International Academic Institute for Science and Technology

International Academic Journal of Humanities
Vol. 13, No. 2, 2026, pp. 21-24.

ISSN 2454-2245

International Academic Journal of Humanities

www.iaiest.com

Gender Disparity and Surrogate Motherhood: A Study of the Absence of Maternal Identity Among Black Women in "The Help" by Kathryn Stockett

S. Rihan [a]

[a] *Post Graduate Student, Department of English, Dr. M.G.R Educational and Research Institute University, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.*

Abstract

Gender bias really shows how women's work and identity are treated and it affects, mainly in societies formed by both sexism and racism. This study argues that the Motherhood and the dearth of maternal identity in the form of Black women in The Help. It centers on how the racial and gender inequality are unnoticed in the novel, and the characters show care, love, and guidance to the children they set up, but remain ignored. This novel, written by Kathryn Stockett, shows the lives of African American female servants working in white homes in 1960s Mississippi. Between the characters like Aibileen and Minny, this story reflects the unjust power imbalance, treatment and Discrimination in the homes. This study analyzes the lives of Black women in The Help, and it reflects how gender Disparity and racism mold their duties as surrogate mothers. Additionally, it explores themes like Motherhood, mainly how Black Women take care of children who are not their own, while their own maternal identity is denied. The paper discusses how domestic work reflects both gender oppression and racial oppression, yet it also questions the conventional ideas about motherhood and identification. By examining these themes, this paper builds to a consideration of gender equality, racial justice, and the value of women's nurturing work in literature and society.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Racial Discrimination, Surrogate Motherhood, Domestic Worker, Identity.

DOI: 10.71086/IAJH/V13I2/IAJH1309
Received: 23 March 2026/Revised: 24 April 2026/Accepted: 11 May 2026/Published: 29 June 2026

Introduction

The Contemporary American literature covers writings from the late 20th century onward that represent today's social, cultural, and political Environment. It examines key points such as race, gender, power dynamics, resource Inequality, and individuality, while the authors unsettle conventional views and amplify the voices of marginalized groups (Hochschild, 1983). Diversity shines through varied types of writers and creative narrative voices, with recurring themes of feminism, struggles for racial justice, and global reach. The indicated works combine individual stories with a wide social impact, highlight authentic realism, recall, and real-world problems. They frequently employ shifting standpoints and disjointed timelines to probe power variation and social scale; finally, it represents the intricate layers of life in present-day America.

Kathryn Stockett sticks out as a present American author. Born in 1969 in Jackson, Mississippi, a place that entirely colours her narratives, she grew up in the South, obtaining early awareness of racial divides. She holds degrees in English and creative writing from the University of Alabama, and honed her skills in New York City's publishing and media scenes. Her famous novel The Help (2009) earned global acclaim by revealing the experiences of Black domestic workers and the absence of Maternal Identity in 1960s Mississippi (Taylor, 2011). Known for its straightforward yet poignant prose, her work boosts overlooked stories and critiques social inequities, fastening her role in crucial conversations about race and visibility (Davis, 1983).

The Novel takes place in 1960s Jackson, Mississippi, where the harsh reality of racial injustice permeates daily life. It tracks three key characters: Aibileen and Minny, Black housekeepers, and Skeeter, a white woman who visualizes a writing career, as their paths suddenly converge. Aibileen takes care of a white family's toddler despite facing emotional obstacles and bigotry; her words, taking care of white babies, that's what I do, along with all the cooking and the cleaning. I've raised seventeen kids in my lifetime… but I ain't never been allowed to be my own (Kathryn Stockett, P. 1)

This line explains the sufferings of Aibileen's unrecognized motherhood, caring for others' children while denied full recognition of her own identity. The character Minny's bold, confident, and raw speech shows her continuing to fire amid mistreatment, highlighting her defiance. The book investigates the nuances of surrogate parenting, as seen in Aibileen's positive affirmation to the child: "You're kind. You're clever. You matter" (Kathryn Stockett, p. 521). It also mirrors her caregiving commitment while striving to encourage a value that rises above discrimination. In the end, The Help represents a narrative creation as a brave aspiration that uncovers wrongs, upholds human dignity, and points to opportunities for societal change.

A notable body of scholarly work has examined the connections between gender, race, and labour in literature, laying a strong foundation for examining surrogate motherhood and the absence of maternal identity among Black women in The Help by Kathryn Stockett (Carby, 1987; Reynolds, 2015). Scholars broadly argue that domestic work, especially for African American women, cannot be reduced to mere economic activity. Instead, it carries deep emotional sorrows and reflects broader social inequalities. Although such studies are understood not just as narrative, but also as a powerful space where lived experiences are voiced, questioned, and critically understood. The perspective depends on a close qualitative reading of characters, conversations, and narration, paired with a black–feminist thematic exploration of parenting, self-negation, and rebellion throughout the novel (Collins, 2000; Christian,1985). Drawing on previous studies, it builds on and focuses on views of disparity in the work. In essence, this paper reveals fiction's role in amplifying hidden perspectives and challenging rigid societal norms.

Caregiving as Labor, Not Identity

In The Help, nurturing is presented less as an act of motherhood and more as a form of paid labor. Black women are positioned in roles where they are in control of and take care of white children, yet the emotional impact of their care is largely denied. Aibileen's remark, "I done raised seventeen kids," (Aibileen, Chapter 1, pg no - 1). This line reveals Aibileen Clark's position as a housemaid while she considers a lifetime devoted to menial home work. It also foregrounds how her caregiving sets off a routine and stripped of personal identity. Although she forms deep emotional ties with the children she nurtures, these affections are not acknowledged as true motherhood. Instead, her work is treated as temporary and easily replaced once her service is no longer needed. She endows profound maternal love full of kindness, encouragement, and steady support into each white child under her love and care, yet the white families view her efforts as standard, but disposable chores. Skeeter's observation, that's what I love about Aibileen: she can take the most complicated things in life and wrap them up so small and simple that they'll fit right in your pocket. (Stockett, 2009, p. 521)

Uncover how Aibileen's remarkable empathy and caregiving duties earn private praise but no public or structural identity. Their function overshadows their recognition, and their duty rather than their humanity notes their importance.

Denial of Maternal Identity

The novel's denial to recognize Black women as mothers seems to be a repeated and powerfully rooted pattern (hooks, 1981; Collins ,2000). Despite the fact that they offer true care, love, and mental balance, they are not socially or culturally recognized as true mothers. The demands of their work always pull them away from their families, creating a disparity in their own lives. Aibileen's affection with Mae Mobley plainly reflects this dispute. She takes care of the child with endurance and love, lead her emotionally. Aibileen's role is observable when she tells Mae Mobley,

You are kind. You are smart. You are important (Stockett, 2009, P. 521).

All I know is, I done had to live my whole life pretending (Stockett, 2009, p. 189).

These two quotes reveal Aibileen's heartfelt emotional bond with Mae Mobley, personifying true motherhood. On the other hand, even as she shows love, intelligence, and compassion, society denies her maternal acceptance. Yet she continues to be used as an outsider within the household. Her presence is needed, but her role is never fully recognized or acknowledged. This harsh loss of maternal identity lies beyond the individual experience and points to a larger social system. Also, it reveals how white motherhood is wealthy, whereas Black motherhood is positioned on the margins. As a result, these women experience a divided sense of self, constantly holding in tension their emotional connections and the restrictions imposed on them.

Surrogate Motherhood as a Condition of Inequality

In The Help, a surrogate parent is represented not as a matter of personal consent, but as being formed by socio-economic constraints. Black women are portrayed in caregiving roles, mostly due to their choices being limited by unequal chances and strongly rooted in systemic barriers. This type of motherhood is accepted by unequal power relations that limit freedom and self-choice. Meanwhile, their consolation efforts are taken as a part of their responsibility, and their own needs and recognition are overlooked.

It’s just plain dangerous… They carry different diseases than we do. (Stockett, 2009, p. 112).

We love them children… but they ain’t ever gone’ be ours. (Stockett, 2009, approximate p. 312).

The White employers in the novel justify their supremacy and indifference from Black nannies, while they entrust these women with the personal chore of nurturing their kids. It highlights how surrogate motherhood is used in a structure that requires emotional work while withholding esteem and justice. Through this lens, surrogate motherhood shows a deep-seated inequity, reveals how some are compelled to pour out endlessly while as, others reap the rewards uncredited. In The Help, the white people are imposing and calculated psychological and social emptiness on their Black workers, in spite of leaning on them for the deeply private responsibility of childcare. This paradox highlights how discrimination continues through harm and anxiety, strengthening the problems despite everyday dependence. Such interplay positions surrogate parenting as a consequence of imbalance, whereas Black women play vital nurturing duties but are denied esteem, lack recognition, and dignity.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the complex connection between gender bias and surrogate parents in The Help, with a specific focus on the lack of maternal identity in Black women. Through a qualitative reading helped by Black Feminist ideas, the study has shown that the experiences of characters like Aibileen and Minny are not individual problems, but a reflection of truly unequal social injustice. One of the most preeminent conclusions of this study is that surrogate parenting in the novel is not shows as a suffering of own choice. Instead, of it appears as a obligatory societal condition moulded by systemic disparity. Black women are positioned in care-taking roles not only because they willingly choose them, but due to social, economic, and racial justice, leaving them with a handful of choices. This study additionally shows that while Black women do the role of mothers in practice, their identity as mothers is consistently undervalued. They take care of, guide, and emotionally help the children they care for, always forming a deep and meaningful relationship. Instead, their own supports are treated as temporary, easily replaceable, and tied

only to their duty as workers. This paradox mainly highlights a harsh reality their parenthood is used, but their identity as mothers is not valued.

Another main finding is the hidden unfairness in these parental relationships. On the other hand, the work performed by Black women may appear to be simple domestic work, but a deeper inspection shows the profound feelings involved. They provide a genuine love, care, and moral values to the children in their nurturing. Aibileen's nurturing words and actions, for example, show that her care treated far beyond duty it is sensibly human and emotionally infuse. Yet, this emotional work remains largely hidden and undervalued. Importantly, this paper argues that the experiences depicted in the novel should not be reduced to mere social injustice. But also, inequality and systemic discrimination are rootedly present, the issue goes deeper into the realm of psychological and identity-based discrimination. The contradiction of maternal identity acts not only on the social set of Black women but also on their sense of self-identity. In conclusion, this study highlights that the surrogate mother in The Help is a strong lens through which the extensive systems of inequality can be understood. It shows how race, gender, and class are intersected to mould not only external conditions but also internal identities. The absence of maternal recognition is not unintentional; it is a deliberate result of a system that benefits from the labor of Black women while denying their humanity.

References

Stockett, K. (2009). *The help*. Amy Einhorn Books.

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.

hooks, b. (1981). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. South End Press.

Davis, A. Y. (1983). *Women, race & class*. Vintage Books.

Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.

Christian, B. (1985). *Black feminist criticism: Perspectives on Black women writers*. Pergamon Press.

Carby, H. V. (1987). Reconstructing womanhood: The emergence of the Afro-American woman novelist. Oxford University Press.

Reynolds, L. (Ed.). (2015). *Black motherhood(s): Contours, contexts and considerations*. Demeter Press.

Taylor, T. (Director). (2011). *The help* [Film]. DreamWorks Pictures.

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*.