

Trauma and racism:
'the help' as
understood in print, in
film, and in scholarly
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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

' There is the South, then there is Mississippi.'

There is a method to madness in literature when talking about the racial prejudice bordering and grasping the context of American history. Black prejudice and ill-treatment date back to a long time in American history and further studies show how these atrocities have formed a vicious circle in the coming generations. Through this paper we bring forward the themes underlying mental illness, faced as a consequence of racial prejudice and the changing American scene in the 1960s- trauma and the sparks of feminism. While the major emphasis focuses on the trauma faced by the characters, we discuss in details the onset and the effects of it in depth. Trauma can be explained as a type of damage to the mind or the body that occurs due to a result of a gravely distressing incident. Trauma is usually the result of an onset of an overwhelming amount of stress which can exceed one's capability to cope or integrate and assimilate their emotions and memories after being involved in that experience. Trauma can be short-lived or as a result of a repetitive force having its toll on an individual or community for weeks, years, decades or even centuries. The reason we have chosen trauma as a form of mental illness or it being a severe harm to the mental health of an individual is because the effects of trauma cannot easily wear-off our memories. Mental illness also refers to a wide range of mental health conditions or disorders which affect our mood, thinking or behavior. It stays attached in our minds or on our bodies as a representation of torture and brutality. It affects the way we look, interpret, behave in life and how post the trauma our actions reveal a reason or our insecurities increase ten-fold. We have chosen the binaries of trauma- physical and emotional trauma and

how it was found central to each character suffering it in the novel and the movie alike.

The book and its major motion picture film focus on the time period set in the 1960s, when the United States was in the grip of the Civil Rights Movement. Deon J. Tones in his article on newamerica.org on the racial struggle in Mississippi wrote: " Racism is principally about domination and control. Hate and fear are used as tools to create an emotional justification for separation and exclusion. In the home, schools, and churches, white children from earliest childhood are subjected to attitudes from white adults designed to instill a belief in the axiom of Dred Scott that African-Americans are inherently inferior to whites and have no rights which whites are bound to respect. Racism means training white children from an early age, at school and at home, that " white skin privileges a way of life." The Help involves substantial dynamism in societal relations that surround the characters. The very first aspect of our study is the theme of trauma. In Gretchen Gusich's article on " A Phenomenology Of Emotional Trauma: Around And About The Things Themselves", states: " In trauma, whether time seems to be slowed or speeding, what accounts for strangeness of our experience of it is the directedness of all of our intentional acts towards aspects of one and the same object may be". Through her article she further analyses the first essential feature of trauma which is the disbelief that pervades traumatic experience. When traumatized, we cannot believe that the traumatic event has taken place. This is because we will something that is in the past, but to believe that it did not happens so as to shield ourselves from our painful emotional response to it. The second essential feature of

trauma is our inability to distinctly, categorically intuit the central state of affairs around which our trauma revolves. The traumatic situation is literally unthinkable by us, for it is incongruent with both our expectations regarding the subject of the trauma and our horizon of sense more generally. The third essential feature of trauma is the temporal disorientation that it brings. Such disorientation arises from our prolonged and single minded attention to an increasingly complex categorical object: the traumatic situation. Trauma has been disclosed in terms of two binaries- the emotional and the physical trauma. These terminologies can be further dissected into its presence in each character in some or the other way.

The very first observation is the physical trauma. It is the benefactor or the leader to emotional trauma. Physical trauma includes the history of physical and sexual abuse on the African American slave workers, which can be looked upon as a genetic vicious cycle by the hands of the 'superior white force', as they liked to address themselves. The book brings out physical trauma in children as well as adults. Mae Mobley, a child of three, and Elizabeth's daughter suffers physical trauma at the hands of her mother. Early abuse in children leads to deep-rooted psychological barriers in later life. A sort of one-sided justification to an unsolvable problem is seen here. The reason for May Mobley's abuse lies in the fact that her mother doesn't find her own daughter beautiful and fears how her daughter will not grow up to become a beauty queen and wouldn't gain acceptance in the society. This entitles the questioning of the purity of a mother's love. Is this a hyped statement or do we oversee the downsides of a mother's love and the attention requirements of her child. Do we as a reading audience find any

source of justification in Elizabeth's blaming on her own child, who is not responsible for the consequences her physical appearance bears. It was the age of materialization in all human attributes. Rebecca Aanerud in her article "The Legacy of White Supremacy and the Challenge of White Antiracist Mothering" states that: "both white women mothering their sons and daughters of color and mothers of color mothering their own children have theorized the maternal experience in the context of racism.... There is a clear connection between maternal empowerment and the ability to build healthy strong identities in children". Aanerud's project is to develop an account of white antiracist mothering, using a model of maternal duty to raise anti-racist white children. Beauty was seen as a key sentiment to associate with femininity, whose fragments are still felt in our modern day society.

Beauty, as defined by the whites against colored was something which was possessed only by the superior genes. The downsides of Euro-centrism and the attachment of physical beauty with color was witnessed in third world colonies as well. Meibom addresses this issue in his publication "From A Novel To The Exploration Of Social Issues-The Help By Kathryn Stockett ": "In addition, during the 1960s, mothers were meant to transmit the standard social roles to their daughters, and therefore teach them and prepare them for marriage and life as a wife and mother." The book also brings in to light the onset societal framework in Mississippi, where marriage, prospects and looks were what decided feminine modesty. The non-materialistic attributes of knowledge and education, were not given trivial importance. Eugenia 'Skeeter' had a lanky and pale appearance, making it hard for her to find

suitors, adding to her mother's worry, whereas her best friends were already settled and had children, which in terms of a neo-modern society gave out the norms of perfection. Skeeter was different from the other white folks, as she still held her mammy or her Constantine in the highest regards. There comes a point where the children's "blindness towards racism" start coming to an end, marking the beginning of the part where they grow up to become just like their parents. But on the other side physical trauma for the black community came as physical abuse, torture, slavery, and submission to the white community as well as to the black male community. In the case of Minnie Jackson, she was physically abused and tortured by her own husband. Meibom in his publication also states: "Patriarchy, backed by religion, had been the norm throughout history and it was taken for granted that men were stronger than women, and therefore the husband and father controlled the family. Between 1965 and 1966, 46% of all crimes against women took place at home, and until the 1970s rape was only considered a crime if the offender was not a spouse. Furthermore, domestic violence was treated as "a family problem rather than a criminal matter" and the murder of wives by their husbands was barely acknowledged by society. The extent of torture for Minny was so high that, she is only safe from the beating while pregnant, as she says herself: "Because that's the only thing that saved me, this baby in my belly." The main reason for her inability to fight back is the fear of him leaving her and the children, and by doing so leaving them, with barely any financial support. However, Minny is deeply ashamed of herself and as she puts it: "I know it makes no sense and I get so mad at myself for being so weak! How can I love a man who beats me raw?" (413). She was traumatized and scared not just for herself but also for her children, as she explains it, "<https://assignbuster.com/trauma-and-racism-the-help-as-understood-in-print-in-film-and-in-scholarly-sources/>

He throw the kids in the yard and lock me in the bathroom and say he gone light the house on fire with me locked inside!" (Pg 437), in a dramatic statement of how physically helpless she feels.

The next trauma is the emotional trauma, a key element playing a role in almost every character's evolution in the novel. Starting with the leads themselves, Skeeter had a tough childhood growing up. Her mother adorned the glamorous ways and was a former pageant winner. Skeeter, unfortunately did not inherit the genes to take it forward in the world of glamour, but what she was gifted with was a massive potential of writing and a clear conscience, which were polished to perfection by their maid Constantine. Skeeter does not care for fashion or looks, nor is her only wish in life to find a husband and settle down, which separates her from the other girls of Jackson and deeply aggravates her mother. Moreover, Mrs. Phelan does not wish for her daughter to become a writer or a journalist, as shown when Skeeter says, " I'll never be able to tell Mother I want to be a writer. She'll only turn it into yet another thing that separates me from the married girls." (56). Furthermore, Skeeter is a very outspoken and honest woman, as she is the only white woman to consider doing something to help the colored situation. Indeed, she directly confronts her best friend Hilly Holbrook and the white society by telling them what she believes about their behavior towards the help which leads to the revelation for the readers to understand Skeeter's obsession with her curiosity regarding the sudden disappearance of Constantine. Mae Mobley and Skeeter bear resemblance in a lot of ways. Their set of similarities, have their own tragic endings. Mae Mobley is only three when Aibileen leaves their house, one can guarantee the maternal

bond which she lacked in getting from Elizabeth, was fulfilled by Aibileen. We can see the strong bond between the two when Mae Mobley says: "Aibee, you're my real mama" (284). The underlying conflicts and trauma brings us to the next point of discussion- the mother-daughter relationship portrayed in the novel.

In Lucy Rose Fischer's "Transitions in the Mother-Daughter Relationship" "Under the influence of a woman's becoming a mother herself, an identification with her own mother may be revived, against which she had striven up till the time of her marriage" Aanerud adds in her work - Patricia Hill Collins who has offered a different set of maternal practices. She observed that much of the work on mothering in the USA feminist theory has positioned the experiences of white middle class women as standard. Collins argues that "identity is the final activity of mother work." She observed that mothers of color must work to build positive and meaningful identities for their children within a larger social context that denigrates people of color. This work involves a complicated dialectic of surviving oppressive structures that work to demean subordinated identity and somehow build self-esteem. In the novel itself, Minnie tries to create a good and a positive outlook for Sugar and giving it her best to ensure she has a secure education. Household situations leads to Sugar looking for work, which is similar to what happened to Minnie as a girl. Hence a genetic vicious cycle has been created. The mother tries her best to ensure the child does not entail the same fate as she suffered, but the question is, it is not the tempting fate no more, in a land which resides in the Jim Crow Laws. In Kei Nomaguchi and Amanda N. House's article on "Racial-ethnic disparities in maternal

parenting stress: the role of structural disadvantages and parenting values”, they comment that: “ Black mothers have more authoritarian parenting values than white mothers, as black mothers are more likely than white mothers to expect obedience and respect from their children, provide more strict rules, and use physical discipline (Chao and Kanatsu 2008; Dixon et al. 2008; Gershoff et al. 2012; Slade and Wissow 2004). Because of more structural disadvantages and authoritarian parenting values, we expect that black mothers report more parenting stress than white mothers” We witness material affection as a bond through Hilly’s relationship with her mother. The only reason her mother stays along with her is because she has the best maid in town with her, however, the minute she fires Minnie, her mother is sent to a nursing home, showing the faulted ties in white mothers and daughters.

Comparing this to Minnie’s situation, there is a true bond between her and Sugar as she is genuinely concerned for her, and the love between them does not have side implications or explanations, there is no materialistic bond that unites the two. Sara Ruddick’s book *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989) identifies a specific standpoint arising out of maternal practices that serves as the foundation for a feminist peace politics. She referred to the kind of thinking that arises from maternal practice as ‘ maternal thinking’. Ruddick identified three maternal practices that she felt were universal by virtue to the fact that they are responses to a ‘ biological child in a particular social world’. While the particular social world may vary, the biological child makes certain universal demands; the

responses to those demands constitute maternal practice {or nurturance} and social acceptance {or training}.

Works Cited

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