

THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS AS BLACK FEMINISTS IN *HIDDEN FIGURES* MOVIE

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ABSTRACT

As African-American experienced subjugation throughout the era of slavery, their status is ranked at bottom of the social ladder in American society. Such position relegates African-American women to sexism, racism, and classism as intersecting oppressions. In *Hidden Figures* movie, the condition of encountering gender, racial, and class oppressions that are intertwined in everyday life is portrayed in the female characters. Based on Patricia Hill Collins' critical social theory, the writer's purpose is to analyze the characters' consciousness-raising and relationship with other black women as well. It emerges that the African-American female characters also possess the characteristics and the thought of black feminist that arise to opposing actions. In conclusion, the representation of black feminist by the characters leads to the development of black women's orientation and African-American women empowerment which result to the improving life of the characters.

Keywords: African-American women, oppressions, black feminism, black feminist thought.

A. Background of the Study

Women, as a part of society, have been stigmatized differently from men physically and intellectually due to the existing principle of male superiority. According to hooks, there is a condition where American women socially interact with racial and sexual imperialisms that are maintained and formed in white supremacy and patriarchy as a result of American history (1982:120). Thus, it emerges that the determinant of women inferiority is rooted from prevailing patriarchal society. Racial imperialism also takes part in constructing the foundation of American society. This is relatable with the condition of non-white women that might lead to the disproportional life of African-American women as Third World Women. The aftermath is that the different visions of white and African-American women in the feminist movement cannot be avoided.

Feminism according to bell hooks as black female activist does not solely focus on the problems originated from patriarchal system,

but it embraces the sexism, racism, and classism perpetuated by Western civilization as well. It also raises consciousness on U.S society reorganization in order to generate oneself to overcome imperialism. (1982:194-195). One of American movies that draws attention to the issues of African-American women is *Hidden Figures*. Thus, sexism, racism, and classism confronted by the characters become the issues that intrigue the writer to find out more about black feminism.

B. Aims of the Study

The purposes of the study are to analyze the intrinsic elements of the movie, to elaborate the main characters' oppressions in the form of sexism, racism, and classism, and to identify the characteristics and the thought of black feminist reflected in the female characters.

C. Methods of the Study

In analyzing the movie, the writer uses library research to collect the data. Books, lecture materials, internet sources, and DVD are used as references to this research. In this

paper, the writer uses objective approach which is used to analyze the intrinsic aspects, pervading narrative elements and cinematographic elements. To analyze the extrinsic elements, the writer will examine the acts of main characters using black feminism theory and it is narrowed down to the more significant theory of Black Feminist Thought by Patricia Hill Collins.

D. Finding of the Study

Black women's Oppressions

1. Sexism

According to hooks, the term sexism concerns to relation between men and women which is mostly about manifestation of male domination, in the forms of discrimination, exploitation, and oppression (1984:47). Inequality in male-dominated societies results in shaping people's thoughts and perception towards women, affecting social interaction and spreading to the organization of social institutions (Newman 2010, 184). In other words, sexism can be expressed personally or it occurs as institutional

sexism. The belief of sexism in individuals appears throughout everyday actions which manifest in social interaction involving gestures and communication patterns. In more broadly scope, institutional sexism is practically started from families, then in other spheres such as in education, health care, economy, and law. (Newman 2010, 199)

2. Racism

Racism is linked to ideas and treatments that emphasize on the inferiority of other racial or ethnic groups to one's own group in intellectual, cultural, and social values to one's own group (Andersen & Taylor 2013, 232). In other words, the existence of racism in society is rooted, provoked, and then developed by the racists' belief that their racial and ethnic characteristics are more prevailing, constructing racial hierarchy. According to Newman, racism can be perpetrated personally in quiet or overt manner by establishing a belief or an action. However, there is another form of racism that is considered as less visible but seriously dangerous which

is taken place in society and privileges them who have power, namely institutional racism (2010:173)

3. Classism

Classism is socio-economic and class-based beliefs and treatment towards others, reflecting dissimilar levels which appears in individual, institutions, and culture. It also refers to inequality in economic system causing imbalance of basic human needs (gustavus.edu/reslife/documents/Classism.doc). As a matter of fact, classism in America pointedly goes along with economic conditions and racial matters as hooks states that, "In the United States, one's class standing then is always determined by racial factors as well as economic factors" (2000:135). As for African-Americans, such situations give great influence to them in living their life because the intersection of class and race leads them to social and economic problems.

Black Feminism

Black feminism is defined in broader scope. It pertains to the thought that encompasses the self-consciousness raising through empowerment of women and men in order to establish the humanist society (Collins 2000, 416). However, it is argued by black feminist intellectuals who can be called as black feminist. Thus, there are some characteristics that may be inherent in people who are suitable for being called black feminist. Two main characteristics of black feminists include the notions that they have to be African-American women who encounter life as being black and being female and they have black feminist consciousness, sensibility, and ideas.

African-American women labeled as black feminist continues to the ideas known as black feminist thought (Collins 2000, 406). Black feminist thought was elaborated by Patricia Hill Collins as critical social theory in which it focuses on empowering U.S Black women who undergo unfair treatments originated from intersecting oppression (2000:22). black women's

relationship with one another and consciousness as a sphere of freedom are selected core themes required in analyzing the movie.

1. Black women's Relationship with One Another

According to Collins, the relationship of black women with one another is recognized as one of the three safe spaces (in Black churches and in Black women's organization during slavery). It is formed in the relationship between friends and in the family interactions which are considered as informal and private dealings among the individuals (2000:102).

2. Consciousness as A Sphere of Freedom

Black women's hidden space of consciousness has been examined by U.S. Black women intellectuals in which it constitutes the inside idea enabling African-American women to outgrow and beat the intersecting oppression of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Collins 2000, 98).

The ideas, according to Collins, which are developed in the safe

space comprise the importance of self definition, self-valuation and respect, self-reliance and independence, as well as self, change, and personal empowerment.

a. The Importance of Self-Definition

Self-definition is a form of consciousness-raising. It is the key to individual and group empowerment (Collins 2000, 413). The objective of self-definition is not the identity, but it is rather about the concerns in the process of self-definition. This process constitutes the understanding African-American women's personal life that has been constructed by racism, sexism, and classism as intersecting oppressions (Collins 2000, 114).

b. Self-Valuation and Respect

The politics of black feminism believe in the value of African-American women, so that the liberation matters to fulfill their needs as independent humans. (Collective, americanstudies.yale.edu). U.S Black women should aware of the value of

their selves in which it might generate self-respect.

c. Self-Reliance and Independence

African-American women are believed to carry the spirit of independence which is derived from their selves or their circumstances. Obviously, the ability of relying on their selves is derived from the struggle of African-American women in surviving from their life experience in which it benefits the people around them, including men and children. (2000:157)

d. Self, Change, and Personal Empowerment

In this point, self, change, and personal empowerment are correlated within the context of parallel relation. This means that when black womanis conscious about contradictions in the society, the changed consciousness encourages her to change the condition of her life by performing actions (2000:117). On the other hand, personal empowerment

through changed consciousness is a commitment to have self-knowledge. (2000:118)

**E. *Hidden Figures* Movie Analysis
Black women's Oppression**

1. Sexism

Sexism is individually committed by Mary's husband, Levi. He reveals his sexist views on Mary, responding to her decision-making to be female engineer. Other sexist belief expressed by the male character is received by Kathrine. When she first meets Colonel Jim Johnson, she cannot prevent the undervalued thoughts and treatments relating to African-American women's sex.

Inequality based on gender in the movie is also executed by institutions. NASA as the institution owned by the United States government inevitably commits to sexism. This happens to Kathrine as the meeting protocol does not authorize woman to be part of it. The problematic issue of sexism which appears in institution is confronted by Mary as well. As she succeeds to enroll in white-majority school, she

finds that the institution promotes sexism.

2. Racism

In general, NASA obviously imbeds racism as their culture which is influenced by the law enforcement applied by government in the 1960s. It legitimates segregation between whites and blacks in every aspects.

Dorothy Vaughan personally faces racist problem at NASA. The oppressive system does not let African-Americans to be as equal as whites by getting permanent job. Personal racism which is recognized by prejudice and discrimination perpetrated by white also happens to Dorothy when a white woman impolitely asks Dorothy presence in that place and accuses her for intending to cause problem.

3. Classism

Black female characters, specifically Kathrine, deal with this kind of treatment formed in personal and institutional practices. All occurrences provoke the economic instability of African-American women, denying the opportunity to

acquire more access in the aspects of social, economic, and educational life.

Black Feminism

1. Black women's Relationship with One Another

In this movie, black women's relationship with one another can be easily recognized as the characters are highly supportive to other African-American women in everything they engage. They have strong bond, respectful manner, and valuation towards one another in which the affirmation of black women as sisters and friends promotes black women's importance, humanity, and right to exist.

2. Consciousness as a Sphere of Freedom

a. The Importance of Self-Definition

Self-definition is a part of increasing awareness towards oneself. This kind of self-orientation can be found in Mary's traits. In one occasion, Mary gets the opportunity to be an engineer by applying engineer training program suggested

by the head engineer, Mr. Zlelinski. She is aware of her identities, but she labels herself for being capable to transcend the confines of social construction that limits her capacity as black woman.

b. Self-Valuation and Respect

Kathrine receives sexist views about her and other African-American women. It turns out that Jim looks down on Kathrine. However, Kathrine does not accept Jim's sexist perception on her and other African-American women. Thus, she elaborates her competency and astonishing lifetime achievements that she got. Also, she does not let anyone define and underestimate her. More importantly, she needs to be respected.

c. Self-Reliance and Independence

The representation can be seen clearly in Mary when she is confronted with her goals as female engineer. As she deals with the court thing by herself, she is aware that the key of achieving the goal is to rely on and stay true to her belief as she sticks to personal principles and

goals to make the impossible possible.

d. Self, Change, and Personal Empowerment

The attitudes of self-empowerment in the movie are represented by Mary and Kathrine in which both women succeed in changing the obstructing situation to a better one. The peak of Mary's success is that she acquires the title as NASA's and America's black woman aeronautical engineer. The rare events are proofs that Mary improves her life by preserving self-knowledge as a part of her self-empowerment.

Kathrine also performs actions that change the situation in NASA office as a result of the increasing consciousness towards the oppression she endures in Space Task Group. In short, because of a changed consciousness which is marked by Kathrine's anger, she demands respect and rights of justice that soon alter to the better condition in the office and the improvement of her status.

F. CONCLUSION

Hidden Figures depicts the female characters as black feminists. The consideration is proved by the characteristics of black feminist that Kathrine, Dorothy, and Mary are born with as African-American women who experience the intersection of sexism, racism, and classism. The treatments are committed by either individual or NASA as governmental institution where they work. By personal, it means they receive mistreatments from both white male and female as well as black male. However, they respond it with consciousness-raising to resist white and male domination. Each character differently performs the orientation of self and the black women solidarity. Thereafter, it turns out that they mostly portray the manifestation of self-change and women empowerment formed in black women solidarity because they successfully alter to better situation. It ensues them to achieve their goals that are considered impossible for African-American women in the era of 1960s.

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