

## POSTCOLONIALITY IN CATHRYN STOCKETT'S NOVEL, *THE HELP*

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### ABSTRAK

*This study focuses on hybrid culture in the perspective of postcolonial studies by using Hommi K Bhabha's theory to understand three characters; Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minny as reflected in Cathryn Stockett's novel, The Help. The Help written by Cathryn Stockett tells one of the life aspects of multicultural American society. The novel describes the relationship between black maids and their white households in Mississippi Jackson. By using descriptive-qualitative method the analysis shows that The Help contains a postcolonial elements that can open the ideology of the writer. Those three main characters have their own different identities in language expression and attitude, as process of hybridity occurred between two different races, the black and the white. In the process of hybridity, there is a process of mimicry (including mockery) as experienced by the three characters. They start mimicking without losing their own identities but forming a new identity as the 'third space' which is called hybrid culture.*

**Key words:** Postcoloniality, hybridity, mimicry, third space.

### INTRODUCTION

The word colonialism is derived from the Greek/Roman, namely 'colonia' which means plantation/farm or township/settlement, and related to the Romans who inhabited other regions but still hold or control the society from the region (Loomba, 1998: 1). According to Loomba, colonialism has led to an implication in the form of human encounter in conquest and domination. defines colonialism as conquest and control of other people's land and goods. Thus, the hegemonic relationship between colonized and the colonizer is based only on power (Sutrisno, 2004:7).

Besides containing hegemonic power to the colonized, postcoloniality as process of cross-cultural understanding provides mutual interaction manifested in the form of hybridity of culture. Here, postcolonial literature can represent a such process.

Postcolonial studies in literature and other field, actually, has been done by

some researchers. Richard King (2001) found Western ideological motives in interpreting Eastern spiritualism in the eye of Western understanding of religion. Meanwhile, Pamela Allen's study on some works of three Indonesian writers, Y.B. Magunwijaya, Pramudya AnantaToer, and Putu Wijaya tries to show postcoloniality in Indonesian fictions. Here, Allen offers rereading of Indonesian history that was distorted by political interest of Orde Baru (New Order) regime. The research was translated into Indonesian language (Allen, 2004). Faruk HT (2007) in his book *Belenggu Pasca-Kolonial* choosed Multatuli's *Max Havelaar*, Semaoen's *Hikayat Kadiroen* and Marah Roesli's *Siti Nurbaya* to read the hegemony of Dutch colonial and the resistance reflected in the main characters. Another postcolonial reading is found in the collections of workshop on Postcoloniality and the Question of Modern Indonesian Literature at the University of Sidney was published and

translated into Indonesian language edited by Keith Foulcher and Tony Day (2008). The book consists of some foreign and Indonesian writers who try to read Indonesia through analyzing some Indonesian modern literature.

Postcoloniality is also found in *The help* (TH), a novel written by Kathryn Stockett. TH is a novel about African-American maids working in white households in Jackson, Mississippi during the 1960s. TH took her five years to complete. She grew up in Jackson, Mississippi. Reflective of her first novel, Stockett was very close to an African-American worker in Jackson Mississippi. By looking at the background of the author, it is not only the characters from the novel that are connected to Bhabha's theory but also the Author, Stockett. The novel Stockett made was perhaps the adaptation of what her life used to be like. TH shows the most prominent aspect, which shows that black people can also be a hero for white people, TH shows a friendly and love-hate relationship among two different races. TH basically tells about Aibileen, an African-American maid who works for white household, raising her seventeenth white child and nursing the hurt caused by her own son's tragic death. Minny, Aibileen's closest friend and Skeeter, went back home to find out why her beloved maid has disappeared. Skeeter, Aibileen and Minny become friends. Fewer still would tolerate it, but as each woman finds the courage to cross boundaries, they come to depend and rely upon one another. And together they have a great story to tell.

The novel mostly tells a story about African-American maids. The author sets the story in Mississippi and inside the story; the author explained how white household treated the African-American maids. Skeeter, which considered being a white person, has an intimate relationship with African-American maids, Skeeter stands between the civilized and uncivilized world. This

also related to the postcolonial issues, or the hybridity theory. This paper tries to describe the relationship between African-American maids and white household and to find out the hybrid culture in the perspective of post colonialism as reflected in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*. This paper is hoped to enrich the previous studies on postcoloniality mentioned above.

### **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The term postcolonial refers to every cultural aspect, which influenced by the process of colonialism from the beginning, since the first contact with colonial government until today (Ashcroft et al, 2002: 2) postcolonial is commonly studied in the field of cultural studies (Barker, 2003: 352-353). In the context of literature, literary studies are not only about fiction, but a reality that was written through fiction characters. Literary studies portrays human in society, same as history, sociology and many more. Through literature, various values have been told implicitly and ambiguously, therefore the readers will be able to receive it. Many postcolonial studies are from humanities social text into literary works because literary works could be an object. Literary works tells about human life and in literary works, the language can be exploited and every hidden meaning could be discovered by how the writer writes or how the readers analyze. Therefore, literary work as a mirror of reality becomes a representation of postcoloniality (see Ratna; 2008: 122-132). However, this includes the current interests in postcolonial literature as exemplified by (Ashcroft et al (2002) *The Empire Writes Back*) more than three quarters of the people living in the world today, experiences colonialism. Postcolonial literature is work produced by people of former European colonies (Barker, 2003: 274)

The presence of postcolonialism has enriched literary study. It basically

discusses the issue of colonial aspects, which do not merely describe the relationship between colonizers and colonized as master and slave. As Abrams states in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*: “Postcolonial studies have focused especially on the Third World countries in Africa, Asia, The Caribbean islands, and South America. It sometimes encompasses also aspects of British Literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, viewed through a perspective that reveals the extent to which the social and economic life represented in the literature was tacitly underwritten by colonial exploitation” (Abrams, 1999: 236)

It means that postcolonial studies which related to literature, is a literary study that is written by Authors whose country once become the European colonized country. African countries, Australia, India, and many more can be included in postcolonial literature (Ascroft, Griffiths Et al, 2002; 2) Postcolonial analysis tends to use various documents in written form, especially literature. In analyzing, literary works do not always related to author's intention, even if it is clear that those words belong to the author. (Ratna , 2008: 94.) On this matter, postcolonialism in literary study is a strategy that brings out questions that can help to identify the signs of colonialism in critics' text, literature as well as the important textual effects from the signs. The word postcolonialism shows that signs and effects of colonialism in literature can refer to the position of the postcolonial writer as personal in a right way that can draw attention to a bigger context. (Foulcher and Day, 2008: 3)

In order to understand the meaning of postolonialism Loomba defines the terms of colony (from latin word colonia= farming village) which means the conquest and dominance over the land and material which belong to colonized people. Complex and traumatic

relationships are often happened between the colonized and the colonizer. The attempt to create a new colony started with an effort to dissolve and then recreate the existing colonies by involving the act of trading, robbery, genocide, slavery and rebellion (Loomba, 2005: 1-42).

Postcolonial theory explores postcolonial discourses and their subject positions in relation to the theme of race, nation, subjectivity, power, subalterns, hybridity and creolization (Barker, 2003: 274). Postcolonialism, on the other side, means an era, or even a theory. Postcolonial theory is made because of the past history. Postcolonialism has an important meaning and considered to solve problems that hidden behind the reality (Ratna, 2008: 77-78). In postcolonialism, self-concept in every culture is different. The condition that we have been through as a victim of colonialism has left us a culture which identical with the colonizer even though we had been passed through that. The culture as a colonized nation has left us a mental condition that could not disappear even after a couple of decades after the colonialism. The thought about how white people ideology is higher than the other is also the result of a culture during the colonial period. The process is continued through media who also 'colonize' us in different way. According to Young, colonial process is still going on in different form (Young, 2001: 73-98)

Meanwhile, Bhabha's view about postcolonialism is different from Said's. Bhabha's hybridity theory can be described as a person with double identities. The colonizer and the colonized. The term of Hybridity has been crucial in Bhabha's view of the ambivalence of colonial discourse. Bhabha's theory of post colonialism developed a hybridity in between native and mixed with colonial cultural context of political power which he defined it as follows:

“Hybridity is the sign of productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities: it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure’ and original identity of authority). Hybridity is the revolution of the assumption of colonial identity through the reception of discriminatory identity effects.” (Bhabha, 1994: 112). Hybrid identity is born in the encounter of colonial that has never been under control or can be controlled with colonial authority. According to Bhabha there is an essential ambivalence in colonial discourse itself, where mimicry is a desire to create other people that experience reformation and can be known as different person, nearly the same, but not quite. (Bhabha 1994:86)

Example of hybridity is stated by Chris Barker: “South African rappers take an apparently non-African musical form and give it an African twist to create a form of hybridization which is now being exported back to the west” (Barker, 173:2003). Hybridity strategy can function with mimicry. Therefore, the hybrid identity by the acts of mimicry was never really in control or be controlled by the colonial authorities because there is ambivalence in colonial discourse. For Bhabha, colonial presence is always ambivalent, torn between the original and shows itself as the authoritative with the articulation that shows the repetition and difference. Ambivalence derived from psychoanalysis that is used to describe the constant fluctuation between wanting something and want the opposite. In the post-colonial discourse, ambivalence developed into a concept that seeks to explain several of choices offered on colonial subjects for identity formation (Bhabha, 1994: 208-252). In Hybridity, the old identity of a person will not disappear easily to the new cultural identity although the new cultural identity will strongly influence it. Bhabha’s

hybridity concept occurs the ambiguity of identity that brings a person in the position of ‘in between’.

Bhabha addresses the issue of relationship between the colonizers and colonized and finds a solution in discovering the “in-between” space where he believes the variations of the different cultures can find a common ground. For that reason he sees the space which lies between two different cultures as a ground for possible understanding. Bhabha’s view is further confirmed when he says:

“It is in this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this ‘Third Space’, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.” (Bhabha, 1994:157).

According to Bhabha hybridity also brings mimicry as a discourse that is ambivalent when in one point it is also building an equation, but in one point also maintaining the distinction. Culture from the colonizer is not only can be imitated, but also can be played. Mimicry can be understood as a process that is forced by the colonizer but pretended and lied by the colonized until as a result there is a condition where Bhabha said “almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha, 1994: 86). Therefore, Bhabha criticizes the models of binary opposition of colonial relation proposed by Edward W Said and Franz Fanon. Said focused on colonizer discourse while Fanon focused on colonized discourse. Both assume that both position between the colonizer and the colonized is stable, also different and contradiction each other. While Bhabha’s concept asserts that colonizer and colonized are not independent to one another. Colonial relations were structured by forms of trust that are various and contradictory. According to Bhabha between the colonizer and the colonized there is a space called in between that allows the two of them interact. (Bhabha, 1994: 128-207)

## ANALYSIS

*The Help* is set in Jackson, Mississippi and begins in August 1962. The novel features three main narrators, Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter. Inside this chapter there will be explanation about the relationship between two the white household and the African-American maids and analyze the three main characters from the novel, Aibileen, Minny and Skeeter by using Homi K Bhabha's Hybridity Theory.

Aibileen Clark an African-American woman who works as a maid, she has been taking care of "white babies" and cooking and cleaning for white family since she was a teen. She helps Skeeter in the process of making TH novel. She lost her son, died in a senseless accident a little over two years before the novel opens and now she lives alone. Aibileen has raised or helped raise seventeen white babies in her lifetime. The eighteenth one, Mae Mobley Leefolt who has just turned two years old and they are very close to one another. Aibileen's relationship with Mae Mobley is very touching. The lessons Aibileen tries to give to Mae Mobely revolve around two basic themes: self-love and racial equality. Mae Mobely relationship with her mother MsLeefolt is not as close as Mae Mobley and Aibileen's relationship. Aibileen and Skeeter connect because they both are writers. And they both live in a society that is not friendly for female authors. But of course they both are different, Skeeter has a degree in English and Journalism; Aibileen is forced to drop out of school in Junior High, to help support her family. The contrasts between Skeeter and Aibileen gradually diminish as the work together to tear down the system that tells them they are different from each other. Aibileen writes her own story and works with Skeeter. Both of them are writing to create a positive change in their communities for African-American woman in Mississippi in the early 1960s.

Minny and Aibileen are two primary women representing TH. She also have a good relationship with a white woman, Ceilia Rae Foote, they both share their stories, and Ceilia Rae never treats Minny like a maid, in fact she treats Minny like her friend. Minny works all day outside her home, cooking and cleaning for white families. She has five children. She is widely known as Jackson's premier chef extraordinaire. Yet, she hates Hilly Holbrook, a white woman in town, Skeeter's friend. Minny used to work for her, but Hilly Holbrook fired her as a maid because she did not use her own toilet. Hilly Holbrook made a toilet designed for black maids because she thinks that black people carry bad diseases. Minny is the one who persuade the other maids to help Skeeter and Aibileen. She also write down her revenge for Hilly Holbrook inside the novel. She realize that the book can be the ultimate act of speak out. She also realizes the danger involved in this. At first, she was not sure on helping Skeeter to write a story about how it feels like to work with white folks, she did not trust Skeeter and she thought Skeeter was up to something. But *The Help* ends happily.

Working with Celia Rae Foote is important part of Minny that she finally realize that there are white people out there who are not mean and abusive. Celia pays Minny double what she was getting before, she gets weekends off and she gets to leave early in the day. Celia sees nothing wrong with eating at the same table as Minny and using the same dishes. Minny sees Celia's friendliness until they both become friends and they both also saved each other's lives and earn each other's trust. A twenty three year old Skeeter Phelan, a white woman with a college degree. She lives at home with her family and she devotes herself, at considerable risk, to a book featuring real stories of the African-American women who work for the white families in her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi. She

has been best friends with Hilly Holbrook and Elizabeth Leefolt since grade school. But as the story progresses, Skeeter becomes more and more distanced from her best friends and other high-society. She breaks all the rules and crosses dangerous lines. As Skeeter's own friends shun her, the African-American community embraces her, though not openly because it is too dangerous.

Like Mae Mobley, she does not exactly fit into the ideals of beauty of her society. Also like Mae Mobley, Skeeter has a close relationship with the black woman hired to care for her, Constantine. Like Aibileen does with Mae Mobley, Constantine taught Skeeter to love herself and not to buy racial prejudices. Behind Skeeter's desire to show the points of view of the Jackson maids is her need to find out what happened to Constantine. Constantine and Skeeter were very close for over twenty years but Skeeter stopped hearing from her during her senior year at college. Constantine has mysteriously disappeared and nobody in town will tell Skeeter what happened. When her editor, Elaine Stein insists that Skeeter include Constantine's story in *Aibileen* finally tells her the truth that Skeeter's mother fired Constantine after confrontation with Constantine's daughter, Lulabelle. This, does not get into the book, betraying her mother is the last thing anybody wants Skeeter to do, as Aibileen points out to her. Skeeter is fearless she does not believe that African-American people are dirty and have diseases that are poison to white people. Her desire to help the maids give voice to their experiences is also motivated by a desire to counteract harmful myths, to justify forced segregation, unequal treatment and other abuses.

The main three characters above show a very close relationship between two different races. These three main characters have their own different identity in terms of language, attitude, backgrounds, and etc. Based on the

relationship reflected from the three main characters above, there is a hybridity culture reflected from each character where there is also a mimicry process which happens inside the third space and brings a reciprocal relationship between two races. The African-American people integrate themselves among their race through similar identity. Not only in languages, but also in attitude that normally African-American people do, like how they speak, how they communicate with one another. This social acculturation could strengthen interracial relationship. After African-American and white people integrate themselves among their own races they will integrate with each other without losing their own identity. As in the Novel, African-American people work for white people, which means they are inside the white people's scope. But, that does not make them lose their identity. Social acculturation emerges when there is toleration toward different identity but have a similar intention, which let them to integrate with each other.

The same thing happened to Mae Mobley, she spent her childhood mostly with Aibileen rather than her mom. It made her feel closer with Aibileen. Aibileen taught her many things, one of them is to love herself because Mae Mobley does not feel good about herself. What Aibileen does that is dangerous is to teach Mae Mobley about racial equality and civil rights. If Ms Lee Folt found out what Aibileen did to her child she will be fired, these lessons are born of Aibileen's desire that people are not born with racist ideas. These ideas are taught, passed from generation to generation. Aibileen is trying to break this cycle by presenting Mae Mobley with alternative ways to think about race. One of the moments in the novel is when Aibileen tells Mae Mobley a story.

The dialogue below shows the spirit of equality:

“one day, a wise martian come down to earth to teach us people a thing or two”

“what’s his name?”

“Martian Luther King...[...] he a real nice Martian, Mister King [...] but some people looked at him funny and sometime, well he down right mean.”

“whyAibee? Why was they so mean to him?”

“cause he was green” (TH: 296)

The conversation above shows how Aibileen tries to teach Mae Mobley racial equality by telling her a story about Martin Luther King, at the end of the story Aibileen told Mae Mobley that everyone is being mean to Martial because he was green. Green in the conversation refers to “black”.

The calling of equal consciousness also rises in the following dialogue:

“once upon a time they was two little girls, one girl had a black skin...one girl had a white skin, little colored girl say to the little white girl ‘how come your skin be so pale?’ white girl say ‘I don’t know how come your skin be so black? What you think that mean?’ but neither of them little girls knew, so little white girl say, ‘well, let’s see, you got hair, I got hair, I got nose, you got nose, I got toes, you got toes’, ‘so we’re the same. Just different color’ say the little colored girl. The little white girl she agreed and they was friend” (TH: 200).

Everything that Mae Mobley gained automatically makes her think differently than anyone around her, she will be like Skeeter. Skeeter does not mind to talk with the African-American workers, Skeeter never treats them like slaves even though she still stick to her identity as a white person. She still acts and talks normally as white people do. Same thing also happens to black people. Even though they have to obey that are

given to them by white people, it does not make them forget their identity. They are only temporarily adapting when they are around white people. For example, Minny and Aibileen. They work and often interact with white people. Even though they behave like white people want, when they speak they still use or put a little bit of their style even if though it sounds impolite. They like Minny did. Minny always used *ain’t*, which is nonformal form, *ain’t* means: is not/ are not although her mom told her to speak formally. For example: a lot of *ain’t* words nowadays usually comes out it hip hop or rap music: “Don’t you say *ain’t*, you speak properly now. I did not race you to talk like a mule” (TH: 39). The dialogue reflects a process of hybridity as one form of postcoloniality.

Besides hybridity there is a process called mimicry. According to Bhabha mimicry is a process of mimicking between two different identities accidentally done inside an interaction or social relationship in colonial period to maintain dominance strategy. But before mimicking there is an action of “mockery” to the colonizer because they did not copy or mimicking the whole model that is offered by the colonizer. The process of mimicry happens because of the emergence of newcomers. Black people came to white people’s scope with their original identity. White people also have their original identity that is different with African-American people. If we see it in terms of the language, black people have their own dialect and their own vocabularies when they speak. White people usually use the formal English. As an immigrant, black people need to fit in with the identity of white people.

What will happen is that African-American people will indirectly mimic the language used by the whites, which is a formal English language. Mimicry happens inside the scope of white people, inside the book, white people scope is

their houses. While working, African-American maids communicate and interact with white people using a language that is a little more formal than what they usually use inside black people's scope. They will also act different in front of white people. That is why; the maids indirectly learn the identity or characteristics of white people while communicating with them.

Besides from language term, there is another mimicry process happened in this novel. When Skeeter offered Aibileen and Minny to help her write TH. They declined it at first, and then they accept. The accepting process was not easy. From mockery to Skeeter then help her to write the novel which have their own story with different style of language because they personally wrote it. There was mockery in the process. Next one is mimicking the colonizer. It occurred when Aibileen and Minny accept Skeeter's offer but still stick to their own identity. Aibileen and Minny mocking on Skeeter about her idea. They did not agree to Skeeter because they think her idea will put them in danger. But Skeeter never give up on Aibileen, she keeps trying until Aibileen thinks that is good to make a change.

## CONCLUSION

Hybridity that occurs between two races concerning a very closed relationship between African-American people and white people is really happen in *The Help*. Mimicry is also follows as experienced by the characters. It is seen through the mimicking of language (as in formal English and non-formal English), attitude (politeness) and practice (the consideration on making the novel) that white people have and mimicked by the African-American people. Inside the process of mimicry and mockery also happened. Third space (liminality) is when two identities will keep their real identities even they are both different, which then the colored identity will fuse towards the white identities. The African-

American identities will not disappear but it will be mixed with the new identities. The new identity is what we call as hybridity. Before the hybridity process happens there is a process called cultural interaction, which happened between African-American people and white people. The cultural interaction can be seen from how they speak and communicate to one another. The culture acculturation among the characters rises hybrid culture in the forms of language expression (mimicry), mockery, reciprocal cultural relationship (the third space). It can be noted that the writer of the novel tries to portrait 'salad bowl' and 'melting pot' of American people that built by multiculturalism.

As writer, Stockett is successful in giving the spirit of equality as voiced by Martin Luther King; a dream that the black and the white can seat together in the same place as one nation. Stockett tries to deconstruct racial prejudice and gives a portrait of multicultural consciousness through her characters in the novel. The multicultural interactions happening in American society today open the third space, the place where hybrid culture takes place. The novel can be categorized as a form of counter culture in fighting racial discrimination experienced by the black that still happens until today in American society.

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