

**"The Struggle of African American Women against The Double
Discrimination Revealed in *Hidden Figures*"**

B.A. English Language and Literature

2021

**The Struggle of African American Women
Against The Double Discrimination Revealed in**

Hidden Figures



Dissertation

Submitted to the University of Kerala in partial fulfilment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts in

English Language and Literature

Course code: EN 1645

Name	Register no:
Adhil Sidhik	13018171001
Mirin Mathew	13018171024
Silpa Krishnan	13018171009
Sherin Susan Samuel	13018171026
Sneha Kunjumon	13018171027

Department of English

Mar Ivanios College of Arts and Science

Mavelikara

Content

Preface		
Chapter One	Introduction	1-5
Chapter Two	Racism, Sexism, Classism and Black feminism in <i>Hidden Figures</i>	6-19
Chapter Three	Conclusion	20-23
	Works Cited	24

Preface

The project titled "The struggle of African American Women Against The Double Discrimination Revealed in *Hidden Figures*" intend to critically analyse the movie *Hidden Figures*, a biographical drama film of 2016. This introductory paper of the project attempts to analyze the evolution of films from Lumiere brothers to Alan Williams and discusses different categories of film. It also discusses the genre of drama, especially biographical drama film and opened up a short note about the movie '*Hidden Figures*'. The second chapter deeply analyzes the movie and points out the themes that come up. It includes racism, sexism, classism and black feminism. The last chapter concludes the dissertation with reference to the director's excellence in expressing the views on how the movie characters represent every black woman.

Chapter One

Introduction

The commercial public screening of ten of Lumiere brother's short films in Paris on 28 December, 1895 is regarded as the breakthrough of projected cinematographic motion pictures. There had been earlier cinematographic results and screenings by others, but they lacked either the quality, financial backing, stamina or the luck to find the momentum that propelled the cinematographer Lumiere into a worldwide success.

Soon film production companies and studios were established all over the world. The earliest films were in black and white under a minute long, without recorded sound and consisted of a single shot from a steady camera. Over the years the cinematic language changed in terms of editing, sound, camera movements etc, contributing many things to narrative films. Georges Melies popularized the technique of special effects in the movies since the late 1890's, through his fantasy films. The practice of extraordinary things like magic, illusion etc, which are impossible to perform in theatre plays. The film industry originated in the early nineteenth-century through a series of technological developments: the creation of photography, the discovery of illusion of motion by combining individual still images, and the study of human and animal locomotion.

A film genre is a motion- picture category based on similarities either in the narrative elements or in the emotional response to the film

namely: serious, comic etc. Most theories of the film genre are borrowed from literary criticism. Each film genre is associated with the conventions, iconography, settings, narrative, character and actor. Standard general characters vary according to the film genre; for film noir, for example, standard characters include the femme fatale and the 'hard boiled' detective; Western film may portray the schoolmarm and the gunfighter. Some actors acquire a reputation associated with the single genre such as John Wayne (the western) or Fred Astaire (the musical). A film genre will influence the use of filmmaking styles and techniques such as the use of flashbacks and low-key lighting in film noir, tight framing in horror films fonts that look like rough-hewn logs for the titles of Western films.

Moreover, different genres have associated film scoring conventions, such as a lush string orchestra for romantic melodramas, and electronic music for science-fiction films. Spectator expectations about a film and institutional discourses that create generic structures play a key role in defining the term. Genres are not definite; they change and evolve over time, and some genres disappear as in the case of melodrama. The different genres of film are action, animation, comedy, crime, biographical drama, experimental, fantasy, historical, horror, Romance, science fiction, thriller, western genres etc. Genre does not just refer to the type of film or its category. The basic genres include fiction and documentary, from which subgenres have emerged, such as docufiction and docudramas. Other examples of subgenres include the courtroom and trial-focused drama known as the legal drama, which is a

subtype of drama. Types of fiction which may seem unrelated can also combine to form hybrid sub-genres, such as the melting of horror and comedy in the evil dead films. Other popular combinations include the romantic comedy, vampire film and the action-comedy film. Alan Williams distinguishes three main genre categories which are narrative, avant-garde and documentary. Genre movies are commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation tell familiar stories with familiar characters and familiar situations'.

One can also classify films by the setting, theme, topic, mood, format, target audience or budget. The setting is the environment where the story and action takes place like in a war film, a western film or a space-opera film. The theme or topic refers to the issues or concepts that the film revolves around, as in science fiction film, spot film etc. The mood is the emotional tone of the film as in comedy films, horror films, or biographical films. Additional ways of categorizing film genres may involve the target audience akin to children's film, teen film or women's film or by the type of production such as B movie, big- budget, block-buster or low- budget film, such as an amateur film.

A biographical film dramatizes the life of a non-fictional or historically-based person or people. Such films show the life of a historical person and the central character's real name is used. The figures portrayed are actual people, whose actions and characteristics are known to the public. Actors like Johnny Depp, Jim Carrey, and Jamie Foxx gained respect as dramatic actors after starring in biopics: Depp as Edward D. Wood, Jr. in *EdWood*, Carrey as Andy Kaufman in *Man on the Moon* and Foxx as Ray Charles in *Ray*. In rare cases, sometimes called autobiopics, the subject of the film plays the character itself: Jackie Robinson in *The Jackie Robinson Story*; Muhammad Ali in *The Greatest*; Audie Murphy in *To Hell and Back*; Patty Duke in

Call Me Anna; Arlo Guthrie in *Alice's Restaurant*; and Howard Stern in *Private Parts*.

Hidden Figures is a 2016 American biographical drama film directed by Theodore Melfi which was written by Melfi and Allison Schroeder. Theodore Melfi is an American screenwriter, film director, and producer. His second film, *St. Vincent* starring Bill Murray, was released in 2014. In 2016, Melfi co-wrote, directed and produced *Hidden Figures* with Allison Schroeder, for which he received Oscar nominations for Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay. The background of the movie *Hidden Figures* reveals the inspirational untold story of female African-American mathematicians working at NASA during the 1960s, the movie follows the story of three women involved in the race to propel humankind into space. The film is loosely based on a book by Margot Lee Shetterly. Shetterly started working on the book in 2010 and it was based on the time [1930s-1960] when some viewed women as inferior to men. The book follows the lives of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, three mathematicians who worked as computers (then a job description) at NASA, during the space race. They overcame discrimination there, as women and as African Americans. The work also featured Christine Darden, who was the first African-American woman to be promoted into the Senior Executive Service for her work in researching supersonic flight and sonic booms.

The film earned four awards at the African-American film critics Association. The film was started by Taraji P. Henson, Janelle Monáe and Octavia Spencer. Taraji P. Henson portrayed mathematician Katherine Johnson, Octavia Spencer played Dorothy Vaughan, an African-American mathematician who worked for NASA in 1949, and Janelle Monáe played Mary Jackson, the first female African-American engineer to work for NASA.

“Hidden Figures” tells the incredible untold story of Katherine Jonson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson – brilliant African-American women working at NASA who served as the brains behind the launch into orbit of astronaut John Glenn, a stunning achievement that turned around the space race. The visionary trio crossed all gender and racial lines and inspired generations. Themes of *Hidden Figures* include racism, sexism, classism, black feminism etc. The book chronicles the lives of black women working at NASA's "human computers" who do difficult math by hand and in their heads. It takes place in the 1950s and 1960s.

Chapter Two

Racism, Sexism, Classism and Black Feminism in

Hidden Figures

Based on true events, *Hidden Figures* highlights the story of three outstanding coloured women, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson. The movie exhibits the above three characters' pivotal role in astronaut John Glenn's launch into orbit. Meanwhile, they also have to deal with racial and gender discrimination at work. As the movie opens, it turns out the setting is set in White Sulphur Spring, West Virginia in 1926. Young Kathrine Johnson is enrolled with full scholarship in West Virginia Collegiate Institute, best school for Negroes in the state, accelerating two grades as she is considered as an extraordinary ingenious student at her age.

Several years later, in 1961, in Hampton, West Virginia, Kathrine, Dorothy and Mary live in a segregation era where they are confronted by prejudice, elaborating the unjust treatments come from white people in their environment. At the NASA office, the news about Russians launching their Korabl Sputnik-4 satellite in orbit, becoming the first one that sends a human to space, makes the leaders examine it as a threat for Americans in case the satellite is in an attempt to spy on them. Therefore, it turns out to be a trigger for the Space Task Group to overtake their lag. The department head, Al Harrison, discovers the calculating machine or so called IBM is not yet available to support their work. Instead, he urges the employees to find someone who excels at Analytic Geometry.

In a segregated area, West Computing Group, a number of coloured women are hired as human computers, including Kathrine, Dorothy, and Mary. Dorothy Vaughan plays her role as the head of coloured computers' division giving tasks to her colleagues. While Mary Jackson is requested for the new permanent assignment as engineer assistant, Kathrine Johnson will be placed in the Space Task Group as geometrical analyst by Dorothy's recommendation. Later, Dorothy reminds her boss, Vivian Mitchell, about her supervisor application as for a year, she plays the role as one but neither is she given the permanent position nor the proper salary. However, Vivian seems to ignore her.

Mary Jackson starts her work in the engineering department and witnesses the failure of wind testing of the space capsule. The head of department, Karl Zielinski, asks for her rational opinion and feels amazed by her intelligence. He also supports her to be the engineer instead of giving detention due to her race and sex. In another building, Kathrine is escorted by Vivian to the Space Task Division, telling her dos and don'ts while working there. Entering the room, people pointed squinted gaze at her. Working at the building is also not too pleased for Kathrine as she is demeaned by her colleagues, Paul Stafford and Ruth, and she has to run for a half of a mile to find the coloured bathroom for minutes every day. Despite the marginalization she endures, she keeps on doing excellent work until Al Harrison notices her.

At one moment, Kathrine is shipped by Dorothy and Mary to be involved in a romantic relationship with Colonel Jim Johnson, whom Kathrine later married to. Back at NASA, the spaceship "Friendship 7" launch program happens to be taken into account and prepared by the group as John Glenn is devoted to become the pilot.

When the IBM machine has arrived, Dorothy feels threatened by it because the career of coloured women as computers will eventually end. However, The excellence at FORTRAN language makes Dorothy get an opportunity to be reassigned for running IBM machines along with other girls. Meanwhile, Mary Jackson who previously petitions the court regarding the enrolment on all-white school wins over it, espousing her to be the only coloured woman who attends engineering night class. Approaching the Friendship 7 mission, Kathrine assures Paul and Al to calculate John Glenn's trajectory. It turns out that Paul attempts to cease her to show her quality as the conflict between them arises. However, she manages to prove that no one can underestimate her by keeping up with the current briefing that no woman can be involved in and demonstrates her precise calculation. Unfortunately, as the IBM machine performs its work, the role of Kathrine as geometrical analyst is replaced.

The day of John Glenn's mission launch, the world comes to witness the historical moment of the first American astronaut going around the earth. Meanwhile in the control room, a problem occurs when Al finds out that IBM calculation does not match yesterday's. To elude the failure, John Glenn suggests Kathrine to perpetrate the calculation for him. Hence, John Glenn succeeds to orbit around the earth and splash safely although there is a little tension during the re-entry. The movie ends with the thread of accomplishments of Kathrine, Dorothy, and Mary.

Sexism plays a major role in the film *Hidden Figures*. According to bell hooks, the term sexism concerns to relation between men and women which is mostly about manifestation of male domination, accompanying discrimination, exploitation, and oppression. From sociological point of view, the legitimation of discrimination is based on a systematic belief of one sex superiority relating to gendered view on masculine or feminine roles and behaviours.

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. 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 a broader scope, institutional sexism practically started from families, then in other spheres such as in education, health care, economy, and law.

The concrete situation of sexism in common society which is marked by the existence of patriarchy embraces male-dominated principles. Thus, patriarchal society is deemed as the root of existing sexist views in America in which Men of all races in America bond on the basis of their common belief that a patriarchal social order is the only viable foundation for society. This viewpoint reinforces gender inequality as the nature of sexes.

In fact, while white women are placed below the white male supremacy, the position of African-American women is more doomed due to the subordination of both white and black men. The social status of African-American women is shaped by colonization in historical events of slavery. Consequently, it continually permeates to ordered social groupings in American society. This is evidently proved by hooks' statement saying that, As far back as slavery, white people established social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third, and black women last.(45)

Relating to the status of African-American women, there is the existing interrelation of gender and race going along with gender inequality. The work of Kane notes that, contrasting to the white women, African-American women are more aware of gender inequality and they believe that it is provoked by social factors rather than biological matters. As a consequence, African-American women happen to be struggling more to minimize gender inequality by supporting social policy and taking actions to improve women's status.

Racism is another theme discussed in this movie. It is linked with ideas and treatments that emphasize the inferiority of other racial or ethnic groups to one's own group in intellectual, cultural, and social values to one's own group. 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 a 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 takes place in society and privileges those who have power, namely institutional racism. Institutional racism constitutes the form of unjust treatments and oppressions in social institutions and it is addressed to inferior groups. Thus, this kind of racism is marked by the power of the dominant group in the economic and political section, deliberately intending to subdue the oppressed group. In conclusion, both forms of racism justify prejudice, stereotype, and discrimination against inferior racial groups, but it differs in the agents who commit those racial practices. Based on hooks' specific explanation about racism in the case of black and white people, the term is synonymously related to the discrimination or prejudice against black people by white people. In fact, America is a country that deeply imbeds and implements the white-racist foundation.

In addition to that, the theme of classism plays an inevitable role in this movie, which is based on socio-economic and class-beliefs and treatments towards others, reflecting a dissimilar level which appears in individual, institutions, and culture. It also refers to inequality in the economic system causing imbalance of basic human needs.

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". 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. It exemplifies in the form of stigma and social standing. Such situations underscore them as the most underprivileged human beings in which hooks notes that, "Women of all races and black people of both genders are fast filling up the ranks of poor and disenfranchised" (87). Thus, the hierarchy of class is observed as a purposely benefiting action to maintain the privileged whites. On the other hand, its existence also aims to deny the access to opportunity of U.S Black people as the classified group in all aspects of life, primarily in the economic sector.

According to bell hooks, African-American women's lack of participation in the women's liberation movement was derived from two major causes. Initially, it was caused by the position of women in the 60s black movement that were placed in a submissive level, so they were assumed to cast out feminism. Therefore, in white women's liberation, African-American women were opposed by existing racial and class arrangements.

In fact, black female reform organizations were solidly rooted in the women's movement. It was in reaction to the racism of white women and to the fact that the U.S remained a society with an apartheid social structure that compelled black women to focus on themselves rather than all women. The recognition of racism as a structure in the women's movement and in the U.S society relegates them to reform their organization which emphasizes solely on themselves rather than all women. As stated before, two considerations of sexism in black movement and racism as well as classism issues in white women's movement lead them to the exclusion from both movements. It might be the initial development of black feminism with the aim to eradicate sexism, racism, and classism.

Moreover, black feminism is defined in a more broad scope. It pertains to the thought that encompasses the self-consciousness raised through empowerment of women and men in order to establish a humanist society. 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.

All African-American women, according to Patricia Bell Scott, are taken into consideration as black feminist due to the life experience living as blacks and it likely generates black feminist consciousness. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, on the other hand, acknowledges that African-American women and men are possible to be called as black feminist as she points Frederick Douglass and W.E.B Dubois as examples of black male feminist. Most of black women intellectuals' works also adhere biological aspect to the ideology, contrasting with the idea that the term black feminist can be ascribed by anyone with black feminist ideas. In short, 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.

Bringing black feminism to the next level, African-American women labelled as black feminist continues to the ideas known as black feminist thought. 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. The theory pervades core themes revolving around the complexity of U.S Black feminist ideas. Rather, black women's relationship with one another and consciousness as a sphere of freedom are selected core themes required in analysing the movie.

Black women's Oppression deals with the characteristic of inequality between male and female in the movie that can be clearly detected. Sexist attitudes are mostly committed by men of both races and are addressed directly to female characters. Therefore, the views of female inferiority as a common natural phenomenon in society result in the absence of opportunity for these African-American women. In consequence, they might not be able to expand their roles in the family and the society. In fact, the unequal perception and treatments are marked by both personal and institutional sexism.

Sexism is individually committed by Mary's husband, Levi. He reveals his sexist views on Mary, responding to her decision-making to be a female engineer. He is not precisely sure that Mary is able to be one. The dialogue between Levi and Mary below depicts the theme of sexism in this movie,

Levi: A female engineer? We're Negro, baby. Ain't no such a thing. Understand it.

Mary: It's not like that there, Levi.

Levi: You can't apply for freedom. Freedom is

never granted to the oppressed. It's got to be demanded.

It can be perceived that Levi underestimates Mary when he asks Mary whether she really wants to be a female engineer or not. However, there is another perception reflected by Levi's words, underscoring the concern of their race. Levi doubts her decision because he assumes that as African-American, there is no opportunity available. He sees black people's status as a minority in the white privileged society as obstacles which they cannot ever avoid and solve because it is the basis of American society. In short, Levi is conscious about the double burden of being black and being female. Levi's empathetic attitudes towards Mary is a form of mixed viewpoints of sexism and racism. Other sexist beliefs expressed by the male character are 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. This dialogue between Jim and Kathrine below prove the theme of sexism in this movie,

Jim: Pastor mentioned you're a computer at NASA.

Kathrine: Yes.

Jim: What's that entail?

Kathrine: We calculate the mathematics necessary to enable launch and landing for the space program.

Jim: That's pretty heady stuff.

Kathrine: Yes, it is.

Jim: They let women handle that sort of... That's not what I mean.

By the end of conversation, Colonel Jim unintentionally throws out a statement insulting Kathrine. When Kathrine explains what she engages in as human computer NASA, Jim responds to it in a skeptical manner. He finds it unusual for institutions to employ women to do such difficult jobs. That is to say that personal sexism committed by Colonel Jim manifests in social interaction which goes along with clumsy gestures. It can be assumed that being black male also gives Colonel Jim the chance to perform sexism in which it indicates that African American women are at the bottom of societal hierarchy.

Inequality based on gender in the movie is also executed by institutions. Thus, the female characters have to confront such problems in more general circumstances. NASA as the institution owned by the United States government inevitably commits to sexism. This can be proved by the dialogue between Kathrine, Al Harrison, and Paul Stafford concerning the rules of NASA's important meeting. Paul: And she is a woman. There is no protocol for a woman attending these meetings.

Mr. Harrison: Okay, I get that part, Paul. But within this wall, who makes the rules?

Kathrine: You, sir. You are the boss. You just have to act like one, Sir. Mr. Harrison: You keep quiet.

The conflicted dialogue between three of them emphasizes on the meeting's attendance permission. As the launching program of John Glenn's orbital mission approaches, Kathrine is supposed to work hard in calculating the mathematics. However, Kathrine's calculations are repeatedly wasted due to the perpetual change of the project information. In response to the problem, Kathrine insists to attend Pentagon briefings so that she can keep up with the recent change. However, Paul strictly resists her request because the protocol does

not authorize women to be part of it. Through Paul's statement, it can be clearly seen that sexism is institutionalized in the NASA office. Its systematic rule is designed to limit or even obviate women's opportunity to become more salient in society. The problematic issue of sexism which appears in institutions is confronted by Mary as well. As she succeeds in enrolling in white-majority school, she finds that the institution promotes sexism. This can be seen from the dialogue below between Mary and Teacher.

Mary: I'm Mary Jackson. I'm enrolled.

Teacher: Well, the curriculum is not designed for teaching a woman.

By seeing the conversation between the teacher and Mary, it can be concluded that sexism is institutionalized in the education field as well. It obviously aims to keep women in mediocrity so that they cannot gain equal status or even they cannot exceed the men. Thus, the male-dominated principle is maintained in society and continually becomes the very basic foundation.

As previously stated, discussing in the theme racism, it can be expressed by individual or institution in which the female characters struggle to face in the form of stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination. In general, NASA obviously imbeds racism as their culture which is influenced by the law enforcement applied by the government in the 1960s. It legitimates segregation between whites and blacks in every aspect. It exposes the inharmonious relationship between white women and African-American women as they do not interact with one another and the gap between them exists. Dorothy Vaughan personally faces racist problems at NASA. The oppressive system does not let African Americans to be as equal as whites by getting permanent jobs. Dorothy strives for getting an official title as supervisor. She requires a promotion to be supervisor with a decent salary as she has already been the one who does the job but she is paid off only a little.

Dorothy: Mrs. Mitchell, if I could.. My application for supervisor, ma'am. I was just wondering if they're still considering me for that position.

Vivian: Well, the official word is no. they're not assigning a permanent supervisor for the colored group.

The response of Vivian Mitchell is unpleasant as she explains that her application is rejected due to the colored people employment designed for only temporary positions. This form of institutional racism intersects with classism as the office regulations are associated with the economic system. It prompts to the disproportions of African-Americans' life because it generates lower income status and aberration in the workplace which relegates them to the unstable economic condition or even poverty, rising the stereotype as lower class people and keeping them at the bottom rank of social class. Personal racism which is recognized by prejudice and discrimination perpetrated by white also happens to Dorothy. The white woman impolitely asks Dorothy's presence in that place and accuses her of intending to cause a problem. It reflects the prejudice as she feels uncomfortable and perceives African-American women as a threat for whites and the accusation towards Dorothy is a manifestation of discriminatory acts.

The conception, judgement, and action formed in injustice based on one's class as well as economic status deemed as classism is also depicted in the movie. Black female characters, specifically Kathrine, deal with this kind of treatment formed in personal and institutional practices. However, it does not stop with the man because people in the room keep staring at Kathrine as she walks by. People throw their squinted gaze on her, illustrating strange feelings towards her. It turns out that the man and the people probably think the typical negative stereotype. The interaction between them and the people's reaction are regarded as classism as the

man puts the garbage can to Kathrine's box. One sure thing about this portrayal is that they directly judge Kathrine as an office janitor.

In other words, by only seeing at Kathrine's race, they conclude that she is ascribed to lower class or working class status. In short, the intersection of race and class results to the stereotype of black people clinging to white's mind as economically deprived and poor-educated, reflecting the characteristics of lower class. As a matter of fact, the intersection of classism, sexism, and racism is fundamentally institutionalized in NASA. The monologue below pervades the fact that Kathrine encounters three inevitable problems at once.

Kathrine: My uniforms. Skirt below my knees, my heels, and a simple string of pearls. Well, I don't own pearls. Lord knows you don't pay enough to afford pearls and I work like a dog, day and night. Kathrine's confession to Al Harrison in front of white men colleagues comprises the oppressive actions she endures while working at Space Task Group. She condemns the mistreatments perpetrated by the institution in weary eyes. She breaks the silence by talking blatantly about the standards of African American women's working appearance differs from white women in the office, restricting her to wear skirts over the knees and not allowing her to put on fancy jewelry. More importantly, the economic oppression in the form of pay gap and employee exploitation are also revealed as she is paid off unfairly because of existing racial discrimination she has been objected to. 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.

The analysis points of black feminism undertake the ideas of African-American women's resistances and responses to the experiences they encounter as minorities. It must be acknowledged that black feminism has to do something with the individuals with some characteristics that label them as black feminists. As the

black female characters, Kathrine, Dorothy, and Mary, are perpetually oppressed by sexism, racism, and classism, they can be characterized as black feminist. They completely possess the characteristics of black feminist by considering about their race, their sex, and their experiences. In the following analysis, they implement the beliefs and thoughts of black feminist formed in black solidarity and African-American women's orientation.

Chapter Three

Conclusion

“Every time we have a chance to move ahead, they move the finishline.”

(Stanton Pruitt)

Hidden Figures, directed by Theodore Melfi, is a bio-drama about three courageous African-American women breaking social barriers in the dynamic field of space travel in the 1960s. It is loosely based on the book, *Hidden Figures: “The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race”*, by Margot Lee Shetterly. It is a heartwarming, albeit predictable, celebration of genius, individualism, and courage. Melfi and Allison Schroede adapted the book into a screenplay that takes some considerable liberties with the source material. The message of the movie is conveyed with force, however, despite some historical inaccuracies and narrative flaws.

Melfi invites us to a world that has very different animosities than what we struggle with today. The conflict in this time period is fascinating. The period accurately depicts race relations, gender role stereotypes, and Russian tension adds significant heft and variance in the storyline. The setting really does place the audience into a time where women and “coloured” people were treated very differently, and it is believable from start to finish. Langley, Virginia is vibrant and presented with a great attention to detail. The story is split between our three “hidden figures” but focuses on the promotion and subsequent achievements of Katherine Johnson. Johnson is responsible for calculating launch coordinates and trajectory for an Atlas rocket in the Space Task Group Headquarters, and she is met with adversity in the form of bigotry. She uses the “coloured” restroom a quarter mile away and has to make her own “coloured” coffee. Johnson’s personal perseverance and progress in her hostile environment is inspiring. Her relationship

with Jim Johnson is also charming. The other two hidden figures are compelling as well, but significantly less so. Dorothy faces challenges with her female boss who denies her deserved promotions, and Mary finds herself blocked by Virginia's Jim Crow laws from becoming a NASA engineer. These two storylines, while mildly interesting, only restate the common themes of the movie twice more. Both characters are fiery and dynamic, but their storylines slow the pace of the film significantly.

Melfi uses his artistic freedom to extrapolate some of the issues that were prevalent in the true story of these figures. There is a sense of exaggerated bigotry from almost every character in the film, which adds to the oppressive nature of the protagonists' plight, but takes away from the actual historical accuracy of the real women the film is celebrating. For instance, Al Harrison is a fictional character who never tore down "coloured restroom" signs, Katherine Jackson never actually walked to another building to use the restroom, and Johnson did not have to receive a court order to attend engineering school. These inaccuracies are partially forgivable, though, due to the overall theme of the film. Melfi has received backlash for establishing Harrison as a "white knight." Melfi is white, and has been targeted by some media outlets for displaying a whitewashed version of the actual history. Melfi responded to criticism by saying,

"We're all humans. Any human can tell any human's story. I don't want to have this conversation about black film or white film anymore. I wanna have conversations about films."

This is, to me, the purpose of the film. People and art should be judged based on merits. Anyone can break barriers, and make films about breaking barriers, regardless of their race or situation. *Hidden Figures* is sharply poignant and thoroughly moving. It celebrates the rewards of merit and ambition, and highlights real heroes in an influential time period. This period is fleshed out and lively, and

most of the performances are consistently compelling. Bravery is bravery, people are people, and cinema is cinema. Barriers can and have been broken, and *Hidden Figures* goes to show that a person's measure has nothing to do with race or sex, but instead, character, work ethic, and determination. African-American women are identified as one of the most underprivileged human beings in society as a result of European colonization of America since the very beginning of their arrivals as slaves. Such a situation brings them to intolerable injustices because of the state of being black and being a woman.

As a consequence, the life of African-American women is familiar with the oppression formed in sexism, racism, and classism. Those contemptuous treatments are solely constructed to maintain patriarchy and to privilege whites. More importantly, the inequalities are supported by both individual and institutional practices. Thus, the term black feminism occurs as a response to the African-American women subjection. Black feminism is the thought that involves the awareness of the existence of sexism, racism, and classism thus those who embrace it commit to fight the suppression and empower other women so that equality grows within the society. Furthermore, they can be considered as black feminist as long as they are all women who experience living as blacks and possess black feminist thought. This thought encompasses consciousness as a sphere of freedom, which is elaborated to self-definition, self valuation and respect, self-reliance and independence, self-change and empowerment. Black women's relationship with one another is also counted in shaping the thought.

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 individuals or NASA as governmental institutions where they work. By personal, it means they receive mistreatments from both white male and

females as well as black male. However, they respond 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 situations. It ensues to achieve their goals that are considered impossible for African-American women in the era of 1960s.

Works Cited

Cousins, Mark. *Story of film*. Place of publication Not Identified:

Sterling, 2020. Print.

Dixon, Wheeler W; and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster. *A Short History of*

film. New Brunswick, Nj; Rutgers UP, 2018. Print.

Hooks, Bell. (2000). *Where We Stand: Class Matters*. New York: Rutledge

Wharton, A.S. (2005). *The Sociology of Gender: An Introduction to*

Theory and Research. Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Black Well

Publishing.

Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey. *The History of Cinema: A Very Short*

Introduction. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2017. Print.

Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*.

New York, N V: McGraw- Hill Education, 2019. Print.

Hooks, Bell.[1982].*Ain 't I A Woman;Black women and feminism*,London;Plutopress.