

The Race for Space and Equality

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Rocket science, strong female leads, and encouragement to follow one's dreams. These are all things that turn heads and make people interested in a topic, and these are all prominent aspects of the film *Hidden Figures*. This film took the world by storm when it was released on Christmas Day of 2017 and provided a detailed view of the lives of three Black women working for NASA in the 1960's. The film addresses racism, sexism, and many other struggles through the perspective of a true story and gives the audience a deeper look into the Space Race.

Common topics addressed throughout the entire film include both racism and sexism. The main characters, Katherine, Mary, and Dorothy, face many struggles due to their race and even more struggles due to their gender. Because the film is set in 1961 in Virginia, segregation is still very common (IMDb, 2016). This is seen clearly in the ladies' place of work, where even NASA has segregated buildings and bathrooms. Early in the movie, Katherine gets moved up to a computer job with the Space Task Group doing analytic geometry. However, since this new position is located a distance from her old position, she must run a full mile round trip just to use the only designated "Colored" bathroom. This eventually starts to interfere with her daily work and, as a result, gets dealt with by her boss, Al Harrison, in a very memorable way. Al knocks the "COLORED WOMEN" bathroom sign off the wall with a crowbar and says, "here at NASA we all pee the same color" (Melfi, 2016). Segregation is further seen in the public schools in the town. Mary has dreams of becoming the first female engineer at NASA but cannot apply for the program without completing specific classes that are only offered at the local all-White high school. She must appear in court to fight for her right to take those classes, which she eventually is granted. Along with the struggles faced due to racism, the ladies faced many struggles due to their gender. Several times throughout the film, characters are shown as being genuinely shocked that NASA employs women, especially in positions such as computing. This same sexism is seen

later in the film when Katherine states her desire to sit in on the classified meeting with all of the astronauts and NASA executives. The head engineer, Paul Stafford, then says to Katherine that there is no protocol for women attending the meeting. To this, she replied that “there is no protocol for a man circling the Earth either,” which is exactly what they are all there to do (Melfi, 2016). Al then allows Katherine to enter the meeting, where she later impresses every man in the room with her on-the-spot calculations. The film gives many different messages, reaching every member of the audience. Racial and gender equality are the more prominent messages, but *Hidden Figures* also encourages people to chase their dreams no matter the obstacles placed in their way.

Throughout the film, it is made clear that while some progress had been made to end segregation and discrimination that it is still a lingering obstacle. This is because racial stereotypes are considered to be cultural stereotypes, and cultural stereotypes are known for being “slow to change” (Blaine, 2017, p. 95). This is evident in the film in many ways, the most recognizable being the constant battle the Black women face despite their small victories. Even though the ladies had constantly proven themselves to everyone at NASA, there was still barrier after barrier standing in their way of further success. In addition to this, sexism is a constant battle throughout the film. While it is understandable for the times, the sexism the ladies faced never quite seemed to go away. Again, the ladies were constantly proving themselves and constantly being confronted with more sexism. This is because, stereotypically, men are perceived as being more “competent” than women, and women are expected to occupy roles more along the lines of a “housewife” or “secretary” and not an engineer or a computer doing analytic geometry (Blaine, 2017, pp. 121-122). This difference in expectations of each gender is most likely attributable to the Social Role Theory. This theory states that gender differences

originated from an “unequal division of labor” between genders (Eagly, 1987). This would explain the lingering prejudice in the film against women attempting to occupy traditionally male-dominated positions in NASA.

One thing that made *Hidden Figures* truly stand out was the way in which the story was told and the characters were portrayed. “When it comes to historical movies about brilliant minds, especially in the realms of math or the sciences, audiences can all but expect a tale of ego” (Cruz, 2017). However, *Hidden Figures* did not follow in these footsteps at all. Cruz (2017) explains this well by saying that “it’s a story of brilliance, but not of ego” and “it’s a story of struggle and willpower, but not of individual glory.” The story was told in such a way that portrayed the true humility of the real people and real stories that inspired it. Furthermore, a specific moment in the film in which I found to be particularly powerful occurred right after Katherine was promoted to work with the Space Task Group. Dorothy was clearly disappointed that she had not also been promoted. Yet, despite this disappointment, she said, “any upward movement is movement for us all.” (Melfi, 2016) This line is particularly powerful because it makes the audience realize just how difficult it was to overcome discrimination during that time. While there had been a victory, “Katherine knocking down one pillar of discrimination doesn’t mean countless more don’t remain” (Cruz, 2017). This scene helps the audience not only see but also understand the struggles that these women are facing in order to follow their dreams. This aspect of the film, along with many others, did well to encourage dreams and goals.

*Hidden Figures* did an exceptional job at tying up loose ends. However, one aspect of the film that I found to be somewhat lacking in explanation was the scene when Al questions Katherine on her whereabouts and Katherine makes a loud speech about the difficulties she faces every day at work. Following her speech, Katherine grabs her belongings and walks out. The

scene then shows Al peeling the “Colored” label off of the separate coffee maker one of the workers provided for Katherine. The following scene is when Al knocks the “COLORED WOMEN” sign off the bathroom door. The story then continues with Katherine in her same computer position with the Space Task Group. It was unclear during these scenes whether Katherine had in fact quit and then was given her job back by Al or if she had simply stormed out. Some clarification here would have been beneficial to help the audience understand exactly what happened. However, this did not hinder the story in any way. While some elaboration here could have been helpful, the film still accomplished its goals regardless.

Overall, the countless positive messages portrayed by the film give it a platform to relate to every single person in the audience. While racism and sexism were the most prominent and recognizable themes, the film also encouraged the audience to follow their dreams no matter the struggles that might get in the way. Despite the slow-changing nature of racial stereotypes, Katherine, Mary, and Dorothy showed the small victories and their impact on the fight for a brighter future. Furthermore, even though there were a few scenes that could have used a bit more elaboration, the film was exceptionally written to be an example of brilliant humility. *Hidden Figures* is truly a film for every person and every generation.

## References

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