

# Women's Voice through Literacy Practices in Kathryn Stockett's "The Help"

Salsa Meiliana Asmaradhani

Universitas Negeri Surabaya  
Surabaya, Indonesia

[salsaasmaradhani@mhs.unesa.ac.id](mailto:salsaasmaradhani@mhs.unesa.ac.id)

Pratiwi Retnaningdyah

Universitas Negeri Surabaya  
Surabaya, Indonesia

[pratiwiretnaningdyah@unesa.ac.id](mailto:pratiwiretnaningdyah@unesa.ac.id)

**Abstract**—This study aims to show how literacy practices facilitate women to expressing their voice against racial discrimination. Using New Literacy Studies to discuss the study on analyzing how literacy practices gives big impact in society and culture. It would also show how characters use literacy practice to express their voice in order to make change in society by sharing their stories using writing and storytelling as the methods.

**Keywords**—new literacy studies; literacy practices; women's voices

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literacy as social practice is a part of New Literacy Studies, which is an approach that believed in literacy practices or reading and writing as an activity that related to the context of social and cultural [1]. The nature of literacy is not only about focusing on skill, but more about thinking literacy as social practice [2], which means that literacy is not always about skill of reading and writing, but it is more about what people do with literacy.

Research that has been done to student shows that when the class read the autobiography of African-American women who participated in civil war, most of the students didn't really know that many African-American women took a big part in the civil war. And it is mainly because many school textbooks in America rarely made a contribution about African-American women effort during civil war [3]. From research that has been done by Dillard, we can see the importance of literacy practices in order to help women's voice to be heard, we can also see that literacy practices can help people to understand about women participation in historical event.

On research that have been done by Kumar, stated that women's life experience should only be told by women because it is more accurate [4]. From research that has been done by Kumar we can see that when women write their own story by themselves it is more accurate than when it is written by men. It proves that if we want to know the real life and hardship of being a woman, it should be from women's point of view.

Expressing voice is a complex thing for women, no matter their race, nationality and religion, whether it is in present days or in the past. Women during and after the civil war and the civil rights movement were struggling to get their liberties and dignity but not many people aware of this. Many efforts that women do which are actually played an important part during the civil rights movement was overshadowed by men. Among many efforts that women do to fight for their liberties, the most

important thing to do for them is actually to survive in their daily life that is full of struggle [5].

*The Help* brought us a sensitive issue, racism that happen during the civil rights movement in America. Take a place on Jackson, Mississippi as the setting, it is a novel centered on racism that happen to the women employee and how they are being treated by their employers. There are three main characters in this novel, two African-American women and one white woman and all of them tell their own story about life, hope, and dreams through literacy practices which is writing and retelling their story then compile it into a book. For the maids sharing their story to Skeeter is not only because they want to help Skeeter finishing her project, but also it is the only way to let people know about their experience while working for white people and how they treat them. This study will analyze how literacy practices can help women to expressing their voice.

## II. METHOD

To start analyzing about how literacy practices can be used to expressing voice by women, understanding about what literacy practices and women's voice is a must thing to do. After that, close reading of the novel, *The Help*, then followed by finding a scene that related to the problem that the writer want to analyze. Books, articles, papers, and essays are use as the references to support the argument. Final step is compiling references, the writer must use a sample in a form of quotation from the novel to help prove that the theory or approach and the problem the writer want to analyze are in line.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the Civil Rights Movement in 1960s, any act of protest for social equality is prohibited because it is against the law. Women in *The Help* use literacy practice to help them express their voice. While another protest act is too dangerous, writing and telling their story is the safest method for them.

### A. Literacy and Women's Voice

The characters desire to be free from discrimination and segregation make them share their experience even though it is against the law and dangerous. Aibileen and Minny at first is hesitated to help Skeeter finishing her project by sharing their stories to her, but then Minny ask her intention of writing a book about black maid's experiences,

**“What makes you think colored people need your help? Why you even care about this? You white’ Minny stands up..... My face is burning red. I speak slowly, ‘We want to show your perspective... so people might understand what it’s like from your side, We--we hope it might change things around here’ ” [6].**

After listening to Skeeter explanation, Minny finally agree to join Aibileen to share her stories with Skeeter. Because she finally knows that what Skeeter want is to know how it feels to live a life as colored people in Jackson, which is a place that uphold white supremacy.

Using literacy practice as a way to help women express their voice is indeed very effective because there is a genre of literary works called *Testimonio*, which is a genre in which Latin American women write a story based on a historical event that happens to them. *Testimonio* itself actually used by many writers to criticize and voicing their opinion on politics and society that always put women below men, in which women wished that it can help them to get equality that they hoped for [7].

Skeeter is put in difficult situation when finishing her project because she is not sure if the book can be published or not,

**“I truly don’t know if Missus Stein will want to print it. But what I do know is, the responsibility of the projects lies on my shoulders and I see it in their hardworking, lined faces, how much the maids want this book to be published. They are scared, looking at the back door every ten minutes, afraid they’ll get caught talking to me. Afraid they’ll be beaten like Louvenia’s grandson, or, hell, bludgeoned in their front yard like Medgar Evers. The risk they’re taking is proof they want this to get printed, and they want it bad” [6].**

The maids who participated on Skeeter’s project put high expectation by hoping that the book will be published because when they agree to help Skeeter finishing her project, they hope that with sharing their stories, people will get to hear their voices that seem to be forgotten. Skeeter as the writer of the book also hope that the book will be published because she understands how hard it is for the maids to share their stories with her by sacrificing their own safety and breaking the law. Even though both Skeeter and the maids are breaking the rules, the maids are the one who is being put in a more dangerous situation. The fact that the maids are actually afraid of being caught, but they still insisted on sharing their stories, shows that how important Skeeter’s project for them.

#### *B. Literacy Practices by Women to Change Situation*

Skeeter’s answer to Minny question in which she said that she hopes that her project might change the situation in Jackson, shows how important women’s voice is in order to make a change in society. Having women’s voice in society will help make a change in society such as helping to “address issues related to security, jobs, human rights, physical well-being and human development” [8].

For her project, seems like what Skeeter want to change is an issue about human rights. Because the maids’ story not only represent their own experience but all colored people in Jackson. A scene where Skeeter ask Aibileen’s opinion about the private bathroom,

**“Aibileen, that talk in there.... Hilly’s talk I mean... Do you ever wish you could change things?’ She asks. And I can’t help myself. I look at her head on. Cause that’s one a the stupidest questions I ever heard. She got confused, disgusted, disgusted look on her face... I turn back to my washing, so she doesn’t see me rolling my eyes. ‘Oh no, Ma’am, everything’s fine’. Skeeter then said ‘But that talk in there about the bathroom’ ” [6].**

Conversation between Aibileen and Skeeter give the reader a glimpse view of Skeeter’s attempt in persuade Aibileen to make change in Jackson. Aibileen think that Skeeter question is stupid because she thinks that it is impossible but the way Skeeter ask her, give her impression that Skeeter idea of change Jackson’s situation is an easy task to do.

It is indeed not an easy job for women to make change in society, in fact it is very difficult. To make it worse, situation in Jackson at that time is very bad, with white people lead the society, of course white supremacy still going strong and it is resulted in segregation and discrimination that getting worse by the day. Not only women, but it is also difficult for men to make a movement to change society. After realizing how difficult it is to make change, Skeeter then ask Aibileen to work together to make change by writing a book. But with only Aibileen willing to work together with Skeeter, it still difficult because they need more people to participate. When women want to make change, they need to gather a group of people who have the same idea in order to reach their goal and represent their priorities and concern [9]. Fortunately, Aibileen and Skeeter successfully asked Minny and other maids to work together, Skeeter book finally can be done and help them to make change in Jackson.

#### *C. Writing to Help Expressing Voice*

Aibileen as the first person who agrees to help Skeeter writing a book have her own way to share her stories. She prefers to write her story

**“Aibileen told me her idea for her to write her own words down and then show me what she’s written..... “You don’t say your prayers, then?” “I never told anybody that before. Not even Minny. Find I can get my point across a lot better writing em down.”..... “So this is what you do on the weekends?” I asked. “In your spare time?” “Oh no, I write an hour, sometimes two ever day. Lot a ailing, sick peoples in this town.” [6].**

The scene above shows that Aibileen prefers to write her story rather than talking about her experience. She feels more comfortable writing it because with writing it out she can say anything that she wants to say without feeling afraid that someone will hear it. Writing for women let them talk about injustice and cruelty that happen to them. And for the reader, it

can help them to help create a society where women's life might be improved [10]. A research done by Smith shows that Latin America women writers used their ability to write to fight patriarchy and criticize the government. Then, it is proved that writing can help women to fight for rights in society [7]. Writing for women not only help them to express their voice but also help to make a change in society.

#### *D. Storytelling to Help Expressing Voice*

Storytelling is part of literacy practice because literacy can act in different ways for every people in a literacy event. People can do literacy practices without reading or writing because reading and writing is not the only way in which text can have a meaning [11]. Stories from everyday experiences can have a different meaning if it told in different context. People who are involved in the event may connect it with their own experience and ask a question about details in the stories being told [12]. Storytelling is a part of oral tradition. Oral traditions are a message that passes on from generation to another. The message can be in form of speech, song, folktales, fables, histories, narrations, proverbs, and song. Oral traditions likely used to pass information across generations without writing and it helps people understand the world and can be used to teach people about culture [13].

Minnie and Aibileen have a different way to share their stories to Skeeter, if Aibileen prefer to write her story, Minny choose to share her stories by retelling her stories to Skeeter,

**“‘You don’t have to do this, Minny.’ Aibileen says. ‘It’s alright if you want a change your mind.’ Slowly, Warily, Minny settles again in her chair. ‘I do it. I just want a want a make sure she understand, this ain’t no game we playing here.’.... She looks at Aibileen as she talks, like she’s trying to forget that I’m even in the room” [6].**

From the scene above, it can be seen that Minny is very serious when she retells her stories to Skeeter. She clearly stated that she wants Skeeter to take everything that she said seriously. Minny seriousness when retelling her stories can be obtained from a factor that she is an African-American person. Oral tradition is part of African culture and African people include everyday life experience into expression, which is telling their stories. Ancient African people used to hear a story from storyteller or Griot about history, folktales, myth narratives, and many more [14]. This statement can prove why Minny and other maids choose to retelling their stories than write it out like Aibileen. It is more comfortable for them because it is a tradition from their ancestor.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Both the maids and Skeeter have same goal which is to change situation in Jackson, Mississippi and put racial discrimination to an end. What they want to do is not an easy job to do because of Civil Rights Movement which happen at that time, they cannot just recklessly expressing their voice by doing a demonstration to protest about social equality. For

Aibileen and Minny, sharing their experience to Skeeter is the safest way. Fortunately, with Skeeter help, they can finally share their feeling on how does it feel to live as a colored maid in Jackson. With the law regarding prohibition to protest in any form, Skeeter and all maids still try their best to finish the book, because it is the only way to let people hear their voice.

In sharing stories, there are two methods, writing and storytelling. Aibileen is the only one who choose to write her own stories because it is more comfortable for her. What Aibileen do is an example that writing can be used by women to expressing their opinion about social injustice when they are afraid to talk about it. When Aibileen choose to write out her story first then read it to Skeeter, The other maids prefer to share their stories by immediately talking about all of their experience to Skeeter. The maids feel more comfortable to do it because it is part of their culture as an African American people.

Literacy practices in *The Help* shows that literacy skills can give a big impact whether it is writing, reading or storytelling. Literacy practices that have been done by Aibileen, Minny and Skeeter proves that literacy practices is an effective method to help women expressing their voice because considering the Civil Rights Movement on 1960s and Jackson's severe discrimination toward colored people, writing and storytelling is the safest way for the helps to expressing their voice and hope that it can make a change in society.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] J. P. Gee, "The New Literacy Studies," *Educacion*, vol. 53, no. 9, pp. 266–276, 1998.
- [2] B. Street, "What's 'new' in New Literacy Studies?: Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice," *Curr. Issues Comp. Educ.*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 77–91, 2003.
- [3] B. R. Dillard, "African American Women's Voices: Using Primary Sources to Introduce Students to The Civil War," *Black Hist. Bull.*, vol. 73, no. 2, pp. 16–20, 2010.
- [4] K. R. Pranesh, "Women as Writers," *Int. J. Curr. Res. Acad. Rev.*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 72–75, 2014.
- [5] "Women in the Civil Rights Movement," p. 2, 2015.
- [6] K. Stockett, *The Help*, 3rd ed. London: Penguin Group, 2011.
- [7] K. M. Smith, "Female Voice and Feminist Text: Testimonio as a Form of Resistance in Latin America," *Florida Atl. Comp. Stud. J.*, vol. 12, pp. 21–38, 2010.
- [8] S. Markham, "Women as Agents of Change: Having Voice in Society and Influencing Policy," *Women 's Voice , Agency , Particip. Res. Ser. 2013 No . 5 Gen. Equal. Dev.*, vol. series 201, no. 5, pp. 1–20, 2013.
- [9] "Women as Agents of Change," *The Monie Project*. UNICEF, pp. 93–108, 1999.
- [10] I. McCormick, "Women ' s Writing and Feminisms : an Introduction," 2016.
- [11] D. Barton and M. Hamilton, "Literacy Practices," in *Situated Literacies: Reading and writing in context*, 2000, pp. 7–15.
- [12] B. Simsek, "Using Digital Storytelling as a Change Agent for Women's Participation in the Turkish Public Sphere," Queensland University of Technology, 2012.
- [13] "The Oral Traditions of Africa." World Affairs Council of Houston, Houston, pp. 1–4, 2006.
- [14] J. B. Harris, *African and African-American Traditions in Language Arts*. 1985.