

DISCRIMINATION TOWARDS AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN AS PORTRAYED IN *HIDDEN FIGURES* FILM

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ABSTRACT

This research analyzed the discrimination issue that happened in *Hidden Figures* film. The discrimination in the film mostly happened to three main characters in the film, Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson and Kathrine Goble. The purposes of this study are to reveal and explain the types of discrimination that happened to these three African-American women and to understand their responses against it. The researcher used mimetic approach and descriptive qualitative method in this research. The data in this research derived from utterances, actions, and explanation of a situation that has relation to the research questions. Based on the analysis, the researcher found that there were only race/color discrimination and gender discrimination that happened in the story. The discrimination in this film was done by white people against African-American people. The analysis also showed that at first, the victims responded to the discrimination by withdrawal, followed by resign acceptance, and ended by verbal confrontation. In the film, the analysis shows that after verbal confrontation, white people no longer discriminated African-American people for their race or gender.

Keywords: discrimination, race, gender, African-American

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menganalisis masalah diskriminasi yang terjadi di dalam film Hidden Figures. Diskriminasi di dalam film ini, sebagian besar terjadi kepada tiga karakter utama dalam film yaitu, Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson dan Kathrine Goble. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengungkapkan dan menjelaskan jenis-jenis diskriminasi apa saja yang terjadi kepada ketiga wanita Afrika-Amerika tersebut dan untuk memahami tanggapan mereka terhadap diskriminasi tersebut. Peneliti menggunakan pendekatan mimetik dan metode deskriptif kualitatif untuk melaksanakan penelitian ini. Data di dalam penelitian ini berasal dari ujaran, tindakan, dan deskripsi akan situasi yang berkaitan dengan rumusan masalah. Berdasarkan hasil analisis, peneliti menemukan bahwa hanya terdapat diskriminasi ras / warna kulit dan diskriminasi jenis kelamin yang terjadi dalam film. Diskriminasi di dalam film ini dilakukan oleh orang kulit putih terhadap orang-orang Afrika-Amerika. Hasil analisis juga menunjukkan bahwa pada awalnya, para korban menanggapi diskriminasi dengan cara menghindari situasi, lalu diikuti dengan penerimaan terhadap diskriminasi, dan diakhiri dengan konfrontasi secara lisan. Di dalam film tersebut, hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa setelah konfrontasi secara lisan, orang kulit putih tidak lagi membedakan orang Afrika-Amerika berdasarkan ras atau jenis kelamin mereka.

Kata kunci: diskriminasi, ras, jenis kelamin, Afrika-Amerika

A. INTRODUCTION

Literary work itself nowadays has been used as a tool to do a lot more matters rather than just to entertain the readers, the listeners, or the watchers. It can be used as a tool to self-express of the writer which changes feelings into beautiful words, languages, even meanings that shown in a literary works. It can help people get experiences and learn about histories. It can be used as representation of the social condition at some particular time and event. It also can be used as a tool to criticize the problems that happen in society even world. One of the literary works which fulfil these functions is *Hidden Figures* film directed by Theodore Melfi. This film pictured real events that happened in our society which made us realize that we all together can create a better world.

Hidden Figures tells an important story of discrimination and civil rights in the United States. This film also reveals one of the biggest achievements for NASA in space race history. The story is about three brilliant and dedicated women who play major roles in the United State space program that had succeed help America won the space race and put an astronaut named John Glenn to circle the earth. As the title of the film *Hidden Figures*, their named were remained hidden from the world for around 50 years. Not just that they did not get credits for their major roles in boosting the status of the United States on an international level, they also did not get to vote or use the same bathrooms or coffee cups as their white co-workers. This film fulfils another function of literature which is to criticize the problems that happen in society by showing the people to push beyond racial and gender boundaries.

The researcher chose *Hidden Figures* film as the object of this research is because there is discrimination problem that strongly appeared in the film. In this film, the discrimination happens to all African-American people. The discrimination issue that happens in the film portrayed through three main characters: Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, and Katherine Jackson as they work as human “computers” in NASA.

Purposes of the study: (1) to find out the types of discrimination that portrayed in the *Hidden Figures* film; and (2) to find out the types of responses against discrimination that the victims did in the *Hidden Figures* film.

B. RELATED LITERATURE

1. Film

Film is one of the literary works which provides innovative ways of thinking about literature. Film is a spot of time in a matter of motion and a shifting scene. It entails a moving of mind, feelings, and emotions (Bennet and Royle 201). Therefore, the intrinsic elements of film are similar with the literature aspects. There are:

- a. Setting: The place, time and social environment that a story takes place.
- b. Plot: Arranged events and character’s actions that develop the basic idea of the story.
- c. Theme: The central idea or moral that exists throughout the story.
- d. Point of view: Point of view refers to who tells the story and how it is told.
- e. Character: The people who are involved in what happens in a story

2. Discrimination

The term discrimination is defined as “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has

the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life” (Willmore 2).

Meanwhile, Sowell said that certain people define discrimination as differences in “life chances”. Like a black child who does not have the same likelihood as white child of growing to be a scientist or executive or like a woman who unlikely to be a leader of a company or a country, or a disable child who “specialize” and treated differently from other of the classmates (168).

The researcher defines discrimination as one person, or a group of persons, being treated differently and less favorably than another on the grounds of racial or ethnic origin, religion, gender, or belief.

3. Types of Discrimination

There are several types of discrimination that are considered by some experts. According to Ben Bowling and Coretta Phillips (2002), discrimination divided into two types. There are:

a. Direct Discrimination

This is a type of discrimination which involves treating someone less favorably and straightforward to the victims because of their possession of an attribute. There are 6 types of direct discrimination according to Ben Bowling and Coretta Phillips. There are:

- (1) Gender discrimination: Individuals are given the service that is unfair because of gender.
- (2) Religious discrimination: Occurs when some people with certain faiths are gaining unfair services in term of education, job field, or gain the same opportunities as others in public places.
- (3) Race/color discrimination: Involves treating someone unfairly because of personal characteristics associated with race, such as skin color, hair texture or certain facial features.
- (4) Age discrimination: Occur when a person does not get the same opportunities as other in a similar situation because he/she is considered to be too old or too young.
- (5) National Origin discrimination: Treating someone differently because they come from particular country or different part of the world, because of ethnicity or accent, or because they seem different by particular ethnic background.
- (6) Health discrimination: Someone is treated differently because of her/his medical impaired due to an illness, disability or mental disorder.

b. Indirect Discrimination

Indirect discrimination refers to treatment that might be described as “the same” in the formal sense between different groups, but the actual discriminatory effected on a particular group. Campaign (2003) said that indirect discrimination is “when an apparently neutral specification, criteria or practice would disadvantage people on the grounds of racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation” (qtd. in Thomsen 2).

4. Types of Responses Against Discrimination

As immediate reactions, no one would respond in the exactly same way to the discrimination that they faced as members of a minority group. However, to point out and determine the types of response to prejudice and discrimination can be done by classifying the self-adjustment pattern. Joe R. Feagin and Melvin P. Sikes postulated four distinct types of responses to discrimination.

a. Withdrawal

Withdrawal means avoiding the discrimination that is going on. Withdrawal is when people of a minority group suspect a discrimination action and chose to avoid and leave the place where discrimination occurs with no intention of taking any part of the discriminatory situation.

b. Resign Acceptance

Resigned acceptance means ignoring the discrimination while continuing the interaction. resigned acceptance is about self-acceptance, conform with the social condition, comply with the custom existed and the regulations, standards or laws applied, reconcile oneself the way it really is, and accept that something undesirable cannot be avoided.

c. Verbal Confrontation

Verbal confrontation is defined as verbally challenging the discrimination as a respond of disagreement where there is no physical threat present or implied.

d. Physical Confrontation

Physical confrontation is defined as physically responding to the discrimination. Unlike verbal confrontation, physical confrontation is a respond of disagreement where there is physical threat present or implied.

C. RESEARCH METHOD

1. Research Design

The research design of this research is formed as a study of film. To analyze this film, the researcher used mimetic approach. The mimetic approach is used in this research to describe the discrimination happens in *Hidden Figures* film as a reality issue or imitation of life. The research method of the study is a descriptive qualitative because the data are served in words instead on number and the data are analyzed with meaning instead of statistic. These methods are used in this research in order to identify the core consistencies and meaning of discrimination, so the researcher can discover the types of discrimination that happened in the film the types of response against the discrimination that occurred in film.

2. Research Instrument

The key instrument of this research is the researcher herself, because the researcher is the one who control the analysis of the data in the research. It means that the researcher is the one that directly going to do the observation, collection, analysis, identification, and classification of the data in this research.

3. Data and Data Sources

The data of this research are some conversations, dialogues, narrations, and some scene with explanation of actions of the characters in *Hidden Figures* film throughout 126 minutes and 43 seconds duration. The data are only information

that has absolute relations with discrimination towards African-Americans in the film.

4. Data Collection

The data collection method that is used in this research is observation method. The observation is done by first, watching *Hidden Figures* film, listening carefully to the conversation, and reading the script of the film repeatedly in order to get better understanding of every scene and content of the story and taking notes of all the important information. The second step is choosing and selecting the data which have relation to the research problems in this research and make it become a narrative story.

5. Data Analysis

After the data, information and theories that are related to the research are collected, the researcher analysed the data by using an Interactive Model of analysis by Miles and Huberman. In this research, the analysis is done by first, selecting, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming raw data that have been collected according its relation to research questions. Then followed by displaying and analyzing the data that portrayed the discrimination or responses against the discrimination. And last is drawing the conclusion after the data had been analysed.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Discrimination Towards African-American Women

The data show that there are two types of discrimination that happen in *Hidden Figures* film. In this film, there are race discrimination and gender discrimination that are shown in the analysis below.

a. Race/color discrimination

(Data 2)

Dorothy : “My application for supervisor, ma’am. Was wondering if they’re still considering me for that position.”

Vivian M. : “Yes. Well, the official word is: no. **They’re not assignin’ a permanent supervisor to the Colored Group.**

(Min. 00:12:06 – 00:12:20)

In this film, Vivian is a white woman who works as supervisor. Vivian sentence above clearly portrayed racial discrimination. She said a little like supervisor cannot be filled by black people like Dorothy. NASA would not assign a person from colored group to be a supervisor. Bowling and Phillips say that discrimination in work place appears in a form where certain group of races fill higher position. On the line above, it shows that colored people like Dorothy, did not have a chance to fill a high position and got high salary in work place although they worked harder than the whites.

b. Gender discrimination

(Data 8)

Jim Johnson : “Pastor mentioned you’re a “Computer” at NASA. What’s that entail?”

- Katherine : “We calculate the mathematics necessary to enable launch and landing for the Space Program.”
- Jim Johnson : “Aeronautics. Pretty heady stuff. **They let women handle that kind of-**”
(Min. 00:36:25 – 00:36:33)

On this scene, Kathrine was discriminated by Jim Johnson who is also an African-American. He was surprised when Kathrine told him that she is working as Aeronautics in NASA. He could not believe that in NASA, they let women do heavy job like she does. Gender discrimination is more likely happen to women because they often considered to be weak. And in this film, Jim underestimated Kathrine’s ability especially because she is a woman, and Aeronautics is a study of the science of flight, which was commonly studied by men back in 1960’s. Therefore, the scene above is classified as gender discrimination.

2. Responses of African-American Women Against the Discrimination

In this part, the researcher analyzed the responses from African-American women as the victims of discrimination in *Hidden Figures* film. Their responses are developing along the story. It started from withdrawal, followed by resign acceptance and ended with verbal confrontation.

a. Withdrawal

(Data 16)

- Dorothy : “**There are quite a few women working in the Space Program, sir.**”
(Min. 00:05:05 – 00:05:09)

Feagin and Sikes say that withdrawal is when people of a minority group suspect a discrimination action and chose to avoid the discrimination that occurs with no intention of taking any part of the discriminatory situation. That is what Dorothy was doing. She cut the officer’s line before he finished his sentence and discriminated them by their race. Dorothy tried to avoid the discrimination that the police may do by clarifying that there are women employees too in NASA.

b. Resign Acceptance



In this film, the segregation is applied in every single public facility. Public facilities between whites and blacks were divided. In NASA, there is no toilet for colored people available in Space Task Group Department or anywhere near it.

Therefore, the scene above shows how Kathrine needed to run half mile away from Space Task Group just to go to colored ladies room in West Campus hall, back and forth while she brought along her papers job. Therefore, the picture above is classified as resign acceptance because African-American workers in NASA accepted the terms of segregation that applied for them and they did not do anything about it but follow the rules.

c. Verbal Confrontation

(Data 18)

Jim Johnson : “Aeronautics. Pretty heady stuff. They let women handle that kind of-”

Katherine : **“Mr. Johnson, it may be best if you quit talking right now. I’ll have you know, I was the first Negro female student at West Virginia University Graduate School. On any given day I analyze the manometer levels for air displacement, friction and velocity and compute over 10,000 calculations by cosine, square root and lately Analytic Geometry. By hand. There are 20 bright, highly capable Negro women in the West Computing Group. And we’re proud to be doing our part for the country. So, yes...they let women do some things over at NASA, Mr. Johnson.”**

(Min. 00:36:48 – 00:37: 34)

The scene above shows that Katherine was trying to show that women can do things that men do too. They can do it better in fact. Her response above is classified as verbal confrontation because Kathrine is verbally challenging Jim Johnson without physical threat implied as a respond of disagreement of Jim Johnson statement who underestimated women. Through verbal confrontation, Katherine was defending herself and other black women who worked in NASA as human computers against the discrimination and the stereotype that stick to them.

After the analysis based on Ben Bowling’s and Coretta Phillips’s theory, the researcher found out that there are two types of discrimination that happened throughout the story which are race/color discrimination and gender discrimination. In *Hidden Figures* film, Dorothy was discriminated for her race so she could not be a supervisor, Mary was discriminated for her race so she could not become an Engineer and Kathrine was discriminated for her race that made white people think that Kathrine was not as smart as them and she did not deserve a place as an Aeronautic in highest department in NASA. Not just that these three African-American women were unable to get the job that they dreamed of, because of their race, they also got unfair services along the process. Meanwhile, Gender discrimination in this film happened to Mary and Kathrine. Because of her gender, Mary’s application to be an Engineer in NASA were repeatedly rejected although she has all the requirements to be an Engineer. On the other side, no one believed that Katherine was able to work as an Aeronautic. In NASA, all men were underestimate her ability and treated her like nobody.

Through this research, the researcher also found out that discrimination that happened to African-American women in this film lead them to make a respond against

it and seek for fairness and equality. By using Joe R. Feagin's and Melin P. Sikes's theory, the researcher found how African-American women in the film respond to the discrimination that happened to them. The stages of their response started from withdrawal, resigned acceptance, and verbal confrontation.

Withdrawal happened when Dorothy, Mary, and Kathrine, as the victims of discrimination in this film at first choose to ignore and avoid the situation where there is discrimination happening, or where the discrimination may occur. When there was no chance to avoid and leave the place where the discrimination is unavoidable, they were responding by resigned acceptance. They accept the fact that they could not go to the same bathroom as whites, sitting in the same place as whites, drinking the same coffee pot, or having lunch in the same room. Dorothy was also accepting the fact that she could not become a supervisor because she is black. Mary was accepting the fact that she could not become an Engineer because she is a woman and Kathrine did nothing but accepting that other white men who worked as Aeronautic treat her less favorably or even mean because they think she did not belong there.

Last, the victims, African-American women, verbally challenging the discriminator and the system or law which discriminated them because of their race or gender. Dorothy verbally challenged her supervisor that she deserves a place as supervisor and her race could not stop her to get her right. Mary on the other side, took her case to the court and verbally challenged the judge by saying that she could not change her gender and the colour of her skin, so she had to break the law and the stereotype to be the first black female Engineer. And Kathrine verbally challenged her boss regarding the segregation system in their workplace.

By verbal confrontation, these African-American women get their rights back and become equal as other white people or other men in their social environment and workplace. At the end of the film, after all the verbal confrontation that has been done, Dorothy finally become a supervisor, Mary became the first black female Engineer and Kathrine happily work as an Aeronautic in highest department, Space Task Group in NASA.

E. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the types of discrimination that happened toward African-American women in the film, the researcher concluded that there is only direct discrimination which done by white people to African-American women in the film. Out of six types of direct discrimination that Bowling and Phillip declared, there are only two types that occurred in the film. They are race/color discrimination and gender discrimination. There is no indirect discrimination because all the discriminations that occurred in this film are straightly shown to the victims.

After analyzing the discrimination that happened to African-American women throughout the film, the researched analyzed the types of responses that these African-American women do against the discrimination. The researcher concluded that the responses that the African-American women do started with withdrawal, followed by resigned acceptance and ended up with verbal confrontation. There is no physical confrontation involved in the film because the discrimination that happened them stops after they did the verbal confrontation against it.

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