

METAFICTIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHY IN KATHRYN STOCKETT'S NOVEL THE HELP

Gol Man Gurung

Associate Professor, Saraswati Multiple Campus, Thamel Kathmandu, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses how the novel The Help blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. The novel describes the event of the Civil Rights Movement, the laws of segregation and intimidation. It takes theoretical insights on Historiographic Metafiction from by Linda Hutcheon, and Hyden white and studies how this novel blurs the distinction between fact and fiction and presents the critique of racial stereotyping present in American society. A new rule has been set under the Civil Rights Movement according to this every citizen irrespective of class; creed or colour will have access to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness through individual effort. This research concludes that The Help not only presents the history by narrating the story through the old maid but also analyses the history through the present-day situation and the text revisits history by revising and questioning it.

KEYWORDS: *Racism, History, Slavery, Segregation, Stereotyping, Historiography, Metafiction*

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* in the light of Historiographic Metafiction. The research reveals how historiography not only represents past events but also gives meaning to them as it is signifying system and turns historical events into historical facts and analyse metafictional elements of the text stressing self-reflexivity, non-linear narrative and parodic intention to pinpoint. Generally, history is defined as the study of past events that reflect historical events whereas fiction is supposed to describe imaginary events but this research projects the nexus between these two. *The Help* is the story of racism, segregation, and feminism set between 1962 and 1964 in Jackson, Mississippi. It mainly tells the stories of African American Women who work as maids. The novel is narrated by three different characters; two African American maids, Minny Jackson and Aibileen Clark and a white woman called Skeeter Phelan. The novel presents the issue of racism. Stockett reflects the perspectives of black maids many of whom raised several white children who later mistreated the maids after these children grew into adulthood.

Hutcheon considers historio graphical metafiction as “constructed and whose self-reflexivity renders (its) implicit claim to historical veracity somewhat problematic” (121). Historiographic Metafiction combines the argument of poetics with historicism in such a way it mutually interrogates with each other. History as a discipline has struggled for decades to assert itself in a legitimate scientific discipline whose methodology results in a truthfulness of the past. Historiographic Metafiction is a term coined by Canadian literary theorist Linda Hurcheon in the late 1980s. Historiographic Metafiction as, defined in her work, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, offers an interpretation of the relationship between history and fiction. Historiographical Metafiction is the attitude towards the truth. Hutcheon says “postmodernism works through parody to both legitimize and subvert that which it parodies” (101). Stockett's *The Help* not only presents the history by narrating

the story through the old maid but also analyses the history through the present-day situation. Thus, the text revisits history by revising and questioning it.

Skeeter Phelan, a recent college graduate, returned home after finding job in Jackson's journal. Two housemaids Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson are both maids. Aibileen has spent her life by raising as many little white girls. Minny is a maid who is the best cook in Mississippi but she is fired unfairly by a local social leader, Hilly Holbrook after long years of service. Life gets harder for Minny before she is hired by another white lady Celia Foote as she has to run her family without a job. Hilly Holbrook is a radical racist who separated household bathrooms for black maids. For Janet Maslin "the trouble on the pages of Skeeter's book is nothing compared with the trouble Ms.Skeeter's real book risks getting into" (28). The author has dared to write about the blacks and revise the history of the then America. She did not allow her maid Minny to use her toilet but once Minny used her toilet by mistake and that was the reason she fired Minny from her job. Skeeter is horrified witness of these racist notions, determines to break the long-suffering of the black maids with this novel based on their trail. But it is not as easy to collect black maid life because it was dangerous for both their life and job too. Skeeter convinces Aibileen and then Minny to speak frankly with her sharing their stories and as the novel develops so does her insight and anger. Skeeter doesn't like to build relationship with Aibileen and Minny for her secret project that breaks social rules and puts them all in risk during the 1960s in Mississippi. Aibileen shares her pain including the murder of her son with eyes full of tears and how she has raised 17 children in her life which very emotionally touched every woman's heart. On the other hand, Minny reveals her most dramatic and rebellious action. Skeeter and Aibileen were shocked when they hear Minny had made Hilly Holbrook eat her toilet just to take revenge. She made a pie mixed with her toilet and Hilly Holbrook ate it.

Minny and Aibileen shared their trails but that was not enough for Miss Myra to publish it as a book. So Miss Myra asks Skeeter to include more stories, about a dozen more. Skeeter has enough courage to speak and express their stories. Though the author is accused of stereotyping the blacks, she does not spare the whites too. For, Topher G. L., this may be true but "White characters don't come off any better or less stereotypical"(May 27, 2009). The situation got changed when one day a black man was shot dead in front of his family. Yule Mae got arrested by the police for a charge of stealing the ring. Skeeter got enough stories to include in her book. Finally, Skeeter's book got published but without mentioning the name of Aibileen and Minny in it as it was a great risk for all of them. The book made a good earning in the market. Skeeter doesn't want to leave Minny and Aibileen alone from the mess that the book has created in Jackson, Mississippi. But Minny and Aibileen pursue Skeeter to leave Jackson as she doesn't have a good life. Hilly blames Aibileen for stealing the silver and she tries to call the police to arrest her as she wants to take revenge for putting her horrible story in their book. At last, she left the job; remembering her son she feels hope that maybe she is not too old to start over.

The Whites treat the Black maid poorly, believing that they are stupid and inferior. Throughout the novel, the whites are always referring to the maids or blacks in general in descriptive terms that usually apply to animals, suggesting that black have more in common with animals than humans. Here, Stockett mentioned the fact of slavery. At the end of the novel where Minny and Aibileen realize that the changes were worth it and a natural progression of living a lifestyle that exemplifies equality. Throughout the novel, there is a well-defined line between the whites and the blacks. This novel helps to bridge the differences between the white women and the black maids and they all worked together to dissolve that line between "us" and "them" while Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement takes place in the background of the novel, the characters have their own Civil Rights Movement led by a few courageous black maids and one white woman. At the end of the novel, a few relationships between black maids and their employees are budding. They sit together at the

same table and speak openly about their lives. In the last part of this novel, Stockett shows that the “us” vs. “them” dynamic will hopefully end.

Theory/Textual Analysis

‘Historiographic Metafiction combines poetics with argument by historicism in such a way to mutually interrogate each other. History is the study of written records that analyses a theoretical understanding of human societies based on those records. History is defined as a narrative account to examine and analyse past events while “historiography is the body of historical work on a specific issue. Historians do not study documents from the past” (Hutcheon, 23). They also study what other historians have written. Historians examine and interpret sources from the past, including documents, art, and even human remains because they are considered the primary source. Metafiction is self-conscious about language, literary form storytelling and directly or indirectly draws attention to their status as artefacts. Metafiction is frequently used as a form of parody to undermine literary convention and explore the relationship between literature and reality, life and art. Metafiction is a literary device used self-consciously and systematically to draw attention to a work’s status as a work of imagination rather than reality. So here, in this novel, Historiographic Metafiction also uses conventional and experimental techniques by rejecting conventional plot and refusing to attempt to become fully like real-life. The opening of the novel shows the historical conditions that gave birth to the Civil Rights Movement. Hilly wants to enforce the law of segregation in the honour of Jackson residents. Her insistence on separate bathroom for African American and white highlight segregation and its degrading outcomes.

Historiographical Metafiction “revisit the textual past but communicate an awareness of its inevitable difference from past and the same thing” (Hutcheon, 12) which has been done by the author in this novel. Stockett revisits her novel *The Help* and this novel reflects the history of 1960s Jackson, Mississippi. *The Help* is a representation of black women. For Motoko, the novel depicts the underbelly of American prosperity “with its intimate portrayals of the maids’ relationship with their employers and the children they care” (1). It is a disappointing resurrection of many mythical stereotypes of black women who were compelled either by slavery or segregation to serve white families. In early 1960s maids and caretakers of white families were referred to as *The Help*. Most wealthy white families had black communities serve as their maid. Most whites still saw themselves as the superior race and were generally satisfied with the restriction that existed for blacks. Stockett shows the segregation and intimidation where blacks are not permitted to use the same facilities as white such as churches, schools, supermarket, and bathrooms. People who hire other people to work for them should maintain a professional distance from the worker. There are certain rules that people should know and follow when dealing with people of different social races. Telling or writing stories can be a way of personal expression and freedom also telling or writing stories can be a way of changing society. In the 1960s, Mississippi southern society girl, Skeeter returns from college with the dream of being a writer. She changed her small town on being a writer and after she takes to interview the black women who spent their lives taking care of prominent white’s families. Only Aibileen the housekeeper of Skeeter’s best friend willed at first but as the pair continues the collaboration, more women decided to come forward and as it turns out they have quite a lot to say. Here, the history of 1960s Mississippi explores the relationship between literature and reality life, art and this novel itself examines the elements of fiction itself.

As stated by Hutcheon, “Historiographic Metafiction shows that historical condition and history can be discursively structured” (120). Historiographic Metafiction is about the implication of ideology. Historiographic

Metafiction suggests the limits of “event” and “fact” that is shared by most of the historians with a purpose to look event that can be factual. The term is closely associated with works of postmodern literature. According to Linda Hutcheon in here *A poetics of Postmodernism*, works of *Historiographic Metafiction* is seen in various novel which operate self-reflexively and yet paradoxically also make claim to historical events and personages and also constructively about the past in a way that acknowledges the falsity and violence of the “objective” historian’s past without leaving us in a totally isolated present. *The Help*, which is about African-American maids who contributed their stories to Skeeters’ book, expresses their deeply felt gratitude to the aspiring young writer. The help shows love and hate relationship between two races. The black maid who works for a white household raising her 17 white children and nurture, caring them is mistreated by the same kids later on as they grow up. Likewise, Linda Hutcheon states: “How can the present know the past it tells?” (9). the answer to this question leads to the discussion of the archive to the novels. Stockett writes:

so I said, miss, Walters, the world doesn’t want to see your naked white behind any more than they want to see my black one. Now get in this house and put your underpants some clothes on”

“On the front porch? Naked?” Kiki Brown asks. Her behind hanging to her knees”

The bus is laughing and chucking and shaking their heads.

“Laws, that women crazy” Kiki say “I don’t know how you always seem to get the crazy ones, Minny.”

“Oh, like yours Miss Paterson isn’t?”(13)

In this novel, Stockett describes how she combines the fiction and history but while examining the lines above Stockett feels so comfortable pretending to be black female, she conducts an imaginary conversation where Aibileen and Minny talk about coochies. Minny mentions that Aibileen’s estranges spouse Clyde has run off wit a woman named cocoa, contracted a venereal disease a week after their departure. And black having ‘diseases’ and doing those things are immoral as an excuse to deny them equality. Here Stockett creates this cocoa coochie Clyde as in characters which is clearly reflected in her novel. Where Aibileen doesn’t realize she too might have contracted a venereal disease and that most Christians devoted to god would be highly offended. But behind that Stockett has Aibileen invoking one of the stupidest lines which is not related to the history but it can be as fiction.

The black population is terrified about this outbreak of violence against a deeply respected member of their community. Here Minny’s horrified comment to Aibileen lines, “Thing ain’t ever going to change in this town, Aibileen. We live in hell, trapped. Our kids are trapped” (230)The white establishment, on the other hand, sees the murder of Evers as simply returning things to business as usual. On the radio, the white mayors of Jackson publicly refuse President Kennedy’s directive to put together a biracial commission. “Jackson Mississippi is the closest place to heaven there is he says and it’s going to be like that for the rest of our life” (231). Here these lines reflect that nothing will be changed in Jackson’s Mississippi white people’s power existence but while going through the novel we find the history which is based on a real incident. Here writer also related this history in her life but Stockett treated some incidents fictionally.

Depiction of white employers and black domestic helpers is not all in all but a white is trying to bring changes in the attitudes of both the Whites and the Blacks for social transformation. White characters are present satirizing their foibles and showing the heroine’s resistance to their sometimes careless, other times vicious racism. Here Kathryn presents the white women’s relationship with black maids. Here, black housekeeper, Aibileen says:

Mae Mobley two years old now She got big brown eyes and honey colour curls. But the bald spot in the black of her hair kinda throws things off. She gets the same wrinkle between her eyebrows when she worried, like her mamma. They kinda favor except Mae Mobley so fat. She ain't gone be no beauty queen. I think it brother miss leefolt, but Mae Mobley my special baby. (2)

Here *Can't Quit You, Baby* (Ellen Douglas) which can be situated in the subgenre of the kitchen drama focusing on the relationship between housewives and their black housekeepers in the south at the crossroads of the issue of race, class and gender as they come out in the privileged locus of meeting between black and white, the kitchen. Writer for the first time in this remarkable novel wants to read everything she has written. Set in Mississippi during the 1960s and 70s these lines indicated the black housekeeper narrator Aibileen is African American women were hired as maids but their main task was to help raise the white children. Skeeter Phelan has a monotonous relationship with her mother. Although Skeeter loves her mother Mrs. Phelan can be very exasperating and irritating when it comes to teaching Skeeter how to behave and present herself in public. However as mentioned before, the role of the white mother in the south was to teach her children about social behaviour, and therefore she was not a close loving mother but could be demanding and harsh. However, the relationship between Skeeter and her mother is not that severe and unforgiving as Mrs. Phelan is simply determined to turn her only daughter into fine young lady and hopefully a caring wife and mother so that she can have the best possible life. Elizabeth Leefolt, on the other hand, represents the role of an authoritative mother as she rarely has any time for her daughter.

Aibileen knows her worth and she does this kind of job very well calling Mae Mobley special because they both established a strong emotional bond with that white baby child. Somehow Aibileen conforms to the stereotype of "Black Mammy" whose sole purpose in life is to take care of white kids. But also Mae Mobley feels so strongly about her, she goes as far as to call her "Real mamma" (284). The hug, kisses, the stories, the way of saying I love you are a pure form of love between white and black. Here Kathryn presents the mixture of historical event and fictional narrative because the racial conflict within the story makes it a work of historical fiction of the racism and the civil rights movement. The fact of separate but equal facilities was the legal requirement in the south in that period where the equality was frequently lacking but this could be a contemporary thing which is mentioned by Kathryn. In the 1960s South Black population worked as domestic help in comparison with the White population and the novel is filled with details about history. There are many lines which reflect that historical incidents are fictionalized.

"Write about what disturbs you particularly if it bothers no one else?" (83). This line explains that Elaine Stein offers this piece of advice in the letter she writes to Skeeter. It echoes the claim of Hayden White that "there is a politically meaningful connection between literature and history" (4). Skeeter takes this advice to heart and starts thinking about her bond with Constantine and the ugly harassment of blacks ultimately deciding to write her book about the maids. It is also the guiding of the help itself, which covers many situations. *The Help* also shows the way of Kathryn writing from the perspective of the black maids Aibileen and Minny. While this meant to lend authenticity to their voices, it also makes them hear stories which they belong to. Through her efforts to be a mouthpiece for the black maids of Jackson, Skeeter develops a close friendship with Aibileen and Minny. *The Help* is set in Jackson, Mississippi and this novel features three main narrators, Aibileen, Minny and Skeeter.

Kathryn Stockett wanted to express the different points of view of different people in the society of the 1960s. During the 1960s racism and violence are prominent in the Southern States due to the Jim Crow laws. In the novel *The*

Help by Kathryn Stockett, it depicts what life was like Jackson Mississippi during the 1960s. Stockett takes inspiration from the segregation she witnessed in her home town and African American maid from whom she has written a passionate and controversial novel in which she shows the struggle between whites and blacks. The general story focused mainly on the problems of racism and how relationships are affected by it. But Stockett created this story similar to her own life and the life of Abilene Cooper. Abilene Cooper accused Stockett of fictionalizing her character without her permission. The bathroom is the main symbol or highlights the down to earth reality. Everybody uses the bathroom for their purpose but in the novel bathroom symbolizes historical factors. Segregated bathroom is supposed to save from disease but here Kathryn Stockett presents the history through the characters which are fictionalized. White women trying to befriend black domestic workers are one of the main issues in the relationship. The purpose of this paper is to study how postmodern novel reconstructs history that does not concern the documented history, but the events that are realistic are presented fictionally. As a result, the novel re-tells past with a view to expose its drawbacks and revise it to bring the marginalized under the spotlight. Hutcheon says that Historiographic Metafiction includes two terms, namely, postmodern fiction, and historical fiction. Both terms are known in the 19th century, and when viewed and interpreted at first glance they have the same meaning, but in reality, the two terms are not the same, even theorists of the difference between the two terms are very difficult to find because their opinion on where the place and culture of truth grew differs greatly. In postmodern fiction, it focuses on the character who is a marginalized figure and Kathryn Stockett describes the status of her character and the facts are used to form the narrative. While historical fiction focuses on the historical idea contained in the story, the historical representation made by the author can be a historical picture different from the present. Postmodern fiction uses two ways in the story that it, first by pitting the historical truth. In the sense that there are some deliberately falsified historical records and second, postmodern fiction uses historical data and reconstruct it fictionally. Similarly, Skeeter reflected the voice which is the voice of the black maids:

There is undisguised hate for white women there is inexplicable love Faye Belle, palsied and gray-skinned, cannot remember her age. Her stories unfold like a soft line. She remembers hiding in a steamer trunk with a little white girl while Yankee soldiers stamped through the house. Twenty years ago, she held that same white girl, by then old women, in her arms while she died. (303)

The reconstruction was done by the author on the historical events of 1960s Jackson Mississippi which is proved by the existence of some historical events that were irrelevant to the fact, such as the existence of events that were different from the facts, the dramatized events. Meanwhile, the event has a very long story and there exist different versions of interpretation in the novel. These explanations show that the author used a historical event which was colour people suffered from discrimination and subordination. She used slavery in writing her novel which is based on historical reality but gets fictionalized. This is closely related to Historiographic Metafiction. For Hutcheon “there are two characteristics of Historiographic Metafiction that it plays or manipulates historical events and still uses historical event accurately” (114). Based on these events it was clear the author did manipulate the historical events in her novel, and the author also keeps the historical event accurately. However, the excessive manipulation of the historical event by the author made her novel seem like a fictional narrative, although there was an accurate fact in it. The manipulated event indicates an intention to make the novel more interesting.

Since the author described a historical event the author presents an unusual main character, Aibileen Minny unlike other historical novels of 1960s Jackson Mississippi which the collared people become the centre of depiction in this novel

the author displays the character of Aibileen Minny through the protagonist and antagonist. Though, these two points of view the character of Aibileen Minny unveil which is beyond and depiction. It was often heard that the character Skeeter has a very high level of glory and good character but it indicated that Skeeter describes the character of Aibileen, Minny which was more showing compassion so it can be accepted by any group of different opinions. As it was known that in the 1960s Jackson's Mississippi history there were several bunches of people who dominated black people as they are humans they treat as in animal. Here Skeeter character glorious big-hearted person who make a peace between two colour people somewhere she misfit. Through this novel, the author portrays the things which seem on the intention to reconcile these characters. Through these two assumptions, it shows the usefulness of the postmodern novel which was too separated fiction and fact in historical novel and the idea that the truth was always open to question.

The present thesis focuses on consciousness, resistance and avenges taking steps of black maids against their white masters. The racial discrimination and domination of white towards the black women raise their voice against the white despite the possibility of backlash. Black women were facing domination. White lady Skeeter makes Black women unite each other. Kathryn Stockett has written a historically accurate book with the help as she conflicts setting and character that are historically realistic and because of that, she has written a book that has great readability since those small details help readers become invested with the book.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, it can be concluded that the author Kathryn Stockett used historical events of racial mistreatment and slavery by narrating the story through the old maid but also analyses the history through the present-day situation and the text revisits history by revising and questioning it. The author emphasizes and tells us history which is a retelling of past. But according to which every citizen that the white or the black will have equal rights and that there will be no discrimination under any races. The novel makes it clear that it is a work of fiction but it did not come from emptiness and has some basis in the real historical events. The novel is self-conscious of its own status as work of fiction and rewrites the official history of America from the point of view of the marginalized blacks in the America of the 1960s.

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