

## RACIAL STRATIFICATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHARACTERS IN TATE TAYLOR'S *THE HELP*

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### Abstract

This study is purposed to uncover strengthening racial stratification done by African-Americans characters in a film, entitle *The Help*, written and director by Tate Taylor. This movie portrays the life of black maids who suffering racial stratification conducted by white women in Jackson Mississippi during the 1960's. This study seeks to argue that the strengthening of African-American characters in this film highlights the racial attitude from the white women attitude. To analyze this film, a concept of racial stratification by Martin N. Marger is applied. The result of this study shows that the African-American characters in *The Help* strengthening their racial stratification for being diversity of appearance and diversity of class social. Taylor shows that the racial stratification is shown by white women who separate their social class as employers from black women who are maids. The maids get many differences of the facilities and attitude from their employers.

**Keywords:** racial stratification, African-American, *The Help*.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Racial stratification frequently arises in society in socializing. Racial stratification obtains treatment in distinguishing roles held following social status inherent in a person. Thus, systematic social classification of people based on race. Community differences belong to classes in stages manifested in upper class and lower class. Classification in these classes is based on a particular social system that has power. Race beginning is due to differences among African-American as black people belonging to the lower class, while the upper class are American as white people. The upper class will

classify themselves into rulers and maintain a higher level of self-esteem compared to the lower classes. Ordinarily, African-American would become submissive and obedient to the powers hold on to by Americans so that they could be made slaves. Therefore, African-American characters are portrayed in literary works.

This condition also brings racial interaction that makes their racial stratification. Generally, racial stratification is class separation that applicable in human population in differences based on racial groups. As stated by (Marger, 2017), the essential biological meaning of race is a

population of humans classified on the basis of certain hereditary characteristics that differentiate them from other human groups. Then, he stated about stratification is not random, with groups and individuals occupying different positions by chance; rather, social institutions such as government, the economy, education, and religion operate to ensure the position of various groups in the hierarchy.

According to (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008), racial stratification is the differentiation of a given population into hierarchically superimposed racial groups. Its basis and very essence consist in an unequal distribution of rights and privileges among the members of a society. Meanwhile, according to (Verdugo, 2008), Racial stratification is a system of structured inequality, where access to scarce and desired resources is based on ethnic/racial group membership. Racial stratification assigns roles and functions to individuals based on their ethnic-racial group membership. And also, stratification systems vary across time and space, two of its primary components appear to be ubiquitous: ideological and structural. Stratification systems have ideologies justifying their existence and have ranged from “the will

of God” to those alleging biological superiority. So, a system of racial stratification exists if race and ethnic group membership are the basis for a system of structured inequality.

A matter of racial stratification faced by African-American is also reflected in literary works. One of them is well-described in an American Film Institute *The Help* written and directed by Tate Taylor. It released on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011 on blue-ray disc, DVD, and digital. It represented in 1960s. The movie is adapted on Kathryn Stocktett’s novel (2009) with the same name. *The Help* movie is one of movie that gives imagery of social lives. It is one of the most popular racial movies in America. Tate Taylor was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture. Tate Taylor has been nominated for and received industry awards including the 2013 Vail Film Festival Vanguard Award, the 2012 BAFTA Best Adapted Screenplay nomination, the 2012 Writer's Guild of America Best Adapted Screenplay, the 2012 Critics Choice Award nomination, the 2012 Image Award nomination for Outstanding Directing and for Outstanding Writing, the 2011 Chicago Film Critics Association nomination. Meanwhile, *The*

*Help* became the best movie on the box office for 25 days in a row and eventually because nearly \$200 million tickets were sold in the worldwide. Then, this movie get international awards also nominates. The 2011 African-American Film Critics Association winner, the 2012 AARP Movies for Grownup Awards nomination, the 2012 AFI Movie of the Year Award winner, the 2012 Golden Globes winner, the 2012 BAFTA Best Film Award nomination, the 2012 EDA Female Focus Award winner.

## 2. DISCUSSION

*The Help* movie is depiction of the black women living in Mississippi during the 1960s when they are officially equal to the whites but still experienced the unequal treatments. Setting up in Mississippi, *The Help* puts forward the depiction of racial stratification against black women, especially against those who as maids for white families. Based on the movie, racial stratification can explore by the being diversity of society and being diversity of public facilities.

### 2.1 Being Diversity of the Society

In *The Help* movie has a society aspects can be identified from the difference in appearance between

American as white women and African-American as black women. Black women are from the lower classes and their work as maid. Meanwhile, white women are from the middle class and have relatively significant jobs. It can be seen from the picture bellow.



In the picture above is using extreme long shot cinematography that presents a broader view on the screen. The place of setting for this picture is in the yard where someone from the upper-class lives. This can be seen from the environment that looks clean and neatly arranged which shows that this is in a luxurious and protected area. The picture above also shows three women who are walking together. Two of the three women above are white women, while the woman in the last line is a black people. It can be seen from the first woman's clothing is using a nice dress with blond and curly red hair neatly arranged. The style shows that she prioritizes the impression of luxury and

grace that makes it look attractive. The posture of the first woman shows her body and head held straight, chest forward, and shoulders slightly retracted. This represents she is a charismatic and charming woman.

The second woman is wearing clothes with an elegant and luxurious coat coupled with a curly blonde hairstyle, which gave the impression that she is an authoritative woman. The posture of the second woman is demanding her purse, which shows that she is a hardworking woman and prioritizes social status. While the ultimate woman to use a simple dress is known that the clothes are a primary uniform for maids. In most cases, if someone wears a uniform, especially within the scope of society, it is a regulated person. So, this black woman is regulated. Meanwhile, white women is wearing free clothes and glamour which is the person who makes the rules. Therefore, in this picture shows white women look more beautiful than black woman. The posture of the third woman in the last line slightly bent forward, she is showing obedient and submissive to white women. The last line can be presented as a form of a slave who follows the rules of the leadership of the

power. This form is included in stratification in society. In this case, white women have power over black women. Hence, it reinforces that racial stratification in appearance between white women and black women that made black women despised.

The other diversity of society in this movie is behavior in a party. The social aspect that appears in the picture above is the exhibition culture that embraces American culture. There is a difference between white and black women at a party.



In those pictures is using the cinematography zoom in with the medium close upshot. At duration 14:11, a place setting in a luxurious room that is attended by white women in their

elegant and gaudy clothes. Also, they have seen gathering by providing a variety of foods and drinks and doing card games. This indicates they are celebrating an event. At duration 14:58, this picture is showing a body of a black woman pouring a drink into one of the glasses of white women. From there, it can be proven that white people show their power by leading the black woman to serve them well. But white women are enjoying themselves at the party. Meanwhile, the black woman is working hard to serve the white women. In this way, it appears that white people assume that black people do not deserve to be free as they do. They deliberately oppressed black people by tireless employment. They did not want black class equality.

The last of being diversity of the society is injustice of a law. Black people are deliberately treated inadequately in government law. If they make a mistake, the police without thinking they will immediately accept the consequences of punishment.



The two pictures above focus on a black woman with two white polices. It is using cinematography with a long shot to clarify the situation in the two photos above. The situation depicted in the two photos above is very gripping between black women and the police. In the picture duration 01:27:56, it can be seen the police directly apprehend a black woman. They are apprehended without showing an official letter from the police to apprehend her. This can be illustrating the injustice in the law for blacks. In essence, the police representations of a form of the government agency tasked directly to provide security and justice for the community in an area and authority. In the second picture duration 01:28:11, it appears that the police

disrespectfully treated black women. This can be seen from the face of the black woman who showed a face that is unacceptable by the treatment of the two polices.

Thus, the woman committed a rebellion, and this can be identified from her posture. The rebellion is carried out by her naturally because the situation is clearly illustrated that she did not get the proper rights as they are considered human. Both of the police are arbitrarily treated a black woman roughly, and they did not care for the black woman. Therefore, they treat the black woman, not the same as white people who receive legal protection. This made black people like criminals without the opportunity to defend them. It can be assumed that the black women as a powerless and the white people that as police have a function to empower the black women.

## 2.2 Being Diversity of Public Facilities

The disparate treatments by the white people to the black people are explained clearly in *The Help* movie. It is identified from using the public facilities. There are differences in facilities between employers and the maids. The employers prohibit their

maid defecating in their toilet. The white family provides toilet outside the home. The idea of separating public facilities is toiletry segregation can be strengthened that black people are not allowed to use the same toilet in order to prevent the white people from diseases carried by black people.



In the three pictures above is using cinematography, which is a medium shot to reveal human objects from the waist to the head. At duration 34:04, it highlights three women; one of



them is a black woman coming out of a small bathroom. The setting of the place is taken in a room of a house that identifies as a car garage. It can be identified from the gap in the wall that indicates the yard outside the house and in duration 34:39, which displays the body gestures of white women waving their hands to black woman and little white girls. It can be proven by the position of the toilet is located in the garage, not in the house. The toilet is representing one of most private spaces in the house. Usually, the toilet always located inside the house. In general, the toilet only separates users according to gender, male and female.

However, in this case, it is different which they identify users through their race. The stratification is shown by white women as clearly. White people deliberately build the toilet for their maid because black people are believed to carry disease by using the same toilet seat as white people. Therefore, they have to build the black toilets in order the white people will not be infected the diseased. Another of toiletry segregation can be seen at duration 7:32. That can indicate a white woman who is limiting toilet paper using a pencil. Activities carried out by women

are an unusual form for people to do in general. She does indirectly is a separation of black toilets by calculating the amount of toilet tissue so that blacks cannot use their toilets. The actions of separate the toilet can represent beliefs in social practices that strengthen racial stratification. This indicates white people despise blacks in social terms by distinguishing the toilet between white people and black people.

Another being the diversity of public facilities, which is can be prove racial stratification between white people and black people, is a bus or public transportation. In this movie, a white woman is an employer and a black woman is a servant for them. Each of them rides with a different transportation to go to their workplace. In there, it can be seen the separation of the bus or public transportation.





The cinematography used at duration 34:39 is zooming out with a medium shot of the white woman who is in the car. Meanwhile, at duration 34:35 is using zoom out with long shot to showing the maids who will ride the bus? From the two pictures above, it can be seen the difference between white women and black women. A difference is can be identified by the transportation that they each ride. The white woman drives her car. Meanwhile, black women go to work at their employer's house using public transportation.

It can represent the difference in facilities received by black women as being very unfair. Furthermore, black people consistent get fewer facilities compared to white people. This can be

seen at duration 01:20:57 and 01:21:11, it has shown black people and woman and man are sitting on a bus together with white people. However, they get a separation of seats. So, it can be seen from the four pictures above, which a separation is carried out by white people to black people in public transportation. In general, transportation is representing as a public facility. Also, transportation can share ownership can be used by everyone without exception. However, public transportation can be implemented as a racial stratification that is clearly shown between white people and black people.

The last of public facilities that can make racial stratification is housing. The housing of white people and black people is differences. It can be seen in the picture below:







The cinematography that uses for both of picture in above is long shot to shown a setting place that identified as housing between white women and black women. In the two pictures above, the difference can be seen between white and black housing. From there, it is illustrated that the white's housing in a large, luxurious, clean place and maintained compared to black women's housing that looks dirty and unkempt. So, it can be seen from these differences that identifying racial stratification in housing. It can be identification justifies by a stereotype that is spread in society that black people represent a group who come from the lower classes. This makes the black people a minority and the white people, a minority in an area. This can be proven by the separation of residence. This separation can be represented by white people. Whereas, black people are only a minority who do not have the right to be free.

### 3. CONCLUSION

*The Help* movie already explains the cruelty of white women in relation to racial stratification in Jackson, Mississippi. Racial stratification shows have many differences between white women and black women in getting equality in many aspects. In that time, black people are always seen as second-class citizens, who never get something or the same treatment as white people. Based on this movie, racial stratification is shown by the white women who become the employer of the black women who become the maid. The black women get many faces racial stratification differently from other aspects. Diversity of the society shows differences in appearance between the white women and the black women, behavior in a party and injustice of the law. The last of differences is the diversity of public facilities that differences in toiletry segregation, bus or public transportation, and housing. From the differences above, black women always get second facilities compared to white women.

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