THE AMERICAN WOMEN FROM THE SIXTIES: AN ANALYSIS OF TATE TAYLOR'S *THE HELP*

AS MULHERES AMERICANAS DA DÉCADA DE 1960: UMA ANÁLISE DO FILME *HISTÓRIAS CRUZADAS*, DE TATE TAYLOR

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Abstract: Directed by Tate Taylor in 2011, The Help takes place in the United States in the decade of 1960s and portrays the oppressive condition of black domestic servants. Assuming that the issue of racism in the United States places black women as "less women" than others in society (DAVIS, 1981), this bibliographic research analyzes the social perspective of black and white women in the 1960s, establishes the relationship between domestic workers and their bosses, and how their different position in society influences that relationship. Our analysis also tries to understand the role that racism plays in the narrative of this film.

Keywords: The Help; Women; Race; United States

Resumo: Dirigido por Tate Taylor em 2011, Histórias Cruzadas se passa nos Estados Unidos na década de 1960 e retrata a condição opressora das empregadas domésticas negras. Par-

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tindo do princípio de que a questão do racismo nos Estados Unidos faz com que as mulheres negras sejam vistas como “menos mulheres” do que outras na sociedade (DAVIS, 1981), esta pesquisa tem como objetivo analisar as questões de gênero e raça nas personagens femininas do filme, as trabalhadoras domésticas e suas chefes, e as diferenças econômicas e sociais entre mulheres brancas e negras nos Estados Unidos na década de 1960. No decorrer da pesquisa, serão feitas análises do trabalho cinematográfico a fim de compreender como o racismo existia no contexto retratado e como ele influenciou as questões de trabalho das mulheres negras.

Palavras-chave: Histórias cruzadas; Mulheres; Raça; Estados Unidos

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INTRODUCTION

The cinematographic work entitled The Help, directed by Tate Taylor in 2011, based on Kathryn Stockett's novel, tells the story of Aibileen (Viola Davis), a negro maid who lives in Jackson, Mississippi, in the 1960s, the Civil Rights Era, and her bonding with the white journalist Eugenia Phelan (Emma Stone), who decides to write a book about the relationship between the maids – or help, as they were called – and their bosses, but through the maids' perspective.

This bibliographical research aims to analyze, through race, gender, and social context bias, the differences between black and white women in the United States in the 1960s presented through the female characters in the narrative of The Help. Ultimately, this work allows reflections on the social tensions of the time portrayed in the narrative, which shows a slight advance regarding the union of women, bringing up their protagonism and a break in the patterns of that period.

THE FILM

"I was born in 1911, Chickasaw County, Piedmont Plantation." This is the first sentence said in The Help (Tate Taylor, 2011) and it introduces us to Aibileen (Viola Davis), one of its main characters and its narrator. In this initial scene, she is being interviewed, the spectator sees white hands writing the title "The Help" on a notebook and Aibileen talking about herself, answering questions about her work as a maid. These are the images the spectator can see: Aibileen speaking in a cautious tone, and the hands taking notes.

Aibileen appears doing the dishes, dressed in comfortable clothes, which leads us to suggest she is at home, although her posture and expression do not show any comfort. Her discomfort, her southern accent, and the subject of the interview are factors that suggest the period in which the film takes place, mid-twentieth century, when many discussions and uprisings about the conditions of black people in the United States were rising, while the government was doing everything to keep crushing their rights.

There is a dramatic background song playing while the interview happens; the shots are of a notebook and Aibileen, firstly in a close-up, then in a close medium, focusing on her only, the protagonist. The last question made to Aibileen by the interviewer

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in voice-over is: “What does it feel like to raise a white child when your own child’s at home being looked after by somebody else?” to which Aibileen looks to her son’s photography on the wall while the music takes place, connecting the shots altogether and leading the viewer to the path to be taken in the course of the story.

In the interview, Aibileen is being questioned about her position as a maid and if there is something else, she would like to do. There is an alliance between the interviewer Miss Eugenia Phelan, or Skeeter (Emma Stone), a white woman, and the interviewed – a nonwhite woman –, a fact that is both odd and interesting given the historical context of the United States in the 1960s, a moment in which the segregation laws strengthened racism.

According to Gayatri Spivak in Can the subaltern speak? (2010), intellectuals should recognize the subaltern’s speech and let them speak for themselves, and in the film, we can see Aibileen and the other maids’ voices being reported by a superior voice in society – Skeeter’s. Even though Skeeter does not exactly represent a dominant voice in society, she is much closer to it than the maids, and so she becomes the only available vehicle by which the maids can speak. She is a subaltern who, unlike Aibileen, has a little more freedom to make choices – to go to college and be a journalist, for example.

As for Aibileen’s subaltern position in society, her role as a domestic is a family inheritance, such as being a housewife was an inheritance for white ladies: “once babies started having their own babies” says Aibileen about the white babies they take care of that eventually become their new bosses. Housekeeping was a new type of oppression that had its foundation on slavery (DAVIS, 1944), “My mamma was a maid, my grandmama was a house slave.”, Aibileen says, when asked why she always knew she was going to be a maid. The fact that negroes had conquered their “liberty” in the 1860s has not changed much the way they were seen or treated by white people. Whites found new ways to keep their privileges safe and made sure they were still the dominators, maintaining the black people in poor conditions.

These conditions in which black people were submitted since they were brought to America cannot, though, be generalized, there are gender asymmetries that affect blacks, the same way it affects whites. In the words of bell hooks in her work entitled Ain’t I a woman (1981), the word “men” refers only to white men, the word “negroes” refers to black men, and the word “women” refers only to white women (HOOKS, 1981,

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p.22). It is from the perspective of the black woman as a forgotten piece of herstory[1] and comparing her to white women's position in society, that the analysis shall take place. According to Spivak:

> Can the subaltern speak? What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern? The question of 'woman' seems most problematic in this context. Clearly, if you are poor, black and female, you get it in three ways. (SPIVAK, 2010, p. 90).

It is possible to find a similar idea to that of Spivak when hooks (1981) emphasizes the fact that black women are on a much lower social scale than white women. hooks criticizes the fact that female activists, such as Betty Friedan on The feminine Mystique (1963), were writing about feminism from the perspective of white women only. She brings up the lack of recognition that racist oppression was not the only kind of oppression they suffered, and that sexism was as oppressive as racism. Even black women were made to believe in that, they were walking a tightrope because they had to choose whether they remained on the side of the black men struggling against racism, or they would support white women in the struggle against sexism. But the truth is, both sides were not supportive of the black women's cause.

The conditions in which black women lived portrayed by The Help belong to their herstory in the United States and its foundation on slavery is the reason that led to such conditions. According to the analysis of hooks (1981) on slavery, in its beginning in the USA, both men and women were forced to work together in the fields, there was no gender separation among them, they both worked the same number of hours a day. Women, however, started to be seen as different from men for the fact they could be raped, and that was used as a different kind of torture and punishment, which placed women as objects to satisfy men's desires.

Over time, sexual assault also began to be used against black women to turn them into docile slaves, the slavers had to be sure they would not rebel themselves since they were more likely to work intimately with the white family as cooks, nurses, housekeepers, and babysitters. In the period after slavery, these activities turned into

1 Feminist history, or history viewed from a female or feminine perspective. The word was coined by militant feminists in the US in 1970, although the standard word *history* is not, in fact, a compound of *his* + *story* but derives from the Greek and Latin *historia,* meaning narrative. See also political correctness, pseudo morpheme. herstorian n. A writer of herstory. [From *her* + *story*, intended to resemble *history*]. (Oxford Dictionary)

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jobs, however, because of its foundation on slavery, they were seen by society as degrading and therefore they were mostly occupied by black women.

The occupation of these degrading jobs enforced the objectification of black women, a concept that is shown in the film, for example, when Skeeter asks Elizabeth's permission for Aibileen to help her with the cleaning advice column for the newspaper, to which Elizabeth exclaims "My Aibileen?". The fact that Skeeter asks Elizabeth for an answer that should come from Aibileen gives the idea that the maid was nothing more than a tool, in addition to the use of the pronoun "my", which indicates property and takes away from Aibileen any possibility of free will. Another example is in the report of one the maids to Skeeter: "Lord, I tried to find another job. But in everybody's mind the French family and miss Jolene owned me. Owned me.".

The way Hilly treats her maids also spells out this oppressive relationship: she changes her maids three times during the narrative and, in addition to this, she forces Aibileen's resignation once she discovers the maid's protagonism in the book. These examples are acts and speeches that sometimes go unnoticed by those who act or say it, not only in the film but also in real life, so they are mistakes of structural racism that need to be fixed for a more egalitarian society.

THE KKK AND JIM CROW

By the second half of the 1900s, black movements were rising all over the USA, mainly led by black men who aimed to conquer civil rights. The film portrays these sorts of persecution against black people, along with the ideology of femininity that placed women as inferior and submissive to men.

In the scenario of black struggles, there are specific moments in the narrative that show its historical context, for example, the assassination of the activist Medgar Evers, the assassination of John Kennedy, or when Miss Stein (Mary Steenburgen) from a publisher in New York talks to Skeeter about the March to Washington that is about to happen. All three events happened in different moments of 1963.

In this period, most of the south of the United States was ruled by a series of discriminatory laws that increased after the Civil War (1861-1865), as a way of keeping black people under the control of whites. These laws were known as The Jim Crow Laws. "The new racial order, known as Jim Crow — a term apparently derived from a

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minstrel show character—was regarded as the 'final settlement,' the 'return to sanity,' and 'the permanent system.'" (ALEXANDER, 2010, p. 47).

The film is marked by the presence of the Jim Crow segregation rules, like the negroes sitting in the back of the bus or living in a separate area of the city. But one of the greatest symbols of the repercussion of these laws in the narrative is the Home Health Sanitation Initiative created by the white female character Hilly Holbrook (Bryce Dallas Howard), whose purpose was to build separate toilets for the help – the black maids. The following dialogue is from the moment when Skeeter comes back from Ole Miss where she used to study and goes on a bridge table at Elizabeth's (Ahna O'Reilly) house – where Aibileen works. While Hilly talks about her initiative, Aibileen listens behind the wall (Figure 1), her discomfort with the subject, as well as that of Skeeter who is at the table, are noticeable:

> Hilly's mom Missus Walters: – Oh she's just upset because the nigra uses the guest bathroom and so do we.
> […]
> Hilly: – Wouldn't you rather them take their business outside? […] It's just plain dangerous. They carry different diseases than we do. That's why I've drafted the Home Health Sanitation Initiative.
> Skeeter: – The what?
> Hilly: – A disease-preventative bill that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the help. I've been endorsed by the White Citizens' Council.
> Skeeter: – Maybe we should build you a bathroom outside, Hilly.
> Hilly: – You ought not to joke about the colored situation. I'll do whatever it takes to protect our children. (THE HELP, 2011)

Figure 1 – Aibileen listening to a conversation



Source: THE HELP, 2011

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When Hilly says “It’s just plain dangerous. They carry different diseases than we do” or “I’ll do whatever it takes to protect our children”, she is being a great example of what white people would think about “the colored situation” back then. Jim Crow was a system of racial control and separation considered, by whites, as necessary and for the blacks’ good, an idea that served to alleviate their conscience, turning ideas such as the health initiative acceptable.

Acts such as Hilly’s, where she justifies her racism by saying it is for the best of the (white) population, distort the idea of racism of that historical context. In another moment, when Hilly sees Skeeter is carrying a pamphlet about the laws that governed colored people in Mississippi, she says “There are real racists out there”, referring to the KKK[2] (Ku Klux Klan). Up to this point of the narrative, Skeeter was aware of the risks that the black population were placed by the laws, and had already clear in her mind that the maid’s relation to their bosses bothers her.

There is a composition of three scenes in the film that shows the horror and fear that the KKK established in the black population. First, there is the speech of Medgar Evers on the TV, a speech that happened in Mississippi and encouraged the political participation of countless African Americans in Jackson, while in The Help it encouraged one non-African American in specific, Skeeter (GRAHAN, 2014, p. 53). In the following scene, there is the chaos that the murder of Evers caused in the black population of Jackson. “KKK shot him”, says Minny (Octavia Spencer) to Aibileen, afraid that the same might happen to them for telling the stories to Skeeter, to which Aibileen responds “We ain’t doing civil rights”. The third scene is of Skeeter surveying several articles and magazines about some key elements in the Civil Rights Movements. Her development during the film takes her in a different direction from the other white women.

The Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers delivered a televised speech in Jackson on May 20, 1963, declaring the indignities and injustices experienced by black people in a response to Mayor Allen Thompson’s previously televised defense of Jackson’s race relation. Nine days after that, he was killed by a KKK member (GRAHAN, 2014, p. 52). The TV speech and murder are shown on the same day in the narrative. This event combined with the violent imprisonment of Hilly’s current maid Youle Mae (Aunjanue Ellis) encouraged the other maids to help Skeeter with the stories. These events

2 The Ku Klux Klan is the oldest and the most infamous hate group in the United States. Although black Americans have typically been the Klan’s primary target, it also has attacked Jews, immigrants, gays and lesbians, communists and until recently, Catholics. (FINLEY, 2018, p. 250)

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enable a grand scene in the film, when several generations of maids come together, willing to work with her (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Maids at Aibileen's house



Source: THE HELP, 2011.

The church that Aibileen and Minny attend also plays an important role in the narrative. The African-American church was crucial to the articulation of many Civil Rights movements, especially in the decade portrayed in the film. Given the connection between the black church and the civil rights strivings of African-American people, the role the church played during the Civil Rights Movement and its relationship to nonviolent social change has been a subject of particular interest. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a social revolution. It culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which substantially ended the codification of racism in the United States. (BROWN, 2000, p. 169).

The nonviolent social change proposed by the church community has Dr. Martin Luther King[3] as its most famous representative. Such participation in Civil Rights is mentioned in the film when Miss Stein talks about the March to Washington, which was led by King. While white people had places like the bridge table, parties, cinemas, res-

3 Dr. Martin Luther King, one of the greatest leaders of this movement, Georgia Baptist pastor, founder of the Christian Leadership Conference, emerged as a local gender leader in the 1950s, with an academic background and a doctorate. Possessing an extraordinary oratory, King gathered many followers, preferring to exalt the collectivity of the movement than the individuality. (SANTOS, 2019, p. 30)

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taurants, and many other options to socialize and gather, the church is the only place shown in the narrative where black people could gather. And a place that made writing a possibility, as we can see when Aibileen says she writes what in some moments she calls stories, in others, she calls prayers.

And even though there are no signs of any organization by the church shown in the film, this is where we can see preacher Green's sermon about courage, a sermon that encouraged Aibileen to accept Skeeter's proposal. After the sermon, Aibileen appears seated while everybody in the crowd stands to sing along. Right after this scene in the church, Skeeter is at Aibileen's house for their first interview. In another moment, the church appears again being the place of recognition for what Aibileen did, a place where she is seen as the protagonist and author of the book. There was probably the only place where she could be applauded without raising any suspicions.

The narrative, then, locates the stories of the women in the film within the scenario of the Civil Rights Movements, the Jim Craw Laws, and the KKK persecution. Although such events are not the main target of the film, it is, of course, a part of history that deserves to be mentioned given its context, as in the case of Evers.

THE WOMEN

The narrative of the film portrays the role of white women in the society of that time, disguising their inferiority by an image of a woman as a perfect mother and home caregiver.

> […] the nineteenth-century cult of motherhood was in full swing. As portrayed in the press, in the new popular literature, and even in the courts of law, the perfect woman was the perfect mother. Her place was at home – never, of course, in the sphere of politics. (DAVIS, 1981, p.31)

Most of the white female characters – except for Skeeter – are placed as good wives and mothers, taking care of their home and children, but such position becomes ironic because those who take care of the home and children of the white women are the maids, who were not inserted in the prevailing femininity ideology of that time.

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The presence of men in the narrative of The Help is almost obliterated, for the focus of the film is directed to the female characters, although their dominance is felt throughout the film, for example when Celia Foote (Jessica Chastain) is worried she cannot get pregnant she says “What’s he gonna do with me?” referring to her husband, or when Elizabeth tries to justify to her husband about the fact she didn’t consult him about the construction of the bathroom for Aibileen.

The same kind of worry is also expressed by Charlotte Phelan (Allison Janney), Skeeter’s mother, who is constantly expressing her disgust with her daughter not being married. She even speculates, in a certain moment, that Skeeter might have feelings for other women, and she goes on saying that there is a special root tea, to “get rid of” of such thoughts. By the end of the film, Skeeter remains single, the narrative takes her on a contradictory path to that of the other female characters, she ends up with a new job, instead of a husband.

The development of Skeeter and Aibileen ends with both achieving their freedom by letting behind the life of fitting into patterns. However, there is a clear distance between the path taken by Aibileen to the one taken by Skeeter, because the conception of women as perfect mothers and wives was directed at white women only. All the colored women who appear in the film are maids and their lives beyond their jobs are barely shown, except the main characters’ Aibileen, who lost her son and lives by herself, and Minny, who is married and a mother of four. Both lives contrast with each other. As a result of the poor conditions in which blacks were placed, colored women usually had to work to help at home, such as Minny’s fourteen-year-old daughter Sugar (Kelsey Scott) who is forced to work after her mother gets fired. Therefore, the feminine hole they were supposed to be fitting – for they are also women –, was not at all embracing.

The character Hilly Holbrook plays a very important role in the narrative. She is a necessary tool to allow the progression of the main characters, for she acts in a direction that goes toward and interferes with the actions of Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minny. Hilly is the wife and mother who is always thinking about the best for her family – whenever it is convenient –, which for her it is consistent with her acts and initiatives that are always protected under the purpose of defending her family from any risks the negroes could offer. Although, it does not mean, of course, that those risks were reasoned in facts.

Hilly has a status in Jackson because of her husband’s involvement in politics, she is seen as an example for the other white women. In Aibileen’s words: “Miss Hilly

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was the first of the babies to have a baby. And it must have come out of her like the 11th Commandment, ‘cause once miss Hilly had a baby every girl at the bridge table had to have one, too.” (THE HELP, 2011)

For those circumstances, Hilly may symbolize “the villain” of the film, she is the personification of prejudice, and because of her social position in the narrative, her speech gains a lot of emphasis and is followed by other women, making her actions even more oppressive to those who oppose her, as we can see when she creates the Home Health Sanitation Initiative when she unfairly fires Minny or rejects Celia.

When Hilly first appears in the film, she is putting marks on a toilet paper to determine the amount of paper her maid Minny would consume. Hilly uses the excuse of searching for the best for her family to encourage the creation of the initiative. This act provokes the viewer because it creates a barrier between the maids and their most basic needs, that of using the bathroom, which supposedly should be one of the few acts of freedom allowed to them.

The bathroom is an analogy to how the Jim Crow Laws could operate in such a low manner in the United States, and how easily the black population could be oppressed. The lack of sense in such an act can be observed by the innocence of the baby Aibileen takes care of, Mae Mobley (Emma Henry), when she sits at one of the many toilets dropped at Hilly’s yard – a prank played by Skeeter. (Figure 3) The baby, of course, was not trying to make a point, she was simply using a toilet, a skill she had just developed with Aibileen’s guidance.

Figure 3 – Mae Mobley seated on a toilet



Source: THE HELP, 2011.

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The bathroom is also what leads to one of the most iconic scenes in the film. After being fired for using Hilly's bathroom instead of hers and having lies spread about her all over the town, Minny decides to visit Hilly to say sorry, and she brings a delicious pie to do so. (Figure 4) But the pie was only the result of Minny's anger and boldness, for she waits until Hilly takes two bites of that pie to reveal her secret ingredient by saying "Eat my shit!". The "terrible-awful" story remains in secret until the moment that Minny decides it must be in Skeeter's book as insurance because it would be published anonymously, and she knew that Hilly would deny those stories happened in Jackson since she would not want someone else to discover that the pie episode happened to her. Minny's disclosure is a sign she will no longer put up with abuses such as the ones suffered by Hilly, it is a moment of rebellion.

Figure 4 – Minny and her pie



Source: THE HELP, 2011.

After being fired, Minny ends up working for Celia Foote who develops an unexpected bonding with the maid, whose bossy and sharp tongue characteristics are constantly contrasting with Celia's infantile character. Celia suffers oppression for being an outsider; she is considered white trash[4] because of her birthplace (Sugar Ditch). "That tacky girl from Sugar Ditch", or "They hate you 'cause they think you white trash" are comments about Celia, who does not have enough class to be accepted by the white middle class of Jackson who looks down on her.

4 Poor white people, especially those living in the southern US. (Oxford Dictionary)

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That might be the reason for the union of Celia and Minny, they are both placed together in an oppressed position when rejected by Hilly Holbrook: Celia because she is married to Hilly's former boyfriend and for being from Sugar Ditch; and Minny because Hilly fired and spread lies about her after she used her bathroom, making sure she would not get another job in town. They both play a role as comic relief in the narrative, Celia's devoid of seeing Minny as inferior to her causes an impact on the maid, but due to the circumstances they soon became allies. Different from Hilly, Celia motivates the progression of Minny in a good way, by showing her softer side and giving her a little bit of hope, which leads her to take her children away from her violent husband. In the same way, Minny helps Celia not only by teaching her how to cook but also giving her the courage to tell her husband about the babies she had lost.

Aibileen's motivations in the initial sequence of the film are shown in an in media res scene[5] used to present her and a general idea of the film's content. When this scene repeats later in the narrative, the spectator already knows what led to that point and the reason for that interview. It is also through the interviews that Aibileen reveals that her son who had died four years ago is the reason she decided to help Skeeter:

> Aibileen: He was just 24 years old miss Skeeter. Best part of a person's life. Anniversary of his death comes every year I can't breathe. But to y'all, it's just another day of bridge. You stop this, everything I wrote, he wrote, everything he was is gonna die with him. (THE HELP, 2011)

Aibileen's motivation to tell the stories is to keep her son Treelore's memory alive, and it is at this moment in the narrative that she moves to the position of the protagonist of her own story: she decides to read her stories, which she compares with her prayers, rather than just answering Skeeter's questions. "I thought I might write down my stories and read them to you. Ain't no different than my prayers", says Aibileen to Skeeter, materializing, then, Spivak's idea of a subaltern who can speak with their voice. According to Spivak: "In seeking to learn to speak (rather than listen or to speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual systematically "unlearns" female privileges. (SPIVAK, 2010, p. 91)

This act of speaking her truth provides a different look at it as it comes from its real source, it is the pure story that might change the conception once created through

5 The practice of beginning an epic or other narrative by plunging into a crucial situation that is part of a related chain of events; (In *Britannica.com.* Retrieved March 23, 2021)

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innumerable filters. It also enables Aibileen to feel the freedom that throughout the film was fueled by the sense of equality and opportunity.

Another important detail of the narrative is Aibileen's mother-daughter relationship with Mae Mobley, the white baby she takes care of, which involves more affection than the baby's relation with her mother, Elizabeth (Ahna O'Reilly). Aibileen is the one who plays the maternal role by being a part of Mae Mobley's self-esteem formation, "You're my real mama Aibee", says the baby who feels better when she is with her nanny than when she is with her mother.

This relation is akin to the one of Skeeter and her maid Constantine (Cicely Tyson), who only appears in the narrative through Skeeter's memories, because Constantine was no longer the help by the time Skeeter comes back from college. Skeeter is not aware of the reason the maid is not working there anymore, and whenever she asks her mother or someone else in the house about Constantine, they immediately dodge the answer. She finds out, by the end of the narrative, that her mother fired the maid when confronted during a DAR (Daughters of America) meeting when Constantine's daughter crossed the kitchen where the white women were gathering, to visit her mother. A situation that would be normal, but due to the circumstances of that period, such an act was absurd and disapproved by the white women, whose pressure demanded an attitude by Charlotte. Although she seemed reluctant and uncomfortable, her choice was made under the imposition of the social context and by the fear of being excluded.

The choice to fire Constantine seems to create a feeling of regret in Charlotte, this feeling causes changes in her, which after telling the truth to her daughter, starts to support Skeeter in her decisions and even thanks her for the courage she had to write the book. Thus, while Skeeter uses the maternal figure, she sees in Constantine as inspiration to writing about "a side to this never before heard"; to Aibileen, the motivation that leads her to tell her stories is her son's memory.

THE HELP

At the beginning of the film, when Skeeter writes "The Help" in her notebook, she is referring to the maids, also called help. However, it is inevitable not to realize the different meanings this term carries over the narrative.

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The help in the narrative becomes the “storytelling” the maids do, which is the help that Skeeter needed so she can become a writer. Skeeter is also the help for the maids, by giving them a chance to speak, their alliance consists of mutual help. However, conceiving the idea that the colored women needed the help of a white woman to speak brings the idea of the white woman as a heroine of the helpless black people, a very well-known feature in the Hollywood film industry, and that’s why the film was not well received by some critics.

> Grounded in the ideology of colorblindness, the White savior narrative involves a White lead character – the hero – who engages in paternal/maternal behaviors to “save” people and communities of color (Hughey, 2012). Typically, the relationship involves a White savior and a seemingly subordinate Black person, but the White hero may also save nonwhite characters of other racial groups (Fitzgerald, 2013). The White hero is nm portrayed as generous, whereas the people of color are grateful for the White person’s generosity (Ash, 2015; Hughey, 2012). Such a simplistic narrative greatly distorts the reality of interracial communication between Whites and the people of color they oppress. (MURPHY, HARRIS, 2017, p. 50)

Unfortunately, the Hollywood industry seems reluctant on showing a narrative about historical racial relations without normalizing racism and establishing stereotypes. In The Help, the narrative is no different, Skeeter stands as the one who helps the maids. When the book – whose title is The Help – is published, it is done by an anonymous author to ensure the safety of all those involved in its production. However, Skeeter is the one who benefits the most from it, she becomes a writer and moves to New York where she got a job offer, while Aibileen, Minny, and the other maids will have to hide their participation in the book so they don’t suffer the consequences.

What Djamila Ribeiro (2017) calls “Lugar de fala” can be translated as standpoint speech, which concerns specific places of experiences, meaning that one cannot talk from a certain point of view if he/she does not belong to this social place of experience. Relating to The Help, whether it is or not Skeeter’s standpoint speech telling someone else’s stories, it is a delicate definition to make. There is a difference, between speaking about and speaking for someone, and although Skeeter is not placing herself as the person who has had the experiences of being a maid, but rather transcribing the maid’s reports, she is still sharing the maid’s perspective under her white linguistic pattern. Even though she is trying to be faithful to the stories of the maids, they still pass through her filter. Ideally, the maids would write and tell their own stories through

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their ways, which would correspond to Spivak (2010), who says that a subaltern subject should be able to represent oneself and not to submit to the reproduction of his/her speech.

In addition to Skeeter's reception by the spectators, some claim that the film is not a realistic portrayal of that period, for it redeems the racism of white people by showing them as naïve or ignorant of the Laws ruling the blacks, or their struggles on the Civil Rights. On the other hand, some others value the way the story is told and understand that the film does not attempt to tell the whole story, but rather to focus on the domestic sphere and their relationship with their female bosses. The film, such as the novel, contains and will continue to have different interpretations, regardless of the type of audience:

> Each will have different ways of making the text into an experience with a coherence and significance that satisfies. Thus, because we respond to a text individually, socially, and culturally, it is not surprising that the varied reception of The Help has not been as predictably divided along racial or regional or professional lines as pundits and even academics might expect. (JONES, 2014, p.23)

In any case, although Skeeter is the tool through which the maids can tell their truths in this first moment, it is from there that Aibileen can move on, knowing the strength she has and that there is a chance she might be heard. By the way, at the end of the film Aibileen makes it very clear what she thinks about keeping writing:

> Aibileen: Mae Mobley was my last baby. In just ten minutes the only life I knew was done. God says we need to love our enemies. It is hard to do, but it can start by telling the truth. No one had ever asked me what it felt like to be me. Once I told the truth about that… I felt free. And I got to thinking about all the people I know and the things I seen and done. My boy, Treelore, always said we going to have a writer in the family one day. I guess it's gonna be me. (THE HELP, 2011)

The same way the narrative started with Aibileen talking about herself and her life, from the past until the present moment, it ends with her talking, but this time not only about events in her life but about her feelings and her future. It is not possible to know what is going to happen with Aibileen, she might fall into a trap from Hilly and get arrested, she might be a successful writer and write her book, anonymously or not. All the film leaves us with is the progress that leads Aibileen, the real protagonist, from a

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submissive person to one who knows that there is hope and a chance to conquer freedom starting with small acts, which is already a start.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The cinematographic work has a cultural value and offers the spectator the possibility of reflecting about their reality in addition to the theme that is approached. However, it is necessary to highlight the fact that the Hollywood film industry continues to repeat patterns, placing the white as a savior, which softens the history of struggles and conquests of minority peoples, such as blacks.

The narrative of The Help (2011) when addressing a trajectory that begins with the union between women of different races and social classes, in a historical period when such alliances were prohibited by law, shows a break in social standards. It also shows how the acts generated from this union can achieve transformations, even if little ones. Such transformations we can see happening with Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter, and as the film leaves it at that, it can only be the beginning of major changes in the lives of these characters.

Finally, this study aimed to develop a discussion on the social differences between black and white women through the analysis of the female characters of The Help (2011). The discoveries made through this research, however difficult, are of unimaginable value. Historical knowledge and values can continue to contribute greatly, both in the academic sphere and in terms of moral and ethical values.

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FILMOGRAFIA DO *CORPUS*

THE Help. Direction: Tate Taylor, Production: Chris Columbus, Michael Barnathan, Michael Radcliffe. 2011. (146 min).