

## **THE DEMARGINALIZATION OF FEMALE DISCOURSES: ON THE INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATIONS AGAINST WOMEN IN THE HELP**

**HUNG-CHANG LIAO<sup>1</sup>, YA-HUEI WANG<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup> CHUNG SHAN MEDICAL UNIVERSITY

### **Abstract**

*This paper aimed to examine the unfair treatment and inequality among women by using and assessing the racial, class, and gender perspectives. It also demonstrated the intersectional discrimination against women, and how it brought the oppression and subordination of women in the private and public spheres, which can be characterized as violations of basic human rights and obstacles to the attainment of women's equality, development, and integrity. In order to further demonstrate the intersectional discrimination against women, the researchers took *The Help* as a case study to compare various oppressive situations of White middle-class and African-American women and depict how the multiple and overlapped forms of oppression and structural discrimination should be taken into consideration to address the intersectional discriminations against women, particularly African American women. This study adopted latent-content analysis, including primary and secondary resources, as a qualitative method to facilitate analysis of underlying content. The study further concentrated on the diverse perspectives of women to observe various forms of discrimination and examine how the intersectionality of race, class, and gender affects their experiences and conditions of being discriminated. While reflecting upon the discrimination and oppression of the underprivileged genders, races and social classes, readers may manage to deconstruct the "intersectionality" and better empathize with those who are marginalized.*

**Keywords:** *Intersectionality, Intersectional Discrimination, Feminism, White*

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) that was ratified on December 10, 1948, all men “are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” All men are born “with reason and conscience” and should treat each other as brothers and sisters (United Nations, 1948, Article 1). To underscore the importance of equality and non-discrimination as the foundation of human rights, Human Rights Day is celebrated annually on December 10<sup>th</sup>, thereby declaring that freedom and equality are the core of human rights and are not subject to discrimination. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) declares freedom, equality, and non-discrimination for all, various forms of discrimination still exist, such as discrimination against women, the disabled, minorities, and people of color.

African American women have been discriminated against in terms of racism, classism, and sexism. For instance, they received unfair treatments in public facilities, where they were discriminated based on their skin color. In order to separate Whites and non-Whites, the public facilities were labeled as “pure white” or “colored” in libraries, restrooms, public transportation, and other facilities (Ware, 2013). With gender racism, societies have demeaned and belittled women of color, including African American women (hooks, 1982). Hence, it is necessary to take actions against racism, sexism, and classism. Since Whites are seen as the superior race, White supremacy leads to the oppression of Blacks and other minorities. Furthermore, when a nation is built on a system that is sustained by sexism, racism, and White privilege, it can lead to multiple oppressions of women with different skin colors. In other words, it presents the intersectional discrimination against these women (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). Hence, the subordinate status and discrimination against women are not only based on their gender status but also on their intersectional interaction with class, race, ethnicity, disability, or even sexual orientation (Fredman, 2016).

The early feminist movement was mainly led by White middle-class women, who viewed women as a homogenous group facing similar forms of oppression. However, they did not experience the same level of oppression as women who were non-White, poor, or belonged to the lower social class. Therefore, to understand how various types of discrimination were faced by these women, it is imperative to consider the intersectionality of discrimination from the overlapping layers of race, gender, and class, which form a unique interlocking matrix of oppression against African American women (Collins, 2009). The intersectional discrimination indicates that differences among people, such as sex, gender, race, class, or even ethnicity, may become oppressive measures against women, especially African American women, and alter these women’s life experiences in social systems, which have been established in favor of White supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism.

In order to let readers acquire a clear idea to understand how women can be intersectionally discriminated, this study intended to take *The Help* (Stockett, 2011; Taylor, 2011) as a case study to examine the multiple and overlapping layers of oppression and discrimination in terms of gender, race and class experienced by women in 1960s.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research was to examine the unfair treatment and inequality among African women or women, using the racial, class, and gender perspectives. As seen in Figure 1, it further aimed to demonstrate how the intersectional discrimination against them led to oppression and subordination in the private and public patriarchy. In order to further illustrate the intersectional discrimination against women, the researchers employed *The Help* (Stockett, 2011; Taylor, 2011) as a case study to compare various oppressive scenarios of White middle-class and African American women and demonstrate how the multiple and overlapped forms of oppression and structural discrimination should be taken into consideration to address the intersectional discriminations against women, especially those belonging to the African American race.

The researchers employed latent-content analysis, including primary and secondary resources, as a qualitative method to facilitate analysis of underlying content (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Creswell, 2000). Following a content analysis of the film and the script of *The Help* (Stockett, 2011; Taylor, 2011), the researchers conducted a literature review on female domestic workers, sexism, gender racism, White supremacy, and intersectional discrimination to examine how Black women were constrained to meet the expectations. The research further concentrated on the diverse female perspectives, taking into account the discourses of White middle-class and African American women, to see through the various forms of discrimination and examine how the intersectionality of race, class, and gender influenced their experiences and predicaments of being discriminated in order to better empathize with and deconstruct the “intersectionality” of discrimination and oppression of the underprivileged gender, races and social classes.

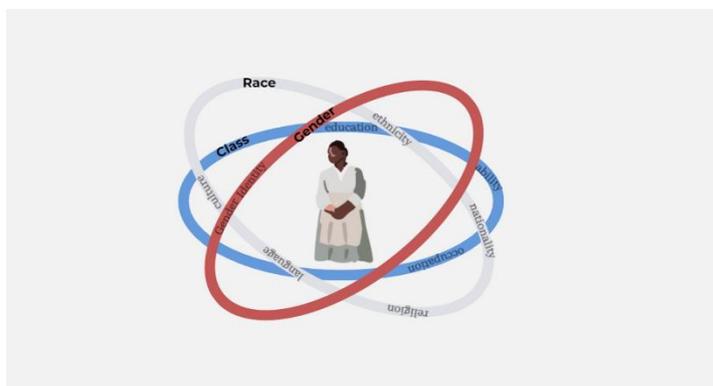


Figure 1. Intersectional discrimination against Black women

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### **Intersectionality and White Privilege in *The Help***

Crenshaw (1989) first used the term “intersectionality” to theoretically analyze how racism, sexism, and classism can be overlapped and intersected and hence lead to discrimination against certain individuals and groups. Intersectionality refuses to examine each axis of oppression in isolation in an analytical system but instead uses the term intersectionality to represent how race, class, gender, and other systems can intersectionally work together to oppress certain groups while privileging others. For example, as shown in the framework in Figure 1, the discrimination against African American women is not simply a combination of sexism and racism, but rather a more complex and intersectional discrimination phenomenon (Crenshaw, 1989 & 1991).

Crenshaw (1989) further emphasized that racism in workplace excludes African American women in different ways from African American men, and gender discrimination in workplace also excludes African American women in different ways from White women. Likewise, the identities and forms of oppression experienced by African American women in social contexts bear similarities and differences with those of African American men. Their identities and oppression are also somehow similar and different from those of White women. As presented by Uwujaren (2015), an analytic framework to better understand the interaction between gender, race, and class, as well as an intersection can be applied to all social justice work to understand those suffering from discrimination in an interlocking oppression and marginalization in terms of sexism, racism, and classism.

During the 1960s in Mississippi, Black domestic workers encountered unfair treatment in several families. Stockett’s novel *The Help* (2011) was set during the civil rights movement in Jackson, Mississippi in 1962, when racial discrimination was still rampant, with Whites hiring Blacks as house help for chores and farming. In that period, segregationist policies even forbade Blacks to use Whites’ toilets.

Eugenia “Skeeter” Phelan, a 23-year-old White girl, was brought up by an African American maid named Constantine. Skeeter always treated Constantine like a family member. While returning home from college, Skeeter found that Constantine had left without saying goodbye, and no one was willing to tell her what happened or where she was. She later found that African American maids who raised children for White people often received unequal and impolite treatment; her friends often treated her Black maids in an arrogant and even abusive way. Her friend, Hilly, had even drafted a sanitation plan to build a separate toilet for the maids due to the fear of any virus carried by African American women. Feeling aggrieved by this, Skeeter reflected upon the discrimination against Black maids in American society and decided to take

on the task of writing a book to portray how African American women, represented by Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, suffered from intersectional oppressions resulting from a combination of gender, racial, class, and other discriminations.

Racism can be defined as an established belief, i.e., an ideology that asserts the superiority of one racial or social group over others, with the aim of dominating and marginalizing those groups (Neville *et al.*, 2001). Due to the color of their skin, African Americans are particularly vulnerable to racial prejudice. Wijeyasingh *et al.* (1997) found that in the United States, a systematic subordination existed between certain target racial groups with comparatively little social power, while certain racial group (Whites) carried more social power. This subjugation was enforced by cultural mechanisms and social institutionalization. White privilege is a social privilege in some societies that favor Whites over non-Whites, especially in the same social, political, and economic scenarios (Wijeyasingh, *et al.*, 1997).

It can be said that the concept of White privilege centers on the benefits that White individuals derive from their social standing as well as on the disadvantages that non-White individuals encounter. McIntosh (2003), a White person, declared that racism is seen as something that puts others at a disadvantage. He further stated that there is a pattern that runs through the matrix of White privilege as the major cultural terrain, where White people can feel free to despise, ignore, neglect, and even criticize those outside of the main cultural form. As seen in *The Help* (Stockett, 2011; Taylor, 2011), which is set in the 1960s in Mississippi, USA, Miss Hilly gave an unapologetic statement in front of the guests about her feelings toward Black people, stating that “99% of all colored diseases are carried in the urine,” and “Whites can become permanently disabled by nearly all of these diseases because we lack immunities coloreds carry in their darker pigmentation” (Stockett, 2011, p. 184). Although these statements may now seem absurd, in the period of 1960s, it was considered a common thought. It was said that Blacks were born with germs, and those germs could be passed on to Whites who were defenseless; hence, “separate but equal” had to be taken as a measure to isolate the Blacks from the Whites. Under the “separate but equal” policy, the Blacks could not visit the same church, hospital, school, or store as White people (Ware, 2013). Even while purchasing commodities, Black people were required to take them out of different windows. Moreover, Blacks were only allowed to sit in the back of the bus (Lhamon, 2003; Kennedy, 1990).

The segregation policy even prohibited Blacks from using White toilets. In *The Help* (Stockett, 2011; Taylor, 2011), the segregation practice of Blacks by Whites is represented by the provision of separate toilets for Black maids. Born into a wealthy, upper-class, White family, Miss Hilly, leading with White supremacy, highly discriminated against Black women helpers. To enforce complete segregation, she drafted a sanitation plan and suggested building a new toilet

for the helpers, fearing that the Blacks carried viruses. Miss Leefolt prohibited her daughter Mae Mobley from using the same toilets as the maids, saying that Black maids are “dirty, diseased” (Stockett, 2011, p. 111). After saying that “nobody wants to sit down on a toilet seat they have to share with them,” Hilly even sarcastically asked an African American maid, “Aibileen, you like having your own toilet, don’t you?” (p. 218). Moreover, with no empathy, she fired her maid Minny as she had used the master’s toilet rather than stepping outside to use the Black maid’s exclusive toilet in a storm. Hence, ironically, the racial “charity activities” for children in faraway Africa, initiated by the White-privileged society, became a sarcastic hypocrisy. In reality, these White-privileged, middle-class women harshly treated their Black helpers. For them, charity fund-raising was only a means to build a good image of themselves; they had no intention to help improve the social structure of racial oppression.

Therefore, Hilly, a White-privileged woman, felt free to criticize Black maids and proposed a Home Help Sanitation Initiative “that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the colored help. I’ve even notified the surgeon general of Mississippi to see if he’ll endorse the idea. I pass” (p. 10). Evidently, when these White people viewed themselves as the superior race, it led to the oppression of Black people and other minorities.

### **Intersectionality of Racism and Classism**

Although the United States liberated the Black people following the Civil War, when the northern army withdrew from the South, the Black people were once again reduced to a discriminated group due to their educational and economic disadvantages. After the Civil War, Black mothers were gradually able to regain their personal and reproductive freedom as the average number of babies born was reduced from the previous seven to four. Furthermore, they no longer feared that their babies would be sold off, and their family relations were more stable than before (Rodgers-Rose, 1980). However, the liberated Blacks remained at the bottom of the socioeconomic and political layers, enduring limited autonomy and a great deal of racial discrimination. Moreover, due to the precarious employment and low pay of Black men, Black women were required to find employment to support or supplement the family income.

Being racially discriminated, Black Americans were assigned jobs that were indubitably racist, as was their forced separation from White people. African Americans women took on the job of being a maid in White households, which was inherited from their parents, as shown in *The Help*:

Woman: Did you know as a girl, growing up, that one day *you’d* be a maid?

Aibileen: Yes, ma’am. I did.

Woman: And you knew that because?

Aibileen: My momma was a maid. My grandmomma was a house slave.

Woman: A...house...slave. (Taylor, 2011, p. 2)

Aibileen knew that under White privilege, her Blackness was the cause of her discrimination and suffering, as Mae Mobly, a girl she raised, asked her: “How come you’re colored, Aibileen?” (Stockett, 2011, p. 461). Under racism, although the Blacks were free from slavery, they still had a low status in the society and could only engage in labor-based work, often living without dignity for survival. In addition to their Blackness, poverty, and lower social status, these African American maids also experienced classism.

Classism, also known as class discrimination, refers to discrimination against people on the basis of wealth, social status, property, level of knowledge, and job segregation (Kadi, 1996). It involves the systematic oppression of subordinate class groups with the aim of gaining advantages and strengthening the values of the dominant class group. Although some African American mothers tried to live up to this social standard, the harsh reality crushed their dreams of following the White homemaking trend. Following the end of slavery in the United States, African American men faced difficulty in finding jobs and were easily unemployed. However, it was easier for African American women to find low-skilled, lower-paying jobs, such as being housekeepers, maids, etc. Compared to Black men, Black women had relatively abundant job opportunities (Landry, 2000). Furthermore, the Negro Code enacted after the Civil War stipulated that African American women and children were required to stay on the plantations to work, and Black women who stayed at home were regarded as “idle” or “pretending to be ladies” (Landry, 2000). Consequently, family economic difficulties and parenting burdens caused by racial and class oppression pushed them into the ranks of the labor force.

The intersectionality of racism and classism in the White community was exemplified by the fact that being a maid was the major job opportunity available to African American women. They were responsible for cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and raising children of White families, while being paid less salary. Due to racial discrimination, these African American women were not provided the opportunity to receive a good and equal education, leading them to move into the lower classes and be further discriminated. Being a maid was a sign of African American women’s status as being female and poor, who must endure a White society that would never be welcoming. Thus, the overlapped intersection of racism, classism, as well as sexism, caused a great deal of suffering for these African American women working for White families in 1960s. They were aware of their low status; hence, as maids, they endured abuse and sarcasm from their White masters in order to earn money. In *The Help*, Aibileen was mistreated by her

master Miss Leefolt and other White housewives. Miss Leefolt's friend, Hilly, called Aibileen "dirty," as she said, "Get me a new plate. One you haven't soiled with your dirty cloth" (Stockett, 2011, p. 503). Further, Hilly turned to Miss Leefolt, sarcastically saying, "You can't even *teach* these people how to be clean" (p. 503). Moreover, White people's prejudice against African Americans caused them to never trust their maids. Despite the fact that these maids were honest, White housewives still had a habit of making excuses of blaming at or even accusing their Black maids.

Hilly: Aibileen, the silver I lent Elizabeth last week.

Aibileen: It not polished good? Humidity been fighting me on polishing day.

Hilly: When you returned it, three pieces were missing from the per. A fork  
and two spoons.

[...]

Aibileen: I ain't got no silver.

Elizabeth: She says she doesn't have them.

Hilly: Then it behooves me to inform you that you are fired, Aibileen. And  
I'll be calling the police.

[...]

Aibileen: I didn't steal no silver.

Hilly: Maybe I can't send you to jail for what you wrote, but I can send you  
for being a thief.

[...]

Hilly: Call the police, Elizabeth. (Taylor, 2011, p. 139-141)

Seeking revenge for the anonymous publication of *The Help*, a book widely known in Jackson's Black and White communities, Hilly maliciously accused Aibileen of stealing a silver fork and two silver spoons. Due to their Blackness, poverty, and gender, African American maids in *The Help* needed to tolerate their White masters' unreasonable abuse and sarcasm. They were forced to confront with challenges and difficulties due to their identity as Black. Moreover, due to their Blackness, they were categorized as inferior and referred to as "others," which means that they were not welcome in American society and were not considered as respectable individuals because of their skin color and inferiority.

Minnie Jackson was another character who endured harsh conditions as a maid. At the age of 14, she dropped out of school to help her mother, who also worked as a helper. Based on her own experience working as a maid, Minny's mother gave her some guidelines to follow in her maid employment, with the first rule being "White people are not your friends" (Stockett, 2011,

p. 46). This rule was meant to remind Black women that they can never be friends to White people. “Don’t you *ever* let that White Lady find you sitting on her toilet” was the second rule (p. 46). Other rules included not sharing the same plate, fork, and cup, storing their utensils in a separate cupboard, eating in the kitchen, and no swearing. On the one hand, these rules protected the Black maids from abuse and punishment, while on the other hand, these rules emphasized the segregation of Black maids by the Whites.

### **Intersectionality of Racism and Sexism**

In the perspective of a postcolonial feminist, the experiences of mainstream or White women should not be equated with those of minority or non-White women. Although women are oppressed by patriarchal societies, the gender experiences of women in various regions vary inevitably according to their differences in class and ethnic differences (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992). African American women, for example, suffer from ethnic oppression by White people and gender-unequal treatment by patriarchal society, subjected to both racism and sexism (Sidanius & Veniegas, 2000).

Although the women’s liberation movement had begun in the 1920s, the society still did not encourage girls to continue their education after graduating from high school and hoped for these girls to get married soon (Bullock, 1999). During the 1960s in the United States, most middle-class southern White girls chose to get married after graduating from high school and participate in social activities, hiring a Black maid to take care of the household. For them, the greatest achievement in life was to find a rich and handsome husband. “What do you want to do?” “What are your future ambitions?” and “Who do you hope to be?” These questions were not considered as important as finding a good husband for the White girls in the 1960s. This can be seen from Skeeter’s conversation with her mother, which was the trend of that era. As a girl who had just graduated from the University of Mississippi, Skeeter successfully found a job as a columnist in the *Jackson Journal*. Though Skeeter was well educated and dreamed of becoming a great writer, her conservative mother, believing that the most reliable destination for a woman was a good marriage, demanded Skeeter to marry and submit herself to the traditional marital concept of “women should get married.” Being single, Skeeter, though knowledgeable, was ostracized and even bullied because she was not yet married, as if she was “unsellable” in the marriage market.

Although these White women were getting married and had Black maids that took care of their families, they still had to make rules within the framework set by the patriarchal society. As women, they could not empathize with African American women. Ironically, they advocated for charity and donated money to starving children in Africa but turned a blind eye to the Black maids

who were being oppressed by them. They asserted equality for all and built separate toilets for Black maids. In fact, with prejudice and White supremacy, they discriminated against African American women as they were in control of the job opportunities for the Black maids. These White middle-class women further oppressed them, spreading rumors so that the Black maids that they disliked could not be hired or were sent to jail.

Generally, people are divided into males or females based on gender, which determines one's position in the household and the society (Cook & Cusack, 2010). It is clear that African American men also experience racism; however, it varies from the way in which African American women endure double the suffering from White people and their Black partners. The institutionalization of male dominance known as patriarchy drives men of all races and social classes to assert their masculinity through physical violence and coercion against others, including women and children (Inhorn, 1996). Hence, in *The Help*, the ruthlessness of White people and the cruelty of African American men made the lives of African American women unbearable. The domestic violence encountered by these women was caused by the male dominance in Black society, giving more power to men and thus making their women experience not only racism but also sexism and classism.

Therefore, it is clear that African Americans are being marginalized in the social network as a result of the intersection of their race and gender, multiple identities, and intersectional identities, leading them to live in an inferior social position. In *The Help*, it can be seen that girls were first asked to drop out of school due to financial constraints. Instead of going to school, African American girls began working as maids in order to help their families. For instance, Aibileen, an African American woman working for Miss Leefolt, was one of those who dropped out of school and worked as a maid. However, while making sacrifice for families, African American women, as Blacks and females, suffered from racism, sexism and family violence. For decades, African American men, as fathers, husbands, or even brothers, had abused African American women simply because they were women and were considered subordinate and inferior to them. In a segregated society, African American men experienced discrimination, and with humiliation, they carried their anger and bitterness and held their wives and children accountable. However, African American women suffered from racism in a much greater extent within and outside of their communities. Hooks (1982) stated that although African American men were not in positions that allow for institutional patriarchy and control over the lives of their women as White men, based on the power they gain from the patriarchy, they still hold significant power over African American women. Hence, in the intersection between racism and sexism, African American women suffer from discrimination to a greater extent as they are neither merely Black nor White. This intersection of sexism and racism made their situation worse.

For instance, in *The Help*, as an African American and a female, Minny had to encounter several obstacles and difficulties in her life. She not only had to be subjected to racism by Whites, but also to sexism due to her gender. In addition to racism, Minny was also abused, physically and emotionally, by her husband, Leroy:

But they don't know what a pathetic mess I turn into when Leroy's beating on me. I'm afraid to hit back. I'm afraid he'll leave me if I do. 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? Why do I love a fool drinker? (Stockett, 2011, p. 485)

As an African American woman, Minny had to work to financially support her husband, Leroy, but also had to endure abuse at his hands. As a woman, under the social ideology of patriarchy (Wallby, 1990), Minny had been dictated to show respect to her husband and accept her inferiority. She could never rebel or fight back due to the power her husband had got from the patriarchy (Beauvoir, 1953). Even though she questioned this power, she found herself too weak to fight against the patriarchal system, thus having no choice but to endure her husband's abuse and violence. Hence, it turned out that as a mother of five, Minny was often brutally beaten by her husband. Minny, in this regard, remembered Leroy's actions when he was fired:

"Shoot. He strut around the kitchen like a plumed rooster cause he in front a the kids," I say. "Act like he the only one supporting the family and I'm just doing this to keep my poor self entertained. Later on though, we in bed and I thought my big old bull for a husband gone cry." (Stockett, 2011, p. 53).

Being an African female, Minny was oppressed by her family when she was a daughter and later by her husband when she became a wife. As a Black female, Minny's childhood differed from the childhood of White women.

Gender discrimination cannot be analyzed independently without contextualization, but is rather analyzed in a specific social, political, economic, and cultural context. For African American women, their gender oppression is intertwined with other social inequalities. As Tong (2009) asserted, to realize gender discrimination, it is essential to identify how gender oppression is intertwined with other social inequalities to produce a unique female experience and avoid the prejudices that come with ethnocentrism in order to realize that there are White and non-White women, and that there is ethnocentrism in feminist discourse.

### **Intersectionality of Racism, Sexism, and Classism**

An intersectional perspective can effectively look into the subordinate status of African American women to realize the phenomenon of intersectionality, considering that women's subordination is impacted not just by their gender identity but also by the manner in which their

gender identity intersects with other facets of their identity, such as race, class, social status, etc., with which the intersectional oppression and discrimination have accumulated over time. Hence, to realize these women's oppression, the multiple forms of oppression and structural discrimination should be taken into consideration to figure out measures to address the female discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). For instance, a young African American girl was discriminated in a labor market not only because of her identity as a female but also because of her age, in the thought that being a young girl, she may get pregnant soon and quit. Moreover, besides her gender and age, she was also discriminated against due to her skin color. Therefore, it is impossible to understand this situation only in terms of her gender because a variety of overlapped discrimination caused by a combination of factors, including age, gender, race, and ethnicity, formed an intersectional discrimination against this young Black girl. This means that this discrimination cannot be interpreted with a single aspect. The young Black girl shared her experiences of discrimination with youth, where she was perceived as inexperienced and incompetent, had a connection with other women in terms of fitting into a traditional gender stereotype, and shared experiences with all Blacks in terms of being considered an outsider. It is a certain intersection of and interconnection with all of these factors that makes the discrimination against this young Black girl different from others.

Black feminists have used the concept of multiple and overlapping oppressions of racism, classism, and sexism to flip the White feminist discourse of gender exclusivity. The Eurocentric concept of dichotomy necessarily distinguishes between the good and the bad. For example, gender is dichotomous as a person must first be classified as male or female before men are considered superior, while women, conversely, are defined as inferior (Collins, 1990). Under this dichotomy, racial oppression and gender inequality appear to be two separate and distinct systems. Many second-wave feminists believe that patriarchy is the greatest source of oppression for women. However, a huge gap exists between the experiences of Black feminists and White feminists, as patriarchy is not the only source of oppression. For African American women, patriarchy was not the primary source of oppression during the history of slavery. While White feminists tend to view racial and class discrimination as unrelated to gender, or to account for gender relations solely in terms of racial or class oppression, Collins (1990) declared that the multiple oppression systems of racism, classism, and sexism that coexist and interact with each other form an interlocking system of oppression. Collins (1990) further presented a matrix of oppression, suggesting that African American women were subjected to racial, class, and gender-based oppression on several levels. The concept of multiple oppressions coexisting simultaneously breaks through the quandary of white feminist thought. If racism, classism, and sexism are considered to be not as independently operating but interlocking systems, African

American women can think about the intersectional oppression they experience (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, if employment policies, designed to promote the rights of the disadvantaged, protect women, they will promote the employment of White women. Similarly, if these policies protect Black people, they will promote the employment of Black men. Hence, Black women will never receive any of the benefits of the employment policies. However, intersectionality challenges the conceptual flaws of both feminism and racial oppression (Crenshaw, 1989).

In discussing intersectionality, Black feminists assert that various forms of oppression coexist and investigate the way in which these oppressions interact with one another to create greater oppression. For instance, in the context of racial oppression, African American women are subject to both external racial oppression and internal gender oppression, which interact with each other to create the multiple, overlapping, and intersectional oppressions experienced by Black women. Black feminist perspectives on multiple oppressions and intersectionality are particularly well suited for exploring social inequalities, the context in which they are situated, the workings of power relations, the emphasis on simultaneous oppressions, and the understanding of the complexity of their surrounding actions in order to capture the spirit of intersectionality analysis (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

In the 1960s, the governments of the southern states still enacted various forms of racial discrimination laws. Hence, to earn bread, Black women, as shown in *The Help*, had no choice but to work as maids in White families because of their economic disadvantages (King, 1988). When the White middle-class women were too busy playing poker to pay love and attention to the children, the Black maids took care of and understood the needs of the White children. White children were brought up by Black maids, who were more like their mothers to them than their biological mothers. However, Whites had prejudice against those with different races, genders, and social statuses. Even if these Black women had sacrificed their lives to take care of White women's children instead of their own children, they faced discrimination not only from their hosts but also from the children they brought up. When White children grew up, they discriminated against these Black women working as domestic maids, thinking that Black people had terrible bacteria (Ware, 2013). Because of their intersecting racial and gender identities, African American women have been stigmatized by race-based sexual stereotypes. Therefore, an intersectional perspective can be effective in examining their subordination and thus recognizing the phenomenon of intersectionality, considering the fact that women's subordination is impacted not just by their gender identity but also the way in which their gender identity is intertwined with other aspects of their identity, such as race, class, and social status (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991).

Various aspects of identity and life experience are often interrelated and "intersectional," as African American women had experienced overlapping areas of discrimination or

disadvantage. *The Help* exposes the oppression of African American women through Aibileen and Minny by employing intersectionality to emphasize the complex, interrelated, and intersecting relationships between various forms of domination, involving, but not limited to, racism, classism, and sexism. Aibileen and Minny represent how African American women in Mississippi experienced racial discrimination during the 1960s. Furthermore, through the lens of intersectionality, it can be said that the interconnections between racism, sexism, and even classism interact with and reinforce each other, thereby causing African American women to experience various forms of discriminations and intersectional discrimination, which varied distinctly from White women and Black men (Gines, 2014). Hence, compared to White women and African American men, Black women have encountered more obstacles and difficulties in their lives.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The study applied intersectionality as a theoretical frame to analyze how racism, classism, and sexism in *The Help* overlapped to shape the intersectional discrimination in its contextualization. With African American women as the focus of the analysis, the study used *The Help* to expose the issues of racism, classism, and sexism encountered by these women in Jackson, Mississippi during the 1960s under the policy of segregation and discrimination against Blacks. This study assessed the experiences of African American women who worked as housemaids for White people and depicted the manner in which they were harshly abused due to the color of their skin. Moreover, as women and wives, they were subject to abuse and humiliation by their patriarchal husbands. While reflecting upon the discrimination and oppression of the underprivileged genders, races and social classes, readers may manage to deconstruct the “intersectionality” and better empathize with those who are marginalized.

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