

Born Free But In Chains: A Study Of Kathryn Stockett's Novel The Help

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Abstract: It is a well known fact that there are multitudinous people around us fighting for their rights and most importantly in a need to be treated as equally as the other. A rebellion for equality has seldom reached fruition. The oppressors and the oppressed may come together for a compromise but never have the former wholeheartedly embraced the latter. Hence, it is safe to say that as long as there exists a wide difference in the living quality and conditions of people, there will be a presence of a dominant class and a recessive one. Kathryn Stockett's The Help puts forth the theme of racial discrimination and inequality faced by the black maids under their 'superior' white masters and it also shows the various distinctions among the white women themselves. Various pieces of literature have portrayed the underlying differences among people and brought into light the absence of equality in their lives. The paper endeavours to shed light on this topic with reference to Stockett's novel The Help and other such references from literature.

I. INTRODUCTION

The theme of 'Equality' is treated like the very concept of 'God' where people accept its presence without any solid evidence to prove it. The issue of whether God is present or not is a totally different matter of debate but as to whether Equality is present or not is to be discussed through this paper. When Equality is discussed we tend to forget that there are various types of equality that exist among the different strata of society; be it gender equality, civil equality and political equality and so on. This implies that achieving equality is a herculean task and there are several factors that have to be taken into account while analyzing it. Inequality has existed since time immemorial and certain excerpts from Plato's *Republic* serves as a solid proof to this statement.

"Plato identifies political justice as harmony in a structured political body. An ideal society consists of three main classes of people—producers (craftsmen, farmers, artisans, etc.), auxiliaries (warriors), and guardians (rulers); a society is just when relations between these three classes are right. Each group must perform its appropriate function, and only that function and each must be in the right position of power in relation to the others. Rulers must rule, auxiliaries must uphold rulers' convictions, and producers must limit

themselves to exercising whatever skills nature granted them (farming, blacksmithing, painting, etc.) Justice is a principle of specialization: a principle that requires that each person fulfill the societal role to which nature fitted him and not interfere in any other business".

Plato was of the opinion that the class distinction in society is inevitable and also essential for complete harmony. He also believed that every individual should act according to the class to which they belong to and not interfere with the actions of people from other classes especially the higher ones. In the form of a set of rules for societal harmony, Plato put forward the ideas of class distinction and inequality. To further strengthen his argument, Plato justified it by drawing a comparison between the three-part structure of the soul and the three classes of a society.

"At the end of Book IV, Plato tries to show that individual justice mirrors political justice. He claims that the soul of every individual has a three-part structure analogous to the three classes of a society. There is a rational part of the soul, which seeks after truth and is responsible for our philosophical inclinations; a spirited part of the soul, which desires honor and is responsible for our feelings of anger and indignation; and an appetitive part of the soul, which lusts after all sorts of things, but money most of all (since money must be used to

fulfill any other base desire). The just individual can be defined in analogy with the just society; the three parts of his soul achieve the requisite relationships of power and influence in regard to one another. In a just individual, the rational part of the soul rules, the spirited part of the soul supports this rule, and the appetitive part of the soul submits and follows wherever reason leads. Put more plainly: in a just individual, the entire soul aims at fulfilling the desires of the rational part, much as in the just society the entire community aims at fulfilling whatever the rulers will”.

Plato, despite being one of the greatest scholars believed in the theory that it is the duty of the people of the lower classes to obey their rulers for the better functioning of a community. As wrong as it sounds today, unfortunately, many people hold Plato’s opinion even in this so-called ‘fast-paced world’. Contrary to Plato’s belief, these class distinctions will result only in further complications and disharmony.

II. THE BLATANT INEQUALITY IN THE HELP

The Help further reiterates the theme of inequality by discussing the hardships faced by the black maids in the white households. Surprisingly, Kathryn Stockett also exposes the differences among the white women themselves. In the novel, Hilly Holbrook develops a feeling of hostility against Celia Foote because the latter had married Hilly’s former boyfriend. However, as the story progresses we realize that keeping her personal reasons apart Hilly and her friends despise Celia because of her differences in demeanor and etiquette when compared to them. Celia’s lack of knowledge regarding the largely unspoken rules of middle-class white conduct is due to the reason that she comes from a poor, “white trash” family but marries into a wealthy one. Since Celia is unaware of how white women are supposed to treat their maids, she treats her maid Minny with more respect than others.

Another such example from the book is that of Elizabeth Leefolt, who despite belonging to Hilly’s elite circle is in a constant struggle to be at par with her wealthier counterparts. Despite being born in a “good family”, her lack of monetary inheritance and her husband’s low income stops her from fully integrating into the wealthy high society. In order to hide her financial troubles, Elizabeth adopts symbols of class, the most important one being the hiring of Aibileen as her maid even when she could hardly afford to pay her. Elizabeth does so because a black maid confers societal status to an average Southern woman in those times. Even the narrator of the book, Eugenia Phelan, also called as Miss Skeeter who formerly belonged to Hilly’s circle of friends is later kept at a distance because of her involvement with the black maids. As a white woman, she is expected not to help the maids or as Hilly puts it, to not “stir up trouble”. However, she goes forward with her involvement with the maids and as a result is treated as an outcast by Hilly and her friends. This is an accurate example of how inequality stems not only from the differences in colour but also from the differences in ideologies. The psychology of the dominating individual could be similar to that of a bully where a sense of insecurity overpowers the individual making them curb the rights of another person to feel less threatened or rather feel powerful.

III. OTHER EXAMPLES FROM LITERATURE

Inequality, as mentioned before can be of many types but the most conventional one stems from the differences in the living standards of the people. These differences pressurize the people into living a life that is considered to be ‘acceptable’ to the society. The most accurate example of this can be seen in Jane Austen’s novels, especially in ‘Pride and Prejudice’. Mrs Bennet dreams of marrying off her daughters into a wealthy family to raise their own standards and assert superiority over the others. In the novel, women married primarily for status and wealth and there was a substantial amount of class snobbery associated with it. The social world depicted in the novel is highly stratified and laden with class struggle and pretension. Another example is from Toni Morrison’s ‘The Bluest Eye’. The final predicament of Pecola Breedlove in the novel predominantly arises from the oppression that she faces because of her skin colour. Fair skin and blue eyes are treated as the only definition of beauty. There is the character of a little boy in the novel named ‘Junior’ who derives great pleasure in terrorizing Pecola. This is an example of how racial discrimination has penetrated even into the young minds.

IV. CONCLUSION

In India, the most commonly seen discrimination is between that of the dark skinned and the fair skinned people. Movies and advertisements play a major role in propagating fairness as the ‘only’ definition of beauty. This pressurizes the individual into taking desperate measures to fit into the society. Movies that revolve around the common story line of a dusky woman who is ignored by the hero and later undergoes a physical transformation to win his approval only further influence people into thinking that ‘black is not beautiful’. This is just one example from the several other discriminations that are faced by the people of our country. Another factor that divides mankind is religion and scientists claim that it has been doing so for the past 2000 years. It can be rightly said that despite being a progressive country, equality still remains as a far-fetched dream for us. Let alone India, equality is an illusion for everyone because humans are imperfect and are in constant competition with each other. The society has dictated a set of rules and programmed our mind in such a way that we act by these rules involuntarily. However, the least that can be expected from what remains of equality is equal opportunities for everyone. This can only be achieved when that sect of the society that enjoys the privileges becomes conscious of the problems faced by their less fortunate counterparts. *The Help* is a novel that explores racial discrimination that was faced by the black maids working in white households in the early 1960s and Kathryn Stockett paints a vivid picture of the brutal environment that these black maids and their families lived in. The novel breaks all illusion that we have of an equal world with people living in perfect harmony with each other. The thirst for power and the innate tendency to outshine one’s peers results in an unequal distribution of resources and ultimately gives rise to a discordant community.

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