



SYSTEMIC RACISM IN NOVEL THE HELP BY KATHRYN STOCKETT (2009)

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Abstract

This research discusses the problem of systemic racism as reflected in American literature during the Jim Crow era. The study aims to identify how racism operates as a structured system influencing ideology, institutions, and daily social practices, and how marginalized groups perform resistance to challenge oppression. This research applies a qualitative descriptive method using textual analysis. The data are taken from narrative descriptions, dialogues, and events that show racial inequality and resistance. The findings reveal that racism is not merely individual prejudice but a deeply rooted social system that maintains white privilege through the transmission of racist ideology, institutional discrimination, and everyday practices that normalize inequality. Meanwhile, resistance is portrayed through covert and overt actions. Covert resistance includes silence, humor, and solidarity, while overt resistance appears in direct confrontation and collective acts of courage. These findings show that racism and resistance coexist as continuous forces: racism preserves domination, while resistance becomes the moral power that challenges and transforms it.

Key words: systemic racism, racial ideology, institutional discrimination, everyday practices, resistance.

A. INTRODUCTION

Racism is a deeply rooted social phenomenon in the history and culture of various societies worldwide. It's more than just individual acts of discrimination; it's a system of values embedded and passed down through generations. In many countries, including the United States, racism has become part of the social, economic, and political structure, making it a systemic issue. This form of racism is often not directly visible, but its impact

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is very real for its target groups, limiting access to quality education, decent jobs, and healthcare and legal justice (Feagin & Ducey, 2021). This concept argues that racism is not just a collection of isolated incidents; it's an organized and institutionalized system deeply rooted in society's structure, institutions, policies, daily practices, and even cultural ideologies that inherently create and maintain racial inequality.

According to Kirana et al. (2024), racism is a system of belief or a doctrine that states there are biological differences between individuals or groups of different races, and these differences are used to decide cultural achievement. It claims that one race is more special and has the right to look down on or even enslave another race that is considered lower. Racism can appear in the form of stereotypes, exclusion, violence, or structural barriers that stop certain groups from getting equal rights. A simple example of racism can be seen when someone refuses to be friends or interact with another person just because of their skin color, or when a company prefers to hire workers from a certain race even though their qualifications are the same. On a bigger level, racism also shows in systemic ways, for example housing discrimination in the United States known as redlining, which purposely blocks Black people from getting access to proper housing.

In the United States, the history of systemic racism has a long and painful past. It began with four centuries of trans-Atlantic slavery, which legalized human ownership based on race, keeping millions of Africans and their descendants in inhumane conditions for over two centuries. Although slavery was formally abolished after the American Civil War, systemic racism did not disappear. Instead, it transformed and was reinforced through the Jim Crow era. Racial discrimination against Black people still occurred through social policies, the justice system, and economic structures (Khoerunnisa & Nurholis, 2025). The Jim Crow system, dominant from the mid-19th to mid-20th century in Southern states, led to racial segregation. Racial segregation is a form of separation based on race that creates social, political, and economic inequality (Haningrum, 2018). This included separation in schools, hospitals, public transport, public facilities, and even places of worship and cemeteries.

It's important to understand that Jim Crow was not merely individual personal choices; it was law and social norms enforced by violence and state power (Klarman, 2004). These were laws and social norms, enforced with violence and state power, designed to maintain a racial hierarchy that placed white people at the top and suppressed Black communities into a subordinate position, systematically limiting their voting rights, economic opportunities, and civil liberties. This system effectively ensured that Black people remained in a low economic and social status, thus becoming a source of cheap labor for the white economy.

The Help offers a deep insight into how systemic racism manifests in daily life and operates on various levels. The most striking example is the controversial "Home Help Sanitation Initiative," championed by the character Hilly Holbrook. This was not just Hilly's personal idea, but a systematic attempt to institutionalize racial segregation within households, based on

racist assumptions about Black people's cleanliness. Furthermore, practices like extremely low wages, lack of benefits or social security for domestic helpers, and the employers' ability to fire them without consequence, are strong indicators of an economic system designed to exploit Black workers. This aligns with the concept of systemic racism, which emphasizes how economic gains accumulate for white groups through the oppression of people of color. Additionally, the novel also highlights racism in everyday interpersonal practices, which, although not always legally institutionalized, are part of a larger racist system. The demeaning treatment received by domestic helpers, from not being allowed to use indoor toilets in the homes where they cared for children and cooked food, to verbal and psychological abuse, illustrates the "empathy disruption" identified by Feagin as a characteristic of systemic racism. Many white employers showed a lack of empathy for the personal lives, suffering, or aspirations of their domestic helpers, and were more concerned with their own social image than the physical or emotional well-being of their workers. Through the interactions between white and Black characters, *The Help* reveals how racism shapes interpersonal relationships, limits opportunities, and suppresses silenced voices.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research applies a qualitative descriptive method because it aims to describe, interpret, and analyze the forms of systemic racism and resistance as represented in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2009). The qualitative approach is appropriate for literary studies since it allows the researcher to explore meaning, social context, and moral implications within a text rather than measure numerical data. The method emphasizes an in-depth understanding of how racism operates in social relations, institutions, and everyday practices as reflected in the novel.

The primary source of data in this study is Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* (2009). The novel was selected because it provides a rich depiction of systemic racism and the lived experiences of Black women during the segregation era in the United States. The secondary sources include scholarly articles, books, and journals related to racism, systemic theory, and resistance, such as Feagin's *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (2006), Van Dijk's *Discourse and the Denial of Racism* (1992), and hooks' *Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990). These references help strengthen the theoretical foundation and guide the interpretation of the data.

The data are collected through documentary analysis. The researcher reads the novel thoroughly and identifies quotations, dialogues, and events that illustrate the forms of systemic racism and acts of resistance. Each finding is then categorized according to the theoretical framework: racist ideology, racist institutions, and everyday racist practices, as well as covert and overt resistance. The data are recorded and organized into tables and notes for further interpretation.

The analysis process is conducted through textual analysis. Each quotation or event related to racism and resistance is analyzed using the framework of

systemic racism. The process involves three steps: (1) identifying and categorizing the data based on theoretical concepts; (2) describing how racism and resistance operate within the narrative; and (3) interpreting the broader social meaning reflected in the text. The interpretation combines descriptive and analytical techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of how *The Help* exposes systemic racism and the moral strength of Black women who resist oppression.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Research Finding

The findings of this research reveal that systemic racism and resistance in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2009) are closely interconnected. Racism operates through three main dimensions racist ideology, racist institutions, and everyday racist practices—while resistance emerges as a response through covert and overt forms. Together, these elements illustrate how racism functions as a deeply rooted social system that regulates belief, policy, and daily interaction, and how resistance becomes a means for survival and empowerment.

A. The Form of Systemic Racism

Systemic racism appears in many connected forms that affect the lives of minority groups in deep ways. These forms do not only happen through individual actions but are built into systems and institutional policies that seem neutral but actually cause racial inequality. In his 2006 book *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*, Feagin argues that racism is not just about individual actions or attitudes, but a well-organized system rooted in society's structures, institutions, ideologies, and daily practices. It is a system of oppression that has lasted for centuries, starting from slavery, continuing through Jim Crow segregation, and now appearing in modern forms.

1. Racist Ideology

Racist ideology is a system of thinking that believes one race is better and superior to other races. Feagin introduced the concept of the white racial frame, which is a way of thinking used by white people. It includes negative stereotypes, moral assumptions, language, and emotions to judge other racial groups. In the novel, some white women look down on their black maids. This shows the existence of racist ideology in the lives of black maids and their white employers. This can be seen in the quotation below.

"All these houses they're building without maid's quarters? It's just plain dangerous. Everybody knows they carry different kinds of diseases than we do. I double." I pick up a stack a napkins. I don't know why, but all a sudden I want a hear what MissLeefolt gone say to this. She my boss. I guess everbody wonder what they boss think a them "It would be nice," Miss Leefolt say, taking a little puff a her cigarette, "not having her use the one in the house. I bid three spades." "That's exactly why I've designed the Home Help Sanitation Initiative,"

Miss Hilly say. "As a disease- preventative measure."
(p.9)

From the quotation, it is clear how racist ideology exists in the daily life of white people, especially among upper-middle-class women. In this context, the racist belief appears in the idea that black people carry diseases, so they should not use the same toilet as white people. This is a negative stereotype that is not based on science, but is accepted as truth in white society. Miss Hilly says that black maids "carry different diseases than we do," showing the belief that black bodies are more dangerous. To support the separation of toilets, Hilly creates the "Home Help Sanitation Initiative," which sounds like a public policy, but its real purpose is to strengthen racial separation. Miss Leefolt agrees with this idea without thinking about whether it is right or wrong, showing that racist ideology is already deeply rooted in their everyday thinking.

b. Racist Institutions

Racist institutions mean racism in systems and social institutions that are structurally made to keep racial inequality. In Feagin's theory of Systemic Racism, institutions such as law, education, economy, and white households are created to protect white domination and to oppress Black people. This inequality is not always seen in personal actions, but is built into rules, practices, and institutional policies that continue across generations. In the novel, there are examples of racist institutions shown through rules that are made to hurt Black people and benefit white people. This can be seen in the following quotation.

"A bill that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the colored help. I've even notified the surgeon general of Mississippi to see if he'll endorse the idea. I pass." (p.9)

This quotation illustrates a form of racist institution, where a social rule or even a law is made to keep white power and hurt Black people. Miss Hilly tries to make the separation of toilets into a legal rule for every white home, not just a personal choice. She even involves a health official to make this racist rule look like it is about "health" or "disease." This reflects how racism is not only an individual prejudice but also something built into social structures and institutions, so that it gains authority and legitimacy. By trying to pass this "Home Help Sanitation Initiative," Miss Hilly is attempting to institutionalize segregation inside private households, turning personal discrimination into a community-wide standard. The use of health arguments shows how racist institutions often disguise themselves under the language of safety, science, or morality to justify inequality. This also mirrors the larger system of Jim Crow laws in the American South, where segregation in schools, transportation, restrooms, and public facilities was enforced by law to protect white privilege.

3. Everyday Racist Practices

According to Feagin's theory of Systemic Racism, everyday racist practices are a form of a social system that has been historically and

structurally embedded within white society. Racism does not only occur in large institutions like law, education, or politics but also appears in daily social interactions that seem ordinary yet are deeply demeaning. In this novel, systemic racism is evident in how Black people are treated in white households and in their surrounding communities. This is shown in the following quotation.

"Franny bend her head down, say, 'You hear what happen to Louvenia Brown's grandson this morning?'" "Robert?" I say. 'Who do the mowing?'" "Use the white bathroom at Pinchman Lawn and Garden. Say they wasn't a sign up saying so. Two white mens chased him and beat him with a tire iron.'" "Oh no. Not Robert. 'He... is he...?'" "Franny shake her head. 'They don't know. He up at the hospital. I heard he blind.'" (p.103)

This quotation show a clear example of everyday racist practices that occur through violence and social control over Black people's behavior in public spaces. The story about Louvenia Brown's grandson, Robert, who is brutally beaten just for using the "wrong" bathroom, reflects how racism is enforced not only by official laws but also through daily acts of intimidation and punishment carried out by white individuals. Even though Robert's action was simple and harmless using a bathroom without a sign it becomes a reason for violent retaliation because racial boundaries were deeply internalized in society. This reveals how ordinary social settings, such as a workplace or a garden shop, became spaces where racial segregation and violence were normalized. According to Feagin, everyday racist practices include repeated actions that maintain the racial order and remind Black people of their place in society. The attack on Robert is part of this everyday system of control a way to reinforce fear and obedience among Black citizens. Such acts make racism feel like an unavoidable part of daily life, where simply existing or moving in the wrong space could result in suffering and dehumanization.

B. The Resistance to Break Systemic Racism Done by Characters

Although systemic racism is a strong, deeply rooted, and historically inherited system, Joe R. Feagin emphasizes that it has never existed without resistance. In his book *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (2006), Feagin highlights that from the time of slavery to the modern era, Black communities have actively and continuously resisted racial domination, both openly and in hidden ways. Feagin explains that this resistance is a direct reaction to experiences of exploitation and injustice.

1. Covert Resistance

Covert resistance is a hidden form of resistance done by oppressed groups, especially African Americans, in systemic racism. According to Joe R. Feagin (2006), this resistance appeared in daily life through small actions, such as pretending to obey white people, using humor or coded language to show rejection, and building solidarity through shared experiences that only their community could understand. This can be seen in the quotation below.

"...so I said, Miss Walters, the world don't want a see your naked white behind any more than they want a see my black one. Now, get in this house and put your underpants and some clothes on." "On the front porch? Naked?" Kiki Brown ask."Her behind hanging to her knees." The bus is laughing and chuckling and shaking they heads. (p.13)

This quotation shows that Minny's story can be seen as a form of covert resistance because she rejects the idea of white superiority in a hidden way. Instead of confronting her white employer directly, she uses humor and sarcasm to show Miss Walters' weaknesses. By making her employer the subject of jokes in front of other Black maids, Minny turns the usual power of white women into something laughable. This shows Minny's rejection of the racial hierarchy, even though she expresses it indirectly. Furthermore, this subtle form of resistance highlights the clever ways in which oppressed individuals navigate a society structured by systemic racism. By using humor, Minny is able to express her dissent without putting herself at direct risk of punishment or retaliation, which demonstrates the strategic and cautious nature of covert resistance. This approach not only undermines the authority of her employer but also serves as a form of psychological empowerment for herself and the other Black maids who witness it. In addition, humor becomes a tool for community building and solidarity. When Minny shares these jokes with other Black maids, it creates a shared space where they can collectively acknowledge and challenge the unfair social order, reinforcing bonds of support and understanding. The laughter becomes more than just amusement it is a subtle act of rebellion, a way to mentally and emotionally resist the oppression imposed on them, and a method of sustaining resilience in a society that systematically devalues them. Overall, Minny's use of humor and sarcasm exemplifies how covert resistance can be both a personal and communal strategy, allowing Black women to contest racial hierarchies safely while fostering solidarity, empowerment, and resilience within their community.

.2. Overt Resistance

According to Feagin (2006), overt resistance is a form of opposition carried out openly, directly, and visibly against racist practices or systems. This type of resistance usually appears in bold and confrontational actions, such as refusing discriminatory rules, verbally opposing unfair treatment, or engaging in collective actions like protests and boycotts. Because of its direct nature, overt resistance often carries high risks, especially during the era of segregation when Black people could lose their jobs, face violence, or be socially ostracized. This can be seen in the following quotation.

When that little brat stole my pocketbook and hid it in g the oven, I didn't whoop her on the behind. But when the White Lady said: "Now I want you to be sure and handwash all the clothes first, then put

them in the electric machine to finish up."I said: "Why I got to handwash when the power washer gone do the job? That's the biggest waste a time I ever heard of." That White Lady smiled at me, and five minutes later, I was out on the street. (p.40)

This quotation shows a form of overt resistance according to Feagin's theory (2006), because the character Minny directly and openly defies her employer's orders, which she considers unreasonable. When her employer asks her to wash the clothes twice, Minny does not comply immediately; instead, she voices her protest by saying that it is "the biggest waste of time." This action is confrontational because she expresses her disagreement openly without hiding it. Minny demonstrates courage and firmness in standing by her principles, even though she is aware that defying her employer's orders could put her position and safety at risk. However, the consequences are immediate: her employer smiles cynically and fires Minny only five minutes later. This illustrates the high risks of overt resistance, where openly opposing the racist system and power relations can lead to serious losses, such as losing one's job, damaging one's reputation, and facing social pressure from a community that enforces racist norms. Thus, this quotation shows how overt resistance is a clear form of defiance, yet it is fraught with danger for Black people at that time. Minny's action serves as a concrete example that, although open resistance carries heavy consequences, the courage to oppose injustice remains an important way to challenge a racist system that oppresses and restricts their rights.

2. Discussion

This research reveal that *The Help* portrays systemic racism as a structured and continuous system that maintains white dominance through ideology, institutions, and daily practices. Racist ideology appears in the beliefs and stereotypes that justify white superiority and Black inferiority, as seen through the characters' attitudes toward the Black maids. Racist institutions are reflected in discriminatory laws and unequal economic systems that limit opportunities for Black individuals, such as unfair wages and segregation policies. Everyday racist practices occur through habitual actions and language that devalue Black people in social interactions, reinforcing white privilege as a normal social order.

At the same time, the novel presents acts of resistance that challenge this oppressive system. Covert resistance is expressed through small, hidden acts such as humor, silence, solidarity, and emotional strength, which allow the characters to preserve dignity and defy subjugation without direct confrontation. Overt resistance, on the other hand, appears through open defiance, such as speaking the truth, refusing discrimination, and supporting collective action to expose injustice. These forms of resistance demonstrate that despite systemic oppression, Black women in *The Help* actively seek agency and empowerment within a racist society. This aligns with Feagin's argument that resistance is an inseparable part

of the systemic racism framework, showing that oppressed groups continuously develop strategies to survive and challenge racial domination.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the analysis of *The Help* (2009) by Kathryn Stockett using Feagin's *Systemic Racism Theory* and the concept of resistance, it can be concluded that systemic racism in the novel is portrayed as an organized and continuous system that maintains white domination and suppresses Black people in various aspects of life. This system operates through three interrelated components: racist ideology, racist institutions, and everyday racist practices. First, racist ideology is represented through beliefs, assumptions, and cultural values that justify white superiority and Black inferiority. The characters of Hilly Holbrook, Miss Leefolt, and other white women embody this ideology through their attitudes and language, which reflect the normalization of discrimination. The transmission of racist beliefs from adults to children, such as through the character of Mae Mobley's mother and teacher, shows that racism functions as a social inheritance, passed from one generation to the next. Second, racist institutions are depicted through structural systems that maintain racial inequality, such as legal, economic, and social institutions. *The Help* illustrates how systemic racism functions as a comprehensive and enduring system consisting of ideology, institutions, and everyday practices that reinforce white dominance. At the same time, it presents various forms of resistance that demonstrate the strength, intelligence, and resilience of Black women in confronting oppression. and the necessity of continuous resistance to achieve social justice. For future researchers, it is recommended to conduct a deeper analysis by combining Systemic Racism Theory with other frameworks such as Critical Race Theory or Intersectionality Theory, in order to explore how race intersects with gender, class, and power in the novel. Further studies can also compare *The Help* with other literary works that depict racial oppression in different contexts or historical periods to enrich the understanding of racism as a global and evolving phenomenon. For students of literature, this study is expected to increase awareness that literary works are not only sources of entertainment but also powerful media that reflect social realities, criticize inequality, and promote empathy toward marginalized communities. Understanding the operation of systemic racism through literature can help readers recognize how ideology and institutions influence daily life and personal interactions. Finally, for the general readers, *The Help* provides an important reminder that racism is not merely a problem of the past but continues in various forms in modern society. Recognizing both the structure of systemic racism and the strength of resistance within oppressed communities can inspire collective efforts to create a more just and equal social system.

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