

# Crossing the Divide: Voice and Representation of African Americans

**Kathryn Stockett and Harper Lee: - I understand the weight of history but can I be your sister?**

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**Abstract:**

This project examines how the oppression of African Americans, especially those in domestic service to white families, is reflected in literature. The two works *The Help* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* will be the main sources. I investigate issues of race and skin colour, as well as the depiction of the 'black' and 'white' races in America in literature. Yet I will also make use of writers on African American issues to evaluate the writings on the main works concerned. What I will try to establish is whether the two writers (Kathryn Stockett and Harper Lee) effectively give a voice to the less empowered African- American segment of US society (this question of empowerment will be addressed below). And most importantly, I attempt to understand how two white women from relatively privileged backgrounds can reach across the supposed racial divide and, through aesthetic expression. I contend that peaceful protest and the mobilization of the arts in all its forms raised awareness of the terrible wrongs suffered by African Americans in the timeframe concerned in this work – an awareness raised not just in the USA but also around the world - and led to a new situation in which discrimination is not only illegal, but also widely acknowledged as deeply wrong.

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## Introduction

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!” (28 August, 1963, Martin Luther King’s most famous inspirational speech.) (Montefiore 152)

The above quotation encapsulates the aspirations and visions of countless African Americans who, after centuries of slavery and oppression, exclusion and discrimination, wish to be evaluated not by their skin colour but by who they really are. The “content of their character” suggests a moral and creative compass pointing to what they can achieve for themselves, their communities and the wider world. Kathryn Stockett and Harper Lee are two authors who will be the inspiration for the present writer with respect to the representation and the voice of black people in the USA. This is for the very important reason that the essence of anti-racist sentiment is inclusivity. Inclusivity entails an active principle of welcoming people of all hues into one’s life, and the total rejection of any exclusion based on perceived race, gender, creed or sexual orientations (Stocpol & Liazos 95). Stockett was born in Mississippi, and Lee was born in Alabama, Where a great many African Americans have lived since the beginning of large scale transport of slaves from Africa to the geography concerned here in the eighteenth century<sup>1</sup> - and still live. It is needless to say that the African Americans did not arrive in this location willingly, the way subsequent waves of immigrants did – Poles, Irish, Russians, British and many more. They were abducted and transported to become slaves. This makes a very material difference in attitude to these very different types of incomers in the mindset of all who understand the issues involved. We can assume both writers understand this, and certainly both witnessed the racial oppression of the black community. They both witnessed the lack of empowerment of the African American

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<sup>1</sup> Roberts, J.M (2004). *The New Penguin History of The World*. 5th ed. London: Penguin Books, p. 644.

community, including their very limited relationship with the franchise (Bullard 33). At the end of her book, *The Help*, Stockett shows her readers how her Southern heritage affects her writing by writing, "Mississippi is like my mother. I am allowed to complain about her all I want, but God help the person who raises an ill word about her around me, unless she is their mother too"(Stockett 450). By writing this she clearly wishes to draw the reader's attention to the point that her place of birth gives her the right to criticize, but she does not confer the same right to others who might not understand the culture of the region, and who might seek to condemn the people of the region without having any deep understanding of what she herself does deeply understand.

As a nominal Muslim from the minority Turkish Cypriot community in Cyprus, and therefore with personal knowledge of discrimination and violence, fear and ethnic tension (I write this to put down a marker that I have experiences and attitudes which are hereby declared<sup>2</sup>). I can personally empathize with those suffering similar plights to the plights of those I know personally. Yet one must not be misled into believing one can genuinely comprehend the plight of other communities. Stockett makes this point, "I don't presume to think that I know what it really felt like to be a black woman ...But trying to understand is vital to our humanity" (Stockett 451).Stockett accepts the fact that however much she tries to put herself in the position of black women it is impossible to understand and reflect their exact feelings, and the word "trying" evokes a certain humility. However, according to Stockett, being born in the Deep South, and having lived there, gives her the right, as she sees it, to give voice to the problems in that society. I allege that all who live in a certain geography can give input to its issues as all share the societal situations that history has produced. Stockett adumbrates this with her views on Mississippi. This concentration on the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Angastiniotis, Antonis. *Barbarism Against the Turkish Cypriots - The Other Side of the Coin*, Rustem Bookhouse and Publishing Ltd, 2005. Print.

issues of a troubled society lies behind her words “vital to our humanity,” and we might also say, vital to her engagement. She counts herself a close witness to oppression. She grew up in a society in which black people were treated as second class human beings, and her empathy with her fellow citizens of the Deep South is clear.

The recently deceased Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* seems to have made a great impact on Stockett. The 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is often equated with *The Help*. The similarities are obvious; both novels are written by white women who are passionately against racial discrimination. Clearly, we can see that colour and perceived social status and gender do not count as criteria for judgment for the two writers concerned here. They are firmly against these negative factors in life not only in the South but elsewhere as well, and in my opinion few works really only encompass the human geography in which they are set. Human values are at the fore – and they are universal human values, both in relation to race, and in relation to a deep sense of how humans could interact if they but managed to ditch prejudice and venality. Both works seek to reach a world audience and convince them that oppression and injustice in the Deep South is of importance and relevance to all. There is fierce criticism of *The Help* from African Americans who feel that Stockett does not have the right to present the situation of black Americans or the knowledge of those in the black community. It may be difficult for any writer today to discount another’s writings on the grounds of their race (perhaps even illegal), but one suspects this is behind some of this carping. bell hooks, for example sees the book as distorting the past in relation to the situation of black women in the Deep South at the time in question (hooks 58-60). The Association of Black Women Historians militates against the movie of the book, asserting that it “trivialized the leadership of black women, belittled the severity of life under segregation, and elevated white women as the liberators”(ABWH, web). Websites not specifically academic which deal with African American and feminist issues are also known

to object to *The Help*, and to reject Stockett.<sup>3</sup> Yet I would argue that these objections are not valid, and that the book is very far from racist, far from belittling African Americans, and is absolutely not aimed at the slightest denigration of black women in the Deep South, or indeed anywhere at all. This is what I contend, and the reader can conclude at the end of this work whether they are convinced or not of this position. A dispassionate reading is not common with novels, for they are generally about human emotions. Yet strict analysis by me is at the fore. It is not to say that race is not a factor in the writings concerned here, but I would say that my deep study of these two white writer's works have yielded no racist tinge that I can discern. I allege that the opposite is the case, and that the fact that a white woman wrote the book does not detract from its validity or from the enlightened purpose of holding up a mirror to American society so that it can see the injustices and horrors it has perpetrated. A colour-blind society accepts input from people of all perceived ethnicities. Incidentally, I assert that colour-blindness is a very broad term, and it means varying things to various people. To me it means the sentiments in Dr. King's speech quoted above, and Nelson Mandela's idea of the (opposite image, but really the same) rainbow nation.

*The Help* (2009) is a novel that takes place in the Civil Rights Era in Jackson, Mississippi. The novel tells its readers the story of the African American maids employed by white families, and the discrimination they face. The story is written from the first person perspective of three women: two black maids, Aibileen Clark, Minny Jackson, and one white woman, Eugenia "Skeeter" Phlean, whose name is a clear reference to Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird* who does not see women of 'colour' as different, or as people to be excluded.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is a very important work in a similar vein. Both books document racial injustice in the Deep South. Both works explore societal inequality through

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<sup>3</sup> See also, Duchess, Harris, Ph.D., J.D. "Kathryn Stockett Is Not My Sister and I Am Not Her Help". The Feminist Wire. August 12, 2011. Web. March 23, 2016.

<http://www.thefeministwire.com/2011/08/kathryn-stockett-is-not-my-sister-and-i-am-not-her-help/>

intimate depictions of families. Both seek to engage the reader in the political/legal situation of discrimination with a view to turning public opinion against it. Similarly to *The Help*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set some decades before the time of writing – in the Great Depression – but unlike *The Help*, it was written at a time when there was still a segregation in the Deep South. There was also still a lynching culture, aimed at terrorising the African American population into permanent subjugation, and it was written five years before African Americans gained full voting rights. This makes it a novel set at a time when the issue was still hot and a courageous novel written as part of the perilous efforts of some white people to share the dangers encountered by African Americans in seeking Liberation. The novel focuses on a white family – the Finches – living in the Deep South in the Great Depression. Atticus Finch is a small-town lawyer, a widowed father of two who embodies fairness, a deep sense of common humanity, and who rejects the racism of those around him absolutely.

Stockett and Lee focus on the intellectuality and power of black women. Skeeter asking for help from Abileen, and Abileen concerning herself with the Miss Myrna column illustrates for the reader the capacity of black women. The abiding image for the reader here is of women cooperating in a common endeavour irrespective of the colour bar of their society. Also, Skeeter's book is actually written mainly by Abileen and the other black maids. It appears that Stockett wishes to highlight the intellectual side of the black women by choosing them to write the book, and only having Skeeter there to type and send it in to print. Skeeter's enthusiasm and courage in taking risks prevalent in that era when white people sided with black people, her coming together with black maids to help them gain a voice, and write about the lives of black people in Mississippi highlights the theme of a *common* voice. The fact that Stockett is “white” increases the sense of, and encouragement in empathy<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On the role of empathy in literature, see also; Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and The Novel*. Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2007. Print

across a divide that the reader increasingly sees as random and horrifically unjust as they progress through the book, *The Help*. Both of the books concerned here emphasize common humanity; both seek to lend expression to less empowered sections of society, and both do so successfully. While there have been many books and papers concerning the issues in contention here – far too many to address – these two works have hit a nerve in American society, and have therefore been very influential. I endorse that this fact is central to giving voice to the African American population, despite that Stockett herself acknowledges that she does not “know what it really felt like to be a black woman” (Stockett 451). The maids concerned in both novels give expression to the “demonised other” in a way that a modern reader empathizes with as we, hopefully, move away from historically racist modes.

## Theoretical Overview

Audre Lorde, an African American poet and feminist, emphasizes the oppression that women have faced, especially black women. In her book *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches, Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference*, Lorde highlights the oppression of black women, pointing out that black women are not only oppressed because they are black, but also because they are female. Lorde argues that black women are not only oppressed by the white community but also within the black community. Lorde points out that black women face sexual abuse, and are treated badly not only by racists in white society, but by their husbands and partners at home too. Lorde's point can be exemplified with the oppression and the physical and verbal abuse of Minny Jackson by her husband Leroy Jackson in *The Help*. When the reader first meets Minny, they see her as a robust character. She is described as a very strong woman by her friend Abileen - "Minny could probably lift this bus up over her head if she wanted to. Old lady like me lucky to have her as a friend" (Stockett 13). However, when it comes to her husband, she is totally defenceless. Minny, who stands up for her rights even in front of her white "baas", lacks confidence to fight for herself against Leroy. According to Lorde, women, regardless of their race, sex, age and class have to come together to fight for their right to be equal members of their polity. Unfortunately, white women do not see black women as equal, and prefer to draw a line between them.

In her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins summarizes the oppression of black women as political and educational poverty. She writes that due to racial discrimination, black women do not have access to good quality education. The phenomenon of unequal access to quality

education and its benefits in the USA is borne out by research.<sup>5</sup> Collins contends that the difficulties black women face in accessing quality education, indeed the barriers to it, disempower black African women as “knowledge and power” go together (Collins xii). They do not only experience racial oppression, but they also experience suppression of their intellectual productivity. Black women have been seen as “the help,” or in non-polite parlance they are the servants of the white community as well as the hard workers in their own houses. They do not have time to cater for their own personal needs, nor do they have time to organise for their liberation. They are always in service to others; i.e. the white community, their husbands and children. Collins also states that although black women have been actively included in black social and political organisations and have spoken about the rights of African Americans, they have never had leadership positions. The basic understanding of this is that in spite of the intellect and the power they have, they remained outsiders in the battle for the rights of the black community during the Civil Rights struggle. Collins also points out that this unfortunate state of affairs is not limited to the USA, but also the case “In Africa, the Caribbean, South America, Europe and other places where Black women now live” (Collins 5). Black women have the intellect, but in society they do not necessarily have the voice to express their thoughts; and this is not only due to white supremacy, it is also a factor in the black community itself as sexism also factors in. Black women tend to aspire to be the ‘perfect’ female figure, to be a good mother, earn money for the home, and even do hard work that white men could not handle. Sojourner Truth points out that African American women engaged in back-breaking work while Southern States’ mores were all for protecting white ladies from all possible inconvenience.<sup>6</sup> A century on from Truth’s speeches and reflections, African American maids manage the houses of their

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<sup>5</sup> See also, Charles V. Hamilton. *Black Power – the Politics of Liberation*. New York: Rondon House, 1992. Print.

<sup>6</sup> For more information see also, Butler, G. Mary. “The Words of Truth”. Sojourner Truth Virtual Institute. Web. March 29, 2016. <<http://www.sojournertruth.org/Library/Speeches/>>

white employers, look after white children, as well as managing their own homes and children. So I believe this power and intellect to manage all these things not only unsettled the white community, but also the men in the black community. Therefore, black women remained in silence for the most part. One strong impression the reader takes from *The Help* is the sheer waste of human potential in those who are marginalised and unempowered. bell hooks' voice is a strong, indeed strident, voice for the unempowered. She examines the issues of race and gender in her book *Teaching to Transgress*. hooks writes about her experiences living through racial segregation in the Deep South, and documents the history of antipathy she witnessed between white and black women. She explores the relationship between "white" women and "black" women' and suggests solutions to the problems in fostering a sense of sisterhood. According to hooks, in order to build up a dialogue; white women have to overcome their fear and hatred of black women and *vice versa* (hooks96-97). It is obvious that without building a discourse of mutual respect among women, they will never achieve the empowerment they long for. What hooks calls "white racist colonisation" is essentially male, and it seeks to stifle the black female voice (hooks 3). She sees education of African American females as the antidote for this kind of "hegemony" (hooks3).

In addition, Audre Lorde points out that the refusal to recognize the difference in terms of race and lifestyle, discourse and attitudes, makes for separation among women. As an African American lesbian, Lorde is very concerned with discrimination in her society, and with what she calls "loathing and contempt for everything that is Black and female" (Lorde 8). This, of course, includes the labelling and condemnation of the "differently" sexually orientated, but the main focus is on how the "white western patriarchal ordering of things" (Lorde 9) skews society. The contrast and comparison of this recognition of society's ills in relation to deep-seated prejudice will be discussed later on in the analysis part of this essay.

In *The Help* Stockett builds up the dialogue that hooks laments the absence of. hooks states that white women should “assume responsibility for examining their own response” and “recognise the truth of racial oppression” before they can move forward in feminism and anti-racism projects (hooks 106). As an example to the feasibility of this endeavor, Stockett exemplifies this with the characters Skeeter and Celia. Stockett uses Skeeter to give voice to the black people of the South. Being away from home for education makes Skeeter realize the change in her understanding of the division between white Southern households and black maids. Skeeter’s change of ideas and her desire to be a writer brings her closer to the black women. Also, her sojourn away from the Deep South society and its social mores (with the assumption of white males’ right to dictate) opens her young mind.

Although hooks criticises Stockett and *The Help* and, as mentioned above, she reacts against it very strongly, seeing it as a misrepresentation of the situation at the time of the book’s setting, I believe she contradicts herself when I read between the lines of her text *Holding My Sister’s Hand: Feminist Solidarity*. hooks feels that ‘white’ feminist women who do not have the socio-economic position of those who can afford to employ servants, live a life of privilege, live in an aura of wealth which they feel needs to be protected, can empathise more with African American women in the absence of the shutting-out defense mechanisms of the wealthy. hooks writes:

In conversations I felt that feminist white women from non-materially privileged backgrounds often felt their understanding of class difference made it easier for them to hear women of color talk about the impact of race, of domination without feeling threatened. (hooks 108)

What hooks suggests here actually overlaps with the character Celia Foote in *The Help*. Celia is from a poor white family in Sugar Ditch, Mississippi. Celia does not draw lines between

her black maid and herself. She treats Minny as an equal. She takes her as a friend, and even talks about her personal problems with her. This personal tie across the pernicious racial divide is refreshing to the modern reader, an affirmation of the common humanity that both Stockett and Lee wish to propagate. Elsewhere I allude to the didactic aspect of these works, and the essence of the didactic impulse of both writers is a desire to affirm our equal human value. hooks might assert that Celia's disinclination to draw lines is a false and pernicious pretence for, as we have established elsewhere, hooks holds that the lines are there.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, dialogue between the two communities is depicted, along with sympathy, empathy and a sense of common humanity in spite of the atmosphere of prejudice, racial oppression and the presence of legally enforced segregation. The Finch family's maid, Calpurnia, is of great importance here, as she is a link between the black and white communities, and she has a voice in both.

Yet while the 21<sup>st</sup> Century reader may well accept the clear cut moral line in what is mentioned above, there is controversy. It is easy for a critic to claim there is condescension in the role that Calpurnia has in the book, and it is easy for a critic to attribute this to the fact that an educated white author writes this. It is an inescapable fact that Calpurnia is a servant, and Atticus is her boss. The power relationship is plain. Also, she is female and he is male. He is in charge; she is not. Katie Pryal argues that, "... there is a failure of cross-cultural racial empathy in the novel" Shaw-Thornburg even asserts that "African Americans might feel marginalized by the text" (both writers cited in - Meyer xiii). The white Atticus as Calpurnia's boss is sometimes seen as an example of "paternalism" (Sarat & Umphrey 19) which the reader is invited to approve of. There are hints that the reader is invited to approve of 'Uncle Tom' characters, and that Lee tries to justify white male supremacy as long as it is

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<sup>7</sup> hooks, bell (2015). *Black Looks, Race and Representation*, New York, Routledge, p. 11.

done in “the right way.” However, there is nothing like ‘Uncle Tom’ about the feisty Calpurnia; As I posit elsewhere, Calpurnia is in charge of the white children, orders them around, and has no Uncle Tom characteristics. Atticus rejects all forms of racial superiority and Scout, as a tomboy, exemplifies an excellent character who rejects traditional female roles, traditional female passivity, and she has no truck with racism as the novel progresses; and this admirable mind-set is with the full support of her father – the conscience of the novel. I believe it is churlish to harp at Lee for portraying a white man with a servant of whatever ethnicity just because he is a white male. Both Lee and Stockett wish to write their way into a better world in which colour bars and other forms of divisive nonsense do not count.

Tom Robinson is a black man who is accused, falsely, of raping a white woman. The true situation is that the woman in question wishes to attract the attentions of Robinson as a preferable alternative to the incestuous sexual experiences she is having with her father. Atticus, the lawyer who courageously undertakes to represent Robinson, tells his daughter Scout, “He’s a member of Calpurnia’s church, and Cal knows his family well. She says they’re clean living folks” (Lee 81). Clearly, a black maid is not an object, but a human to be respected, and whose opinions are respected. The use of the diminutive has the opposite of diminution of Calpurnia’s status; the intimacy of a nickname is in stark contrast to the more usual curt manner towards servants in the Deep South. That Atticus, who does not know the Robinson family’s situation at first hand, completely accepts his black maid’s appraisal speaks volumes for the dialogue between them. This contrasts with most of the experiences of the maids in *The Help*. With the children, Calpurnia is quite firm, and there is no sense that her word counts less for the fact of her race or gender. She has authority in the household over Scout, such as when she tells her – “You run along now” (Lee 35). Atticus reinforces this to Scout – “...you do as Calpurnia tells you...” (Lee 142). There is also intimacy – Scout

says, “Calpurnia bent down and kissed me” (Lee 35). This in a part of the world where white supremacists deplored any physical contact between the races, indeed contact with the same cloth. Within the Finch household there is a haven on racial equality in a sea of racist oppression and injustice. This is the exemplar of the novel.

There is a later echo of the theme of the exact opposite of intimacy sought between the two perceived races when Ewell (the rapist of his own daughter, and mischievous litigant against Tom Robinson) is disgusted at any form of interaction between Mayella and a black person (the rape allegation is, of course, a fantastical lie, yet interaction of an innocent – from Robinson’s side – nature did occur). The didactic element of Harper Lee’s work is strong, with the Finch family pointing to the right way to live life in the South in stark contrast to the rather bestial way the Ewells live. The former in full dialogue with the “other” community, the latter utterly rejecting such a thing.

To sum up, both *The Help* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* explore themes of black oppression, injustice towards people of colour, and the determination of many in the white community to stay on top. Both works face the reader with the very clear picture of people of privilege who in no way deserve to be on top. *The Help* also explores the further, compounded, oppression of black women at the hands of their own race. Both novels are highly effective in evoking empathy from the reader, with, as touched on above with the word ‘didactic,’ what seems a passionate desire to inspire societal change in the United States greatly for the better.

### **Part I: The Help – Maid in America**

Segregation is an incontestable stigma in US history. The discrimination in legislation prohibiting denial of human rights on the grounds of colour, perceived ethnicity, gender, disability and sexual orientation has divided US society. Within this context, both *The Help* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* place importance on the oppression that black people faced in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This relatively recent book, *The Help* by Stockett explores the power relationships of, most specifically, women in the Deep South at the time of segregation – in this case the early 60s. This paper sets out to analyse the work on various levels. Firstly, how effective is the book in conveying the injustice and the racism that it portrays? Secondly, do plot and characterization interact to engage the reader's empathy? Thirdly, does the work deserve to be seen as taking the baton from Harper Lee's hands?

*The Help* is about three brave women who want to change the perspective of their society. Stockett, like Lee, prefers to use black people's dialect when they are the narrators. These one white and two black women come together to give voice to the problems of black women in the white-dominated community of Jackson, Mississippi. Along with the voice of the black women an important emphasis is put on racism and self-discovery. The three protagonists of the novel take the risk of isolation and brutal attack to overcome the deep-seated prejudice of the white society in order to build a better future for the upcoming generation. Skeeter's journey starts when she comes home after graduation. In the early chapters the change of Skeeter's perspective is highlighted - she is not a young girl any more, and she has grown to wisdom. She develops her own ideas about the prejudice that is going on in the South. Skeeter wants to be a writer, and she chooses to write a book about black maids (women). The creation of this theme could represent a kind of pay back Stockett wishes to make to her one-time nanny, Dimitrie.

In the early 1960s Mississippi was still in the grip of segregation.<sup>8</sup> To assure the reader's understanding Stockett provides some historical context of the era in question<sup>9</sup>. Stockett exemplifies this historical context by Skeeter reading Jim Crow Laws and people watching the 1963 Washington March and Martin Luther King Jr's speech on television:

The Summer rolls behind us like a hot tar spreader. Ever colored person in Jackson gets in front a whatever tee-vee set they can find, watches Martin Luther King stand in our nation's capital and tell us he's got a dream. I'm in the church basement watching. Our own Reverend Johnson went up there to march and I find myself scanning the crowd for his face. I can't believe so many peoples is there-two-hundred-fifty thousand. And the ringer is, sixty thousand a them is white. (Stockett 294)

The word 'tar' may evoke blackness, maybe not; the word 'our' most certainly points out the fierce contention that the African American characters in the book share with Dr. King, that the nation belongs to all; the fact that so many white citizens attend the event is hopeful, but it must be kept in mind that this is Yankee Washington, and not the Deep South. The white community in the Deep South in fact refuses to realize that black people are equal humans, they do not accept that they can be equal to white people. African Americans felt that they had to protect themselves from oppression at the hands of white supremacists<sup>10</sup>. Black women, perhaps, more than black men had more space between themselves and liberation.

Stockett greatly emphasises the importance of black maids in the upbringing of white children. Although Abileen tells us about the general disappointment and unhappiness of the

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<sup>8</sup> For more information of the period see also, Cook, Robert. *Sweet Land of Liberty?: The African American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Routledge, 1998. Print.

<sup>9</sup> Readers who desire to have more detailed history of the period may read *The African American Civil Rights Movement and Jim Crow Laws*.

<sup>10</sup> See also, Charles V. Hamilton. *Black Power – the Politics of Liberation*. New York: Rondon House, 1992. Print.

maids in the children they bring up, at the same time she illustrates how naive and compassionate they are in their job of bringing up these children. Abileen's relation with Mae Mobley is a good example. She tries her best to protect the children under her care from the prejudice of white people. Skeeter also is raised by a black maid, Constantine, who teaches her to be an independent, brave woman who chooses her own path despite the criticism of her friends. Again, we see the very positive input of the ostensibly unempowered having a great deal of power in the long term. The people of colour concerned often failed to move forward for themselves, but perhaps felt the satisfaction of seeing those whom they looked after and who took the baton from others hands (OK, white hands) doing so, or perhaps felt the devastation of being left behind. This is outside the scope of this work.

Although there are three main protagonists in *The Help*, the most influential character is Abileen, who fights against racism in her own way. She may not be a collage graduate like Skeeter, but the way she treats the children she looks after shows a highly developed personality, and she provides is an example for the reader in respect to overcoming the prejudice that the children learn from their families.

Once upon a time they was two girls," I say. "one girl had black skin, one girl had white." ... So little white girl say, 'Well, let's see. You got hair, I got hair.'"I gives Mae Mobley a little tousle on her head."Little colored girl say 'I got a nose, you got a nose.'"I gives her little snout a tweak. She got to reach up and do the same to me."Little white girl say, 'I got toes, you got toes.' And I do the little thing with her toes, but she can't get to mine cause I got my white work shoes on." "So we's the same. Just a different color', say that little colored girl. The little white girl she agreed and they was friends. The End (Stockett 200).

The opening of this passage with a fairy tale beginning – “once upon a time” – evokes a sense of universality, something that cannot be particular to any socio-political-national group. It conjures up a folklore which traditionally embraces the less empowered in society. The dialogue between the girls highlights their innocence – innocence of the terrible adult phenomenon of racism. On skin colour, “What you think that mean?” – the unspoken answer is “nothing.” Their comparison of their features emphasises the commonality of all humans, and the choice of bodily features to illustrate this is interesting. The passage quoted above gives the same child-like response to racial differences, and the writer clearly wishes to highlight the fact that innocent children have no natural racist inclinations; that ugly phenomenon, as *The Help* illustrates elsewhere, comes from adults in the socio-economic, political and ideological climate they find themselves in. The words “the end,” are emphatic. Stockett puts a metaphorical full stop to racism. Or in the American argot, we are all the same human beings – period. Mae is, of course, delighted by the story, and it is part of the dialectic that Aibileen Clark is putting her through. Like Skeeter, she is destined to be an empowered member of her society, untethered by a sense that skin colour or gender are factors that should exclude. This is, of course, in stark contrast to Mae’s abusive and thoroughly unpleasant mother, Elizabeth, who, in juxtaposition to Aibileen, gives the lie to the idea that “white” mores and modes of discourse are superior to those of “blacks”.

The passage quoted is in the argot, as Stockett perceives it, of African Americans at the time of the novel’s setting. This has aroused controversy, with some critics questioning a white middle class woman’s ability to reproduce faithfully the discourse of working class African Americans. It has even been suggested that the attempt is patronizing.<sup>11</sup> I disagree with this for the same reason that if a writer seeks to give a voice to African American women, it is appropriate that it should be their own voice as the writer perceives it. This is no new

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<sup>11</sup> See also, <https://acriticalreviewofthehelp.wordpress.com>

departure, and certainly no reason to criticise Stockett. Take this line from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. "This yer young-un business makes lots of trouble in the trade.....if we could get a breed of gals that didn't care now for their young 'uns....'twould be about the greatest modr'n improvement I knows on" (Beecher-Stowe xxiii). The vernacular comes through here with the shortenings and the 'wrong' grammar; and this is a white, middle-class American woman writing against the oppression of African Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. (Today the book might seem mawkish and unpalatable to African Americans, but at the time it first went to press it was a revolutionary work, a passionate condemnation of slavery expressed in the idiom of the times). More up to date, Jennifer Peirce writes about the oppression practiced for racist reasons in the United States – a white woman standing against this injustice<sup>12</sup>.

As stated above, the dialogue between Mae Mobley and Abileen shows how Abileen voices her feelings in order to sow the idea of racial equality in the mind of this little white child. It is the content of a person's character that is important - not the skin colour. What comes to the forefront here is that the education of the white children by their black nannies will have a great influence on the future of racism because all of us are born as equals with different possibilities; some of us lucky and some of us are unlucky, but none of us need be racist, although of course racism persists in spite of all. Just as we do not have the opportunity to choose our family, we do not have the opportunity to choose our skin colour. The norms learnt from the social environment, the family and friends shape our route in life and our thoughts. In *The Help* Abileen ensures that Mae Mobley will grow up without racial prejudice. A white person's perception, if that white person is racist, may be that the African American servant's role is inferior, that it is not one that has room for achievement. Stockett suggests the opposite. The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand of the one who influences

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<sup>12</sup> Cf., Pierce, Jennifer. *Whiteness, Gender, and the Backlash Against Affirmative Action*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. Print

the growing young mind, for good or ill. Abileen as a character is opposite to the empowered but awful Elizabeth who feels superior yet shows no superior qualities, and, indeed, declines to rock the cradle at all.

As Lorde writes in *Our Dead Behind Us: Poems*: “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.”<sup>13</sup> Lorde asserts that women should co-operate in the constant struggle against the prejudice they face for the fact of being women. Stockett depicts Hilly in *The Help*, in such a way as to suggest that with some people recognition of equality is not a realistic prospect. Hilly is an example of an unreformed racist who seems to have no qualms in displaying her contempt for coloured maids. The reader readily identifies her as cruel and self-indulgent. As mentioned elsewhere, the impression the reader has of the intellects of the black maids going to waste is powerful – so is the impression the reader has of the completely gratuitous nastiness of Hilly from which nobody gains anything. We can go further, and characterise this kind of behaviour as emotional abuse, a violation of the basic human right to be free of assault, be it verbal or other. Needless to say, Hilly’s intellectual credentials are lamentable. The juxtaposition of Hilly and Skeeter is very effective indeed. Hilly’s contention that black people are unclean has as much intellectual underpinning as a caste obsessed Indian’s contention that some people are untouchable – in other words, none. Hilly says “All these houses they’re building without maid’s quarters? It’s just plain dangerous. Everybody knows they carry different kinds of diseases than we do” (Stockett 8). An educated reader will also note that her belief that black maids transmit foul diseases in a way that whites do not flies in the face of any scientific knowledge. Her belief that African American people are also unclean in a moral sense also renders her a ridiculous as well as sinister character. Believing herself to be utterly

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<sup>13</sup> Audre Lorde quotes by Jone Johnson Lewis, about.com guide : <http://www.womenshistory.about.com>. Web. 23 March 2016.

superior to the black characters while displaying such ignorance and such a low level of morality makes her one of the most powerful tools of the writer in highlighting not just the wickedness of racial and sexual oppression, but also its absurdity. Yet Hilly is only a rather unpleasant example. Other white women go along with the social mores of the segregated society in its twilight, and the reader almost pities them in that they cannot realise that the world has moved on, and their time of pretended superiority is running out. Already by the era of the book Jim Crow laws is largely seen as anachronistic. Not only are they seen as brutal and vile, and as giving the lie to the Crusade in Europe against the Nazis.<sup>14</sup>

Condemning institutionalized racism abroad while practicing it at home is hypocrisy.

Roberts and Klibanoff ask, “How had the South’s certifiable, pathological inhumanity towards Negroes been allowed to exist for so long in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century?” (Roberts & Klibanoff 8). Meals are also an interesting aspect of the book. Eating together is not accepted. The two perceived races must dine apart, as the white ‘ladies’ (the inverted commas suggest that a true lady does not do this) cannot endure the supposed pollution this would entail.

The reader cannot help seeing a great deal of the treatment of the ‘black’ maids as dehumanization. The book is not meant to be a light entertainment, of course, but this aspect affects the reader in a way that can almost be seen as harrowing. Yet there is lightness and joy too. Skeeter’s desire to give a voice to her African American sisters in spite of the social disapprobation that it entails, and in spite of the fact that there is not much in it for her (compare with the selfish and egotistical racists among her fellow whites), is very engaging. This character is one who can contribute to breaking the cycle, to ending the horrors that some other characters clearly see as normal and fitting.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf., Eisenhower, Dwight. *Crusade in Europe*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1948. Print

The idea of the racial/racist divide often being seen as normal and fitting is exemplified by the schoolroom experience of Mae Mobley. The girl depicts herself with a black pencil, and the teacher (I resist the temptation to use inverted commas here) objects on the grounds that a white girl should not depict herself with that supposedly unpleasant colour. “What’s wrong, baby? What happen?” ‘I coloured myself black’ she cried...’What do you mean’ I asked...’She said black means I got a dirty, bad face’”(Stockett 409).The teacher contends that Mae degrades herself by drawing herself in black. This will, the teacher asserts, make other people see her as “dirty.” This vignette gives a small portrayal of the massive institutionalized racism that the educational system in the Deep South perpetuated. Children were invited to believe themselves superior on the grounds of lighter skin pigmentation rather than, as in my opening quote, the “content of their character.” Yet, we can also clearly see that the greatest efforts of the racist establishment in the Deep South are not effective in turning minds to its perverted purposes. Skeeter fully realizes (as the book progresses) that she is being lied to, and that the ideology of racist white supremacy is a vile fiction that even children can see through. It is worth quoting Skeeter here at length:

I search through card catalogues and scan the shelves, but find nothing about domestic workers. In nonfiction, I spot a single copy of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. I grab it, excited to deliver it to Aibileen, but when I open it, I see the middle section has been ripped out. Inside, someone has written NIGGER BOOK in purple crayon. I am not as disturbed by the words as by the fact that the handwriting looks like a third grader’s. I glance around, push the book in my satchel. It seems better than putting it back on the shelf. In the Mississippi History room, I search for anything remotely resembling race relations. I find only Civil War books, maps, and old phone books. I stand on tiptoe to see what’s on the high shelf. That’s when I spot a booklet, laid

sideways across the top of the Mississippi River Valley Flood Index. A regular-sized person would never have seen it. I slide it down to glance at the cover. The booklet is thin, printed on onionskin paper, curling, bound with staples. “Compilation of Jim Crow Laws of the South,” the cover reads. I open the noisy cover page. The booklet is simply a list of laws stating what colored people can and cannot do, in an assortment of Southern states. I skim the first page, puzzled why this is here. The laws are neither threatening nor friendly (Stockett 172 – 173)

It is interesting that Skeeter’s disturbance arises mostly from the fact that the racist who has defaced a book seems an educated person. Also, it attests to her sense of anti-racism that she sees slipping the book into her bag as less of a misdemeanor than letting it continue to emit its vile message *in situ*. The juxtaposition of the mundane flood statistics and the Nuremburg Laws-like Jim Crow Laws strikes the reader with the sheer matter-of-fact nature of institutionalized racism in the Deep South. The fact that she sees these laws as neither threatening nor friendly deepens the reader’s sense of the bland-faced ways of the oppressors.

This is deepened by Skeeter’s brush with the legal intricacies of segregation and oppression. As she writes:

I read through four of the twenty-five pages, mesmerized by how many laws exist to separate us. Negroes and whites are not allowed to share water fountains, movie houses, public restrooms, ballparks, phone booths, circus shows. Negroes cannot use the same pharmacy or buy postage stamps at the same window as me. I think about Constantine, the time my family took her to Memphis with us and the highway had mostly washed out, but we had to drive straight on through because we knew the hotels wouldn’t let her in. I think about how no one in the car would come out and say it. We all know about

these laws, we live here, but we don't talk about them. This is the first time I've ever seen them written down. Lunch counters, the state fair, pool tables, hospitals. Number forty-seven I have to read twice, for its irony". (Stockett 173)

The modern reader will share this sense of irony. The listing of very ordinary places and the absurd restrictions placed on African American people using everyday facilities compounds the reader's sense of the unreality (from today's perspective) of this overly controlled polity governed on perceived racial grounds. The reference to lunch counters resonates with readers who know something about the history of the Deep South, and connects with Stockett's preoccupation with Dr. King. Lunch counter sit-ins were a major part of African American resistance to exclusion at the time the novel is set in. And Martin Luther King lent his support to those engaged in this form of protest.<sup>15</sup> In this way Stockett is very effective in rallying her readership to condemn the system that she seeks to pillory. Incidentally, the fact that "we don't talk about it" speaks volumes for the attitude mentioned elsewhere of "that's just the way things are."

An understanding of history cannot be blotted out by those in power *The Help* helps those of us in other parts of the world where we have never had to suffer the indignities of African Americans to understand the unique suffering that such people experienced (and still do to a lesser extent), and the universality of the issues involved.

In *The Help*, the recognition of black women is at the fore; black women do all the housework from cooking to taking care of the white women's children. They are not only exploited in this way, but they are also seen as posing a threat – that of transmitting disease onto white people. White women fight for their rights, but first they have to get their own rights as white women, and then struggle for the rights of black women if they actually care

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<sup>15</sup> See also, Arsenault, Raymond. *Freedom Riders*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print

to do such a thing. Black women were not seen as equal to white women, and to a certain extent they were not recognised as individuals either. In *The Help* there is an easy assumption of superiority among the white women, and this comes across in a lack of respect and a peremptory use of language. “Get the house straightened and then go on and fix some of that chicken salad now,” says Miss Leefolt’ (Stockett 3). Stockett highlights not just the unpleasant power relationship here, but also subtly shows how the “superior” one in the relationship does not earn her status through merit; the word “now” implies a certain stupidity. Needless to say, the maid cannot tidy the house and make chicken salad at the same time. Tellingly, the African American maid uses the honorific “Miss” automatically even in the absence of the person concerned. Language that sets status parameters, and language that the oppressed go along with in spite of it being part of their oppression – or perhaps we can say as a consequence of it. This we will also see below in our other selected work.

## **Part II: To Kill a Mockingbird – Lee Surrenders White Supremacy**

Again we have a work written by a white woman in a passionate refutation of the evils inflicted on her fellow citizens of the Union by white racists. Again we have a novel highlighting the also pernicious phenomenon of the comfortable members of the dominant section of society practicing indifference in the face of what is clearly terribly wrong. I would say that the attitude of “that’s just the way things are” is one of the world’s silent evils. This work explores this in the context of small town Southern USA.

Continuing the theme of service to white families by black women, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, an important character is the Finch family’s maid, Calpurnia. Here we have a situation in contrast to that in *The Help*. In *The Help* the domestic staff are used but not included. There is no sense that they are empowered members of the households they toil for. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Calpurnia is black, and she works for a white family, but the resemblance in the situation ends there in relation to the domestic arrangements. Atticus treats Calpurnia as a lady, and that is exactly what she is. She is empowered in the household and her word counts. Indeed, Calpurnia is a mirror of Atticus, in that she rejects the colour bar too, and takes Scout and Jem to a ‘black’ church service in defiance of some African American’s sentiment against admitting whites into their worship. Calpurnia escorts the ‘white’ Finch children to the ‘black’ church – an unusual event in the Deep South at the time the book is set – and is clearly determined to bring the event off without backing down to any objections. However, she meets objections. On arriving at the venue, Calpurnia encounters a

member of the African American community who shows hostility to the presence of two white children. As Scout, the fictional narrator of the book, recounts:

“Lula [a black member of the congregation] stopped, but she said, ‘You ain’t got no business bringin’ white chillum here – they got their church, we got our’n. It is our church, ain’t it, Miss Cal?’

“Calpurnia said, ‘It’s the same God, ain’t it?’”

Scout notes that “... she was talking like the rest of them.”(Lee 119)

The point is that prejudice cuts both ways; Calpurnia makes the inclusivity point about the “same God.” Yet Scout has considerable discourse analysis skills. She picks up on the fact that when Calpurnia is among her fellow African Americans, she switches into their dialect.

“‘They’s my com’ny,’ said Calpurnia. Again, I thought her voice strange: she was talking like the rest of them” (Lee 125). Scout asks Calpurnia about her mode of speech later.

“‘Cal,’ I asked, ‘why do you talk nigger-talk to the – to your folks when you know it’s not right?’” (Lee 131). The dash shows Scout’s reigning in of her tongue as she was about to say

‘the niggers.’ Again, we see the dialectic or slow epiphany that Scout is undergoing in relation to race. She does not accept Calpurnia’s rather comical answer “Well, in the first place, I’m black” (Lee 131). This sardonic rejoinder enhances her equality in expression.

Calpurnia then explains that differing situations require differing modes of discourse in case people from various sections of society feel one is “puttin’ on airs” or merely seeming “out of place” (Lee 132). She point out that this is precisely the same in the case of the white children.

Again, the reader hears the black woman’s voice of wisdom and her expression of inherent commonality among humans. In this important passage of the book, both the gulf between the races is highlighted in terms of prejudice and exclusion, as well as through the different discourse the two races use (emphasising their differing sub-cultures), yet through

the deeply human character Calpurnia the possibility of a virtuous bridge appears, and in the event the white children are welcomed into the church and treated with respect and kindness. A subtle point is then made about prejudice and division. Scout notes that the sermon condemns bootleggers (dealers in illegal alcohol) but that “women were worse.....I was confronted with the Impurity of Women doctrine that seemed to preoccupy all clergymen” (Lee 127). Here we see that gender prejudice cuts across the racial divide; also, that Christianity promotes it. There is a parallel with *The Help*, in which, as explored elsewhere, ‘black’ women face not only racism but also sexism. Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm famously remarked “I have been far oftener discriminated against because I am a woman than because I am black” (Montefiore 160). This quote reflects exactly the themes of the two novels concerned – that prejudice and oppression are multi-faceted. Needless to say, in both the novels in question the female characters have a subservient role in relation to males, and the female writers highlight the societal wrongness of this fact. Again, let us point out the importance of the fact that both writers are female. Unlike white males (on the whole) they are probably far more able to empathise with the victims of prejudice as they too belong to an oppressed group.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird* the issue of our common humanity – as opposed to the divisive issues mentioned above, are depicted in relation to litigation. It is intriguing and shocking to read of the way the legal system in the Deep South is skewed against African Americans. Atticus Finch defends an African American man who is accused of raping a white woman. His courage in doing this is great indeed. The issue of black men being sexually interested in white women was a passionate and dangerous one between the two world wars. A member of Congress, Thomas Sisson is reported as saying he “would rather the whole black race of this world were lynched than for one of the fair daughters of the South to be ravished and torn by one of these black brutes” (Markowitz xv). Although Tom

Robinson is proven innocent, it is impossible to get the white jury to overcome their bias, and accept the innocence of a black person, and as the above quote graphically illustrates, they feel their naked injustice is sanctioned at the highest levels. Atticus is deemed disgraceful by many in the white community for representing a black man accused of violating a white woman, and not only him but also his children suffer from the prejudice of the white community. The prejudice of this society is so strong that harming fellow whites, even their children, is seen as justified if these whites are seen to side with black people. The historical significance of Mississippi at this time and the relation between the black and white communities shows that although the situation is different in the 1930s when *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set, by the post war era when *The Help* is set the situation is little better. In relation to white supremacists harming fellow whites they see as ‘race traitors,’ in the era *The Help* is set in, Viola Gregg Liuzzo (Bullard 80) and the three white activists portrayed in the film *Mississippi Burning*<sup>16</sup> were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan for siding with the African American community in their struggle for their rights. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Ewell the incestuous white racist attempts to kill the Finch children for siding with the black community; in *The Help*, most white characters would be in no danger of that whatsoever.

Whether it is true or not that these two novels are very similar, are from the same stable, and try to do the same job, we can say that they bring up very similar themes – themes which I am exploring. The novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, focuses on the Finch family (a bird very similar to a Mockingbird – there is a sense here that Lee wishes to say that if you hit someone else, you hit yourself). The father of the family, Atticus, is bringing his two children up with a strong sense of moral values, and with a total rejection of the racial and gender

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<sup>16</sup> Cf., *Mississippi Burning*. Dir. Alan Parker. MGM, 1988. Film.

prejudice and oppression that surround the family. His views are illustrated well with this piece of dialogue with his daughter, Scout:

“‘Scout,’ said Atticus, ‘nigger-lover is just one of those terms that don’t mean anything – like snot-nose. It’s hard to explain – ignorant, trashy people use it when they think somebody’s favouring Negroes over and above themselves. It’s slipped into usage with some people like ourselves, when they want a common, ugly term to label someone.’

‘You aren’t really a nigger-lover then, are you? [Scout]

‘I certainly am. I do my best to love everybody....’” (Lee 114-115)

The phrase “snot-nose” shows how childish and stupid he sees racism as being; the words “ignorant, trashy” suggest his sense of the low cultural level of racists; and the word “everybody” evokes Atticus’s inclusivity. Scout’s question is ambivalent. It can be read as her seeking reassurance that her father is not sinning against racist white attitudes; it can also be read as the girl seeking reassurance that her father cannot be labelled and condemned by white society with that vile soubriquet. Atticus’s rejoinder is conclusive and inclusive.

The plot has several levels. One is the interaction between Scout (Jean-Louise – her nickname reflects her tomboy nature and rejection of traditional feminine roles) and her brother Jem, and the epiphany they arrive at on the issue of race and the ethics of equal human value. Scout uses the word “nigger” early on in the book, and is reproved by her father: “‘Don’t say nigger, scout. That’s common’” (Lee 81). The modern reader might find the word “common” snobbish, but the sense with Atticus is that it is beneath his daughter to use such a foul word about her fellow humans. Scout’s inquiring mind seeks to understand the situation in her locality, and this includes how justice is administered (or rather, not.) She asks her father:

“‘Do all lawyers defend n-Negroes, Atticus?’”

“Of course they do, Scout.”

“Then why did Cecil say you defended niggers? He made it sound like you were runnin’ a still.” (Lee 81)

The n before Negroes shows Scout’s biting back the word nigger. Using the word when quoting Cecil just about excuses it, as Scout is referring to another’s discourse. Scout is learning, and the book contains a kind of dialectic in which Scout, and to a lesser extent, Jem, tests her attitudes, and those of others against the touchstone of her moral authority – Atticus.

Atticus would never dream of using the n word to insult the people around him. Yet, and in reference to the n word, it strikes the reader as strange that Calpurnia uses it. When confronted by the hostile Lula, she says “Stop right there, nigger” (Lee 125). Yet there is the suspicion that Calpurnia sees herself as being of higher status than other people of colour, being the very empowered member of a high status white household, and the n word is used to draw this distinction. This is, perhaps, not the most positive voice of African American females. However, it can also be argued that Lee depicts a strong African American woman who chooses her own discourse. It is interesting to note that by the 1980’s African Americans in the media - notably Richard Prior - started to make extensive use of the n word at the same time as whites in US society found they most certainly could not any more.

Of course, a large part of racism is labeling and condemning, and as we posit, this is a wide and lamentable phenomenon. White women writers can oppose it as well as anyone. The demonization of one Boo Radley, who is seen as a freak because he is reclusive, but in the event saves Scout and Jem’s lives is one of the central subjects of the book. Again, the theme is prejudice versus reality, and Boo Radley is a mirror of black people in the community who are also labelled and condemned against evidence and logic. The children of the town are frightened by Boo in a rather exciting way, and he is seen as a bogeyman, one who might at any time come at the children of the town. He is supposed to have committed a

violent crime, and is arrested and taken into custody. Yet, “The sheriff hadn’t the heart to put him in jail alongside Negroes, so Boo was locked in the courthouse basement” (Lee 17).

Even those accused of serious crimes are treated differently if white, and the sense here is that Boo as a white man must be protected from the ‘contamination’ that racists perceive as coming from contact with black people. It should be noted that Boo is a completely silent character. Again, this is a mirror of the situation of so many persecuted African Americans – he has no voice. Lee demonstrates an awareness that social exclusion and denial of self-expression cuts across the racial divide.

The main and most dramatic strand in the plot (as mentioned elsewhere) is the court case Atticus fights in defence of a black man, Tom Robinson, who is falsely accused of raping a white woman. Atticus ably defends his charge, but knows in his heart that the culture of the Deep South is against him, and he will lose irrespective of evidence and due legal process. Scout asks her father whether he will win the case, and he immediately responds in the negative. Tom Robinson is killed while trying to escape, and the man who brought the charge against Tom Robinson, Ewell, tries to murder Atticus’s children in revenge for Atticus’s opposing him and being a ‘nigger-lover.’ He meets poetic justice by being killed in turn by Boo Radley, who appears in defence of the children. An outcast who does more than the ‘included’ do.

The court proceedings display another aspect of representation and voice in respect of white and black citizens in the Deep South. Atticus, in defending Tom Robinson leads his client’s accuser, Mayella to contradict her false story, but to no avail. The way the dialogue in court progresses is telling. Atticus asks of Robinson, ‘You never asked him to do odd jobs before?’ ‘I mighta,’ conceded Mayella. ‘There was several niggers around’” (Lee 187). The reader notes that the offensive term for African Americans is allowed without question, for the voice of the white woman is free in expression, however vile the things it expresses.

Unfortunately, the discourse of the more empowered section of society influences the discourse of the less so. Atticus asks Tom Robinson why he ran away from the scene of the supposed crime, and the black man answers, “Mr. Finch, if you was a nigger like me, you’d be scared, too” (Lee 199). It seems he has accepted his insulting label.

The word ‘voice’ figures greatly in this work, and rightly. As bell hooks writes of the dialectic of change within society in her book *Teaching to Transgress*, “Just as the way we perform changes, so should our sense of ‘voice.’ .... [this is our] particularity and uniqueness”(hooks 11). The British poet WH Auden pointed out that "poetry makes nothing happen." But he goes on to compare it to a spring that arises elsewhere, "a way of happening, a mouth" (Auden 406). I would contend that women’s literature that crosses the racial divide is much like this. While so many un-empowered black Americans seem voiceless, in fact there is a vibrant stream of cultural expression that attempts to cross racial barriers and give voice to the 'black' community in the USA. Names which spring to mind are: Maya Angelou, recently deceased and honoured by the President among many others; Stokely Carmichael, a more overtly political writer of great influence; Toni Morrison, who won a Nobel Prize; Rachel Russel on a more flippant note who writes the hugely successful *Dork Diaries*; Alex Hailey, the writer of the Black American epic *Roots*; Gil Scott Heron, a black equivalent of Bob Dylan whose music backdrops political and sociological poetry. It is uplifting that courageous white women like Lee and Stockett cross the racial divide to facilitate and foster this representation, this voice.

## Conclusion

It is easy to regard the two works concerned as very similar, and it is very easy to see them as poles apart. I would contend that they are somewhere in the middle. As argued above, the aims of the two women writers are similar – they wish to highlight the racial oppression of African Americans, and they wish to highlight the sexism that cuts across the racial divide. They both show that exclusion and oppression are manifested in various forms. They also both show that this need not be so. Both works point to a humane and inclusive alternative to the prevailing ways in the Deep South before the Lyndon Johnson-inspired sea change in US society<sup>17</sup>. It is impossible to know what either woman wanted personally from their works apart from, of course, royalty money, but we can believe that they both desire/desired a more just and equitable polity for all. This certainly shines out of both books. Both writers are passionately engaged (in the present writer's opinion), and they write with a fierce sense of history. It has traditionally been the male preserve to write or compose or paint in ways which are designed to change the course of human life (effectively or not, see reference to Auden above). As Seamus Heaney writes of Goya, "He painted with his fists and elbows/Flourished the red cape of his heart/As history charged."<sup>18</sup> The two novels in question in this work do this, from a female perspective. There is much above about the female

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<sup>17</sup> See also, Gould, Lewis. *The Modern American Presidency, Lawrence*. University Press of Kansas, 2009. Print.

<sup>18</sup> See also, Heaney, Seamus. *North* "Summer 1969". London: Faber and Faber, 1975. Print.

perspective, and I would assert that the two female writers in question put that perspective in a strong and creative way. Their 'white' backgrounds should not matter, except, as also previously posited, insofar as that renders them courageous women who wish to put the hand out over the perceived divide, and render US society polyglot, inclusive, understanding, sympathetic, empathetic, and democratic in the sense that all choose the way they live. As Dr. King points out, this is not just a dream for white people but a right for all. I think I have shown the reader the valuable input of the two writers I have selected in supporting this ideal, this work-in-progress in US society.

We have discussed what various critics and thinkers have said about these two novels; there is a certain amount of hostility towards Stockett, as we have discussed, less hostility towards the national icon Lee. I would assert that this hostility is misplaced, for reasons previously stated. Indeed, I can contend that the hostility of some female writers towards the two female writers in question actually mirrors the kind of division between 'sisters' that they purport to seek to overcome.

In terms of the micro level, the two books have similarities that strike the reader. Both Scout and Skeeter experience a dialectical journey and achieve epiphany which in both cases alters their lives most positively. The epiphany is in great part an understanding of what a person of colour in the Deep South lives and feels. The wise Atticus already understands this as he exemplifies in his contention that one must put on another's skin and walk around in it in order to understand them. Aibileen too exemplifies this desire to achieve empathy, and she surely has a more difficult leap of faith to make in this respect for while Atticus is a professional, she is a maid. He has a higher education, she does not. He attracts respect, and deserves it. She attracts the reader's respect (let Stockett's detractors take note), yet attracts the contempt of many for the very colour of her skin. He is white, and she is black – and in the grim reality of a racist culture this means a lot. Both Stockett and Lee seek to emphasise

the leadership qualities of these two characters and to give a wide audience a sense that people like this drive positive social change. We have contended that these works are very overtly didactic, and rightly so.

The reason for this didactic element to the works can be seen in the cities of the locations of their settings. Maycombe, Alabama and Jackson, Mississippi are Deep South territories with a history of racist horror. This horror ranges from the harrowing lynching culture, indeed torturing people to death in front of a delighted audience,<sup>19</sup> to the callous indifference of the privileged to the sufferings of those around them. Both writers know very well the locations at first hand, both have lived the *zeitgeist*, and have understood on the deepest level the terrible wrongness of prevailing divisive attitudes; and both have sought through their writings to fight against this terrible wrongness with their “fists and elbows.” This is the common theme, the linking thread, and, when contemporary controversies subside, this may be the value that future readers place on the two novels’ place in the Liberation of African Americans. On a personal note, I was so keen to add to the mass of writing about black American writers, but intrigued to see if I could successfully argue the value of two white writers - this, I felt, was more challenging.

A suggestion for future study could be the issue of what the two writers wished to achieve in relation to racial issues in the United States. It would be interesting for a future researcher to try to identify the effects on the young in American schools of the texts concerned. While one might see both novels as world-wide best-sellers, and therefore influential and historically important, a future study might try to establish what schoolchildren, especially African American schoolchildren (let me qualify that, African American schoolchildren in dynamic interplay with their peers from every part of the world, for the America of the present day is not a nation of black and white, but a rainbow nation of

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<sup>19</sup> See also, Carrigan, William. *The Making of a Lynching Culture*. University of Illinois Press, 2004. Print.

all manner of people from all parts of the globe, all of whom, I would assert, deserving an equal and equitable place in the polity that has always purported to offer that) get from these works. I will not speculate.

As every sincere writer on contemporary racism, perhaps those making an income from it, would say –‘I hope very much indeed that I will become jobless.’

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