

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF RACISM OF AFRICAN WOMAN IN THE FILM “HIDDEN FIGURES”

¹Cyndhi Alviani ²Hot Saut Halomoan

¹ Universitas Buddhi Dharma ¹Universitas Buddhi Dharma

¹ Jl. Imam Bonjol No. 41, Karawaci Ilir, Tangerang

¹ alvianicyndhi60@gmail.com ¹ hotsautmanurung@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Keywords:
Hidden Figures Film
Intersectionality
Racism
Gender
Discrimination
African-American Women

Article history:
Received:
11 November 2025
Accepted:
20 November 2025
Available online:
16 January 2026

This study examines the representation of racism and the structural limitations experienced by African-American women in the film *Hidden Figures* (2016) through a critical analytical approach. The film portrays the true story of three African-American female scientists—Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson—who worked at NASA during the era of racial segregation in the United States. Employing the theoretical framework of intersectionality and racial critique, this research explores how these women confronted systemic barriers rooted in both racial and gender discrimination within a white male-dominated professional environment. The findings reveal that *Hidden Figures* powerfully represents the dual struggle of Black women against stereotypes, social exclusion, and institutional inequality. The study underscores the importance of recognizing the visibility and contributions of minority women in historical and cultural narratives. Furthermore, it highlights the necessity of adopting an intersectional perspective to understand the complex dynamics of race, gender, and power within popular culture and formal institutions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Racism and gender discrimination have long been deeply ingrained in American society, shaping not only social institutions but also cultural expressions such as film, literature, and popular media. Hollywood, as one of the most influential cultural industries in the world, has historically reflected and at times reinforced societal hierarchies based on race, gender, and class. Within this context, African American women have been doubly marginalized, constrained by both racial and gender-based discrimination. Their stories have often been overlooked, simplified, or distorted to fit dominant narratives, leaving significant gaps in the representation of their lived experiences and contributions to society.

The emergence of *Hidden Figures* (2016), directed by Theodore Melfi and adapted from Margot Lee Shetterly's nonfiction book, represents a pivotal intervention in this cultural landscape. The film chronicles the true story of three African American women Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson whose intellectual brilliance and mathematical expertise were crucial to NASA's success during the early years of the U.S. space program. Set in Virginia during the 1960s, the film unfolds against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement and the Jim Crow era, revealing the institutional and social barriers that shaped African Americans' professional and personal lives.

Through its depiction of racial segregation, gender inequality, and resilience, *Hidden Figures* offers a compelling representation of African women's struggle for recognition in a field

traditionally dominated by white men. The film portrays their persistence and intellectual excellence as acts of resistance against a system designed to exclude them. Yet, while it celebrates the achievements of these women, it also invites deeper reflection on the ways Hollywood constructs narratives about race, gender, and progress.

The representation of African American women in Hollywood has historically been fraught with stereotypes and erasure. Early cinematic depictions often relied on caricatures such as the “mammy,” “jezebel,” and “sapphire,” each of which served to justify racial hierarchies and patriarchal control. These portrayals marginalized Black women by denying them complexity, intellect, and autonomy. As bell hooks (1992) argues, such imagery not only dehumanizes but also normalizes systemic oppression by framing Black womanhood within narrow and exploitative boundaries.

Hidden Figures disrupts this legacy by foregrounding three women who embody intelligence, dignity, and professionalism traits long denied to Black female characters in mainstream media. By focusing on their scientific contributions rather than their subordination, the film reclaims narrative space for Black women as thinkers, innovators, and agents of historical change. However, this reclamation also raises important questions: Does *Hidden Figures* fully escape Hollywood’s tendency to sanitize systemic oppression for audience comfort? Or does it reproduce a form of “liberal optimism” that celebrates individual triumphs while downplaying collective struggle?

The concept of **intersectionality**, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides a critical framework for understanding the experiences depicted in *Hidden Figures*. Intersectionality posits that systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, and classism do not operate independently but intersect to create unique and compounding forms of discrimination. For African American women, this intersection means that their struggles cannot be explained solely through the lens of race or gender but must consider the simultaneous impact of both.

In the film, this is clearly illustrated through the experiences of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson. Each woman faces racial discrimination from white colleagues who question their competence, as well as gender-based obstacles that deny them equal access to professional opportunities. Katherine’s daily walk to a segregated restroom, Dorothy’s struggle for promotion despite her qualifications, and Mary’s legal battle for educational access are emblematic of how racism and sexism reinforce one another. These scenes serve as both historical testimony and symbolic critique, illuminating how institutional policies and social norms intersect to perpetuate exclusion.

Furthermore, the setting of NASA a space dedicated to exploration, innovation, and progress becomes a powerful metaphor for America’s contradictions. The nation that seeks to conquer the stars simultaneously enforces segregation on Earth. By juxtaposing these realities, *Hidden Figures* exposes the moral hypocrisy of a society that celebrates scientific advancement while denying basic human equality.

Education and intellectual empowerment emerge as central themes throughout the film. Each protagonist uses knowledge as a weapon against oppression, echoing the Black feminist tradition that views education as both a right and a form of resistance. Dorothy Vaughan’s self-taught mastery of computer programming represents a quiet revolution; through her initiative, she not only secures her own future but also trains other Black women to adapt to technological change. Mary Jackson’s determination to become an engineer despite legal segregation underscores the necessity of challenging discriminatory laws through persistence and intellect.

Katherine Johnson's mathematical brilliance, meanwhile, directly challenges the white male monopoly on scientific authority. Her achievements culminating in her pivotal role in calculating John Glenn's orbital flight symbolize the reclamation of intellectual space by those long excluded from it. These narratives collectively convey a message of empowerment: that education and perseverance can dismantle barriers that laws and prejudice seek to uphold.

From a theoretical standpoint, these acts of resistance align with Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) concept of the "matrix of domination," which emphasizes how marginalized individuals resist oppression through self-definition, knowledge production, and solidarity. The women of *Hidden Figures* embody this form of empowerment, transforming their workplace into a site of both struggle and liberation.

While *Hidden Figures* celebrates the protagonists' victories, it also exposes the structural inequalities of mid-20th-century America. The film depicts how the ideology of meritocracy central to the American Dream is undermined by racial and gender biases that deny equal access to opportunity. Despite their competence, the women are subjected to systemic barriers that their white male peers never face.

In depicting this contradiction, the film resonates with W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness," wherein African Americans must constantly navigate between their self-perception and the perceptions imposed upon them by a prejudiced society. Katherine Johnson, for instance, must constantly prove her worth in a space where her presence itself is questioned. The scene where her white supervisor finally removes the "Colored Bathroom" sign symbolizes not only a personal victory but a broader acknowledgment of the absurdity of segregation. Yet, the film's resolution through benevolent white intervention also reflects the limitations of Hollywood narratives that center white redemption within Black struggle.

Despite its progressiveness, *Hidden Figures* operates within the conventions of mainstream Hollywood cinema, which often prioritizes emotional accessibility over political radicalism. Its portrayal of racism tends to focus on interpersonal conflicts rather than systemic critique, suggesting that change is achievable through individual goodwill rather than collective activism. This narrative simplification reflects what scholars such as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994) describe as "multicultural liberalism," where diversity is celebrated symbolically but structural inequities remain unchallenged.

Nevertheless, the film's achievements in representation are significant. By humanizing its protagonists and highlighting their intellect and professionalism, it challenges the invisibility of Black women in both historical and cinematic archives. It also opens up new avenues for future films to engage more critically with race, gender, and class dynamics without sacrificing commercial appeal.

The value of *Hidden Figures* lies not only in its storytelling but in its broader cultural impact. Released during a period of renewed racial tension and social justice movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, the film resonated with audiences seeking affirmations of Black excellence and resilience. Its success at the box office and award shows demonstrated a growing appetite for narratives that center marginalized voices without reducing them to suffering or victimhood.

However, intersectional feminist scholars caution that visibility alone does not guarantee liberation. As Crenshaw notes, representation must be accompanied by systemic change to dismantle the overlapping hierarchies that sustain inequality. *Hidden Figures* thus serves as both inspiration and reminder a call to celebrate progress while acknowledging the work that remains.

II. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using content analysis to examine the film *Hidden Figures* (2016). The purpose is to identify and explain the forms of racial and gender discrimination experienced by the three African American women Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson and to analyze their responses to such oppression.

Film, as a visual literary medium, reflects social structures and cultural ideologies; therefore, this research interprets the meanings embedded in dialogues, narratives, and character actions. The study found two dominant forms of discrimination racial (color-based) and gender-based—and revealed a pattern of response from withdrawal and resignation to verbal confrontation, which ultimately leads to recognition and change within the narrative.

Research Object

The material object of this study is the film *Hidden Figures* (2016), directed by Theodore Melfi and adapted from Margot Lee Shetterly's nonfiction book. It was selected for its portrayal of racial and gender inequality in a professional environment (NASA) during the 1960s.

The formal object is the concept of racism and gender discrimination, analyzed through the theoretical perspectives of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminist Thought, focusing on the experiences of African American women in institutional and social contexts.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through several methods:

1. **Film Observation** – The researcher watched *Hidden Figures* multiple times to identify scenes, dialogues, and contexts depicting racism and gender bias.
2. **Transcription and Coding** – Key conversations and visual cues representing discrimination or empowerment were recorded, categorized, and coded.
3. **Library Research** – Books, journals, and scholarly works—particularly those of Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and bell hooks—were reviewed to strengthen the theoretical framework.
4. **Literature Review** – Academic sources on race, gender, and film were analyzed to contextualize the findings within broader cultural and feminist discourses.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using **content analysis**, following these steps:

1. **Identification** – Detect scenes and dialogues that illustrate racial and gender discrimination against African American women.
2. **Classification** – Organize data into themes such as segregation, workplace inequality, and empowerment.
3. **Interpretation** – Analyze selected data using Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought to uncover social meanings and power dynamics.
4. **Conclusion** – Summarize how *Hidden Figures* portrays structural limitations faced by African women and how they resist these forms of oppression through intellect, solidarity, and resilience.

III. RESULTS

This chapter presents the analysis of the African female characters in the film *Hidden Figures* (2016) directed by Theodore Melfi. The analysis is conducted through a critical lens to uncover how racism and gender discrimination limit the opportunities and social roles of African women. Using qualitative content analysis, the discussion highlights various scenes, dialogues, and character interactions that reflect the systemic oppression faced by the protagonists: Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson.

Overview of the Movie Hidden Figures

Hidden Figures is a biographical film that depicts the true story of three African women, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson who worked at NASA during racial segregation in the United States in the 1960s. The three had extraordinary abilities in mathematics and technology, but they had to struggle to gain recognition in a workplace dominated by white men. The film shows how structural racism and sexism hindered their careers and social lives.

Forms of Racism in Films Racism

Hidden Figures is depicted in both overt and covert forms, reflecting the systemic racial segregation and discrimination that permeated American society in the 1960s. The film not only highlights individual prejudice but also depicts how institutional and structural racism affected the lives and careers of African women working at NASA. The following are the major forms of racism depicted in the film:

Institutional Racism

One of the most visible forms of racism is institutional racism, where organizational policies and practices routinely disadvantage African employees. For example, Katherine Johnson was forced to walk a long distance to use a separate restroom for “Colored Women” located in another building. This arrangement was not due to the malicious intent of an individual, but rather to a larger system that has normalized racial segregation within federal agencies like NASA.

Scene: Mary Jackson’s conversation with the judge to attend an all-white engineering class

Dialogue: Mary Jackson: “Your Honor, out of all the cases you’re going to hear today, which one is going to matter one hundred years from now? Which one is going to make you the first? The first to allow a colored woman to attend an all-white school.”

Judge: “Mrs. Jackson, the law is the law. But I’ll grant you permission to attend the night classes at Hampton High School.”

Institutional Racism Element:

This scene illustrates institutional racism because Mary Jackson is legally barred from attending the engineering classes she needs to qualify as an engineer solely due to her race. The restriction is not based on her ability or merit, but on segregation laws embedded in the education system. Even her access requires special legal permission, showing how structural barriers maintain racial inequality in professional advancement.

Furthermore, meetings and briefings where important decisions are made are often closed to black employees. Katherine, despite being a brilliant mathematician, was initially excluded from high-level strategy meetings simply because of her race and gender. This reflects how access to information, decision-making, and promotion is often denied to people of color.

Every day or Micro-Level Racism

In addition to institutional practices, the film also depicts everyday racism or microaggressions. These are subtle and often unintentional forms of discrimination that reinforce racial stereotypes. An example is when Katherine is given a trash can of used calculators instead of being greeted as a respected coworker. Her math skills are often questioned, and her presence at work is greeted with suspicion and condescension. Another moment is when Mary Jackson is denied permission by a white judge to attend night classes at an all-white school. Although the judge is polite, the imbalance of power and racial barriers are evident. Mary must “prove” herself in a way that her white peers never had to.

Separation in Facilities and Opportunities

The film highlights physical segregation, including separate coffee pots, restrooms, and seating arrangements. When Katherine uses the “white” coffee pot, her white colleagues respond with visible discomfort, reinforcing her status as an outsider.

Job advancement was also segregated. Dorothy Vaughan, despite working as a supervisor, was denied a position and salary because of her race. Only after she proved herself indispensable was she reluctantly promoted, illustrating how black excellence often had to go beyond the norm to be recognized.

Symbolic Racism and Erasure

Hidden Figures also addresses symbolic racism, where the contributions of black people are downplayed or erased from the mainstream narrative. The premise of the film is that the accomplishments of these women were hidden for decades, highlighting how history often erases the contributions of African, especially women. Their exclusion from public memory is itself a form of racial injustice.

Intersectional Discrimination

Finally, the racism experienced by the characters is compounded by gender discrimination. The female protagonists are not only black but also women in a male-dominated patriarchal institution. This intersectional oppression means they are doubly marginalized. For example, Mary Jackson is told that being an engineer is unrealistic for “someone like her,” referring not only to her race but also to her gender.

Hidden Figures depicts racism as a multi-layered and systemic force, operating through laws, institutions, social practices, and cultural erasure. The film reveals that the limitations imposed on African women are not only individual but also deeply structural, requiring incredible perseverance to overcome. This depiction serves as both historical documentation and critique of ongoing racial inequality.

Discrimination in Facilities and Work Space

One of the most obvious forms of racism in the film is the segregation of facilities. Katherine Johnson, for example, has to walk a long distance just to use the “colored” restroom because the white restrooms won’t let her in. This illustrates the institutional racism that was embedded in NASA’s work regulations at the time.

“There are no colored toilets here, in the East Group, or anywhere outside of West Campus.”

This dialogue shows how black women are excluded from mainstream spaces and not considered part of an equal system.

Discrimination in the Division of Tasks

Despite their extraordinary abilities, these characters are not given great responsibility at the beginning of the story. Katherine Johnson is only used as a manual "calculator" without being involved in important decision making. Dorothy Vaughan, despite having carried out her duties as a supervisor, is not formally recognized.

"I do work as a supervisor, but I can't get the title."

This discrimination demonstrates the structural barriers that prevent black women from gaining equal promotion and recognition.

Limitations of African Women

Hidden Figures vividly depicts the limitations placed on African women, reflecting the intersectional discrimination they experienced because of their race and gender. These limitations were not simply the result of individual prejudice, but were embedded in the institutional systems and social norms of the 1960s. Through the lives of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, the film highlights how structural barriers limited their professional growth, social participation, and personal dignity.

Professional and Employment Limitations

One of the most obvious limitations seen in the film is the restriction of professional mobility for African women. Despite their high levels of skill and education, these women are relegated to low-status positions. Katherine Johnson, for example, is excluded from important meetings and her work is often unacknowledged. Her role is initially limited to checking calculations, despite her ability to perform advanced mathematical analysis. This limitation is not based on ability but on societal assumptions about who is considered competent or trustworthy.

Dorothy Vaughan performed her supervisory duties without receiving a formal title or salary, simply because she was a black woman. Her efforts went unacknowledged until they became critical. This pattern of delayed or denied recognition reflects a broader historical reality for African in professional settings.

Educational and Legal Barriers

Mary Jackson's journey reveals the educational limitations that African women face. To become an engineer, she had to attend an all-white school, which required a court order. This obstacle was not due to academic incompetence, but to legal and institutional racism that limited access to opportunities for advancement. The need for legal intervention to access basic educational rights underscores the depth of the systemic exclusion that black women face. Mary Jackson's journey in *Hidden Figures* serves as a powerful example of how African women faced not only informal discrimination but also formal, institutionalized legal and educational barriers. Her aspiration to become an engineer was not hindered by a lack of ability, but by systemic obstacles embedded in the very structures meant to enable social mobility. To qualify as an engineer, Jackson needed to take graduate-level engineering courses, which were only offered at a segregated all-white high school requiring her to petition the court for permission to attend. This moment reflects how the path to professional advancement for Black women was obstructed not just by social norms, but by codified segregation and exclusionary laws.

This instance illustrates structural racism, which refers to the cumulative and compounding effects of societal policies, practices, and norms that systematically disadvantage certain racial groups. The fact that legal action was necessary to gain access to education highlights the

institutional gatekeeping mechanisms that upheld white privilege and actively suppressed Black potential.

From a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective, access to education is a racialized and politicized terrain. As Derrick Bell (1992) argues, legal victories for civil rights are often conditional and symbolic, granted only when they align with the interests of the dominant group a principle known as interest convergence. Jackson's victory in court, while meaningful, also represents an exception rather than a dismantling of the larger system that made such legal battles necessary in the first place.

Moreover, Mary Jackson's case reflects what Kimberlé Crenshaw refers to as structural intersectionality: the ways in which multiple systems of oppression race, gender, and class interact to limit access to rights and resources. As a Black woman, Jackson's marginalization was amplified. While white women faced gender-based barriers in engineering, and Black men encountered racial discrimination, Black women like Jackson had to navigate both simultaneously, often without the support of either movement.

Historically, the denial of educational opportunities to Black communities was a cornerstone of white supremacist structures. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) may have declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, but the persistence of local segregationist policies, particularly in the South, meant that in practice, access to equal education remained highly contested well into the 1960s and beyond. Mary Jackson's legal petition occurred within this fraught context, symbolizing the continued struggle for civil rights even after legal victories had been won on paper.

Additionally, this barrier underscores the importance of representation in STEM fields. Lack of access to education in science and engineering perpetuated not just underrepresentation, but also the myth that Black women were inherently less suited for these fields. By fighting for her right to study engineering, Mary Jackson was not only pursuing personal advancement but also challenging deeply embedded social hierarchies that policed who could aspire to intellectual and professional success.

Finally, this struggle is also a testament to resilience and agency. Despite facing systemic discrimination, Jackson's perseverance demonstrates the capacity of Black women to assert their rights and push back against structural limitations. Her case serves as a powerful educational narrative one that can inspire future generations to question, resist, and reshape institutional norms.

Physical and Spatial Segregation

Other limitations were seen in the physical separation imposed by segregation laws and workplace customs. Katherine Johnson was forced to walk a long distance just to use the "Colored" restroom, which was a waste of time and energy and signified her exclusion from the institutional space. Similarly, the presence of a separate coffee pot marked "Colored" for its use was symbolic of how racial segregation permeated everyday interactions, even in professional settings. These spatial limitations not only create discomfort but also remind African women of their marginal status in the workplace and society at large.

Emotional and Psychological Barriers

African women in the film are also constrained by emotional baggage. They are expected to remain calm, respectful, and patient in the face of obvious injustice. Expressing anger or frustration can result in social retribution or loss of professional opportunities. This emotional restraint is a survival strategy, but it is also a form of oppression that suppresses their full humanity. Katherine's

outburst at the bathroom situation is a powerful moment that reflects months of pent-up pain, humiliation, and exhaustion.

Intersectional Discrimination

The limitations experienced by the women in *Hidden Figures* cannot be understood through a single-axis framework of discrimination. They are marginalized not just because they are black or women, but because they are both. This intersectionality, a term introduced by (Crenshaw K. , (1989)) highlights how overlapping systems of oppression create unique forms of marginalization. The film shows how African-American women face complex exclusions that are not always experienced by their white or black male counterparts.

The limitations of African women as depicted in *Hidden Figures* are rooted in systemic, historical, and cultural injustice. These women were subjected to structural inequalities, educational and employment barriers, racial segregation, and emotional distress. Yet, despite these limitations, they persevered and ultimately succeeded, revealing not only the strength of their characters but also the need to critically address the historical erasure and marginalization of Black women in American society. Their stories challenge us to rethink who is remembered in history and who remains silenced today.

Limitations Based on Gender

In addition to race, the characters also experience discrimination based on gender. The world of engineering and science at the time was dominated by men. Mary Jackson, for example, had to register for a bar just to attend an all-white school to become an engineer. "Every time we had a chance to get ahead, they moved the finish line." This reflects intersectionality, a concept by Kimberlé Crenshaw that shows how the experiences of Black women cannot be explained by gender or race alone, but rather a combination of the two.

Social Invisibility

Katherine is not recognized for her significant contributions to space mission calculations. She is not even mentioned in important documents. This is a form of erasure of the contributions of black women from official history.

Actions of Resistance and Liberation

Racism in *Hidden Figures* is depicted in both overt and covert forms, reflecting the systemic racial segregation and discrimination that permeated American society in the 1960s. The film not only highlights individual prejudice but also depicts how institutional and structural racism affected the lives and careers of African-American women working at NASA. The following are the major forms of racism depicted in the film

In *Hidden Figures*, the African female protagonists do not passively accept the limitations placed upon them. Instead, they actively resist the systemic oppression they face, in both subtle and bold ways. Their actions serve as a form of liberation, challenging institutional racism and patriarchal norms. This section examines how Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson each embody resistance and self-empowerment in different ways.

Katherine Johnson: Intellectual Assertion and Direct Confrontation

Katherine's resistance was rooted in her intellectual prowess and her refusal to be treated as inferior to her white, male colleagues. One of her most powerful moments of resistance came when she confronted her boss, Al Harrison, about the dehumanizing expectation that she must walk half a mile to use the "Colored" restroom. Her emotional but calm speech forced Harrison to

acknowledge the absurdity of segregation within NASA. In response, she physically removed the “Colored Restroom” sign that symbolized a breakthrough, even though it had to be demanded.

Additionally, Katherine’s participation in high-level meetings, previously reserved for white men, marks another form of resistance. She insists on being present when decisions are made and proves her worth through precise and significant calculations. Her presence at the meetings defies racial and gender boundaries, challenging the notion that only white men are worthy of intellectual space.

Dorothy Vaughan: Self-Education and Collective Empowerment

Dorothy’s resistance was both personal and communal. Given no formal supervisory position, she did not wait for validation. Instead, she took the initiative to learn FORTRAN and teach it to her entire team of black female “computer geeks.” Her self-education was a form of strategic resistance that prepared her and others to survive the technological shift toward automation.

What made Dorothy’s actions revolutionary was that she lifted others up with her. Her empowerment became collective, ensuring that no one was left behind when the IBM computer was introduced. By mastering the new technology, she not only secured her team’s relevance but also forced NASA to recognize their value. Her promotion, once denied, became inevitable.

Mary Jackson: Legal Resistance and Breaking Down Barriers to Education

Mary’s journey is a prime example of legal resistance. To become an engineer, she had to attend an all-white school. Rather than accept the restrictions, she petitioned and appeared in court. Her respectful but forceful argument convinced the judge, and she was granted the right to enroll. Mary’s resistance took place within the legal framework, but her courage in confronting segregation head-on was radical and transformative. By becoming the first Black female engineer at NASA, Mary challenged systemic exclusion and set a precedent for future generations of women of color in STEM fields.

Quiet Defiance and Respectful Presence

Regardless of the actual action, these women’s persistence in the face of dehumanization is an act of resistance. Their professionalism, dignity, and refusal to harbor feelings of inferiority send a powerful message. By continuing to show up, performing exceptionally, and demanding respect, they are shaking up the status quo from within.

These women did not resort to violence or rebellion; instead, their resistance was rooted in excellence, tenacity, and shared support. Their liberation came not only through external validation but through a reaffirmation of their identities as scientists, leaders, and women worthy of respect.

The acts of resistance and liberation depicted in *Hidden Figures* are multifaceted, from direct confrontation and legal challenges to strategic self-education and quiet resilience. Together, they illustrate the many ways that African women throughout history have resisted marginalization. The film powerfully illustrates that resistance does not always come in the form of grand gestures, but often in the form of quiet, persistent acts of courage that change the system from within.

Education and Intellectualism as Tools of Resistance

All three characters use education and intelligence as weapons against racism. Katherine shows that she is the only one who can calculate the orbital path correctly. Mary does not give up until she gets permission to go to college. Dorothy teaches herself the FORTRAN programming language so that she will not be replaced by computers.

Solidarity and Brotherhood

The characters in this film show the importance of solidarity among black women. They support each other in the face of social and structural pressures. This is in line with Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought which emphasizes the importance of collective experience as strength.

Relevance to Theory

Critical Race Theory: The film shows that racism is not just individual prejudice, but a social and legal structure that regulates work space, education, and professional recognition. Black Feminist Thought: The female characters in the film represent “double subjects” who are oppressed by two systems of domination: patriarchy and white supremacy. However, they are able to scale their space through active resistance.

Social Message of the Film

The Hidden Figures film not only reviews history, but also provides inspiration about the importance of equality, recognition, and justice in every aspect of life. The film highlights how racism and sexism can be overcome through perseverance, intelligence, and solidarity.

Feminist Sociology and Power Structures

Feminist sociology sees that social institutions such as education, law, and the workplace systematically reproduce gender inequality. In the film:

1. NASA as a scientific institution is depicted as highly masculine, hierarchical, and full of white patriarchal norms.
2. Female characters must repeatedly “prove” their worthiness, while their male counterparts are never held to the same standards. This reflects the gender stratification and institutional biases that are a major focus of critique in feminist sociology. While liberal feminism emphasizes the struggle through the system (education, meritocracy, law), feminist sociology reminds us that the system itself needs to be critiqued and changed because it was built by and for the dominant group white males. Liberal feminism in film highlights the individual triumphs of female characters. However, feminist sociology emphasizes the importance of collective solidarity and social movements that fight for systemic change. Hidden Figures does little to highlight the role of the African community or the civil rights movement, even though at the time structural struggles were taking place outside of NASA. The film successfully depicts the struggles of African women to overcome individual and institutional barriers, but it is still limited in depicting the complexity of structural oppression. Feminist sociology provides a deeper understanding of how social and cultural institutions help reinforce racial and gender-based inequities. Therefore, critical analysis of such films should not stop at the narrative of individual equality, but also consider broader social, historical, and collective dimensions.

Collective vs Individual

Liberal feminism in the film highlights the individual victories of female characters. However, feminist sociology highlights the importance of collective solidarity and social movements that fight for systemic change. Hidden Figures does not highlight much of the role of the African community or the civil rights movement, even though at that time the structural struggle was taking place massively outside the NASA institution.

Struggle Through Competence and Professionalism

The three female characters in the film fight discrimination not through direct confrontation, but through hard work, intelligence, and professionalism. Katherine shows her ability to calculate rocket trajectories with high accuracy. Dorothy independently teaches the Fortran programming language and teaches it to fellow African women, while Mary fights in court for her right to take engineering classes.

Through this struggle, the film depicts that African women not only have the intellectual capacity equal to white men, but are also capable of being agents of change amidst a system that limits them.

Representation of Liberal Feminism

From a liberal feminist perspective, the struggles of the three female characters in the film reflect core values such as:

1. Equality of opportunity: All three of them fought to get the same education, job promotions, and access to information as white men and women.
2. Right to education and work: Mary fought against the legal system that restricted black women from studying in engineering institutions. Dorothy refused to be held back by a bureaucratic structure that did not recognize her leadership abilities.
3. Individuals as agents of change: The film emphasizes the importance of individual struggle to prove capacity and break down discriminatory boundaries through legal and professional channels.

However, liberal feminism in this film emphasizes individual struggle and meritocracy more, so that it sometimes closes off the narrative of collective struggle or social structures that perpetuate injustice.

Comparison with Feminist Sociology Perspective

Figures such as bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw emphasize that African women face double or even triple forms of oppression: as women, as black individuals, and as members of an oppressed social class. In the film:

- All three characters must fight against an educational and legal system that is designed to benefit white males.
- They not only have to be “smart” and “hard working,” but also face systemic biases that are difficult to change without structural intervention.
-

Institutional Structures as Systemic Problems Unlike liberal feminism, which sees change as being achieved through individual struggle, feminist sociology views institutions such as NASA, schools, and the courts as part of patriarchal and racial structures that need to be reformed systemically, not just by “great” individuals. **Absent Collective Solidarity** The film emphasizes the narrative of individual success, and under-represents the collective role of the women’s movement or the civil rights movement. In fact, in historical reality, black activists at that time fought for rights systemically through demonstrations, litigation, and mass action.

Racism in Workplace Segregation

One of the most evident forms of racism portrayed in *Hidden Figures* is institutional segregation. The film clearly depicts how African women were systematically excluded from equal access to workplace facilities. Katherine Johnson, for example, is forced to walk half a mile to use the

“Colored Ladies Room.” This scene represents structural racism, where discriminatory policies are embedded in the organization’s operations.

Scene & Dialogue:

Timestamp: 00:38:25 – 00:39:15

Dialogue:

Harrison: “Where the hell have you been?!”

Katherine Johnson: “There’s no bathroom for me here.”

Katherine Johnson (continued): “I have to walk to the West Campus half a mile away. And I can’t use one of the handy bikes. And there are no colored bathrooms in this building, or anywhere nearby.”

Analysis:

This scene reveals structural racism embedded in the institution’s infrastructure. Under Crenshaw’s intersectionality, Katherine’s experience is shaped by both her race (as an African) and her gender (as a woman in a male-dominated department). Her productivity is questioned not because of incompetence, but because systemic racism forces her into an inefficient and humiliating daily routine.

From an intersectional perspective, Katherine is discriminated against not only because she is African but also because she is a woman in a male-dominated scientific environment. This dual oppression magnifies her struggles, as white male colleagues not only question her competence due to her race but also her gender.

Racism in Professional Opportunities

Dorothy Vaughan’s experience demonstrates how racial bias hinders career advancement. Despite performing the duties of a supervisor, she is denied the official title and corresponding salary for an extended period. This reflects institutional racism that operates under the guise of bureaucratic procedure but is rooted in racial prejudice.

Timestamp: 00:28:40 – 00:29:05

Dialogue:

Dorothy Vaughan: “Mrs. Mitchell, I was just wondering if you’ve heard anything about that supervisor position?”

Mrs. Mitchell: “I believe it’s already filled.”

Dorothy Vaughan: “No one’s been appointed yet.”

Analysis:

Dorothy’s lack of promotion shows institutional racism cloaked in bureaucratic delay. From an intersectional view, her disadvantage is compounded white women may face sexism at NASA, but they are not simultaneously subjected to racial exclusion from leadership roles. Dorothy’s eventual promotion only occurs when her IBM programming skills become indispensable, reflecting the need for African women to far exceed expectations to receive recognition.

Crenshaw’s framework reveals that Dorothy’s position as an African woman places her at a disadvantage on two fronts while white women at NASA also faced sexism, they did not endure the same racial barriers. Dorothy’s eventual promotion only occurs when her technical skills in programming become indispensable, showing how African women often have to “overperform” to receive recognition.

Racism in Educational and Legal Barriers

Mary Jackson's journey to become NASA's first African female engineer illustrates systemic racism reinforced by legal segregation. She must petition the court to attend an all-white engineering program, highlighting how education systems upheld racial exclusion. The courtroom scene reveals not only legal discrimination but also the persistence required of African women to navigate these barriers.

Timestamp: 00:53:10 – 00:54:35

Dialogue:

Judge: "Why would you want to attend an all-white school?"

Mary Jackson: "Your Honor, out of all the cases you will hear today, which one will matter 100 years from now? Which one will make you the first?"

Analysis:

This scene highlights systemic racism upheld by law. Crenshaw's theory emphasizes that Mary is not only fighting racial exclusion but also challenging gender stereotypes in engineering. Her legal victory is a personal milestone but also symbolic of broader challenges against intersecting systems of oppression.

Under Crenshaw's intersectionality, Mary's case shows how laws designed to maintain racial hierarchy intersect with patriarchal norms that doubted women's abilities in technical fields. Her success does not erase the discriminatory structures but showcases the resilience required to overcome them.

Interpersonal Racism and Microaggressions

Beyond overt segregation, the film depicts subtler forms of racism microaggressions through dismissive attitudes, underestimation, and exclusion from decision-making. For example, white colleagues often overlook Katherine's contributions or question her mathematical results until verified by a male superior. This reflects Crenshaw's idea that racism is not always explicit; it can be embedded in daily interactions, shaping workplace culture and reinforcing systemic inequality. These microaggressions, combined with sexism, create a hostile environment that African women must navigate.

Overcoming Racism through Agency and Solidarity

While the film portrays numerous instances of racism, it also emphasizes the agency of African women in resisting and overcoming these challenges. Katherine's insistence on attending high-level briefings, Dorothy's self-taught mastery of IBM programming, and Mary's legal challenge against segregated education all demonstrate active resistance against oppressive systems.

Through the lens of intersectionality, these acts are not merely personal victories but collective challenges to the interconnected systems of racial and gender oppression. Their success illustrates how African women's struggles are both individual and representative of broader social change.

Subtle and Overt Racism in Interpersonal Dynamics

The film portrays multiple microaggressions and discriminatory behaviors from white colleagues. For example, Paul Stafford, Katherine's co-worker, deliberately withholds information crucial for her calculations and questions her credibility, not because of her lack of skill, but because of her race and gender. These acts are reflective of racial gatekeeping, where white men control access to knowledge and authority.

Moreover, even the well-meaning white supervisor, Vivian Mitchell, displays a form of passive racism upholding systemic barriers while denying personal prejudice. Her statement, “I have nothing against y’all,” illustrates color-blind racism, which ignores structural inequalities while maintaining them.

Gendered Racism and Double Discrimination

The protagonists face intersectional oppression—a combination of racism and sexism. Their contributions are doubted not only because they are black, but also because they are women in a male-dominated scientific field. This double discrimination is most apparent when Mary Jackson is told she cannot attend engineering classes at an all-white school, despite being qualified. The legal battle she pursues highlights both the legal and social exclusions faced by African women striving for professional growth.

Katherine’s role is constantly undermined until her mathematical genius becomes indispensable. Only when John Glenn personally requests her confirmation of flight coordinates does the institution begin to truly acknowledge her worth. This validation, however, only comes after she surpasses near-impossible odds, illustrating how African women must overperform to receive minimal recognition.

Resistance and Empowerment

Despite these barriers, *Hidden Figures* also emphasizes resistance, resilience, and agency. Dorothy Vaughan teaches herself and her team how to program the IBM computer, anticipating the future of automation and ensuring continued employment for black women. Her proactive leadership challenges the stereotype of black passivity in the workplace.

Mary Jackson’s legal petition to attend an all-white school is a pivotal act of resistance that bridges civil rights activism and professional ambition. Katherine Johnson’s moment of defiance calling out the absurdity of segregated bathrooms forces her white superiors to confront the institutional racism they perpetuate. These acts of resistance not only benefit the protagonists but contribute to a broader redefinition of black womanhood from invisible laborers to visible innovators and leaders.

The Problem of White Saviorism and Cinematic Choices

While *Hidden Figures* powerfully centers Black women’s experiences, some critics have noted the film’s use of the white savior trope. Al Harrison, Katherine’s supervisor, is shown as the one to remove the “colored bathroom” sign, symbolically desegregating the office. This moment is emotionally effective but historically inaccurate. According to real-life accounts, Katherine Johnson did not experience such restroom segregation in the way the film portrays.

This choice reflects Hollywood’s tendency to depict white characters as catalysts for change, potentially undermining the agency of the Black protagonists. While Harrison’s character is fictionalized to create dramatic tension, his actions risk overshadowing the quiet, persistent efforts of the real women who fought systemic racism on their own terms.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis of the film *Hidden Figures* (2016), it can be concluded that this film very much depicts the forms of structural racism and gender discrimination faced by African women in the professional work environment, especially at NASA in the 1960s. Through the characters of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, this film shows that:

1. Structural racism and sexism are major barriers for black women in achieving equal positions, both in terms of facilities, professional recognition, and educational and career rights.
2. Forms of discrimination experienced include segregation of work spaces, removal of contributions from official documentation, restriction of positions, and denial of fair access to training and self-development.
3. The main characters in this film are able to overcome these limitations through intelligence, tenacity, solidarity, and courage. They prove that ability knows no skin color or gender.
4. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminist Thought, the film can be seen as a narrative critique of discriminatory social and political systems, as well as a form of recognition of the contributions of African women to the history of science and technology.
5. The film *Hidden Figures* is not only entertainment, but also educational media that carries a strong message about social justice, gender equality, and the fight against discrimination.

REFERENCES

- Collins, P. (2000). *Pemikiran Feminis Kulit Hitam: Pengetahuan, Kesadaran, dan Politik pemberdayaan*. London: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (1998). *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. University OfMinnesota Press.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness,*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (2004). *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Costello, V. M. (1993). *"The Creation of Self and Personalism in Tony*. Montana: Missoula: University of Montana.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). *America: Kimberlé Crenshaw* .
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). *"Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies."*. America: Crenshaw, Kimberlé.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). *Memetakan Margin: Interseksionalitas, Politik Identitas, dan Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan Kulit Berwarna*. *Stanford Law Review*, 1241-1299.
- Delago, R. &. (2001). *Teori Ras Kritis*. NYU Press.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hasanah, S. &. (2020). "Re-Imagining Black Scientists in *Hidden Figures*." *Journal of Film Criticism*, 67-84.
- Hooks, b. (1992). *Penampilan kulit hitam: Ras dan Representasi*. South and press.
- Liao, W. &. (2022). *Women as Hidden Figures in Male Hegemony: Gender and Racial Ideologies in Hidden Figures*." *ournal of Film and Cultural Studies*, , 99-117.
- Melfi, T. (Director). (2016). *Hidden Figures* [Motion Picture].
- Mulvey, L. (1975). *Kenikmatan Visual dan Sinema Naratif*. *Layar*, 16, 6-18.

Rachmatiya, A. &. (2021). "Discourse and Racism in Hidden Figures.". *Elite Journal*, 45–59.

Shetterly, M. L. (2016). *the american dream and the untold story of the black women who helped win the space race*. american: Margot Lee Shetterly.

Smith, V. (1986). *Anatomy of a Canon Sojur*. America: Smith V.

Thompson, A. (2020). "See what she becomes: Black women's resistance in Hidden Figures.". *Feminist Media Studies*, , 612–628.