

EGALITARIANISM IN KATHRYN STOCKETT'S NOVEL *THE HELP* (2009)

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Abstrak

Tujuan penelitian ini adalah (1) menganalisis sejauh mana novel ini merefleksikan egalitarianism, (2) menunjukkan kontribusi elemen fiksi (karakter dan setting) dalam mengungkap egalitarianism dalam novel ini. Data penelitian ini adalah teks tertulis yang dikutip dari novel. Kutipan teks tersebut kemudian diinterpretasikan dan dianalisis dengan elemen fiksi (karakter dan setting) dan dikaitkan dengan konsep egalitarianism yang dikemukakan oleh Richard Arneson. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa protagonis melakukan tindakan-tindakan seorang egalitarian untuk melindungi hak dan mengangkat status orang kulit hitam atau minoritas di lingkungannya yang rasial. Keinginan kuat untuk mencapai tujuan tersebut merefleksikan melalui tindakan-tindakan yang bertentangan dengan ideologi serta kepercayaan yang dianut oleh para mayoritas pada umumnya.

Key words: Egalitarianism, egalitarian, majorities, minorities, belief, ideology.

A. Introduction.

The United States faced the most important era regarding civil rights and racial equality in 1960s. This era was marked by the rise of interracial tensions between majorities and minorities especially between whites and blacks. As majorities, whites played roles in society; they ruled and even limited the opportunities of minorities. As the result, blacks received unequal treatments in their social life since they were only regarded as the second layer of citizens and the inferior ones by whites. The injustice and racial inequality that are received by blacks led to social movements called African-Americans Civil Rights Movement. It aimed to end racial segregation and discrimination against blacks and enforce equal rights for them. Even though most of whites reacted negatively and could not accept the equality for blacks, there were some whites who did the opposite. They rejected the ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority since they believe that equality reflects the natural state of humanity.

People who have a high sense of humanity will avoid discrimination against the minorities. They are categorized as people who believe that all people were

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created equal in fundamental worth or social status and should be treated equally. These people are called egalitarians. Sears (1998) mentions that one of egalitarian values is equality of opportunity or equal treatments. Egalitarians are characterized by their belief in the equality of all people and each person can achieve prestige, but it should not be used to gain power over others. Moreover, whites who have the characteristics of egalitarians will treat blacks as minorities equally and even defend their rights as human beings. Meanwhile, the belief in equal social and civil rights for all people is called egalitarianism.

According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2002), the term egalitarianism is described as a belief that all human beings are equal in fundamental worth or moral status and should be treated equally in society. Meanwhile, egalitarians are people who believe in the equality of all people. Egalitarians always care about human equality and treat all people equally, regardless their social or racial background. It deals with the attitudes of egalitarians in order to remove inequalities among people as well as discrimination on grounds such as race, gender, religion, etc. Moreover, Gordon (2008) states that egalitarianism is the position that equality is central to justice. Egalitarians believe that there are certain absolute humanitarian principles like autonomy, freedom or human dignity that owned by human beings and should be protected. It can be understood that egalitarianism promotes equality and human rights in order to remove inequalities, discrimination and injustice.

Egalitarianism can be created through the personal experience of an individual. Mark Rossiter, a white film-maker is an example who seeks his black nanny who raised him. In this case, egalitarianism is created through the interracial relationship between a white child and his black nanny. Mark realizes that there was something unusual about the ways his nanny treated; unequal and different. He argues that his nanny should have received a better treatment. Johnston(2010) states that Mark considers his nanny as a second mother to him since the affection that she had given makes him to be a better person. This experience makes him consider that all people are equal and should be treated equally.

This paper is going to discuss about egalitarianism and investigate to what extent the fictional devices such as character and setting give contribution in disclosing this issue in the novel *The Help* (2009) written by Kathryn Stockett.

Kathryn Stockett was born in 1969 in Jackson, Mississippi. She studied at University of Alabama with a degree in English and Creative Writing. After graduating, she moved to New York City where she worked both in magazine publishing and marketing for nine years. She currently lives in Atlanta with her husband and daughter. *The Help* is her debut novel.

As an author with her first novel, Stockett has won several prestigious awards such as New York Times bestseller (Fiction, 2009, 2011), Amazon's Best Books of the Year (#19, 2009), Orange Prize Longlist (2010), Indies Choice Book Award (Adult Debut, 2010), Townsend Prize (Fiction, 2010), Exclusive Books Boeke Prize (2009), SIBA Book Award

(Fiction, 2010), International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award Longlist (2011), and Christian Science Monitor Best Book (Fiction, 2009). Those awards are the proof that *The Help* is one of the novels that suitable to be read by all people. *The Help* has sold more than 3 million copies and a Hollywood film version has released in 2011.

The Help (2009) shows Egalitarianism. It is a philosophy asserting the equality of all human beings, especially in their access to the rights and privileges of their society. Egalitarians express the idea that all human persons are equal in fundamental worth or moral status. In this novel, egalitarian is represented by the protagonist, Skeeter, a white American who favors blacks as equal as whites. Egalitarianism that committed by the protagonist aims to defend the rights and raise the status of blacks amongst racist society. It is uncovered through two ways: building a good relationship with black society and writing a nonfiction book from blacks' voices.

In building a good relationship with black society, the protagonist makes some efforts. First, she shows positive attitudes toward black maids and put all of the differences between them aside. This is done to give moral encouragement to the blacks and maintain the harmonious life as social beings. Second, she searches for her childhood maid's existence. There is a close connection between the protagonist and her childhood maid who is a black and played the role of a mother for her. Those efforts are made in order to defend the rights of blacks as human beings.

The protagonist writes a nonfiction book from blacks' voices. This book tells the truth about the life of black maids that unnoticed by public. This truth is told and experienced by black maids themselves. There are several points contained in this book. First, the protagonist exposes segregationism and inequalities that occurred in her society. Second, she reveals the violation of human rights such as unjust treatments toward blacks. Third, this book tells the irony of black maids who work for white households. It is made to let people know and understand that blacks are also human beings who live with equal rights. It is the way of the protagonist to raise the status of blacks.

There are two studies that give contribution and inspiration in analyzing this novel. The first study is written by Janet Maslin (2009), entitled *The Help: Racial Insults and Quiet Bravery in 1960s Mississippi*. This study focuses on the characters and setting. The purpose of this study is to reveal racial discrimination in Mississippi, United States during 1960s. It is based on the concept of liberalism and segregationism. These contradiction concepts are represented by two characters in *The Help* who are the same in racial background but have different personality and ideology. The concept of liberalism is represented by the protagonist, Skeeter. She is described as a liberal person who avoids being racist and dependent. She also supports ideas such as civil rights and freedom. Those characteristics are reflected by some actions. First, she refuses being a housewife and spending time playing bridge like her friends do. On the contrary, she prefers to find a job and earn money by her own. Second, she protects individuals from

violence. It can be seen by the way she treats blacks as minority friendly. Meanwhile, the concept of segregationism is represented by the antagonist named Hilly. She is a white who supports the separation between blacks and whites. In addition, she is categorized as a dependent person who has no job and relies on her husband. This study shows that racial discrimination can be triggered by the ideology and personality background of a person. It also shows the bravery of a woman who fights against conservative ideology of her society which is represented by the protagonist.

Another study is written by ReidunKornelieMork (2005), entitled *All Men are Created Equal: Langston Hughes's Opposition to Discrimination Against African Americans*. This study focuses on the works of Langston Hughes. This analysis deals with the concept racial inequality. It employs the method of New Historicism, and views the text in the context of the cultural conditions of its time of production. The purpose of this study is to disclose segregationism in United States, and the different stages of the practice of it. This is represented by Hughes' poems such as "The Weary Blues" and "Mulatto". This study shows blacks' struggle for equality. It is reflected by the speakers and tones of these poems. The speakers are African Americans and the tones are anger and frustration.

Arneron (2013) states that an egalitarian favors equality of some sort: People should get the same, or be treated the same, or be treated as equals, in some respect. An egalitarian maintains that people ought to be treated as equals—as possessing equal fundamental worth or moral status, dignity and as equally morally considerable. Egalitarianism promotes equality and human rights as the natural states of humanity. It advocates the removal of racial inequalities, discrimination and injustice among people since it opposes racism.

Egalitarianism influences someone's attitude toward others. Egalitarianism can be created through personal experiences of a child with his caregiver. It is related to the concept of attachment. It is an emotional bond that connects one person to another person. An attachment relationship was possible between domestic workers or caregivers and the children they help to raise. The earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers have a big impact that continues throughout life. According to Merwe (2009) attachment refers to an affectional tie that one person forms to another specific individual. Attachment can be applicable to non-maternal caregivers. In this analysis, an attachment occurs between a white child and her black maid as a non-maternal caregiver. Furthermore, Merwe states that a white child that raised by a black maid experiences severe anxiety in being separated from them. To overcome this separation anxiety, the child will strive to seek her caregiver existence. Since regarding all people are equal and the absence of racial prejudice, it can be understood that egalitarianism can be reflected by a good interracial relationship between whites and blacks.

B. Methodology.

The analysis of this novel focuses on egalitarianism that occurs in United States during Civil Rights era in 1960s. It is done by combining text-based and

context-based interpretation to reveal the meaning. Text-based interpretation focuses on exploring fictional devices such as characters and setting. These devices cannot be separated because they are interrelated each other. Characters are used to show some characteristics of egalitarianism from the character's attitudes and thoughts. Setting reveals the meaning through circumstances and atmosphere of the story. It is used to see how egalitarianism works in a culturally diverse society. These devices are connected to context-based interpretation by observing social phenomena in United States. Furthermore, these elements are associated with Arnerson's perspective about the concept of egalitarianism.

C. Analysis.

To build a good relationship with black society, the protagonist makes some efforts such as showing positive attitudes toward black maids and searching for her childhood maid's existence. The protagonist in this novel is a white American woman who treats blacks equally and differently from the most whites. It can be seen from her actions and the other character's perspective about her. The setting of this novel is in 1960s when blacks received unequal treatments by society. While most whites tend to marginalize blacks, the protagonist treats them like proper human beings with equal rights.

The protagonist shows positive attitudes in socializing with black society such as in greeting and thanking. Moreover, her attitudes are completely different from the other whites. It can be seen from her treatment toward Aibileen, a black maid who works for the protagonist's friend Elizabeth Leefolt. It is revealed through the quotation below:

The doorbell ring and I open it up. "Hey, Aibileen," Miss Skeeter say, cause she the kind that speak to the help. "How you?" "Hey, Miss Skeeter. I'm alright. Law, it's hot out there."

... Miss Leefolt walk in the kitchen. "Oh, there you are, Skeeter." She look at us both kind a funny. "I'm sorry, did I . . . interrupt something?" We both stand there, wondering what she might a heard. "I have to run," Miss Skeeter says. "See you tomorrow, Elizabeth." She open the back door, say, "Thanks, Aibileen, for lunch," and she gone.

... I go in the dining room, start clearing the bridge table. And just like I knew she would, Miss Leefolt come in behind me wearing her upset smile. Her neck's sticking out like she fixing to ask me something. She don't like me talking to her friends when she ain't around, never has. Always wanting to know what we saying (Page 9)

The quotation reveals the positive attitudes of the protagonist toward a black maid. She shows the hospitality in greeting the maid. Even though greeting is one of the habitual customs among whites, she also applies it to blacks. It proves that the protagonist believes that there is no gap between whites and blacks in socializing. She treats the maid equally, regardless of her social status as a maid. Moreover, another positive attitude that is shown by the protagonist is thanking.

The sentence *thanks, Aibileen, for lunch* implies that even though serving food is just one of the duties of a maid, but she feels grateful and respects it. It is kind of a good manner of the protagonist in order to build a good relationship with blacks.

Besides, the protagonist's attitude is different from another white character in this novel. While she treats the maid friendly, Elizabeth tends to show her superiority as the employer toward her maid. The sentence *She look at us both kind a funny* shows the suspicion of Elizabeth against the interaction between the protagonist and the maid. Moreover, the sentence *She don't like me talking to her friends when she ain't around, never has* shows that Elizabeth not only acts as her maid's employer, but also as her owner since she limits her right as a social being to socialize with others. This different attitude indicates that the protagonist is an egalitarian who upholds the equality of all people and has a willingness to build a good relationship with blacks. Furthermore, the sentence *...cause she the kind that speak to the help* implies that this positive attitude has become one of the characteristics of the protagonist since it receives the recognition from the maid.

In building a good relationship with black society, the protagonist also tries to defend the rights of blacks since there are many injustices that happen toward blacks in her society. Blacks are treated like they are not humans but diseases that must be wary of. This effort not only occurs when the protagonist interacts with black maids, but also when she interacts with the other whites. This situation is captured through the following quotation:

Miss Skeeter look real confused. "The Home...the what?"
"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." Miss Skeeter, she frowning at Miss Hilly. She set her cards down face up and say real matter-a-fact, "Maybe we ought to just build you a bathroom outside, Hilly." And Law, do that room get quiet. (Page 8)

From the quotation above, it can be seen that the injustice is not only conducted by the white individuals, but it is also implemented by the government. This indoctrination makes the position of blacks becomes more marginalized in society as well as their civil rights are abused. This injustice is in the form of segregationism. On the other hand, the protagonist does the opposite; she defends the rights of blacks. The sentence *Maybe we ought to just build you a bathroom outside, Hilly* shows the disapproval of the protagonist to that idea. It also reflects the braveness of the protagonist to maintain equality and against the other whites. This effort proves that as an egalitarian, the protagonist not only defends the rights of blacks, but she also opposes racial segregation in her society.

The next effort that conducted by the protagonist in building a good relationship with blacks is searching for her childhood maid's existence, Constantine. Unlike the other whites who turn out to be racists and ungrateful when they grow up, the protagonist believes that there is a close connection between her and the maid. It is shown in the quotation below:

"Is that Preacher Green's sermon you're playing on the radio?" She ask. "Yes ma'am, it is." Miss Skeeter kind a

smile. "That reminds me so much of my maid growing up." "Oh I knew Constantine," I say. Miss Skeeter move her eyes from the window to me. "She raised me, did you know that?" I nod, wishing I hadn't said nothing. I know too much about that situation. "I've been trying to get an address for her family in Chicago," she say, "but nobody can tell me anything." "I don't have it either, ma'am."
(Page 9)

From the quotation above, it is clearly captured that the protagonist feels very lost her childhood maid. It also shows that there is an emotional bond that connects her to the maid. She considers the maid more than the person who raised her. The utterance *She raised me, did you know that?* emphasizes that the protagonist feels grateful and considers the maid as the one who played the role as a mother for her.

The protagonist is anxious in being separated from the maid. To overcome this anxiety, she strives to search for her childhood maid's existence. The sentences "*I've been trying to get an address for her family in Chicago,*" she say, "*but nobody can tell me anything*" shows the effort of the protagonist in searching for the maid's existence. It indicates that the protagonist had has a good relationship with the maid before. It also shows the absence of racial prejudice between her and the maid in socializing.

The other act that conducted by the protagonist is writing a nonfiction book in order to raise the status of blacks in society. This book is the voices of blacks which expressed through the text. The protagonist is only the writer who delivers those voices. There are several points contained in this book such as segregationism, inequalities and the violation of human rights. This book also tells the irony of black maids who work for white households.

There are some bad treatments experienced by blacks in society. They are treated unequally and inhumanly by whites. As an egalitarian, the protagonist does not tolerate those treatments and wants to deliver them to public. It can be seen from the following quotation:

I've been so wrapped up in my own self, it hasn't occurred to me that Aibileen might be as thrilled as I am that an editor in New York is going to read her story. I smile and take a deep breath, my hope growing stronger. On our fifth session, Aibileen reads to me about the day Treelore died. She reads about how his broken body was thrown on the back of a pickup by the white foreman.
(Page 127)

The quotation shows that the protagonist does not write the book for her own interest. She wants to change public opinion about blacks; that they are also human beings who must be treated equally and properly. The sentence *...my hope growing stronger* indicates her strong ambition to make the life of blacks becomes better. The setting refers to the condition in which the protagonist has a willingness to publish the story of blacks that unnoticed by public. Thus, people

realize the bad effects of those treatments. She does not fabricate the story to impress people but just deliver those voices into writing. The word *session* shows that she gets the information by interviewing blacks themselves. In other words, the contents of this book are based on the real voice of blacks. Another unjust treatment that experienced by blacks is verbal abuse. In this case, they are accused of doing something they do not such as stealing. It can be seen from the following quotation below:

“Miss Leef—” “She telling everybody in town I’m stealing! That’s why I can’t get no work! That witch done turned me into the Smart-Mouthed Criminal Maid a Hinds County!” (Page 18)

The text shows the irony of the maids in working for white households. Despite the fact that they raise white children and teach them moral value, blacks are still treated improperly. The setting refers to the condition in which the maid lost her job because of the accusing. Thus, it leads to racial prejudice that causes blacks regarded as criminals and uneducated people. The sentence *...She telling everybody in town I’m stealing!* shows that whites construct a bad reputation for blacks by defaming them. By writing a book from blacks’ voices, the protagonist wants to make people treat equally, properly and with dignity.

D. Conclusion.

Novel *The Help* (2009) written by Kathryn Stockett shows egalitarianism. It is revealed through text-based and context-based interpretation. Text-based interpretation examines the interrelation between fictional devices such as character and setting. These devices are connected to context-based interpretation which refers to the social phenomenon in this novel. Egalitarianism is represented by the protagonist, a white American woman who considers and treats blacks equally. Living among racist society, she tries to defend the rights and raise the status of blacks since she believes that all people are equal in fundamental worth or moral status. Egalitarianism is uncovered through two ways; building a good relationship with black society and writing a nonfiction book from blacks’ voices.

The first way is building a good relationship with black society. The setting refers to her condition as a white American who witnesses unequal treatments and marginalization that received by blacks in her society. This situation gives significant contribution in disclosing her efforts in building a good relationship with black society. These efforts are made by showing positive attitudes toward blacks and searching for her childhood maid’s existence. The positive attitudes are shown by her interaction or socialize with blacks such as in greeting, thanking and being a good listener. The protagonist also shows her appreciation toward blacks as well as defends their rights. Meanwhile, in searching for her childhood maid’s existence the protagonist realizes that the maid has given a big influence for her which later makes her to be an egalitarian.

The second way is writing a nonfiction book from blacks' voices. The setting refers to the social environments in which both society and government treat blacks unequally. It makes the protagonist strives to raise the status of blacks. It is done by hearing the voices of blacks and delivers them to public through the book. These voices including segregationism, inequalities and the violation of human rights they experience in social life. This book also tells the irony of black maids who work for white households. It is made to let people know and understand that blacks are also human beings deserve equal rights.

Egalitarianism is not only found in literary works such as novel. It also can be found in reality since there are inequalities that still happen. For instance, interracial tensions arise when the dominant race or majorities come with the notion racial superiority. Meanwhile, the minorities are regarded as the inferior ones. They receive unequal treatments and their rights as proper citizens are abused by the majorities. In United States, blacks as the minority have struggled to demand their civil rights. It led to the emergence of Civil Rights Movement which aimed to remove inequalities such as racial discrimination and segregationism. The death of its leader, Martin Luther King indicates that this movement did not work out effectively. In this case, there are some whites who supported this movement since they believe in equality of all people. These people are categorized as egalitarians who represent Martin Luther King in demanding equality. However, everything is different at the present time. Blacks are treated equally by societies. The election of Barack Obama as the first black American president proves that blacks have received their rights as proper American citizens. It means that the barriers are no longer exist since there are many whites support and promote equality for all people.

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