minny did to Hilly Holbrook. When Aibileen gets to know that her stories cannot be published until more stories appear, she

literally breaks down and feels helpless about the situation. When a black-American is shot dead and there is an emergency in Mississippi, Minny and Aibileen comfort and stand for each other, while Skeeter just seems upset by the news, but not threatened.

Skeeter's genuine and innocent interest in the black liberation is foregrounded in a scene where she decides to put the story of how her own mother fired their maid Constantine for no fault of hers, but just to satisfy the white pride. But even this decision is propelled by Ms. Stein's instruction to Skeeter to include her personal story in it. Further, when the book gets published and wins wide acclaim due to its scandalous contents, the remuneration is distributed to the maids by Skeeter, and the maids are thrilled about it. When the film ends, Skeeter wins a job in New York and moves out; but Aibileen loses her job. Though she walks out hopeful of becoming a writer that she dreamed of, how much the possibility would become practical is a dubious aspect to consider. Whereas the only loss Skeeter suffers is the prospect of her boyfriend who leaves her; which was anyhow not a priority to her.

The Help is a feel-good film which superficially boasts the advocacy for black liberation in Mississippi during the Civil Rights years. But when analyzed in terms of the differences in gendered agency and a subaltern perspective, it may be concluded to be still biased towards the same racism that it purports to oppose. Representation remains a problem for the blacks, when it is not sanctioned by the whites. Agency is definitely curtailed, and even resistance is interceded by a person of a different race (here, the colonizing one). The black housemaids remain the subaltern, and they "cannot speak" (Spivak 104), until and unless mediated by a benevolent intellectually superior representative who facilitates their speech, and offers them a voice, taking upon themselves, the "white man's burden". Gayathri Spivak's observation about how an intellectual must only pave the way for the subalterns to gain their voice, but not get in the way of their liberation remains relevant in this context. Viola Davis (Aibileen)

cannot be dismissed as casually regretting her role in the film. There is indeed, substance to her statement.

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