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Representation of Black Feminism in *Hidden Figures*

Andre Ikhsano[1], Jakarudi[2]
[1,2] Institut Komunikasi dan Bisnis LSPR
[1,2] Jl. KH Mas Mansyur Kav. 35 Jakarta Pusat
Email: andre.i@lspr.edu[1], jakarudi@gmail.com[2]

ABSTRACT

Hidden Figures is a film based on the true story of three African American women who help NASA in the space race. The three African American women are Katherine G. Johnson, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan. With the setting of the 1960s era, these three women are fighting against a climate of segregation (separation based on race or skin color) in their work environment (NASA). This study aims to explore Patricia Hill Collins' theory of black feminism and to integrate it with Stella Ting-Toomey's theory of face-negotiation. This research is based on a critical paradigm and uses a qualitative approach. Using Sara Mills's critical discourse analysis as a data analysis technique, this study found a representation of black feminism in the film Hidden Figures. The discrimination experienced by the characters is in the form of racism, sexism, and classism. However, the resistance carried out by the characters is through self definition, not in safe spaces as mentioned by Collins. The characters also do not avoid conflict, but use a negotiation approach with a compromising style to achieve a win-win solution.

Keywords: *Black feminism, face-negotiation, racism, sexism, classism*

ABSTRAK

Hidden Figures adalah film yang diangkat berdasarkan kisah nyata tiga perempuan Afro-Amerika yang membantu NASA dalam *space race*. Ketiga perempuan Afro-Amerika itu adalah Katherine G. Johnson, Mary Jackson, dan Dorothy Vaughan. Dengan *setting* waktu era 1960-an, ketiga perempuan ini berjuang melawan iklim segregasi (pemisahan berdasarkan pada ras atau warna kulit) di lingkungan kerja mereka (NASA). Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendalami teori *black feminism* Patricia Hill Collins dan hendak mengintegrasikannya dengan teori *face-negotiation* Stella Ting-Toomey. Penelitian ini didasarkan pada paradigma kritis dan menggunakan penekatan kualitatif. Menggunakan analisis wacana kritis Sara Mills sebagai teknik analisis data, penelitian ini menemukan representasi *black feminism* di dalam film *Hidden Figures*. Diskriminasi yang dialami para tokoh adalah berupa *racism*, *sexism*, dan *classism*. Akan tetapi, perlawanan yang dilakukan para tokoh adalah melalui *self definition*, tidak dilakukan dalam *safe spaces* sebagaimana disinggung oleh Collins. Para tokoh juga tidak menghindari konflik, namun menggunakan pendekatan negosiasi dengan gaya *compromising style* dalam mencapai *win-win solution*.

Kata Kunci: Black feminism, face-negotiation, racism, sexism, classism

INTRODUCTION

Black feminism is a movement to fight oppression experienced by black women (Taylor, 2016). Black feminism focuses on racism, classism and gender; these three things are believed to be the source of oppression experienced by black women (Collins, 2009). Race is a socially constructed artifact in which a person is categorized based on visual differences. Classism is rooted in the economic system of capitalism which produces a system of domination and

subordination based on social class. Sexism is a form of prejudice and discrimination against a person's gender (Reid, 1988). For Particia Hill Collins (2009), the three are related to each other (intersectionality).

In fighting the oppression experienced by black women, black feminism challenges the stereotypes that black women tend to attach to (Collins, 2009). This bad image or stereotype is believed to be produced by schools (Cole, 2017; Islam & Asadullah, 2018; Starr, 2018), media (Andrews et al., 2017; Kilgo & Mourão, 2019; Perkins, 2016) and government agencies. In the context of the media, it turns out that the media can also support the feminist movement to promote equality for women, one of which is through films (Hobson, 2002). The film itself is a reflection of the condition of society and can be used to deliver certain messages to the community (McQuail, 2005).

Through the film *Hidden Figures*, readers can also see how the film not only tells about discrimination experienced by African-American women, but also how they struggle against oppression. In *Hidden Figures*, the discrimination experienced by African-American women is clear, as in the words "colored ladies room" on the outside wall of the toilet. The writing was eventually destroyed by one of the characters in the film, *"No more colored restrooms. No more white restrooms. Here at NASA, we all pee the same color"*.

Based on the explanation above, this study intends to explore Patricia Hill Collins' theory of black feminism and integrate it with Stella Ting-Toomey's theory of face-negotiation. In this study, several previous studies that have the same research subjects with this study are research of Febrianti et al. (2000), Haryanti et al. (2019), Febriani and Arianto (2020), Monica et al. (2018), and Susanti et al. (2020) (Febriani & Arianto, 2020; Febrianti et al., 2019; Haryanti et al., 2019; Monica et al., 2018; Susanti et al., 2020). The difference between this research and previous studies is the data analysis methods and techniques used, as well as the integration of black feminism with the face-negotiations theory.

Black Feminism

Black feminism believes that gender is the main source of women's oppression. In contrast to white female feminism, which considers the family as the main instrument of women's subordination, black feminism considers the family as an important instrument to protect against racism (Breines, 2007). In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins says that race, class and gender are the focus of black feminism (Collins, 2009). Three of them are considered as a source of interrelated oppression (intersectionality) experienced by black women. Thus, black women must experience triple oppressions: racism, sexism, and classism (Lynn, 2014).

Discrimination based on race, gender and class will not end if there is no strong ideology for existence of black women. This is where black feminism has an important role to challenge bad image of black women (Acuff, 2018; Benard, 2016; Collins, 2009; Taylor, 2016). These bad images are designed so that forms of social injustice appear natural, normal, unavoidable in everyday life (Collins, 1996, 2009).

Face Negotiation

Face-negotiation theory helps explain how individuals in different cultural groups communicate with each other (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2016). Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2016) define faces as positive images of individuals in the context of social interaction. Face refers to a person's self-image in front of others which involves respect, loyalty and other similar values (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The face-negotiation theory itself comes from the Politeness Theory developed by Brown and Levinson, which argues that facial needs are universal, formed during social interactions, and are determined based on culture (Brown et al., 1987; Shpeer & Howe, 2020).

METHOD

This study uses critical paradigm with qualitative approach. The unit of analysis in this research is four (4) scenes in *Hidden Figure* film which will focus on compromising sexism, racism and classism. The data analysis technique used is Sara Mills critical discourse analysis..

Table 1. Research Focus

Object of Research	Element	Evidence
Black Feminism in the film *Hidden Figures*	*Compromising Sexism*	Prejudice or discrimination based on sex
	Compromising Racism	Discrimination against women based on race or ethnicity
	Compromising Classism	Discrimination against women based on social status

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Racism and *Classism* in the First Scene

Table 2. Sara Mills's Critical Discourse Analysis in the First Scene

Subject-Object Position	**Subject**: Katherine (Woman)	**Object**: Harrison (Man)
Author-Reader Position	**The author** describes the discriminatory situations (racism and classism) experienced by African-American women. This situation is very detrimental and needs to be fought for.	**Readers** are positioned as African American women who should be aware that black women have the same rights as white men.

In the *first scene*, Katherine is depicted experiencing discrimination while working at the *Space Task Group*, such as toilets separation, workload, and the salary she receives. In this context, Katherine was unable to use toilet normally used by white males. Toilets for Katherine, as well as for other African-American women, are far outside the building (racism). Katherine's workload is even heavier than the white workload, including the longer work hours experienced by African-American workers at NASA (classism). Likewise, the ratio of the amount of income (salary), whether it is received by Katherine or her colleagues (classism).

However, this discriminatory situation was well handled by Katherine. On one occasion, Katherine expressed her opinion (negotiation) to Harrison that differences in toilet can have an impact on work effectiveness and efficiency. This can be seen when Katherine got wet in the rain coming from the toilet, things Katherine would not have experienced if she could use the toilet in the building.

Figure 1. First Scene (Minutes 1:01:16 – 1:03:58)

Harrison finally realized that the climate of segregation not only had a negative impact on Katherine, but also decreased the effectiveness and efficiency of teamwork. Moreover, NASA is trying to catch up with Russia. As team leader, Harrison took the important decision by allowing African-American workers to use toilets in the building, which had not previously been allowed for African-American workers.

Sexism in Scene Two

Table 3. Sara Mills's Critical Discourse Analysis in Scene Two

Subject-Object Position	**Subject**: Mary Jackson (Woman)	**Object**: Judge (Man)
Author-Reader Position	**The author** describes the discrimination in education experienced by African-American women. In a situation like this, African-American women struggle to claim their rights and take a negotiating approach in resolving conflicts.	**Readers** are positioned as African American women who have to fight for the right to education, because basically everyone (including women) has the right to education regardless of their background.

This scene tells story of Mary Jakcson's struggle to gain access to education at a university until she finally succeeded in becoming an engineer and working at NASA. Mary Jackon was finally able to prove that she too could be an engineer, a job that at that time was identified with men. When she demanding her rights, Mary Jackson succeeded in making a negotiating approach to the judge on how education should be equal in treating men and women.

Figure 2. Scene Two (Minutes 1:10:48 – 1:13:05)

Classism, *Racism*, and *Sexism* in Scene Three

Table 4. Sara Mills's Critical Discourse Analysis on Scene Three

Subject-Object Position	Subject: Katherine (Woman)	Object: Harrison (Man)
Author-Reader Position	**The author** describes the discrimination experienced by Katherine (as well as other African-American women) in the workplace. However, they chose to fight and showed they had the capability and were able to resolve conflicts.	**Readers** are positioned as African-American women who should be aware that they have the same capabilities, and even exceed white men.

This scene shows that Katherine is actually nothing more than a "computer" that is not allowed to write a report. Katherine was also prohibited from attending meetings. In this regard, white males should naturally dominate Katherine and other African-American workers (classism). Their knowledge is also superior to that of Katherine and the African-American workers (racism). Or, more generally, women should not be equal to men (sexism).

Figure 3. Scene Three (Minutes 1:21:11 – 1:22:16)

However, if Harrison does not allow Katherine to enter and attend the meeting, the launch will fail, because only Katherine is able to provide a precise calculation of whether or not the launch will be carried out by NASA. With her skills, especially in the field of geometrical analysis, all the participants at meeting were finally struck by Katherine's ability to perform calculations. Through this scene, Katherine's capabilities and competencies are recognized or equal to all of her male colleagues.

Racism and *Sexism* in Scene Four

Table 5. Sara Mills's Critical Discourse Analysis on Scene Four

Subject-Object Position	**Subject**: Dorothy (Woman)	**Object**: Bill Couhan (Man)
Author-Reader Position	**The author** illustrates the importance of fighting the bad stereotypes of white men by empowering fellow African-American women. Equality can be fought for, and negotiation can be an approach in realizing equality.	**Readers** are positioned as African-American women who should be aware that they have the same capabilities, and even exceed white men.

Dorothy is a well-performing African American female worker at NASA. However, due to differences in skin color, Dorothy's career was hampered. The challenges grew when NASA started using IBM computers. With this new device, Dorothy and her Afro-American colleagues will certainly find it difficult if they are unable to operate the new device. Dorothy immediately learned how to operate the new device. He also taught his female colleagues (Afro-Americans) so they could use the computer, before white males could use it.

Figure 4. Scene Four (Minutes 1:21:11 – 1:22:16)

When NASA finally promoted Dorothy to a certain position, Dorothy refused, unless NASA was willing to include his colleagues (African-American). Dorothy's offer was accepted. Apart from being appointed as supervisor, Dorothy also brought her African-American colleagues to work on operating IMB. On the other hand, Bill had to break the rules requiring separation between white and black workers. However, with the presence of Dorothy and other African

American women, Bill was able to operate IBM to its full potential and succeed NASA's other missions.

DISCUSSIONS

Through the four scenes described earlier, the *Hidden Figures* film shows how the three main characters experience discrimination in the form of racism, sexism, and classism, and how the three are connected each other (intersectionality). In the context of this film, what is interesting is the film's setting that takes place in the middle of "space race" of the United States and the Soviet Union. As a result of the segregation experienced by Katherine in toilet problems, for example, the effectiveness and efficiency of work is at stake (Hughes & Dodge, 1997), and this in turn leads character of Harrison to an important decision: *"No more colored restrooms. No more white restrooms. Here at NASA, we all pee the same color"*. What Katherine was trying to convey, then, was how discriminatory behavior could not lead NASA achieve its goals.

Likewise with Dorothy, who clearly showed how discrimination reduced effectiveness and efficiency in achieving NASA's goal: defeating the Soviet Union. What happened to Dorothy is not much different from what happened to Katherine. The difference, Dorothy has succeeded in empowering her fellow Afro-American women. Here, role of empowerment was successfully performed by Dorothy (Vm, 1995) compared to that of Katherine and Mary Jackson.

The two scenes above, experienced by Katherine and Dorothy, show how discrimination against women occurs in the work environment (Marshall & Barnett, 1992; Pogrebin et al., 2000). Outside the workplace, Mary Jackson's character was discriminated against when she was banned from participating in the *Engineer Training Program*. In fact, this training program is a requirement to become an engineer at NASA. After all, the training program was held at Hampton High School, a school for whites. However, after taking legal action, Mary Jackson finally got her rights and was able to attend the training. As a reflection of reality (McQuail, 2005), the scene experienced by Mary Jackson can show how the education space (school) which should be value-free is actually entangled in discriminatory practices (Lomotey, 2019; Mählck, 2016; Mitchell Jr. et al., 2017).

The struggles of the three women above, when viewed in the framework of Collins' black feminism, demonstrate the ability of the three to carry out *self-identity*. This means that the struggles of the three figures were not carried out in the *safe spaces* as offered by Collins, but outside *safe spaces*, especially by using the *face-negotiation* approach in resolving conflicts (discrimination).

Another thing that is worth to mentioning is how film (as a medium) could be a means to campaign for equality values for women as well as to motivate them to fight for these values (Wibowo, 2019). Of course there are many other forms of media that can also be used to campaign for the values of equality for women (Ikhsano & Inkiriwang, 2015; Rahmi, 2017). However, film media certainly has its own advantages in conveying a message to the wider community (McQuail, 2005) as has been done by *Hidden Figures*.

CONCLUSION

The film *Hidden Figures* represents Black Feminism shown by the characters Katherine G. Johnson, Mary Jackson and Dorothy Vaughan. This representation of black feminism is depicted through the discrimination experienced by the three of them in the form of racism, sexism, and classism. These three main characters successfully fight against discrimination through *self-definition*. The struggle of the three was not carried out in *safe spaces* as stated by Patricia Collins. Katherine's *self-definition* has succeeded in making her an indispensable figure for NASA, especially because of her ability to analyze geometry; Mary Jackson became NASA's first black female engineer; Dorothy Vaughan became NASA's first black female super-visor. In doing *self-definition*, both Katherine, Mary and Dorothy choose *face-negotiation* as a resolution of the conflicts.

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