

## Race & Prejudice: Constructing Race Identity in “The Help” Movie (2011)

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to describe and analyse the representation of racism in the film "The Help." The research method used are descriptive qualitative and content analysis to identify how the concepts of racism, stereotypes, and power are displayed in the film's narrative. The theory used in this study is the "Theory of Prejudice" proposed by Gordon Allport, which helps in understanding how negative perceptions of certain groups can develop into discriminatory attitudes and actions. The results of this study provide deep insight into how racism is presented in entertainment media and its impact on social consciousness.*

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### 1. Introduction

Racism is differences in behavior and inequality based on skin color, ethnicity, race, and a person's origin that results in restrictions or violations of a person's rights and freedoms. Race is the concept that diverse groups within the human race can be distinguished by inherited physical and behavioral characteristics (Semdley, Wade, & Takezawa, 2023). This is usually based on the physical characteristics of a person of a race with their innate behavior, including personality, intelligence, morality, and other cultural characteristics. Racism could lead into an act of prejudice. Prejudice is an unfavorable belief or attitude toward people who belong to a particular group. People's behavior and interactions with others, particularly those who vary from them in some way, can be greatly influenced by prejudices. Prejudice is often characterized by unfavorable sentiments and stereotypes about members of a group as well as a propensity to treat them unfairly (Cherry, 2023). This has an impact on "one particular party" who feels that their people are the best and deserve to do anything or are superior. Racism can be classified into three categories: institutional racism (which includes housing market conditions that favor one group over another); personal racism (which is similar to prejudice); and cultural racism (which refers to common beliefs about the superiority of one group over another). Another common feature of racism is when one group controls resources that another group needs or wants (Jones, 1997).

Racism often occurs against a certain race which often causes problems, commotion, and oppression of a race. In America, there have been many cases of discrimination against color people (people who have skin colors other than white). According to (Horowitz, Brown, & Cox, 2019), the differences between white Democrats' and white Republicans' perceptions of how black Americans are treated in the United States vary from 39 to 53 percentage points in each of these areas. More than half of white Democrats believe that black people receive less equitable treatment than white people when it comes to dealing with the police, the criminal justice system, hiring, pay, and promotions, applying for a mortgage or loan, going to stores or restaurants, voting in elections, and getting medical care (88% vs. 39%). Another case of racism that just happening in US is when a teen student in Texas high school was sent to in school suspension for refusing to change his hairstyle so the teen's family calls discriminatory (Wyke, 2023). The teenager, Darryl George, received a disciplinary notice from Barbers Hill High School in Mont Belvieu, Texas, stating that he was suspended for 13 days because his hair was not in conformity when let down. He had been attending an off-site disciplinary program for a month, and this was his first day back at the school. His braided locs, which dropped

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below his eyebrows and ear lobes, were reported to have violated the district's dress code, which led to his initial removal from the classroom at the Houston-area school in August, according to school authorities. His family claims the penalty is against the CROWN Act, which was passed into law in Texas in September and forbids discrimination based on race in hairstyles. According to the school, hair length is not covered under the CROWN Act. Therefore, we take this research from the theory of prejudice. Prejudice theory is a theory that discusses the dislike shown to a person or a group that is so large. According to experts (Baron, Byrne, & Branscombe, 2023), prejudice is an attitude that is more negative towards individuals in a group based solely on their membership in that group. Prejudice can be grouped into several types according to (Vaughan & Hogg, 2008); there are prejudices that can be seen from the target, namely prejudice sexism, racism, ageism, prejudice against homosexuals, and prejudice against people with physical disabilities, but the types of prejudice that the author highlights the most is racism.

The Help is a drama film directed by Tate Taylor and released on 2011. The movie is set against the backdrop of the civil rights movement in America in the 1960s and tells the story of an ambitious young writer named Skeeter (played by Emma Stone) who decides to write a book detailing African-American maids' views of the white families they work for, and the hardships they experience daily. Two maids named Aibileen Clark (played by Viola Davis) and Minny Jackson (played by Octavia Spencer), agree to share their stories with Skeeter, even though their actions risk serious consequences for them. Through the process of writing this book, they opened many people's eyes to the reality of life as black domestic servants in the American South during that era. The movie depicts their struggle against racial discrimination and how they sought to achieve change. "The Help" is a moving story about friendship, struggle, and hope. The movie has an 8.1/10 rating on IMDb (Ranker, 2020).

The previous study by Adam (2018) in "RACISM IN "THE HELP" MOVIE BY TATE TAYLOR (A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH)" using the theory from Paradies and Williams (Paradise, 2008) in the movie "The help," African-American people believe they have lower status than white people, therefore they convinced that they have no rights to decide the future and have a boundary between white and black people. This believe is based by the social status given by group of white. White people maintain the idea that they are belong to a dominant group and they believe that they can explicitly discriminate non-dominant black group. Other study from (Pakaya, Mariana, & Husain, 2021) entitled "Analysis of Racism in "12 Years A Slave" Movie Directed By Steve McQueen" found that white people's power is higher than blacks based on the movie. The proof is when black commits a crime towards white they can be sentenced to death easily. This movie also give a clear pictures about how the white is always act superior and using their superiority to treat black inhumanly. For an instance, this movie shows Epps, Solomon's third and most inhumane master, whom Solomon serves for ten years. Epps is cruel and spiteful to all of his slaves, reserves particularly brutal treatment to an elderly male slave named Abram and a young pretty female slave named Patsey. Epps frequently rapes Patsey, making her the object of his jealousy and hatred. this can be identified as verbal representation of forced slavery. This is well-suited with (Blumer, 1958) statement that the superiority feeling often can be seen in the way the dominant racial insult the traits quality of the subordinate racial group.

Another research from the movie "Hidden Figures" by (FEBRIANI & ARIANTO, 2020) shows that racism appear in society and mostly in work place. The racism effect is varies from time to time. This movie specifically shows many black womem is lose their job as a results of racism. (FEBRIANI & ARIANTO, 2020)also found that the possibility of black woman to be a engineer because of their ability is high, however they have to works harder to achieve this because of lack facility to have a degree. They tend to stuck in same job called "human computer." We also can see how black women have to work day and night yet still paid by the very minimum amount of money. The conclusion is that this movie contains racism issue in workplace.

Another study about racism in movie, titled "RACISM AND RESISTANCE STRATEGIES IN AMMA ASANTE'S MOVIE WHERE HANDS TOUCH (2018)" by (Fazriyah, 2021) discovered six form of racism got from the main character named Leyna including everyday racism, material determinism, social construction, differential racialization, intersectionality, and voice color. The racism she experienced bring her into resisth action such as Leyna uses valuing oneself, leaning on shoulders, role flexing, avoiding, standing up, and fighting back. However, leyna didn't use one type of resisth action from theory of Shorter-Gooden (2004) called resting on faith. Another research that also using Allport's theory is a research from (Atmanika, Ahsani, Ahdiani, Kasiyarno, & Ananda, 2022), they discovered five forms of racism based on Allport's types of prejudice that happened to the main character named Oscar who is black. In the end of the movie, Oscar has to suffer the most fatal impact of racism that also happening in real life which is death. According to Allport's theory that they were using in the research, the death of Oscar as the main character was count as extermination, which is the last types of discrimination in Allport's theory. "The Help," is an inspiring film based on the backdrop of racial segregation in the American South in the 1960s, offers an interesting perspective to examine racism using Gordon Allport's theory of prejudice. The film challenges the ingrained prejudices that shape the lives of the protagonists and emphasizes the importance of breaking down the walls that support racism through genuine human interaction. Therefore, the researchers encourage readers to study the acts of discrimination and racism that occur in the movie using Gordon Allport's theory and the movie "The Help" as a research object.

## 2. Method

In this research, the method that the researchers chose are descriptive qualitative and text and content analysis. Descriptive research is used to establish the existence of phenomena by explicitly describing them (Seliger & Shohany: 1989). Textual analysis is referring broadly to a variety of methods of study used to characterize, decipher, and comprehend texts. A text can provide many different types of information, in addition to its plain meaning. These include subtext, symbols, assumptions, and values (Caufield, 2019). Content analysis is a specialized type of text analysis that measures and analyzes the presence, frequency, and relationship of specific words, themes, or concepts in a text. Content analysis can be used to identify the intent, focus, or trends of individual, group, or institutional communication, as well as to describe attitudinal and behavioral responses to communication, determine the psychological or emotional state of a person or group, reveal international differences in communication content, and reveal patterns in communication content (Elgar, 2021).

## 3. Result and Discussion

### a) Verbal Antagonism



*Data 1 / "It's just plain dangerous. They carry different diseases than we do" / The Help\_15:42\_black people carry dangerous diseases*

The aforementioned data unequivocally validates the pervasive nature of discrimination against black people as depicted in the movie "The Help." When Hilly says "It's just plain dangerous. They carry different diseases than we do", it's shown an illustrative instance of such discrimination is articulated through the conceptualization of black individuals being unfairly associated with perilous diseases, exemplifying a form of verbal hostility and accusation prevalent in the narrative. "Before it becomes an excuse, skin color turns into a curse. It is not a natural inequality; rather, it is one made by humans. Even though we may now be aware that there is no scientific foundation for race, we still act and think differently depending on the color of someone's skin. The fact that a person's skin tone does not determine their value is something we must keep researching and comprehending." (HANDA, 2021).



*Data 2 / "Said he's shoot me dead If I walked on his land again" / The Help\_01:30:13\_one of the maids was threatened by her white boss*

Data 2 further elucidated an additional manifestation of verbal antagonism, exemplified through the recounting of a harrowing narrative by one of the maids. Based on the dialog “Said he’s shoot me dead If I walked on his land again”, the maid revealed that she had been subjected to explicit threats by her white boss, who callously asserted that she would be fatally shot should she ever dare to trespass onto her white boss's property. This part had the deep-seated racial tensions and blatant acts of intimidation experienced by black individuals within the complex social dynamics portrayed in the narrative.



*Data 3/ "And that nigger Minny, do I have plans for her" / "The Help\_02:02:14\_Minny was threatened by Hilly*

At the end of the sequence of events that show verbal hostility in the movie story, as shown by the third dataset (Data 3), a significant event occurs when Hilly visits Eugenia's home. Her main goal is to discuss the book that Eugenia wrote, which is a collection of testimonies from black maids who describe their experiences working for white families in Jackson, Mississippi. This confrontation adds another level of complexity to the interpersonal dynamics within the plot by focusing not only on Hilly's disapproval of Eugenia's book but also on the menacing act of threatening Minny, Hilly's former black maid who is no longer work with her by saying “And that nigger Minny, do I have plans for her”.

b) Avoidance



*Data 1/ "to nurse in wards or rooms in which Negro men are placed" / "The Help\_37:20\_white nurses forbidden to work at colored halls*

The first set of data that was previously mentioned clarifies how far to which white people intentionally avoid forming relationships with black people. As a result, segregation appears in a number of contexts, including the medical field, where white nurses are unable to interact with black patients. This situation is made worse by laws that require white nurses to be barred from entering or working in "colored halls". It is shown on the dialogue “to nurse in wards or rooms in which Negro men are placed”, which emphasizes the institutionalized barriers and racial segregation that are present in the society that is being portrayed.



*Data 2/ "Books shall not be interchangeable between the white and colored schools" / The Help\_37:31\_ white students have different books with black students*

Moreover, the latter data set explains the ways in which white people define their access to education differently than that of black people. Based on the dialogue that says "Books shall not be interchangeable between the white and colored schools", it implies that white students are given a different set of educational resources, such as different sets of books, and that this creates an environment in which the educational materials assigned to white students and those designated for their black counterparts are noticeably non-interchangeable.



*Data 3/ "No colored barber shall serve as a barber to white women or girls" / The Help\_37:39\_ colored beauty parlor cannot handle white people*

The most recent avoidance dataset offers another striking illustration of the degree to which white people purposefully avoid engaging with their black counterparts. In this particular dataset, an interesting example occurs when Skeeter (Eugenia) reads a book that is filled with laws that discriminate against people of color. It is says in the dialogue that "Books shall not be interchangeable between the white and colored schools". This literary investigation exposes a harsh reality in which black salons are prohibited from attending to the hairdressing needs of white people, and the opposite circumstance is likewise restricted. Within the context of the story, the deeply embedded and systemic patterns of racial segregation and exclusion that permeate the social fabric are deftly revealed.

## c) Segregation



*Data1/ The Help\_ 4:44\_ colored bathroom*

In the first set of data, an obvious example shows how white people are frequently denied fair access to a variety of amenities, including public spaces. The creation of a separate "colored" entrance to a cinema that is only used by people of African American descent highlights this shocking inequality and provides concrete proof of the discriminatory actions taken by white people to prevent equal access.



The existence of distinct hospitals earmarked exclusively for Black individuals—often referred to as "colored" hospitals—provides strong evidence of the systemic segregation within the healthcare industry, as revealed by the second set of data. Rely on the dialogue that says “Drove to the colored hospital”, was a discovery reinforces the evidence that white people, as the majority social group, deliberately maintained and enforced unequal access to healthcare resources, compounding the severe differences in medical care that are based on racial differences.



*Data3/ The Help\_ 1:40:55\_ 'white only' cab*

A notable observation is the presence of a "white only" taxi, indicating that access to this specific taxi service is restricted to individuals of white ethnicity, thereby categorically excluding black people. This case provides a powerful illustration of the overt denial of equality that occurs in the context of public transportation, where discriminatory practices conflict with the values of inclusivity and equitable access.



*Data 4/ "that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the colored help" / The Help\_15:55\_colored bathroom*

Another strong illustration of segregation in the film is revealed in the most recent data set. This case explores the establishment of an additional segregated area that is reserved for Black people. The story begins with a dialogue that states "that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the colored help" from Hilly, it is unequivocally that white people should use a different bathroom, which is commonly referred to as the "colored" bathroom. This reinforces the deeply ingrained racial divide, especially when considering the experience of the black maid. This highlights how systemic and institutionalized discrimination is portrayed in the movie, underscoring the stark reality of racial inequality as it is portrayed in the storyline.

#### d) Physical Attacks



*Data 1/ The Help\_1:28:27\_cops attacked Gretchen the black maid*

The scene that is portrayed in it tells a disturbing story about Gretchen, the black maid, being physically abused. It is a clear example of social injustice. The fundamental cause of this heinous event is Gretchen's desperate theft of Hilly's jewel, which was motivated by a lack of other options and a sense of necessity. After Hilly learns of the theft, the series of events intensifies. She uses her power to send law enforcement agents to arrest Gretchen. Fearing that she would be apprehended, Gretchen makes a desperate attempt to break free from the authorities, only to be brutally thrashed in the process, highlighting the terrible costs that those caught in the complex web of systematic injustice must pay.



Data 2/ "I don't know. Some nigger got shot." / *The Help*\_1:21:19\_a black person got shot

The data that follows reveals another upsetting instance of a physical attack that targets Black people. In particular, what happened was that Aibileen got on a bus and the driver says "I don't know. Some nigger got shot." This cold-blooded order was given on the grounds that a tragic incident had involved the shooting of a Black individual nearby, which exposed the deeply embedded racial prejudice that was demonstrated by discriminatory practices and the denial of equal treatment. "The entire white world cheers if any white man in the world declares, "Give me liberty or give me death." When a black man says the exact same thing, word for word, he is labeled as a criminal and treated as such. Every effort is made to expose this bad apple so that future generations won't be like him" – James Baldwin. (Liz Kaufman, 2020).

The data that has been collected shows the oppression contained in the film *The Help*, especially the behavior of white employers who do not give freedom to black maids. This includes both speech and action oppression. Examples of oppression in terms of speech can be seen from the actions of employers offending them in front or behind, giving nicknames to maids, and swearing. Verbal aggressiveness is a form of violence in communication. The purpose of verbal aggression is to attack someone's impression or self-concept. Verbal aggression attacks another's character, background, abilities, physical appearance, and the like (Hocker & Wilmot, 2017).

According to (Kusumawati, 2016), "Nonverbal Communication" is a message packaged in a form without words. Nonverbal communication such as bulging eyes can be interpreted as anger. Bullying in the form of this form can be represented through eye movements, gestures, tone of voice, glaring eyes, ignoring speech, and forced dismissal because the maid used the employer's toilet, which is happened during the movie.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, societal divisions and structural injustices are sustained by the issues of racism and discrimination depicted and embedded in the movie "The Help." The Social Identity Theory developed by Gordon Allport provides important insights into the types of prejudice by highlighting the conflicts of discrimination and racism that also contained in this movie. Based on his theory, the researchers have found 12 acts of discrimination that has been divided into 4 four types such as verbal antagonism, avoidance, segregation, and physical attack. The researchers found none of acts or scene that showed the last type of Allport's theory which is extermination.

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