

Solidarity Amidst Hardship: Female Animal Narratives in *The Help*

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Abstract. *The Help* tells the story of racial segregation in Jackson, Mississippi, in the early 1960s. In the novel, animals symbolize the marginalized existence of white and black women under male and racial oppression. White women are demeaned in marriage and the workplace, while black women face silence regarding bodily and linguistic rights. This paper, from a feminist and postcolonial perspective, integrates animal criticism to examine the portrayal of animals like cockroaches, bears, and dogs, illustrating the existential dilemma of these women and exploring ways to overcome these challenges. It argues that Stockett depicts both groups' discourses as ineffective under patriarchy and racism but also highlights the positive aspects of inter-female assistance across racial lines and the inevitable breakdown of racial segregation.

1 Introduction

The Help by Kathryn Stockett, first published in 2009, quickly became a New York Times bestseller and has been translated into 42 languages. Set in the early 1960s during the civil rights movement in the American South, the novel follows three women in Jackson, Mississippi: African American maids Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, and young white woman Skeeter Phelan. Despite their different backgrounds, they all endure oppressive treatment in a patriarchal, racially segregated society. Their collaboration on a book exposing the lives of Black maids highlights the social realities and the mutual support.

Although subtle, the animal elements in the novel significantly enhance thematic meanings. Through their symbolism, the plot, contrast between Black and white characters, and emotional resonance are deepened, allowing readers to engage more profoundly with the story. Ecocriticism, a literary theory that examines the relationships between literature and the natural world, has rapidly developed in the 21st century. Within this framework, animal criticism focuses on the depiction, symbolism, and treatment of animals in literature, highlighting how these works reflect human relationships with other beings.

American scholar Alan Bleakley, in his book *The Animalizing Imagination: Totemism, Textuality and Ecocriticism*, believes that the imagination of animals exists in three areas: as biological (literal), psychological (imaginal), and conceptual (semiotic, symbolic, textual) [1]. This tripartite framework helps to expand our understanding of animals beyond their physical characteristics and into the realms of human imagination and cultural symbolism.

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Ecocriticism, as a field, further explores these dimensions by considering “the wider ecology movement as a phenomenon to be studied within the discipline of cultural studies.” In this context, the notion of “animal”—especially within the animal rights and animal welfare movements—has become a central emblem of ecological awareness. Bleakley notes that “such totemic and textual animal rites then supplement the more familiar animal rights of the wider ecological movement” [1]. This article uses ecofeminist and postcolonial perspectives to explore the animal-like survival struggles of white and Black women in *The Help*. By examining animal symbolism, it reveals how the shared challenges and help of women in a patriarchal, racially segregated society.

2 White Women: White Rabbits in a Patriarchal Society

In 20th century American Southern society, white women were subject to clearly defined societal expectations, urging them to follow traditional roles, such as becoming dutiful wives and mothers responsible for family and social life.

2.1 Passive Role in Marriage

The Help depicts the daily lives of affluent white homemakers and young women in a small town, highlighting deep-rooted gender inequality despite their material privileges. Hilly Holbrook, a girl from impoverished Sugar Ditch, Mississippi, represents this oppression. Born into poverty and low social standing, she marries into the wealthier, conservative Johnny Holbrook family, leaving her feeling insignificant and anxious. This male-dominated dynamic is symbolized by the grizzly bear specimen in her home. Minny, while cleaning, is struck by the bear’s imposing presence, recalling, “I stop in the doorway and give that grizzly bear a good long stare. He’s seven feet tall and baring his teeth. His claws are long, curled, witchy-looking. At his feet lays a bone-handled hunting knife. I get closer and see his fur’s nappy with dust. There’s a cobweb between his jaws”[2]42. In human society, the strength and predatory spirit symbolized by the bear directly align with the central position of men in societal norms and their dominance in gender relationships. Introducing the grizzly bear specimen into the story, the author aims to highlight the central position of men in the novel through visual and symbolic techniques.

Under this oppression of male power, Hilly attempts to gain self-esteem and a sense of identity by playing the traditional female role to meet her husband’s expectations. She strives to cater to Johnny’s interests and preferences by preparing his favorite foods and participating in his beloved recreational activities. She tries to align herself with her husband in these aspects to strengthen their connection. Moreover, Hilly holds the view of procreation for men as a duty: “I mean, kids is the only thing worth living for.” She lowered her head, paused, then twisted and went downstairs. I follow behind, noticing how she holds the stair rail tight on the way down, like she’s afraid she might fall”[2]33. Under this perspective, she repeatedly becomes pregnant but unfortunately suffers three miscarriages. Marabel Morgan argues that in a male-dominated world, women view themselves as burgers to satisfy men’s insatiable desires: Like a burger, they might have to prepare themselves in various ways from time to time[3]. Women, objectified like burgers, lack agency and must be shaped to become consumable in a patriarchal world. Hilly’s character portrays a woman struggling for recognition, affection, and social standing in a male-dominated society.

Miss Skeeter also confronts challenges as an older unmarried woman. Miss Skeeter is independent, intelligent, and possesses her own thoughts and ambitions. However, to conform to the moral standards of the time, Skeeter is continuously set up on blind dates by her family and close friends, who also instruct her on the proper etiquette she must adhere to:

“And don’t forget to smile. Men don’t want a girl who’s moping around all night, and don’t sit like some squaw Indian, cross your ankles. Don’t you remember anything from Missus Rheimer’s etiquette class? And just go ahead and lie and tell him you go to church every Sunday, and whatever you do, do not crunch your ice at the table, it’s awful. Oh, and if the conversation starts to lag, you tell him about our second cousin who’s a city councilman in Kosciusko...”[2]170 Under continuous arrangements from her family and friends, Skeeter is forced to go on blind dates and must adhere to a series of stereotypical expectations regarding women’s behavior and appearance. Although she fantasizes about meeting Stuart for the first time, the reality of the Southern society becomes apparent when he returns a second time to apologize, leading Skeeter to recognize her situation. The disparity between Skeeter’s romantic fantasies and the harsh realities of Southern society underscores the pressures exerted by patriarchal norms on women’s choices and autonomy. As Skeeter grapples with these expectations, the presence of animals—particularly cats—begins to take on symbolic meaning, reflecting her evolving understanding of her constrained position. At this moment, the recurring appearance of cats serves as a metaphor. In the first encounter, when she is excited, she lies about hitting a cat with her car to hide her embarrassment: “I hit a cat” [2] 112. In the second encounter, she describes, “we sit on the bottom porch step. Silently, we watch our old cat Sherman sneak around a tree, his tail swaying, going after some creature we can’t see”[2]356. Cats serve as “absent referents” in terms of carnivorous behavior; similarly, women, like the cats, are the absent referents in male-dominated settings, becoming the dismembered, slaughtered, or consumable female figures[4]. The two cat images metaphorically represent women, revealing their humble status in the blind date and marriage market where they are devalued by themselves and others. Within this framework, feminist-animal criticism highlights how the recurring appearance of cats serves as a metaphor for Skeeter’s suppressed instincts and desires. In her first encounter with Stuart, her fabricated story of hitting a cat mirrors her need to conceal vulnerability, while in the second encounter, the image of the old cat hunting unseen prey reflects her growing awareness of the unseen forces—both societal and personal—that control her fate. These moments deepen the connection between women’s subjugation and the symbolic role animals play in illustrating their inner turmoil and external pressures.

2.2 Stereotypes at Work

Patriarchy, as a hierarchical structure, extends beyond human societies and can be observed in the natural world, where male dominance often dictates behavior and roles. [4]. This gendered system is implicit in both human and animal relationships, reflecting the division of power and responsibilities. In many animal societies, males are tasked with leadership, hunting, and territorial defense, while females are relegated to roles centered around reproduction and nurturing offspring. Similarly, in *The Help*, these entrenched gender roles manifest in the interactions between men and women, underscoring how power dynamics mirror those seen in the animal kingdom.

Skeeter faces several challenges in her professional life, highlighting the societal stereotypes and gender discrimination women encounter in the workplace. Skeeter is independent in thought and passionate about writing. After graduating, she managed to secure a position at the male-dominated *Jackson Daily* newspaper but was only assigned to write a domestic column for women (Miss Myrna Column). Historically, men and women led separate lives, the former specializing in hunting animals while the latter pursued a life of gathering [4]. This demonstrates how women’s career choices are strictly limited by gender stereotypes and societal expectations. Many professions are male-dominated, making it difficult for women to enter or limiting them to fields such as education, nursing, and secretarial work. The patriarchal system, present in both animal societies and human

interactions, is evident in Skeeter's encounter with the governor's son, where male dominance and dismissive attitudes towards women's work come to the fore. When Skeeter reveals that she writes a "domestic maintenance" column for *The Jackson Daily*, the governor's son belittles her efforts, saying, "I can't think of anything worse than reading a column on how to clean house" [2]118. From a feminist-animal criticism perspective, this interaction mirrors the rigid roles of males and females in animal societies, where females are typically restricted to reproduction and nurturing, while males dominate hunting, leadership, and defense. Just as animal societies assign females specific roles, the governor's son's attitude highlights a similar limitation placed on women in human society, restricting them to "acceptable" fields like domestic work.

3 Black Women: The Black Ants of Apartheid

This framework of feminist-animal criticism not only critiques the treatment of animals but also explores how the same mechanisms of control and dominance are applied to human bodies—particularly women of color—thereby linking speciesism with the broader issues of racial and gender inequality. By examining these intersections, this approach highlights the systemic nature of patriarchal control, which seeks to regulate and oppress both women and animals, drawing attention to the need for liberation across these categories.

3.1 Lower Body

Black bodies endure extreme violence, including torture, whipping, beatings, and murder. These brutal acts occur frequently, often with the tacit approval of government agencies. Aibileen confesses to Miss Skeeter that before serving Mrs. Leefolt, her 24-year-old son was crushed to death by a truck driver while performing hard labor. The perpetrator, however, faced no consequences: "Aibileen reads to me about the day Treelore died. She reads about how his broken body was thrown on the back of a pickup by the white foreman. And then they dropped him off at the colored hospital. 'That's what the nurse told me, who was standing outside. They rolled him off the truck bed and the white men drove away.' Aibileen doesn't cry, just lets a parcel of time pass while I stare at the typewriter, she at the worn black tiles" [2]153. Upton Sinclair describes the conditions of the slaughterhouse: pigs' legs are tied to a line so they can be hung upside down, screaming, grunting, and howling. He uses the state of the slaughterhouse as a metaphor for the fate of workers under capitalism, akin to the horrifying crimes committed in a dungeon, buried away from human society's mainstream vision and memory [5]. Sinclair's description of the cruel scenes in the slaughterhouse aims to expose the ruthlessness and exploitation faced by workers in capitalist society. This callousness not only affects workers but also reflects the experiences of other vulnerable groups in society. Just as animals are treated mercilessly in slaughterhouses, Black individuals also endured ruthless and cruel treatment, particularly during times when racism was rampant. This treatment regarded Black people as inferior or as objects to be handled as one would animals. The novel also mentions Medgar Evers, a Black civil rights activist who was shot dead by the KKK. Minny exclaims in anger, "Things ain't never gone change in this town, Aibileen. We living in hell, we trapped. Our kids is trapped"[2]188. In the Oxford dictionary, "trap" means a device used to catch animals, such as a snare, net, or clamp. The word "trap" links Black people to the animalization process. Nellie McKay states in her foreword that the exploitation of animals normalizes and rationalizes brutality as a common, accepted occurrence. It happens in various facets of society, connecting and separating people of different genders, skin colors, and social classes [4]. The term trap suggests a snare or

ensnarement, implying Black individuals being confined in an unfair, restricted state, akin to animals caught in a trap.

In Jackson, segregation extends to restroom facilities, with each household having separate restrooms designated for Black individuals, a common practice in the region. The novel opens with Mrs. Celia suggesting to Elizabeth Leefolt the construction of a separate restroom for her maid Aibileen, reflecting the pervasive injustice towards Black people and the misapplication of scientific ideas: “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. I double” [2]8. Moreover, to institutionalize discrimination against Black bodies, she even established the “Home Help Sanitation Initiative” that defined “black bodies as diseased” [6]—a proposal urging every white household to provide separate restrooms for Black maids. Hilly Holbrook solemnly presents the Home Help Sanitation Initiative. The “sanitation initiative” reflects how white society reinforces racism and discrimination against Black people through seemingly reasonable regulations. This biased act aligns with Keith Thomas’s observation that certain groups, including Black people, were dehumanized and treated like beasts, highlighting a pervasive ethic of human domination that disregarded their humanity. But it also legitimized the ill-treatment of those humans who were in a supposedly animal condition” [7]. Disguised as a “sanitation initiative,” this promotes and reinforces racism, creating biases against certain races. It reflects pervasive discrimination, equating Black people to animals, depriving them of humanity and dignity, and excluding them from care and respect. The novel also highlights restroom taboos: Minny recalls her mother warning her not to use white people’s restrooms when she started working as a maid at 2pm. Black workers building restrooms for the Leefolt family had to use bushes, and Robert was brutally beaten for using a white restroom not explicitly forbidden. “The smugness with which man could do with other species as he pleased exemplified the most extreme racist theories, the principle that might is right”[8]. This kind of racist attitude deprives Black people, like plants and other living beings, of dignity and rights, treating them as objects for arbitrary control, exploitation, and harm. Black bodies were branded with the mark of being “alien”.

Furthermore, the novel vividly depicts the living conditions and survival state of Black women in Jackson through descriptions of the crowded living environment and labeled white clothes. The narrative mentions how white neighborhoods in Jackson stretch one after the other, while the living areas provided for Black people resemble “one big anthill” [2]12, filled with barking dogs and homeless animals. The surrounding land is owned by the government, with buying and selling prohibited. As the Black population grows, their available space cannot expand, resulting in even greater crowding of the existing areas. “The environment stands as a nonhuman witness to the violent process of colonialism, an engagement with alterity is a constitutive aspect of postcoloniality”[9]. The environment serves as a silent witness, reflecting ecological aspects and evolving social and political relations, particularly in the history of slavery in the American South. Living spaces of Black people, marginalized and neglected, were often separated from those of white people, mirroring ongoing racial segregation after the abolition of slavery in 1863.

3.2 Lower Organism

Black women in the novel are not only deprived of the right to speak about their bodies but also treated as intellectually inferior, suffering from the fear of speaking up, especially when facing interrogation from white housewives. Some white women, leveraging racial privilege, oppress Black maids verbally, representing a linguistic form of recolonization from a postcolonial perspective. Aibileen, feeling the heat rise to her cheeks and her tongue trembling, struggles to find words when asked to use a separate restroom. Pressed by her

employer, she imagines burying her head in the stove, fearing the consequences of speaking out. Aibileen's attempts to encourage other maids to participate in her writing project are met with excuses, reflecting their fear of repercussions, similar to the fear of punishment for political speech with the KKK. Like the Black women in Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the maids are excluded from power, especially in spoken language[10]. The silence of Black maids underscores their passive status in a society dominated by white supremacy, depriving them of voice and power.

Racism and speciesism, as intertwined concepts in postcolonial ecocriticism, both reflect the failure to ethically manage relationships—whether between humans or between humans and non-human species. In the context of *The Help*, this dehumanization is evident in how Black maids, despite their essential roles and meticulous care, are reduced to second-class citizens. Their contributions are likened to camellias that, while appearing beautiful, conceal unwanted creatures: “You bring a bunch inside, thinking how it’s so fresh it looks like it’s moving and as soon as you go down for a sniff, you see you’ve brought an army full of spider mites in the house”[2]302. This metaphor illustrates the hypocrisy of Southern society—outward respect for Black women’s labor hides the deep-seated social prejudice that keeps them marginalized. Through the lens of feminist-animal criticism, this metaphor not only critiques racial discrimination but also reveals how speciesism serves as a parallel system of marginalization. Just as camellias conceal hidden creatures, Black maids are outwardly relied upon but socially devalued. This juxtaposition emphasizes the patriarchal tendency to dominate and exploit both women and animals, with no regard for their intrinsic worth. Both racism and speciesism reduce individuals to objects of utility, reinforcing hierarchical structures that obscure the true value of their contributions. This critique exposes the deep-rooted social hierarchy that continues to marginalize Black women’s labor, even in settings where they are indispensable.

4 Mutual Help

In the novel, the solidarity and support among women of different skin colors play a crucial role in shaping women’s value. The deep friendship established between Minny and Mrs. Hilly Holbrook serves as a way to find self-worth amidst adversity. They not only face societal expectations and stereotypes about women together but also help each other break free from traditional roles through mutual support. Mrs. Holbrook attempts to play traditional female roles to conform to social expectations but repeatedly fails. However, with Minny’s companionship and support, she demonstrates confidence and resilience, eventually finding her identity as a strong, independent woman. William Harrison suggests that chickens in Lawrence’s novel represent women, while porcupines are the opposite, representing the power dynamics between men and women [11]. The act of slaughtering a chicken implies Mrs. Foote’s subversion of male dominance and affirmation of her self-worth. Additionally, when facing harassment from an unknown man, Mrs. Foote taps into her more aggressive side, using a hunting knife by the Grizzly House to chase the man away. Minny describes her as being “as fierce as a bear.”

The female protagonist, Miss Skeeter, challenges societal conventions by writing a book about black female maids, revealing the voices and values of the black female community while also finding her own voice and value. “No matter which ‘space’ (geographical, cultural, class, etc.) they occupy, those who have long lacked writing experience finally express their concerns and realize their own voices,” she writes. For a long time, Miss Skeeter was constrained by societal expectations and family pressures to become the perfect homemaker. However, through writing, she discovered her unique talents and value. This realization allowed her to break free from the constraints of traditional roles and

redefine her existence. After the novel was successfully published, she recognized the racial biases of her suitor Stuart and decisively broke off the relationship. She also took Aibileen and Minny's advice and decided to pursue her writing career in New York. Her writing serves as a means to express her opinions and advocate for social change. Miss Skeeter's work can challenge societal norms and stereotypes, especially concerning race and gender. Through her books, she can change people's perceptions, advocate for equality and respect for marginalized groups, and identify causes she believes in and supports. This also enabled her to find a clearer sense of purpose and self-identity in society. By emphasizing the solidarity, support, and diversity of women's self-identity, the novel presents how women continually expand their value and identity in challenging social situations. This provides insights for contemporary women pursuing authentic self-discovery and offers meaningful reflections on overcoming traditional role limitations.

Miss Skeeter plays the role of a guide and advocate for black women's voices in the novel. Aibileen is a vivid example of Miss Skeeter's call for the right to speak out. From her initial desire for reading, to reading the books Miss Skeeter guides her through, and eventually to openly sharing her experiences, she undergoes a journey from silence to voice. Raised by a black nanny, Miss Skeeter strives to break down racial barriers, actively advocating for black voices in the conception and creation of her book. Miss Skeeter's efforts range from providing Aibileen with Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Dickinson's poetry, and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, to verbally guiding her with questions like, "Do you ever wish you could... change things?" [2]10. Through these interactions, Aibileen gradually opens up to Miss Skeeter, sharing her experiences as a black maid. This process of speaking out marks an awakening and a crucial step for black women to regain their voice in society. She confesses, "I'm proud a what I'm selling. I can't help it. We telling stories that need to be told." [2] 207-208. The journey from silence to voice signifies the awakening of black women and their reclaiming of their right to speak.

The voices of the whole community also provide a new perspective on historical narratives. Through the stories of black maids, the novel challenges biases and omissions in traditional historical accounts. Their experiences, struggles, and perseverance become an essential part of the societal history. Under Aibileen's advocacy, the black maids express their true views on life and their genuine emotions of pride. They gradually begin to realize that their experiences and stories have value and deserve to be expressed and shared. In *Animals and Society*, Keith Tester argues that a fish is a fish entirely because of society's definition; animals are like a blank slate, onto which society writes information or ascribes symbolic meanings [12]. In the novel, this act of speaking out offers a different perspective on injustice and discrimination in American history, prompting a deeper reflection on the past. Additionally, the book's cover serves as a metaphor for its title. "Miss Skeeter say the peace dove be the sign for better times to come"[2]393. The "dove of peace" on the book cover symbolizes the arrival of a new era, echoing the cooperation and mutual assistance between black and white women. The dove usually represents peace, reconciliation, and non-violence, signifying the efforts of black and white women working together towards social justice and racial equality. Their united voices prompt society to reevaluate history for a more just and equal future. With the help of white women, black women actively speaking out encourage society to reflect on past biases, discrimination, and racial conflicts. This reflection helps recognize and understand the injustices and inequalities in American history. The rewriting of American history by African American women is intended to inspire reflection on the past, understanding the interdependence and opposition between black and white races, and creating conditions for both races to embrace one another with 'love' to achieve the goal of national integrity. The novel demonstrates the significant role of black and white women in shaping historical narratives, promoting societal reflection, and understanding racial relationships, making them essential forces for national and social progress.

5 Conclusion

Astrid Erll, who views literature as cultural memory, argues that literary texts are part of an ongoing process characterized by dynamic interactions between text and context, individual and collective, society and interior[13]. By focusing on the everyday life of a small town in the American South, Stockett's novel illustrates the complex relationships between gender and race in the male-dominated society of the South and the Civil Rights Movement through attention to both black and white women's bodies and the connections to animal metaphors. As "a beautifully written love/hate letter to the South "[6], *The Help* depicts the marginalization of both white and black women in a patriarchal and racially segregated society, while also providing a sense of infinite hope for the future of the South through mutual support and self-discovery.

By focusing on the animal elements within the novel, including animals as literary images and cultural symbols, this article conducts an in-depth analysis from the perspective of animal criticism, combined with feminist and postcolonial viewpoints, to explore the intricate connections inherent in various forms of oppression, exploitation, and tyranny in human society. Based on these analyses, the article seeks cultural pathways to address gender, racial, and species-based discrimination.

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