
The Depiction of African American Maids vs The White Socialites on *The Help* (2011)

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Abstract

This research paper aims to investigate the contrasts in the relationship of two racial entities in the United States, African American maids and the White socialites, particularly in the segregation era (1960s). Findings and criteria of analysis were drawn from a movie called *The Help* (2011) with Peirce's semiotic approach and descriptive method. Based on the observation during movie screening and literature review, the root problem happening between two groups is the disparity of privilege and socioeconomic status based on race. Besides the intangible background, signs of segregation also appeared in the movie, such as Confederate Flag of Mississippi, separate toilets, and the attires. That context demonstrates that the white socialites have stronger position over the African American maids in which the white socialites appeared as the rich and good-looking employers who treated the maids with unequal acts and accusations. This situation has not ceased to exist in real life as in American society especially when it is supported by hate and, also, government policy.

Keywords: Race; Group; Movie

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INTRODUCTION

The Help (2011), a novel-adapted movie, brought back the challenging situation involving the black maids and white socialites in Jackson, Mississippi when the civil rights movement was about to break out. The movie was adapted from Kathryn Stockett's novel with the same title published in 2009. The main characters are Skeeter (Emma Stone), Aibileen (Viola Davis), Minny (Octavia Spencer), and Hilly (Bryce Dallas Howard). Skeeter is a white-educated woman who worked together with African American maids, Aibileen and Minny, to write a book about how the African American maids perceive the white families. Hilly, a white socialite woman, used to be Skeeter's best friend yet she was the supporter of African American subordination in the neighborhood. "It was so interesting to compare their perspectives," said Stockett in an interview with *Time* (Suddath, 2009). Manohla Dargis (Dargis, 2011), a movie critic, thought that the movie depicts the devided American society which is 'insulting and terrifying' especially with Hilly's struggle to separate the African American people with her white clan. Therefore, the conflicts in this movie began when two different racial groups fought and created different perspectives.

This study aims to analyze the conflict between two prominent racial groups in the United States which are the African American maids and the white socialites, and it would be elaborated with an approach of Semiotics for decoding signs and symbols on some scenes. This article argues that the contested racial and class identities between the African American maids and the white socialites are discriminative due to socioeconomic condition. In this paper, Peirce's semiotic model was used to gain some information about the signs in the movie. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), an American philosopher, proposes a model in which three semiosis functions are intertwined: the sign (that which stands for something else), the interpretant (meaning or meaning effect), and the object (the thing or referent) (Curtin, 2006). However, this approach is not just simply like doing a social interpretation of the link between the sign and signified. This study would have to understand the signs and contexts in the movie critically with some references to support any argument.

This paper took some references from previous publications. Banjo & Jennings (2016) wrote about how white society was being described in an African American/Black movie. It shows that the research on American movie industry still focuses on the portrayal of minority group, particularly based on skin colors. They argued that movie can be used as a platform either to fight or to conform with the prevailing principles. In this study, African American and White's attitudes and relationship were investigated with social identity theory and critical race theories.

There is another review that was drawn from a research paper discussing about African American representation in a movie. Haryanti, et. al. (2019) analyzed how the African American women in *The Hidden Figures* (2016) was being distinguished from the dominant masculinity and 'whiteness' in their working environment. This study applied mimetic approach and descriptive qualitative method. Verbal communication in the movie scenes expressed that the African American women made a resistance to the dominance and the tension did not raise for so long anymore.

RESEARCH METHODS

This academic research uses semiotic approach to analyze the occurrence in the movie. The word semiotic comes from a Greek one called "semesion" which is related to sign and it is divided into "semainon" as signifier and "semainomen" as signified or indication (Yakin & Totu, 2014). Semiotic itself is the examination of signs in which the existence of the signs is being studied and how it describes the social life. A sign is something that stands for an object that is observable, whether in material or not. Charles Sanders Peirce (1931) sees an object as a reference to our thoughts which is formed in human's mind. Object is also known as one thing that seves or illustrates the sign.

One more component in Peirce's framework of semiotics is interpretant. Interpretant is the meaning which is communicated by the representation of the object. These three components, sign, object, and interpretant are interacted one and another and work through semiosis process.



This process supports the analysis of this study in full context. Thus, in this movie, all aspects, scenes, wordings, and all visualization presented by the figures will be described in the discussion.

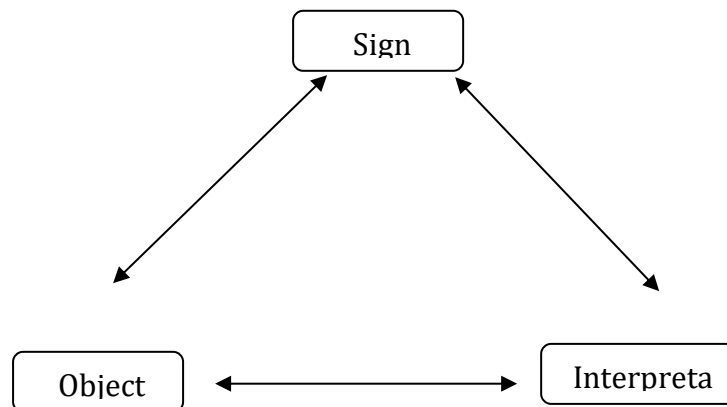


Figure 1. Three-Dimensional Sign Model
Source: Peirce, 1913

When it comes to full context, the analysis should also notice the bigger picture of this movie background. *The Help* (2011) was taken when the discrimination against the colored people happened in Mississippi which means every sign representing the misconduct is this research's subject matter. Signs capture scene by scene, such as narratives, gesture, physical attributes of the characters, and others will be very helpful to describe the object in detail. This study collects every relevant sign, and it was done continuously during the screening. After gathering the data, the discussion would have clearer and more adequate interpretation especially of the relations between the African American and white people related to the situation happening in Mississippi around 1960s.

Deeper in the analysis, contrasting two different identities, African American and the whites, is also the center of discussion because those two racial groups have different and conflicting attitude and perspective. In this part, finding references that talk about each group is recommended to avoid misinterpreting the meaning. Sentences or texts coming out from figures were used and processed regarding their semantics as well since they are bringing the intended information (Speaks, 2014). Full observation is very necessary to be taken because it would lead to the meaning making in this research.

Observation for gathering the data and encompassing an inductive exploration to discover reappearing themes, patterns, or concepts continued with description and interpretation are the main stages in qualitative descriptive method (Nassaji, 2015). Many disciplines have used qualitative descriptive method in their respective fields, including film studies. This research method is very suitable for studying the movie because it functions to describe a phenomenon (racial segregation in Mississippi) and its characteristics (African American vs the Whites). The complete data withdrawn from the movie will lead to more holistic and deeper understanding of the figures' perspectives and attitudes.

Literature review also help exploring the relationship between two specific variables and examining the entire evidence in this research. A literature review can clarify the research problems by incorporating the results and views from them (Snyder, 2019). There are some literatures that are scrutinized in this study, such as books and journal articles in communication, language, culture, and, also, media articles. Literature review supports to find evidence and important parts of building theoretical framework and also conceptual design.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two Identities in *The Help*

Racial Identity is prone to be recognized because it is visible from the skin colors and body image no matter where they come from or what nationality they hold on to. Races are divided into

socially distinct groups based on physical criteria (LeMelle, 1972). Some of the prominent races in the world are white skin (European/Caucasian), dark skin (African/Negroid), or yellow skin (Asian/Mongoloid). Among them, there is sometimes a contestation between two or more groups because one feels better and prouder than another. Tilden J. Melle (1972) called the situation as 'racial stratification' because one dominant group can subordinate the other inferior one which happens in *The Help* (2011) between the middle-class whites and the African American workers. Nowadays, the word 'race' is more used as a stereotypical view towards some racial groups which drives the society how to behave and treat them in person (Webber et. Al., 2003).

Class identity refers to the circle or status that people may belong to within the society. It is the form of belonging to a community which shares equal economic, professional, or social status (Martin & Nakayama, 2008). The class identity can be shown by the dress or adornment (tattoos, jewelry, high fashion) as good as the posture/stance (Jackson, 2014). Some people who embrace a certain level of class are generally involved in some formal events as well and, in that event, they do not practically meet for making cooperation or networking, but for flaunting their attributes and pride. Class identity also affects the way people communicate and behave in the process of socialization (Jackson, 2014).

Racial Segregation in Mississippi

At the starting part of the movie, Skeeter drove to a restaurant in Jackson, Mississippi where there were two separate ways to the toilets each for the whites and the colored (African American) ones. Looking from the commonsensical or the viewers' point of view, there should be something unusual within the society. The state government must have an intolerated policy and they subordinated certain groups based on the prejudice of skin-color adjudication. Seemingly, in the 1960s, the State of Mississippi was challenged by racial/social upheaval and civil rights movement between middle-class white people and the African American or the colored (Ingraham, 2016). Previously, Mississippi was also one of the Southern states which fought for American Civil War to combat slavery in the nineteenth century. Moreover, as a perspective from personal experience, Margaret McMullan, the writer of *In My Mother's House* and *Aftermath Lounge*, also told the media about how unfair the situation for her was during the upheaval: "My father's decision to leave Mississippi wasn't easy. But in the end, he was ready to get us away from *the violence, the hate, the restrictions*, and, some would say, *advantages of growing up white* in a state among extended family." (McMullan, 2017)

She is one of the Americans who would no longer recall this dark past due to its shame on inhumane discrimination. Some people are also willing to get rid of a state symbol (which is an emblem) to forget this social disgrace. It was shown on the scene when the Mississippi state flag with the Confederate emblem on it (see Figure 1) flew on the top of a diner in Jackson. Apparently, there is still a debate among the people of Mississippi whether the Confederate emblem on the 1894-designed flag should be removed. The emblem only takes a small area of the whole flag and it is drawn in a red-colored square with a blue cross over it and 13 stars representing 13 Confederate States. The Confederate emblem was ever adopted by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) to uphold white supremacy against the black people in the early 20th century (Allen, 2020). The Confederate emblem also defines Mississippi as "a distinctive region with individual rebelliousness, a self-conscious 'redneck' culture, segregation, and racism" (Coski, 2005). James Forman, a professor at Yale Law School, also commented that the emblem was used by the government to alienate the African Americans or the blacks from the whites (Forman, 1991).



Figure 1. The State Flag of Mississippi
Source: The New York Times

However, the Government of Mississippi still maintains the 1894-designed flag up to this moment even though it is still felt contradictory. The current government thinks that the meaning is not always humiliating the 'others' or the colored in American society. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2018), many supporters of the emblem reckon that the symbol is a pride for them and a preservation of Southern heritage. Thus, on April 17th, 2001 a statewide referendum was conducted, and the state designed in 1894 is approved as the official flag of Mississippi by the state government.

The African American Maids vs The White Socialites

Even in the 1960s the whites and African Americans are similarly considered 'American', there was still a big gap between those two groups. The heading above tells it all. Socioeconomy and racial discrimination are the main aspects of the segregation between the whites and the African Americans (Lowry II, 1971). This is how all the tense and 'othering' in the society began and this is how Hollywood can make an angle for creating a movie about racism.

The concept of 'other' itself was found when Edward W. Said (1935-2003) was intrigued by how the people in the Western World (Europeans, Americans) portray the people and things from a different culture (Ranjan, 2015). The portrayal of certain racial identity, like black or white, is usually commonsensical and stereotypical without in-depth knowledge in making a judgement. Stuart Hall (1997) defines 'stereotyping' as the act of narrowing the view towards certain people based on simple and fixed characteristics that are appeared as fixed by nature. A lot of scenes in this movie shows how the black maids are perceived as 'other' and stereotypically judged by the dominant white socialites. This section is discussing the difference in racial and class identities between two groups (African Americans and white socialities) through symbols, signs, and images that attach to them.

Physical Appearance

The othering in *The Help* is obvious through the physical depiction of the African American maids. The African American maids' representation in this movie (and any other movie involving African American servants) is associated with the word 'Mammy'. The representation of Mammy was born in the Southern part of the United States as a common metaphor for the African American women, particularly the servants (Love, 2013). Mammy is conceived as a servant who is 'overweight, large-breasted, motherly figure, and working for the Caucasian (whites) family in the South' (Chen et. Al., 2012).

The viewers can clearly recognize how different the African American maids and the white socialites are. Two main characters of African American maids, Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, both have a large posture of a woman which is way different from how the white socialites look. Different from the white women, the African American maids looked like if they were ignorant of their dietary habit. The physical depiction of African American maids' body has contradicted with the white womens' fear of being fat (Chen et. Al., 2012). In the movie, Minny Jackson got so excited

in eating a lot of food, like fried chicken and chocolate pie. There is also one scene when Celia Foote, Minny's white employer, treated her with plenty choices of food on the table as the appreciation for her dedication to Celia's family. Media, in this case, Hollywood, already have standards, values, norms, on some characters that can influence the society's view towards a certain group (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). Meanwhile, the white socialite women in the movie have a slim body and such groomed hair and face. According to Harvey Young, a cultural historian, those white socialite women looked so 'attractive and well-dressed' to impress their society in 1960s discriminative era (Young, 2012). Speaking of the dress, the African American maids in *The Help* wore the same uniform for any occasion, like cooking, washing, babysitting, serving, and even helping at a gala dinner. You can see the subtle difference between how the African American maids and white women dress in *The Help* movie poster (see Figure 2). The African American servants wore maid dresses with the with apron, full-length white stockings, and maid shoes on any occasion while the white socialite could wear various dresses with fashionable patterns, accessories, and high heels. The picture is seen as controversial to be used on an American cover because it reminds the viewer of the racism and political correctness in the South 1960s (*The Telegraph* 2009).



Figure 2. *The Help* (2011) Movie Poster
Source: Internet Movie Database (imdb)

The Characterization

Characterization is a stereotypical view or judgement which is drawn from the symbols and signs attached to the characters in the movie. The symbols and signs are used by the characters (in the movie) to highlight the representation of identities (Orgad, 2012). Characters are beyond signs 'in the text' or mental representation 'in the head', they are 'collective constructs with a normative component' (Eder, 2010). This section is examining the characterization of these two groups, the African American maids and the white socialites, through the scenes and the attributes attached to them.

The African American maids or '*Mammies*' in this movie are portrayed as a nurturing or 'mothering' figure (Love, 2013). There is one scene in *The Help* when Aibileen babysat and spoil a white kid even though that kid messed up the home. The kid's parent was a white socialite woman who was busy, and she kept asking Aibileen to do motherly activities. Aibileen sincerely kept saying "You is kind, you is smart, you is important" to that little (white) girl. Despite the motherly nature, the white families never regarded the African American maids as relatives or part of the family. The African Americans got negative images from the dominant whites' point a view to alter the

attention away from the problem in the system. Hollywood is a form of 'systemic exclusion' of African American people which is a white America's enduring insurrection of a whole race (Miller, 1998). Also, the exclusion undoubtedly happened in one scene when Aibileen had to use a separate toilet at her (white) employer's house. The Southern States at that time continued the racial segregation that had been long encrypted in state legislation called "Jim Crow laws" (Science 2015). This law set all separate system for African Americans / colored and white Americans in public services, including the restrooms (Pilgrim, 2012).

The African Americans in the movie are also perceived as dishonest, sly, and criminalized, by white employers and authority. Criminals have been the common depiction of Hollywood towards the African Americans in their movies (Miller, 1998). There is also a strong association between social status and criminality when the people from low socioeconomic status are affiliated with criminal action, like 'robbery, burglary, and larceny' (Johnson, 2015). There are series of scenes incriminating Hilly's maid, Yule Mae. Yule Mae asked for help to her employers, Hilly and her husband, to fund her kids for better education. That white middle-class couple roughly declined her request right away and Yule Mae decided to steal an earring even though she would never mean to do that. After all, the police arrested her at a bus stop, and she was abused in front of the public. It was also Hilly's idea to antagonize the black maids since she is the full supporter of racial segregation. Hilly was hateful towards black people because in her eyes they are portrayed as 'savage and brute' people in society (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016).

In contrast, the whites get the viewers' attention for their positive representation. They looked prosperous, well-groomed, aducated, and dominant in the society. They were different from the poor African Americans since they had high living standards in that era (Lowry II, 1971). They kept gathering with their own white fellows which are shown in some scenes. The whites assembled to attend a bridge club, luncheon, charity ball, and government campaign where the African Americans were excluded from such events. The white women also drove their own car everywhere while the African American maids just used the segregated public bus around the neighborhood. This is called 'racial hegemony' which means an intergroup hierarchy of domination based on skin color in many aspects and the whites are the hegemon in this case (Winant, 1994, cited in Philogene, 2004). The domination of white in this movie is also shown by their 'heroic' and 'saviour' representations. In one scene, Skeeter secretly came to Aibileen's house to write a book in a purpose to encourage the African Americans subordination which was considered illegal. This scene shows that the whites can appear as 'messianic' character who can surely help the African American 'pariah' with their better moral and mental capabilities (Hughey, 2014).

Nevertheless, the whites in this movie are antagonized as well because they are manipulative, supremacist, and abusive towards the African American people. White characters are represented as troubled by 'race, culture, and ethnicity'; scope was from slight suspicion to force against others (the African Americans) (Banjo & Jennings, 2017). There is a scene when Hilly accused Aibileen of stealing the silver spoon from her employer's house and Aibileen was offended because she never did that at all. Hilly was about to call the police but Aibileen interrupted, "You (Hilly) are a Godless woman". Consequently, Aibileen had to leave the house and the work she had due to the prejudiced accusation by that white woman. However, Aibileen just had to accept the dismissal without a certain condition which means she let the white supremacy prevailed in the racial segregation. The scene has reinforced the whites to treat the African Americans as slaves as their best depiction because they think the African Americans were 'docile and manageable' (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016).

CONCLUSION

It is uneasy to imagine the life around civil rights movement with the despicable racial segregation. From the entire movie, there was not such an actual change happened to the society in Jackson, Mississippi. In fact, the African American maids and the white socialites in the South complemented each other and even considered as Americans but they were just two disparate worlds. Each of them has their own stereotypical view to one and another regarding the attributes



that they have, like skin color, residences, facilities, education, and so on. It is easy to identify how the African Americans or whites are characterized in some Hollywood movies. Also, the storyline sounds common in Hollywood regarding the intercultural or interracial movies. The skin-color-based judgement has been implied in a lot of Hollywood movies either the setting was in the past or present. Notably, the stories which have been adopted by Hollywood are reflected from the situation in the real society. Americans were dealing with racial harassment pretty much when President Donald Trump was still in his reign. In 2017, Ku Klux Klan (KKK) or white nationalists came on a rally in Charlottesville to rule out the non-white in 'the land of the free'. The white officers still criminalize the African Americans whose attitude to the whites is not as irritating just like happened to George Floyd in 2020 which ignites the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Thus, it is only the surface that the whites and African Americans/colored people in America look like accepting each other. There is still the actual issue deeper in the society which has not been released the segregation in the past.

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