

# THE STRUGGLE OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALE CHARACTER IN MARGOT LEE SHATTERLY'S NOVEL *HIDDEN FIGURES*

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## Abstract

The main topic of this research is the struggle of an African-American woman in facing discriminatory treatment. It is a study on the main character in Margot Lee Shetterly's novel: *Hidden Figures*. The process of this research involves the overall story, intrinsic elements: character and characterization, conflict, setting and plot and also extrinsic elements: liberal feminism, multicultural feminism and racism. This qualitative research is conducted by applying descriptive analysis method along with library research technique, leading to the identification that racism and feminism turns out to cause discrimination. The main character, Katherine, undergoes discrimination on education and employment for African-American people. These experiences eventually prompts the main character to fight against discrimination by proving that she is capable of becoming the first black woman who works for NASA.

**Keywords :** *discrimination, female main character, feminism, racism, struggle*

## BACKGROUND

Women play a very important role in life, a figure who is strong in carrying out various roles, knows no fatigue, hardworking, and is able to play a dual role is considered able to balance and even able to defeat the role of men. This has caused social jealousy among the people, especially men who feel their position is "threatened". Therefore it can be said that this phenomenon raises norms in relation to gender forced in society. As quoted in the book *Gender and Women's Inferiority* (Sugihastuti, 2007: 4), gender is something that is obtained at birth and not something that we have, but something that we do and display. Gender is a cultural and practical assumption that governs the social construction of men, women and their social relations.

Men are indeed constructed as people who are stronger and have more power than women. This makes some men look down on women who consider women to be weak and unreliable creatures. This kind of thinking is internalized as truth by society. Gender injustice often occurs in the lives of women in America in the 1960s, stereotyping the role of women complicates understanding of women themselves. The community expects that women's duties are to take care of the household, meaning that women cannot work like men or women should not get a higher education. Understanding the issue of gender differences is expected to lead to a more humane and fairer view of women even though in the old context women were discriminated in both education and employment. Women have the right to participate and be respected as well as men in the fields of education, social and work.

In the old context, the work positions in America are disaggregated into groups based on sex, ethnicity and racialism. In the book *United States the First New Nation in a Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Lipset, 1963: xviii) which states that African-American descent are hampered at every opportunity to achieve economic success, so that opportunities for African-Americans have not been able to run properly. This is because the black race is considered a low race by whites, on the contrary the whites assume they are a superior race. The assumption of "White Supremacy" results in the ideology and actions of whites who feel superior to blacks. White people consider themselves "normal," "better," "smarter," "holy," different from blacks in the journal *White Supremacy Culture* (www.dismantlingracism.org). As a result, blacks were treated in the form of discrimination.

Even decent education cannot be obtained by blacks, not only because of their low social status, but also because their races are considered inferior. Black people are discriminated against in education, as indicated by their prohibition from going to school in the same place as whites.

Another example is the difference in employment status, blacks have few career opportunities compared to whites despite having the same education. American society believes that all people must have the opportunity to get and achieve something they want (Lipset, 1963: xx), until the late 1960s there was a change in the situation that was much better for blacks. This is evident in the position of the black labor market which has increased to almost the same as white women.

The increase in black race female workers in America in the 1960s occurred because women wanted to get a better life, the way they wanted. This resulted in the emergence of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Feminism is considered as a form of politics aimed at intervening and changing unequal power relations between men and women, and revealing the existence of injustice against women while simultaneously demanding equal rights with men.

The second wave of feminism with the big theme "women's liberation", emerged as a reaction to women's dissatisfaction with the various discrimination they experienced despite the legal and political emancipation achieved by the first wave of feminism. One of the efforts that they strive for in the novel *Hidden Figures* is to be accepted to work for NASA.

NASA is a body formed by the United States in 1958 with the aim of creating a future in space exploration and aeronautics that would benefit the economy of the United States and all of humanity. NASA researchers, engineers and contractors work together to make this extraordinary technology possible. (SPINOFF National Aeronautics and Space Administration: 2013).

The emergence of NASA began at the end of World War II (WW II) which triggered a cold war between the central bloc and allies. World War II, which lasted for six years, leaving two superpowers as winners. The two countries were the United States of America (US) and the Soviet Union who were both incorporated in the Allied Bloc during World War II. The ideological differences adopted by the two countries ended in the Cold War. The political and military tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union make these two countries compete to be the most superior in many ways. The impact of the Cold War was demonstrated through a space race between America and Russia, the fear of the United States of Russia's superiority that first sent its Sputnik satellite into space. (Ramadhanti: 2017)

All of the above are conditions described in Margot Lee Shetterly's novel *Hidden Figures*. In addition, this novel also takes the theme of hard work, unyielding and persistence. *Hidden Figures* discusses issues related to gender and racial inequality that are still problems in daily life. In this case, the present researchers will conduct a study on the novel by using the theory of feminism and racism. The main character, Katherine Johnson, was the first female black race who could work at NASA and help John Glenn become the first American astronaut to orbit the Earth. But at that time, white people in America were very discriminating against blacks. In Western countries, blacks are used as objects rather than history, blacks are considered to cause problems for whites. (Barker, 2004: 219). This is what makes Katherine receive double the pressure as African-American descent. Katherine had to prove that they too were worthy of being able to work at NASA even though many people were sneering and treating them inappropriately.

### **Problem Identification and Limitation**

The identification of the problem lies in the treatment of whites who discriminated against Katherine as an African-American woman. Therefore, the problem is limited to the struggle of the main female character in obtaining equality in her life both in terms of work and education in the midst of conditions that still impose white supremacy. The views of the white race against the black race is going to be analyzed through the study of characters that are supported by the elements of conflict and settings that occur between the characters through feminism and racism approaches. Resistance to various forms of discrimination experienced by the picture of American background life still looks down on black race.

### **Research problem**

Based on the background and problem identification, the formulation of the

problem obtained in this study is how the main female character faces the discriminatory treatment she experienced as an African-American descent to be accepted to work at NASA.

### **Research purposes**

This study aims to show the efforts of the main character as a black race woman in her struggle to face the discriminatory treatment she experienced. In addition this research also aims to show that the desire to get a better life in all aspects of life is the right of every human being regardless of one's gender or racial issues.

### **Research Methodology**

Based on these objectives, this study uses descriptive analytical methods using intrinsic and extrinsic elements. The intrinsic element discusses character and characterizations, conflicts, settings and plot, while the extrinsic element discusses liberal and multicultural feminism and racism. Whereas, the research technique used to conduct this research is library research. In analyzing research data, the author uses the Literature Research Methodology reference book by Jabrohim, 2003. There are three parts in research activities, namely planning, implementing and reporting.

### **Literature review**

In analyzing research, a literary work can be divided into two parts, namely intrinsic and extrinsic elements. Intrinsic elements are the elements that construct the literary work itself and participate in building the story. In analyzing this novel, the writer only discusses characters, settings, conflicts and plot. (Nurgiyantoro, 1995: 30)

### **Character and Characterization**

A character is an actor who carries events in a fictional story so that the event can intertwine a story. (Aminuddin in Nurgiyantoro, 1995; 79). While "characterization" is broader in

understanding than "character". Characterization covers the problem of who the character is, how characterization and how the placement and depiction in a story so as to be able to provide a clear picture to the reader.

There are four categories of characters according to Burhan Nurgiyantoro (Nurgiyantoro, 2013: 258-274), namely:

- Leaders and Additional Leaders
- Protagonist and Antagonist
- Flat Character and Round Character
- Static Character and developing Character

### **Conflict**

Conflict is something dramatic, referring to the battle between two forces that is balanced and implies the existence of actions and countermeasures (Wellek & Warren, 1989: 285) In novels, conflict is very important to attract readers because conflicts through various events will determine the story that is produced. Forms of conflict can be divided into two categories: External conflict and internal conflict. External conflict is a conflict that occurs between a character with something outside of himself, it can be with the natural environment, the human environment or other figures. Internal conflict or (psychiatric conflict, inner conflict) is a conflict that occurs in the heart and mind of a character's soul like a conflict experienced between humans and themselves.

### **Settings**

The setting or background of the story is also called the foundation of the story, referring to the understanding of the place, the relationship of time and history and the social environment in which the events are told. The setting can be divided into three elements, namely:

- The setting of the place shows the location of the event being told.
- The time setting relates to the problem of "when" events occur that are told in a work of fiction.

- Socio-cultural background refers to matters relating to the behavior of the social life of the community somewhere

### **Plot**

Plot is a series of events in a story arranged chronologically. Quoted from Stanton (1965: 14) argues that the plot is a story that contains a sequence of events, but each event is only connected causally, one event caused or caused another event. There are three types of plots in literature, namely:

- Progressive or progressive flow; that is, the story begins with the introduction of characters and their character, introduction to the setting of places, times and events. After that, problems began to arise and the problem became more complicated.
- Reverse flow or regression; in this flow, the story begins with the stages of completion then the anticlimax, climax, the appearance of conflict and ends at the stage of introduction of the character of the story.
- The mixed flow or To and Fro of this story starts from the climax stage, the climax is presented earlier then backed up to the problem recognition stage.

### **Extrinsic Element**

The present researchers uses extrinsic theory to analyze the main female characters in the novel *Hidden Figures*. The main purpose of analyzing the extrinsic element is to find out the background using feminism and racism approaches. The extrinsic element is the subjectivity of individual authors who have attitudes, beliefs and outlook on life. (Nurgiyantoro, 1995: 30).

### **Feminism**

The theory of feminism is used to analyze problems about the position of women in all aspects of life. Feminism is a women's movement that demands emancipation or equality and fairness of rights with men.

Emancipation occurs as a result of women from a low economic position who receive legal restraint wanting to develop and advance. In general, feminism is considered as a form of politics that aims to intervene and change the unequal power relations between men and women. (Hollows, 2000: 4). As quoted in Barker, feminism is a field of theory and politics that contains various perspectives and perceptions that compete with one another in order to take action (Barker Chris, 2004: 26).

Feminism in its history is divided into several waves starting from the first wave feminism, the second wave feminism and the third wave feminism or known as post-feminism. The first wave of feminism (1792-1960), produced several streams such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, anarchist feminism, marxist feminism and socialist feminism. In the second wave of feminism produced several streams like feminism gynosentrys existentialism and feminism. The third wave of feminism produced several streams such as postmodern feminism, multicultural feminism, global feminism, and ecofeminism which focused on diversity and change.

### **Liberal Feminism**

This feminism developed in the West in the 18th century, along with the development of new thoughts of the enlightenment. The philosophical basis of this school is Joh Lock's teachings on natural rights (human rights) that every human being has the right to life, the right to freedom and the right to seek happiness. The basis of understanding liberal feminism are the principles of liberalism which believe that the main purpose of social life is for individual freedom and prosperity. The aim of liberal feminism is to create a "just and caring society where freedom develops". Thus, in such a society both women and men can develop themselves. Liberal feminism in the 18th century fought for equal education and in

the 19th century fought for equal political rights and economic opportunities. (Tong, 1998: 18).

At that time in the 18th century feminists wanted equal education. One of the feminist figures was Mary Wollstonecraft, she encouraged women to become autonomous decision makers and the path to autonomy was pursued through education, she decided that highly educated women did not need to be independent independently economically, or politically active. For Wollstonecraft, wanting a woman to be a person- a woman as a whole, women are not "just tools" or instruments, for the happiness or perfection of others. Instead, women are "goals" to determine their own destiny (Tong, 1998: 21-22). The struggle for Wollstonecraft was continued by John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, in the 19th century liberal feminists wanted equal political rights and economic opportunities. Mill and Taylor believe if society wants to achieve sexual equality, or gender justice, for that society must give women the same political rights and opportunities, and education that men enjoy. (Tong, 1998: 23)

### **Multicultural Feminism**

Multicultural feminism was born in America as a response of black feminists to white feminists. In other words, black feminists view the world of women differently from what white feminists understand. Because they come from different races, different cultural and historical backgrounds. These differences have led to different understandings in the framework of the struggle to defend women (Mustika, 2016) quoted in Tong (1998: 310-312). In general, multicultural is defined as an intellectual social movement that promotes the values of diversity as a most basic principle, multiculturalism demands that all cultural groups must be treated with respect and as equals. Philosophical multiculturalism is

an attempt to critique the majority culture which oppresses minority cultural groups, namely when these minority cultural groups must follow the rules of the majority culture in order to be accepted in the public system. Differences in race, class, age, religion, and work opportunities among women can be the main triggers of a prolonged conflict (Mustika, 34-35). Oppression against black women was systemized, and structured in line with three interconnected dimensions in the United States namely "economic", "ghettoization", "ideological" dimensions.

### **Racism**

Race itself, when viewed from a biological point of view, has the understanding that human populations are divided into social classes according to hereditary characteristics that distinguish between one group or group of people with another group, as quoted in the journal *Representation of Black & White Race in Film Avengers*. Berril: 3).

Racism in a scientific perspective is an attempt to identify both ethnologically and anthropologically about human origins and to clarify humans based on their physical characteristics. The physical characteristics of each human being are different from each other both because of genetic and geographic, climate, and natural conditions in which they live. In this case, racism is a belief that humans can be differentiated into various races and members of a race will be inferior to other races. People who believe in racism like this are called racists. They claim that they are mentally, physically, morally and culturally superior to other races. For this reason, racists feel that they are entitled to all the features and conveniences in their lives over others. (Jusuf and Srivanto, 2001: 15)

Racism in general is the majority against minorities, in America it is presented with a white majority against minority groups. In America itself, sociologists distinguish

racism into individual racism and institutional racism. Individual racism mainly refers to prejudice beliefs and discriminatory behavior by whites personally to minority groups. Institutional racism refers to policies taken by the community, schools, work and business environment and other fields that prohibit opportunities for ethnic minorities. (Jusuf and Srivanto, 2001: 17)

Some researchers use the term racism, including:

- Refers to preferences for certain ethnic groups (ethnocentrism).
- Fear of strangers (xenophobia)
- Rejection of relations between races (miscegenation)
- Generalization of a certain group of people (stereotypes),
- Hostility or prejudice toward a people.

### **Literature Review**

In this study, the authors used scientific journals relating to feminism and racism. Some of the previous studies were used as references to help understand feminism and racism more deeply. Previous research used in this study are:

- Mustika's scientific journal entitled *Discrimination Against Some Women in the Perspective of Multicultural Feminism: Study of Scappa Per Amore Novels* by Dini Fitria.
- The scientific journal Fita Yuniawati with the title *"Resistance of Main Characters Against Gender Construction in Putri Novel by Putu Wijaya: Study of Feminism"*

From the two scientific works, the researchers see Mustika's journal entitled *Discrimination Against Some Women in the Perspective of Multicultural Feminism: Dini Fitria's SCAPPA PER AMORE* is the most relevant research conducted by the present researchers because it discusses multiculturalism feminism and elevates women's struggles, racial struggles and discrimination of minorities.

### **Analysis**

*Hidden Figures* tells the story of the struggle of a woman of African-American descent named Katherine Johnson, a 24-year-old woman. Katherine has curly hair and black skin like most other African-American descent, this is what triggers the discrimination that she gets from the environment because of the skin color she has. Katherine was born into an educated family whose father was a mathematician and this too became Katherine's aspiration to become a mathematician as her father, she was a very smart, independent, hard-working woman, this is evidenced by the amount of work done and she was very unwavering, no one can stop her decision. Katherine always made sure that she came from West Virginia. This was because there was a difference between West Virginia and South Virginia in which people in parts of South Virginia resisted the abolition of slavery, because slavery was an economic supporting factor for them. So that most black people will live in the south because the area is more progressive, in terms of schools, public spaces, and restaurants. Even though West Virginia is a small town and lacks progressiveness, Katherine prefers to live there because the city is free from slavery and Katherine strongly opposes the existence of slavery that she wants equality.

The setting of the place in this novel is not only the place where the characters live but also where they work. After leaving the job to become a teacher Katherine got an offer to work at NASA. Working as a mathematician at NASA was not easy and it was an achievement in the life of Katherine who was a black descendant, because to be in that section for black women were still rare. Most blacks won't get that job. This also became an opportunity for Katherine to prove the quality of blacks. In addition to the cold war, Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory needed many mathematicians

and scientists to help its mission in defeating the Soviet Union.

Katherine experienced problems between herself and others. This can be seen by the disappointment of Dr. Davis and Dr. Clayton, they are the ones who have fully supported Katherine's career as a mathematician. However, after Katherine became a mathematician, Katherine decided to quit working and chose to become a housewife for many years before finally returning to work, so her relationship with Dr. Davis and Dr. Clayton became tenuous by the decision she had chosen.

In addition, the problem that Katherine faced was with the environment. Katherine's presence as a descendant of the black race was considered unpleasant. This refers to individual racism, discriminatory beliefs and behaviors committed by whites personally to minority groups, they are extremely anti-black. White Supremacy assumes that white people are superior in every field compared to blacks, but evidently, blacks can compete and fight harder to get or achieve what they desire.

The act of racism that Katherine underwent in the presence of racial differences affected the wages received. Katherine got a different salary because of the fact that Katherine was not just black, but also a woman. These facts made Katherine receive twice the pressure in life. This happens because of institutional racism in which the policy is made by the community, schools, work and business environment and other fields that prohibit opportunities for ethnic minorities.

Often people will assume that women should not get equality and women should not work and have high positions because ultimately the task of women is to be a housewife. Unlike Katherine, as a woman who has an open mind, in this case, Katherine wants to be able to participate in the meeting. However, someone forbade it

because Katherine was a woman and that too made her fight for the injustices that she received. The phenomenon of liberal feminism is reflected when the main character fights for her right as a human being to get a better life. According to Katherine, women also have the right to choose the kind of life they want to live, and no one should forbid them. However, men who disagree will take an active role in women. They do not want the presence of women workers to replace their position as workers.

In the past, black people would have found it difficult to be accepted in social environments or workplaces. This also happened to Katherine, when Katherine worked at Langley and became an important part in it. Still, the white people were disturbed by Katherine's presence so that she was discriminated against at work, this resulted in a rejection of racial relations (miscegenation) as well as Jim Crow's law governing separation, resulting in their separate living between whites and blacks. Blacks were not allowed to use the same bathroom as white people, so Katherine had to look for another toilet outside the building that had a special toilet for blacks. In addition, the distinction between places of education complicates Katherine's life, because there are only a few schools that can accept them as blacks, and blacks are rejected in public places.

Another form of discrimination that Katherine received was the use of public facilities that should not be used by blacks. Public facilities are a form of facilities intended for all people without any difference and without exception. This does not apply to blacks, in this case, Katherine, who is black, still, is treated differently. This act of discrimination made Katherine, an American citizen, demand to be treated the same as the others, not considering herself as an object that could be treated at will. This resulted in discrimination against them, that is,

when the blacks were not allowed to sit in the front of the car, they were placed in a special section in the back so that their presence as blacks did not disturb the whites. This phenomenon raises institutional racism which refers to policies taken by the community that prohibit opportunities for ethnic minorities.

Another racist form that blacks had to face is that there are differences in education and there are only a few schools that can accept black female students. In the past white people would continue to assume that blacks are old-fashioned race, unable to join the modern world as an efficient and productive nation. Black women would be refused to be accepted in the social environment and this complicates the lives of those who want to change and develop as a person. The social status of black people who are considered low resulted in their education which is very rarely experienced by blacks. One of the schools for blacks is Howard University, where Katherine studied to become a mathematician.

Realizing that education is an important aspect that will be useful for her life in the future, Katherine determines to fight for equality in education. She wants all black women to get a high education, so that both women and men, those who are black or white can compete and those who are white will no longer denigrate black people for their backwardness. Katherine believes that education can change mindsets. Someone who has a high education is more valued in social status.

African-American women fight racial injustice that they underwent by creating women's associations. This movement demands no difference in treatment between blacks and whites. This happened because blacks protested against the injustice of blacks' refusal in public places, an initial problem when there was a law separating blacks and whites. The



unfavorable relationship between blacks and whites was due in the past to the enslavement of blacks by whites. As a result of these problems is the existence of a law that enforces separation so that the whites really do not want to mingle and separate themselves with blacks. Black people continue to receive racial discrimination and that was also what Katherine experienced, she was not allowed to sit in the front and only to use the bathroom with colored writing. This made Katherine want the same treatment as fellow human beings. This phenomenon of multicultural feminism occurs when Katherine as a black person wants equality, the goal of multiculturalism demands that all cultural groups must be treated with respect as equal people.

To be at this point, many obstacles had to be overcome, coupled with differences in race and sex, causing Katherine to experience twice the pressure. For Katherine to be a black female mathematician was not only an ideal that came true or wages that increased for Katherine, but became an engineer more than that. She loved the job and her life became more meaningful. Thanks to her work she was able to be accepted and valued by the environment where she works, and with all her hard work Katherine had been bearing fruit. Her struggle as a black woman to be able to get her freedom in life and to be able to work properly really paid off. This is proven from the entry of Katherine working at NASA. Besides that, for Katherine, working is a positive thing, by working, women are able to earn their own salary, able to play an active role outside their home and get recognition from the community. This is what causes men to dislike women because they are worried that their position can be defeated by the presence of women workers.

The struggle that Katherine had carried out so far bore fruit, Katherine fought off all

discrimination that had happened until her presence could be accepted at work. Katherine has an important role at NASA, thanks to her success that brought changes to the lives of black women who were originally black people unseen and unnoticed, now they can show others that they exist and capable of making achievements. This phenomenon of multicultural feminism occurs when Katherine, as a black woman, fights for her dream to become a mathematician and work for NASA in the midst of pressure from the majority. Gradually this allowed the blacks and whites to live together as fellow American citizens.

The effort of liberal feminism that black women do in this novel is to fight for equality, in terms of work in accordance with the goals of liberal feminism, namely for individual freedom and welfare. It was proven in the 1960s that the increase in black female workers in Langley had equaled men, this was because at that time men were at war with World War II so that for the time being it was women who replaced their work positions.

All her hard work paid off and her service in helping NASA was recognized by the government, so Katherine won several awards. As well as Katherine's presence brought changes, especially for black women who at the time were considered negative so that it made limited scope not much to be done other than just being a housewife without having a job or higher education. Katherine fought for her right to a better life and now more and more people are brave enough to fight injustice making them acceptable at work and in the social environment and prove their quality that they too are worthy of competing with whites. Katherine became an inspiring female figure for other black women so they could rise up and fight for their rights as free human beings.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the discussion conducted through the study of the main character in the novel *Hidden Figures*, the present researchers obtained the finding that Katherine Johnson is as the main character who experienced discrimination. The discrimination experienced by Katherine Johnson has a relationship with her race and gender. This makes the main character fight for and want a change in her life, especially for those black race women both in terms of education and employment.

Katherine suffered discrimination because of her racial and gender differences as a black woman. Katherine experienced discrimination in education because she, who was black, was not allowed to go to school in the same place as white people, as well as discrimination at work, when there were only a few jobs that could be done for blacks.

As a result of these acts of discrimination, Katherine has become an independent woman, not dependent on others and can play a dual role as a single parent and a career woman. The character, Katherine, was a hard worker. This is proven by the various kinds of work that she has done.

In this case, Katherine fought off all the acts of discrimination she experienced by proving the quality of herself who was considered a minority, but able to compete with whites. Being an educated woman increased Katherine's desire to fight for women's rights to become free human beings, as well as to fight all discrimination experienced by black women who happened to undergo twice the pressure in life.

The results of the analysis show the struggle of the main female character in fighting for their rights as fellow human beings, especially women who desire the freedom to get a better life, not limited by the race they have. The act of racial discrimination they receive as blacks are seen from, namely: differences in education, the use of public facilities,

differences in wages earned, differences in residence, etc. This occurs because white people assume that they are superior and that black people are socially labeled as negative. In their efforts to fight for their rights from discrimination, the main character is supported by internal and external factors.

The Internal factor that influenced Katherine's success was her strong determination to change in order to get a better life. Discrimination caused by racial and gender differences resulted in Katherine not being able to get both the education and employment she needed. This drove her to rise and fight for the freedom of black women to live their lives accordingly. Whereas, the external factors were Katherine's family background. Coming from a highly educated family background, thus triggered Katherine to persistently continue to achieve her dream of becoming a mathematician.

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