



The Portrayal of Racism in The Help Movie

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to analyze the portrayal of racism in *The Help*, a film that reflects racial inequality rooted in social systems, everyday interactions, and media representation.

Methodology – This research employed a descriptive qualitative design using purposive sampling. The data were selected from spoken dialogues, monologues, and the movie's narrative voice. The data were collected through documentation and note-taking techniques, then identified, classified, and analyzed using Carmichael and Hamilton's theory of racism.

Findings – The findings reveal that Black characters in *The Help* experience two types of racism, namely individual racism and institutional racism. Individual racism is reflected in direct insults, humiliation, and unequal interpersonal treatment. In contrast, institutional racism is represented through social norms, policies, and legal structures that maintain racial segregation and restrict the rights of Black individuals.

Novelty – This study contributes to previous research by providing a focused analysis of *The Help* using Carmichael and Hamilton's theory, especially in distinguishing racism as both a personal and structural problem.

Significance – This study is expected to benefit students, researchers, and educators in literature, film studies, and social studies by improving their understanding of racism as a complex social issue.

Keywords: Black characters; Racism; The help

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1. Introduction

Racism is a social phenomenon that continues to shape unequal relations between racial groups in many societies (Brown et al., 2025). It is not only expressed through hatred, verbal abuse, or direct violence, but also through stereotypes, exclusion, prejudice, and unequal treatment that become part of everyday social life (Banaji et al., 2021). Racism places certain racial groups in a superior position while other groups are treated as inferior, powerless, or less worthy of respect (Ellefsen et al., 2022). This problem becomes more serious when racist attitudes are accepted as normal and repeated through daily interactions, social habits, and public institutions (Zhang et al., 2022). As a result, marginalized groups often experience limited freedom, unequal opportunities, and the loss of dignity in both private and public spaces (Ikawati, 2018).

Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) classify racism into two main types, namely individual racism and institutional racism. Individual racism refers to racist actions committed by individuals toward people from a certain racial group. This type of racism can be seen through insults, humiliation, rejection, threats, violence, and other forms of direct discriminatory treatment. Meanwhile, institutional racism refers to discrimination that is embedded in institutions, laws, rules, norms, and social systems. Unlike individual racism, institutional racism is often more difficult to challenge because it does not always appear through one specific person's action. Instead, it works through accepted structures and practices that continuously produce unequal treatment for marginalized racial groups.

The issue of racism is also widely represented in literary works, including films (Manurung et al., 2021; Nazar et al., 2024; Sinaga et al., 2020). Films are important cultural texts because they not only provide entertainment but also reflect social realities, historical experiences, and power relations in society (Nugroho, 2023; Wicahyani et al., 2023). Through characters, dialogues, conflicts, and settings, films can show how racism operates in everyday life and how marginalized groups experience discrimination (Saleem et al., 2026). *The Help* is one of the films that portrays racial inequality in the United States during the 1960s. Set in Jackson, Mississippi, the film explores the lives of Black domestic workers who serve white families and care for their children. Although these Black women contribute greatly to white households, they are still treated as inferior because of their race.

The Help is important to analyze because it presents racism as both a personal and structural problem. The film shows how Black domestic workers experience direct discrimination from white characters through insults, humiliation, suspicion, and unequal treatment. At the same time, the film also portrays how racism is supported by social rules, racial norms, and institutional practices that restrict the lives of Black communities. These representations show that racism is not only caused by individual prejudice, but also maintained by a larger social system that gives power and privilege to white people (Brown & Homan, 2024). Therefore, analyzing *The Help* can help reveal how individual and institutional racism work together to control the position, freedom, and dignity of Black characters in the film.

Several previous studies have examined racism in literary works and films using different approaches. Maharani et al. (2022) analyzed racism in Antebellum using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and found that the film represents discrimination, racial inequality, and Black struggle against oppression. Yusuf et al. (2023) examined *Till* and identified several forms of racism, including interpersonal, institutional, structural, and societal racism, violence, and discrimination. Kumaunang et al. (2022) studied Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and revealed that racism appears through rejection, insults, and violence, which affect the mental health of African American characters. Hasan et al. (2021) analyzed *Heart of Darkness* through a

postcolonial lens and examined the relationships among racism, colonialism, and imperialism. Saputri (2023) examined Green Book through a sociolinguistic approach and found individual, interpersonal, institutional, structural, and cultural racism, as well as humanity in character interactions. Although these studies contribute to the discussion of racism, they have not specifically examined *The Help* by using Carmichael and Hamilton's theory of individual and institutional racism. Therefore, this study fills the gap by focusing on how *The Help* represents racism through direct discriminatory actions and through social systems that maintain racial inequality.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze the types of racism portrayed in *The Help*, focusing on individual and institutional racism. This study examines how Black characters experience racism in their daily interactions with white characters and how racial inequality is maintained through social rules, norms, and institutional practices. By applying Carmichael and Hamilton's theory, this study is expected to provide a more focused understanding of how *The Help* represents racism as both a personal and structural problem in society. The discussion emphasizes the forms of individual racism and institutional racism experienced by Black characters in the film.

2. Methods

This research used a descriptive qualitative method because it focused on analyzing the characters' dialogues that contained types of racism in the movie. Qualitative research is used because this study focuses on interpreting and understanding social phenomena as represented in the movie. The data source for this study is a film titled *The Help*, directed by Tate Taylor and released in 2011. The data consist of dialogue, monologue, and narrative voice of the Black characters. Focusing on Black characters who experienced individual and institutional racism. The data collection method was observation. The film *The Help* was watched several times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the context in which the Black characters occurred. The dialogue, monologue, and narrative voice of the Black characters were then analyzed to identify the types of racism. In analyzing the data, this study applied the theory of racism types by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), which classifies racism into individual and institutional forms. The analysis identified the forms of racism in the selected data and classified them into appropriate types. Then, each piece of data was interpreted to explain how racism is represented in the movie.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

The results show that racism in *The Help* is represented through two main types, namely individual racism and institutional racism. Individual racism is reflected in direct interactions between white and Black characters, such as insults, humiliation, suspicion, and unequal treatment. These actions are often driven by personal prejudice and stereotypes that position Black individuals as inferior, unclean, or untrustworthy. In the film, this type of racism appears in everyday situations, particularly in the relationship between white employers and Black domestic workers. The findings indicate that individual racism operates at the interpersonal level, where discriminatory attitudes are expressed through language, behavior, and social interaction.

Institutional racism is shown through broader systems, social norms, and regulations that maintain racial inequality. The film portrays segregation through rules related to separate facilities, restrictions on social interaction, and limitations on freedom of expression and participation. These practices are supported by legal and societal frameworks that normalize discrimination and enforce unequal treatment. Institutional racism in the film is reflected in formal policies and social expectations that control the behavior of Black individuals and

restrict their rights. The findings suggest that racism in *The Help* is a systemic issue, where power and privilege are unequally distributed, and discrimination persists across different aspects of social life. The types of racism can be summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1 - Types of Racism in *The Help* Movie

Types of Racism	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Examples
Individual Racism	3	37.5%	MINNY: "Forgive me, Lord, but I'm gonna have to kill that woman, Aibileen. Now she gone to putting pencil marks on my toilet paper. " (Taylor, 2011, 0:10:13-0:10:21)
Institutional Racism	5	62.5%	AIBILEEN: " They set my cousin Shinelle's car on fire, just 'cause she went down to the voting station. " (Taylor, 2011, 0:35:57-0:36:50)
Total	8	100%	

Based on Table 1, the types of racism portrayed in *The Help* were classified into individual racism and institutional racism. The table shows that there are eight data points, consisting of three instances of individual racism and five instances of institutional racism. This indicates that institutional racism is more dominant than individual racism. These findings suggest that racism in the movie is deeply embedded in social systems and institutions.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Individual Racism

In the movie *The Help*, individual racism can be seen through the racist treatment of one individual toward another. This type of racism is shown in the way white characters directly insult, humiliate, and discriminate against Black characters. The racist actions occur in daily interactions, especially between white employers and Black domestic workers. These actions show how personal prejudice influences the way Black characters are treated as inferior in social relationships.

Data 1

Minny : "Forgive me, Lord, but I'm gonna have to kill that woman, Aibileen. **Now she gone to putting pencil marks on my toilet paper.**"

Aibileen : "Did she?"

Minny : "Mm-hmm."

(Taylor, 2011, 0:10:13-0:10:21)

Data 1 illustrates individual racism through the interaction between Minny and Aibileen. In this scene, Minny expresses her frustration with Hilly's behaviour, particularly the act of leaving pencil marks on the toilet paper to monitor whether Minny uses the same bathroom facilities. This action reflects discriminatory treatment from a white individual toward a Black individual, which aligns with the concept of individual racism proposed by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967). Hilly's behavior is driven by personal prejudice and racist beliefs, especially the assumption that Black people are "dirty" and carry diseases. As a result, she treats Minny with suspicion and denies her the basic dignity of using the same facilities, reinforcing a clear social boundary between them.

Furthermore, Hilly's actions can be understood as forms of control and humiliation in everyday interaction. By marking the toilet paper, she creates a system of surveillance that

limits Minny's freedom and constantly reminds her of her inferior position. Although the act may seem small, it carries a deeper meaning as it reflects how racism operates subtly in domestic spaces. This scene shows that individual racism is not only expressed through explicit insults or violence, but also through everyday actions that degrade and marginalize Black individuals. It highlights how personal prejudice can shape behaviour and maintain unequal power relations between white employers and Black domestic workers.

Data 2

Elizabeth : "Hilly, I wish you'd just go use the bathroom."
Hilly : "I'm fine."
Missus Walters : "Oh, **she's just upset because the nigra uses the guest bath and so do we.**"

(Taylor, 2011, 0:14:59-0:15:07)

Data 2 illustrates individual racism through Hilly's discomfort when she realizes that Aibileen, a Black maid, uses the same guest bathroom as white guests. Although Hilly does not directly say her objection in this dialogue, Missus Walters reveals the reason for her discomfort by saying that Hilly is upset because "the nigra uses the guest bath and so do we." This statement shows a racist attitude because it positions Aibileen as someone who is not worthy of sharing the same facility with white people. Hilly's reaction is based on racial prejudice, especially the belief that Black people are unclean. Therefore, her refusal to use the bathroom reflects how personal prejudice can influence everyday behaviour and create discriminatory treatment.

This scene also shows how individual racism can manifest through speech, attitudes, and social interactions. Aibileen hears the conversation, but she cannot respond because of the unequal power relation between Black domestic workers and white employers. Her silence reflects the limited position of Black characters in a racist social environment. Hilly's discomfort and Missus Walters' racist remark humiliate Aibileen and reinforce the idea that Black people are inferior in white social spaces. Although this act occurs in a domestic setting, it reveals how racism becomes part of daily life. Therefore, Data 2 shows individual racism because Hilly's personal prejudice leads her to reject the idea of sharing the same bathroom with a Black person.

Data 3

Minny : "Aibileen, I done went and did it now. I went to Miss Hilly's house this afternoon."
Aibileen : "Why Minny?"
Minny : "She done told every white woman in town I'm a thief. Said I stole a candelabra. But I got her back."

(Taylor, 2011, 0:38:00-0:38:18)

Data 3 presents a strong example of individual racism through Hilly's actions toward Minny after their conflict. In this scene, Minny tells Aibileen that Hilly has spread false accusations, telling other white women in town that Aibileen is a thief who stole a candelabra. This act reflects direct and intentional discrimination carried out by one individual against another, which fits the concept of individual racism. Hilly's decision to accuse Minny without evidence shows how racial prejudice influences her judgment and behaviour. Instead of treating Minny fairly, Hilly uses her social position to damage Minny's reputation. The accusation is not only a personal attack but also a reflection of the stereotype that Black individuals are dishonest or untrustworthy, which reinforces negative racial assumptions (Brewster et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Hilly's action demonstrates how individual racism can have serious social and economic consequences for the victim. By spreading slander among white employers,

Hilly attempts to prevent Minny from finding another job, effectively controlling her livelihood. This shows that individual racism is not limited to verbal insults or everyday discrimination, but can also extend to actions that harm a person's social standing and economic survival (Braveman et al., 2022). Hilly's behaviour is motivated by personal revenge, particularly after Minny used her toilet, which she considers unacceptable due to her racist beliefs. This scene highlights how individual prejudice can be translated into harmful actions that marginalize Black individuals and maintain unequal power relations.

3.2.2. Institutional Racism

In the movie *The Help*, institutional racism can be seen through social systems, policies, and institutions that restrict the lives of Black people. This type of racism is shown in the way Black domestic workers are separated from white people through rules about public facilities and social behaviour. These rules are not only based on personal prejudice, but also supported by the wider society that normalizes racial segregation. As a result, Black characters experience discrimination not only from individuals but also from a system that limits their rights, freedom, and dignity.

Data 4

Skeeter	: <i>"We never finished our conversation at Elizabeth's. About the book want to write? I'd really like to interview you, Aibileen. I know it's scary."</i>
Aibileen	: <i>"They set my cousin Shinelle's car on fire, just 'cause she went down to the voting station."</i>
Skeeter	: <i>"A book like this has never been written before."</i>
Aibileen	: <i>"Cause there's a reason. I do this with you, I might as well burn my own house down."</i>
Skeeter	: <i>"I promise we'll be careful."</i>
Aibileen	: <i>"This already ain't careful, Miss Skeeter. You not knowing that is what's scaring me the most. Scare me more than Jim Crow."</i>

(Taylor, 2011, 0:35:57-0:36:50)

Data 4 illustrates institutional racism through the broader social and political conditions that shape Aibileen's fear and hesitation to participate in Skeeter's project. In this scene, Skeeter attempts to persuade Aibileen to share her experiences for a book, but Aibileen refuses, recognizing the risks. Her response shows that racism is deeply rooted in systems that control and limit the lives of Black individuals. The fear she expresses is based on a social environment where Black people can be punished for speaking out. This reflects how institutional racism operates through structures that discourage resistance and maintain silence among marginalized groups.

Aibileen's reference to her cousin Shinelle provides a concrete example of institutional racism in practice. Shinelle's car was set on fire simply because she went to a voting station. It indicates that Black people were actively prevented from exercising their basic civil rights. This act is not just an isolated incident, but part of a larger system of intimidation designed to suppress Black political participation. It demonstrates how institutions, such as the political system and local authorities, fail to protect Black citizens and allow violence and discrimination to occur. This aligns with the concept of institutional racism, where unequal treatment is embedded within systems and practices.

Furthermore, Aibileen's statement that the situation scares her more than Jim Crow emphasizes the deep and lasting impact of institutionalized racism. Jim Crow laws historically enforced racial segregation and legitimized unequal treatment between Black and white people in public and private life (Edwards & Thompson, 2010). By referencing Jim Crow,

Aibileen highlights that the fear experienced by Black individuals is tied to a long history of systemic oppression. Her fear of participating in the book project shows how institutional racism continues to influence behaviour, limiting freedom of expression and reinforcing power imbalances. This scene demonstrates that institutional racism operates through both formal laws and informal practices, creating an environment where discrimination is normalized and resistance becomes dangerous.

Data 5

*Aibileen : "No person shall require any white female to nurse in wards or rooms in which Negro men are placed. Books shall not be interchangeable between the white and colored schools, but shall continue to be used by the race first using them. No colored barber shall serve as a barber to white women or girls. **Any person printing, publishing or circulating written matter urging for public acceptance or social equality between whites and Negroes is subject to imprisonment.**"*

(Taylor, 2011, 0:37:17-0:38:00)

Data 5 presents another example of institutional racism through Aibileen's narration of formal rules that regulate racial separation in everyday life. The statements she recites reflect official laws and policies that govern interactions between Black and White people across multiple domains, including healthcare, education, employment, and social relations. These rules prohibit shared spaces and resources, such as hospital wards and school books, and even restrict Black workers from serving white individuals in certain contexts. The use of formal language, such as "no person shall require," indicates that these are legal regulations rather than personal opinions. This demonstrates that racial segregation is not merely a social practice but a system that is formally established and enforced through institutions, affecting how people live, work, and interact daily.

Furthermore, Aibileen's narration highlights how institutional racism operates by controlling behaviour and limiting the rights of Black individuals through legal consequences. The rule stating that anyone who promotes social equality between Black and white people can be imprisoned shows that the system actively suppresses resistance and discourages efforts toward change. This creates an environment in which inequality is maintained through social norms and the fear of punishment (Ahmed, 2026). As a result, Black people are forced to comply with discriminatory laws in order to avoid legal and physical consequences. This scene emphasizes that institutional racism is deeply embedded in the legal and social structure of society, making discrimination systematic, normalized, and difficult to challenge.

Data 6

Skeeter : "I parked way up on State Street and caught a cab here, like you asked."

Aibileen : "Got dropped two streets over?"

*Skeeter : "Mm-hm. **I know that it's against the law, what we're doing.**"*

(Taylor, 2011, 0:41:03-0:41:28)

Data 6 illustrates institutional racism through the atmosphere of fear and secrecy surrounding Aibileen and Skeeter's meeting. Before the interview begins, Aibileen asks Skeeter to park far away and approach the house discreetly. This precaution reflects an awareness that their interaction is not socially or legally safe. Skeeter's statement, "I know that it's against the law, what we're doing," confirms that their effort to document the experiences of Black domestic workers is seen as a violation of established rules. This shows that institutional racism operates through laws and social expectations that regulate behaviour

and limit interactions between Black and white individuals. The need to hide such a conversation demonstrates that speaking about racial injustice is highly discouraged.

Furthermore, this scene highlights how institutional racism suppresses the voices of marginalized groups by creating fear of punishment. Aibileen's initial hesitation and careful planning indicate that Black individuals are not free to share their experiences openly, as doing so may lead to legal consequences, social exclusion, or even violence. The system works not only by enforcing segregation, but also by controlling knowledge and preventing the exposure of injustice. In this context, the simple act of telling one's story becomes a risky and resistant act. Therefore, Data 6 shows that institutional racism is deeply ingrained in legal structures and social practices. It shapes behaviour and maintains silence among the oppressed.

Data 7

Minnie: “You cooking white food, you taste it with a different spoon. If they see you put the tasting spoon back in the pot, might as well throw it all out. Spoon, too. And you use the same cup, same fork, same plate every day. And you put it up in the cabinet. You tell that white woman that’s where you’re gonna keep it from now on out. Don’t do it and see what happens. Morning, ladies. When you’re sewing white folks coffee, set it down in front of them. Don’t hand it to them, ’cause your hands can’t touch. And don’t hit on they children. White folks like to do they own spanking. And last thing. Come here. Look at me. No Sass-mouthing. No Sass-mouthing. I mean it. Give your mama a kiss.”

(Taylor, 2011, 0:47:54-0:48:49)

Data 7 illustrates institutional racism through the normalized rules that Minny teaches her daughter about working as a maid in a white household. In this scene, Minny explains that her daughter must use separate utensils, avoid direct physical contact with white people, and follow strict behavioural expectations. These instructions reflect a system of racial separation that governs everyday interactions. The requirement shows how segregation is practiced in routine domestic activities. This demonstrates that racism is maintained through widely accepted social practices that regulate behaviour.

Furthermore, Minny's detailed instructions reveal how institutional racism is internalized and passed down across generations. As a Black domestic worker, Minny has learned these rules through experience and teaches them to her daughter as essential knowledge for survival. The warning “don’t do it and see what happens” suggests that there are consequences for breaking these rules, even if they are not explicitly stated. These consequences may include being scolded, losing a job, or facing harsher treatment. As a result, Black individuals are compelled to follow these practices to avoid punishment, which further normalizes racial inequality (Kyeré & Fukui, 2022).

In addition, this scene highlights how institutional racism shapes identity, behaviour, and power relations within society. The emphasis on avoiding “sass-mouthing” and maintaining submissive behaviour reflects the expectation that Black workers must not challenge white authority. This reinforces a hierarchy in which white individuals hold power, while Black individuals are expected to be obedient and compliant. It shows that social systems and cultural expectations shape individual behaviour and reinforce unequal power relations (Agung et al., 2025). The fact that these rules are taught within the family setting shows how deeply rooted institutional racism is in both social and cultural life. Therefore, Data 7 demonstrates that institutional racism operates through everyday practices, social expectations, and inherited knowledge.

Data 8

Hilly : "Aibileen, are you enjoying your new bathroom over Elizabeth's? Nice to have your own. Isn't it, Aibileen?"

Aibileen : "Yes, ma'am. And I thank you."

Hilly : **"Separate, but equal. That's what Ross Barnett says, and you can't argue with the government."**

(Taylor, 2011, 1:10:57-1:11:20)

Data 8 demonstrates institutional racism through Hilly's justification of racial segregation as a legitimate and acceptable practice. In this scene, Hilly asks Aibileen whether she enjoys her "new bathroom," which is clearly meant to separate Black domestic workers from white families. Although the question appears polite on the surface, it conveys a sarcastic, controlling tone, as Hilly seeks to reinforce the idea that segregation is beneficial and appropriate. Aibileen's response, "Yes, ma'am. And I thank you," reflects her limited position, as she is expected to accept and even express gratitude for discriminatory treatment. This interaction shows how institutional racism operates through everyday communication, where unequal treatment is presented as normal.

Furthermore, Hilly's statement, "Separate, but equal. That's what Ross Barnett says, and you can't argue with the government," clearly connects her actions to a broader legal and political system. By referring to the governor and government authority, Hilly legitimizes segregation as something supported by official policies rather than. This reflects the principle of institutional racism, where discrimination is maintained through laws and state power that reinforce racial hierarchy. The idea of "separate but equal" suggests fairness, but in reality, it creates unequal conditions that privilege white individuals while marginalizing Black individuals. Therefore, this scene shows that institutional racism is sustained through political authority that justifies and normalizes segregation in everyday life.

4. Conclusions

Based on the analysis that has been conducted, *The Help* portrays racism as a serious social issue that affects the lives of Black characters in both personal and structural ways. The analysis shows that individual racism appears through discriminatory actions, verbal humiliation, negative stereotypes, and unequal treatment from white characters toward Black characters. These actions reflect how racism operates in daily interactions and how Black characters are positioned as inferior in social relationships. In addition, institutional racism is represented through rules, norms, and social systems that limit the rights and freedoms of Black communities. The movie shows that racism is caused by personal prejudice and supported by wider structures that normalize discrimination and segregation. Through the experiences of Black domestic workers, *The Help* illustrates how racism shapes work, social status, and human relationships. Therefore, the movie emphasizes that racism is a deeply rooted problem in society and cannot be separated from the unequal power relations between white employers and Black domestic workers.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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