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Afro-American Women's Journey: From Segregation to Self-Determination in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2009) and Margot Lee Shetterly's *Hidden Figures* (2016)

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Abstract

The present work offers a comparative analysis of Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2009) and Margot Lee Shetterly's *Hidden Figures* (2016) by focusing on black female's segregation and resistance within the context of the Civil Rights era. It first highlights the historical and social conditions that led to the writing of the novels and seeks to provide a coherent comparison between the two selected texts by exploring the realities and double oppression of African American women. Moreover, drawing upon the theoretical framework of Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism and Alice Walker's Womanism, the study explores how these works depict and challenge the racial barriers and double discrimination faced by women, particularly of color. The present research depicts how these women, thanks to their efforts, determination and solidarity, succeeded to overcome the social injustices and gender inequalities encountered in their daily lives.

Key Words: New Historicism, Womanism, *The Help*, *Hidden Figures*, Jim Crow Laws, Civil Rights Movement, segregation, determination, resistance, solidarity.

Dedication

I dedicate this modest work to:

My father for his support

My mother for her affection and patience

My dear sisters Nesrine and Celia, and only brother M'henni

My lovely friends Yasmine, Nadjat, and Melissa

And to everyone who helped me, with all my love I dedicate to them this precious work

Fatiha

Dedication

This thesis is honestly dedicated to:

To the memory of my grandparents

My dearest parents

My beloved brothers Mostapha, Hakim and Rafik

To my Sweet nieces Serine and Rouya

My friends Fahima, Fatiha and Salima

And all those who love me

Yasmine

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List of abbreviations

NACA: National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics.

NASA: National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

LDF: Legal Defense Fund.

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General Introduction

INTRODUCTION

Discrimination existed in the United States since the colonial era. This act was manifested through slavery, genocide, segregation, and lynchings. Different ethnic groups such as African Americans, Jews, non-protestant immigrants who came from Europe, Asian Americans, and many other minorities were the victims of these inhuman practices. African American community groups were the only ethnic group who suffered extremely from discrimination and segregation because of their skin colour. Even though African Americans had had large contributions to the history of America, the whites justified their injustices by referring to the theory that the blacks were descendants of enslaved people. Those slaves who were brought to America left their homelands and were taken by force to work in the New World's plantations. This act of enslavement deprived African Americans of their inalienable rights like sharing in the social, economic, and political progress of the United States.

Accordingly, Most Blacks in the United States faced racism and discrimination in all aspects of life, especially during the legacy of the Jim Crow Laws. These laws separated African Americans from whites in education, transportation, housing, and public facilities. Even after these laws were officially abolished, this minority group faced the effects of institutional racism for years.

Throughout the tragic American history, African Americans were considered as property and cheap commodities in the eyes of the law, this made life really brutal and harsh for them. They suffered from poverty, held ill-paid and insecure jobs. Along with men, black women also faced multiple forms of oppression due to their race and gender. They were mistreated and had limited access to education and job opportunities. In the South, African American women often worked in domestic services for very low wages, they were relegated to the lowest level of society and were often segregated and alienated for being both black and women.

Despite these challenges, African Americans mobilized to resist this sustained violence and discrimination by creating several movements. Their first attempts to better lives began with the movements of the Underground Railroad (1800), the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Civil Rights (1950), and the Selma to Montgomery March (1965), leaving behind important figures in the history of the African Americans, including Martin Luther King Jr, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X.

Literature is one of the most important tools that reflected the struggle of African American women throughout history. Many writers such as James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, and Toni Morrison used their literary works to call attention to the issues faced by these minorities. They explored themes of oppression, race, injustice, resistance, and the search for identity. Kathryn Stockett and Margot Lee Shetterly are two of those engaged writers who have used literature to articulate the experiences of African American women through their literary works, *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*.

The Help (2009) is a historical fiction novel, written by the American novelist and editor Kathryn Stockett, who was born in 1969 in Jackson, Mississippi. As a white American who was raised by a black domestic help, Stockett was irritated and moved by the bitter conditions the black householders were subjected to. Through her novel, she depicts the atrocities that women of colour face in Mississippi. She, furthermore, explores the ways discrimination pervades every aspect of their social life.

In addition to the previously mentioned work, *Hidden Figures* (2016) is a nonfiction (historical) novel written by the African American female writer and researcher Margot Lee Shetterly, who was born in 1969 in Hampton, Virginia. Shetterly devoted her literary skills to reveal the untold stories of black women and their accomplishments by following Dorothy

Vaughan, Mary Jackson, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Hoover, and Christine Darden throughout their personal and professional lives. Her masterpiece simultaneously demonstrates race and gender during NASA's origin and the history of computing.

The Review of Literature

The two novels under study have been studied by many scholars from various perspectives. Thus, many writers delved into the examination of *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* to critically analyze and interpret them, focusing mainly on the effect of these books on the American literature. In her article entitled —Black Women's Memories and The Help‖ (2014), Valerie Smith explores the racial tensions between the white and black women in *The Help* by referring to the principal white character —Eugenia Skeeter‖ to be unaware of the dangerous racial environment in which the black maids live. Stating the following —her lack of knowledge about her Constantine's life suggests the asymmetry in the relationship between the black maids and the families for which they worked.‖ (30). She adds that the African American maids know every detail about the lives of their white masters; Yet the whites believe that the personal life of the black maids was not worth and important to know (30).

In the same vein, Suzanne W. Jones published an article under the title —The divided Reception of *The Help*‖ (2014) in which she gives great importance to the reception of the novel by both —Whites‖ and —Blacks‖. Jones's opinion is that white people hope that *The Help* has revealed the common humanity of all, while African Americans fear that the crudely sketched images of themselves may end up reinforcing —old stereotypes‖ (9). She adds that many scholars have focused on Stockett's stereotypical portrayal of both black and white characters, however, some African American scholars such as the association of black women historians point out that —*The Help* is not an accurate or realistic portrayal of both black

people or the time period, but rather the coming-of-age story of a white protagonist, who uses myths about the lives of black women to make sense of her own (12).

To show how the white supremacists used racial injustice to marginalize the black community in *The Help*, Christopher Lloyd, in his article —Bodies that don't matter: Regulating Race on The Toilet in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2016), refers to the use of toilet to show the tension of race relations focusing here on the matter of —embodiment and bodily process (13). He suggests that Stockett's novel, through its attention to toilets, feces, and urination, demonstrates —the central tensions and disavowals of race relations in the Civil Rights era South.

In her review entitled "Computing While Black", Evelyn M. Hammonds considers the stories of black women like the West Computers are hard to document when even the white women scientists and engineers working in national laboratories during and after World War II are "still difficult to uncover" (26). The writer also states that West Computers endured all the "discriminatory practices" they face in their workplaces because they give more importance to their jobs. Hammonds also attests that "they believed that the opportunity to work as mathematicians was not one they could afford to waste, since work for black women in this era was largely agricultural or domestic" (27).

A review published by Jenna P. Carpenter entitled "Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race" (2017) explains how the African American women of Langley took advantage of every opportunity to "advance themselves and their families" despite the discriminatory practices against women of color at NASA (67). The writer also states that these black women had been allowed to work in aeronautical innovation and space flight only because of "the national emergencies that World War II and the Cold War space race" created in the United States (68).

In an article entitled — African-American Women's Power in Margot Lee Shetterly Hidden Figures (2022), Scarlet Valensya Athala Rumayan, Tini Moge, and Imelda Lolowang, tackle the subject of women's power and represent "the strength of African American women in facing all acts of discrimination that they experience in the work environment at NASA and in their social lives" (1416). They also discuss the roles of braveness, determination, and self-defence in the rise of the African American women of NASA despite the segregation laws they face in their workplaces.

The Problematic and The Issue

Discrimination can be considered one of the most important issues in the history of the United States, especially for women of color. Women of African origins witnessed acts of segregation and discrimination for centuries and were relegated to the lowest level of society due to their race and gender. That is why black women's inferiority is the subject matter of many writers, critics, and poets. Overall, the study's main problem is to demonstrate the humiliations and sufferings of African American women in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* and Margot Lee Shetterly's *Hidden Figures*. The two novels under study have been analyzed separately but, according to our review of literature, they have never been taken under study from our perspective.

This research will be made for certain purposes. Its main concern is to provide a coherent comparison between Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* and Margot Lee Shetterly's *Hidden Figures* by identifying the common existing affinities between the two novels. The study will focus on the issue of racial segregation which deeply affected the African American community. In addition to this, the dissertation seeks to highlight the authors' representation of the black female suffering and their resistance and determination in the segregated 20th century America.

Throughout the analysis, the present study aims at answering the following subquestions: in which ways do the black female characters in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* navigate and experience segregation within their community? How do the novels portray the relationship between the white and black characters? how do the novels portray the strength and solidarity of women despite the challenges imposed by segregation?

As English literature students, we are highly captivated and attracted by the African American literature. After delving into the latter, we are interested in revealing a part of the miserable conditions of being an African American woman in a racist white dominant society. The reason behind our choice of the novels as the main corpus of the study is that both of them support the area of investigation and provide insights into the portrayal of black women's agency, resilience, and the complexities of their experiences.

Chapters Overview

Along with the general introduction and conclusion, this research will be divided into two chapters. The first chapter will cover the social and historical contexts that led to the writing of the two novels. Moreover, we will provide each of Kathryn Stockett and Margot Lee Shetterly's life Experiences, literary achievements, and the plot overviews of the novels. This chapter will also provide a brief overview of the theories: New-Historicism and Womanism.

In the second chapter, we will reveal the dark side of the American society by focusing the theme of black women's segregation as depicted in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* providing examples of the daily lives of the black protagonist during the Jim Crow and Civil Rights era. Furthermore, we will analyze the role of resistance and the importance solidarity in overcoming racism and oppression.

**Chapter One: Kathryn Stockett and Margot Lee
Shetterly: Times, Lives and Influences**

Introduction

This chapter is devoted first to the biographies of Kathryn Stockett and Margot Lee Shetterly, their literary influences and the plot overview of their novels. However, this part of the dissertation strives not only to introduce the writers and their works but also aims to delve more into their lives to find the resemblance between them. Moreover, in this chapter, we will shed light on the historical background of the aforementioned works by introducing the Jim Crow Laws and the Civil Rights Movement since the stories of the works highlights the effects of these historical events on African American women. Finally, this chapter provides a general overview of Stephen Greenblatt's theory New-Historicism and Alice Walker's Womanist theory.

Kathryn Stockett: Life Experiences and Literary Achievements

Born in 1969, in Jackson, Mississippi, Kathryn Stockett is an American fiction writer and editor, who grew up in a Southern household with a deep appreciation for literature and storytelling. Stockett attended the University of Alabama, where she majored in English and creative writing. After graduation, she headed to New York to work as an editor and offered her services in magazine publishing and marketing for about nine years before moving back to the South with her daughter to pursue her writing career.

Kathryn Stockett is best known for her 2009 debut novel *The Help*, published by Amy Einhorn Books, which highlights the experiences of marginalized people in the South during the Civil Rights era. After five years of writing and sixty rejections, *The Help* became an immediate bestseller and spent more than 100 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list.

Stockett drew inspiration for the narrative from her grandparents' black maid Demetrie, who left an impact on her childhood memories. In an interview with the website Book Reporter, she explained her attitude as a child: "Growing up in Mississippi, almost every family I knew had a black woman working in their house—cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the white

children. That was life in Mississippi. I was young and assumed that how most of America lived." However, when Stockett moved to New York, she realized that life in the South was not universal, and found herself sharing stories with other Southerners she met in the North about black domestic help working in white houses. This led her to think about what Demetrie must have experienced as a maid.

It is worth mentioning that *The Help* is a historical fiction novel and not an autobiographical account. However, in order to write her book, Stockett drew inspiration from her observations growing up in Jackson, Mississippi during the 1970s. Her understanding of the area and its racial dynamics has impacted her depiction of the social and cultural atmosphere of *the Help*. Amy Sharps, in the Guardian, describes the novel as a depiction to the civil rights society and relates segregation with the social reality, she argues: —Stockett has not only written an unforgettable, at times humorous and all-round brilliant story; this is also an informative masterpiece, educating people about the life of the help in the segregated society of Jackson, Mississippi in the early 1960s, using some of her personal experiences of growing up in the deep southll.

Published in 2009, *The Help* is a historical fiction novel about race, gender, endurance, and the fight for justice. It portrays the complexity of the relationship between black domestic help and their white masters in the early 1960s. The novel is set in Jackson, Mississippi and features the issues of racial inequality and social partiality during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Stockett through the setting of her novel opens a window for the reader to see the real conditions of living in a racially segregated society relying on her childhood memories. She also gives critical visions to her white characters' beliefs and insights mainly Skeeter Phelan's character and the antagonist of the novel Hilly Holbrook to show their different perspectives.

The story is told by three women, who live in Mississippi when the Jim Crow Laws were still in effect, Aibileen Clark, Minny Jackson, and Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan. The book consists of thirty-four chapters, each narrated by one of the protagonists. Aibileen Clark, a middle-aged African American maid, faces racial prejudices and mistreatment in her master's household and aspires to change her circumstances by revealing the bitter conditions of working for a white family.

Her friend Minny Jackson is an outspoken black maid who works for Miss Hilly Holbrook's mother Miss Walters, but she soon loses her job after Hilly puts her mom in a nursing home and spread rumours that her mother's servant is a thief. In order to get her revenge, Minny bakes a pie with her own faeces and offers it to Hilly.

Eugenia is a privileged white woman in her early twenties who graduates from college and returns home to her family's cotton plantation aspiring to become a writer. When she comes back home, she realizes that her beloved Nanny Constantine has disappeared and no one tells her the reason for her mysterious absence.

While Skeeter's real dream is to become a writer, the only job she can find is writing a household advice column called —Miss Myrnal in the Jackson Journal. As she knows very little about housekeeping, Skeeter forms a friendship with Aibileen and seeks her help in writing a book about the hard experiences of black maids who work for white families. In the beginning, Aibileen hesitates to help because of the fear of the consequences of speaking out against her white employers. But later she accepts and starts meeting Skeeter secretly, and then Minny and other maids join in to record their stories.

Along the way, Skeeter learns the truth about what happened to her black maid Constantine. Constantine gave birth to Lulabelle who was light-skinned even though both of her parents were black. This is not accepted either by the white or the black community, so

Constantine puts her own daughter up for adoption. While Skeeter attends college, Lulabelle visits her mother in Jackson. However, when Miss Charlotte Phelan (Skeeter's mother) finds out who Lulabelle is, she kicks her out and fires her mother and Skeeter never sees her again. Hence, she is dismayed by the mistreatment and racism of the white families against the maids that she sees around her.

As the three women come together to document the challenges the other maids encounter in Jackson, they face many obstacles to keep their project secret from the white community and risk facing violence if they are discovered. At the same time, Skeeter faces struggles in publishing the book and opposing her family and friends.

In the end, Skeeter finally manages to publish her book entitled *The Help* which is set in the fictional town of Niceville, and becomes a bestseller in Jackson. Even though it is published anonymously, the white women of the area start to recognize themselves in the book's characters, however, they cannot react because they are afraid of being exposed for their mistreatment of their maids. Particularly Miss Hilly, who knows the real writer of the book, but cannot react because her secret involving Minny's pie, tries to convince the women of Jackson that the stories were set in a different place. The book becomes a medium for giving a voice to the marginalized maids in the face of oppression and discrimination.

Margot Lee Shetterly: Life Experiences and Literary Achievements

Margot Lee Shetterly is an American writer, born in Hampton, Virginia, on June 30, 1969. Her mother was an English professor at the historically black Hampton University, and her father worked as a research scientist at NASA's Langley Research Centre. She studied at Phoebus high school and graduated from the University of Virginia.

In 2010, Shetterly started working on her novel *Hidden Figures*, in which she tackles the subject of women's history and discrimination. She sold the rights of the book in 2014 to

William Morrow, an imprint of Harper Collins, to be adapted as a feature film by the same name in 2016. The movie was nominated for many awards, including an Oscar nomination.

Shetterly lived in Mexico with her husband, and they founded the "*Inside Mexico*" magazine. She founded, in 2013, *The Human Computer Project*, in which she archives the works of the women who worked as computers and mathematicians at NACA and NASA. Shetterly received a 2014 book grant for the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and two grants from the Virginia Foundation of the Humanities for her work on the Human Computer Project. She won the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work, nonfiction for her novel *Hidden Figures* (Shetterly).

Like Stockett, Shetterly also was affected by the environment she grew up in. Therefore, she based the story of her novel *Hidden Figures* on the experiences of the real black mathematicians of NASA. As a black woman, Shetterly was closer to understand the pain her fellow African Americans lived, which is why she managed to highlight the subject of segregation and the importance of resilience in the fight for justice.

The story of *Hidden Figures* takes place in 1943 amid World War II, in Hampton, Virginia, where the Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory seeks to hire hundreds of physicists and mathematicians to support engineers in performing aeronautical research as part of the NACA. Mathematicians or "Computers" at that time were almost women, but the Jim Crow Laws were still present in the South, which makes Hampton segregated, and the women who started working at Langley were placed in a segregated office called West Area.

In the summer of 1942, Dorothy Vaughan, an African American math teacher, works in a laundry room to earn extra money. One day she sees the advertisement for jobs at NACA, she applies and then is hired as a mathematician even though the job requires her to move a long distance and live away from her husband and children.

Dorothy starts fearing losing her job at NACA after the war, but after the Head Computer Margery Hannah gets promoted and her second, Blanch falls ill and dies, Dorothy is asked to be the Head Computer of the West Area computing division in 1946. Years later, after performing well, she becomes full head of the unit in 1951. Mary Jackson, another African American woman, joins her at West Computing and works for her.

When The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union becomes intense and the launch of Sputnik starts a Space Race between the two, the United States works on developing spacecraft that can send a man into space. Katherine Johnson, an African American mathematician, who starts working at Langley Laboratory, is thrilled with the challenge, and contributes in putting her efforts to build a working spacecraft, and even though she is not allowed at first to attend editorial meetings, she insists to be included and joins the meetings to become the first woman to publish a research report for the Space Task Group.

Mary Jackson succeeds to become the first black female engineer at NASA and helps her son to become the first African American child to win the local soap box derby race, and Dorothy Vaughan teaches herself the programming language FORTRAN to be able to program the computers that will replace her, which means saving her job. Katherine Johnson works hard with the Space Task Group to figure out how to send a man to the moon despite the black activists who protest the mission because of the segregation they face. She succeeds, by her calculations and contributions, to see Apollo 11 land safely on the moon, and she remembers all the women who helped her to achieve her dreams.

The book delves into the history of the Civil Rights Movement and how segregation affected the lives and careers of African Americans in the United States. It highlights the success of the African American women in NASA despite the struggles they have been through and their contributions to the history of America.

Texts in Contexts

Since literature is a vehicle that serves as a reflection of the past, capturing the perspectives, values, and emotions of people living in a certain era. Stockett and Shetterly, were highly influenced by black women's living conditions during the Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights eras. By using New Historicism , we understand that the two writers were shaped and influenced by the historical events and figures of these time periods. Therefore, through *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, they depicted how a segregated society functions during the Jim Crow era and the civil rights movement, even though Stockett and Shetterly did not directly witness some specific events portrayed in their novels, they undoubtedly drew on the experiences of their community to authentically capture the challenges faced by the black maids and the African American mathematicians during that era.

Both *The Help* and *Hidden figures* shed lights on the injustices and humiliations faced by African American women during the mid-twenties. For that reason, it is important to mention the Jim Crow Laws and the Civil Rights Movement to give the reader of our dissertation a deep understanding of the enduring effects of segregation and racism and inspiring determination of women of color to overcome these atrocities.

Jim Crow Laws

The period of the Jim Crow Laws in the United States was an offensive and miserable part of the American history. It is a set of state and local laws that took in place from 1877 to the 1960s. These laws were named after a character in a minstrel show who tries to emphasize the inferiority of black people by depicting a mocking and negative portrayal of a stereotypical black person (Guffey 41).

Jim Crow Laws were first established in the southern states after the Reconstruction (1877) which followed the Civil War. The Reconstruction era had granted African Americans citizenship and voting rights, but these gains were quickly reversed by these laws which appeared to enforce racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans (316).

Freedom filled the white souls with fear after the abolition of slavery because they were frustrated with certain black reconstruction achievements (7). The white community could not accept the idea of black people sharing the same social facilities and having access to the same healthcare, education, and jobs.

The Jim Crow Laws were intended to marginalize African Americans by suppressing their rights and limiting their access to good-paying jobs and good education. In 1896 the first legal attempt to repeal Jim Crow Laws was upheld in the case of Plessy v. Ferguson in which the Supreme Court established the —separate but equall doctrine to affirm the constitutionality of racial segregation as long as the separate facilities were equal. However, the facilities provided for black people were often substandard and inferior to those provided for white people, leading to widespread inequality and discrimination.

Violence against African Americans was also widespread during this period, and lynchings were commonplace. One of the famous incidents was the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, when a white mob attacked and destroyed the prosperous neighbourhood of Greenwood in Tulsa, Oklahoma, killing between 60 to 300 African Americans and 21 whites (xx).

Despite the hardships, African Americans continued to resist and fight for their rights through legal challenges, protests, and civil disobedience. The Civil Right movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a crucial moment in this struggle and led to the overturning of many of the Jim Crow Laws (1).

In conclusion, the Jim Crow Laws were a dark period in American history, where racial segregation and discrimination were enforced through legislation and violence. The laws were only repealed through the efforts of brave activists and leaders who fought for equality and justice for all.

Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights Movement was a social struggle that started mainly in the 1950s and 1960s to abolish segregation and discrimination against African Americans and to fight for justice and equality in the United States. It was marked by its key events that changed the history of segregation.

One of the most important events in the Civil Rights Movement was the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown V. Board of Education* in 1954 (Tushnet 173). After justice declared that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, the LDF celebrated a defining moment for the Civil Rights in a long. Rosa Parks, an African American woman, marked another seminal event when she refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery Alabama bus in 1955. Her arrest created a boycott of the city's bus system, organized by Martin Luther King Jr, and it ended after over a year when the Supreme Court declared segregation on public buses unconstitutional (113).

In The Civil Rights Act of 1964, Congress passed a Public Law that prohibited discrimination based on colour, race, sex or national origin. It was signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964 and it helped to enforce voting rights which changed the governments in the area of voting for African Americans (Kirk 138) and it prohibited the discriminatory practices they faced such as literacy tests and poll taxes and other bureaucratic restrictions.

The March on Washington in 1963 and The Selma to Montgomery March in 1965 in

Alabama had also a crucial role in fighting against segregation in America. African Americans protested in large numbers with significant names such as Martin Luther King Jr, who left an impact with his speech —I Have a Dream

The Civil Rights Movement was a long and difficult struggle for African Americans. After slavery was abolished, segregation, discrimination and violence took place all around the country, their resistance against these non-human practices paid off with victories. Even though Civil Rights couldn't give them true equality, it left them with inspiring stories and examples to keep fighting against segregation.

Theories and Approaches

Stephen Greenblatt's New-Historicist Theory

In the early 1980s, the American theorist and literary critic Stephen Greenblatt introduced New Historicism as a new form of literary criticism in his essay *The Improvisation of Power* (1980) and in his book *Renaissance Self Fashioning* (1980). It came as a reaction to Traditional Historicism and New Criticism and rejected the idea that literature should be separated from the cultural background of the author, and the historical background of the period of writing. New Historicism concentrates on the historical, social, and cultural contexts of the author in the period in which his/her literary work was produced. And it believes that texts should depict a cultural, historical, and political event. Since New Historicism came out of Marxist criticism, which focused on the oppressed and the oppressor, New Historicists are also concerned with the power structure in the text, and they believe that power is circulated in society, and every person has current power structures.

Cultural Poetics —seeks to reveal the relationship between texts and their sociohistorical contexts (Veenstra 174). The term Culture in Greenblatt's *Towards a Poetics of Culture* suggests that New Historicism studies more than just literary texts, but it interprets the culture of the text. Moreover, a Poetics of Culture studies how cultures manifest in a

specific way (Frank), and Cultural Poetics scholars declare that any interpretation of a text is incomplete without considering the text's relationship to the discourses that contributed in producing it. (Greenblatt 4).

Cultural Poetics critics assure that studying a text leads to understand the social world of the text and the social forces that affect the reader's negotiation with the printed material.

Poetics of Culture smudge the line between history and literature and asserts that texts, literature, are ensconced in cultural history. It also recognizes how power affects literature as much as history does. Moreover, history is an essential element in the interpretive process instead of being considered simply a background (Greenblatt7).

Contextualization is one of the key concepts of New Historicism which argues that literature cannot be understood without considering the historical and cultural context in which they are produced. Which includes the social, political, economic, and intellectual conditions of that time. The Interdisciplinary approach in New Historicism also draws on multiple disciplines, such as history, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, to study the cultural and historical context of literary texts, which allows for a comprehensive understanding of the forces that helped in shaping the text.

New Historicism is interested in the role of power and politics in producing literature, and New Historicists believe that literary texts can reflect and reinforce power relations, which examines issues such as gender, race, sexuality, and class. This theory is also characterized by questioning the idea of objective truth and considering knowledge as a product of cultural and historical processes.

To conclude, New Historicism is a literary theory that seeks to understand the complex relationship between literature, culture, and history. This critical approach sees literature as a product of a particular cultural moment and not as a record of one's mind, and it brings in

history, sociology, and cultural studies. In other meaning, New Historicism is concerned with the political functions of literature and the concept of power, emphasizing a sociohistorical approach rather than a strict adherence to factual details.

Alice Walker's Womanist Theory

Womanism was first coined by the Southern writer, novelist, social activist, and literary critic Alice Walker in her essay collection *In Search of our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). The word Womanism is used to refer to the —feminists of color or —black feminists in particular. However, Alice Walker insists that Womanists have different perspectives and demands from Feminists (Long 653). While the Feminist movement has made tremendous strides in advocating for gender equality, it has frequently been criticized for its lack of intersection and failure to cope with the unique struggles experienced by women, particularly of color, in marginalized communities. In an article intitled —Alice Walker's Womanism: Perspectives Past and Present (2012), Izgarjan Aleksandra and Markov Slobodanka affirm that —Although at the start, the goal of feminism was to win equality and suffrage for women, already in the nineteenth century it became clear that there were two separate women's movements since white women refused to support the struggle of black women for their rights (306). That is why Womanism emerged to place a special focus on the experiences and perspectives of black women and center their efforts and contributions that were not acknowledged in the Feminist movement. In other words, Womanism was created as a response to the exclusion of African American women within the feminist movement.

Alice Walker interpreted the word —Womanism in various ways. She claims that it is derived from —womanish which is associated with being responsible and serious opposite of —girlish (11). Thus, Womanism promotes strength and solidarity among women, recognizing that all women have valuable perspectives and experiences to contribute to feminist

movements. It seeks to create spaces that value and uplift the voices of marginalized women, including women of color, Indigenous women, queer and transgender women, and women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Womanism challenges the idea that feminism should solely focus on the experiences of privileged groups and emphasizes the importance of building solidarity across differences.

Womanism serves as a form for addressing and understanding that women's discrimination and oppression is shaped by multiple factors and intersecting identities such as gender, class, sexuality, ability, and more. Moreover, Womanism promotes solidarity and community among women across different racial and ethnic backgrounds and acknowledges that systems of oppression are interconnected and cannot be understood or addressed in isolation. Intersectionality highlights the importance of considering the unique challenges faced by women at the intersections of multiple identities and emphasizes the need for inclusive and intersectional approaches to feminist analysis and activism.

Womanists see social activism as a central component of effecting change, and encourages women to challenge oppressive systems and work towards social justice. This social activism involves political advocacy, coalition-building, community-based initiatives, and grassroots organizing. It also encourages the power of collective action with emphasizing the importance of addressing both individual and systemic forms of oppression.

Womanism sees spirituality and well-being of women as a source of strength and resilience, by considering the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical aspects of women's lives. It also encourages them to resist societal norms and define themselves on their own terms, by challenging the impositions of limiting and oppressive labels.

Conclusion

In this part, we have gained insight into Kathryn Stockett's and Margot Lee Shetterly's personal backgrounds and experiences, which are projected in their writings. Furthermore, we have provided a brief overview of the narratives, characters, and central themes of *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*; that serve as a reflection to the worlds created by the authors to highlight the struggle and challenges faced by the black female characters with a deep exploration of segregation. Throughout this chapter, we have also explored the historical and theoretical context tackled in the two novels.

**Chapter two: Afro-American women's Resistance Vs
self-determination in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* and
Margot Lee Shetterly's *Hidden Figures***

Introduction

The first thing that craped our attention when thinking of doing this comparison is that both *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* tackle the issue of black women's segregation and the importance of solidarity. Therefore, we will focus on the existed segregation in public facilities as demonstrated by the novels' black protagonists. Moreover, we will highlight the importance of black women's resistance and solidarity to overcome segregation and oppression. In order to achieve the study's aim, we will make use of the New-historicist and Womanist literary theories to reveal the hidden stories of women of color during the Civil Rights era.

In their novels, *the Help* and *Hidden Figures*, Kathryn Stockett and Margot Lee Shetterly explore the experiences of marginalized black women in the mid-20th century United States by examining the power dynamics between white and black individuals and by highlighting the theme of racial prejudices, segregation, and social class. *The Help* focuses on the racial tensions between southern domestic workers and their white employers, while *Hidden Figures* examines the experiences of African American women working at NASA. The aforementioned works involve the struggles these women of colour faced in achieving equal rights and recognition for their contributions in a society that discriminates against them. Their stories offer a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of life-changing pivotal moments in history. Additionally, the narratives celebrate the bravery, resistance and perseverance of these women in the face of systemic oppression. Ultimately, both novels feature strong black female protagonists who are determined to make a difference in their lives and the lives of others around them.

Black Women's Segregation

Ageline Ibane, Surya Sili and Chris Asanti, in their article entitled —Anti-Racism: A

Study of The Main Characters in *The Help* (2009) Novel by Kathryn Stockett affirm that —Segregation occurs when people actively exclude members of a minority racial group from the allocation of resources and access to institutions. The most common examples include denial of equal education, housing, employment, and health care based on race (238).

In fact, the above definition fits the situation of African American women of the mid 20th century America. They were subject to all forms of segregation not only because of their race, but also because of their gender. Hence, unfortunately, they suffer from dual burdens. The following will illustrate what these women went through in their daily lives since they were obliged to live in separate houses, use separate public facilities and so on.

Housing

During an era of racial oppression in the American South, housing was an integral aspect of segregation and an unjust treatment toward African Americans. Black individuals were frequently forced to live in an independent or separate housing that was deemed inferior compared to others. Moreover, this housing was commonly overlooked in terms of restoration, had an excessive number of occupants, and was deficient in fundamental amenities. Even when Black Americans could afford better housing, they faced threats of violence and menaces from the white supremacist groups and individuals.

The depiction of black women's segregation in Mississippi is highly clarified through the town division. *The Help* shows how a segregated society functions internally in the context of the wing Civil Rights Movement in the United States during the 1960s. Stockett states in *The Help* about her childhood: —as a little girl, seeing black people in the colored part of town, even if they were dressed up or doing fine, I remember pitying them. I am so embarrassed to admit that now (Stockett 516).

Furthermore, in the novel, it is explained that there are two settlements, one for whites and another for blacks. The white settlement is located in the center of the city, while blacks are only allowed to live in the segregated parts of city. This is because, in the South, blacks and whites cannot coexist in the same area. In the second chapter of the novel, Aibileen says: —Six days a week, I take the bus across the Woodrow Wilson Bridge to where Miss Leefolt and all her white friends live, in a neighborhood call Belhaven. Right next to Belhaven be the downtown and the state capital. Capitol building is really big, pretty on the outside but I never been in it. I wonder what they pay to clean that placell (22). She adds: —So, Jackson’s just one white neighborhood after the next and more springing up down the road. But the colored part a town, we one big anthill, surrounded by state land that ain’t for sale. As our numbers get bigger, we can’t spread out. Our part a town just gets thickerll (22).

These quotations demonstrate the inferior conditions of the coloured neighborhood of Jackson where Aibileen and her fellow African American maids reside. While whites live in extraordinary places with better facilities, blacks were considered subordinate-class citizens.

The segregation of housing is also presented in the character of Constantine Bates, the Phelan family's housemaid, who raised Skeeter Phelan and took care of her. Yet she was living in a separate neighbourhood. Constantine devoted her whole life serving Skeeter's family; however, she was not allowed to live with them in the same household. Constantine had to walk one mile every day in order to reach her home located in the coloured people’s section of Jackson.

CONSTANTINE LIVED ABOUT a MILE from our house, in a small Negro neighborhood called Hotstack, named after the tar plant that used to operate back there. The road to Hotstack runs along the north side of our farm, and for as long as I can remember, colored kids have walked and played along that

mile stretch, kicking at the red dust, making their way toward the big County Road 49 to catch a ride. (78)

In her novel, Margot Lee Shetterly sets her story in the American state of Virginia, a segregated part for African Americans, where they only rely on each other in daily life aspects. They share segregated hotels, theatres, restaurants, shops, and schools. Black Americans have poor buildings and facilities compared to whites. Dorothy Vaughan is one of the characters who encounter these segregated facilities, when she starts her new job at NACA, she moves to a new place designated for new employees, which is separated according to race. Her new home is located in a Negro neighbourhood near public facilities designated for blacks.

Dorothy Vaughan arrived in Newport News on a Thursday and started work at the Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory the following Monday. The personnel department maintained a file of available housing for new employees, carefully segmented by race to —establish congenial connections|| and —avoid embarrassment.|| Five dollars a week got Dorothy a place to lay her head, two meals a day, and the kind attentions of Frederick and Annie Lucy, a black couple in their sixties. The Lucys owned a grocery store and opened their spacious home, which was located on the periphery of the Newsome Park development, to boarders. A larger version of what Dorothy had left behind, the East End was populated by stable Negro families in well-maintained homes, thriving local businesses, and a growing middle class, many of them shipyard workers whose tenure predated the boom. On the corner of the Lucys' block, a pharmacist had purchased a lot with plans to open the city's first Negro pharmacy. There was even a brand-new hospital nearby: Whittaker Memorial

opened earlier in 1943, organized by black doctors and constructed by black architects. (*Hidden Figures* 34)

Workplaces

White supremacy in America and the Jim Crow Laws maintained to spread segregation in workplaces, especially for black women, by designating certain occupations for whites only and other positions for blacks. African American women were given domestic or manual positions, or they were placed to work under the whites. They were also put under segregated circumstances in which they do not interact with whites during free time, eat separately, use separate pots and separate bathrooms.

In some households of Jackson, black domestic servants are only allowed to be in certain areas of the house like the kitchen and living areas, nevertheless, they are not allowed to be in private areas such as bathrooms and bedrooms and they are often asked to use the back door instead of the front door. In *The Help*, segregation in workplaces centers around the African American maids Aibileen and Minny. As they work for the Leefolt and Holbrook families, Aibileen and Minny are treated with little respect and consideration which made them feel like outsiders in their own workplace.

—Rule number three: when you are cooking white people's food, you taste it with a different spoon. You put that spoon to your mouth, thing nobody's looking, put it back in the pot, might as well throw it out.¶

—Rule number four: you use the same cup, same fork, same plate every day. Keep it in separate cupboard and tell that white woman that's the one you'll use from here on out.¶ (*The Help* 54)

Employers often have unrealistic expectations of their maids and demand that they perform a variety of tasks that are not part of their job description, which can include degrading and menial work. This type of exploitation can lower the maids' sense of worth and contribute to feelings of humiliation. In addition, household helpers are bound to strict guidelines and protocols that reinforce their subordinate position. Their freedom and authority to accomplish their tasks are restricted, frequently faced with excessive supervision, and dehumanized, viewed as mere commodities rather than self-governing individuals.

Furthermore, in the novel, several white employers verbally mistreat their African American maids by uttering derogatory words, condescending statements, and racially charged comments due to their race and gender. When Miss Hilly discovers that Minny told her master Celia Foote about her chocolate pie, she threatens Miss Celia saying "you tell your Nigra maid if she tells anybody about that pie, I will make her suffer!" (384). This kind of degrading language strips the maids of their pride and reinforces the unequal racial system.

In Hidden Figures, the discourse of segregation in workplaces can be unveiled through the experience of the character of Dorothy Vaughn, a 32-year-old woman, who works as a math teacher in Farmville, Virginia during the school year, and works in a laundry room at Camp Pickett in central Virginia during school holidays in folding socks and trousers for the American soldiers. When she gets the job at the NACA, she finds herself placed in the West Area of Langley Laboratory, an office where all workers are black, as Shetterly, in the first chapter, states: —The only difference between the other rooms at Langley and the one that Dorothy walked into was that the women sitting at the desks, playing the machines for answers to the question what makes things fly, were black! (43).

The room where Dorothy and her colleagues is not the only segregated part of Langley. White Americans do not accept to share the same cafeteria tables with black female

employees and they manage to separate the lunchroom by placing the "Colored Computers" sign on their tables as the writer says in chapter five:

Most groups sat together out of habit. For the West Computers, it was by mandate. A white cardboard sign on a table in the back of the cafeteria beckoned them, its crisply stenciled black letters spelling out the lunchroom hierarchy: COLORED COMPUTERS. It was the only sign in the West Area cafeteria; no other group needed their seating proscribed in the same fashion. The janitors, the laborers, the cafeteria workers themselves did not take lunch in the main cafeteria. The women of West Computing were the only black professionals at the laboratory—not exactly excluded, but not quite included either. (46)

One of the most important characters in Shetterly's novel is Katherine Johnson, an intelligent and hardworking woman of African American descent who works as a math teacher. She was born into an educated family; her father was a mathematician and he became her aspiration. She also starts working in Langley Laboratory in Hampton Virginia in 1953 under the supervision of Dorothy Vaughan, and then she joins one of the most powerful groups in the laboratory —the Flight Research Division. During her first day in her new office, a white man next to her gets up and walks away after she sat on her new desk,

The room hummed with pre-lunch activity as Katherine surveyed it for a place to wait for her new bosses. She made a beeline for an empty cube, sitting down next to an engineer, resting her belongings on the desk and offering the man her winning smile. As she sat, and before she could issue a greeting in her gentle southern cadence, the man gave her a silent sideways glance, got up, and walked away. Katherine watched the engineer disappear. (117)

Bathrooms

In the late 19th and the mid-20th century, the Colored Bathroom sign was one of the most famous laws signed by the Jim Crow Laws, and it was justified as a way to keep safety and convenience in America. Since white Americans consider African Americans dirty and ill, they try to limit their access to public restrooms by putting signs on bathroom doors in workplaces and public spaces, or by building different ones inside white houses for their black servants; however, black women were the most affected by these racial prejudices. This subject is taken into study by both Stockett and Shetterly in their novels through the maids and the Computers in their daily lives.

We notice from the first chapter of the novel *The Help* that the initiative of segregation within the white households starts with Aibileen's employer, Miss Elizabeth Leefolt, a 23-year-old white woman who is always hyper-focused on looking presentable in front of her white community. The initiative starts in her house in the Bridge meeting, also called the Bridge club day where the white women meet every fourth Wednesday in a month to discuss the upcoming Junior League Benefit. When her friend Miss Hilly Holbrook asks to use the bathroom, Miss Elizabeth feels sorry that she does not have a separate bathroom for her black maid Aibileen. Therefore, Elizabeth and her guests are obliged to share the same restroom with the maid.

—Oh Hilly, I wish you'd use the guest bathroom,|| say Miss Leefolt, rearranging her cards. —Aibileen doesn't clean in the back until after lunch|| ...

—But the guest bathrooms where the help goes,|| Miss Hilly say. Nobody says anything for a second. Then Miss Walter nod, like she explaining it all. —She's upset cause the Nigra uses the inside bathroom and so do we.|| [...] All four of em got a cigarette in one hand, they cards in the other. —Elizabeth, if you had

the choice, I hear Miss Hilly say, —wouldn't you rather them take their business outside? [...] Miss Hilly talk slow, like she spreading icing on a cake. —You just tell Raleigh every penny he spends on that bathroom he'll get back when y'all sell this house. She nod like she agreeing with herself. —All these houses they're building without maid's quarters? It's just plain dangerous. Everybody knows they carry different kinds of diseases than we do. I double.

(The Help

17-18)

In another passage in the book, Miss Hilly, who is the leader of Jackson's Junior League and a strong supporter of segregation tries to get a law passed called the Home Help Sanitation Initiative. A law that requires every white household to have an outdoor bathroom for their black servants stating the following: —A bill that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the colored help. I've even notified the surgeon general of Mississippi to see if he'll endorse the idea. I pass. Hilly claims that blacks are dirty and they carry different kind of diseases which is plain dangerous because they might infect white people with their viruses if they continue to use the same bathroom (18-19).

Hilly Holbrook's ideology of racial segregation plays a productive role in her initiative as she succeeds to keep racialized bodies separate and inferior. Hilly's power and reputation as a racist southern woman depend on setting boundaries that separate black women from white women and abuse people of colour as if they were subhuman.

When Minny Jackson was only fourteen years old, her mother started to teach her how working for a white lady should be and gives her instructions to use her separate bathroom only. This is to say that black women were taught to be always inferior and less worthy even by their own parents: —Rule number two: don't you ever let that White lady find you sitting

on her toilet. I don't care if you've got to go so bad it's coming out of your hair braids. If there's not one out back for the help, you find yourself a time when she's not there in a bathroom she doesn't use (54).

In *Hidden Figures*, Dorothy Vaughan and all the other African American women working with her at NACA receive separate treatment from the whites including the sign of "Colored Bathroom" to keep them away from them. According to the writer: —There was nothing they could do about that or the separate "Colored girls" bathroom. (*Hidden Figures* 47)

Mary Jackson, one of the novel's most important characters, is an African American woman who dreams to become an engineer and who also works with Dorothy Vaughan. One day, on her way to the East side of the Laboratory, after Dorothy sends her to work on a project with different white computers, Mary asks the white women to direct her to the bathroom, but the women disrespect and humiliate her instead, as Shetterly illustrates in the following passage:

On one such occasion, two years after Mary joined West Computing, Dorothy Vaughan sent Mary to the East Side, staffing her on a project alongside several white computers. The routines of the computing work had become familiar to Mary, but the geography of the East Side was not. Her morning at the East Side job proceeded without incident—until nature called. —Can you direct me to the bathroom? Mary asked the white women. They responded to Mary with giggles. How would they know where to find her bathroom? The nearest bathroom was unmarked, which meant it was available to any of the white women and off-limits to the black women. (*Hidden Figures* 104-105)

Schools

The Help examines the attitudes regarding education and the unequal accessibility to education for black citizens in Jackson. In chapter 14 of the novel Miss Hilly and Miss Leefolt discuss with Aibileen the fact that blacks and whites are different and should be educated differently:

But Miss Hilly shaking her head. —Aibileen, you wouldn't want to go to a school full of white people, would you? —No, Ma'am I mumble. —Not a school full of a just white people. But where the colored and the white folks is together — Answer Aibileen. Hilly and Miss Leefolt look at me. I look back down at the kids. —But Aibileen — Miss Hilly smile real cold — colored people and white people just so.... different. — she wrinkle up her nose. I feel my lip curling. A course we different! Everybody knows colored people and white ain't the same. But we still just people! Shoot, I even been hearing Jesus had colored skin living out there in the desert. (*The Help* 221-222).

Throughout the novel, Aibileen endeavours to impart to her adored baby Moe Mobley the value of treating all individuals impartially, regardless of their skin colour, because she believes in the purity and innocence of children, and wants them to be aware of the importance of equality between the races and how to love others. "After all I spent teaching Mae Mobley how to love all people, not judge by color" (474) Moe Mobley's teacher ruins Aibileen's efforts and teaches the baby girl that black is dirty as Mae Mobley says after painting herself in black at school "black means I got dirty" (473). She adds —Miss Taylor says kids that are colored can't go to my school cause they're not smart enough — (455). The quotation demonstrates that during the Jim Crow era, there was severe segregation and discrimination in both schools and among teachers. This means that black students were only allowed to be taught by black teachers, and white students were only taught by white teachers.

And women were not allowed to pursue their studies in order to work as housemaids or because of the limited access to education in the Southern state.

In her novel, *Hidden Figures*, Shetterly studies the subject of segregation in schools and she refers to certain events in the history of the United States like the year of 1958 when Virginia's public school closed, the state's governor Lindsay Almond chained the doors of the schools that tried to integrate under Brown vs. Board of Education case. Thirteen thousand students —found themselves sitting at home in the fall of 1958 (170). White students also paid the price for the state's racial crusade when the schools closed and their parents agreed to the decision just so that their kids do not go to schools with blacks as Shetterly states in the novel

—“I would rather have my children live in ignorance than have them go to school with Negroes,” one white parent told a reporter. (*Hidden Figures* 170)

Mary Jackson is one of the African American women who faced segregation in schools, she wants to be an engineer in a time where all engineers are men and whites, there are almost no black engineers and the country does not accept women. She had to beg to be allowed to study at the Whites-only school as the writer says in chapter fourteen:

For Mary, differential equations were the first step. Actually, it was not that simple. The first step was to get permission to enter Hampton High School. If Mary had applied for a job as janitor, the doors to the school would swing wide open. As a professional engineer-in-training with a plan to occupy the building for the nefarious purpose of advancing her education, she needed to petition the city of Hampton for —special permission (136) to attend classes in the whites-only school. (136)

Economic Exploitation

Income inequality or economic segregation represents the inequality of payment that a group of people face in society. This social phenomenon in the United States is faced commonly by African American women, who receive less amount of money compared to white women for the same jobs. Stockett and Shetterly took this subject into discussion and studied the different black female characters who faced income inequality and who were obliged to work harder to gain more money instead of being paid equally to the whites.

This is made evident in *The Help* when Minny applies for a job in another white household and informs her new employer Miss Celia Foote, a naïve white woman who is completely isolated from Jackson's society, that she only makes one dollar per hour despite her cooking talent —five years and not even minimum wages! (*The Help* 53).

The job of the maids in the white society is crucial as they keep the households clean, serve the white people and take care of their children, yet black maids are exploited in various ways; paid less than minimum wage, and forced to work unreasonable hours as Aibileen says —Miss Leefolt don't pay but ninety-five cents an hour, less than I been paid in years! (13).

The society that Stockett describes has its own set of laws, which is undoubtedly created for the benefit of the white population. The way Aibileen describes her financial status sheds light on the actual small wages received by the black householders:

I get paid forty-three dollars ever Friday, which come to \$172 a month. That means after I pay the light bill, the water bill, the gas bill, and the telephone bill, I got thirteen dollars and fifty cents a week left for groceries, my clothes, getting my hair done, and tithing to the church. Not to mention the 15 cost to

mail these bills done gone up to a nickel. And my work shoes is so thin, they look like they starving to death (28).

The passage makes clear that the black housemaids' living conditions are in no way comparable to those of white families. Aibileen has only thirteen dollars and fifty cents a week left over after covering basic expenses, which she uses for groceries, clothes and church donations. Being white justifies paying competent black maids under the minimum wage, by forcing them to work even on holidays and taking credit for their work. In other words, black maids suffer in various aspects of their lives due to economic exploitation.

In *Hidden Figures*, Shetterly exposes the fact that economic exploitation took place in America, and black women experienced income segregation, where they were paid less than whites for the same jobs. Dorothy Vaughan, for example, is a teacher, which is a job that offers prestige, but Virginia's black teachers earned 50 percent less than their white counterparts (Hidden Figures18).

Dorothy Vaughan has an acceptable job compared to other African Americans, but she decides to reside away from her family during school holidays just to earn extra money for her children. She takes a job at Camp Pickett in a laundry room because 40 cents an hour were more than she earns as a teacher as Shetterly states in chapter two:

Another woman in Dorothy's situation might have seen the laundry job as unthinkable, regardless of the economics. Wasn't the purpose of a college degree to get away from the need to work dirty and difficult jobs? And the location of the camp, thirty miles southeast of Farmville, meant that she lived in worker housing during the week and got back home only on weekends. But the 40 cents an hour Dorothy earned as a laundry sorter bested what she earned

as a teacher, and with four children, a summer of extra income would be put to good and immediate use. (18-19)

Katherine Johnson is also one of the black protagonists who are paid less than the whites, she was a math teacher at the Negro high school in Marion Virginia in 1944, but she —earned \$50 a month, less than the \$65 the state paid similarly trained white teachers in the county (69).

Black Women's Resistance and Determination

Resistance against segregation laws and prejudices of the white community against the blacks has grown over the years and succeeded to regain the dignity and respect of African Americans. The fact that they were determined not to let white supremacy disrespect them and limit their opportunities to keep them under their supervision and control maintained to spread strength and a need to develop the African American society.

Resistance Through Writing

Literature plays a crucial role in resisting black women's segregation, it portrays, through poems, novels, and books of history, the hard conditions and the unfair laws faced by this minority group throughout time. Stockett and Shetterly were among those authors who maintained to express the power of resistance of the black community in general and the black women in particular in facing discrimination laws and achieving the impossible through black female characters.

The Help vividly portrays the courage and resistance of black females who challenge the acts of injustice and the oppressive systems of Mississippi. Minny and Aibileen's unwavering determination highlights the power of resilience in overcoming oppressive

systems and creating change. They persist in telling their stories even when they are faced with oppositions and threats to their safety.

Aibileen Clarck exemplifies resistance by speaking out against the mistreatment of herself and other maids. Despite the risks of losing her job and personal safety, she chooses to participate in the writing of Skeeter's book which exposes the truth about the lives of black maids in Jackson, Mississippi. Through her bravery and perseverance, Aibileen challenges the oppressive system that aims to keep her and other maids silent and marginalized. At the end of the novel, Aibileen finally achieves her desire to improve her life and succeeds to leave her job at the Leefolt family and start her writing career.

The sun is bright but my eyes is wide open. I stand at the bus stop like I been doing for forty odd years. In thirty minutes, my whole life's...done. Maybe I ought to keep writing, not just for the paper, but something else, about all the people I know and the things I seen and done. Maybe I ain't too old to start over, I think and I laugh and cry at the same time at this. Cause just last night I thought I was finished with everything new. (*The Help* 512)

Escaping and Starting a New Life

Another example of resistance is portrayed through Minny's character. As a black woman she is expected to be quiet and submissive however she has a strong desire to be free from the oppressive conditions in which she lives —I sigh. Seventy-two more hours and I'm a free woman. Maybe fired, maybe dead after Leroy finds out, but free! (165). This quotation shows that Minny's desire for freedom encompasses the hope of escaping her husband, Leroy. Furthermore, At the end of the novel Minny succeeds to withstand her abusive husband and retaliate against his violence. She cleverly uses the benefits of —*The Help*! (Skeeter's book), and escapes with her children in order to start a new life and establish her identity.

Resistance is not only depicted through the characters of the black maids. Skeeter is also determined to tell the stories of black individuals and exposes the racism in her community. She risks her own reputation and safety to stand up for what is right. Through her actions, she becomes a symbol of hope for black women. Similar to the character of Skeeter Phelan in the novel, *Stockett*, aimed to create a voice and understanding for African American women who work in white households. Her desire was to change the norm and give strength to these women by telling their stories. Both Skeeter and *Stockett* turn to writing as a means of empowerment in order to give a voice to marginalized black women.

Acting Against Segregationist Signs

Like the black maids in *The Help*, Shetterly's black Computers are determined to resist and fight against the segregation rules they have to face at Langley laboratories. The white supremacy in their workplaces never stops them from fighting for acceptance and equal opportunities and taking advantage of every single day at NACA. They also show acts of resistance against the rules made for African American women in the laboratory. For instance when Miriam Mann, Dorothy's friend at Langley, removes the "Colored Computers" sign on the cafeteria table and puts it in her purse twice. This action expresses their strength, confidence and determination to challenge this oppressive system:

There was nothing they could do about that, or the separate —Colored girls' bathroom. But that sign in the cafeteria . . . It was Miriam Mann who finally decided it was too much to take. —There's my sign for today, she would say upon entering the cafeteria, spying the placard designating their table in the back of the room. Not even five feet tall, her feet just grazing the floor when she sat down, Miriam Mann had a personality as outsized as she was tiny. The West Computers watched their colleague remove the sign and banish it to the

recesses of her purse, her small act of defiance inspiring both anxiety and a sense of empowerment. The ritual played itself out with absurd regularity. The sign, placed by an unseen hand, made the unspoken rules of the cafeteria explicit. When Miriam snatched the sign, it took its leave for a few days, perhaps a week, maybe longer, before it was replaced with an identical twin, the letters of the new sign just as blankly menacing as its predecessor's. (*Hidden Figures* 47)

Miriam Mann's act gave her and the other black women at NACA a feeling of belonging to the laboratory. It is a non-violent action that mirrors the fact that they are not inferior to the white computers and they can regain their dignity and confidence in the face of discrimination at the NACA. Shetterly states —Miriam Mann's insistence on sending the humiliating sign to oblivion gave her and the other women of West Computing just a little more room for dignity and the confidence that the laboratory might belong to them as well (51).

Dorothy, the strong-minded black mathematician, is aware that she may lose her job at NACA but this fact does not stop her to enjoy and benefit all her time at work. Even though she has to face multiple ways of segregation by her white colleagues, her ambitions and dreams are strong enough to make her understand that there would not be another better place in the world for her since she is black and women —Even if the job lasted only six months, she was going to make the most of this chance. For an ambitious young mathematical mind—or even one not so young—there wasn't a better seat in the world (52).

Dorothy's insistence, hard work, determination, and confidence make her the head of the West Computers unit at Langley. Her chances as a black mathematician are small, but she

never stops looking for more and she is determined to succeed in her career as Shetterly states in chapter nine:

—Effective this date, Dorothy J. Vaughan, who has been acting head of the West Area Computers unit, is hereby appointed head of that unit.¶ Dorothy must have known it. Her girls and her peers knew it. Many of the engineers knew it, and her bosses eventually came to the same conclusion. History would prove them all right: there was no one better qualified for the job than Dorothy Vaughan. (91)

Mary Jackson also does not give up on her dream to become an engineer. Even though most engineers in the 1900s were men and black women were limited to certain jobs and careers, she insists to fight against these rules and go for her dream.

Mary was seeking to make herself more useful to her country, and yet it was she who had to go hat in hand to the school board. It was a grit-your-teeth, close your-eyes, take-a-deep breath kind of indignity. However, there was never any doubt in Mary's mind that it must be done. She would let nothing—not even the state of Virginia's segregation policy—stand in the way of her pursuit of the career that had rather unexpectedly presented itself to her. (136)

Women's Solidarity as a Form of Resistance

In her book, Kathryn Stockett highlights the idea of collective power and the need for change through the voices of women who refuse to remain silent. While facing various hardships, the maids demonstrate solidarity by supporting and caring for each other. Aibileen and Minny, for instance, establish a sense of camaraderie that provides them with the strength to overcome the difficulties they encounter in Jackson. Through this, they forge a tight-knit

relationship, relying on one another for motivation and comfort. when Aibileen's son, Treelore, tragically passes away, Minny assists her friend Aibileen and offers emotional support during this rough time, —Minny came every day to make sure I was still breathing, feed me food to keep me living (Stockett 2). Minny empathizes with the grief Aibileen experiences and helps her through her pain. Aibileen also assists Minny in securing employment after being dismissed from her job at the Holbrooks: —Minny! I got a job lined up (40).

The idea of solidarity and universality is also depicted through the white character Skeeter Phelan. Despite growing up in a racially segregated society, Skeeter challenges the racial prejudices and discriminatory practices of her white community and forms a friendship with the black maids. Her unconditional love and affection for her nanny Constantine serve as a powerful force that challenges the societal norms and barriers, as Skeeter illustrates: —I missed Constantine more than anything I've ever missed in my life (60). This quotation demonstrates the amount of love Skeeter carries for her maid. Stockett has mentioned that she had a strong connection with her childhood African American maid Demetrie stating the following —And God, how I loved Demetrie. After school I'd sit in my grandmother's kitchen with her, listening to her stories and watching her mix up cakes and fry chicken (515). This close association serves as a source of inspiration for Constantine and Aibileen. Skeeter also learns from Constantine to challenge the injustices she sees around her as she says: —All my life I'd been told what to believe about politics, coloreds, being a girl. But with Constantine's thumb pressed in my hand, I realized I actually had a choice about what to believe (80).

Solidarity can also be depicted in the character of Celia Foote, the white lady who hires Minny after she is fired by Miss Hilly. Unlike Jackson's white ladies, Celia was born

and raised poor and does not believe in social barriers between blacks and whites. She treats her maid Minny as a close friend as she announces: "I'm lucky to have you as a friend, Minny" (263). Despite their different backgrounds, they formed a bond based on mutual respect and understanding. Celia never mistreats Minny or makes her feel inferior, she even eats with her on the same table. Minny says: —she sits at the kitchen table, asks me if I'm ready to eat (2).

Margot Lee Shetterly also examines the power of sisterhood in her novel, and she manages to show the importance of women's solidarity in the American society. Mary Jackson succeeds in making collaboration with white women she works with like Emma Jean Landrum, an engineer at NASA, and participates in a career panel in 1962 which was organized by African Americans: —When Mary asked Emma Jean to participate in a career panel in 1962, organized by the local chapter of the National Council of Negro Women, she readily agreed. An all-black group of junior high school girls paid close attention to Mary and Emma Jean's joint lecture, entitled —The Aspects of Engineering for Women. (*Hidden Figures* 182)

The human computers in *Hidden Figures* manage to get to their positions at Langley by the help of each other, Dorothy Vaughan meets with Henry Pearson, the head of the branch of the Flight Research Division, and secures Katherine Johnson's permanent position to be one of the members in his branch and to get her a pay raise, as Shetterly states in the following passage:

The meeting between Dorothy Vaughan and Henry Pearson ended as they both knew it would, with Pearson offering Katherine Goble a permanent position in his group, the Maneuver Loads Branch, with a corresponding increase in salary. Dorothy's insistence also had a collateral effect: one of the white

computers in the branch, in the same limbo position as Katherine, had herself gone to Pearson to petition for a raise. The white woman's request had fallen on deaf ears. The rules are the rules, Dorothy reminded Henry Pearson. Dorothy wielded her influence to win promotions for both Katherine and her white colleague. (120)

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have tackled the themes of black women segregation and resistance in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* and Margot Lee Shetterly's *Hidden Figures* by analyzing the importance of women's solidarity. Through the analysis, we have intended to depict how black females were subjected to the white supremacy and segregation in their daily lives. Moreover, how they reacted to these inhuman practices and persisted to stand for their dignity and respect, and how women solidarity had an important effect on their lives.

General Conclusion

Through this research, we have examined the common affinities between Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* and Margot Lee Shetterly's *Hidden Figures* in term of black women's segregation and self-determination. Since the two novels take place in a specific time period in America which is the Civil Rights Era, we have explored the historical background of the period through these two novels and tried to represent the impact of the authors' environments on their works.

The first chapter delved into the biographies of the authors since they are of paramount importance, the synopses of the novels, and the theoretical framework that guided our comparative study. This chapter sets the stage for understanding the historical and social contexts in which these works were created, providing essential background knowledge for the subsequent chapter that examined black women's segregation in the lens of New Historicism and Womanism.

We assumed that the biographies of Kathryn Stockett and Margot Lee Shetterly offers insights into the personal experiences and motivations that shaped their literary works. By exploring their backgrounds, we gained a deeper understanding of the factors that influenced their writings. Additionally, understanding the socio-political environments in which these authors were immersed allows us to comprehend the larger societal issues they sought to address through their novels.

In her novel *The Help*, Kathryn Stockett explores the stories of Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, two African American women working as domestic workers in white households. It expresses the harsh conditions and segregation that these women face in their workplaces and daily lives. Stockett also illustrates the relation of the white protagonist Skeeter with the maids and the strong bonding they have created to face segregation, and the importance of staying united and fight for their rights and dignity.

In her novel *Hidden Figures*, Margot Lee Shetterly also explores the theme of segregation in the stories of Dorothy Vaughan, Katherine Johnson, and Mary Jackson, three African American mathematicians who work at the National Advisory Committee of Aeronautics NACA during the Space Race Era. Shetterly talked about all the hardships these women had to face as black women and the impact of segregation laws on their careers. Shetterly also highlights on the theme of women's resistance against segregation and the importance of solidarity to achieve the dreams of these African American mathematicians in America.

The Help and *Hidden Figures* provided a concise overview of narratives, characters and most important themes. And allowed an understanding to the manifestations of segregation and the importance of sisterhood. Furthermore, the theoretical framework of New Historicism and Womanism provided the critical lenses through which we have analysed and interpreted the themes of black women's segregation and discrimination within the novels in the second chapter. New Historicism, with its focus on historical context and cultural artifacts, enables us to situate the narratives within their specific socio-political landscapes. Womanism, on the other hand, allows us to explore the experiences of women of color, their resistance strategies, and their collective solidarity in the face of oppression. These theoretical frameworks provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities and segregation in both novels.

In the second chapter, we came to complete the aim of this study by analysing *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* based on the New Historicist and womanist literary theories. We first covered some important events in the American history. Then, we studied the impact of racism on the Black female protagonists by keeping them separated from the whites in all aspects of life such as housing, education, workplaces, and even bathrooms. Our mission was

also to show how African American women can achieve their dreams and regain their dignity despite segregation. Moreover, by analysing *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, we have unveiled some important affinities between these two works.

The two novels study one of the most important periods in America and led us to tackle some aspects of its history. On the one hand, we demonstrated the impact of the Jim Crow Laws on the lives of African Americans women. These laws legalized segregation against African Americans in many aspects of life. We have explored the experiences of the novel's characters in their workplaces and daily activities under the effects of the Jim Crow Laws. On the other hand, we explored the role of the Civil Rights in promoting the need to fight and resist against segregation, and the importance of solidarity in making dreams come true.

We have uncovered the pervasive nature of segregation in public facilities and the economic injustice experienced by African American women during the 1960s as shown in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*. In *The Help* we witness the stark segregation within public facilities, particularly through the experiences of the African-American maids Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson who work in white households and the immense courage they had in defying societal norms. Similarly, in *Hidden Figures* the black women mathematicians at NASA were confronted with the challenging segregation and prejudice within their workplaces and in public spaces. However, the novel demonstrated their unwavering commitment to their work and their resilience and sisterhood.

Moreover, the application of New Historicism has allowed us to situate these narratives within their historical contexts and recognize the significance of these periods in shaping the experiences and struggles of women of color. Through an intersectional lens, Womanism has helped us understand the unique challenges faced by these women,

acknowledging the oppressions of race and gender that they confronted. This analysis underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the multi-dimensional forms of discrimination faced by marginalized women of color.

In a broader sense, this analysis highlights the significance of literature in amplifying marginalized voices and fostering critical discussions on race, gender and social justice. By examining these novels through the lenses of Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism and Alice Walker's Womanism, we have deepened our understanding of the complexities and nuances of black women's experiences within historical frameworks. The analysis serves as a reminder of the ongoing work that needs to be done in order to dismantle oppression and create a more inclusive and equitable society.

In a nutshell, it is crucial to recognize the continued relevance of the themes explored in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*. The struggles faced by women of color depicted in the aforementioned novels resonate with the challenges that persist today. By learning from the past and embracing the principles of inclusivity, intersectionality, and collective action, we can strive towards a future that embraces diversity, equality, and justice for all.

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