

## RACISM TOWARDS AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN “HIDDEN FIGURES”

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### Abstract

Racism is issue that still going on in the world. Different race and skin color make some people believe that they have more privilege than others. The issue of racism can be seen from Hidden Figures movie that was addapted from the book with the same title. Hidden Figures by Theodore Melfi is a story about racism towards African American women who worked in NASA during the space race in 1960. In this research, the researcher takes three main characters named Katherine, Dorothy and Merry who get discrimination in their life because they have different race and skin color as a source. Qualitative descriptive method is the method that was used in this research. The tehcnique of collecting data is by watching the movie and reading the book then collect the utterances and dialogue that have racism issue. The aim of this research is to find out racism in what field that happened in America during 1960 especially in NASA through Hidden Figures. The result of this analysis found that the racism reflected trough discrimination in education, facility, social, and work.

**Keyword:** Discrimination, Racism, Afro American, and Hidden Figure

### INTRODUCTION

Afro American or also known as African American is a term that Whites used to call an African during 1961. Africans themselves were brought directly from Africa and became slaves. At first, Africans become slaves because Europeans need people who willing to work as a labor and were paid with minimum wage.

Before United States was found, Africans workedf with Europeans. Although slaves are known as black people, there are also some whites that become slaves even though the percentage was low. Not only they were treated as slaves, other bad treatment also happened to them. The treatment that they got was humiliating. Slaves were forced to work day and night and were paid the minimum wage or they even didn't get anything from their hard work. Many Women were raped and had to let their children became slaves too due to human trafficking. They also couldn't have education. After the United States was found, they were separated to two regions. This made the children got separated even futher from their parents.

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After United States was found, it was separated to two regions. They are North and South. The fact that African in North and South have different point of view in living their life, this phenomenon led to Civil War. The reason of this war at first is about the slavery which both of them have different opinion about this and the second is to follow about the states right. North Americans were working as agriculture by hanging their life through cotton. Opposite from North, in South the southerners were working as industrial. Not to mention that these two also had different economic status. South as an industrial country they were had a higher social economic.

The different perspective about slavery was very brutal at that time. North Americans thought that South shouldnt have slaves anymore because it wasnt the right thing to do and South thought that slavery is such a common thing to happened at that time. The fact that African in north and south have different equality in living their life it led to the civil war. The purpose of this war at first is about the slavery which they were forced to become slaves and follow about the states right. North Americans were working as agriculture by hanging their life through cotton. Opposite from North, in South the southerners were working as industrial. Not to mention that these two also had different economic status. South as an industrial country they were had a higher social economic and they were thinking that it wasn't ok to have slaves. These different point of view lead them to civil war, but because South was a developed country the result of the war was won by Southerners.

### **Post-colonialism**

Post-colonialism (or often post-colonialism) deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Post-colonialism is a condition where effect of colonization on society and the response from the society itself. Post-colonialism can be classified into racism, slavery, feminism, ambivalence, mimicry and so on. The identity itself can be from gender, race, social group, cultural, ethnic. Racism is one of the thing that they face. According to Wilson in which the presumed biological or cultural superiority of one or more racial groups is used to justify or prescribe the inferior treatment or social position(s) of other racial groups (Clair, 2015). Although it happens to men and women, women are more difficult to live their life during that time. Races, sex, and paradigm of how women should live their life is still not equal. They often control how women should dress, work, and choose their career. The racism towards black women makes them fight for their right.

### **Racism**

Racism often appears when someone is a minority in the society. Whether it is based on skin color, gender, race, nationality, and so on. Racism will always appear if we still have

the mind that not think about the equality. Racism can happen to both men and women. Speaking about racism, we often don't realize about it. The awareness is still low. Accepting the difference will make a change at least we don't discriminate the minority.

In Hidden Figures movie white Americans still think that black people are minority. Not only minority, black Americans also considered as the lowest race. Many problems are appeared in this movie. One of the things that appear is how low their salary is. No matter how low their salary is they still work to survive. Some also have to do an over work thing in order to get what they deserve. They also rarely to get a credit for what they have done. Those examples are only little case that we still find until today.

In this movie, black women were treated differently. The movie is about three African-American women who worked in NASA in 1961. They as black women often got a disrespectful treatment and even had a title 'human computer'. In NASA, white people often got the best position. They even had the different bathroom, cafeteria, library, and so on. These women worked hard even though they didn't get what they deserved.

During Space Race, Katherine who had an engineer brain was asked to join in Space Task Group to help other employees as she was mastered on Analytic Geometry. NASA wanted to send somebody to space but Russia already did that. Knowing Russia was the first country that sent someone to space NASA was frustrated. Katherine was begged to work even harder to make their mission accomplished. Her friends were stuck in the same company and begging to get promotion to have a better position in order to lift up their family. Based on what we already discussed above, the writer will focus on a dialogue in the movie that show racism towards black women.

The term 'post-colonial' per se was first used to refer to cultural interactions within colonial societies in literary circles (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Post-colonial involves racism, ambivalence, discrimination, feminism, slavery and so on. According to Ashcroft post-colonial refers to a term of a condition where effect of colonization has appeared. Post-colonial's identity is we can see from the different identity based on gender, race, cultural and so on.

Before we know the definition of racism, we have to know the definition of race first. Race is an ethnicity of a person or group as a physical appearance. Race itself can be categorized by physiology, distinct group and biologically. The Racism itself can be defined as: a way of thinking that considers a group's unchangeable physical characteristics to be linked in a direct, causal way to psychological or intellectual characteristics, and which on this basis distinguishes between 'superior' and 'inferior' racial groups(Ashcroft et al., n.d.). The racism issue will very whether it is from gender or race. The difference that appears in society lead the problematic about racism. For instance, the skin color, different race, ethnicity. Ethnicity itself

Racism that common happens is in America where black people and white people commonly appear in the same situation. In this research the writer would like to discuss about racism that happens to black women which is gender and race.

Racism in America itself began in the colonial era when white Americans have a privilege of having a good life, have privilege to have work, and privilege to live as good as possible. While white Americans have a better chance to live their life, black Americans on the other hand suffering from life itself. Many of them becomes a slave sometimes they also can't get enough salary. As minority black people tend to get racism from white people. Can't get a better education can cause a major problem. Many ended up not having job at all, becomes a slave and if they have job they will only get a lowest position possible.

In the previous the issue about racism is already found. The first study was done by Katy Sian. She made a paper that examines the experience of racism encountered by academic working within British Universities(Sian, 2017). The method she was using is qualitative which used to examine the condition of object in nature (as side of experiment), her paper is talking about the effect that the structural and syntatic nature of racism that British academics face. In conclusion her interviewees are having racism experience because of the different colour and difference in higher education.

The second research were done by Salter, Perez, and Adam. In this research they bring out the topic about racism in perspective of cultur-psychological. They bring this topic because it is imprinted in cultural artifacts along with ideological discourse and institutional realities. It comes to conclusion that the three key point that shows about the psychological racism. They see the phenomena based on everyday worlds then the preferences and selection, the last is inhabit cultural words. This perspective directs attempts at intervention away from individual tendencies and instead focuses on changing the structures of mind in context that reflect and reproduce racial domination (Salter et al., 2018).

The third researcher is done by Bachtiar. He took the topic racism based in a novel entitled "To Kill Mockingbird" by Harper Lee. The approach that he takes is by identifying through sociological approach. The research was done by using descriptive qualitative method. In conclusion, based on his analysis the discrimination of race is appear when Tom Robinson was fight for his right in the court because black people never wins from whites. The second is he pictures America in the twentieth century where at that time black people was considered the lowest race of all (Syaifudin, 2018).

The last journal that contributed in developing this idea is written by Waworuntu & Arianto (2019) entitled Hibridity of the Chacracters in My Son the Fanatic Story by Hanief Kureshi. By using the Homi K Bhabha theory, this study revealed how the character reflected hybrid phenomena and opaqueness towards its identity. The results of this study indicated that

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there are two forms of hybridity representation in this study. First, the character of mimicry reflected in the sense of ambiguity and contradictory character as a discourse of cultural devotion due to the colonial construction that was formed. Mimicry is represented by the character Parvez in the story. Second, the ambivalence represented by his son named Ali. Ali was aware of the colonial discriminatory against culture so he resisted the construction but on the other hand, he did not know what identity he should hold.

By looking at the description and discussion above, the writer wants to bring up the topic about racism in the post-colonialism era. This issue will probably always appear if we do not have any knowledge about it. Especially in the society where there are minorities. The writer hopes this paper will bring us more knowledge about racism, especially in the post colonialism based on Hidden Figures.

## **METHOD**

This research was done by using qualitative method. Based on (Creswell, 2010), qualitative method is research method which on failsafe post positivism, which used to examine condition on condition of object in nature (as side of experiment), where the examiner key instrument, the analysis data qualitative and the result of qualitative method more emphasize to meaning the generalization (Semiawan, n.d.).

Qualitative method has five kinds of methods. They are Biography, Phenomenology, Grounded-theory, Ethnography and Case Studies. The writer chooses the Phenomenology. Phenomenology actually means let the symptoms be realized and show themselves (Semiawan, n.d.). The reason why the writer chooses this is because the basic characteristic of phenomenology is identifying problems based on someone's life experienced based on the symptoms that appear in the movie and book and the data is not related and not discussing with number or statistics.

The book called Hidden Figures (The American Dreams and The Untold Story of the Black Women Who Helped Win The Space Race) was written by Margot Lee Shetterly in September 2016 before it was adapted as a film. The book won as the number one based on The New York Times Non-Fiction Best-Seller also got Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in 2017. The book that has a long time to write to (it was almost six years) finally released and contain for about more than 300 pages. The book itself by looking at the title was talking about three African-American Women who work in Nasa during the Space Race. The three main characters got discrimination during that time. Given title as "Human Computer" because of how they always treated like a computer. They were forced to work day and night, expected to follow all

the rules that were given. The rebellion happened due to the discrimination that couldn't be handled anymore.

Beside from the success of the book, the movie itself has positive feedback from the viewers. In the movie not much different from the book. Three main casts were Taraji P. Henson as Katherine Johnson, Octavia Spencer as Dorothy Vaughan, and Janelle Monae as Mary Jackson. The movie also has numerous awards, one of them is nomination for Best Picture from Grammy Awards. The movie was directed by Theodore Melfi. Its success made more than 200 million dollars (USD).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After the researcher finished the research, nine data were found. The racism itself appears not only in the work place, but also appears in social and education. As the minority they need to work hard to have a better life. Given title as "human computer" make them less appreciated. Work day and night doesn't make them get salary as they should do. Also they can't get a promotion because of the racism issue, as a result when they really want to get a promotion they have to go to the court and ask for permission. Here are the data that the writer found:

### 1. WORKPLACE

(1)

*Dorothy: "Mrs. Mitchell? If I could my application for supervisor ma'am are they still considering me to fill that position?"*

*Mrs. Mitchell: "Yes? **The official word is no. They're not assigning a permanent supervisor for a colored group.**"*

*Dorothy: "May I ask why?"*

*Mrs. Mitchell: "I don't know why."*

Data one shows how racism appear in the position of a job. Colored people can't have a position that match with their ability. All they got was being in a low position. As minority black people can't get a promotion if they get promotion, they can't have the position for a long time. The word "colored" refers to the black woman which conclude that this dialogues is one of an example of racism.

(2)

*Mr. Zielinski: "Marry, a person with engineer mind should be an engineer. You can't be a computer for the rest of your life."*

*Marry: "**Mr. Zielinski, I am a Negro woman. I'm not gonna entertain the impossible.**"*

*Mr. Zielinski: "**Let me ask you. If you were a white male, would you wish to be an***

*engineer?"*

*Marry: "I wouldn't have to. I'd already the one."*

Data two shows how bad the racism is. The one that have an ability like an engineer can't be an engineer just because of their skin color. The black women always think that white will always have a privilege to have a better life. The word "Negro" refers to herself as a black woman is an example of racism. She knows for sure that she can't be an engineer because there is no one black female engineer.

(3)

*Vivian: "they've never had a colored in here before, Katherine. Don't embarrassed me."*

Data three shows that white always call the black women by saying "colored" to prove that they are different by the skin color. As the researcher stated before "colored" refers to a black woman. As a first person who gets a promotion in Space Task group she is ask to act as polite as possible because it is a risk job. If she did a wrong job she will not have job anymore especially when she is a minority.

(4)

*Katherine: "excuse me. May I ask where the ladies' room is?"*

*Ruth: "sorry! I have no idea where "your bathroom" is."*

Data four shows that colored people have different bathroom, they are not allowed to share a place with whites. The words "your bathroom" are showing a racism because there should be a colored bathroom for them. They can't be using the same bathroom as white Americans.

(5)

*Mr. Al: "Where the hell do you go every day?"*

*Katherine: "To the bathroom, Sir."*

*Mr. Al: "To the bathroom? To the damn bathroom. 40 minutes a day? What you doing there?"*

*Katherine: "There's no bathroom for me in here, Sir."*

*Mr. al: "What do you mean there is no bathroom for you in here?"*

*Katherine: "There is no bathroom. There are no colored bathroom in this building or any building outside the West Group which is half mile away. Did you know that? I have to walk to Timbuktu just to relieve myself. And I can't use one of the handy bikes. Picture that Mr. Harrison. My uniform skirt below the knee, my heels and a simple string of pearls. Well I don't own pearls. Lord knows you don't pay colored enough to afford pearls! And I work like a dog day and night living off of a cup of*

*coffee from a pot none of you want to touch!* So excuse me if I have to go to the restroom a few times a day.

Data 5 shows how a woman fight for what she deserved, she even yelled to her director because how terrible the condition is. She doesn't get enough salary even though she works hard. She even has to run to the different building just to relieve herself. This differentiation makes the minority hard to just want to relieve themselves. They even can't afford anything because of how low their salary is. The only reason why they still work in there is because instead of become a slave they would rather work with a low salary.

(6)

*Levy Jackson: "A female engineer? We are Negro baby. Ain't such a thing I know it. You can't apply for freedom. Freedom is never granted to the oppressed. It's got to be demanded. Taken."*

*Mary Jackson: "Stop quoting your slogan at me. There is more than one way to achieve something."*

*Levi Jackson: "all I'm saying don't play the fool. I don't wanna see you get hurt NASA's never ever given you guys your due. Having a couple extra degrees aint gonna change that. Civil right aint always civil."*

Data six shows that colored people can't have the best education, they are not accepted in any High School in Virginia. The result is they can't get a better job or promotion because they have lack of education. The sentence "a female negro engineer" shows how impossible it is for black people to get a higher position in their workplace.

## 2. EDUCATION

The data was talking about racism that appeared in education where black people couldn't have the same education as the white people. Back then, schools are meant to be for the white only.

(7)

*Mary Jackson: "Virginia acts like Brown versus Board of education never happened. They are never gonna have a colored woman to just take classes at an all-white school."*

*Dorothy: "Well sounds about right."*

*Mary Jackson: "That's all you gonna say?"*

*Dorothy: "I am not gonna sit here and listen to you complain about the way things are. Petition the court. Fight for what you want."*

Data seven shows that when colored people want to get a better job they have to attend to a High School, unfortunately there is no colored High school, in conclusion they can't have



degree and can't get the best job. The only way she can do is fight for what she wants in the court. By going to the court in order to ask for permission to enroll to college from the judges because that is the last thing she can do even though it wasn't easy for colored people to go to the court.

### 3. PUBLIC AND SOCIAL AREA

This is the racism that happened in the public area. In this data, the racism appeared in the library.

(8)

*Librarian: "We don't want any trouble in here."*

*Dorothy: "Oh I'm here not to find any trouble ma'am."*

*Librarian: "What are you here for?"*

*Dorothy: "A book."*

*Librarian: "**You have books in a colored section.**"*

*Dorothy: "They don't have the book that I'm looking for."*

*Librarian: "**That's just the way it is**"*

Data seven shows how minimum colored people facility is. They do have a section for colored people, but it is not as complete as non-colored. The "colored" and "that's just the way it is" is showing how the equality of having a life is really minor. As we can see from the dialogue, black Americans can't get a book that they are looking for because of how small their variety of books is. They also forbidden to find the book in non-colored section.

(9)

*Judge: "**Hampton High School is a white school Mrs. Jackson**".*

*Marry: "Your Honor may I, I believe there are special circumstances to be considered*

*Judge: "**What would warrant the colored woman attending a white school?**"*

*Marry Jackson: "May I approach your bench sir?"*

*Judge: "Yes."*

*Marry Jackson: "Your honor you all of people should understand the important of being the first."*

*Judge: "How's that Mrs. Jackson?"*

*Marry Jackson: "You were the first in your family to serve in the Armed Forces. U.S Navy. The first who attend university George Mason and the first judge recommissioned by three consecutive governments.*

*Judge: "You've done some research. But what's the point?"*

*Marry Jackson: "The point is no Negro woman in the state of Virginia has ever attended an all-white high school. And I sir I plan to be an engineer on NASA but I can't do that without taking them classes. And I can't change the color of my skin. And all of the cases you have heard today which one gonna matter 100 years from now? Which one is gonna make you the first?"*

*Judge: "Ok. Only the night classes Mrs. Jackson."*

Data 9 shows that it is not easy for them to get a degree in Virginia. In Virginia during 1960 high schools or colleges are only for white people, black people are not allowed to enroll to it due to minority. They even have to go to the court to beg the permission to enter High School in order to have more appropriate job. Go to court to ask the judge for permission is not easy. Having a chance to talk to the judge is rarely happens. Therefore if they do have the chance, they still need to beg in order to have the same equality in education.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion Hidden Figures movie is serving the real case that appeared in post colonialism era. The data that the researcher found were the evidence of how racism take control in such a long time. In this case the racism appear mostly in the work place, but other than that it also appears in the society and education. The effect of racism varies from time to time, but in this movie specific many black women can lose their job. Many black people especially women had to fight for what they want. They have to sacrifice their time in order to lift up the family's economy. The researcher also found that black woman has the best ability to be an engineer, but because of the lack facility to have a degree they just stuck in the same job, called "Human Computer".

Racism can be seen from the dialogue. It can be seen from the dialogue and utterances from the term "colored". Fight for what they want and deserve is the right thing to do. From the dialogue we can see that the minority never gets an appreciation and promotion even if they do, it is usually not a long term position. Always get a title of "human computer" they must work hard day and night and get the salary as low as it is. Lack of facility, lack of education and need to work hard and double as their title is what they have to do. In conclusion the writer found that this movie contains racism issue in workplace specifically NASA in Virginia during the space race 1961.

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