



## EXEMPLIFICATION OF GENDER POLITICS IN KATHRYN STOCKETT'S *THE HELP*

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.74.320](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.74.320)



### ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the gender politics and identity crisis illustrated in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*. Skeeter is an aspiring writer thriving hard to follow her passion in a society where women's education and professional ambitions are considered insignificant. As a Southern writer, Stockett is well aware of the traditional roles of a white woman and how it was perceived as the most important part of a woman's life. They are encouraged to find a husband and start a family rather than becoming independent. The story is set in a small town Jackson, and the mentality of the most white women characters as they turn twenty is to settle down with a family. There happens no thought of building a career and finding their purpose in the world. Skeeter, one of the main protagonists is an exception, as she dreams more than becoming a wife and a mother and hence becomes an outcast within her community. With the second-wave feminism lingering in the background, Stockett's narrative of Skeeter subtly unfolds the gender identity crisis she has to confront.

Keywords: Gender identity, Identity Crisis, Mississippi, Feminism, etc

### Skeeter's Struggles with Gender Roles:

'The Help' features Skeeter Phelan who wants to bring about a change in the society she lives, she wants to become an author, and she wants to find out what happened to her dear old coloured maid Constantine. Skeeter's mother Charlotte Phelan, on the contrary, is an epitome of the southern white women. She constantly urges Skeeter to find a suitable man and settle down.

"Four years my daughter goes off to college and what does she come home with?...a pretty piece of paper."(55)

Charlotte Phelan, view of attending a college is not to acquire knowledge, but an opportunity to find a partner for young girls. Her suggestion to Skeeter for applying for the teller job at the Farmer's bank was not for the sake of her finding a job, but only for the numerous proposals due to the news of the neighbor girl Fanny's numerous proposals after working there. Charlotte constantly pressures Skeeter about her looks, being tall, skinny and curly haired. The stereotypical beauty standard of the white women contrasts with that of Skeeter's looks and personality. She was objectified for her thin, pale stature, even from birth. Though "Eugenia Phelan" is her original name, everyone called her "Skeeter". Her brother Carlton had given her the

name for looking like a mosquito as a baby. For her brother Carlton Jr, is a tall, handsome young man with blonde wavy hair who attends LSU for law further makes her life miserable. As for her mother, her son is better at finding a partner than her ugly, tall daughter. Her mother fails to understand that Skeeter is a woman who is determined and passionate about the things she likes, like to write and be an author. But Skeeter gets reluctant to open up about her dreams to her own mother.

“I’ll never be able to tell Mother I want to be a writer” (56)

Even her boyfriend Stuart Whitworth, during their initial meetings makes a sexist statement about Skeeter working for the Jackson Journal. He comments women’s university education as ploy to find husband, he says,

“Isn’t that what you women from Ole Miss major in? Professional husband hunting?” (118)

Such stereotypical thinking was common as Mississippi being a Southern state has yielded no reputation for women who actually wants to learn and work. Skeeter is a new woman of the twentieth century, a woman who thinks for herself, who wants to live her life her way. She wanted to get her own apartment, partly inspired by her New York publisher Elaine Stein. Skeeter impresses the editor of Harper and Row publishers, Missus Stein by sending a job application and this is how Stein responds,

“ It is admirable that that a young lady with absolutely no work experience would apply for an editing job at a publisher as prestigious as ours.”(71)

On Elaine Stein’s advice Skeeter discovers what bothers her, and there begins the documentation of all the maid’s interviews starting with Aibileen. For a woman of small town in Mississippi, it is impressive how self sufficient and determined she is. Writing the book with the coloured maids made her life take a huge turn in terms relationship with her old friends. She has to hide herself from the white folk of the town so none would notice her interviewing the maids. Avoiding contact with her old childhood

friends due to their different belief system, Skeeter becomes frustrated and feels like an outcast. She relates herself to the actual good man Boo Radley in the novel “*To Kill A Mockingbird*” who is mistaken by the town as a bad person,

“I’ve become one of those people who prow around at night in their cars. God, I am the town’s Boo Radley” (351)

### Conclusion

In the end when Skeeter pursues her task of publishing the book along with the maids, she does share the net profit equally among them. But what question that remains is whether her parents and family find out how she was an integrationist and how she successfully published a book on the cruelties of the white majority. Skeeter can be criticized for leaving the town in the end, even if Aibileen and Minny implored her to. She had everything she wanted- she was a writer, a published author, had been offered a her dream job in a prestigious city away from the place she always wanted to, but leaving in the end after planting a storm in the town was cowardly. Skeeter should be appreciated for all the sacrifices she made, leaving her home, leaving her friends for the book. But when in actuality, Skeeter never liked being in Jackson and wanted to get away from the mediocre minded town folk. Skeeter’s character in the end stomps all the blocks in her life. What bothered her was the lousiness of the southern town which lacked understanding her passion and interest. At last, Skeeter achieves her feminist goals and gets her way of life, a job of her own and not dependant on husband.

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