

Hidden Figures: A Black and Liberal Feminist Movement Portrayed in Theodore Melfi's Movie.

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Abstrak

Black Feminism berkaitan dengan pemahaman tentang pengalaman perempuan berkulit hitam mengenai rasisme, seksisme, kelasisme, atau identitas sosial dan politik lainnya. *Liberal Feminism* adalah cabang feminis penting yang bekerja sama untuk mencapai kesetaraan gender melalui reformasi politik dan hukum dalam kerangka demokrasi liberal. Film adalah salah satu bentuk penyebaran informasi yang dapat digunakan dalam gerakan feminis. Pesan dan ideologi dalam sebuah film, dapat mempengaruhi penonton dengan cara afektif, dan kognitif. Film Theodore Melfi yang berjudul *Hidden Figures* menggunakan teori feminis untuk menggambarkan konsep stigma yang menempel pada perempuan secara berbeda. Jenis penelitian ini adalah penelitian kualitatif. Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk menemukan apa yang diwakili oleh black feminism dan liberal feminism dalam *Hidden Figures*. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa komunitas orang berkulit hitam juga menghadapi masalah yang masih terjadi hingga saat ini, seperti diskriminasi di tempat kerja dan pengalaman mengabaikan pencapaian mereka demi rekan kulit putih mereka.

Kata Kunci: Feminisme, Rasisme, Orang berkulit hitam, Film.

Abstract

Black feminism is concerned with understanding racism, sexism, classism, or other social and political identities as they relate to black women. Liberal feminism is a significant feminist branch that works together to implement political and legal reforms in the context of liberal democracy to attain gender equality. A film is a form of information dissemination used in the feminist movement. Messages and ideologies in a film can affect the audience in affective and cognitive ways. Theodore Melfi's film *Hidden Figures* employs feminist theory to depict the inherent concept of women getting stigmatized differently. The type of research is qualitative. This paper aims to discover what black feminism and liberal feminism represent in *Hidden Figures*. The results show that the black community faces particularly pertinent today, such as workplace discernment and the involvement of getting their accomplishments unnoticed in the indulgence of their white counterparts.

Keywords: Feminism, Racism, People of color, movie.

INTRODUCTION

Black women were oppressed by society in the middle of the 20th century. Both black and woman, individually, were considered lower-status humans in society. However, let us imagine being both black and a woman in that atrocious era. This horrible thing is displayed perfectly in Theodore Melfi's movie called *Hidden Figures*, released on December 2016. This fact birth many questions that followed this paper. At that time, was there any difference in how people of color and white people were treated? Was there also segregation that happened inside the workplace? As feminists, how did women's main characters act when they were treated unequally? With those questions, this

study aims to understand how black feminism and liberal feminism represent in *Hidden Figures*.

1. Hidden Figures

Hidden Figures is a 2016 movie directed by Theodore Melfi. *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Who Helped Win the Space Race* is a biography book that served as the inspiration for this film. The book was penned by Margot Lee Shetterly in 2010 and published later in September 2016. The movie tells us the hidden story of NASA. The movie's primary focus is to introduce the hidden figures that helped NASA on its "Friendship 7" mission. Moreover, those are Katherine G. Johnson, Dorothy

Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, three human calculators, calculated the momentous launch by NASA's astronaut, John Glenn.

Because of segregation in The United States of America back then, black women were separated from white men. They were looked upon and underestimated by their white co-workers. The three of them were limited by their gender and race to fulfill their brilliance and ambition, which led to their names being cemented in U.S. history as American heroes.

2. Theodore Melfi

Theodore Melfi is an American producer, screenplay writer, and director. On October 27, 1970, he was born in Brooklyn, New York. He is best known for the movies that he directed, wrote, and produced, namely *St. Vincent* (2014) and *Hidden Figures* (2016).

He was born to a peculiar family, a mobster father and a former nun mother. After he graduated from Missouri State University, he applied for a job at a small eatery in Los Angeles. His dad was an abusive but loving father. Theodore told 'Hollywood Reporter' that his dad would slap him if he said or did something wrong, but he immediately cried and hugged Theodore.

He accidentally fell into the film business when an associate questioned him whether he had any knowledge of how to produce a movie or not. He learned directing from a book entitled "Film Directing Shot By Shot" by Steven D. Katz. The first feature movie that Theodore produced was a 1998 drama entitled *Park Day*. He then directed some commercial stuff, which led him to direct the 2014's film *St. Vincent*, which also paved the way for the movie *Hidden Figures*.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theory that this paper will use is the theory of feminism, predominantly black and liberal feminism. An important goal of black feminism is to alleviate the oppression black women face (Taylor, 2017). Black feminism emphasizes on several parts of the unique identity that black women have. It allowed them to speak up about being black and being a woman, which always is the target of gender inequality. Although black women always faced discrimination and prejudice from society, it is not stopping them from continuing to be critical for black liberty and the gender equality movement. Black women taste the bitterness of being excluded from feminism for their skin color. Because they are women, they, too, are excluded from the black liberation movement. According to Taylor (2017), it is impossible to reduce the experiences of black women to either racial or gender classification, but rather to understand them on their own terms.

Alison Jaggar stated in her book entitled *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (1983), Liberal feminism is a theory that emphasizes on issues that happen to women.

Those issues include education rights, political rights, and equality in the workplace, including equal pay and equal treatment. The main goal of liberal feminism is to achieve gender equality in the public domain, such as equal pay, better working conditions, equal education rights, and ending job sex segregation.

The movie, *Hidden Figures* not only voices about discernment experienced by women of colour, but also how they bawl against oppression. It can be seen from the words "colored ladies' room" outside of the toilet. This movie also gives examples of how women are treated differently in their job fields. It could be found when the main characters were not allowed to enter a 'men only' meeting, discussing something these women could do.

METHOD

The type of research we will use for this study is qualitative. The research was conducted utilizing the descriptive qualitative method instead of statistics since the data was gathered through the use of words and photographs (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, as cited by Puspita and Ramdhani, 2022). The data will be collected from the movie streamed on Disney+ Hotstar Indonesia. According to Putri (2009), the most relevant strategy for writers looking for a way to be able to analyze data is to use qualitative methods. As part of the research, the researcher focuses on categorizing the types of feminism and explaining how they encounter feminism in the workplace. The analysis results will then be combined to formulate reasonable conclusions and a final report.

The research group did a focus group discussion about the topic that will be discussed in this paper. We started by watching the movie together. We noted some feminist aspects that happened in the film. We discussed each of our interpretations of the movie's message. Then, we altogether did a quick analysis of the movie using the feminist theory. After that, we worked as a group on this paper until we finished.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Many African-American women were brought to the United States as enslaved people. As a result, they were subjected to oppression, which is when one group deprives another group of access to society's resources on systematically and over a long period of time. Historically, the black feminist movement has been distinguished by focusing on the convergence of racism, class oppression, and gender oppression. The stress on the communal conditioning and interconnectedness of these discrimination points for African American women in American civilization has always been an essential aspect of the movement. (Collins, 2002).

The historical film *Hidden Figures*, directed by Theodore Melfi, is a film themed on racism and sexism in America throughout the 1960s. The actual tale of Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, and Katherine Johnson is depicted in the movie *Hidden Figures*. These three black women star in their own personal adventures, which occur against the backdrop of the Space Race and the Civil Rights Movement.

There was a nuclear arms duel between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War, in which both nations competed to become the first nation to master spaceflight. The events in *Hidden Figures* are set during World War II and the Cold War.

The first thing that we discuss in this paper is how black people, especially black women, were treated by society. Being black and women were considered the ultimate degrade in society back in the 20th century. Black women were always the victim of both racism and sexism. Black women were treated as the lowest humankind in the community. They were constantly being separated from white people. At the public transportation, there were "colored only" seats. The public library had a "colored-only area" that often did not provide valuable and informative books. Furthermore, even NASA's Langley Research Center's bathrooms were separated into "white bathrooms" and "colored-only bathrooms" located far away from the main building.

In this movie, Taraji P. Henson played a real-life figure, Katherine Johnson. She was looked down upon by her co-workers, whom white men dominated. The society around her also belittled her and her two other black women friends, Dorothy and Mary. The white police got suspicious of the three of them when they had a car problem. Even by fellow black people, Katherine was belittled as a woman. Jim, a black man from the military, whom Mahersala Ali played, commented on her working at NASA. Saying that her work is "pretty heady stuff," only followed by "they let women handle that sort of thing," implicating that he underestimates Katherine as a woman. Dorothy was excluded from the public library because she looked for a book with her children in "the white area." She did that because in "the black area," the book was not available there. This action resulted in Dorothy being captivated and kicked off the public library. However, later in the movie, Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary proved they could do their respective works and even wrote their names as America's Heroes.

A colored woman engineer named Mary Jackson applied for a job at NASA. However, she always got turned down due to she had not completed a specific program in higher education. However, the program was only limited and accessible to white people. This made Mary come to the council and fight for her right to study

at the said program. Even after the board accepted her proposal, she could only learn in the program at night class. When Mary came to the class that she had applied to before, she was found surprised that she was the only woman and also the only person of color in the building. The teacher that taught the program even had the gut to say that the curriculum is not made for women, but she ended up proving him how wrong he was.

Another woman of color, a friend of Mary Jackson, and an acting supervisor named Dorothy Vaughan, a human-computer in the west building. She was told that the official rejected her application as a permanent supervisor. But, later in the movie, she proves that she can operate the most advanced calculator machine that not even white men can do, IBM 7090. She corrected the failed and wrong calculations done by white men on IBM. Hence, she was offered the position of operating the machine. However, she declined it the second after Ms. Mitchell said that she should do this alone, not with her colleagues (black women). After some time arguing about how the IBM machine still needed many human resources, she stated that "her girls" (black women) were ready for that, and she agreed to lead the IBM team.

Katherine Goble was frequently overlooked because of her skin color. There were a lot of times when she was treated differently than any workers who happened to be white men in her working environment. From a coffee pot that none of the white men want to touch, to the bathroom that is purposely built for colored only.

Even though the girls were going through bad times at NASA, they were still capable of to proved NASA that their brains are more important than how they look. It is proven by how NASA still wants black women's knowledge to be useful for NASA even though NASA has treated them like junk. The girls' brains were the reason behind the most imperative operations in the United States of America's history. Those three black women and human computers were responsible for the astronaut named John Glenn's launch into space, the first American to orbit the Earth. The girls also calculated his safe return to Earth, resulting in people in NASA, and the whole of America, respecting them and making them the heroes of the United States of America.

The second thing we discuss is how segregation happened in this movie. Segregation is a separate practice that the official does, mainly in the work field. Segregation mostly separates people from each other based on their appearances, beliefs, caste, and also economic class. Segregation in schools can reduce school quality and increase exposure to racial discrimination, both disadvantageous to black children's health and behavior (Wang et al., 2022).

In this movie, segregation happens to the film's three main characters. The aspects that separate them from the rest of their working environment are race and gender. It's about them being women of color.

As we can see in the movie, there is a scene where there is segregation between white people and people of color. This is shown by how they have separate bathrooms for each of them. There is a "colored bathroom," and it is also mentioned that there is a "white restaurant." That shows how people of color are treated differently and segregated from white people. Besides that, the more ridiculous thing is a coffee pot for some people of color that white people did not want to touch at all. In this scene, we know it is included in liberal feminism, where one of the goals of ending gender segregation at work will work effectively when the law is changed.

The last thing that we will discuss is how women's main characters act when they are treated unequally. As we see in the movie, rejection of unequal treatment can be seen when Dorothy cuts the line that distinguishes them by race. Dorothy tried to circumvent any possible unequal treatment by clarifying that there are also female employees at NASA. Not only that, but the unequal treatment also applies in the facilities. The accommodations between whites and blacks are distinguished. In this case, what the character in the movie does is she has to run to go to the colored ladies' room in the west campus hall. She cannot do anything. She just follows the rules. Another example can be seen in the scene below.

Jim Johnson: "Aeronautics. Pretty heady stuff. They let women handle that .."

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."

The scene shows that Katherine insists that women can do the things that men do and that women are capable of doing it better. This is a disapproving response to Jim Johnson's remarks about women. This also shows that even from the same race, Katherine still gets discriminated against just because she is a woman. After being discriminated against, she stood to herself and proved to Jim Johnson that she was worthy and NASA was not wrong to let her handle that.

CLOSING

Conclusion

In this research, we can conclude that the practice of segregation and inequality is one of the biggest problems society has. Black women were considered as a lower human beings. They were constantly being separated from white people. Black women were always the victim of both racism and sexism. The women in this movie also experienced segregation because of their skin color and her gender. Nevertheless, with all that degraded treatment given by white men, they still stand firm and capable of defending themselves.

This movie's existence helps us understand that people's personal, social, and political rights must be seriously maintained. On this Earth, everybody is human. There is no superior when it comes to humanity, and it should always be like that, from time to time.

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