

## **AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S POWER IN MARGOT LEE SHETTERLY HIDDEN FIGURES**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to reveal about African-American Women's Power in Margot Lee Shetterly Hidden Figures. In this study the author will use qualitative research because the data to be collected is in the form of words. In analyzing the novel, the author uses a sociological approach and the theory of sociology of literature proposed by Alan Swingwood. Therefore, based on the findings found in this novel, there are several things that represent the strength of African-American women in facing all acts of discrimination that they experience in the work environment at NASA and in their social lives. There is strength as a woman who is brave, persistent and has good self-defense. Based on the research that has been done, this can provide many lessons for everyone, especially women to be able to further improve their own abilities, there are also suggestions and input for every reader who reads this research, namely: 1) It is highly recommended for students of the Department of English Education to may use this as an appropriate reference for other relevant research studies. 2) For women, this research further raises the power of women not only as a mother but also being able to do anything according to their respective abilities and preferences. 3) For the Department of English Education, this research is proof that we can learn character learning through literary works, for example the novel Hidden Figures which raises many important issues that are closely related to today's life.

**Keywords:** *Women, Power, Discrimination, Social.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Women, as a part of society, have been stigmatized differently from men physically and intellectually due to the existing principle of male superiority (Rorintulus

et al, 2022). Every human being in this world has the same right to be treated equally and has the privilege to ask that (Menggalomo, Oroh and Mamentu, 2020). According to hooks, there is a condition where American women socially interact with racial and sexual imperialisms that are maintained and formed in white supremacy and patriarchy as a result of American history (Hooks, 120). Thus, it emerges that the determinant of women inferiority is rooted from prevailing patriarchal society. The consequence of this is that a great number of women in society collectively can gain the opportunities to have choices, but in a very inadequate manner, leading to discrimination and exploitation (Lolowang, 2010). In line with the explanation above we can see that literature is a reflection of humans life, literature is the reflection of human life better in the society or in their private life, every phenomenon that found in the society usually reflects in the literary works such as poem, novel, drama or short story. It can be implaid that literature is human reflection of experience which was shows by using written form of language” (Sabudu, 2019:1). Futhermore, the literary work is a result of human thought (Onthoni, Rorintulus & Lolowang, 2022) and (Tatipang, 2022). Appropriate to what we have seen and felt thereby creating a more interesting work (Dengah, Maru and Lolowang, 2019).

Hidden figures is a non-fiction book written by Margot Shetterly in 2016. The book took the first ranks in the New York Times Non-Fiction Best Seller’s List and got Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for Non-fiction in 2017. The novel was inspired of a filming by the same name which was nominated for three Oscars. The book took place from the 1930s through the 1960s when women were still viewed as inferior to men. This biographical novel tells about three black American women, who overcame discrimination, as women and as African Americans while they were working at the National Aeronautics and Space Agency (NASA) as mathematicians (known as human computers). Through this novel, the writer tries to describe the power from African-American Women’s life experiences of the black woman in the era of world war.

This research work is interesting and important to study because in the novel Hidden Figures besides being literary works based on true stories, this research will reveal and provide some useful, inspiring and excellent learning findings for women in

maintaining existing values, improving self-quality as part of supporting people's statements about the quality of women both in the world of work, social, community, education and all aspects of human life. To support this idea, Maru (2014) stated that "Human's experience in a literary work presents a written story that can be felt and analyzed by many people through reading. Every human being in this world has the same right to be treated equally and has the privilege to ask that (Manggalomo, Oroh and Mamentu, 2020).

The lessons and messages and experiences obtained in this work, namely regarding the capacity of women at this time are clearly different, meaning that women today must have the same rights as men, especially in their nature as housewives, not just a career conclusion. of a woman, but women have the capacity, competence and strength in leadership, business, education, religion and have roles in academia, politics and government

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

In this research, the writer will use qualitative research because the data will be collected in the form of words. It means that, this research does not deal with numbers or diagrams as in quantitative research. Bogdan, R. and Biklen, S. stated that qualitative research also can be classified as a library research since the data collected from the novel and the other related book (Bogdan & Biklen, 30).

### **Data Collection**

There are two kinds of sources that the writer will use in collecting the data. First sources are the novel of Hidden Figures, and second sources are relevant books that support the writer's research.

### **Data Analysis**

In analyzing the novel, the writer uses the sociological approach and sociology of literature theory that is proposed by Alan Swingewood. The writer assumes that both sociology of literature theory and sociological approach is suitable for the analysis.

Literature is often said to be a school of life in that the authors tend to comment on the conduct of society and individuals in society. Literature is an artistic expression of feelings and emotions that poured into words. (Hohary, Maru and Lolowang: 2020). The main part of the novel takes place in 1974, a time when the discrimination toward Black People in America was still very strongly raised. In relation to the sociological of literature perspective aspect based on Swingewood and Laurenson (1962) in Theory of Literature book, the researcher focused on the sociology of the society. It means the sociology of the society was reflected in social phenomena where she lived. In another word, the work of the author and their society could not be separated because they got inspired by the society life.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Women's power is defined by the potential or actual strength of women's efforts, the use of women's power in a major national emergency. The influence exerted by women as a group, especially in the workforce and in social and political activities. More specifically, this research has made several discoveries and answers the purpose of this research, namely to reveal about African-American Women's Power in Margot Lee Shetterly Hidden Figures. In the process of researching the existing novel content, the researcher uses the theory of Literary work as a mirror to the age.

This approach deals with the time when the literary works are created. Swingewood and Laurenson (1972:13) state that "literature as the mirror to age. It is indicating that the readers can discuss the social phenomenon which happens to the society in a certain period and certain place through the literary work". It means that literary work reflects the situation and condition of social life in the society. In connection with that, it is also based on the social life that occurred in society at that time based on the existing social conditions and situations. The following are the ideas of the sub-topics that we will discuss in this chapter 4 analysis, including: 4.1 strength as a brave woman, 4.2 Having Power as a Determined Women and 4.3 4.3 Having a Strong Self-defense, and all of them represent strengths that reflected in African-American Women's Power in Margot Lee Shetterly Hidden Figures.

## **Power in Braveness**

The emergence of NASA began at the end of World War II (WWII) which triggered a cold war between the central bloc and the allies. World War II which lasted for six years, leaving the two superpowers as the victors. The two countries are the United States (US) and the Soviet Union, both of which were members of the Allied Powers during World War II. The ideological differences held by the two countries ended in the Cold War. Political and military tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union made these two countries compete to be the most superior in many ways. The impact of the Cold War is shown through the space race between America and Russia, the fear of the United States' superiority over Russia, which first sent its Sputnik satellite into space. Because of America's hasty attitude that made them set high hopes for NASA, which is a space agency that will prepare to launch satellite rockets into space, at the same time America at that time still had the ideology of racism between whites and blacks, and conveyed through the story of Hidden Figures and after that it is explained in detail in social discrimination for women and black citizens in the fields of education, work and sociology.

Furthermore, the women in NASA have power in bravery, woman who courageous and dauntless in the face of unbelievable struggle. A brave woman is one who is seen as brave, strong, and powerful by everyone in her life. A brave woman handles challenges with grace and patience and turns to others for help when she needs it. Women themselves have an incredible community in terms of support, networking, and strength, and by adding in the attribute of bravery women become unstoppable forces of innovation, strength, and power that improve the lives of everyone around them. Although sometimes women are considered weak by many people and get discriminated against just because of the dominance of women in a job they are involved in.

Moreover, in this modern era, discrimination still happens everywhere. It is not only in the superficial level but more complex and out of reach from the hand of authorities. Minorities are often vulnerable to the discrimination such as what happens

to African American community in United States especially the women. From time to time, African American women are the ones who suffer a lot from this toxic nature of society. As explained in *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* by Maggie Humm, the combination of racism and sexism has severely limited the progress of African American women, which is proven by the fact that they are still discriminated against due to their color and gender (230-231).

“For Mary, differential equations were the first step. Actually, it was not that simple. The first step was to get permission to enter Hampton High School. If Mary had applied for a job as janitor, the doors to the school would swing wide open. As a professional engineer-in-training with a plan to occupy the building for the nefarious purpose of advancing her education, she needed to petition the city of Hampton for “special permission” to attend classes in the white only school” (144).

Through Mary’s response against the discrimination by sending the petition, it shows Mary’s stance to strongly oppose the discrimination in educational institution. This response is an overt resistance because Mary takes an action through sending the petition. She moves to the extent of the legal basis because the discrimination is supported by the law. Mary has to pass several bureaucracies in order to give the petition. It is kind of hard, but Mary still keeps struggling because she is not only struggling for herself, but the advancement of all women in education as well.

“She would let nothing not even the state of Virginia’s segregation policy stand in the way of her pursuit of the career that had rather unexpectedly presented itself to her. She had worked too hard, her parents had worked too hard; a love of education and a belief that their country would eventually heed the better angels of its nature was one of their great bequests to their eleven children” (144).

This quotation shows that behind Mary’s struggle to fight against the gender discrimination is supported by her strong believe and determination. Her unstoppable ambition and insatiable desire to upgrade her career makes her do anything possible to open the engineer class for women. Her loyal and devotion to education makes her so on fire to fight for education. Thus Mary’s action and response to the discrimination

shows that she is working against the system which limits her to advance her degree in engineering major.

“The City of Hampton granted Mary the dispensation. The pass gave her access to the classes, though it did not make them broadly available to others. Whether pain securing the permit exacted, it was more than offset by the victories lying in wait. She began her coursework at Hampton High School in the spring of 1956” (145).

Finally, with the ups and down of her struggle, her petition finally accepted, the government opens the “special class” in white only school and male only major. This victory is not only benefited Mary, but also the glory for African American women. She earned her engineering title through hard work, talent, and drive, but the opportunity to fight for it was made possible by the work of the people who had come before her (2016, p. 198).

### **Power in Determination**

The increase in the employment of black women in America in the 1960s occurred because women wanted to have a better life, the way they wanted to. This stems from the emergence of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. Feminism is considered as a form of politics to intervene and change the unequal power relations between men and women, as well as revealing the existence of injustice against women as well as demanding equal rights with men. Through historical facts, it is related to the condition of the story of black women at NASA through the novel *Hidden Figures* where they demand feminism where women's rights must be the same as men's and cannot be separated by biological factors or abilities.

In addition, the emergence of determination from women at that time as a weapon to liberate their rights in all aspects. Women feel they have control over their own choices and their own lives. The benefit of feeling this control is they are more willing and motivated to take action. They feel what they do can have a direct impact on the outcome. They intentionally do things they know will help them achieve their goals. If things turn out well they'll take the credit. But if things do not go well, they will openly accept responsibility and take the blame for their failures.

In addition, a self-determined women make a mistake on a large, important project at work. Because they are self-determined they will admit what was done wrong, suggest they can do it better, assess the situation, and take the necessary action to correct the problem. This is a valuable skill that many successful people practice continually throughout life. The same thing happened to African American women who have strong self-determination as their strength in the midst of acts of discrimination that befell them, especially in the novel *Hidden Figures* which depicts African American women who get minimum acknowledgement in the workplace. Their capabilities and intelligent are not acknowledged that they cannot enter to the editorial meeting where the direction of the research comes from. In respond to this discrimination, Katherine does a fearless response by keep questioning the male engineers.

“Why can’t I go to the editorial meeting?” Katherine Goble asked again, undeterred by the initial demurral. She always kept up the questioning until she received a satisfactory answer. Here request were gentle but persistent, like the trickle of water that eventually forces its way through rock. The greatest adventure in the history of humankind was happening two desk away, and it would be a betrayal of her own self-confidence and of the judgment of everyone who had helped her to reach this point to not go to the final distance” (181-182).

This quotation shows that Katherine is triggered to enter to the editorial meeting because editorial meeting is a prominent place for an individual to make a great contribution during the cold war. She also looks back to other African American women who put their hope to Katherine to reach the final point, to be a part of editorial meeting members. Thus, she makes a fearless decision to insist the male engineers to enter to the editorial room. From her response, it shows that Katherine does an overt resistance to the discrimination because she keep questioning and insisting the male engineer to alter the status quo, to allow women to enter the editorial meeting. Her response also shows that she works against the system that prohibits women to contribute in the editorial meeting because she strongly opposes the system.



"As much as anything, she asked with confidence in the ultimate decision. "Let her go," they finally said exasperated. The engineers just got tired of saying no. Who were they, they must have figured, to stand in the way of someone so committed to making a contribution, so convinced of the quality of her contribution that she was willing to stand up to the men whose success or failure might tip the balance in the outcome of the Cold War?" (182).

After long process of struggle, she finally makes it happen. She gets the triumph over the system. In 1958, Katherine Goble finally made it into the editorial meeting of the Guidance and Control Branch of Langley's Flight Research Division, soon to be renamed the Aerospace Mechanics and Space Administration. Now, she was going to come along with the program (2016, p. 182). Katherine struggles has shown to the world that woman are also capable to contribute in the research and those contributions have to be acknowledged by the male engineers.

### **Power in Self-defense**

The second wave of feminism with the big theme of "women's liberation", emerged as a reaction to women's dissatisfaction with the various discriminations they experienced despite legal and political emancipation achieved by the first wave of feminism. One of their efforts in the novel *Hidden Figures* is to be accepted to work at NASA. through this section they have a strong self-defense attitude in defending what is their right to be considered as a whole person in the world of work and their careers as official workers at NASA, it is defined as the right to prevent suffering force or violence through the use of a sufficient level of counteracting force or violence. This definition is simple enough on its face, but it raises many questions when applied to actual situations. For instance, what is a sufficient level of force or violence when defending oneself, what goes beyond that level, what if the intended victim provoked the attack, do victims have to retreat from the violence if possible, what happens when victims reasonably perceive a threat even if the threat does not actually exist, what about when the victim's apprehension is subjectively genuine, but objectively unreasonable.

As you can see, self-defense law is more complicated than it first appears. In order to handle the myriad situations where self-defense arises, states have developed rules to determine when self-defense is allowed and how much force a victim can use to protect themselves. As mentioned, the exact rules differ between states, but the considerations are largely the same.

The self-defense that black women have at NASA is based on their principle that no one is left behind because all humans and respond to various acts of discrimination, they experience the limited access to the public facilities like the public transportation, housing and restaurant. The public facilities are segregated for the African Americans. For instance, inside of the bus, there are two sections, the back section is for the African Americans and the front section is for the whites. In respond to the discrimination in the bus, Dorothy Vaughan does a response.

“On the first day of December 1943, as the leaders if the United States, Great Britain, and Russia concluded a conference in Tehran in which they planned a summer 1944 invasion of France an operation that would be known to history as D-Day Dorothy Vaughan stepped behind the Colored line on the Citizen Rapid Transit bus and headed to her first day of work at the Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory” (36).

From this quotation it shows that Dorothy does a passive resistance to the discrimination. It also shows that she does a covert resistance because she does not insist to the government to remove the colored line. She also ignores the discrimination in the public transportation and just focuses on the good fortune of working at the Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory.

Besides Dorothy Vaughan, Katherine Goble also experiences the discrimination in the bus. She gets unequal treatment from the driver in the bus when she wants to go to Virginia. Upon entering Virginia, she and the other black passengers, who had been interspersed with whites throughout the bus, were ordered to move to the back. A short time later, the driver evicted the black passengers, announcing that service wouldn't continue into the town's Negro area. Katherine paid a cab to take her to the house of the principal of the Morion school, where she had arranged to rent a room.

Thus, women face lots of obstacles when they want to advance their career because the male engineers always look down their capability. As experienced by Katherine when she is moved to the Flight Research Laboratory, she gets discriminated by the sexist look of the male engineer.

“Bemused, Katherine considered the engineer’s sudden departure. The moment that passed between them could have been because she was black and he was white. But then again, it could have been because she was a women and he was a man. Or maybe the moment was an interaction between a professional and sub-professional, an engineer and a girl” (123).

At first, Katherine feels down because of the internalized discrimination. The internalized discrimination has reminded her about the job strata that the engineer must be a man and the computer is a woman. She feels so inferior because regardless how good the position as the computer, she is still a girl. However, her response to the engineer is changed when she realizes her father’s word.

“But Katherine Goble had been raised not just to command equal treatment for herself but also to extend it to others. She had a choice: either she could decide it was her presence that provoked the engineer to leave, or she could assume that the fellow had simply finished his work and moved on. Katherine was her father’s daughter, after all. She exiled the demons to a place where they could do no harm, then she opened her brown bag and enjoyed lunch at her new desk, her mind focusing on the good fortune that had befallen her” (124).

Though her response, it indicates that she resists from the gender discrimination through ignores it and creates a positive mindset to the engineer. She focuses more on the gratitude that she already gets a very good African American women job which is a female computer. In this sense, Katherine already shows a passive resistance. She does not perceive it as a sexist look but she just think that the engineer only want to she does not want to take it as a serious matter and she just want to focus on her work. She ignores the situation that brings a negative impact to her performance at the work place. Ignoring the sexist look is one of her strategy to deal with the discrimination.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

This research examines the power of African-American Women as portrayed in the book. The power of African-American women is shown in a form of personal characters, full of skill or talented person, self-esteem, self-quality and self-actualization while accusation of Black Empowerment Advocates. During 1940s, African American women are discriminated racially through the limitation, prohibition and segregation of the facilities in educational institution, public transportation, housing, restaurant, office toilet and cafeteria. As experienced by Dorothy Vaughan, Katherine Goble and Mary Jackson, they only have limited sources to expand their knowledge because they are in the segregated educational facilities. In the workplace, those women are also downgraded to be the second class of society because they face the crude discrimination in a form of segregated cafeteria, segregated toilet, and less appreciation or acknowledgment toward their hard works.

Therefore, based on the findings found in this novel based on existing research, there are several things that represent the strength of African-American women in dealing with all acts of discrimination that they experience both in the work environment at NASA and in their social life. There are: Strength as a brave women, as determined women and having a good self-defense.

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