

**Economic Discrimination Against
Black Characters in *The Help*:
A Gramscian Hegemonic
Approach**

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Dhea Amelia Renata

Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

Sri Sumaryani

Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

Abstract

The Help by Kathryn Stockett critically examines the lives of Black domestic workers in 1960s Jackson, Mississippi, highlighting persistent economic inequalities. Utilizing Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, this research employs a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine the novel's dialogues and narratives, revealing two key forms of economic discrimination faced by Black characters: inequalities in the work and wage system, and barriers to social mobility. These forms of oppression intersect to sustain racial hierarchy and structural inequality. The study concludes that the novel not only portrays historical racial discrimination in the South but also illustrates how hegemonic power normalizes economic subordination through cultural consent, thus highlighting the relevance of the discussion on social justice.

Key words

Economic Discrimination, Gramscian Hegemony, Racial Inequality, *The Help*

Corresponding author:

Dhea Amelia Renata, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia

Email: renatadhea5@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The issue of racial and economic discrimination against Black people has long been a major concern in literary and social studies in the United States. One of the most significant periods in the history of the civil rights struggle was the 1960s, especially in the Mississippi region, which is known as the center of tension between white supremacy and the Black liberation movement (Butler, 2019). Mississippi in that decade became a symbol of extreme social inequality, where racial segregation was legalized through Jim Crow laws and reinforced by social ideologies that placed Black people in a subordinate position, politically, socially, and economically (Ueland & Warf, 2006).

The socio-economic conditions in Mississippi at that time reflected a system of racial capitalism that can be analyzed using Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which refers to class domination maintained not only through force, but also through social consensus and cultural ideology (Sardar, 2024). The dominant class, the White community, controlled the means of production and economic structures while instilling values that justified these inequalities as natural and moral. Thus, economic discrimination against Black people was not only a form of material exploitation but also a manifestation of ideological power that governed social and cultural consciousness (Lung & Ball, 2015).

With this in mind, this study aims to examine how economic structures and hegemonic ideologies in 1960s Mississippi shaped the lives of Black workers, through an analysis of Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help*. In particular, it seeks to understand how Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony can be applied to reveal the mechanisms of coercion and consent that support economic discrimination in the text.

While the United States has made great strides in the political and social spheres, the legacy of racial discrimination still lives on today (Guo, 2022). The election and re-election of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States marked a significant milestone, signifying a new level of diversity and openness in American politics. However, this does not mean that racism has ended, but rather that forms of structural inequality and discrimination continue to flourish in various walks of life (Span, 2015). It is therefore essential to study the representation of racial discrimination in literature to understand how these inequalities have been maintained historically and culturally. The novel *The Help*, set in Jackson, Mississippi, in the early 1960s, is a significant example, as it depicts the conditions of segregation and economic exploitation that reflected the social realities of the southern United States at that time.

People are familiar with *The Help* mainly through its film adaptation, but it's essential to acknowledge that it was originally published as a novel. Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* (2009) explicitly represents this situation through the story of Black women working as domestic housemaids in Jackson, Mississippi, during the early 1960s. Through the perspectives of characters such as Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, Stockett illustrates how economic relations between White employers and Black workers are rooted in hegemonic social structures, where economic subordination is accepted as part of the moral fabric of society. In this context, *The Help* can be read as a cultural representation of the practices of capitalistic and racialized hegemony described by Gramsci (1971). This study therefore asks the following question: how does *The Help* highlight the economic discrimination suffered by Black characters, and how does Gramsci's theory of hegemony help us understand the reproduction of these inequalities in the context of the American South?

Previous studies have primarily examined the representation of racial discrimination against Black people in *The Help*. These studies highlight social relations, the main character's anti-racist attitudes, and the various forms of social discrimination faced by Black domestic workers during the era of segregation (Iban et al., 2019; Maurilla, 2018; Szulkowska, 2017). However, this research takes a different approach by emphasizing economic discrimination. It explores how the economic structures of White society dominate and exploit Black labor through subtle ideological mechanisms. This perspective positions *The Help* not only as a social commentary but also as a reflection of a broader hegemonic system.

This study employs Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to analyze the economic discrimination experienced by Black characters in *The Help*. By analyzing the economic discrimination depicted in the novel, I argue that it showcases how the dominant class creates and maintains economic inequality through labor relations, wage systems, and social narratives that normalize subordination as a mechanism of hegemony.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Economic discrimination against the Black community is one of the most visible manifestations of the system of structural inequality created by colonialism and racial capitalism (Udah, 2017). In the social context of the United States, this inequality is rooted in the relationship between the White dominant class and the Black subordinate class, which maintains patterns of labor exploitation and control over economic access (O'Donnell, 2024). The phenomenon is a central theme in several works of South American literature, including *The Help* by Stockett (2009), which depicts the economic, racial, and ideological relationships between White employers and Black domestic helpers in 1960s Jackson, Mississippi.

The main issue raised in this study is how *The Help* shows a form of economic discrimination as a result of the capitalist hegemonic system that works through racial ideology. While many previous studies have highlighted the racial, gender, and moral aspects of the novel, few have focused their analysis on the relationship between ideological hegemony and economic domination, particularly in the context of Antonio Gramsci's theory. Antonio Gramsci (1971) explains that the power of the ruling class is maintained not only through *coercion* but also through the *consent* formed through ideology, morality, and culture. Hegemony occurs when the values of the ruling class are voluntarily accepted by society because they are considered universal truths.

In an economic context, hegemony fosters conditions where the exploitation of the working class is viewed not as injustice, but as a normal aspect of the social order (Karataşlı, 2023). Gramsci's concept of the *historical bloc* (Lears, 1985) is also relevant to the analysis of *The Help*, as it describes how economic, ideological, and political structures mutually support one another to maintain racial inequalities in the American South. Thus, hegemony theory is used in this study to highlight the links between economic power and ideology in literary representation.

Numerous studies on Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* have examined different forms of racial and social injustice faced by Black communities in the United States during the segregation era of the 1960s, particularly in Mississippi. Notable contributions

to this topic include research conducted by Szulkowska, (2017), Maurilla (2018), Wulandari et al. (2019) Menggalomo et al. (2021), Nanlohy et al. (2021), and Simon, (2021). Other studies examine themes of resistance and power dynamics, including research conducted by Normalisa & Rosyidi (2020), and Afini (2023). These studies demonstrate that collective consciousness and resistance against the ruling class are expressed through the symbolic and narrative actions of Black figures, serving as a rejection of white ideological domination.

From a gender and feminist perspective, research by Dominilla et al. (2020) and Iban et al. (2019) reveals how Black women experience multiple oppressions due to the intersection of racism, sexism, and capitalism. Nasir & Abdullah (2021) and Pangestika & Supeno (2023) highlight ideological and linguistic dimensions, such as the use of *African American Vernacular English* (AAVE) and the construction of the *white savior complex*, which reinforce the racial social hierarchy. The psychological studies by Putri & Suprayogi (2024) focus more on the motivation and moral awareness of the white character, Skeeter, as an agent of social change.

This study proposes a novelty by analyzing the forms of economic discrimination suffered by Black characters in the novel *The Help* using Antonio Gramsci's theoretical framework. This study aims to show that the novel describes how the white ruling class creates and maintains economic inequalities through the work and wages system, barriers to social and economic mobility, and a social discourse that normalizes the subordinate position of the Black community.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the forms of economic discrimination experienced by Black characters in *The Help* (Stockett, 2009). A qualitative method enables the researcher to interpret the social and ideological meanings embedded within literary texts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Using Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony as the primary framework, this study examines how the dominant White class maintains its economic and ideological control through the normalization of inequality within the capitalist system.

The primary data for this analysis are derived from the novel *The Help* (2009), which depicts the racial and economic dynamics of 1960s Mississippi. The secondary data include books and scholarly articles related to Gramsci's theory, postcolonial studies, and racial representation in American literature. The data collection process involved close reading, note-taking, and identifying textual evidence that reflects labor relations, wage disparities, and ideological subordination. Quotations were selected based on their thematic relevance and their capacity to illustrate hegemonic dynamics, including power relations, economic discourse, and experiences of marginalization.

After selection, the textual data were organized and categorized using analytical criteria based on Gramsci's concepts of coercion, consent, and ideological power. The data were categorized into two main themes: inequality in the work and wages system, and barriers to social and economic mobility. In each stage of the analysis, narrative elements were

correlated with the socio-historical context of the American South to ensure interpretive coherence and methodological transparency.

Each quotation was analyzed within its social context, utilizing Gramsci's concepts of hegemony, consent, and ruling-class domination. The findings are presented descriptively to illustrate how hegemonic structures perpetuate the economic subordination of Black characters in the novel.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals that the economic discrimination faced by Black characters in *The Help* (Stockett, 2009) illustrates the social and economic dominance upheld by the White ruling class in Jackson, Mississippi, during the 1960s. Utilizing Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony as the analytical framework, the research shows that domination is maintained not only through material power, referred to as coercion in Gramscian terms, but also through the shaping of social consciousness, known as consent (Gramsci, 1971). This makes economic inequalities appear normal and legitimate.

This dual mechanism of coercion and consent helps to explain the racial dynamics of the American South, where legal systems and social institutions were designed to uphold racial segregation and economic inequality. Coercion was enforced through Jim Crow laws, employment discrimination, and state-sanctioned violence. In contrast, consent was facilitated by cultural narratives, religious beliefs, and social norms that framed racial hierarchy as natural and moral (Chakravarty, 2022). Thus, White supremacy in the South persisted not only through force but also through the acceptance of the social order by both races, a process that normalized structural oppression (Patterson, 2018).

Based on this Gramscian analysis, the study identifies two primary forms of economic discrimination present in the text: (1) inequality in the work and wage system, (2) barriers to social and economic mobility. Each of these forms exemplifies how hegemony operates across material, structural, and ideological dimensions to sustain the economic subordination of Black characters in *The Help*.

To better understand the primary manifestations of economic discrimination in the novel and their relationship to Gramsci's concepts, the table below summarizes the key findings identified in this study.

Table 1. Forms of Economic Discrimination in *The Help*

Form of Economic Discrimination	Textual Evidence	Gramscian Concept	Interpretation
Inequality in the work and wage system	"I get paid forty-three dollars every Friday, which come to \$172 a month ... I got thirteen dollars and fifty cents a week left for my	Material coercion	Black maids endure economic exploitation through unfair wages and exclusion from labor protections, reflecting structural

	groceries, my clothes, getting my hair done, and tithing to the church” (Stockett, 2009, p. 32).		economic dependence.
	“Mama was a maid. My granmama was a house slave” (Stockett, 2009, p. 277).	Ideological consent	The persistence of domestic labor mirrors the ideological continuation of slavery, internalizing subordination as natural.
Barriers to social and economic mobility	“But the colored part a town, we one big anthill, surrounded by state land that ain’t for sale. As our numbers get bigger, we cant’t spread out. Our part a town just get thicker.” (Stockett, 2009, p. 24).	Institutionalized coercion	Segregation serves as an economic mechanism that limits access to property and resources, thereby reinforcing class immobility.
	“When I tell my seventh-grade teacher I ain’t coming back to school cause I got to help out my mama, Miss Ross just about cried. ‘You’re the smartest one in the class, Aibileen,’ she say.” (Stockett, 2009, p. 43).	Cultural domination	Denied access to education perpetuates intergenerational inequality and the reproduction of social hierarchy.
	“‘We don’t want a change nothing around here,’ ... thinking about all the things we don’t want to change.” (Stockett, 2009, p. 248)	Ideological consent	Internalized fear of change illustrates how consent perpetuates hegemonic stability and suppresses social resistance.

Note. Quotations are taken from *The Help* (Stockett, 2009) and analyzed using Antonio Gramsci's framework of hegemony to illustrate the economic discrimination faced by Black characters.

This table highlights how economic inequality, ideological legacies, and structural barriers interlock to maintain the hegemonic dominance of the White class in the American South. It also serves as a foundation for the detailed analysis presented below.

The current study takes a different approach from previous analyses of *The Help*, which mainly concentrated on racial or psychological factors (Iban et al., 2019; Maurilla, 2018; Szulkowska, 2017b). Instead, it emphasizes the economic aspects of hegemony, illustrating how labor relations and material dependence strengthen ideological domination.

Inequalities in The Work and Wage System

In the early 1960s, Mississippi was among the Southern states that continued to uphold the legacy of the Jim Crow system, even after its legal abolition (Cofield et al., 2025). Although segregation laws were formally repealed, racial separation and economic discrimination remained deeply rooted in social and institutional practices. In this social order, Black people, particularly women, were confined to domestic and low-paying jobs, such as housekeeping and childcare, with limited access to formal education or professional opportunities (Phillips-Cunningham & Popp, 2022). Despite the enactment of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which established a minimum wage in the United States, domestic workers, many of whom were Black women, were excluded from its protection (Palmer, 1995). As Sturkey (2024) notes, this exclusion was not only economic but also ideological, as Southern society perpetuated the belief that Black labor was naturally suited for servitude in White households. Their economic vulnerability was not only a product of discrimination in pay but also of a structural system that limited their access to education and alternative employment.

This systemic inequality is illustrated through Aibileen Clark's account of her daily economic struggles:

"I work for Miss Leefolt eight to four, six days a week except Saturdays. I get paid forty-three dollars every Friday, which come to \$172 a month. That means after I pay the light bill, the water bill, the gas bill, and the telephone bill, I got thirteen dollars and fifty cents a week left for my groceries, my clothes, getting my hair done, and tithing to the church" (Stockett, 2009, p. 32).

This passage highlights how Black domestic workers endured long hours in exploitative conditions while remaining trapped in poverty. In contrast, White women like Skeeter Phelan had the means to pursue higher education and careers in writing, demonstrating how class and race intersect to shape access to economic opportunities. The disparity between Aibileen and Skeeter, both women with intellectual potential, emphasizes that education and the ability to move up the social ladder were privileges afforded primarily to Whites.

The inherited social structure that perpetuates this inequality is acknowledged by Aibileen herself when she states, "*Mama was a maid. My granmama was a house slave*" (Stockett, 2009, p. 277). This statement highlights the continuity between slavery and the domestic labor system of the 1960s. This connection underscores the reality that, despite legal emancipation, true economic freedom remained unattainable for Black people.

The legacy of servitude did not vanish. Instead, it adapted, transferring its ideology from plantations to households. When Skeeter later asks Aibileen, "*Did you...ever have dreams of being something else?*" Aibileen responds, "*No ma'am, I didn't.*" (Stockett, 2009, p. 277). This exchange illustrates the internalization of hegemonic values, what Gramsci (1971) calls consent, in which the oppressed unconsciously accept their position as natural and inevitable. This internalization stifles not only individual aspirations but also collective potential for change. Aibileen's reflections expose the troubling acceptance of societal roles that reinforce oppression. By understanding her perspective, readers can engage with the broader implications of race, gender, and class dynamics, prompting critical conversations about the need to dismantle such inequities and reclaim agency.

Minnie Jackson's story further exposes the material aspect of exploitation. When asked about her previous wage, she admits, "*How much was she paying you?*" "*Dollar an hour,*" I say, *feeling kind of ashamed. Five years and not even minimum wage*" (Stockett, 2009, p. 73). Through this description, one can see the deep-rooted dependence shaped by racial and economic constraints. Despite facing unfair wages, many Black women chose to continue working because their employment options were severely limited. Systemic barriers to education, economic exclusion, and pervasive racial stigma effectively restricted them from exploring alternative career paths. Consequently, these women found themselves increasingly tied to domestic labor, which emerged as the only viable means of survival. This situation not only underscores the challenges and restricts their opportunities. As a result, Black women remained in a position where they had little choice but to rely on domestic work to support themselves and their families.

Beyond wage inequality, Gramsci's concept of coercion is also visible through social control and fear. Minny's encounter with Hilly Holbrook demonstrates how reputation and social influence operate as instruments of hegemony:

"I tell her 'No thank you, Miss Hilly.' And so she say she pay me fifty cent more and I say, 'No ma'am. No thank you.' Then she break my back, Miss Celia. She tell me she know bout the Childs and the Rawleys and all them others that turn me down. Said it was cause she'd made sure everybody knew I was a thief. I've never stole a thing in my life but she told everybody I did and wasn't nobody in town gone hire a ass-mouthing thieving Nigra for a maid and I might as well go head and work for her for free" (Stockett, 2009, p. 648).

Here, Hilly weaponizes gossip and community reputation as tools of economic coercion, leveraging social dynamics to exert control over those around her. The white elite's practice of social surveillance is a deliberate strategy designed to discipline and isolate Black workers, effectively ensuring their compliance without resorting to overt

violence. This subtle form of oppression underscores the insidious nature of power dynamics within the community. In Gramscian terms, such mechanisms illustrate how the dominant class skillfully combines forms of coercion and consent to maintain its control over the subaltern population. By utilizing social pressure and the threat of reputational damage, the elite reinforces a structure where dissent is silenced, and complicity in the quest for agency among marginalized individuals. This fear and mistrust thrive, making it increasingly difficult for the oppressed to unite and challenge their circumstances.

The precariousness of this economic order is further illustrated by Aibileen's reflection after being dismissed from her job, "*I come home that morning, after I been fired, and stood outside my house with my new work shoes on. The shoes my mama paid a month's worth a light bill for*" (Stockett, 2009, p. 289). This poignant moment highlights the fragility of economic stability for Black women in the South. Losing one's job meant immediate poverty and familial hardship. The quote exposes the complete absence of structural support for Black workers, who relied entirely on the goodwill of White employers for survival.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that *The Help* portrays economic inequality as a complex intersection of race, class, and gender. Through a combination of coercive control, economic dependence, and the internalization of submissive ideologies, white society in the American South perpetuated its hegemony. In Gramsci's (1971) framework, this reflects the ruling class's ability to maintain dominance not solely through material power, but through moral and intellectual leadership that defines servitude as natural and unchangeable. Characters like Aibileen and Minny thus embody the lived reality of a hegemonic order that normalizes exploitation as a legitimate and inevitable part of social life.

Barriers to Social and Economic Mobility

While the previous section examined wage inequality as a direct form of exploitation, the barriers to social and economic mobility depicted in *The Help* reveal how social segregation operates as a subtle mechanism for preserving the economic power of the White class. In this novel, the Black community in Jackson, Mississippi, is illustrated as both physically and socially separate from White society. Aibileen, one of the characters, poignantly describes the division:

"So Jackson's just one white neighborhood after next and more springing up down the road. But the colored part a town, we one big anthill, surrounded by state land that ain't for sale. As our numbers get bigger, we cant't spread out. Our part a town just get thicker." (Stockett, 2009, p. 24).

The reality of racial segregation is emphasized in this description, demonstrating that it goes beyond being just a social issue. It is also a systematic economic tool designed to limit the spatial and economic opportunities available to the Black community (Pettigrew, 2025). With restricted access to land, public facilities, and essential resources,

the Black residents find themselves confined in a situation that perpetuates their economic stagnation.

According to Antonio Gramsci (1971), such a scenario exemplifies a form of institutionalized coercion. This is not coercion through overt physical violence but rather through structural mechanisms that systematically constrain the lives and opportunities of oppressed groups. The limiting of space for the Black community in Jackson is a reflection of broader societal structures that reinforce inequality and maintain the dominance of the White class, ensuring that the economic divide remains firmly in place (Keating, 2023). The novel invites readers to recognize how these barriers inhibit not only individual aspirations but also the collective potential of an entire community striving for equality and upward mobility.

Another aspect of social deprivation can be seen in education, which is often viewed as a pathway out of poverty. Aibileen's story highlights this struggle when she recalls how she had to leave school at a young age to help her mother. She expresses, *"I been writing my prayers since I was in junior high. When I tell my seventh-grade teacher I ain't coming back to school cause I got to help out my mama, Miss Ross just about cried. 'You're the smartest one in the class, Aibileen,' she say."* (Stockett, 2009, p. 43). This snippet not only reveals her personal sacrifice but also reflects the systemic issues faced by Black women. Their roles as primary breadwinners often force them to prioritize work over education, trapping them in a cycle of economic dependence. In contrast, White women like Hilly and Elizabeth have the privilege of pursuing personal goals, backed by their husbands' steady incomes. This discrepancy highlights how Black women labor tirelessly with little chance of significant economic improvement.

Drawing on Gramsci's theory of hegemony (1971), we can observe how dominant ideologies shape perceptions of social and economic inequalities, rendering them appear natural and unworthy of challenge. Aibileen's experience encapsulates these challenges, illustrating how deeply rooted social structures hinder true progress and perpetuate cycles of deprivation for Black women and their families.

The next economic dimension of deprivation is poignantly illustrated through the experience of Yule May Crookle, a black mother who epitomizes the struggles faced by many in similar circumstances. Employed as a maid by Hilly Holbrook, Yule May finds herself in an incredibly difficult position as she strives to secure higher education for her twin sons. Despite her tireless efforts and those of her husband, they are unable to accumulate enough money to send both boys to college. In a heart-wrenching letter to Sketeer, Yule May expresses the emotional turmoil of her situation, stating,

"For ten years, my husband and I have saved our money to send them to Tougaloo College, but as hard as we worked, we still didn't have enough for both. My boys are equally as smart, equally eager for an education. But we only had the money for one and I ask you, how do you choose which of your twin sons should go to college and which should take a job spreading tar?" (Stockett, 2009, p. 478).

The struggles that Black mothers, such as Yule May, face in their lives are powerfully illustrated by this narrative, who labor for years yet find themselves

constrained by systemic economic inequalities. The stark reality is that the unequal economic system severely limits access to higher education, which is often viewed as the primary pathway to achieving social mobility and a better life.

Yule May's situation can be understood as an example of ideological domination, particularly through the perspective of Gramsci's framework (1971). This suggests that her struggles are rooted in the broader systems of power and control that shape societal beliefs and behaviors. The ruling class perpetuates a system where disparity is maintained, and poverty is portrayed as an inevitable condition of life rather than a result of systemic oppression and inequality. This situation illustrates the broader societal issues at play, highlighting the need for awareness and action to dismantle such economic barriers that hinder the prospects of countless families striving for a better future.

The mechanisms of domination function not only through social and economic restrictions but also through the internalization of hegemonic values that render inequality both natural and moral in the eyes of society (Rizwan & Qureshi, 2025). Aibileen and other Black workers are depicted as bearing the dual burden of material poverty and profound psychological oppression. In a pivotal conversation between Aibileen and Minny, they discuss the daunting prospect of finally telling the truth about their experiences working for white families. Minny's reflection, "*We don't want a change nothing around here, 'Aibileen says and we're both quiet, thinking about all the things we don't want to change.*" (Stockett, 2009, p. 248) underscores their reluctance to embrace change. Aibileen echoes this sentiment, leading to a heavy silence as they both contemplate the myriad aspects of their lives and community that they instinctively hesitate to challenge. Here, Stockett's narrative strategy highlights the deep-seated impact of societal norms on individuals. By portraying fear and despair, she shows how these emotions can inhibit the desire for change, making it seem perilous. The characters' struggles reveal the risks of challenging the status quo, emphasizing that the path to progress, while necessary, is fraught with risks.

In the following scene, Stockett illustrates how racial ideology operates within the domestic sphere as part of the mechanism of hegemony. Miss Leefolt unconsciously transmits the idea of social boundaries between Whites and Blacks to her daughter.

"This is not your bathroom!" Baby Girl wagging her head. "My bafroom!"

Miss Leefolt snatch her up, give her a pop on the leg.

"Miss Leefolt, she don't know what she do-"

"Get back in the house, Aibileen!"

I hate it, but I go in the kitchen. I stand in the middle, leave the door open behind me.

"I did not raise you to use the colored bathroom!" (Stockett, 2009, p. 184).

This scene illustrates how the process of internalizing the ideology of subordination occurs across generations, where discrimination is learned not through direct coercion, but through social customs and morals that seem right. From Gramsci's (1971) perspective, this represents a form of consent, whereby the unconscious acceptance of the dominant ideology occurs in both the oppressed and the oppressor.

Miss Leefolt acts according to the hegemonic social norms that assert racial segregation as natural, while Aibileen, despite her awareness of the injustice, feels compelled to comply in order to keep her job. Thus, the novel demonstrates how the hegemonic order is upheld through everyday social mechanisms, not merely through legislation or violence, but through the transmission of values that normalize inequality. This process ensures that structures of economic and social domination persist even without explicit coercive intervention.

In addition to the domestic sphere, hegemonic ideology also operates in the public sphere, especially when Black communities face racial violence and lack effective means to oppose it. When news of the murder of civil rights activist Medgar Evers spread in the Jackson community, the public response illustrates the difference between anger and entrenched despair. Jessup angrily exclaimed,

“That is not enough!” Jessup say, banging his fist on his hand. “They shot him in the back like a dog!”

“Jessup.” Deacon raise his hand. “Tonight is for prayer. For the family.

For the lawyers on the case. I understand your anger, but, son-“

“Prayer? You mean y’all just gonna sit around and pray about it?” (Stockett, 2009, p. 402)

Stockett illustrates the moral dilemma faced by the Black community, torn between the desire to fight back and the belief that patience and prayer are the only safe options. In the context of Gramsci’s (1971) theory, this reflects the highest form of ideological consent, where the dominant system succeeds in instilling the belief that social change should be waited for, not fought for. The church, which is supposed to be a space of solidarity and liberation, instead becomes an arena where moral obedience to the hegemonic order is reproduced.

Stockett demonstrates that hegemony in the American South is rooted not only in economic and social relations but also in spiritual and emotional control. Jessup’s despair symbolizes resistance, yet it remains stunted by fear and the internalization of conservative values. In an oppressive society, prayer becomes not just an expression of faith but also a passive form of resistance, tamed by the prevailing power structure.

Through this series of events, *The Help* reveals how social segregation, economic restrictions, and the internalization of hegemonic values are interconnected in maintaining racial inequality. The social limitations imposed on Black characters directly hinder their economic mobility, while psychological and spiritual dependence reinforce a subordinate position that is difficult to escape. Utilizing Gramsci’s perspective, Stockett (2009) highlights not only economic exploitation but also the subtle mechanisms of ideological power that render injustice a seemingly natural aspect of everyday life.

These findings not only deepen the understanding of racialized economic hierarchies in Southern American literature but also demonstrate the continuing relevance of Gramsci’s hegemony theory in examining systemic oppression. However, as this study focuses on a single literary text, future research could expand the analysis by comparing multiple works or integrating additional theoretical perspectives.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the novel *The Help* by Stockett reveals that the economic discrimination faced by the Black characters reflects a system of social and economic hegemony upheld by the White population in Jackson, Mississippi, during the 1960s. By referring to Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, coercion is experienced by Black people through exploitative work systems, wage inequality, and social segregation that restrict their access to education and employment opportunities. In contrast, consent is reflected in the internal acceptance of a social order that normalizes inequality as a natural and moral condition. In this context, Stockett illustrates how white supremacy is sustained through unjust economic policies and social practices that are deeply embedded in the daily life of the Southerners.

The two main forms of economic discrimination examined are inequality in the work and wage system, as well as barriers to social and economic mobility. These factors illustrate how material exploitation and ideological control collaborate to perpetuate structural inequality. In the context of Black life in Mississippi, this domination was reinforced by the enduring legacy of slavery, which positioned Black labor as a crucial part of the white household economy while still relegating Black individuals to a lower social class. Through characters like Aibileen and Minny, Stockett demonstrates how the cultural legacy of slavery fosters a sense of superiority among white individuals who feel entitled to uphold the social hierarchy. Thus, Stockett's *The Help* not only critiques the Southern racial order that naturalizes economic subordination, but also exposes how everyday domestic life in Mississippi embodies the continuation of systemic inequality.

This study contributes to existing research on *The Help* by highlighting the economic dimension of hegemony, an aspect often overlooked by previous analyses that focused primarily on social, psychological, or racial dimensions. It demonstrates that Gramsci's theory remains a relevant framework for understanding how economic and ideological relations intersect in Southern U.S literature. For future research, it would be relevant to extend this analysis to other works of literature by American authors to examine the continuity of hegemonic structures in different historical contexts. Comparative or interdisciplinary studies could also explore the intersections between race, gender, and class, or apply the Gramscian framework to contemporary narratives to observe how economic and cultural domination persists in new forms.

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