

The Otherness in Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Take My Hand*

Jing Hu*

Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Malaysia

Manimangai Mani

Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Malaysia

Hardev Kaur

Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Malaysia

Abstract—In her recent historical fiction, *Take My Hand* (2022), New York Times bestselling author Dolen Perkins-Valdez explores the specific manifestations of post-slavery racism, particularly institutional racism. This is vividly portrayed through the experiences of Civil Townsend, a determined new nurse, who witnesses the systematic denial of reproductive rights and autonomy among impoverished African American females. Due to the novel being published within the last two years, there is a significant lack of extensive scholarly analysis on its critical themes. This research employs the postcolonial concept of Otherness to examine the oppression of black women in the narratives. It investigates how stereotyping and dehumanizing as facets of Otherness within a postcolonial framework, contribute to their oppression. It also gives an analysis of the causes and consequences of the practice of Othering. The study offers insights into the power dynamics between the dominant and marginalized racial groups, underscoring the persistent battle against racial stereotypes and institutional racism. The conclusions of this research underscore the notion that the ideology of Otherness is central to the oppression experienced by the African American female characters in the novel. It advocates that achieving equality involves recognizing and respecting differences ideologically.

Index Terms—institutional racism, oppression, Otherness, African American females, reproductive rights

I. INTRODUCTION

Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Take My Hand* (2022) was chosen for analysis due to its penetrating insight into the medical plight of Black women and girls, whose "bodies and futures have never been protected in the American experiment" (Ansa, 2022). Dolen Perkins-Valdez, a Memphis native, imbues her narrative with the complex racial history of her hometown. She first gained acclaim with her debut, *Wench* (2010), and continued her success with another New York Times bestseller *Balm* (2015). Her latest *Take My Hand* (2022) has garnered several accolades, including the 2023 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work-Fiction, the 2023 Fiction Prize from the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, and the Silver Gavel Award from the American Bar Association. As noted in *The Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Fiction 1980–2020* (2022), Dolen Perkins-Valdez has achieved in fiction what historians often struggle to do in historical study and writing: enabling readers to see and, if they are lucky, experience the horrors of the convoluted and sometimes violent racial history (Green, 2022).

Take My Hand (2022) is a historical novel that explores the themes of race, power, and medical ethics in 1970s Alabama. The story centers on the experiences of Civil Townsend, an enthusiastic newly-graduated nurse from an upper-middle-class background in Montgomery, Alabama. She works at a family planning clinic where her first patients are India and Erica Williams, young Black sisters aged 11 and 13 from a rural area. Feeling remorseful for administering Depo-Provera contraceptive shots to the girls—shots still in animal trial phases and carrying cancer risks—Civil dedicates considerable effort to making amends to them. However, despite Civil's careful oversight, the girls are secretly subjected to surgical sterilization under compulsion, reflecting a real-life historical atrocity: the forced sterilization of Minnie Lee and Mary Alice Relf. Civil challenges the prevailing injustices, initiating a lawsuit that captures national attention, and finally wins the lawsuit. This narrative highlights a neglected aspect of American history—the coerced sterilization of poor African American women and girls. Sanders (2022) notes that the novel aims to promote accountability rather than absolution, reminding readers of the roots of medical mistrust among marginalized communities, which stem from such grievous acts.

* Corresponding Author. Email: hujing.sc@163.com

II. LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE NOVEL

The novel is distinguished by its unique themes and historical significance, positioning it as a potentially enduring work in the literary canon by book reviewers. Due to the novel being published within the last two years, there is a significant lack of extensive scholarly analysis on its critical themes. This literature review only seeks to employ a mix of primary reader reviews and author interviews to delve into its complexities.

In her 2022 review of “‘*Take My Hand*’ Exposes a Dark Episode in American History”, Tina McElroy Ansa commended the novel for revealing the U.S. government’s neglect of poor Black girls and women in the 1970s. Similarly, Callaghan (2022) described the novel as a poignant narrative that dramatizes a real historical incident, positioning it within a broader context of historical state-sanctioned violations against the health and reproductive rights of Black Americans and other minorities—a continuing legacy. Furthermore, journalist Doll (2022) suggested that the novel prompted reflection on individual capacity to confront racial injustices and enduring societal inequalities, encouraging readers to consider the autonomy and choices of those they intend to assist.

The existing literature underscores the novel’s exploration of morality, racism, and oppression, yet lacks a scholarly discussion of these themes. This study seeks to address this gap by incorporating the concept of Otherness, offering new perspectives on the oppression of black women as Others in a predominantly white society.

III. STUDY AIM AND ANALYSIS APPROACH

This research investigates the oppression of African American female characters in Dolen Perkins-Valdez’s *Take My Hand* (2022) through textual analysis. It focuses on two primary aspects of Otherness—stereotyping and dehumanizing—within a postcolonial framework, along with an analysis of the causes and consequences of the practice of Othering. This study aims to illuminate the unique oppression and injustices faced by Black females in reproductive healthcare.

IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Influential thinkers such as G.W.F. Hegel, Jacques Lacan, Frantz Fanon, Simone de Beauvoir, G.C. Spivak, and Edward Said have all significantly contributed to the understanding of the concept of Otherness/Othering. Hegel articulates that “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (Hegel, 1977, p. 111). This statement suggests that one’s self-consciousness is validated through recognition by others, thereby establishing a mutual reference for the existence of “I and we,” and vice versa. Hence, “self” and “other” represent distinct subjectivities, each maintaining their unique spaces and boundaries without infringing upon each other’s “inter-subjectivity” area. This conceptual framework has been adopted by scholars across social sciences and humanities to explore how individuals perceive others who differ from themselves (Sharma, 2019, p. 110). From a feminist perspective, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1972) posits that the concept of ‘the other’ is as crucial to human consciousness as consciousness itself, stating, “In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality—that of the self and the other” (p. 16).

Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) marks the beginning of the postcolonial discourse on Otherness. In this text, Said articulates that “The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said, 2003, p. 5). He asserts, “ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)” (Said, 2003, p. 43). This dualistic ideology, once rooted in the consciousness of both the West and the East, becomes normalized among their populations, framing oppression and exploitation as inevitable and rational.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said critically examines how the East is framed as inherently different and fundamentally othered by the West. He argues, “the Orient and Orientals [are considered by Orientalism] as an ‘object’ of study, stamped with an otherness—as all that is different, whether it be ‘subject’ or ‘object’—but of a constitutive otherness, of an essentialist character” (2003, p. 97). Further, he describes the extent of this othering: “the only Orient or Oriental or ‘subject’ which could be admitted, at the extreme limit, is the alienated being, philosophically, that is, other than itself in relationship to itself, posed, understood, defined—and acted—by others” (2003, p. 97). Said posits that this alienation is not merely superficial but a deep, philosophical estrangement that strips the East of its identity and agency, forcing it into a perpetual state of “otherness.” This conceptualization positions the East as merely an object defined and acted upon by Western norms and expectations, devoid of its own voice or agency. Consequently, this framing leads to what Said describes as an “apparent ontological inequality of Occident and Orient” (2003, p. 150), solidifying a dichotomy where the East is perennially subordinate to the West.

Said critically analyzes the reduction of the Orient to a passive and voiceless entity in his work, stating, “Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself” (2003, p. 302), which positions it merely as an object under Western scrutiny. He outlines how the West systematically others the East through stereotyping, presenting the West as “rational, developed, humane, superior” while depicting the East as “aberrant, undeveloped, inferior” (2003, p. 300). Beyond mere stereotyping, Said highlights the deeper power dynamics at play, noting that “the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared or to be controlled” (2003, p. 302), which reflects the imperialistic motives of the West towards the East, perceived as a threat or a territory to dominate, comprised of “dehumanized lesser peoples” (2003, p. 347). Said also extends these observations on marginalization and oppression to other disciplines, suggesting similar dynamics are at

work in “such fields as black or women’s studies” (2003, p. 96).

V. PAST STUDIES ON THE CONCEPT OF OTHERNESS

In her dissertation, “The Importance of Reading Said: Orientalism, Women, and Postcolonial Literature After 9/11,” Allison Mader (2017) utilized Edward Said’s concept of Otherness to probe the intricate dynamics of identity, power, and resistance within contemporary postcolonial literature, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 cultural and political climate. Her analysis highlighted the depiction of Muslims as the Other. Mader pointed out that Muslim women were consistently depicted as inherently oppressed, “with an unqualified or amorphous notion of oppression” (p. 53). She argued that such representations allowed Western powers to justify their dominance over the East, suggesting that the issues of these “uncivilized” Muslim nations “can only be resolved by domination or obliteration” (p. 73). While Mader’s study intricately connected Otherness with colonial discourse to explore power dynamics and identity in a postcolonial setting, this approach will be adapted in the current study to examine the experiences of African-American women, thereby broadening the application of Otherness in understanding varied cultural and societal contexts.

In the 2017 article “The Othering in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*,” Matava Vichiensing delved into the concept of Other/Otherness, focusing on the marginalization of clones as “the other” in contrast to normal humans. The study examined the various manifestations of othering, such as through linguistic features, indoctrination, objectification, and assimilation, within the novel’s depiction of a world where genetically cloned embryos were not only created but were brought to term and utilized in existence. It described cloning in the novel as serving both therapeutic and reproductive purposes, with cloned bodies produced for medical science. Vichiensing concluded, “Within the context of *Never Let Me Go*, the notion of Otherness is sharply delineated, marking a definitive separation between ‘the normals’ and ‘the clones’; ‘us’ and ‘them’; ‘the self’ and what is strange, ‘the others’” (p. 134). However, this application of the concept of Other/Otherness has been primarily confined to the genre of dystopian science fiction and explored within a non-human environmental context.

The article “Edward Said’s Orientalism and the Study of the Self and the Other in Orwell’s *Burmese Days*” by Moosavinia, Niazi, and Ghaforian (2011) emphasized Edward Said’s concept of the Other. The authors applied Said’s theoretical framework to analyze the novel *Burmese Days*, focusing on the depiction of the Self (the Occident) and the Other (the Orient), and how these depictions were infused with power dynamics favoring the Occident. The novel was examined as an instance where Orientalist stereotypes and the Occident/Orient dichotomy significantly influenced the narrative, characters, and themes. The study highlighted the paradoxical stance of Orwell, who, despite his critiques of imperialism, simultaneously perpetuated Orientalist stereotypes, especially in his portrayal of Burmese characters and society. However, the concept of Otherness was utilized in the analysis of a novel set in the 1920s under British rule in Burma (present-day Myanmar), and this conceptual framework has not been expanded to encompass investigations within African-American contexts.

In his 2006 dissertation “The Moor’s Last Sigh: Boabdil and the Black Image in American Orientalism, 1816—1893,” James E. Brunson III explored the concept of Otherness and the depiction of the black image within the context of 19th-century American Orientalism. He specifically focused on how Hispanic-Moorish and Arab-Islamic elements were integrated into racial and ethnic stereotyping. Brunson extended Said’s framework to the American context, where portrayals of black and Islamic figures in literature and art reflected the broader geopolitical interests and racial attitudes of the time. By analyzing a diverse set of sources, including art, literature, and historical documents, his study provided a comprehensive view of how the black image was constructed and utilized within American Orientalism. While the study primarily explored how these representations influenced the broader discourse on race and power, it did not extensively address their impact on societal views of black individuals’ oppression in the U.S. My research, however, will focus on analyzing how the ideology of Otherness contributes to the oppression of Black women.

Said’s concept of Otherness, is a pivotal analytical tool for examining power dynamics and representation in postcolonial literary works and dystopian science fiction. Despite its broad applicability, the use of this concept in analyzing African-American literary texts, especially those concerning African-American women’s narratives, is comparatively less developed and merits further academic investigation.

VI. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

While institutional racism is widely recognized in areas such as housing, education, and employment, its presence in medical interactions involving Black women has received comparatively less attention (Davis, 2020). *Take My Hand* (2022) addresses this gap by highlighting the use of reproductive harm and medical violence as tools of oppression against Black girls. Employing Said’s concept of Otherness, the novel illustrates how structural racism, represented by the white head nurse, Mrs. Seager, perpetrates oppression on the poor Black girls, India and Erica. This racism consists of ideologies and practices that view Black women as inferior others, manifesting through stereotyping and dehumanizing, particularly within the context of nursing violence and medical racism.

A. Stereotyping

In his *Orientalism*, Said contends that “the Orient and Orientals [are considered by Orientalism] as an ‘object’ of study,

stamped with an otherness—as all that is different, whether it be ‘subject’ or ‘object’—but of a constitutive otherness, of an essentialist character” (2003, p. 97). This ‘otherness’ isn’t merely a surface-level distinction; it’s perceived as something fundamental and ingrained. To clarify, Orientalism typically presents Eastern cultures and individuals as inherently and unalterably distinct from Western standards. This perspective has frequently been employed to rationalize and sustain Western authority and influence over Eastern areas, while also reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices. As Said emphasizes, “The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, [and] dehumanizing ideology” that entangles Arabs and Muslims is exceptionally potent, and this web is perceived by every Palestinian as their uniquely harsh fate (2003, p. 27). Said uses this statement to emphasize the potent web of oppression and discrimination that is strongly felt by Palestinians, becoming an integral part of their lived experience.

A similar web of oppression has been experienced by the poor Black girls, India and Erica, in Perkins-Valdez’s *Take My Hand* (2022). India and Erica were presumably “sexually active or would be soon” (2022, p. 89) according to Mrs. Seager, the white chief nurse at the Montgomery Family Planning Clinic. Her clinical detachment¹ was evident when she instructed Civil to examine the girls for infections and sexually transmitted diseases without acknowledging their presence: “Check them for infections and sexually transmitted diseases” (p. 114). Mrs. Seager’s presumption that the young girls, needed birth control because they were either already sexually active or would be soon is a clear example of stereotyping. This assumption is not based on any individual assessment but rather on a racialized and sexualized stereotype of Black girls being hypersexual.

Said’s concept of Otherness involves the creation of these kinds of essentialized identities, where the dominant group (in this case, represented by Mrs. Seager) views the subordinate group (India and Erica) through a lens of preconceived notions and biases. For example, in the Western intellectual discourse, “the Arab after all is said and done is an undifferentiated sexual drive” (p. 311), “the Arab produces himself, endlessly, sexually, and little else” (p. 312). Similarly, by stereotyping the sisters as “sexually active”, the sisters have been “stamped with an otherness” — “a constitutive otherness” (Said, 2003, p. 97), which places them in a position of increased scrutiny and control. This dynamic reflects broader societal power structures that marginalize poor and Black communities. The dominant narrative that portrays these girls as sexually precocious serves to reinforce their marginalization by justifying the control over their bodies and lives. It perpetuates a system where those in authority, like Mrs. Seager, can make decisions on behalf of these girls without their input.

When Civil first found the two sisters were too young for the shot, she discussed the sisters’ situation with another new black nurse, Alicia, who responded “Some of these young girls are fast. They are starting earlier and earlier these days. Especially ...” (p. 34). Civil continued what she had not finished “Especially what? Poor girls?” (p. 34). The black nurse Alicia’s response reflects an internalization of negative stereotypes about young Black girls. These stereotypes are a product of the dominant culture’s portrayal of Black girls as hypersexual and precocious. This internalized Otherness shows how pervasive these stereotypes are, affecting even those within the marginalized group.

Alicia’s words embody Said’s concept of Otherness by characterizing these girls as “fast” and “different” from girls of other races, thereby justifying intrusive medical interventions like birth control shots. Alicia’s incomplete statement implies that young Black girls, especially those who are poor, are inherently more sexually active, highlighting the socioeconomic dimension of this stereotype. The girls’ economic condition, a result of political and economic “imperialism,” increases their likelihood of being categorized as Others. These stereotypes, reinforced by class distinctions imposed by “imperialism,” subjected the sisters to dehumanizing reproductive harm and medical violence, rooted in the structural racism prevalent in the country.

Williams and his colleagues (2019) employ the terms institutional or structural racism to describe societal frameworks and policies that limit the “socially stigmatized” individuals’ access to favorable opportunities and resources in society (1375). The system of racism is built and maintained by implementing policies and structures that enable the dominant group to selectively distribute societal advantages and resources, disadvantaging those deemed inferior. Over time, economic policies detrimental to the black community have resulted in their economic vulnerability. This economic fragility further triggers and reinforces negative stereotypes, which may subsequently restrict social services in the community and lead to experiences of racial oppression (Thompson et al., 2022). This aligns with the discovery by Chambers and her collaborators that Black women experiencing increased economic hardships were more susceptible to facing racial discrimination in diverse domains (Chambers et al., 2020).

This perspective is confirmed in the novel, where India and Erica, as representatives of impoverished Black girls living in the slums and receiving long-term assistance from aid organizations, are portrayed as typical of the lower-class, impoverished Black experience. At a very young age, they are labeled as ‘sexually active,’ considered “poor, Black, and mentally unfit” (p. 238), and suffer from reproductive harm and oppression. Mainstream ideology suggests that they should not bear children, as their offspring might perpetuate their perceived foolishness and poverty, further depleting national resources, which violates the “old eugenics law from the 1930s” (p. 238) mentioned in the novel. This is how Civil describes the girls’ initial administration of birth control injection from her point of view.

When the girls were first brought to the clinic, Erica had been twelve years old and India ten. And no one had ever bothered to ask them if they were even menstruating. I believed that both girls were virgins. But here we

¹ Clinical detachment involves the suspension of personal emotions, enabling practitioners to observe, discuss, and address the body with an objective perspective. This concept is articulated by Tony Walter (2004), as listed in the reference.

were inserting what could be poison into them on the off chance that one of them might become sexual. Or raped. There it was. The unthinkable word. (p. 115)

When Erica and India are brought to the clinic, the medical staff does not inquire if they are menstruating, showing a clear disregard for their individual development and bodily autonomy. This oversight indicates that they are not viewed as individuals with unique needs but as objects to be controlled. Said's concept of the "Other" being denied agency is evident here; the girls' voices and consent are completely excluded from the decision-making process. This reflects Said's argument that the "Other" is defined by negative attributes imposed by the dominant group—in this instance, the presumption that the girls might become sexually active or face sexual violence, justifying preventive medical intervention.

Erica recalls, "This lady came around to our house one day and told my daddy she was taking us to the clinic to make sure we don't have no babies" (p. 115). This recollection underscores the authoritative and paternalistic approach of the clinic, where decisions are made without the girls' input. This reflects a power dynamic in which the dominant group imposes its will on the marginalized "Other," denying the girls their agency and reinforcing their status as mere objects of medical control rather than individuals with autonomy and rights, and views them through a lens of racial and gendered stereotypes.

In *Orientalism*, Said writes, like other groups labeled as "variously designated as backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded, the Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment (2003, p. 207)". This study holds that, in *Take My Hand* (2022), Black girls are constructed as inferior through a similar framework. When Civil discussed with the white lawyer Lou the reasons behind the misfortune faced by the two Black girls, she inquired "So the idea was what . . . to stop us from having children because we were inferior" (p. 238)? Then, Lou answered, "Well, the ideas were often aimed at specific populations that included Black people, yes. But also the poor, the mentally retarded, the disabled, the insane" (p. 238). Here, we can see that Black moms are viewed through the lens of stereotypes that equate them with "poor, mentally retarded, and insane". This construction serves to justify their marginalization and the reproductive violence inflicted upon them. The statement by Lou effectively explained the structural system that put Black females in these derogatory categories, reinforcing their Otherness and dehumanization.

Based on the collaborative investigation by the nurses initiated by Civil, the case of the poor black sisters was not an isolated case. Alicia reported to Civil that there may be 11 girls sterilized in the past 3 years in just the small clinic they work for. And Lou also told Civil the fact that in 1919, thirty-three states enacted sterilization statutes based on "Eugenics", which is "Like gene selection", depriving the poor and black women's reproductive rights for their inferior genes (p. 238). Said's analysis of *Orientalism* describes how the West uses biological determinism and moral-political admonishment to construct the Orient as inferior. In *Take My Hand*, a similar process is at work. The reproductive harm inflicted upon Black females is justified through notions of biological determinism—that they are inherently less deserving of having children for their poor genes. This is coupled with moral-political admonishment, where their reproductive autonomy is controlled under the guise of public health or social improvement. Being labeled as a different and inferior race and class, and perceived mental capacity serves to dehumanize Black females and strip them of their rights.

B. Dehumanizing

In *Orientalism*, Said argues that Western powers direct a pervasive "dehumanizing ideology" towards Arabs and Muslims, constructing the Oriental as the Other and effectively erasing their humanity (2003, p. 27). The experiences of the two Black girls receiving Depo-Provera contraceptive injections can be viewed as a manifestation of a similar dehumanizing ideology. When Civil discussed the injections with her ex-boyfriend Ty, he warned her that Depo had not been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). He cited studies conducted five years earlier on mice and monkeys, which revealed cancer risks and led to the FDA's rejection of the drug. The use of Depo on the girls despite its lack of FDA approval and known cancer risks indicates a blatant disregard for their safety and well-being. This scenario mirrors Said's assertion that the Other is consistently dehumanized and treated as less than fully human.

Ty compared the administration of risky drugs to women at the clinic to historical experiments on men in Macon County. This comparison highlights how marginalized communities are often subjected to medical experimentation and negligence, erasing their humanity and treating them as expendable. Civil felt guilty about administering the drug to the sisters and hoped for minimal harm, thinking, "Maybe they had altered the medication into a better formula since that study. The clinical studies were on animals, not humans" (p. 69). Civil's internal guilt and rationalizations illustrate the deeply entrenched dehumanizing ideologies in these medical practices, which might be a government conspiracy. Civil asserted that she believed there was a significant possibility that the federal government was regarding the young Black girls as "the subjects of a live clinical trial" (p. 90). Civil's concerns and suspicions reveal the government's ideology regarding the treatment of impoverished Black girls, perceiving them as less than fully human and comparable to the treatment of animals.

Civil and Ty visited their university to seek assistance from Miss Pope, an African American university librarian. Miss Pope provided them with evidence of the mistreatment of Black individuals in the U.S. medical system. She presented them with "the history of medical experimentation on Black folks" and shared the articles she found about the syphilis experiment (p. 74). The historical evidence found by Miss Pope highlights the continuity of dehumanizing practices in which Black bodies were treated as experimental subjects rather than as fully human patients deserving of ethical care.

This reduction to mere tools for experimentation parallels the treatment of Oriental Others, who are dehumanized, objectified, and stripped of their humanity by Western powers.

Miss Pope whispered to Civil and Ty about how some white folks perceive Black bodies: “They think we can tolerate pain better than them,” and “some of them even thought syphilis couldn’t kill us” (p. 76). She clarified that it was “a crazy White man’s idea of a laboratory game with Black bodies” as much as it was an experiment on the consequences of the diseases (p. 76). Miss Pope’s mention of these beliefs reflects pervasive racial stereotypes that dehumanize Black individuals by denying their experiences of pain and suffering. These misconceptions treat Black people as less sensitive and less human, reducing their humanity and perpetuating harmful myths.

There is a long history of dehumanizing Black women. Wynn observed that, being viewed as the “Other”, Black women under slavery were inhumane objects that might be used for scientific purposes (2019, p. 108). In the 19th century, the development of racialized science led to stereotypes that Black slaves had “thicker skin and thicker skulls than whites,” making them “less sensitive to physical pain” (Plous & Williams, 1995, p. 796; Ford, 2019, p. 12). This belief contributed to the notion that Black women experienced less pain during childbirth compared to White women (Wynn, 2019). A notorious example is James Marion Sims, who performed surgeries on enslaved Black women without their consent or anesthesia, and is still considered the founder of U.S. gynecology.

According to Miss Pope, the government is aware of the situation but chooses to feign ignorance: “Because even though regular folks didn’t know, the medical folks knew. In some respects, the government did this in plain sight” (p. 77). The distinction between what “regular folks” and “medical folks” know highlights the concealment of critical information from the public. This concealment maintains power dynamics where those in authority control knowledge and decision-making, often to the detriment of marginalized groups. Said argues that authority is challenging to analyze when “it is virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true, and from traditions, perceptions, and judgments it forms, transmits, reproduces” (2003, pp. 19-20). This means the oppressed are denied access to vital information that affects their lives. These conversations indicate the ongoing institutional racism that underpins these Othering practices and a persistent dehumanizing ideology that continues to marginalize Black individuals within the medical system and society at large. The government’s actions (or inactions) treat Black females as less deserving of protection and care, effectively dehumanizing them.

Civil added, “Or they (the government) thought they were doing good” (p. 77). This exposes the federal government’s justification for its actions toward Black females in the U.S., paralleling Egypt’s experiences under British colonization as analyzed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Said examined Balfour’s speech, noting Balfour’s perceived right to speak on behalf of England, the West, and Western civilization about modern Egypt. In his speech, Balfour claimed that England knew “what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves” and that England’s colonization brought Egypt “moral prosperity” and “financial prosperity” (2003, p. 35). Similarly, the federal government perpetuates a heritage of paternalism and exploitation in *Take My Hand* by defending its invasive and repressive activities with the claim that it knows what is best for Black women. This analogy emphasizes how important it is to investigate and confront the narratives that continue to marginalize and dehumanize Black women. Achieving real equality and justice requires acknowledging and respecting individual autonomy and rights.

Edward Said argues that in the process of Othering, the autonomy of the Oriental country is denied, reducing it to an inferior “it” compared to the superior “us” (2003, p. 32). This remarkable Othering serves to “keep the region and its people conceptually emasculated, reduced to ‘attitudes,’ ‘trends,’ statistics: in short, dehumanized” (2003, p. 291). This tendency is especially evident during periods marked by the mobilization of fear and hatred, often resulting in “violence and the ugly shedding of human blood” (xiii). In *Take My Hand* (2022), this extreme form of dehumanization is exemplified by the medical violence inflicted on the two sisters. When Mrs. Seager discovered that Civil had not administered the required contraceptive shots to the girls, she forcibly took them for tubal ligation, a bloody and permanent procedure. Upon learning from Mrs. Williams, Civil rushed to the hospital, only to find that India and Erica had already undergone the forced sterilization surgeries. Erica cried to Civil:

“Miss Civil. Oh, I hurt so bad.”... I lifted the covers. Blood-soaked bandages were wrapped around her abdomen. “They done something to us, Miss Civil. I thought we was coming for shots. But they done something to us. They say we can’t have no babies.” ... The room smelled of blood and urine and disinfectant. Erica started to cry. (Perkins-Valdez, 2022, p. 136)

The forced sterilization of India and Erica highlights the extreme measures taken by the dominant group to control and exploit marginalized individuals, treating them as less than human and denying their basic rights and autonomy. Iris Marion Young, in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), argues that violence as oppression encompasses not only the acts themselves but also the societal context that facilitates and condones them. Its “systemic character” makes it a form of social injustice, not just individual moral wrongdoing (p. 62).

As the plots unfold, Dr. Robard’s testimonies in the lawsuit against the federal government further illustrate the systemic injustice, revealing that while two-thirds of patients at federally funded clinics are white and one-third are Black, 43 percent of those sterilized are Black. Furthermore, in North Carolina from 1960 to 1968, 63 percent of the 1,620 sterilizations were performed on Black women. These statistics underscore the disproportionate impact of these practices on Black women, exposing their dehumanization and exploitation by the dominant group.

C. Causes and Effects of Otherness

Mrs. Seager's perception of the Black sisters is deeply influenced by historical stereotypes of Black women. These pervasive and damaging stereotypes continue to shape mainstream ideology, resulting in Black women being treated as second-class citizens and often dehumanized. For African American women in the United States, the dehumanization caused by stereotypes has not been eradicated in the 21st century. They continue to endure the same injustices and oppression as their mothers did. Amy Roeder's article "America is Failing Its Black Mothers" (2019) exposed the inadequate healthcare African-American women receive, contributing to high maternal mortality rates. She mentioned the tragic case of Shalon Irving, a CDC epidemiologist, which exemplifies the severe consequences of medical negligence. Her friend, Raegan McDonald-Mosley, highlighted the inveterately systemic issues: "There's something inherently wrong with the system that's not valuing the lives of black women equally to white women" (2019).

W. E. B. Du Bois, in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903, reprinted 2008), described racism as "the strange meaning of being black" in a world that sees blackness as a problem (2008, p. 11). Similarly, according to Frantz Fanon, race is not an inherent biological characteristic but a product of historical construction and cultural interpretation (Kane, 2007, p. 356). In his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon asserts that "for not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man," and that a black individual might not be aware of the exact moment "when his inferiority is determined by the Other" based on racial or ethnic differences (2008, p. 90). He emphasizes that this dynamic also affects African Americans (2008, p. 90). In *Take My Hand* (2022), the two sisters are completely unaware of the specific moment when they were labeled as "Others," despite their youth and the fact that no one had asked if they were even menstruating. This labeling occurs solely because of their Blackness, not their age or gender. Blackness is constructed as the binary opposite of Whiteness. According to Edward Said, the essence and root of this binary opposition stem from "the notion that difference implies hostility, a frozen reified set of opposed essences, and a whole adversarial knowledge built out of those things" (2003, p. 352).

Beyond the ideological roots of hostility stemming from perceived differences, the lack of resources exacerbates the Othering of marginalized groups. Unlike white individuals and affluent African Americans, poor Black families, like the two sisters in *Take My Hand*, have limited access to material and informational resources. "Members of the urban underclass are socially isolated in that they lack social ties to individuals who participate in mainstream American society" (Tigges et al., 1998, pp. 53-54). Mrs. Williams and her son, Mr. Williams, do not read or write and unknowingly authorized tubal ligation by marking a document they could not comprehend. The family survives on \$147 per month from the Alabama Department of Pensions and Security, along with food stamps, and is subject to weekly visits from a government representative. This dependency on welfare creates a context where they can be easily coerced into compliance. "It is a very sophisticated, though perhaps unintentional, form of coercion, but it is coercion nonetheless" (Perkins-Valdez, 2022, p. 215).

These resources are crucial in enabling a Black individual to challenge the authority of white doctors, particularly in making informed refusals during vulnerable times. As a result, the two sisters struggle to resist the oppressive contraceptive system, facing paternalistic dominance from white nurse administrators and institutionalized reproductive harm, which marginalizes their bodily autonomy. In contrast, Civil, an African American woman with strong family support and social resources, is better equipped to question medical authority. In the novel, Civil not only uncovers the truth about forced sterilizations but also seeks justice for the victims, demonstrating the power of resistance against oppression. Her education and status empower her to identify and oppose unjust medical practices, illustrating inequalities in social resources and access to information exacerbate the challenges faced by marginalized groups.

After the dominant political power acquires "adversarial knowledge," hostility to the difference often manifests as systemic racism. In *Take My Hand*, the conspiracy to deprive impoverished Black women of their maternal rights is evidently systemic or structural. This is reflected in the words of Mrs. Seager, the white head nurse, who admonishes Civil: "We have been sanctioned by the federal government to execute our duties. We must take our mission very seriously. A wheel cannot work without its spokes. We are the spokes of that wheel" (p. 11). Mrs. Seager and her group received federal authorization to carry out their duties. Initially, Civil, as a Black woman who trusted her country, found it hard to believe, thinking, "The federal government could not possibly be doing the same thing with Depo and Black women" (p. 76). She finally accepted the truth after Ty "made a list of the places in the state that get money from the federal government and have the authority to sterilize" (p. 232).

Because Black individuals are positioned on the periphery of a white-dominated society, they often face baseless accusations and punishment. This dynamic shapes and stereotypes their racial identity, leading those unfamiliar with the Black race to accept the image created by whites as the true representation. Institutionalized racism has thus evolved into a tool for judging "us" and "them," rather than fostering a genuine understanding of race. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes, "In every society, in every collectivity, exists—must exist—a channel, an outlet through which the [energy] accumulated in the form of aggression can be released ... every society naturally requiring its own specific kind of catharsis" (1952, 2008, pp. 124-5), demonstrating that racism is perpetuated institutionally as a form of "collective catharsis".

Alienation is another effect of Otherness. Said contends that the Oriental is best described as "lamentably alien" after the process of Otherness, as they are "rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or—as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory—taken over" (2003, p. 207). Mrs. Williams, the grandmother of India and Erica, narrated, "Don't you know that? Ain't nobody ever

taught you what they can take? They just take take take” (p. 155). This sentiment was reiterated when Civil took the Williams family to visit their cousin’s house, emphasizing “Take take take” (p. 183). In this context, Mrs. Williams’ repeated lament, “take take take,” highlights the continuous exploitation and dehumanization experienced by marginalized individuals, similar to the “lamentably alien” status described by Said. This perception reflects the relentless extraction and dispossession faced by Black communities, where they are treated not as people with rights and identities but as resources to be exploited or problems to be managed.

Despite Civil’s efforts to improve their living conditions, Mrs. Williams continues to live in a state of anxiety. She expresses her feelings to Civil: “We was living here together—me, him, Mace, the girls. Then somebody come and take it all away. Faceless people. Like ghosts but not ghosts. When I tried to stop them, they shouted words at us” (p. 154). Mrs. Williams’ persistent anxiety underscores the deep-rooted impact of systemic racism and historical exploitation. Her fear that “faceless people” can come and take everything away reflects the sense of vulnerability and powerlessness that results from being Othered. These “faceless people” represent the institutional and systemic forces that continue to oppress and alienate marginalized communities, stripping them of their agency and subjecting them to constant uncertainty and fear.

Ultimately, when viewed through the lens of Otherness, marginalized Black women in American society are depicted as a group requiring external redemption rather than being acknowledged as autonomous individuals. Said argues that 19th-century Western writers’ views on the Orient differ in style and form but not in fundamental content. He states, “Every one of them kept intact the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability; ... (they) saw the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption” (2003, p. 206). In *Take My Hand* (2022), after recounting the two girls’ stories to her daughter, Civil emphasizes the narrative’s authenticity and remarks, “This is just another white savior story. The white person drops in from the sky, saves all the Black folks, and by doing so, redeems themselves. We’re the channel through which they save their own souls, but we cannot save our own” (p. 195). Civil’s comments thoroughly disclose the deep-seated consciousness and mechanisms of oppression in American society, where the white ruling class consistently stereotypes and essentializes the Black female community, portraying them as passive, inferior, and incapable of self-redemption.

VII. CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Take My Hand* (2022) through Edward Said’s concept of Otherness reveals the persistent stereotyping and dehumanization of Black women in American society. Furthermore, this study suggests that the binary opposition rooted in the notion that “difference implies hostility” and the lack of resources are the primary causes of the Otherness experienced by Black females in the U.S. These factors contribute to deepened structural racism, alienation, and the depiction of Black women as needing external redemption, undermining their autonomy. The narratives in the novel highlight the deeply entrenched mechanisms of oppression, illustrating how Black women are denied agency and autonomy, instead being positioned as objects of control and intervention.

As Civil declared, “Our bodies belonged to us. Poor, disabled, it didn’t matter. These were our bodies, and we had the right to decide what to do with them. It was as if they were just taking our bodies from us, as if we didn’t even belong to ourselves” (p. 294). This statement underscores the fundamental fight for bodily autonomy and self-determination. However, even today, the stereotyping and dehumanization of Black females are evident in various forms. These range from obstetricians disregarding the pain of Black patients and performing medically unnecessary cesarean sections to outright dismissing and downplaying their health concerns (Wynn, 2019). Stereotypes such as the Jezebel, the “Welfare Queen,” and the Sapphire also shape public perceptions of Black motherhood and restrict the exercise of reproductive rights by Black women.

Civil’s assertion encapsulates the core struggle against a system that seeks to control and dehumanize marginalized groups. Achieving equality requires more than looking back the past injustices; it necessitates recognizing and respecting differences ideologically. Said concludes that “Each age and society re-creates its “Others” (p. 332), indicating that perceptions of differences are continuously interpreted and re-interpreted. This paper argues that achieving equality requires recognizing and respecting these differences ideologically. It calls for a more equitable and inclusive understanding of Black women’s experiences, acknowledging their full humanity and inherent rights beyond racial and gendered stereotypes.

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Hu Jing is a PhD. Student at Cross Department, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia; her research interests include African-American Literature, Postcolonial Criticism. E-mail: hujing.sc@163.com

Manimangai Mani is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia; her research interests include Post-colonial Studies, African and Caribbean Literature. E-mail: manimangai@upm.edu.my

Hardev Kaur is an Associate Professor at the Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia; her research interests include English literary studies and African and Caribbean literature studies, and Trauma Studies. E-mail: hardevkaur@upm.edu.my