

AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN'S STRUGGLE AGAINST DOUBLE OPPRESSION IN THEODORE MELFI'S *HIDDEN FIGURES*: A BLACK FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstrak

Theodore Melfi adalah sutradara film yang diangkat dari kisah nyata, *Hidden Figures*. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk melihat berbagai penindasan yang dialami oleh perempuan Afro-Amerika di tempat kerja, seperti yang digambarkan dalam film *Hidden Figures*. Metodologi penelitian kualitatif deskriptif digunakan dalam penelitian ini. Perspektif Feminisme Kulit Hitam dari Patricia Hill Collins digunakan dalam penelitian ini. Temuan dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa karakter utama dari film tersebut mewujudkan prinsip-prinsip feminisme kulit hitam. Tokoh utama perempuan Afro-Amerika menghadapi penindasan ganda dari NASA, tempat kerjanya, dan juga dari individu. Nilai-nilai feminisme kulit hitam meningkatkan kesadaran wanita kulit hitam untuk berjuang sehingga mereka dapat menunjukkan bahwa mereka memiliki kualitas yang tidak dimiliki oleh kelompok kecil lainnya. Hal ini dapat membantu mereka melawan penindasan, mendapatkan rasa hormat sebagai sesama manusia, dan pada akhirnya mencapai tujuan mereka.

Kata kunci: perempuan afro-amerika, feminisme kulit hitam, penindasan ganda

Abstract

Theodore Melfi is the director of the movie based on a true story, *Hidden Figures*. This research aims to examine the various oppressions experienced by Afro-American women in the workplace, as depicted in the *Hidden Figures* movie. Descriptive qualitative research methodology was used in this study. Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminism perspective is used in this research. The findings of this study show that the main characters of the film embody the tenets of black feminism. The Afro-American female protagonist faces double oppression from NASA, her workplace, and also from individuals. The values of black feminism raise the consciousness of black women to fight so that they can show that they have qualities that other small groups do not have. This can help them fight oppression, gain respect as fellow humans, and ultimately achieve their goals.

Keyword: afro-american women, black feminism, double oppression

1. INTRODUCTION

The world is full of individuals with multiple identities such as ethnicity, gender, social status, sexual orientation or religion. Unfortunately, not all people receive the same treatment, and many experience oppression because of their identity. Oppression of women is a problem that still exists in society and has not been resolved. Women experience various forms of oppression perpetrated by individuals and their communities. They are treated unfairly and have limited access to education and work rights.

Double oppression is a form of oppression experienced by minority groups, resulting from the combined effects of two distinct factors that contribute to their discrimination. This phenomenon was first observed among black women. According to (Crenshaw, 1989), black women experience double oppression due to their race and gender. Not only are they subjected

to oppression by men based on their gender, but they are also oppressed by white peoples based on their race.

According to (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018), recent findings have shown that women still remain a minority in powerful positions, such as politics or professional academics. This oppression is much greater for women belonging to different ethnicities, particularly due to their skin color (Perry et al., 2013). This is especially true for Afro-American women, who face oppression from both white and black men. As they are not viewed as equal human beings, their treatment is often worse than that of white women. In order to improve their situation and create a better world for them, it is essential to listen to and discuss women's experiences of inequality, and work towards finding solutions to their problems.

Various types of literary works that address this phenomenon have been widely written and posted, and this is a signal that the double oppression experienced by black women is not a trivial matter. One of the movies that raises the issue of this problem is *Hidden Figures*. The historical non-fiction book was the inspiration for the movie. "Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Who Helped Win the Space Race" written by (Shetterly, 2022) and directed by Theodore Melfi with assistance from Allison Schroeder as scenario writer. The movie is set in Hampton, Virginia, United States in 1961, where the era of slavery has ended but racial segregation still exists.

Margot Shetterly, author of *Hidden Figures*, discovered that the black intellectual community she grew up in was a blend of civil rights, technology, and the hard work of underrepresented scientists, especially women of color. Shetterly interviewed and filmed the stories of pioneering black women mathematicians at Langley Research Center.

The movie tells the story of three Afro-American women, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, who worked at NASA, a male-dominated institution. Despite their skills, they are only offered jobs as computers, secretaries, or janitors, and are segregated from white women. Mary was prevented from becoming an engineer, Dorothy was underpaid, and Katherine was treated unfairly. *Hidden Figures* accurately depicts the struggles of Afro-American women, yet many overlook the issue. This research aims to help people understand the struggles of these women in fighting racism and sexism, emphasizing the importance of treating minorities equally regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity.

In this study, researchers want to present the oppression that occur in Afro-American women characters in the *Hidden Figures* movie. The researcher will analyze this movie using the Black Feminist Thought by (Collins, 2022). This study was chosen because researchers are interested in studying literature, and researchers want to know how the struggle of Afro-

American women characters in that era, so researchers try to study and understand, and try to present the conditions of oppression that existed in the United States in that era.

In this study, some previous studies that have the same research topic as this study are research of (Baroy et al., 2022), (Jaha & Darmastuti, 2018), (Panuntun & Chusna, 2021), (Andrianto et al., 2022), (Febriani & Arianto, 2020), and (Sari et al., 2022). But there are also differences between previous studies, one of which uses the theory of black feminist thought and there are also no researchers who reveal how Afro-American women fight the multiple oppression that occurs in Afro-American women characters in the *Hidden Figures* movie. This research will present the struggle against the type of oppression faced by Afro-American women in the *Hidden Figures* movie using theory of black feminism. Because it discusses the same issue, previous research is very informative and helps the author to sharpen the analysis of the various oppressions experienced by the three Afro-American women who appear in the *Hidden Figures* movie.

2. METHOD

The researcher decided to analyze this research as a qualitative descriptive research based on what has been presented. The researcher used this technique to explain words or phrases from the *Hidden Figures* movie that depict various kinds of oppression and the struggle against oppression. When conducting descriptive qualitative research, words, sentences, and paragraphs taken from literary works are the data analyzed. (Creswell, 2014) defines qualitative research as a type of research in which researchers rely on information from participants or objects with a broad scope, general questions, and data collection consisting of words or texts from participants, explaining, interpreting these words.

The approach used in this research is the Black Feminist Approach. This theory will be used to analyze racism and sexism experienced by women characters in the movie. The researcher focuses on two main things, which are double oppression and the struggle of black women against double oppression reflected in the *Hidden Figures* movie as the main source of research data.

There are two types of objects used in this research, they are material objects and formal objects. Material objects are objects that are in the research field, while formal objects are objects that are seen from a certain point of view (Faruk, 2012). The material object in this research is the *Hidden Figures* movie directed by Theodore Melfi and the formal object is Afro-American women who struggle against multiple oppression. There are two types of data sources. The main data source for this research is conversations, dialogues, narratives, and

scenes in the 126-minute 43-second. The second data source also includes materials collected from various print and digital sources, such as books, journals, and websites, which provide ideas that will be used for the analysis of the research data.

Qualitative data analysis involves interpreting text or images from various sources, such as the *Hidden Figures* movie script. The researcher analyzed the story, setting, and characters to identify themes and patterns related to feminism. The researcher collected and selected relevant data, displayed it for easy analysis, and explained the various oppressions in the script using the theories used in the research. The analysis then described the main character's struggle against oppression and drew conclusions from the data obtained. The data collection method involved the researcher focusing on important aspects of the research, such as watching the movie several times, highlighting the oppression and struggles of black women, and taking notes on feminist quotes to gain a deeper understanding of the context (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, researchers will analyze the *Hidden Figures* movie using Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist perspective. The data shows that there are two types of oppression that occur in the *Hidden Figures* movie. In this movie there is sexism and racism shown in the analysis below.

3.1 Sexism

First, they experienced oppression while on their way to work. They had to pull over because their car suddenly broke down. Dorothy looked under the car to find out the cause, and it turned out that the starter was broken. Then a white policeman stops beside their car. A white policeman in the incident suspected the three women because their car was parked incorrectly in the middle of the road. In fact, Dorothy was fixing her broken car. The three women were treated with suspicion by the policeman, who also showed an oppressive attitude towards them.

“NASA. That's something. Didn't know they hired...”

In the sentence, the white policeman's dialog implies a message of sexism that women are still considered unequal and that women do not have the ability to work at NASA.

“There are many women working in the Space Program, sir.”

Dorothy's sentence above is a form of their struggle as Afro-American women who have been oppressed by the white police. Dorothy said that not only men are able to work at NASA but women are also able to work at NASA.

The second sexist oppression is during the scene where Colonel Jim is talking to Katherine. After learning that Katherine works at NASA. Jim Johnson asks about the existence of women at NASA. Colonel Jim accidentally insults Kathrine. Jim doesn't believe it because he believes gender oppression is still rampant there.

“Aeronautics. Pretty heady stuff. They let a women handle that kind of thing-”

From Jim's sentence, it can be concluded that Jim shows a sexism as a black man towards Afro-American women that they are at the bottom of society.

“I’ll have you know that I was the first black student at West Virginia University Graduate School. On any given day I analyze manometer levels for air displacement, friction and velocity and compute over 10,000 calculations with cosine, square root and lately Analytical Geometry.”

Katherine's sentence is a form of her struggle as an Afro-American woman who was unintentionally oppressed by Jim Johnson. Katherine said that she was very worthy to work at NASA because she was the first Afro-American graduate student at West Virginia University and she could do manual calculations by hand more than 10,000 calculations with cosines, and square roots.

The third sexist oppression occurs when Mrs. Mitchell talks about Mary not being allowed to study at Virginia Hampton School's engineering program because the school is only for whites.

“I just follow the rules here and I expect everyone who works for me to follow them too. There is no special situation for everyone. You should all be grateful for still having a job.”

Mrs. Mitchell's statement above reinforces racial oppression. While Mary, like most NASA engineers, holds a bachelor's degree in physical sciences and mathematics, it is still not enough to join the engineering program at Virginia Hampton School. As seen in the image above, despite working harder than white people, it's not always possible for colored people, like Mary, to go to college, get a great job, or make a lot of money.

After receiving advice and encouragement from her family, other black women and Mr. Zielinski. Mary finally tried to apply to the court to fight for her right to become a women engineer. Mary is showing Mr. Zielinski that she has managed to get a schedule to fight for her rights in court.

NASA requires that the engineer must be a man. This is what confused Mary. She was supposed to take courses at a white school in order to get an engineering degree. An engineering degree was one of the requirements to apply to engineering training programs. As black women were prohibited from applying by state law, this goal was considered unattainable. Despite

these challenges, she was still able to pursue her career as a female engineer. Hence, she was confident to make it happen by seeking the court's intervention. Mary fought for her rights. Mary confidently convinced the Judge to grant her wish.

“And before Alan Shepard sat on a rocket, no American had ever touched space. He will always be remembered as the Navy man from New Hampshire who became the first person to touch the stars.”

“And I, sir, plan to become an engineer at NASA. But I can't do that without taking classes at that all-white high school. And I can't change my skin color. So, I have no choice but to be the first. And I can't do that without you.”

“Your Honor, of all the cases you will hear today, which one will be important in the next hundred years? Which one will make you “the first”?”

Mary's words explain her struggle to become the first Afro-American woman engineer. Eventually, Mary's application was approved by the judge on the condition that Mary could only attend night classes. This situation is a proof of Mary's struggle to reach her goals, which were considered unattainable by white people.

When Mary attends her first class, The male students in her class did not believe that women could and should take science lessons.

“Well. The curriculum is not designed for teaching...a woman.”

The lecturer's sentence includes gender oppression. She claimed that since Mary was a woman and the curriculum at the school was not geared towards her, she could open the door for higher courses at Hampton High School.

3.2 Racism

The first racial oppression occurs when Katherine asks Ruth where the bathroom is. Ruth says that there is no bathroom for you.

“I'm sorry. I don't know where your bathroom is.”

Ruth's sentence above does not mean that Katherine should use Katherine's own bathroom. But she said it in reference to Katherine's black race. Katherine had to find "her" bathroom because she couldn't use the bathroom used by white women.

NASA as an institution commits racism against black employees by differentiating the location or use of bathrooms. Katherine would run around to go to the colored women's bathroom. The bathroom is located in the West Computing Group, which is reserved for black women because there are no bathrooms of color in the Space Task Group. In fact, the distance between the Space Task Group and the West Computing Group office is half a mile.

“There are no bathrooms here. There are no colored bathrooms in this building or any building outside of West Campus. It's half a mile away! Do you know what? I have to walk to Timbuktu just to relieve myself! And I can't use a bicycle. Photos with my uniform skirt at the knees and high heels. And don't get me started on the simple pearl necklace I can't afford. God knows you don't pay people of color enough for that. And I work like a dog day and night, living on coffee from a coffee pot that half of you don't want me to touch! So, forgive me if I have to go to the restroom several times a day!”

Katherine's sentence is her struggle against the oppression that happened to her. Katherine expressed her frustration to Mr. Harrison, her supervisor. She described how discrimination in the workplace prevented her from doing her job, such as the lack of colored toilets in the Space Task Group building, which forced her to rush to the West Computing Group building to use them. Then, a separate coffee pot for him at work that no one would touch. After revealing all the oppression that she received at work, Katherine apologized to Mr. Harrison and asked for his permission to leave the office. Harrison and asked his permission to leave the office. Mr. Harrison did not remain silent. He walked to the drinking section, then he removed the colored sign on the coffee pot.

Mr. Harrison dismantled the colored bathroom sign in front of all white and black employees.

“Damn thing! For Christ's sake! Here it is! No more colored toilets. No more white toilets. Just regular toilets. Go wherever you want. Preferably close to your desk. At NASA we all... pee the same color.”

After this incident, things changed so that Katherine no longer experienced the problem of oppression as an Afro-American woman in the workplace.

The second racial oppression occurs when Dorothy visits the library with her children. But in the middle of their book search, a white librarian suddenly interrupts Dorothy's activities.

“We don't want any problems here.”

“You have a book in the colored section.”

The white librarian impolitely informed her that there were other books for black people and they didn't want any trouble. As a result of the threat they felt, black people were prohibited from sharing rooms with white people. The white librarian's words showed racism towards the black woman. Later, the white woman called the white security guard, and Dorothy was expelled from the library with her kids.

The security guards removing Dorothy and her kids from library.

“Take your hands off my men. Don't touch them.”

“You’ve had a blessed day.”

Dorothy's sentence above is her struggle against oppression. Dorothy was angry when the security guard pushed her children's shoulders. Dorothy was very angry with the security guard at the time because she did not want her innocent children to be victimized. Dorothy responded to the security's treatment by praying for the security's day.

Leonard asked why Dorothy took the book.

“Son, I pay taxes. And taxes paid for everything in that library. You can't steal what you've paid for.”

Dorothy's sentence above is also included in the struggle against oppression. She explains to her children that as long as we pay taxes, we have the right to take what we have paid for.

4. CLOSING

After using Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminism theory, it can be said that the double oppression experienced by Afro-American women characters in the movie is racism and sexism. The author finds incidents that show the struggle of Afro-American women against double oppression in the *Hidden Figures* movie.

The *Hidden Figures* movie depicts the double oppression experienced by Afro-American women at NASA, which includes limited opportunities for advancement, lack of dignity in the workplace, and limited access to facilities such as restrooms, canteens, schools, and coffee makers. Their ability to use public spaces such as buses and libraries was also limited.

In the *Hidden Figures* movie, all the Afro-American women characters struggle and fight against workplace oppression in their own unique ways. To rectify and fight oppression in the workplace, black women unite to support Afro-American women's struggle for equal rights. All the struggles of the Afro-American women characters in the movie show that, despite facing workplace oppression, they can still achieve their goals through perseverance and hard work. In addition, their struggles show that they have qualities that other small groups do not have. This can help them fight oppression, gain respect as fellow human beings, and ultimately achieve their goals.

At the end, Katherine Johnson became a permanent member of the Space Task Group. She did the calculations for the Apollo 11 mission to the moon with Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins. and received the Presidential Medal of Freedom for Service. Dorothy Vaughan became the first black supervisor at NASA when she became Head of the Centralized Electronic Computing Group at Langley. She joined Team Scout in 1964, an organization dedicated to sending an unmanned rover to Mars. Mary Jackson continued her education at the University

of Virginia to earn a master's degree in engineering. She was selected as the first woman engineer of color at NASA.

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