

## **THE PORTRAYAL OF DISCRIMINATION TOWARDS FEMALE CHARACTERS IN *THE HIDDEN FIGURES* MOVIE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research discussed the issues of discrimination occurred toward the black female characters in *The Hidden Figures* movie. It aimed to describe the types of discrimination and to explain the impacts toward the black female characters. The researcher used the qualitative research as the method and feminist literary criticism as the approach of this research. The data derived from narrations and dialogues in the movie script related to the research questions. The findings of this research showed that there were two types of discrimination portrayed in the movie; those are derogation and denial. The findings also showed that the impacts of discrimination toward black female characters emerged in psychological and economic fields.

**Key words:** Discrimination, Black feminism, African-American women

### **ABSTRAK**

*Penelitian ini membahas isu-isu diskriminasi yang terjadi pada karakter perempuan kulit hitam dalam film *The Hidden Figures*. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggambarkan dan menjelaskan jenis-jenis diskriminasi dan dampaknya terhadap karakter perempuan kulit hitam. Peneliti menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif dan pendekatan kritik sastra feminis dalam melaksanakan penelitian ini. Data dalam penelitian ini berasal dari narasi dan dialog dalam naskah film yang berkaitan dengan rumusan masalah. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa ada dua jenis diskriminasi yang digambarkan dalam film tersebut; yaitu derogasi dan penolakan. Hasil penelitian ini juga menunjukkan dampak diskriminasi terhadap karakter perempuan kulit hitam ditemukan dalam bidang psikologis dan ekonomi.*

**Kata kunci:** Diskriminasi, *Black Feminism*, Perempuan Afrika-Amerika

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

The status of women in society has become an endless problem to talk about. In the lens of patriarchy, women are inferior to men. Based on Fishbein, it is

originated in classical Greece belief that women are viewed as morally, intellectually, and physically inferior to men (27). Women are considered as the lower-class in society. It makes them become limited to have the opportunity in taking a role in society. This occasion then leads women to start the emancipation to achieve the equal rights for them. In the United States, the culmination of women's emancipation is the massive revolution in 1960s. The movement of women's emancipation in the United States defends equivalent rights for women, which means women should have the same right as men.

Not only gender discrimination, the issue of racial discrimination also happens in the United States. According to Hooks, the black women have to bear the brunt of society's need to degrade and devalue women because of sexual racism (120). The women's movement that focuses on the struggle for the rights of black women is often called as black feminism (Daley and Lay 51). It aims to take action to stop the racist, sexist, and classist discrimination.

Black women are discriminated in many aspects of society, for they are considered as the lower class citizen since the day they come to the United States. They experience unfair treatment such as the public facilities which separated based on skin. The white people put a sign with a tag "white only" or "colored" which is usually placed in the toilet, library, public transportation, and else.

There are many things in real life illustrated through words and actions by literature. Literature is a place where people decant all their ideas into a work such as poem, drama, novel, movie, prose, etc. One of the social aspects that often depicts in literature is the issue of discrimination. *The Hidden Figures* is a movie which took place in 1960s in the United States. The movie tells about the story of a team that consists of three African-American women who are experts at mathematics. They are Katherine, Mary, and Dorothy. They work for NASA and perceive unequal treatments by their colleagues because of their race and certainly their gender. This movie contains many issues of discrimination towards black women which is interesting to be analyzed. The inequality experienced by the characters in the movie also contains the aspect of black feminism.

The objectives of this research are to explain the types of discrimination and to describe the impacts of discrimination toward the black female characters. It is expected that this research can enrich the comprehension about the values of discrimination in literary work, as well as to give information about the condition of African-American women in the United States at 1960s. Hopefully, this research could be beneficial as the additional reference for future researcher.

## **B. RELATED LITERATURE**

### **1. The Intrinsic Elements of Movie**

Intrinsic elements are contained within a literary work. As the part of literary work, movie also has the intrinsic elements within it. In order to analyze any kind of literary work, it is important to understand about the literary elements. As the researcher wanted to analyze a movie, the intrinsic elements are as follows:

- a. Plot: The order of events organized to make a whole story (Diyanni 42).
- b. Character: Someone in literary work who has a kind of identity which made up by appearance, conversation, action, name, and possibly the thoughts going on in the head (Gill 127).
- c. Setting: The realm of the story where the character does the action.
- d. Point of View: The perspective of how the story is told.
- e. Theme: The main idea of the story.

## **2. Black Feminism**

Black Feminism is a movement which points out that sexism, racism, and class oppression are bound together. According to Kanneh, black feminism does not only focus on women, but more specifically on the struggles of black women (qtd. in Daley and Lay 51). This movement arose due to the dissatisfaction of black women towards feminist movement. Black feminist movement focuses on sexism and racism experienced by black women.

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American civil rights advocate wrote an essay which argues that black women were discriminated both in gender and race, but there are no legal systems to protect them as the minority. She stated that black women are discriminated against in ways that often do not fit neatly within the legal categories of either “racism” or “sexism”, but as a combination of both of them (Smith 1).

Crenshaw also coined the term intersectionality in her essay. When talking about black feminism, intersectionality has a role to be the significant aspect of black feminism. It refers to the way gender, race, and other social categories interact to influence an individual life outcomes. Intersectionality is also defined as the synthesis of oppression. Crenshaw stated that, based on the gender and race, black people exist in the situation within two systems of subordination: racism and sexism (1470).

## **3. Discrimination**

Discrimination refers to the behavior that refuses the equal treatment towards people because of their membership in some group (Herbst 185). The act of discrimination can appear in many aspects in social life. Age, gender, race, ethnicity, caste, and disability are some aspects where discrimination commonly occurs.

Not only that, discrimination also occur in employment. The discrimination in employment also relates to other discrimination such as gender and race discrimination. People will have different opportunities in getting job because of certain reason which usually based on the discrimination toward their gender or their race. The occasion of such discrimination that described above is often faced by black women. In their workplace, they usually get patronized as well as undergo the unequal treatment within their job. They have limited access in their job and also get a lower salary than men.

#### **4. Types of Discrimination**

Peter I. Rose defined three different types of discrimination; those are derogation, denial, and aggression. Further explanations are as follows:

a. Derogation

Derogation is originated from derogatory behavior. In derogatory behavior, there is a term called ethnopaulisms. According to Rose, ethnopaulisms is derogatory terms used by the members of an ethnic group towards the other group, and when openly expressed, it becomes a form of discrimination known as antilocution, a fancy word of name-calling (139). In other words, derogatory behavior includes any acts of name-calling which usually contains racial insult.

b. Denial

According to Rose, denial implies the act of avoiding contacts or not giving opportunities to the prejudiced groups or members of the groups. It contains establishing and maintaining some measures of physical and social distance from minority groups (145). Rose also divided several forms of denial; such as avoidance and segregation. Avoidance refers to the act of avoiding the interaction with other people from different racial group. Segregation means the act of setting up barriers privately between one group to those who considered unworthy of normal social interaction (Rose 148).

c. Aggression

Aggression takes form in aggressive action. It refers to the act of violence. Rose stated that violence or the threat of violence has been used for a long time to keep minority groups aware of their inferior status (155). The act of violence appears in many forms, such as beating, bombing, lynching, race riots, massacre, pogroms, and genocide (155). In the case of discrimination toward African American people, the form of violence that threatens them emerges in the act of lynch mob (156).

#### **5. The Impacts of Discrimination**

Several studies have stated discrimination can affect negatively on people (Versey 7). Discrimination also generates impacts on psychological and economic field. In psychological field, discrimination can lead to mental health issues and low self-esteem to people. According to Perry, et al, racial and gender discrimination lead to low self-esteem, and external locus of control, cultural mistrust, and other characteristics which increase susceptibility to mental health problem (30).

However, discrimination also has the positive impact to people. Eccelston and Major stated that discrimination also have positive impact the self-esteem if it allows external attributions rather than self-blamed (qtd. in Versey 7).

Furthermore, the impact of discrimination also takes place in economic fields. Discrimination could negatively impacts people's employment which will cause the

economic inequality. Klobuchar stated that the impact of discrimination in economic field emerged in the form of lower profits, reduced wages and underemployment, and reduced economic growth (2).

## **C. RESEARCH METHOD**

### **1. Research Design**

In this study, the researcher used qualitative research as the method of the research. Patton and Cochran said that qualitative research is characterized by its aims, which related to understanding some aspect in social life, and its methods which (in general) generate words, rather than numbers, as data for analysis (3). Feminist literary criticism was applied to this research as the approach in order to analyze the black female characters. According to Tyson, feminist criticism concern itself with the way literature reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression toward women (83). In order to help the researcher answer the research questions, the theory of black feminism and the theory of discrimination by Peter I. Rose were applied to this research to answer the first research question, and the theory of the impacts of discrimination for the second research question.

### **2. Research Instrument**

According to Bogdan and Biklen, the researcher is the key instrument in conducting qualitative research (qtd. in Semi 24). Therefore, the research instrument to observe and discuss the research questions of this study is the researcher herself.

### **3. Data and Data Source**

The researcher used *The Hidden Figures* movie as the source data. The data were taken from the narrations and the dialogues in the movie script. Afterwards, the researcher collected the data in the form of phrases, clauses, and sentences that contain the types of discrimination and the impacts toward the black female characters.

### **4. Data Collection**

In order to collect the data, the researcher did some procedures. First, as the main object of this research is movie script, the researcher collected all the data from the script of *The Hidden Figures* movie by reading. The researcher read the script frequently and carefully in order to get valid and accurate data. Second, after the researcher understand the movie script, the researcher identified the data by marking the script. Through the dialogues and sentences, the researcher scoped only the important things that contain the aspect of discrimination and the impacts toward the black female characters.

## 5. Data Analysis

In this study, the researcher used the techniques from Miles and Huberman in order to analyze the data, which consist of data reduction, data display, and data conclusion (10). Data reduction refers the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying the abstraction, and transforming the basic data. In this step, the researcher reduced the collected data into the related topic. Data display refers to the process of displaying and analyzing the data. In data display, the researcher arranged the reduced data into further analysis of the form of discrimination and the impacts toward black women. Following that, the researcher started to do the analysis by using the organized data that contain the types of discrimination and the impacts toward black women. Last, the researcher did the data conclusion: drawing/verifying. Data conclusion refers to the process of depicting the conclusion after the previous attempts. In this step, the researcher composed the conclusion based on the analysis in order to answer the research questions

## D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, the researcher presents the findings of the types of discrimination and the impacts of discrimination toward black female characters in *The Hidden Figures* movie.

### 1. Derogation

Derogation includes any acts of name-calling, color-laden phrases, verbal slips, and testimonials (Rose 139). Below is one of the data of derogation found in *The Hidden Figures* movie.

(Data 15)

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

He stops himself. Too late. Backpedals.

Jim Johnson : Well. That's not what I mean.

Katherine : What do you mean?

Jim Johnson : I was just surprised something so...taxing-

Katherine stops him.

Katherine : **Mr. Johnson, it may be best if you quit talking right now.**

Jim Johnson : **I'm not meaning any disrespect-** (pg. 40-41)

The data described a situation when a black man said a word that indirectly denigrates a black woman. Jim Johnson is a colonel who met Katherine while worshipping at the church. Jim, who was interested in Katherine, then approached her and talked to her about her occupation. Unfortunately, he unintentionally said something that makes Katherine get offended.

The researcher identified that Jim was surprised by the fact that Katherine could have a job in aeronautics sector. He considered it as a heavy work for a woman. Hence, Katherine was offended because as a woman, she was deemed incapable for such job. According to Rose, impolite reference to color, religion, and gender is often made without any intention to harm or disparage by people who never consider about the origin of the remarks that may be find offensive by other people (139). From the data, it can be seen that Jim did not have any intention to hurt or disparage Katherine, as he said that he did not meaning any disrespect toward her, but Katherine still get offended by him.

Because of the derogation she just experienced, Katherine defended herself after feeling humiliated by a black man. She showed her ability with confidence. This indicated the existence of impact of discrimination in psychological field. In psychological field, discrimination could have negative and positive impacts. The negative impacts of discrimination were the low self-esteem and other characteristics that increase the possibility to mental health problem (Perry, et al, 30). And based on Ecelston and Major, the positive impact of discrimination appeared in the form of positive self-esteem if it permits external attribution rather than self-blame (qtd. in Versey 7). The data below portrayed the impact of discrimination in psychological field in the form of positive self-esteem.

(Data 16)

Katherine : 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 computer 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.**

Katherine adjusts her glasses.

Katherine : **So, yes...they let women do some things over at NASA, Mr. Johnson.** But it's not because we wear skirts...it's because we wear glasses. (pg. 41)

The data illustrated Katherine's reaction after she was offended by Jim Johnson's words. She replied him by mentioning some of her achievements as a capable black woman and she is proud of that. She wanted to show that women are worthy and capable to work at NASA. Katherine showed her achievements confidently. According to Nair, one of the signs of positive self-esteem is confidence (76). The way Katherine showed her accomplishments confidently indicated that she has the positive self-esteem even though she was denigrated by a black man. Therefore, the researcher considered the data as the impact of discrimination in

psychological field towards Katherine's character because she has positive self-esteem portrayed through her confidence in facing an act of discrimination.

## 2. Denial

According to Rose, denial is the act of avoiding contacts or not giving any opportunities to the minority groups (145). There are two types of denial based on Rose's theory: avoidance and segregation.

### a. Avoidance

Avoidance is the act of staying away from people with different racial background. Below is one of the data of avoidance found in *The Hidden Figure* movie.

(Data 26)

Katherine : There's no bathroom here. There are no colored bathrooms in this building or any building outside the West Campus. Which is half a mile away! Did you know that? I have to walk to Timbuktu just to relieve myself! And I can't take one of the handy bikes. Picture that, with my uniform: skirt below the knees and my heels. And don't get me started about the "simple pearl necklace" I can't afford. Lord knows you don't pay "the coloreds enough for that. And I work like a dog day and night, **living on coffee from a coffee pot half of you don't want me to touch!** So excuse me if I have to go to the restroom a few times a day! (pg. 65)

The data illustrated a situation when Katherine was scolded by her boss for going too long just to go to the bathroom. Katherine could not hold it anymore and put out all her grievances for being treated unfairly in the division. The data showed that people in Katherine's division did not want to use the coffee pot that has been touched by her. The researcher considered it as avoidance because there was an occurrence where white people did not want to touch something that has been touched by black people. This showed the existence of avoidance related to Rose's theory which said the white people reduced the interaction with black people who are socially defined untouchable (145).

Apparently, the act of avoidance has an impact toward Katherine. She portrayed the impacts of discrimination in psychological field because of her colleagues' treatments toward her. The following is the data that describes the impact of discrimination in psychological field occurred towards Katherine.

(Data 11)

Katherine : Truth be told, Dorothy, **I don't know if I can keep up in that room. I'll be back with the Computers in a week, or out of a job entirely.**



Dorothy : Oh, please. You're better with the numbers than anyone in there and you know it. Make that pencil move as fast as your mind does, you'll be fine. (pg.31)

The data showed that Katherine is feeling doubtful about her fate in the job. This is proved in the data when she said "I don't know if I can keep up in that room", the researcher assumed it as an expression of the lack of confidence in herself because of unequal treatments from her colleagues. The researcher considered it as Katherine's feeling of losing trust on people, she does not have faith that people in Space Task Group would give her an opportunity to stay in there.

The researcher claimed this data as the psychological impact of discrimination toward Katherine's character because it portrayed the feeling of losing trust on people. The feeling of losing trust on people and lack of confidence are the signs of low self-esteem (Nair 76). Therefore, it can be assumed that Katherine perceived the impacts of discrimination in psychological field in the form of low-self esteem.

### b. Segregation

Segregation is the act of setting up barriers between a group to the other group who are considered unworthy of normal social interaction (Rose 148). Here is the example of the act of segregation found in *The Hidden Figures* movie.

(Data 20)

Vivian Mitchell : **NASA doesn't commission females** for the Engineer Trainin' Program. (pg. 52)

The data explained a situation when Vivian came to see Mary to tell about her application to enter the engineer training program. Vivian said that NASA does not assign women for the program. The researcher identified the reason Vivian said the bold words was because NASA has applied a regulation which prevents women to join the engineer training program. According to Rose, the device of segregation is the restrictive regulations that prevent outsiders from entering the circle dominant group (148). It was clear in the data that there was a restrictive regulation toward women applied by NASA. Therefore, the researcher considered it as a form of segregation because the data showed that a woman is restricted by the rule to get a profession which usually done by men.

The impact of this kind of discrimination arose in psychological field. The data below illustrated Mary's character was feeling the inferiority because of the segregation that restricts her to be a female engineer.

(Data 7)

Zielinski : Mary...a person with an engineer's mind should be an engineer. You can't be a Computer the rest of your life. That would be a tragic waste of your ability.

Mary : Mr. Zielinski, **I'm a Negro woman. I'm not going to entertain the impossible.** (pg. 20)

The data illustrated the situation when Mary was talking with her boss, Mr. Zielinski. He talked about Mary's capability to be an engineer. He convinced her to reach her dream because she has the capability and it could be a waste if she does not want to fight for it. Mary responded it by saying that it was impossible for her because she was a black woman. Through Mary's words, it can be seen that she depicted the feeling of inferiority because of her status as a black woman. She started to feel that she has no power to achieve her dream because of her race and gender, and she could do nothing about that. That was why she said it was impossible for her to be an engineer.

The researcher considered this data as the impact of discrimination in psychological field appeared in the form of low self-esteem. According to Ha, people with low self-esteem endure the feelings of inferiority (qtd. in Khalek 8). Therefore, the data above can be inferred as the impact of discrimination in psychological field because it described about the feeling of inferiority occurred towards Mary.

After the analysis, the researcher found that out of three types of discrimination, only two of them found in the movie; those are derogation and denial. The data of derogation were uttered by white woman and black man. It was found that the data contained the aspect of racism and sexism because there are actions of demeaning people from other racial and gender group.

The second type of discrimination emerged in the findings is denial, which consisted of avoidance and segregation. The act of avoidance appeared in the form of avoiding interaction by making distance toward black people and the white people that did not want to have direct interaction with black people. For segregation, it became the most dominant types of discrimination found in the movie because of the restrictive regulations which separate some public facilities and limit the minority group to achieve certain professions.

The act of segregation in the movie appeared in some public facilities, it was found in school, bus, workplace, bathroom, church, cafeteria, library, and court. Most of them were denoted by the sign "colored" which was usually put on the entrance and the seat. Segregation also emerged in restrictive rules which limit the minorities in some aspects; such as education and employment.

On the other hand, as the third type of discrimination was aggression, there was no data appeared in the form of aggression in the movie. According to Rose, aggression is the act of violence that has been used to keep the minority groups aware of their inferiority status (155). In connection with this research, there was no act of violence happened towards the black female characters. Even though the dominant group (white people) has done some acts of discrimination toward the black female characters, they only showed it through the denial and derogation. They did not show it in extreme way like violent act to make the black people aware of their inferiority status.

Furthermore, the impacts of discrimination are illustrated in psychological and economic fields. The three black female characters experienced all the impacts of discrimination in the movie after perceiving the act of discrimination. Derogation has the positive impacts emerged in psychological field, in the form of the positive self-esteem portrayed through Katherine's confidence. Denial has negative impacts appeared in psychological and economic field, as well as the positive impact in psychological field portrayed through the black female character's positive self-esteem. As there were two forms of denial, segregation and avoidance have positive and negative impacts of discrimination toward the black female characters. Avoidance has the negative impact in psychological field in the form of low self-esteem occurred toward Katherine, and segregation has the positive and negative impact emerged in psychological and economic field occurred toward the black female characters.

The black female characters portrayed the positive self-esteem after they have experienced the negative impacts of discrimination before. The impact of discrimination was developing in their characters, the black female characters started to portray the negative impact of discrimination in psychological field when they were discriminated. Afterward, they got support from their family and friends which then lead the positive self-esteem arose within their characters. So, it can be inferred that the black female characters gained the positive impact of discrimination after they were discriminated.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

Based on the analysis, the researcher found that there are two types of discrimination experienced by the black female characters, derogation and denial. Three black female characters perceived the unequal treatments by the white people in the form of derogation and denial (avoidance and segregation). In connection with the impacts of discrimination, there are two categories of the impacts of discrimination namely psychological and economic fields. The finding showed that three black female characters experienced all categories of the impacts of discrimination. The researcher found that the most dominant impact of discrimination appeared in psychological field.

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