

DEPICTION OF SYSTEMIC RACISM IN HIDDEN FIGURES MOVIE BY THEODORE MELFI

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ABSTRACT

Racism is an act of differentiating behavior towards a society that is considered inferior by those who feel as superior. Racism is also divided into several dimensions, one of which is systemic racism which is closely related to regulations that affect people's lives in main sectors such as public facilities which include libraries and courts, and education. The purpose of this study is to describe the depiction of acts of racism in Hidden Figures Movie by Theodore Melfi. The research method used is a qualitative-descriptive research method, which focuses on research results in the form of descriptions. The data collection techniques used were listening and note techniques, as well as data analysis techniques used including data condensation, data display, and conclusions and verification. The results of this study state that the systemic racism contained in the film Hidden Figures applies to public facilities such as public library, court, as well as workplaces and schools.

Keywords: Hidden Figures, Racism, Systemic Racism

INTRODUCTION

Human life is certainly inseparable from interactions with others or often referred to as social interaction. Weber (in Faujiah, 2021) states that social interaction is an individual action that can affect other individuals in a social environment. Social life or social interaction also has its own challenges over time and changing times. This is caused by the heterogeneity of the population in every region of the world. Among the 7 continents in the world, namely the continent of Asia, the continent of Africa, the continent of North America, the continent of South America, the continent of Antarctica, the continent of Europe, and the continent of Australia, of course, the people living on these continents come from various tribes and also races with unique characteristics with different physical characteristics. These differences often lead to tragic events such as discrimination in all its forms.

Discrimination is known as a difference in behavior towards a person or a group that is considered inferior by those who feel superior. With regard to superiors and inferiors, many people consider themselves inferior, this is natural because inferiority exists due to other objects or other people who are in better condition and have higher dominance (Hikmaharyanti, 2021, p. 59). So, it is only natural that acts of discrimination cannot be avoided. This was emphasized by Willmore (in Haryanti, Kuncara, & Valiantien, 2019) that discrimination is an act in the form of distinction,

exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, skin color, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has an impact on limiting human rights and fundamental freedoms in political, economic, social, cultural, educational, and others. This discrimination often occurs to those who have different skin colors in an area where the majority is white. Generally, this phenomenon is referred to as racial discrimination or racism.

Racial discrimination or racism is often referred to as a term for those who openly take action with the aim of expressing hatred for a race in the form of speech or physical action, which even causes casualties. This was also added by Bravemen's opinion (2022) which stated that racism is the degradation of people of color to inferior status and treatment based on unfounded beliefs about innate inferiority, as well as unfair treatment and oppression of people of color, whether intentional or not. The act of racism that is widely known by the world community is racism committed by white Americans against African-Americans who incidentally are black. One of the films with the theme of racism in America is a film entitled *Hidden Figures* directed by Theodore Melfi.

Hidden Figures is a film with the setting in the 1960s that tells the story of 3 black women who work at NASA as a minority among other employees who are dominated by those of whites. While they were working at NASA, there were a lot of white employees' behaviors and remarks that implied racist behavior towards them. The three figures experienced this because in that era it was very rare for African Americans to be able to work as employees, especially at NASA. Therefore, they became easy targets for those who were jealous of the abilities of the 3 women and committed acts of racism.

Racism itself is divided into several dimensions, based on Amnesty.id (2021) Lilian Green state that racism has four dimensions, namely internal, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic. Based on the four dimensions, in the film *Hidden Figures* the writer finds dialogues that lead to acts of systemic racism. Systemic racism encompasses a complex array of anti-Black practices, unfairly acquired white political-economic power, ongoing economic and other resource inequalities along racial lines, and white racist attitudes created to maintain and rationalize privileges and white power (Joe Feagin). Systemic racism emphasizes the involvement of the entire system, and often all systems—for example, the political, legal, economic, health care, school, and criminal justice systems—including the structures that uphold the system (Bravemen et al., 2022, p. 172). Therefore, through the film *Hidden Figures*, the author will examine the description of systemic racism against its characters.

DATA SOURCE

The data sources that the authors used in this research were the dialogues in *Hidden Figures* movie which depict systemic racism. This film is setting in the 1960s and tells the story of the struggles of three black women who work as a minority at NASA. All three work side by side with the racist treatment of white employees verbally hurled at them.

METHODS

The research method is a series of activities in seeking the truth of a research study, which begins with an idea that forms the formulation of the problem giving rise to the initial hypothesis, with the assistance and perceptions of previous research, so that the research can be processed and analyzed which ultimately forms a conclusion (Sahir, 2021, p. 1). The qualitative method is a method with a research process based on perceptions of a phenomenon with its data approach producing descriptive analysis in the form of verbal sentences from the object of research (Sahir, 2021, p. 6). Descriptive research method is the nature of research that describes a phenomenon with accurate data that is examined systematically (Sahir, 2021, p. 6).

Sugiyono (2021) states that data collection techniques are the most important step in research because the main goal of conducting research is to obtain data that will be used in the research process. The data collection technique used in this research is a data collection technique using the observing and noting method. Mahsun (2017) put forward that the listening method was used to obtain data by listening to the use of language. The term listening is not only for the use of language orally, but also the use of language in writing. The next step in collecting this data is to intercept the use of language from written objects. The next stage after listening and tapping is recording all the data needed for analysis.

The data analysis technique used in this research is the data collection technique proposed by Miles, Huberman, & Saldana (2014), namely by going through three stages of the analysis process as follows:

1) Data Condensation

Data compaction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and/or changing previously collected data. At this step the writer sorts out the data that belongs to systemic racism in the film *Hidden Figures*.

2) Data Display

Data presentation is the stage where the data that has been selected is then compiled, prepared, and then analyzed to obtain a description of each of these data.

3) Drawing Conclusions and Verify

Conclusion drawing and data verification are the last stages in the analysis process, namely the synchronization and re-checking stages regarding the relevance between theory, data, and analysis results in the form of a new interpretation or understanding of the results of the data analysis.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Research on systemic racism has not been widely carried out at this time, but the authors found several studies that are almost similar to systemic racism. The first research comes from research conducted by Soelistyarini, Rinahayu, & Nuswantari (2020) entitled *Institutional Racism and Black Resistance as Portrayed through Images and Narratives in American Graphic Novels*. In this study, the author discusses acts of institutional racism that occur against African-Americans

through graphic novels that carry the theme of racism in them. The second study was written by Indriani & Wahyuni (2021) with the title *Institutional Racism in American Post-Civil Rights Movement in Dear Martin by Nic Stone*. In this study, the author discusses the institutional racism that occurred against black people in America after the post-civil rights movement era in Nic Stone's novel Dear Martin. Finally, a study entitled *Discrimination Towards African-American Women as Portrayed in Hidden Figures Film* was written by Haryanti et al. (2019). In this study, the author discusses the forms of discrimination that occur against the main character in the film Hidden Figures, the discrimination that occurs against the characters is racial and gender discrimination.

Discrimination

Willmore (in Haryanti et al., 2019) that discrimination is an act in the form of distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, skin color, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has an impact on limiting human rights and fundamental freedoms in politics, economics, social, cultural, educational and others. Then, Theodorson (in Madula, Kuncara, & Asanti, 2017) state that discrimination is the unequal treatment of individuals or groups on the basis of several attributes, usually categorical in nature, such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, or social class membership. Discrimination is also divided into several types, as stated by Ben Bowling and Coretta Philips (in Haryanti et al., 2019) discrimination is divided into two, namely direct discrimination (gender, religion, race, age, nationality and health discrimination) and indirect discrimination.

Based on the theories above, it can be concluded that discrimination is an act of limiting and differentiating behavior and human rights in various important sectors such as politics, economics, social, culture, and education. This is done by one individual or certain group against another on the basis of differences in race, ethnicity, gender, and religion.

Racism

Bravemen et al. (2022) who stated that racism is the degradation of people of color to inferior status and treatment based on unfounded beliefs about innate inferiority, as well as unfair treatment and oppression of people of color, whether intentional or not. Then added by Ali (2020) that racism plays into various differences in policing and education is a complex problem. It has been asserted by others that racism is an "ideology of racial domination" in which the perceived biological or cultural superiority of one or more racial groups is used to justify or determine the inferior treatment or social position(s) of other racial groups. (Wilson, 1999; Bravemen et al., 2022)

Based on the theories above, it can be concluded that racism is unfair and unequal treatment carried out by a certain race that thinks that they are superior to those who are in a minority and are considered inferior.

Types of Racism

Reporting from Amnesty.id, Lilian Green stated that racism has four dimensions, which include:

Internal racism refers to our own thoughts, feelings and actions, consciously and unconsciously, as individuals. Examples include believing in negative racial stereotypes, or even denying the existence of racism.

Interpersonal racism is an act of racism from one person to another, which can affect their public interactions. For example, negative behavior such as harassment, discrimination, and racist words.

Institutional racism exists in political, economic, or legal institutions and systems that directly or indirectly perpetuate discrimination on the ground of race. This leads to inequalities in wealth, income, education, health care, civil rights and other areas. For example, discriminatory hiring practices, silencing the voices of people of a certain race in boardrooms, or a work culture that prioritizes the point of view of the dominant racial group.

Systemic racism involves authorized institutions or entities enforcing racist policies, whether in the areas of education, health care, housing, government, and others. This is a ripple effect from hundreds of years of racist and discriminatory practices that are still ongoing today.

Systemic Racism

According to Joe Feagin and Kimberley Ducey (in Bravemen et al., 2022) systemic racism encompasses a complex array of anti-black practices, unfairly acquired white political-economic power, economic and other resource inequalities that are sustained along the way. racial lines, and white racist attitudes were created to maintain and rationalize white privilege and power. Systemic here means that racist reality is manifested in each of the main sectors of society such as the economy, politics, education, religion, family—[reflecting] the fundamental reality of systemic racism.

Bravemen (2022) also added that systemic racism involves institutions or authorized entities that enforce racist policies, whether in the fields of education, health care, housing, government, and others. This is a ripple effect from hundreds of years of racist and discriminatory practices that are still ongoing today.

Based on these theories, it can be concluded that systemic racism is racism that focuses on bound regulations implemented by the authorities in main sectors such as education and the economy and causes injustice to those of different races, thus hindering their social life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Systemic Racism in Library

Systemic racism is closely related to people's daily behavior, one form of this act of racism can be seen from the public facilities provided by the government, for example, the public library in America in the 1960s.

00.50.11 – 00.50.17

Librarian : You have books in **the colored section**

Dorothy : it doesn't have what I'm looking for

Librarian : Well, that's just the way it is

The data above is one of the scenes in the film Hidden Figures which was carried out in a public library for whites. In the library, it was clear that there was an act of racism uttered by white librarian and there was also segregation between libraries for whites and blacks. Dorothy came to the library for whites on purpose because she was looking for a book, but it was not available in the black section's library. Then, when Dorothy came there, she was treated unfavorably. Seeing what the librarian said by saying "you have books in the colored section", it was clear that it was a racist sign against Dorothy as an African American. In addition, it can be concluded that the conversation above is a depiction of systemic racism because the act of racism is related to public policies and public facilities provided by the government, only implementing separation for those who come from white race and black race.

Seeing this reality, actually there should not be segregation and differentiation of libraries based solely on race or skin color. This is because humans have the same right to enjoy public facilities such as reading and borrowing books at the library regardless of race or ethnic origin.

Systemic Racism in Court

Systemic racism is closely related to every movement of society, one form of this act of racism can be seen from the public facilities provided by the government, for example, the courts in America in the 1960s.

00.58.13 -00.58.17

Court Officer : Mrs. Jackson. Colored seats are at the back of the courtroom

Mary : Thank you, Ma'am

The data above is one of the scenes where Mary went to court in America in the 1960s. This act of systemic racism was reflected in the conversation between the court officer and Mary, who at that time was making demands so that her rights could be fulfilled. The court officer's remark that seats were for blacks in the back indicated that at that time regulations regarding the separation of seats for whites and blacks were very commonplace. However, seeing this reality, of course, it is clear that racism is indeed a daily occurrence for those of African-American descent. Therefore, with segregation or unfair treatment in court, it can be concluded that this event is included in the depiction of systemic racism in the film Hidden Figures.

Systemic Racism in the Workplace

There is a lot of racism in public facilities, especially in the places where they work. Below are some depictions of systemic racism in the workplace.

The following is a conversation that took place in one of the buildings at NASA.

01.19.26 – 01.19.39

Bill : Hey, what the hell are you doing? **You can't be in here.** Who are you?

Dorothy : I'm with the West Computing Group. Dorothy Vaughan, sir.

Bill : Well, this is **a very delicate piece of equipment.**

Dorothy : I'm sorry, sir. I'm just trying to be helpful.
 IBM Staff : Bill, we've got numbers.

The data above clearly illustrates systemic racism in the work environment, as seen from Dorothy's conversations with other employees at NASA. It can be seen through the words of the IBM staff named Bill by saying "...You can't be in here..." and "...a very delicate piece of equipment." Through these words the officer seemed to have an implied meaning that Dorothy as a black female employee should not exist. at that place and coupled with the words of the IBM officer who seemed not to believe in Dorothy's ability and assumed that Dorothy would damage the expensive item. Even though in reality Dorothy just wanted to help and in the end Dorothy was able to help with their work. The conversation above is one depiction of systemic racism in the work environment.

Apart from being doubted about their abilities, in the workplace there are often differences in behavior and position restrictions for those who are minority employees in a company. This is one of the phenomena.

00.12.02 – 00.12.16

Dorothy : "Mrs. Mitchel! If I could? My application for supervisor, ma'am. Was just wondering if they're still considering me for that position."
 Mrs. Mitchel : "Yes. Well, the official word is no. **They're not assigning a permanent supervisor for the colored group.**"

This data really reflected how difficult it is for black employees to reach higher and proper positions in white companies. During the conversation, Dorothy was trying to persuade Mitchell so she could become a supervisor, but unfortunately the regulations that were in place at NASA at that time required Dorothy to lose her chance to reach a permanent supervisor position. This is shown by Mitchell's statement that they (NASA) did not employ permanent supervisors for black employees. Through these remarks, it is clear that there is an act of systemic racism that is very strong and even affects the lives of black employees.

It is still related to systemic racism in the workplace, but now it does not discuss positions but the place or working position of black employees.

00.17.11 – 00.17.17

Katherine : "Excuse me, ma'am. Mr. Harrison's computer reporting."
 Mrs. Ruth : "**Take the desk in the back.** I'll get your work in a... bit. Mr. Harrison won't warm up to you. Don't expect it. Do your work, keep your head down."
 Katherine : Thank you.

The data above also clearly illustrates the actions of systemic racism in the workplace. Those who work at NASA as ordinary employees who come from African-American descent certainly cannot be separated from the treatment of racism by co-workers, whether intentional or not. Like the conversation above, where Katherine, who at that time entered the Space Task Group building for the

first time, was immediately asked to sit, but in a chair or back row. This was enough evidence and depiction of systemic racism in the workplace, Ruth was unconsciously committing racism against Katherine by specifically distinguishing the seat that Katherine had to occupy as the only black female employee in the building.

Systemic Racism in Education

Apart from public facilities such as libraries, courts, and also workplaces, the world of education was also not free from acts of systemic racism at that time. The following is data that describes this phenomenon.

01.11.00 – 01.12.00

Mary : “Good morning, your honor.”
Judge : “**Hampton high school is a white school**, Mrs. Jackson.”
Mary : “yes, your honor. I am aware of that.”

From the data above, it can be understood through the words of the judge who firmly said that the school which Mary proposed for her to study was a school for those who came from the white race. Mary proposed to study at a white school because this was one of the requirements for her to become an engineer in NASA. From the judge's remarks above it is clear that this is categorized as a depiction of systemic racism because the racism that is practiced is used as a rule and a requirement that must be complied with voluntarily by all groups.

CONCLUSIONS

The social life of people with heterogeneous populations in each region easily causes discrimination among one another, especially those who are a minority in that area. This discrimination can be in the form of words or physical actions that can lead to death. Discrimination itself is divided into two main parts, namely direct discrimination which includes gender, religion, race, age, nationality and health discrimination, as well as indirect discrimination. With regard to discrimination, the author chooses to discuss racial discrimination because the data obtained through the film *Hidden Figures* is dominantly included in acts of racism. Specifically, the racism that the author chooses is only one of the four existing dimensions of racism, namely systemic racism where this racism is closely related to the behavior of people of black descent who experience freedom to live their lives due to binding and unfair rules for them.

Through the analysis phase that has been carried out by the author, it can be concluded that the systemic racism that the author gets through the *Hidden Figures* film is in several main sectors of people's lives which include the realm of education, public facilities, courts, and the work environment. In these sectors, people experience injustice and lack of freedom in carrying out their daily lives, even those who want to find a book are limited because they have dark skin, want to go to school in an appropriate place even though there are many obstacles due to African-American

descent, as well as seats in the workplace, nor in other public facilities was it ever provided for them to be able to sit in the front as if the place for black people had to be in the back.

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