

Problematic Social Stratification Experienced by Aibileen Clark in Tate Taylor's *The Help* (2011) Movie Script

Fennyta Diva Fadilla¹, Hariyono²

¹ English Literature Program, Universitas Dr. Soetomo, Surabaya, Indonesia

fennytadv09@gmail.com, hariyono@unitomo.ac.id

Abstract

This paper would like to examine the matter of problematic social stratification experienced by Aibileen Clark in Tate Taylor's *The Help* (2011) movie script. *The Help* is a movie tells about the character named Aibileen Clark that faces such racial discrimination as a maid in America around 1960s. This movie is crucial to be a theme of a thesis because it speaks about such a system that restricted human freedom as specially in applying certain freedom. Through qualitative method, this study employs close reading as technique of data collection and winnowing as technique of data analysis. The analysis results to ideas of Aibileen Clark experiences problematic social stratification of inequalities which unequally distribute societal resources (such as income and power) with the most privileged individuals and families enjoying a disproportionate share. Aibileen even feels hesitant to speak about her opinions regarding white people, not only because of laws but also because of differences in power. In conclusion, Aibileen Clark clearly experiences social inequality in economy, social status, and political power, and her story reflects the struggles of many Black women in American history through her voice.

Keywords: Inequality, Racism, Social Stratification, Tate Taylor, *The Help*

INTRODUCTION

The Help is a drama film directed by Tate Taylor and released in 2011 (Taylor, 2011). The film tells about the lives of Black women who work as maids in white families during the 1960s in Jackson, Mississippi. Through the perspective of a young writer named Skeeter, the story shows racial discrimination, social inequality, and the struggles of maids like Aibileen and Minny. The film also shows their courage to speak out against an unfair system.

Social inequality indicates the existence unequal suitability and payoffs for different groups and society having social status and ranks (Islam, 2020). This sentence explains that social inequality happens when groups in society receive different opportunities and rewards because of differences in social status or position. This difference appears in access to resources, education, jobs, or public services. As a result, groups with higher social status usually enjoy greater advantages than those with lower social status.

That social inequality result to problematic social stratification Social stratification is a sociological term that applies to the ranking or grading of individuals and groups into hierarchical layers such that inequality exist in the allocation of rewards, privileges and resources. Social stratification simply refers to as structured inequalities between or among different social groupings (Amar et al., 2021; Anikin et al., 2017; Binelli et al., 2015). The quote is that in society, people and groups do not have the same position but are arranged in clear levels some are at the top, some are in the middle, and some are at the bottom. These levels do not form by chance but exist because of systems, rules, and social norms that determine who has more access to money, power, education, or better life opportunities. As a result, the differences between those in high and low positions become normal in the system, and these differences tend to continue from one generation to the next.

METHOD

Method

Through qualitative method, this study employs close reading as technique of data collection and winnowing as technique of data analysis. This research focuses on the character Aibileen Clark, especially in her character as a maid who experiences racial discrimination in her life. In this research problematic social stratification is the theory, while *The Help* is the object of the analysis. It is done through descriptive approach that analyze the dialogue of Aibileen Clark and another characters regarding problematic social stratification.

Results and Discussion

Aibileen's Experiences within Racial Discrimination

This sub chapter explain the data of how Aibileen response to social discriminations done other and circumstances. The data is shown below:

Data 1

“Aibileen: Miss Skeeter, What if...What if you don't like what I got to say? About white peoples?” (Page 43)

The above quotation happens when Aibileen, as a Black woman, feels hesitant to speak about her experiences or opinions regarding white people. This quote also shows that political injustice is not only about laws but also about social relationships and the fear of speaking because of differences in power.

Data 2

“Aibileen: Minny got her some stories, sho nuff. But, she ain't real keen on talking to white peoples right now.” (Page 43)

The above quotation happens when Aibileen says that Minny actually has many important stories to share, but she is not ready or comfortable talking to white people at the moment. This is not because Minny refuses to speak, but because she feels fear, trauma, and distrust that come from the unfair treatment she experiences for years while working in a racist environment.

Data 3

“Aibileen: Lotta of folk think if you talk back to your husband, you crossed a line...need to be punished.” (Page 70)

The above quotation happens reflects how social norms at that time limit women's freedom to speak, especially within the household. Aibileen explains that many people believe if a wife talks back to her husband, she crosses a line and deserves to be punished. This view shows that even relationships inside the home follow an unequal system, where women especially Black women from oppressed groups do not have the freedom to express their opinions, even to their own husbands.

Data 4

“Aibileen: I don't believe in lines anymore. Lines is in our heads cause people like Miss Hilly try to make us believe they there.” (Page 70)

The above quotation happens when Aibileen explains that the social boundaries which separate people based on class and status are actually created by the mindset and systems built by those in power, like Miss Hilly.

Data 5

“Aibileen: All I'm saying is kindness don't have no boundaries.” (Page 71)

The above quotation happens when Aibileen comes from a lower class as a housemaid, her moral and human dignity stays high because she shows love, patience, and sincerity in treating others. This sentence indirectly criticizes the way society often believes that only people from the upper class deserve respect. It emphasizes that a person's worth and dignity appear through their actions toward others, not from their wealth or social position.

Data 6

“Aibileen: You know what'd happen to me if Miss Leefolt knew I was tellin' stories on her?” (Page 34)

The above quotation happens when Aibileen explains that political and social power stays in the hands of certain people, and they decide the fate of others without considering fairness. Miss Leefolt, as a white woman from the upper class, holds great social and symbolic power. She can fire Aibileen at any time, spread rumors, or create social pressure against her just because she feels offended. This kind of power does not come from moral truth, but from the high social position she holds in the community.

Data 7

“Aibileen: They set my cousin Shinelle's car on fire just cause she went down to the voting station.” (Page 34)

The above quotation happens how political power, when concentrated in the hands of a dominant group, becomes a tool to oppress and silence others who try to exercise their rights.

Data 8

“Aibileen: Cause they's a reason. I do this with you, I might as well burn my own house down.” (Page 34)

The above quotation happens when Aibileen explains that her decision to speak and share her story with Skeeter, a white woman, is not easy or without risk. She realizes that if she dares to speak the truth, the consequences can be very dangerous, such as losing her job, being isolated, or even facing violence.

Data 9

“Aibileen: This already ain't careful, Miss Skeeter. You not knowing that is what scares me most. I'm sorry.” (Page 39)

The above quotation happens shows how power and influence in society stay in the hands of the dominant group in this case, upper-class white people while people like Aibileen, a Black working-class woman, live under constant pressure and real risks.

Data 10

“Aibileen: I know pretty well what happens if the white ladies found out we was writing about them.” (Page 40)

The above quotation happens shows that freedom of speech does not belong to everyone, and in an unjust society, even the truth becomes something frightening when spoken by someone without power.

Data 11

“Aibileen: Any person printing, publishing or circulating written matter urging for public acceptance of social equality between whites and negroes is subject to imprisonment.” (Page 40)

The above quotation happens shows that political and social power is not distributed fairly. Only certain groups have the right to speak and make the rules, while others must remain silent even when they only fight for equality and justice.

Data 12

“The stack is “The Help,” in hardcover. It's wrapped in pale blue. A white peace dove spreads its wing under the title.” (Page 119)

The above quotation happens when a result of collaboration between Skeeter and the Black maids is finally published and released to the public. Its pale blue cover and the image of a white peace dove symbolize hope, peace, and change. The book is not just an ordinary piece of writing, but a symbol of the social transformation that begins to take place.

Inequality and Its Connection with Problematic Social Stratification

Social stratification is a sociological term that applies to the ranking or grading of individuals and groups into hierarchical layers such that inequality exist in the allocation of rewards, privileges and resources. Social stratification simply refers to as structured inequalities between or among different social groupings (Amar et al., 2021; Anikin et al., 2017; Binelli et al., 2015). The quote is that in society, people and groups do not have the same position but are arranged in clear levels some are at the top, some are in the middle, and some are at the bottom. These levels do not form by chance but exist because of systems, rules, and social norms that determine who has more access to money, power, education, or better life opportunities. As a result, the differences between those in high and low positions become normal in the system, and these differences tend to continue from one generation to the next.

A complex of social institutions that generate observed inequalities which unequally distribute societal resources (such as income and power) with the most privileged individuals and families enjoying a disproportionate share. Some individuals, by virtue of their roles or group memberships, are advantaged, while others are disadvantaged Oyekola, I. A., & Oyeyipo, E. J. (2020). Social structures place individuals or groups in different positions, so some people have greater advantages than others in access to resources and opportunities. As a result, certain groups always occupy more favorable positions, while others face limitations in their chances to advance.

According to Kailash Pyakuryal, a professor in Chitwan, Nepal, he takes a quotation from Max Weber who states that social stratification makes the social inequality take the form of unequal life chances (Pyakuryal, 2008). This inequality also appears in politics, where only some groups can influence decisions and policies. Control over political resources and strategic positions tends to concentrate in certain groups, while others struggle to participate or have a voice in important decision making (Grosfoguel, 2016; Kendall, 2017).

Aibileen's Experiences on Problematic Social Stratification

This sub chapter explains the analysis done from the data regarding the theory of problematic social stratification. The analysis shown below:

In data 1, the above quotation is in line with social stratification, this quote shows that interaction between Black and white people is limited not only in action, but also in the freedom to speak, express, and share experiences. Aibileen feels she must be very careful with her words, because she fears being seen as disrespectful or punished socially.

“Miss Skeeter, what if...” Aibileen starts by addressing “Miss Skeeter” as a polite form of respect, showing that she honors her white conversation partner. Her sentence pauses at “what if,” which reflects her doubt and anxiety. She carefully considers the risk of what she wants to say. “What if you don’t like what I got to say?” In this sentence, Aibileen honestly expresses her worry. She fears that her words may not be accepted or might offend Skeeter. This fear does not come from saying something wrong, but from living in a social system that limits Black people’s freedom to speak the truth, especially to white people.

Another quotation above that shows the causal factor of social inequality is found on “About white peoples?” This sentence clarifies that Aibileen wants to talk about her experiences with white people a very sensitive topic. At that time, speaking honestly about white people’s treatment can be risky, including the chance of losing a job or facing social pressure (Grosfoguel, 2016; Kendall, 2017). Aibileen feels she must speak carefully and ask for permission before continuing.

In data 2, the above quotation is in line with social stratification, this quote shows that interaction between Black and white people during that time faces social pressure and fear. Even to simply speak, Black women like Minny must think many times because of serious risks such as losing their jobs, being seen as disrespectful, or even facing threats.

"Minny got her some stories, sho nuff." Aibileen says that Minny has many stories, and those stories are truly valuable. The phrase "sho nuff" (sure enough) shows that Minny's experiences are real and important to hear. This shows that Minny's life as a Black maid holds powerful testimonies that can open people's eyes to injustice. "But, she ain't real keen on talking to white peoples right now." In this sentence, Aibileen explains that Minny is not ready or comfortable talking to white people right now. It is not because of hate, but because she feels fear, emotional pain, and deep caution from her past experiences (Grosfoguel, 2016; Kendall, 2017). She understands that speaking honestly carries serious risks, especially when directed at white people in an unequal system.

In data 3, the above quotation is in line with social stratification, this quote shows that social limits do not only restrict interaction between races, but also between genders within the same community. Women like Aibileen and Minny must always be careful when they speak, even in private spaces like their homes, because they face social judgment or violence if they challenge male authority.

"Lotta of folk think if you talk back to your husband..." Aibileen explains the social norms in her community. In a patriarchal culture, speaking back to a husband is seen as improper behavior. This sentence shows that women especially from the oppressed Black community do not have space to express their opinions or feelings openly, even inside their own households. "...you crossed a line..." This quote means that a woman who talks back is seen as crossing a boundary set by society. This boundary is not written in law, but it is strongly believed and protected by social norms. When a woman crosses this line, people consider her wrong or disobedient even if what she says is true.

Another quotation above that shows the causal factor of social inequality is found on "...need to be punished." This part shows the belief that a woman who "challenges" her husband deserves punishment. It reflects how unequal a woman's position is in the social system at that time. The punishment can be verbal, physical, or emotional. Aibileen does not say this because she agrees, but because it is the reality many women around her face.

In data 4, the above quotation is in line with social stratification, Miss Hilly, as a white woman from the upper class, uses her wealth and influence to reinforce class boundaries, making people like Aibileen feel unworthy of being in a higher position. However, Aibileen realizes that even though she belongs to a lower class, her status as a moral, caring, and wise human being remains high. She refuses to keep believing in the social lines created by people like Miss Hilly. Aibileen shows that true status is not determined by economic class, but by a person's values and dignity.

"I don't believe in lines anymore." Aibileen says that she no longer believes in the "social lines" that are used to separate people based on race or class. "Lines" here do not mean physical lines, but symbols of social boundaries such as who deserves respect, who is allowed to speak, or who is seen as "lower" or "higher" in society. This sentence shows that Aibileen starts to recognize her own worth and refuses to accept the social system that places her in a lower position (Grosfoguel, 2016; Kendall, 2017).

"Lines is in our heads cause people like Miss Hilly try to make us believe they there." In this sentence, Aibileen explains that the boundaries are not physically real, but they live in people's minds because they are created and forced by people like Miss Hilly. Miss Hilly represents white people in power who plant fear and a sense of inferiority in Black people, so they will not question their place in society. Aibileen realizes that these limits do not come from nature, but from a system designed to keep inequality in place.

In data 5, the above quotation is in line with social stratification, in a society like the one shown in *The Help*, people are often judged based on class whether they are rich or poor, a boss or a servant. However, Aibileen shows that kindness is a universal value that does not depend on someone's place in society.

"All I'm saying is..." Aibileen starts with this phrase to show that she does not want to argue or force her opinion. She simply wants to express something honest and heartfelt. This opening reflects her humility and her desire to be heard with respect. "...kindness don't have no boundaries." This part is the core of Aibileen's message: kindness has no limits not of race, social class, wealth, or skin color. She wants to show that kindness can come from anyone, and should also be given to anyone, no matter their status.

In data 6, the above quotation is in line with social stratification, Aibileen knows she does not have strong legal or social protection. She understands that Black people like her live under a system that limits their voice. The fear she feels shows how unequal the distribution of power is in society, where Black individuals do not have space to speak freely without facing serious risks.

"You know what happens to me..." Aibileen begins with a rhetorical question that shows her fear and concern. This sentence means that she clearly understands the risks she faces. Her tone shows that she lives under pressure, where she must be careful with everything she says and does. "...if Miss Leefolt knows I tell stories on her?" In this part, Aibileen explains that if her employer, Miss Leefolt, finds out that she shares her work experiences (especially the unpleasant ones) with others, there will be serious consequences. The phrase "tell stories on her" means to speak about someone behind their back, which during that time can be seen as an act of rebellion, especially when a Black maid talks about her white employer.

In data 7, the above quotation is in line with social stratification, the sentence shows that when someone from an oppressed group in this case, Aibileen's cousin, a Black woman tries to use her political right to vote, she faces harsh punishment. Burning her car is not just a criminal act; it serves as an act of intimidation from those in power, warning Black people not to take part in the democratic process.

"They set my cousin Shinelle's car on fire..." Aibileen says that a group of people burns her cousin Shinelle's car. This sentence shows an act of violence and intimidation toward Black citizens (Grosfoguel, 2016; Kendall, 2017). Burning the car is not just about destroying property it sends a clear message of threat to warn others not to do what Shinelle does. "...just cause she goes down to the voting station." Aibileen explains that the only reason for this cruel act is that Shinelle goes to the voting station. This shows that in the social context of the time, when a Black person tries to use their political rights like voting it is seen as crossing an unspoken line. As a result, they face punishment, either socially or physically, just for exercising their basic rights as citizens.

In data 8, the above quotation is in line with social stratification, this quote highlights how power and control in society at that time fully belong to upper-class white people, like Aibileen's employers. They have the authority to control, punish, and silence anyone who is seen as breaking the social norms. Although Aibileen is wise and morally strong, she does not have a voice in that system. That is why she feels that even a small action could destroy her whole life.

"Cause they's a reason." Aibileen says that there is a strong reason why she hesitates to help Skeeter write the book. This sentence shows that her decision is not something simple, but something that carries great risk. She knows that speaking openly as a Black woman in a racist society brings serious consequences to her life.

"I do this with you, I might as well burn my own house down." this sentence reflects her deep fear. Aibileen feels that if she agrees to share her story, it is as dangerous as destroying her own life. "Burning my own house down" is a way to express her fear of losing everything her job, her safety, and even her peace. This shows how much pressure Black people face in a society that punishes those who challenge injustice.

In data 9, the above quotation is in line with Concentration of Political and Social Power, this quote highlights that in an unjust society, power is not only about position or rules, but also about who has the right to feel safe when speaking and who lives in fear. Aibileen represents the voices of those who are oppressed by an unequal structure of power.

"This already ain't careful, Miss Skeeter." Aibileen says that what they do right now talking about the lives of Black maids to a white woman is already very risky. The phrase "ain't careful" shows that she fully understands this action can bring danger to her. This sentence shows that Aibileen lives in a social environment that limits her freedom to speak, especially when the conversation involves criticism of injustice. "You not knowing that is what scares me most." Aibileen expresses deep concern because Skeeter, a white woman, does not fully realize the danger Aibileen might face. What scares Aibileen the most is not just the risk itself, but that her partner in this situation does not fully understand the consequences. This shows the difference in life experience and understanding between people in power and those who live under social oppression.

Another quotation above that shows the causal factor of social inequality is found on "I'm sorry." this short sentence shows Aibileen's politeness, even while she shares a serious fear. She still shows respect to Skeeter while speaking honestly. This reflects how people like Aibileen often feel the need to apologize simply for expressing their fear or limitations a clear sign of the deep imbalance of social power.

In data 10, the above quotation is in line with Concentration of Political and Social Power, the sentence directly reflects how social and political power concentrates in the hands of white people, especially upper-class white women like Aibileen's employers. Even though maids like Aibileen only write the truth about their experiences, they still live in fear because they know that those in power can easily punish them by firing them, spreading harmful gossip, or socially isolating them.

"I know pretty well..." This sentence shows that Aibileen clearly understands what might happen. The phrase "pretty well" means she does not guess or assume, but speaks from real experiences she sees and lives through. She is not naive she knows the risks that come with her actions. "...what happens if the white ladies find out..." This part reveals that there is real fear if the white women their employers discover that the maids write about them. In that time, Black maids do not have the social freedom to speak out or criticize their white employers, even if they only tell the truth. So, Aibileen knows that just being caught can bring serious consequences.

Another quotation above that shows the causal factor of social inequality is found on "...we write about them." This phrase confirms that they write real stories about their experiences working for white families. Even though the goal is to speak truth and seek justice, the people in power see it as a threat to the system. Aibileen understands that writing something like this can be seen as an act of rebellion by those who hold social and political power.

In data 11, the above quotation is in line with Concentration of Political and Social Power, in the society described in *The Help*, laws and social norms exist to protect the interests of those in power and to punish anyone from the lower class who dares to challenge them. Aibileen, as a Black woman from the working class, lives under intense legal and social pressure. She not only fears social consequences but also faces a real threat of legal punishment if she dares to speak the truth.

"Any person printing, publishing or circulating written matter..." This part explains that anyone who writes or shares written material can be considered breaking the law. Aibileen refers to a rule that shows how freedom of speech stays very limited, especially for Black people who live under an unfair legal system. "...urging for public acceptance of social equality

between whites and negroes...” This means that if the writing encourages people to accept equality between white and Black individuals, it becomes dangerous. In reality, equality is a basic human right (Grosfoguel, 2016; Kendall, 2017). This part shows that the law exists not to support justice, but to protect inequality.

Another quotation above that shows the causal factor of social inequality is found on “...is subject to imprisonment.” This part clearly says that anyone who breaks this rule may go to jail. In *The Help*, this highlights the serious risk Aibileen faces. She not only deals with social pressure but also the real threat of legal punishment just for speaking the truth.

In data 12, the above quotation is in line with Replacement of Old Elites by New Ones, in this context, *The Help* represents the new voices of those who are silenced for so long Black maids like Aibileen and Minny. Meanwhile, Skeeter, who comes from the dominant group, chooses to use her position not to protect the old power like Hilly, but to speak out for truth and justice. This shows a shift from the old elites who oppress others to the new elites who care, who are open-minded, and who stand for the oppressed.

“The stack is *The Help*, in hardcover.” This sentence describes that there is a stack of books titled *The Help* that is already printed and ready for distribution. Symbolically, it marks an important moment when the voices of Black maids like Aibileen and Minny finally reach the public and are heard by many people. “It’s wrapped in pale blue.” The book cover is light blue. This color is not just a design choice, but it carries a deeper meaning. Pale blue often represents calmness, hope, and new beginnings. In the context of the story, the color symbolizes hope for social change and peace for those who have been treated unfairly.

Another quotation above that shows the causal factor of social inequality is found on “A white peace dove spreads its wing under the title.” The white dove spreading its wings is a powerful symbol of peace and freedom. Its position under the title shows that the book delivers a message of healing, truth, and the courage to stand up against injustice without violence. It also reflects the hope that the truths shared in the book inspire peaceful change in society.

CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, it is shown that Aibileen experiences sadness, inner pressure, and loss (such as the death of her son), but she must hide her emotions in front of her white employers. She also experiences limitation of personal freedom and expression. Aibileen cannot speak or act freely without fear of losing her job or safety. She is also trapped in the continuation of inequality across generations. The children she raises learn racist values, while her wisdom and experiences receive no recognition, allowing inequality to continue. Aibileen Clark in *The Help* clearly experiences inequality in economy, social status, and political power, which reflects problematic social stratification where social layers not only create differences but also block social mobility. Her story shows how unequal structures keep injustice across generations, highlighting the urgent need for awareness and social change.

REFERENCES

- Amar, D. A., & Widjayanti, E. P. (2021). Afro-American Racial Oppression in Paul Laurence Dunbar and Amiri Baraka's Poems. *Lililacs Journal*, 1(1), 33-40.
- Anikin, V., Lezhnina, Y., Mareeva, S., & Tikhonova, N. (2017). Social stratification by life chances: Evidence from Russia. *Higher School of Economics Research Paper No. WP BRP*, 80.
- Binelli, C., Loveless, M., & Whitefield, S. (2015). What is social inequality and why does it matter? Evidence from Central and Eastern Europe. *World Development*, 70, 239-248.
- Grosfoguel, R. (2016). What is Racism?. *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 22(1). 9-15.
- Islam, A. (2023). *SOCIAL INEQUALITY, POPULAR UNDERSTANDING, CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES*: Department of Development Studies. Bangladesh.
- Kendall, F. (2012). *Understanding white privilege: Creating pathways to authentic relationships across race*. Routledge.
- Oyekola, I. A., & Oyeipo, E. J. (2020) Social Stratification. In: *Introductory Sociology*. Obafemi Awolowo University Press, pp. 125-138.
- Pyakuryal, K. (2011). Restoration of Democracy and People's Empowerment in Nepal. *Occasional Papers in Sociology and Anthropology - Volume 6*.
- Taylor, T. (2011). *The Help*. Walt Disney Studio.