

Hidden Figures Film Analysis

March 10, 2020

Marilyn Cordova

Films are an ingrained aspect of society. Advertisements for up and coming movies are constantly viewed, whether that be through television or social media. The profound effect that film can have on the lives of individuals is an understated reality. When movies illustrate stereotypes and prejudices it allows the audience to empathize and humanize the victims. Films can aid in altering those negative stereotypes and prejudices to more positive thoughts. Therefore, the films that society is exposed to can alter the way an individual views others and social concepts. *Hidden Figures* sheds light on both racist and sexist attitudes that have plagued the United States and are still prevalent today.

Hidden Figures is an emotional tale of three Black women who repeatedly deal with racist and sexist attitudes while working for NASA during the 1960s. Throughout the film, these women are faced with daily segregation such as colored bathrooms, separate coffee pots, different workspaces, libraries, breakrooms, et cetera. The movie highlights how subtle and explicit racism can be shown through different characters, even those who assume that they are not racist. The movie also articulates the ideals that were set for women and the negative perceptions that were prominent during that era. Generally, people do have “expectations about the traits and abilities of men and women” (Blaine & Benchley, 2017, pg. 132) and the movie demonstrates these negative stereotypes, such as a women's perceived low cognitive ability. Yet, throughout the film, one can see these women persevere and become extremely successful even in the face of all of their struggles.

Hidden Figures embodies the prominent racial and gender stereotypes held by Americans towards female African Americans. There are presumed gender differences that have paved the way for sexist attitudes to prevail. Although gender differences do exist, they are “usually

small... (and) don't apply to everyone" (Hack, 2020, Sexism Lecture). For example, in the movie when Colonel Jim Johnson has his first interaction with Kathrine Johnson he states that he did not realize that NASA "let women handle" (Gigliotti, Chernin, Topping, Williams, Melfi, 2016, 0:36:30) mathematical configurations for their space program. Colonel Johnson demonstrates "old-fashioned sexism" (Hack, 2020, Sexism Lecture) which is when there is "support (for) traditional gender roles (and) believe women (are) less competent" (Hack, 2020, Sexism Lecture). His assumptions are based on the stereotype that women have lower mathematical abilities than men. However, "men and women are similar in most cognitive and intellectual domains" (Blaine & Benchley, 2017, pg. 128). Furthermore, the case can be made that Johnson is significantly advanced in her mathematical and cognitive abilities when compared to most. Another example that illustrates a sexist stereotype is when Mary Jackson attends her first-night school class and the professor states "Well, the curriculum is not designed for teaching a woman." (Gigliotti et al., 2016, 1:31:18). As mentioned earlier, this professor is also demonstrating "old-fashioned sexism" (Hack, 2020, Sexism Lecture) and likely believes that the curriculum may be too difficult for a woman to understand. His train of thought stems from the gender stereotype wherein "femininity is associated with sociability and nurturance" (Blaine & Benchley, 2017, pg. 120-121). Blaine and Benchley (2017) state that when there is a high level of warmth, such as nurturance, there is a low level of competence associated with that person (pg.121). Therefore, the professor likely believes that women need to be taught at a much slower rate and in a different fashion, although this is an inaccurate viewpoint. Racial discrimination was prevalent throughout the entire movie. For instance, when Vivian Mitchell states to Jackson, Johnson and Dorothy Vaughn that "y'all should be thankful y'all have jobs at

all” (Gigliotti et al., 2016, 0:47:21). The separation between ‘us’ and ‘they’ is an explicit way to show her “blatant sense of superiority” (Hack, 2020, Racism Lecture) that is tied to “old-fashioned racism” (Hack, 2020, Racism Lecture). Mitchell’s character exemplifies the common ideal that “White Americans have more economic and political power and control over resources than Blacks do” (Blaine & Benchley, 2017, pg. 95). Mitchell directly expressed that Black people are less worthy to have jobs and these women should consider themselves lucky. Lastly, a final example that demonstrates racist attitudes is when Vaughn is in the White section of the library and the librarian confronts her by stating “We don’t want any trouble in here.” (Gigliotti et al., 2016, 0:49:45). The librarian expresses her disbelief that a Black individual is interested in literature rather than violence. The librarian manifests blatant “old-fashioned racism” (Hack, 2020, Racism Lecture) that exemplifies her “automatic associations between blackness and immorality” (Blaine & Benchley, 2017, pg. 96). Her associations reflect her “deeply negative assumptions about Blacks” (Blaine & Benchley, 2017, pg. 97) and she does not even consider the possibility of correcting her negative belief. She fails to recognize that individuals who are not White can be positive and productive members of society. Overall, the movie approaches racism and sexism in a way that allows the audience to connect and empathize with the heroines of the film.

The movie depicted a variety of scenes that convey strong messages of how these women were subjected to sexism and racism and how they persevered. A powerful scene was the divide between the White and Black NASA workers as they welcomed the astronauts. However, even with this obvious divide, John Glenn introduced himself to the African American women as well. The scene demonstrated the subtle racist values of their daily coworkers. Yet, it also illustrated

how welcoming and friendly a caucasian person could be to African Americans. This scene shows the diversity of values during that time, which was a recurring theme throughout the movie. A scene that correlated with change in attitude was Al Harrison's removal of the colored sticker on the coffee pot. His actions demonstrated more than words could- his acceptance of his new coworker, Kathrine Johnson. The colored sticker was a way to make Johnson feel like an outsider, even in a room full of coworkers with the same goal. The sticker illustrated that first and foremost she is African American and secondly their coworker. Following that scene, Al Harrison tears down a colored sign above the restrooms and concludes with a statement that removes colored restrooms from NASA. His actions and words made it clear to those around him that things such as the color of one's skin are an insignificant factoid that should be dismissed. Lastly, the scene where Johnson is told that she is excluded from high-level meetings not only because she is a civilian but because women are not authorized to enter represents common sexist attitudes. The scene illustrates how deeply ingrained sexist beliefs were in society. Throughout the movie, one is able to connect with each scene and grasp the horrifying reality of racism and sexism in America.

An aspect *Hidden Figures* could have improved upon was delving into how the women at NASA were able to obtain jobs and what obstacles they had to overcome. The movie also fails to inform the audience of the different obstacles that African American women had to go through when compared to caucasian women. If the movie would have covered the background story of the heroines the movie would have felt more complete. Lastly, poorly staged scenes in the movie include when Vaughn is listening to the broadcast of Glenn's takeoff and re-entry into earth and

Johnson's demotion. Although these particular details were ineffectively produced it does not take away from the overall message of the film.

Every movie has a certain impact on society, whether it be grand or small, each impact is different and certain meaning is attached. *Hidden Figures* demonstrates the abhorrent normalcy of racism and segregation in America, a time where change and peace seemed out of reach. Heroines Mary Jackson, Kathrine Johnson, and Dorothy Vaughn illustrate individuals that crossed racial and gender boundaries powerfully and movingly, inspiring individuals for decades to come. The movie emphasizes the need to look past initial expectations and to view others for who they are and what they bring to the table; because often the hidden figures of society produce not only ripples but waves of change and innovation.

References

- Blaine, B.E., & Benchley, K.J.M. (2017). *Understanding the psychology of diversity* (3rd ed.) Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Gigliotti, D., Chernin, P., Topping, J., Williams, P., Melfi, T. (Producers), & Melfi, T. (Director). (2016). *Hidden Figures* [Motion Picture]. United States: 20th Century Fox.
- Hack, T. (2020). *Racism* [Powerpoint].
- Hack, T. (2020). *Sexism* [Powerpoint].