

Hidden Figures: An Analysis on Women Oppression of Theodore Melfi

Lara A. Baroy^{1*}, Aileen A. Lucero², Nina Louren P. Rosales³, Lito L. Diones⁴

^{1,2,3}Student, Department of Languages and Literature, Cebu Normal University, Cebu City, Philippines

⁴Associate Professor III, Department of Languages and Literature, Cebu Normal University, Cebu City, Philippines

Abstract: This study investigates the women's oppression in Theodore Melfi's Hidden Figure movie, specifically it engages into characters, plot and dialogue. In line with this, the study is obtained using three literary theories, namely Feminist theory, which examines the characters of the movie, Conflict Theory to support the plot and Patriarchy Theory which helps to investigate the dialogue towards on women's oppression found in the movie. Furthermore, this study is qualitative in form particularly discourse analysis as the method used to analyze the literary movie strenuously. The purpose of this study is to give relevance on how women are treated in the society from the beginning of the recorded history and up to these days. Furthermore, the findings of the study show that the characters, plot and dialogue clearly revealed women's oppression. The communal coffee pot for whites, no bathroom for blacks, pentagon for whites, kicked out in the library, and bullied in school, dismissed application, treated like trash collector, and abused intelligence are the several forms of oppression found in Hidden Figures. In conclusion women's oppression is found in Theodore Melfi's Hidden Figures. Women have experienced multiple discrimination and abuse. Moreover, in recommendation, the following are prescribed to the future literary researchers, instructors, and student; characters can be extracted through Cognitive theory; the Frinctean's Curve story structure is used to disclose women's oppression in Hidden Figures; dialogue is paired with symbolism to investigate thoroughly the various form of women's oppression.

Keywords: blacks, colored, hidden figures, oppression, women.

1. Introduction

Literature is a broad term that interprets arts, creating innovative works that depict humanity in society in a way that society may appreciate, comprehend, prosper from, and use. It is a form of human expression and serves as a form of communication between the writer and the reader or audience through literary works. It brings awareness of various realms of journey. It is an essential component of the literature milieu, which is the sum of all socially active literary works of a specific era and cultural circle (Morris 81).

To human beings, literature serves as a foundation of life. It plays a major role because it reflects society and shapes humanity as well. Further, with the help of literature, people from every walk of life understand the culture and differences of individuals. According to the Department of English Literature and Linguistics in Bar-Ilan, literature offers a wealth

of inspiration and creative expression, as well as the opportunity to develop skills important in the current global context. At its best, literary works serve as a type of foundation for human society.

Additionally, this study focuses on analyzing a film or movie as their chosen genre. The movie Hidden Figures by Theodore Melfi talks about the struggles of the three African – American female employees of NASA during the height of the spacecraft. It is a true to life story of triumph over adversity and their victories over sexism, racism, and oppression of women (Graff). In order to analyze the representation of oppression in the movie Hidden Figures, the authors first need to have a working definition of oppression. Oppression is commonly defined in historical and sociological books as a dominating group oppressing a minority group. Racial oppression is frequently treated in literature. In Marilyn Frye's article Oppression, she expands that oppressed people's lives are constrained and formed by unavoidable and systematic hurdles that catch them in the middle of them, preventing them from progressing in any aspect. Oppression of women is a major societal problem that gets more and more attention for some feminists even these days. Women have been oppressed, discriminated against, and disadvantaged with great consistency back the beginning of recorded history (Dickson & Louis). In this case, this study uses these three elements of a movie; the plot, character, and dialogue to further discuss the issue of gender inequality and sexism in the world - leading to women's oppression. Through this, human beings can understand in a deeper sense how the traditional view of male supremacy affects women in all realms.

This study investigates women's oppression in Theodore Melfi's *Hidden Figures*. Specifically, it engages into; character, plot, and, dialogue. The study is being supported by George Eliot's Feminist Theory, Lindsey German Patriarchy Theory, and Friedrich Engels' Conflict Theory.

The first theory is the Feminist theory of George Eliot. The terms Feminism and Feminist are first used in the 1960s. All these articles look at women's experiences of gender oppression, the origins of oppression, how gender inequality is sustained, and different remedies to gender inequality. Feminist theory or ideology is committed to the liberation of women's movements. It aims to define women's oppression,

*Corresponding author: larabaroy123456@gmail.com

explain its roots and consequences, and suggest liberation measures (12). There is no pretension that feminist theory can be neutral because it is the foundation of action. There is a commitment within feminist theory to reform oppressive structures and to connect abstract ideas with concrete concerns for political action. There must be a determination to do something about women's issues. It looks into gender inequality as well as how gender is formed. It is better understood as an intellectual and normative project. It aids in the understanding of and response to unfair and unjust gender relations. In dealing with the character as one of the essential elements raised in the research study, the feminist theory of George Eliot is very essential and useful. This theory emphasizes the character's importance in the accomplishment of the research. Moreover, this helps the study to discourse about women's participation and roles in almost every field in society in general. In addition, it helps to investigate how most women are represented.

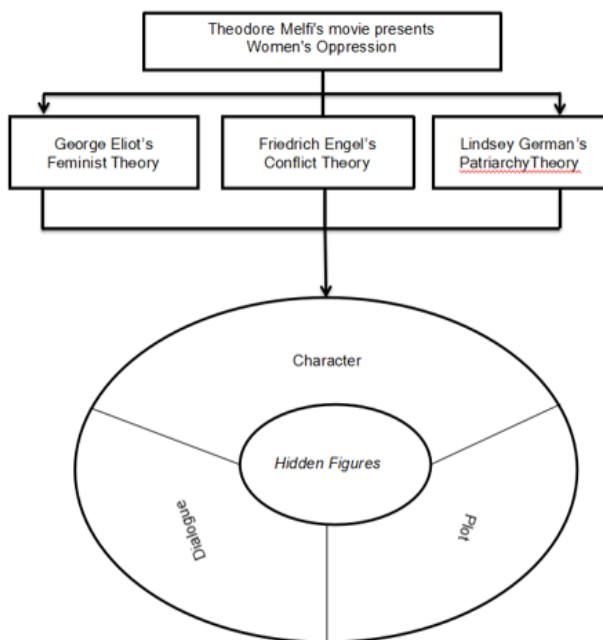


Fig. 1. Schematic presentation of the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study

The second theory is the Conflict theory by Friedrich Engels. According to conflict theory, competition among social groups for limited resources defines society as a struggle for dominance. This theory asserts that men emphasize gender to uphold implication and dominance at the expense of women and that this interpretation of gender is effective. Conflict theory claims that the dominant group's efforts to hold onto power serve as the sole justification for such roles continuing to exist. Moreover, this approach is normative in that it urges a gender power balance and prescribes improvements to the current power structure.

The Conflict theory is used to examine the plot in the movie *Hidden Figures*. This theory explains how the plot plays a big role in conducting this research study regarding women's oppression. It helps the researcher to build a connection to the root cause of the problem through the use of the plot as one of

the elements of the movie.

Lastly, the Patriarchy theory of Lindsey German is the most persistent and pervasive notion in today's Women's Movement. The patriarchy idea has the advantage of being all things to all people. It relies more on the nebulous experiences that some parts of the women's movement treasured than on a critique of materialism. Due to the abundance of possibilities, it may be challenging to even discover a description of the terminology (4). It reinforces the common belief in the women's movement that there must be a division of labor and that the workers' movement and socialism must fight capitalism separately. The fight against patriarchy is fought separately by the women's movement. Lindsey German's Patriarchy Theory is used in dialogue as one of the elements of the study. The dialogue uses Patriarchy Theory to determine the inferiority of women and the supremacy of men in the movie as well as to distinguish how the dialogue affects the lives of men and women. This theory is applied because it opens the human capacity to connect. In this theory, it shows how dialogue is being studied as one of the sub-problems that is being focused on. Thus, this research investigates how men and women view the purpose of dialogue differently.

2. Literature Review

According to the article *Literary Character* by Scott Flee, character is defined as one of the most essential elements in a story because they are the one who transmit what the author wants to say to the reader or viewer. A character is a fictional figure who appears in the story. In addition, character plays a vital role in developing a plot. Through the character, the plot is revealed in a story. In the absence of a character who motivates the act, the plot is not able to flow and develop. The character always does the act with a specific purpose in mind.

Furthermore, characters are classified as dynamic and static characters. These two types of characters are defined depending on how they grow and develop. A dynamic character is one who is constantly changing in certain parts of their personality, attitude or character. These characters change or develop their personalities throughout the novel as they encounter issues or conflict, whereas a static character remains the same person at the conclusion as they were at the beginning.

The article in the character carries relevant information that serves as a guide in the development of the current study. It supports the research argument to explain why such characters in the movie *Hidden Figures* are being oppressed.

Subsequently, the next article that the study uses to relate to the dialogue is the article by Tom Gleason titled *Why is Dialogue Is the Most Important Part of the Film?* According to the said article, dialogue plays a great significant role in film production because it makes the film mature, sophisticated and strongly crafted. A movie with dull, unexciting dialogue and cheesy lines appears immature and makes the screenwriter tend to think that he didn't try his very best to create an extraordinary, well-crafted film. Good dialogue is believed to build better characters because it reveals strength and personality while on the other hand, unpleasant dialogue can make characters seem dull and boring like an ordinary person.

(Gleason).

These understanding on related article is used in the study in order to further discuss the essence of a dialogue as part of the elements of a movie that are being raised in this study. This helps in the analysis of how language and communication reveal the main problem that the study is working under investigation.

The related literature that are employed in this section helps the current study to understand and comprehend the oppression that is shown in the movie. By that the study can easily look into the factors that suggest women's oppression which this study is concerned.

In order to further understand the study, related studies are utilized. According to a thesis study by Erinda Wanti titled *White Savior in Hidden Figure*, racism often manifests in unpleasant actions such as violence, segregation and even slavery between a racial group. One example is through this depiction of the image of white people as heroes of race and another skin color called the white savior narrative. The objective of this research is to detect traditional types of racism as well as new racism in the *Hidden Figures* film as portrayed in the white savior narrative. This study, the author entails the forms of conventional racism and new racism, namely the White Savior Narrative of the *Hidden Figure* movie, in which it strengthened the support of the theories being presented, that can be used as the reference in this present study. This study supports the current study in discussing oppression in terms of race and skin color as factors that this study considers.

In addition, a research dissertation by Jean Damascene Ngendahayo titled *The Impact of Women Oppression on the Societal Destruction of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart movie*, it emphasizes that the persecution of women in Igbo society and its impact on social ruin and women injustice in Achebe's movie *Things Fall Apart*, that focuses particularly on the causes of Igbo societal obliteration as it explores discrimination, inheritance deprivation for women, and other incidences of abuse against feminism. The purpose of the study is to determine the various types of oppression in *Things Fall Apart* and analyzes how women's oppression is presented in the movie. Further, it is identified that women's roles are limited at home and to raising children, rather than in the economic and political realms where women are seen incapable of possessing something comparable to men. Women are being beaten and men also observed socially and economically undermining women as a result of their patriarchal culture and civilization. Consequently, a thesis study of Women's Oppression *seen in Musical Movie Les Misérables*, states that this film repeats a number of gender issues. This study demonstrates the importance of examining the gender issue in the film. This present study utilizes Marxist Feminist Theory, and it is supported by the application of Film theory. Moreover, the study uses qualitative research as well. The qualitative descriptive method is used to analyze the data. According to the study, women are more repressed in the household than in society. It is due to the family's 'owning' or 'ownership' of women. As a result of the tighter realm of the family and the proximity relationship among family members, the interaction

leads to more acute female oppression than in society.

These related literature and studies that are being discussed provide solid understanding and enough knowledge on examining women's oppression found in Theodore Melfi's *Hidden Figures* as this study focuses on. Hence, these related published studies and the present study have similar topic studied but differ in form, style, and method used.

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The study is beneficial to literature instructors, students and future researchers. First, to literature instructors for this can serve as a guide for them in teaching literature and literary works. Second, to the literature major students because it gives them knowledge and ideas with regards to the topic. Lastly, it is beneficial to future researchers for this provides additional information and knowledge that can be used as the basis of their future study as well.

3. Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative method, particularly discourse analysis approach. Qualitative research is a type of research that relies on free and interactive communication to acquire data. As a result, qualitative research methods allow in-depth observation inquiry and asking participants focusing on their statements, while the researcher also critically examining their purpose and sentiments. It is created in such a way as to expose the individuals' perceptions of a potential group associated with a specific issue. Discourse analysis has defined approaches and theories for dealing with challenges that arise in areas such as education, cultural studies, and communications.

The primary source of this study is the Hidden Figure movie, which was directed and produced by Theodore Melfi. It has 127 minutes running time, released on December 25, 2016, in the United States and distributed by 20th Century Fox.

Furthermore, this study uses three phases: Phase 1. Character, Phase 2. Plot, Phase 3. Dialogue.

A. Phase 1. Character

Phase 1 tackles the analysis of the character. The character is analyzed through George Eliot's Feminist theory. To examine the characters, character's background is being obtained first. After looking into the character's background, the study investigates its women's oppression to employ what is needed in the character's analysis. Hence, a table titled character's analysis is used.

B. Phase 2. Plot

Phase 2 emphasizes the plot. The plot is analyzed through Conflict theory and with the use of the Aristotelian plot structure. In analyzing the plot, the scenes are used. After examining the scenes, women's oppression is employed in order to further understand how the movie depicts women's

oppression which is the main focus of the study. To fully understand the study, a table in Plot Analysis is being utilized.

C. Phase 3. Dialogue

Phase 3 talks about the dialogue. The dialogue is analyzed through Patriarchy theory of Friedrich Engels. In dialogue analysis, the study selects content in the movie to determine how women are treated and represented in the society. Furthermore, women's oppression is employed to understand more how the movie Hidden Figures depicts oppression. In Dialogue Analysis, table is employed.

4. Results and Discussion

A. Phase 1. Character

The table 1 presents the character's background and women's oppression that the characters' experience in the movie. The analysis of the characters is determined through George Eliot's Feminist Theory. In-depth textual analysis and thorough investigation are used to support the claim and reveal the women's oppression in the characters.

Employees are divided into groups based on race and gender. Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughn and Mary Jackson work in the colored group with 19 black women. The three ladies are known as software engineers because they solve difficult mathematical problems to get astronaut John Glenn ready for his quest to become the first American to orbit the Earth. Katherine works at NASA in the Langley Research Center, while continually reminded of her lesser standing, Katherine is starting to break down racial and gender boundaries at NASA. The protagonist is forbidden from participating Pentagon briefings, forced to travel half a mile to the colored restroom, and unable to use the office's communal coffee pot since no one wants to touch it. Furthermore, the male coworkers find it difficult to acknowledge the superior intelligence of women. the male coworkers find it difficult to acknowledge the superior intelligence of women. Although Katherine is aware that it is crucial to continue battling, yet ponders whether it actually be effective. Meanwhile, Dorothy wants the best for the two boys, and tries to mentor them about how to handle the discrimination. Dorothy work as a supervisor, however does not have the title or salary to show for it.

Table 1. Characters Analysis

Characters	Character's Background	Women's Oppression
Katherine Johnson	Lives in a small town in West Virginia	Communal coffee pot for whites
	The first black female student at West Virginia University Graduate School	No bathroom for whites
	Works at NASA in the Langley Research Center.	Pentagon meetings for whites
Dorothy Vaughn	Lived in Virginia in the early 1960's.	Kicked out in the Library
	Employee at NASA's Langley Research Center.	
Mary Jackson	Lived in Virginia in the early 1960's.	Discriminated in class
	A mathematician at NASA's Langley Research Center.	
Mrs. Joylette Coleman	Teacher and Katherine's mother	Bullied in school

Even though being kicked out from the library, Vaughn still manages to get the information needed. After studying, Mrs.

Vaughan plans to apprise the women that Vaughan supervises to learn about the latest technology.

Mary aspires to work for NASA as an engineer, a profession that has never been held by a black woman. One roadblock is that Mary needs to be officially qualified as an engineer but is unable to do so because the program is only open to white people. On top of the challenges at work, Mary is still determined to do the job with strong work ethics.

Lastly, Mrs. Joylette Coleman who is Katherine's mother and also a teacher did not even escape bullying in the workplace. Racism does not only happen in NASA but also in every part of the country where there are black people.

Furthermore, women's oppression in this movie happened because of gender differences. In NASA, men have underestimated the ability of black females and treated like nobody. A study titled *Gender Discrimination Is Still Alive and Well in The Workplace 2021* by Bryan Robinson revealed that women's oppression is still present in today's age. Gender negatively impacted career opportunities for female rather than the male, women who excel early in their academic careers have less opportunities for leadership in the work industry.

After the analysis based on George Eliot's Feminist Theory, women's oppression that is found in Phase 1 discussion, with the use of character and character's background are, communal coffee pot for whites, no bathroom for blacks, pentagon meetings for whites, kicked out in the library, discriminated in class, and bullied in school.

B. Phase 2. Plot

The table 2 presents scenes and the women's oppression that happens in the movie. The elements of the plot are used to analyze the scenes of the movie in order to investigate the women's oppression in *Hidden Figures* of Theodore Melfi.

Table 2. Plot Analysis

Plot Structure	Scene	Women's Oppression
Exposition	Defense industry must be desegregated.	Segregation
	Black mathematician women in 1935.	Restrooms for whites
Rising Action	Dorothy Vaughan appointed at Langley.	Dismissed application Arrested with sons
	Katherine joined the Space Task office.	Treated like a trash collector.
	Black individuals protested on the street.	No restroom
Climax	U.S government agencies compete. The Space Act merges all competitors.	Abused intelligence Pentagon meeting for whites
Falling Action	Mary studies at University of Virginia.	All-white school class.
Resolution	Glenn returns safely to Earth	Forbid in monitoring office.

Since 1935, the majority of Langley mathematicians are females. These females are known as computers and have proven to be more capable in computation than white engineers. Further, colored many West Computing women who works in engineering groups on a full-time basis. As a result, West Computing employs significantly more people. Mary Jackson pursue education at the University of Virginia. With that, Mary

Jackson faces discrimination because the school is good is for all-white high school class. The tools have been knowledge, discipline, hard work, and self-respect. Mary works hard to instill in her son the confident belief that she is as capable and deserving of success in life as any other child. This clearly shows that in terms of work opportunities, people with color have less recognition in society. Using the Cognitive Theory of Friedrich Engels reveals and explains men striving to preserve influence and authority against women (23).

The ideology affects the view of society towards women. Women should depend on the idea that men are superior to women in all aspects. Thus, when it comes to work opportunities, women are less likely to have opportunities than men because of the idea that men are more powerful and have more strength to provide than women. The movie *Hidden Figures* by Theodore Melfi shows relevant forms of oppression that are still evident up to these days.

Furthermore, Marxist theory of Lenin Vogel, emphasizes that the numerous components of the society that women oppressed are because of these factors namely; religious doctrine, work opportunities. According to Lenin, the special oppression of women in capitalist society has two roots. First and foremost, women like national minorities, face political inequality as a group. Secondly, women are imprisoned in what Lenin refers to as domestic slavery—that is, they perform the unpaid work in the residence required to maintain and regenerate the producing classes under oppressive conditions (Vogel,1977).

This analysis on women's oppression found in *Hidden Figures* is present nowadays, concludes that up to this time women's oppression is timely and relevant in societies because of the idea of men supremacy.

Hence, the black women break the barriers of black people and white people inside NASA. Women's oppression that can be seen in the Phase 2 discussion, through the use of plot structure and scenes, are segregation, restrooms for whites, dismissed application, arrested with sons, treated like a trash collector, abused intelligence, pentagon meeting for whites, all-white school class, and lastly forbid in monitoring office.

C. Phase 3 Dialogue

The table 3 presents contents and the women's oppression that occurs in the movie.

The three-african women have experienced odds throughout the journey while working in NASA. Each one of the protagonists have faced various challenges in life in different circumstances because of the skin color, gender, and status. Among these scenarios, this research presents *Hidden Figures'* dialogues and its content that suggest inequality, sexism, racism, and discrimination.

There is another opening in the Engineer Training Program. Mary, a person with an engineer's mind should be an engineer.

You can't be a computer the rest of your life.

Mr. Zielinski... I'm a Negro woman. I'm not gonna entertain the impossible?

Mary who possesses engineering skills, is asked to join in a

team lead by Zielinski, a Polish-Jewish 'emigre' - engineer who encourages Jackson to pursue formal engineering certification. Zielinski is a survivor of the Holocaust. On the other hand, Mary needs to take more classes to accomplish engineering, but the only one school that is available is a segregated institution where white people predominate.

I plan on being an engineer NASA,

But I can't do that without taking them classes at that all-white high school, and I can't change the color of my skin.

So, I have no choice but to be the first, which I can't do without you, sir.

On the contrary, Dorothy is the supervisor and de facto head of a team of computers that involves Katherine and Mary and consists of about thirty black women who are all accomplished mathematicians. Dorothy is waiting for an official promotion to supervisor, but after speaking with a senior administrator, it becomes clear that it won't happen for a reason that is both obvious and unspoken race.

What's not fair is having the responsibility of a supervisor, but not the title or the pay. And watching you two move on.

Now, don't get me wrong. Any upward movement is movement for us all, just isn't movement for me

Table 3. Dialogue Analysis

Dialogue	Content	Women's Oppression
Exposition	<i>There are quite a few women working in the space program.</i>	domination of males
	<i>Would you try to be an engineer if you were a white man?</i>	unequal privileges
	<i>They're not assigning a permanent supervisor for the colored group.</i>	discriminating the blacks
Rising action	<i>And it's not because we wear skirts. It's because we wear glasses.</i>	shows sexism
	<i>There is no bathroom. There are no colored bathrooms in this building or any building outside ...</i>	segregation
	<i>That's not fair is having the responsibility of a supervisor, but not the title or the pay.</i>	inequality
	<i>We go from being our father's daughters, to our husband's wives, and to our babies' mother</i>	weak with minimal roles
Climax	<i>And she is a woman. There is no protocol for a woman to attend these meetings.</i>	gender
Falling action	<i>Well human computers can't calculate an orbital flight in the time we have ...</i>	discrimination doubting the potentials
Resolution	<i>We're already sir ...</i>	proving one's potential

However, among the group of mathematicians, Katherine is chosen to join Al Harrison's main research team. Katherine is the lone woman and the only person of color in the workplace, aside from the secretary, who is portrayed by Kimberly Quinn. Separate but unequal is further illustrated by the difference between that dilapidated and deteriorating building and the comfortable and well-equipped white women's lavatory.

There is no bathroom. There are no colored bathrooms in this building, or any building outside the West Campus, which is half a mile away. Did you know that?

I have to walk to Timbuktu just to relieve myself! And I can't use one of the handy bikes. Picture that, Mr. Harrison My uniform, skirt below the knees and my heels. And simple string of pearls. Well, I don't own pearls. Lord knows you don't pay the colored enough to afford pearls! And I work like a dog day and night, living on coffee from a pot none of you WANNA touch!

So, excuse me if I have to go to the restroom a few times a day.

Katherine appears to spend the most of her time on-screen racing through corridors, across parking lots, sometimes in the rain, and always lugging a massive stack of books just to be able to use the restroom. Katherine's boss is completely unaware of how inconvenient life is in the comparison to that other workers—all of whom are white males who have access to a toilet nearby, and who in addition, taking the convenience for granted, make Katherine's life more difficult and humiliating by forcing Katherine to use a separate coffee pot from the rest of the staff. Harrison doesn't comprehend Katherine's frequent absences from her desk until Katherine explains why.

The constant slurs and dehumanization that black Virginians and NASA personnel have experienced is the foundation of the film. These segregationist laws and customs, together with the mentalities and conduct that kept them in place, are specific, robust, analytical, and unyielding. The film focuses on black Virginian's struggles to deal with pervasive societal racism and, where possible, to call it out, oppose, combat, and even beat it. It portrays vile white supremacist beliefs and methods that are poisoned and are closely related to the victories of earlier generations.

Women's oppression found in the dialogues' content of Theodore Melfi's movie *Hidden Figure* are; domination of males, unequal privileges, discriminating the blacks, Injustice, shows sexism, inequality, segregation, weak with minimal roles, gender discrimination, doubting the potentials, and proving one's potential.

In Multiple Jeopardy theory of Deborah King, there are important components of an individual's identity, such as gender, class, or race, that result in discrimination or oppression and have a variable that can be manipulated on the unequal treatment that individual develops and systems approach. This systematic and multiple forms of racism and sexism still exist, and for many, socioeconomic disparity makes those problems on oppression worse (King 1988). This study also shows that Theodore Melfi's *Hidden Figures* have viewed women in a less context of the society. This analysis reveals that men especially the whites are superior and on the top of the hierarchy status, while women specifically women in colors are in the subordinate position. Men's voice and participation in the society are more powerful than women.

Furthermore, this study on women's oppression found in *Hidden Figures* is relevant to the contemporary era, where women of today are less appreciated, valued and are still discriminated in some developing countries because of gender stereotypes.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, women's oppression is found in Theodore Melfi's *Hidden Figures*.

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