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Literacy as Power and Its Impacts on Women's Empowerment in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*

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A B S T R A C T

This study reveals how literacy functions as a form of power and shapes women's empowerment in Kathryn Stockett's novel, The Help (2009). Drawing on New Literacy Studies, Williams and Zenger's (2007) concept of literacy as power, and Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, it employs qualitative textual analysis of three key literacy events: the book's initiation, the writing process, and its publication. The findings show that literacy operates through control over meaning, action production, and strategicity, enabling marginalized Black women to challenge dominant racial narratives, navigate risk, and generate social consequences. Within Kabeer's framework, literacy emerges as a strategic resource that enables agency and produces achievements, including economic mobility and psychological autonomy. Rather than merely a medium of expression, literacy is shown to function as a socially embedded and strategic practice through which marginalized women negotiate and reshape power relations.

Keywords: *Literacy as Power, Women's Empowerment, New Literacy Studies, The Help, Literacy Events*

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INTRODUCTION

"The pen is mightier than the sword." (Bulwer-Lytton, 1839) has long represented the belief that literacy possesses a power transcending physical force. However, contemporary popular culture often portrays literacy ambivalently, with action films subordinating writing to physical action (Williams & Zenger, 2007). Kathryn Stockett's *the Help* (2009) offers a striking counter-narrative. Set in Jackson, Mississippi, during the Jim Crow era, the novel follows Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan, a white aspiring writer, who collaborates with Black domestic workers Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson to produce a secret book revealing the realities of Black women's lives in white households. The novel topped the *New York Times* Best Seller list for over 100 weeks and was adapted into an Academy Award-nominated film in 2011, demonstrating its cultural significance as a text about literacy, race, and women's empowerment.

Traditional literacy models view reading and writing as neutral technical skills—what (Street, 1984) terms the "autonomous model." In contrast, New Literacy Studies (NLS) conceptualizes literacy as ideological social practice embedded in power relations and cultural contexts (Street, 1984, 2003; Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Key distinctions include *literacy events*—observable occasions where text is integral to interaction (Heath, 1983)—and *literacy practices*—the broader cultural values, attitudes, and power relations governing how events unfold. In their work, *Situated Literacies,* Barton, (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) identified six principles of literacy as sosial practice, those are: literacy involves social practices inferred from events; multiple literacies exist across domains; practices are shaped by institutions and power relations; practices are purposeful and connected to broader social goals; literacy is historically situated; and practices are dynamic and acquired through participation (Barton et al., 2000).

Building on NLS, (Williams & Zenger, 2007) conceptualize literacy as power operating through three mechanisms. First, control over meaning: literacy enables individuals to shape

how events are interpreted and to challenge dominant narratives. Second, action production: literacy shapes decisions, creates consequences, and produces tangible outcomes in social reality. Third, strategicity: literacy is deployed deliberately within specific institutional and social contexts; its power derives not from technical skill alone but from "knowing how, when, and why to display their literacy practices" (Williams & Zenger, 2007, p. 96). Critically, a text is authoritative not in itself but because of who speaks it, where, and why. They also assert that "literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible, and influential than others" (Williams & Zenger, 2007, p. 13). This emphasis highlights that literacy functions as power not simply because individuals possess the technical ability to read and write, but because they are able to mobilize literacy strategically within particular social contexts. Literacy becomes powerful when it is deployed to negotiate meaning, assert authority, challenge dominant ideologies, or reconfigure social relations.

To assess the impacts of literacy as power on women's lives, this study adopts (Kabeer, 1999) theory of women's empowerment, which defines empowerment as "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 1999), encompassing resources, agency, and achievements. In the context of (Kabeer, 1999), resources are not only the material property but also the social and symbolic resources, which allow people to exercise choice. In this meaning, literacy serves as an intellectual and symbolic asset that increases access to information, communication, and representation. Agency is the power to formulate objectives and take action around the same even in limiting conditions. The achievement, in the meantime, are the products of agency, that can be partial, limited, or imbalanced as well as transformative. In the context of *The Help*, this framework provides a basis for examining how literacy, when understood as power, may relate to women's empowerment within constrained social conditions.Kabeer emphasizes that the three dimensions are interdependent: resources create the preconditions for choice, agency converts resources into valued outcomes, and achievements feed back into both resources and future agency. Empowerment is therefore not a binary state but a continuum, and it must be understood within the structural conditions that delimit alternatives and shape consequences. This framework is particularly relevant to *The Help*, where Black women's lives are shaped by intersecting oppressions.

A number of previous studies have examined *The Help* as a narrative that foregrounds issues of race, gender, and women's voices, particularly the lived experiences of Black female domestic workers. Drawing on New Literacy Studies, (Asmaradhani & Retnaningdyah, 2018) argue that literacy practices such as storytelling and writing enable characters like Aibileen and Minny to articulate marginalized experiences and challenge racial discrimination. In this view, literacy is understood as a social practice that facilitates voice and solidarity among oppressed women. However, this approach largely positions literacy as a medium of expression, rather than examining how it operates as a form of power within unequal social conditions. Similarly, (Devita, 2024) uses intersectionality and sisterhood to analyze interracial female relationships in the novel, emphasizing solidarity and resistance among Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minny. While this study contributes to understanding relational agency, it does not explicitly address literacy as a mechanism for negotiating power, leaving its role analytically underdeveloped.

Beyond *The Help*, several studies explore literacy as power in other texts. (Novianti, 2023) shows how literacy in *The Queen's Gambit* enables the female protagonist to challenge gender norms, while (Maghfiroh, 2016) examines literacy as cultural capital and control in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, and (Octavia, 2016) frames literacy as self-improvement in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Although these studies highlight literacy's transformative potential, they tend to frame empowerment in individual terms and give limited attention to structural inequalities shaped by race and class.

Taken together, these studies reveal a critical gap: while previous research has examined literacy as expression, identity formation, and individual empowerment, it has not adequately addressed how literacy simultaneously operates as a form of power and as a

mechanism of empowerment within intersecting systems of race, gender, and class. This raises a central problem for the present study—namely, how literacy in *The Help* functions beyond voice and representation to actively negotiate, redistribute, and transform power relations. Addressing this problem, the present study integrates New Literacy Studies, (Williams & Zenger, 2007) framework of literacy as power, and (Kabeer, 1999) empowerment theory to examine literacy as a strategic resource that enables marginalized women not only to speak, but to exercise agency and achieve meaningful empowerment within structurally constrained conditions.

METHOD

This study employs qualitative textual analysis (Barry, 2009; McKee, 2004) to examine how literacy operates as a form of power and contributes to women's empowerment in *The Help*. The primary data source is Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (Berkley Books edition, 2010). The data consist of carefully selected narrative segments, dialogues, and descriptive passages that represent literacy events—observable moments in which reading, writing, or storytelling shape social interaction. In line with the structure of the findings, these data are drawn from three key phases of the narrative: the initiation of the book project, the collaborative writing process, and the publication and public reception of the manuscript.

Data selection follows three specific criteria to ensure analytical relevance and consistency with the research focus. First, the selected passages must explicitly involve literacy practices, including storytelling, writing, or textual circulation. Second, they must demonstrate one or more of (Williams & Zenger, 2007) mechanisms of literacy as power—control over meaning, action production, or strategicity. Third, the passages must indicate a process related to women's empowerment, particularly in terms of access to resources, the exercise of agency, or the emergence of achievements, as conceptualized by (Kabeer, 1999). These criteria ensure that each selected excerpt can be directly mapped onto both the literacy-as-power framework and the empowerment model, allowing for an integrated analysis rather than parallel interpretation.

The analytical procedure is conducted through three interrelated stages: coding, categorization, and interpretation. In the coding stage, textual data are systematically examined to identify recurring patterns of literacy use, power negotiation, and empowerment processes. Each passage is coded according to (Williams & Zenger, 2007) three mechanisms—control over meaning, action production, and strategicity—as well as (Kabeer, 1999) dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements. This dual coding process allows the analysis to capture both how literacy functions as power and how it contributes to empowerment within the same textual moment.

In the categorization stage, the coded data are organized into three major literacy events that directly correspond to the structure of the findings and discussion section: (1) the initiation of the book project, (2) the writing process, and (3) the publication event. This step ensures that the analytical framework is not only theoretical but also structurally embedded in the narrative progression of the novel, allowing each section of the findings to represent a distinct phase in the literacy-mediated empowerment process.

In the final stage, interpretation is conducted by synthesizing the categorized data with the theoretical frameworks. Each literacy event is analyzed to demonstrate how literacy operates through control over meaning, action production, and strategicity, while simultaneously being evaluated in terms of how it generates resources, enables agency, and produces achievements. (Street, 1984) ideological model of literacy is further employed to situate these practices within broader socio-cultural and power relations. Throughout the analysis, textual evidence is triangulated with theoretical concepts and the socio-historical context of 1960s Mississippi, ensuring that the interpretation remains both theoretically grounded and contextually nuanced. This integrated approach allows the findings to trace a coherent progression—from the emergence of literacy as a resource, to its strategic deployment, and ultimately to its role in producing empowerment outcomes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion by examining how literacy operates as a form of power through key moments in the narrative of *The Help*. According to (Heath, 1983), literacy events are observable situations in which written texts shape social interaction, including acts of reading, writing, and discussion. Building on this concept, the analysis identifies three major literacy events in *The Help*, each of which demonstrates (Williams & Zenger, 2007) three mechanisms of literacy as power: control over meaning, action production, and strategic deployment within social constraints. Furthermore, each literacy event is analyzed through (Kabeer, 1999) empowerment framework to examine how literacy generates resources, enables agency, and results in achievements. In this way, the findings are structured to show how literacy functions dynamically across different stages of the narrative, gradually transforming from a potential resource into a powerful instrument of social change and empowerment.

Initiation of the Book

The first major literacy event in Kathryn Stockett's *the Help* occurs when Skeeter Phelan proposes the secret book project to Aibileen Clark. Within Williams and Zenger's (2007) framework, literacy functions as power through three interconnected mechanisms: *control over meaning*—the capacity to shape how events are interpreted and to challenge dominant narratives; *action production*—the capacity of literacy to shape decisions, create consequences, and produce tangible outcomes in social reality; and *strategicity*—the ability to know how, when, and why to deploy literacy practices within specific social contexts. In this initiation event, all three mechanisms are activated, transforming an abstract desire for social change into a concrete, collective resource that, within (Kabeer, 1999) framework, constitutes the material precondition for later empowerment.

When Skeeter first explains the project to Aibileen, she states:

> *"I have an idea. Something I want to write about. But I need your help.... I'm talking about a book," she say and her eyes is big. She excited. "Stories about what it's like to work for a white family. What it's like to work for, say . . . Elizabeth."*(Stockett, 2010, p. 104)

This proposal demonstrates how literacy operates as *control over meaning*, as it directly challenges the dominant white Southern narrative about domestic labor. As (Williams & Zenger, 2007) argue, literacy practices are always embedded within power relations, and those who determine what counts as legitimate knowledge hold significant social power. The dominant narrative in 1960s Mississippi constructs Black domestic workers as contented, loyal, and grateful—as "part of the family." This narrative functions to justify low wages, long working hours, and degrading conditions by framing the relationship as mutually affectionate. By proposing to write "stories about what it's like to work for a white family" from the maids' perspective, Skeeter challenges this interpretation. She asserts that the maids possess a different understanding of their own lives—one that has never been heard by the white public. The act of writing and publishing these stories reclaims control over meaning from white employers and returns it to the domestic workers. This is not merely the presentation of alternative facts, but a fundamental reorientation of interpretive authority.

Skeeter articulates this purpose with even greater precision when speaking to her editor in New York:

> *"I'd like to write this showing the point of view of The Help. The colored women down here." I tried to picture Constantine's face, Aibileen's. "They raise a white child and then twenty years later the child becomes the employer. It's that irony, that we love them and they love us, yet . . ." I swallowed, my voice trembling. "We don't even allow them to use the toilet in the house."* (Stockett, 2010, p. 109)

Here, Skeeter identifies a specific textual strategy: presenting the point of view of the maids. This is not merely a matter of content but of positioning. The book will not function as a sympathetic report by a white woman about Black maids; rather, it becomes a vehicle through which they can speak in their own voices. (Williams & Zenger, 2007) emphasize that

literacy practices are shaped by social institutions and power relations, where certain literacies are more dominant, visible, and influential than others. Skeeter's literacy is dominant due to her race and class; she has access to publishing institutions, editorial networks, and the white reading public—access that Aibileen and Minny do not possess. However, she deploys this dominant position not to speak for them but to create a platform for them to speak for themselves. This strategic choice demonstrates that the power of literacy lies not only in the ability to read and write but also in the ability to determine whose voice is amplified and how that voice is positioned within public discourse.

When the project is extended to Minny Jackson, her initial resistance reveals the racial hierarchy that makes this literacy event both possible and problematic. Minny directly challenges Skeeter:

> *"What makes you think colored people need your help? Why you even care about this? You white."*(Stockett, 2010, p. 167).

This question reflects what (Williams & Zenger, 2007) describe as the differential valuation of literacies. Minny recognizes that Skeeter's racial identity grants her a form of literacy power that Minny cannot access. This question forces Skeeter to confront this asymmetry. Skeeter's response does not deny her privilege but redirects attention toward the collaborative purpose of the project. This is where *strategicity* becomes evident: the conscious deployment of literacy within specific social constraints. Skeeter understands that her literacy is institutionally valued, and she uses that advantage strategically to create space for voices that have historically been marginalized.

The initiation event also functions as *action production*. (Williams & Zenger, 2007) define action production as the capacity of literacy to shape decisions and produce tangible outcomes in social reality. When Skeeter responds to Minny's skepticism by stating:

> *"We want to show your perspective . . . so people might understand what it's like from your side. We—we hope it might change some things around here,"* (Stockett, 2010, p. 167).

She articulates the idea that literacy can generate action. The book is not merely conceived as a document, but as an instrument designed to produce consequences in the social world. The decision to write, publish, and distribute the book is itself a form of action. In contrast to the view of literacy as a neutral skill—what (Street, 1984) calls the *autonomous model*—this perspective recognizes that reading and writing are always oriented toward social goals. In this context, as Skeeter suggests, the purpose of literacy is to present the point of view of *The Help* and to reshape public perception through the book they are producing.

At this stage, empowerment begins to emerge, which (Kabeer, 1999) defines as the process through which those denied strategic life choices acquire that ability through three interdependent dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. By applying (Kabeer, 1999) framework, this initiation event generates resources, enables agency, and produces initial achievements.

Kabeer defines resources as the material, social, and symbolic assets that enable individuals to exercise choice. The book project itself becomes such a resource. Evidence of this appears when Aibileen later reflects on her decision to participate:

> *"I been in some tense situations, but to have Minny on one side a my living room and Miss Skeeter on the other, and the topic at hand be what it feel like being Negro and working for a white woman,"*(Stockett, 2010, p. 190).

The project introduces a new asset—collaborative narrative production—that did not previously exist. For Aibileen and Minny, this resource is the opportunity to transform their lived experiences into public testimony. As (Kabeer, 1999) argues, resources create the preconditions for choice.

Agency is exercised in the act of deciding to participate. Aibileen's agency is evident when she eventually agrees after initial hesitation:

> *"Law have mercy. I reckon I'm on do it,"*(Stockett, 2010, p. 125).

This decision is not passive but a deliberate choice to speak. Minny's agency is expressed through her skepticism and conditional agreement. Kabeer defines agency as the

ability to define goals and act upon them, encompassing decision-making, negotiation, and resistance. Minny's challenge to Skeeter represents an exercise of agency that compels Skeeter to confront the underlying power imbalance.

Achievements at this stage are partial but meaningful. The project exists as a shared commitment. As (Kabeer, 1999) notes, achievements are often partial and do not necessarily signify complete empowerment, yet they represent a meaningful expansion of choice. In this initiation stage, the achievement lies in the emergence of an opportunity for the maids to narrate their experiences and struggles from their own perspective. Thus, the initiation event demonstrates how resources, agency, and achievements operate simultaneously at the very beginning of the literacy-mediated empowerment process

The Writing Process

The second major literacy event occurs during the collaborative writing process, where the strategic deployment of literacy becomes most visible and where the maids exercise agency from a position of structural disadvantage. (Williams & Zenger, 2007) argue that literacy becomes powerful not merely through technical skill, but through "knowing how, when, and why to display their literacy practices" (p. 96). This understanding of *strategicity* is central to the writing process in *The Help*. Aibileen and Minny do not simply tell their stories; they make deliberate decisions about what to include, what to conceal, and how to position their narratives within the social context of Jim Crow Mississippi. These decisions constitute concrete evidence of how literacy functions as power when deployed strategically.

Aibileen's first act of agency in the writing process is to impose conditions on her participation. She tells Skeeter:

> *"Miss Skeeter, we gone have to be real careful. … And you gone have to change my name. Mine, Miss Leefolt's, everybody's."*(Stockett, 2010, p. 125)

This demand for anonymity is a literacy practice that exemplifies *strategicity*. Aibileen understands the dangers of written testimony in Jim Crow Mississippi. The novel documents specific punishments for Black individuals who spoke out against the racial order: one maid had her tongue cut out for "talking to some Washington people about the Klan" (Stockett, 2010, p. 46). (Williams & Zenger, 2007) note that in many representations of popular culture, literacy practices are portrayed as effortless and spontaneous. In contrast, Aibileen's literacy is risk-laden. She cannot afford to be effortless because the consequences of exposure are severe. Her strategic decision to write anonymously represents a precise assessment of how to deploy literacy without being destroyed by it. The demand for name changes is not merely a protective measure but an assertion of control over the terms of participation. Aibileen, in effect, states that she will contribute her stories, but she will not be traceable. This is agency exercised through strategic concealment.

The significance of this demand becomes even clearer when situated within the broader context of Black literacy practices in the Jim Crow South. As (Street, 1984) argues in his ideological model of literacy, all literacy practices are embedded in power relations and cannot be understood independently of the social structures that shape them. Aibileen's insistence on anonymity is a product of the very inequality she seeks to challenge. She would not need to hide if the society were just. The fact that she demands anonymity demonstrates a clear-eyed assessment of risk. This is agency exercised not through direct confrontation, but through concealment—what Scott (1990) describes as the *hidden transcript* of resistance, in which subordinate groups develop offstage discourses that critique power while minimizing the risk of retaliation.

The most striking example of strategically deployed literacy in the writing process is Minny's proposal to include the "Terrible Awful" episode. The "Terrible Awful" refers to Minny's act of revenge against Miss Hilly Holbrook: baking a chocolate pie containing human waste and watching Hilly eat two slices. This incident is deeply shameful and potentially dangerous to disclose. Yet Minny proposes including it, explaining:

> *"What if we put the Terrible Awful in the book.... But if we put it in there, then Miss Hilly can't let anybody find out the book is about Jackson. She don't*

> *want anybody to know that stories about her. And if they start getting close to figuring it out, she gone steer em the other way."*(Stockett, 2010, p. 374).

This proposal transforms Minny from a mere source of narrative into a strategist operating at the level of meta-narrative. She is not simply telling a story; she is calculating how that story will function within a future social context. This exemplifies what (Williams & Zenger, 2007) define as *action production* at the level of narrative design: Minny constructs the text to produce a specific future action—Hilly's deflection of suspicion. This calculation is highly sophisticated, as it recognizes that the power of the text lies not only in its truth claims but, in its capacity, to produce responses from readers. Minny understands that Hilly's primary vulnerability is her social reputation. Hilly has constructed her identity as a respectable Southern woman, a leader of the Junior League, and a defender of segregation. The story of the pie would destroy that reputation. Therefore, if the story is published—even anonymously—Hilly will be compelled to prevent anyone from identifying the book as being about Jackson. She will redirect suspicion, deny connections, and indirectly protect the book's anonymity in order to protect herself. Minny's strategic calculation is that the oppressor will become the protector of the oppressed's narrative.

This strategic use of narrative reflects what (Williams & Zenger, 2007) identify as the capacity of literacy to produce action. In their analysis, literacy in popular culture often functions instrumentally: characters read to gain information, write to send messages, and decode to uncover secrets. However, Minny's proposal goes beyond this. She does not use literacy to gather information, but to manipulate future behavior. The text is designed as a strategic instrument. Their anonymity, combined with the inclusion of the "Terrible Awful," ensures that Hilly cannot acknowledge the book's connection to Jackson without exposing herself. She also cannot ignore the book, as it circulates publicly. Her only option is denial, and denial itself becomes a weak form of defense that signals guilt. Minny anticipates all of these outcomes. Her agency lies not only in telling her story, but in designing it to produce a specific behavioral response from her adversary.

From the perspective of New Literacy Studies, Minny's proposal illustrates that literacy practices are always embedded within power relations (Street, 1984). The "Terrible Awful" narrative emerges from the same structural inequality that produced Minny's act of revenge. It functions as a covert literacy practice that transforms the white community's obsession with social reputation into leverage for Black domestic workers. As Gee (2015) argues, literacy is not merely about decoding text but about participating in "Discourses"—ways of thinking, acting, and believing that shape how individuals construct meaning within specific contexts. Through years of working for white families, Minny has learned to read the social dynamics of white Southern society. She understands what Hilly values (reputation) and what she fears (exposure), and she strategically deploys that knowledge in the writing process. This represents agency exercised not through direct confrontation, but through the strategic manipulation of social vulnerabilities.

From (Kabeer, 1999) perspective, this writing event also represents an expansion of resources. Anonymity becomes a protective resource that enables participation. The condition itself—name changes—functions as a new asset that reduces risk and makes the project feasible. As Kabeer argues, resources are not limited to material assets but include social and symbolic dimensions. Aibileen's knowledge of how to protect herself constitutes a crucial resource within the collaboration.

Within (Kabeer, 1999) framework, Minny's proposal also demonstrates sophisticated agency. Kabeer defines agency as the ability to define goals and act upon them, encompassing strategic calculation. Minny defines a goal (protection from Hilly after publication), calculates potential consequences, and negotiates with her collaborators regarding what should be included in the narrative. Evidence of her agency also appears when she later tells Aibileen: "I'm only telling you for the book, you understand. Ain't nobody sharing no heartfelt secrets here," (Stockett, 2010, p. 375). She maintains strategic distance, refusing to frame her participation as emotional confession. This represents agency as calculated disclosure rather than vulnerability.

In addition, the maids achieve a new level of control over their own representation. Aibileen transforms her private prayer-writing into public testimony. She tells Skeeter: "I never told nobody that before. Not even Minny. Find I can get my point across a lot better writing em down" (Stockett, 2010, p. 153). This reflects a shift in her understanding of literacy—from a private, devotional practice to a public, strategic tool.

Minny's intermediate achievement lies in transforming her shameful secret into strategic leverage. By proposing the inclusion of the "Terrible Awful," she reframes an act of revenge as a calculated narrative strategy. As (Kabeer, 1999) argues, achievements can be psychological as well as material. Minny's ability to articulate the incident strategically, rather than confess it shamefully, represents a meaningful shift in her self-understanding. Thus, the writing process demonstrates how resources (anonymity and strategic knowledge) are mobilized through agency (strategic decision-making) to produce intermediate achievements (the manuscript and transformed self-perception).

Book Publication

The third major literacy event occurs when the completed book is published and enters the public sphere. This moment represents the culmination of the literacy-as-power trajectory, demonstrating how written texts can produce tangible social consequences. (Williams & Zenger, 2007) identify *action production* as the capacity of literacy to shape decisions, create consequences, and generate observable outcomes in social reality. In the publication event, action production operates at multiple levels: the televised review initiates public discussion; individual readers adjust their attitudes and behaviors; and the antagonist is forced into a performative contradiction she cannot resolve.

The most concentrated moment of achievement occurs during the televised review on the local program "People Will Talk." Aibileen watches the broadcast in Miss Leefolt's living room. The host, Dennis James, holds up the book and comments on its anonymous authorship, suggesting that the fictional town of "Niceville, Mississippi" could easily be Jackson. The local book reviewer, Joline French, reacts with immediate outrage:

> *"…a disgrace to the South! A disgrace to the good Southern women who've spent their lives taking care of their help. I know I personally treat my help like family and every one of my friends does the same…" (Stockett, 2010, p. 407)*

French's reaction constitutes clear evidence of successful *control over meaning*. The dominant narrative—the myth of the grateful, well-treated maid who is "part of the family"—is publicly challenged on television. Her anger functions as a defensive response, an attempt to reassert the hegemonic interpretation. However, the fact that she feels compelled to respond publicly indicates that the book has disrupted the taken-for-granted assumptions of her social world. As (Williams & Zenger, 2007) argue, literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relations. French represents those institutions—the Junior League and the white Southern elite. Her outrage therefore signals not strength, but threat; the book has destabilized the interpretive framework that sustains her authority.

Dennis James counters French by referencing the book's most memorable narrative:

> *"Joline, did you read that ending? About the pie? If my maid, Bessie Mae, is out there listening, Bessie Mae, I have a new respect for what you do every day. And I'll pass on the chocolate pie from now on!"* (Stockett, 2010, p. 407).

This moment exemplifies *action production* in its most visible form. The written text produces a tangible shift in the speaker's publicly stated attitude. James declares that he will treat his maid differently—a direct behavioral consequence of encountering Minny's narrative. The "Terrible Awful" episode, strategically positioned at the end of the book, functions exactly as intended: it compels readers to confront their complicity and, in some cases, to reconsider their behavior. This is not merely a shift in opinion but an articulation of future action. Whether sincere or performative, the public nature of this statement indicates that the book has made it possible to voice critiques that were previously unsayable within dominant discourse. The boundaries of acceptable speech have shifted.

The most dramatic evidence of action production appears in Miss Hilly's response after reading the book. Rather than engaging in reflection, she resorts to frantic denial. She tells Elizabeth Leefolt:

> *"…is not Jackson. This book is garbage, is what it is. I'll bet the whole thing was made up by some Nigra – " (Stockett, 2010, p. 506)*

Hilly's denial is precisely the redirection of suspicion that Minny had strategically anticipated. The oppressor is compelled to protect the very narrative that exposes her. (Williams & Zenger, 2007) observe that those who rely on institutional literacies often become ineffective when confronted with counter-literacies operating outside institutional control. Throughout the novel, Hilly exercises institutional literacy as a mechanism of power—most notably through her "Home Help Sanitation Initiative," a written policy designed to formalize segregation. She believes that official documents and codified rules will secure her authority. However, the anonymous book operates beyond institutional control. Hilly cannot identify its authors, censor its distribution, or publicly acknowledge its connection to Jackson without implicating herself. Her only available strategy is denial, and this denial ultimately signals vulnerability rather than control. The literacy she cannot control undermines the literacy she once believed guaranteed her power.

Applying (Kabeer, 1999) framework, the publication event generates tangible achievements for each protagonist. For Skeeter, the book results in a professional opportunity: "a copy editor's assistant at Harper's Magazine in New York"(Stockett, 2010, p. 432). This represents upward mobility—an achievement that reflects her structural advantages but remains a significant outcome of the project.

For Aibileen, the outcomes are complex yet meaningful. She loses her job after being falsely accused of theft, yet she receives financial compensation: "There'll be more money coming. At least one hundred dollars to each of you"(Stockett, 2010, p. 443). More importantly, she is offered a position as the Miss Myrna columnist at a local newspaper (Stockett, 2010, p. 443). This marks a transition from invisible domestic labor to paid public writing. As (Kabeer, 1999) suggests, achievements are often partial; however, this shift represents a redefinition of Aibileen's identity—from domestic worker to writer.

For Minny, the book facilitates escape from domestic violence. After her husband loses his job due to Hilly's influence, Minny ultimately leaves him. Aibileen reflects:

> *"Minny's away from Leroy. I never once heard her say she gone leave Leroy, and Minny don't say things twice. When she do things, they done the first time."* (Stockett, 2010, p. 447).

This constitutes an existential achievement—the reclamation of control over her own body and life. The literacy project provides both material resources (financial compensation) and psychological resources (validation and solidarity), enabling this transition. As (Kabeer, 1999) emphasizes, achievements must be understood within structural constraints; while Minny's escape is significant, her future remains uncertain.

The publication event also produces new resources that enable further empowerment. Skeeter's employment becomes a resource for continued professional development. Aibileen's columnist position provides both income and a sustained platform for literacy practice. Minny's separation from Leroy creates conditions for safety and autonomy. These newly generated resources illustrate (Kabeer, 1999) argument that empowerment is iterative: achievements from one stage become resources for future agency.

The most profound achievement, however, is Aibileen's psychological transformation. After being dismissed from her job, she reflects:

> *"But at the same time feeling, in a way, that I'm free, like Minny. Freer than Miss Leefolt, who so locked up in her own head she don't even recognize herself when she read it. And freer than Miss Hilly. That woman gone spend the rest a her life trying to convince people she didn't eat that pie."*(Stockett, 2010, p. 452).

Here, Aibileen redefines freedom as moral autonomy. Although she loses her employment, she no longer depends on white approval. This psychological shift cannot be

measured materially, yet it is central to empowerment as defined by (Kabeer, 1999): the ability to make strategic life choices. Aibileen asserts her own definition of freedom, while Miss Leefolt remains constrained by internalized norms and Miss Hilly becomes trapped by her own reputation. In contrast, Aibileen exits with dignity and self-awareness intact. This marks the culmination of the literacy-mediated empowerment process: from resource (the book project), through agency (strategic decisions in writing), to achievement (psychological liberation).

In sum, applying Kabeer's framework to *The Help* reveals that literacy mediated empowerment operates as a trajectory from resources to agency to achievements, with each dimension shaping and being shaped by the others. Skeeter's institutional resources enable her oppositional agency, leading to professional mobility. Empirical applications of Kabeer's framework—such as studies of sex workers in Bangladesh, young women in Mozambique, and ICT adoption in the UAE—have shown that resources alone do not guarantee empowerment; what matters is whether those resources can be mobilized through agency to produce transformative achievements (Das & Kundu, 2009; Moussa & Seraphim, 2017; Chopra et al., 2023). The case of the MUVA Assistentes in Mozambique, for example, demonstrated that combining income opportunities with mentoring and skill building strengthened resources, enhanced agency, and produced tangible achievements beyond short term income (Chopra et al., 2023). Similarly, in *The Help*, the literacy project combined Skeeter's institutional access, Aibileen's vernacular writing, and Minny's oral storytelling to create a collective resource that none of them could have mobilized alone that leads to empowerment. As (Kabeer, 1999) emphasizes, empowerment is not a fixed state but a continuum. Each woman experiences a meaningful expansion of her capacity to make strategic life choices, and this expansion is ultimately produced through literacy as power.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that literacy in The Help functions not merely as a technical skill but as a socially situated form of power shaped by unequal access, strategic action, and structural constraints. By combining Bronwyn T. Williams' literacy framework with Kabeer's empowerment model, the study demonstrates that literacy serves as a means of contesting meaning, exercising agency, and generating social change. The findings reinforce the ideological model of literacy while extending it through empowerment theory, showing how marginalized women negotiate intersections of race, class, and gender through literacy practices. This study contributes to literacy and gender studies by highlighting literacy as a critical site of resistance, self-definition, and transformation. Practically, the findings suggest that literacy education and social justice initiatives should move beyond technical instruction toward empowering marginalized voices to articulate experiences and challenge dominant narratives. Future research should explore literacy and empowerment across diverse cultural, literary, and digital contexts to deepen understanding of literacy as social practice and power.

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