



The Aspiration of Black Mathematicians Women in Gaining Equality towards Male Domination in the Movie “Hidden Figures” (2016)

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Salsabila, D., Priyoto and Susiyati. (2025). The Aspiration of Black Mathematicians Women in Gaining Equality towards Male Domination in the Movie “Hidden Figures” (2016). *Journal of English Language and Literature*, 9(1), 345-352. doi: 10.37110/jell.v9i1.297

Received: 20-04-2025

Accepted: 25-07-2025

Published: 02-09-2025

Abstract: This research investigates the representation of gender roles in the film *Hidden Figures* (2016) through the authentic experiences of three African American women, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson who were employed at NASA in the 1960s. Using Gender Role Theory, this study examines the methods these characters use to confront and navigate discrimination in a workplace characterized by male dominance and racial segregation. Using qualitative content analysis methodology, this study focuses on specific scenes that illustrate the challenges these women face as a result of their race and gender. The results show that each character faces systemic barriers, including limited access to education, inadequate recognition, and exclusion from leadership roles. However, their resilience and determination allow them to overcome these barriers. Katherine asserts her right to participate in important meetings, Dorothy teaches herself programming to maintain her relevance in the evolving workforce, and Mary defies legal barriers to pursuing a career as an engineer. This representation emphasizes the film’s core message: that perseverance and self-respect can effectively challenge and resist oppressive gender norms. Ultimately, this research not only depicts the personal struggles of these women, but also highlights the broader societal implications of challenging conventional gender roles, underscoring the importance of visibility.

Keywords: *Hidden Figures, Gender Role, Goal Theory, NASA, Female Empowerment*

INTRODUCTION

Literature, as a form of imaginative expression, functions not only as an artistic activity but also as a reflection of society, encapsulating complex human experiences and worldviews. Wellek and Warren (1963) assert that literature originates from the imagination, going beyond the mere recording of factual information. Similarly, Abrams (1953) argues that literature shapes and articulates human experience through symbolic and creative

narratives. In the contemporary context, these narratives are not limited to textual forms; they extend to audiovisual media, particularly film, which combines visual, auditory, and narrative components to convey meaning and evoke emotion.

Film, as Kracauer (1960) explains, has a unique capacity to capture and enhance the authenticity of everyday life, providing insight into social issues. In this realm, feminist film has emerged as an important platform for examining themes related to

gender, identity, and equality. Feminism, as defined by Hooks (1984), is a movement dedicated to the eradication of systemic sexism and oppression, emphasizing inclusivity and social justice in gender and racial dimensions.

This study investigates *Hidden Figures* (2016), a biographical drama directed by Theodore Melfi, which depicts the significant contributions of three African-American women, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson whose efforts at NASA were instrumental in the successful launch of astronaut John Glenn into orbit. Set against the historical context of 1960s America, the film explores the dual challenges of racism and sexism that these women faced in an institution dominated by white men.

Utilizing the framework of gender role theory, the paper analyzes how the film depicts the societal expectations and institutional constraints imposed on its female protagonists. Their efforts from Mary's legal battle for access to education, to Dorothy's demonstration of leadership, to Katherine's insistence on the recognition she deserved, embody the basic tenets of liberal feminism, which advocates for equal opportunity, recognition, and advancement within prevailing societal structures.

In sociological and psychological discourse, gender roles are understood as norms and expectations that are culturally constructed and imposed on individuals based on their sex assigned at birth. These roles not only regulate behavior but also the types of work, emotional expression, and social contributions that are considered appropriate for each gender. Traditionally, women are expected to demonstrate characteristics such as nurturing, empathy, submissiveness, and a strong focus on domestic responsibilities, while men are generally associated with assertiveness, leadership, rationality, and dominance in the public sphere (Hofstede, 2001). As Judith Butler (1990) argues in *Gender Trouble*, "gender is not something one has, but rather something one does," emphasizing that gender is not an inherent quality but rather a performative construct, maintained through repeated actions within a societal context. These repeated performances often reinforce traditional binaries, thereby limiting women's access to leadership positions and reducing their visibility in male-dominated sectors.

Nevertheless, contemporary scholarship and media are increasingly challenging these rigid binaries. Film has emerged as one of the most effective media for this resistance, given its ability to depict and disrupt traditional narratives through compelling visual and emotional storytelling. As Laura Mulvey (1975) argued in her seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, media often reinforces patriarchal structures through the "male gaze"; however, it also has the potential to subvert these structures by redefining who is represented and in what ways. In this context, *Hidden Figures* (2016) is a significant case study. Set in the early 1960s, a period marked by institutionalized racism and entrenched patriarchy, the film illustrates how conventional gender expectations are embedded in professional environments, particularly in male-dominated fields such as aeronautics and space science. At NASA, these norms are evident in structural constraints and cultural biases, manifested through segregated restrooms, exclusion from technical briefings, and the routine disregard for women's expertise.

In this context, the film's protagonists, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, not only confront social norms but also challenge deeply rooted gender expectations within a racially segregated and male-dominated institution. Their resilience and determination are evident as they navigate systemic barriers and assert their place in spaces traditionally reserved for white men. Dorothy masters FORTRAN to stay competitive amid the automation revolution, Katherine demands access to classified information to complete her calculations, and Mary fights a legal battle to enroll in a segregated engineering program. These actions reflect their refusal to accept the limitations imposed by gender roles and highlight their pursuit of professional recognition and equality.

The dynamic interplay between external gender role expectations and individual agency is the analytical foundation of this study. This interplay facilitates a nuanced understanding of how women navigate and resist oppressive systems. Hooks (1984) underscores this intersection when she states, "Feminism is for everyone, and it's about justice. It's about challenging the systems of domination that limit our lives." The actions of the protagonists in *Hidden Figures* embody this

principle: their personal endeavors are inextricably linked to broader struggles for equality. Their perseverance represents not only a quest for professional recognition but also serves as a form of resistance and reclaiming of identity. In *Hidden Figures*, the personal becomes political, as each woman's accomplishments reveal the limitations of a gendered social order and propose alternative visions of competence, worth, and belonging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Role Theory, as articulated by Eagly and Wood (2012), posits that gender roles are socially constructed behaviors and expectations assigned to individuals based on their perceived sex, rather than inherent biological differences. These roles are learned and reinforced through socialization processes across various institutions such as family, education, and media. Eagly and Wood (2012) explain that gender roles dictate specific traits, responsibilities, and behaviors appropriate for men and women, which are maintained through cultural norms and daily interactions. Complementing this,

Bem's (1981) Gender Schema Theory highlights how individuals internalize gender norms early in life, shaping cognitive frameworks that influence their behaviors in alignment with societal expectations. West and Zimmerman (1987) further argue that gender is a continuous social performance shaped by context and interaction, rather than a fixed attribute.

1) Gender Roles in the Workplace

In workplace settings, gender roles manifest through institutionalized expectations that often privilege masculine traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness (Acker, 1990). Ridgeway (2011) emphasizes that gender influences perceptions of competence and authority, often disadvantaging women in leadership and career advancement. Despite increasing diversity, the International Labour Organization (2008) notes persistent inequalities that disproportionately affect women, especially in precarious employment sectors.

2) Gender Roles in Education

Within educational settings, traditional gender roles often influence expectations and opportunities for students and educators alike. Girls are frequently steered toward nurturing or humanities-

based fields, while boys are encouraged to pursue science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) (Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). These biases can shape self-perception and limit academic aspirations, particularly for girls in male-dominated disciplines. Similarly, male educators in early childhood or primary education may face stigma due to the association of teaching young children with feminine traits (Allan, 1993). Such gendered assumptions in education reinforce unequal access to learning and career pathways, sustaining broader patterns of systemic inequality.

3) Gender Roles in Leadership

Eagly and Karau (2002) describe a "double bind" faced by women leaders, who must balance societal expectations of femininity with the traditionally masculine traits associated with leadership. Women are often penalized for displaying assertiveness, while men's leadership qualities are more readily accepted (Catalyst, 2020). Connell (2005) conceptualizes leadership itself as a gendered social construct, reinforcing barriers to women's advancement. However, evolving perspectives advocate for inclusive leadership models that value diverse traits such as empathy and collaboration (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Several previous studies have examined *Hidden Figures* through the lenses of gender, race, and power, offering diverse theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches to analyze the struggles of Black women within oppressive systems.

First, Maryam, Astuty, and Pradana (2022), in their study *An Analysis of Gender Inequality on Black Women Characters in Hidden Figures*, applied feminist theories from Mansoor Fakih and Relawati to explore marginalization and subordination faced by the female protagonists. Through qualitative descriptive analysis, they highlighted how patriarchal and capitalist structures constrain women's agency, with the film portraying acts of resistance against such systemic injustices. However, this study remains largely descriptive and does not examine how the protagonists proactively set and pursue their personal and professional goals within such constraints.

Second, Panuntun and Chusna (2022), in *Patriarchal Cultural Perspective in Woman Characters of Hidden Figures*, used patriarchal theory to examine male dominance in decision-making and professional advancement. Their findings emphasized how the female characters

challenge societal norms through resilience, intelligence, and ambition, illustrating resistance within a patriarchal cultural framework. Yet, their analysis does not delve into the dynamics of goal-setting or how gender roles shape the characters' strategies for overcoming barriers and achieving success.

Third, Purasih (2024) investigated *Racial Discrimination in Hidden Figures* using the Three Levels of Racism theory and the Resistance Strategy framework. The study uncovered how institutional and interpersonal racism impacts the protagonists' experiences and identified resistance strategies such as striving for excellence, building solidarity, and asserting identity as capable Black women in STEM. Nonetheless, this research focuses on racial oppression and resistance, without considering how the characters' individual goals and internalized gender roles interact with systemic racism to influence their pathways toward achievement.

While these studies provide rich insights into the sociopolitical and cultural dimensions of *Hidden Figures*, they primarily rely on frameworks such as feminism, racism, discourse analysis, and intersectionality. The current study diverges by integrating Gender Role Theory to examine not only the external barriers the characters face but also their internal motivations and goal-oriented strategies. This approach offers a novel analytical lens by connecting societal role expectations with individual agency, highlighting how the protagonists confront structural inequalities while maintaining personal ambition and professional integrity.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative content analysis of the film *Hidden Figures* (2016), which focuses on the representation of gender role dynamics. Data were collected through multiple viewings of the film in its entirety, with a particular focus on scenes depicting professional challenges and conflicts related to traditional gender expectations. Thematic analysis was conducted using Gender Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) as the primary analytical framework. The analysis investigates how the characters' professional experiences are influenced and constrained by institutional and cultural norms related to gender. To enhance analytical depth, the

study incorporates relevant literature, including scholarly articles, theoretical texts, and biographical accounts of real-life individuals depicted in the film.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the key findings derived from the analysis of the film *Hidden Figures*, using gender role theory and goal theory to explore the complex challenges and motivations faced by the main female characters. The analysis focuses on specific scenes, detailing their time stamps, key dialogues, and underlying symbolic messages.

The central focus of this discussion is the intersection of gender and race, which served to limit access, recognition, and authority for women, particularly black women, in the male-dominated and segregated context of 1960s NASA. These scenes not only expose structural oppression but also highlight how the main characters assert their presence through intelligence, perseverance, and emotional resilience.

In order to systematically present these findings, the discussion is organized into two main themes: gender role representations and the process of pursuing goals motivated by intrinsic factors. This framework facilitates a detailed examination of how Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan navigate institutional and cultural barriers while striving for personal and professional fulfillment. Their experiences illustrate the transformative influence of self-belief and long-term vision, particularly in an environment designed to discourage such ambition. By including selected dialogues, this section enriches the theoretical analysis, highlighting the emotional and cognitive labor often overlooked in traditional representations of scientific achievement.

1) Gender Role Representation

a. Gender Roles in the Workplace

Several underlying forces define the exclusion Katherine experiences in this scene, centering around Institutionalized Gender and Racial Gatekeeping. Katherine is deeply competent, the only mathematician capable of solving the orbital equations required for the space launch, yet she is deliberately barred from attending high-level briefings. This reveals a mindset embedded in the system around her, where women, especially Black women, are

seen as tools for labor, not as equal intellectual contributors. The structural discrimination is not overtly violent, but covertly entrenched: her mind is valued, her presence is not.

This silent yet forceful exclusion is captured in the following exchange, which affirms the systemic nature of her marginalization.

Paul Stafford: *"There's no protocol for women attending."*

Katherine Johnson: *"There's no protocol for a man circling the Earth either, sir."* (Sequence: 00:27:13 – 00:30:22)

Katherine's reply is not just witty; it reflects her awareness of gendered injustice and her refusal to accept invisibility, even in an environment that treats her as an exception rather than an equal. This moment highlights how she negotiates the socially constructed gender roles that expect women, especially Black women to remain silent and compliant in male-dominated spaces. According to gender role theory, women are often socialized to embody patience and deference, yet Katherine subtly challenges these expectations by asserting her frustration without abandoning her composure. This supports Panuntun and Chusna's (2022) finding that the female characters in *Hidden Figures* resist patriarchal norms through resilience and intelligence, while adding nuance by illustrating how resistance can take the form of redefining gendered expectations rather than outright rebellion.

Similarly, her endurance during the humiliating routine of running to the "colored" restroom exemplifies how gender roles shape her response to discrimination. Rather than openly protesting early on, which might have conflicted with the internalized norms of feminine restraint and dignity, she performs her duties with excellence, embodying a quiet resistance that aligns with traditional expectations of perseverance. As gender role theory suggests, women often express agency within the constraints of societal expectations, and Katherine's dignified endurance demonstrates how she utilizes socially sanctioned traits like grace and resilience to navigate structural oppression.

Katherine's situation reflects the lived reality of many women of color, who often navigate discrimination by embodying resistance through resilience and excellence rather than open protest at every slight. This pattern can be understood through gender role theory, which explains how women are

socialized to internalize expectations of composure, patience, and self-restraint, qualities that Katherine exhibits even as she confronts systemic injustice. Her eventual outburst, finally voices her frustration, marks a critical moment where she pushes back against these internalized gender norms to assert her dignity more explicitly. This illustrates the ongoing tension between conforming to and challenging societal expectations of femininity, showing that even quiet endurance can evolve into direct resistance when the burden becomes too heavy to bear.

Katherine Johnson: *"There are no colored bathrooms in this building or any building outside the West Campus, which is half a mile away."* (Sequence: 00:33:05 – 00:34:50)

Marks the breaking point of long suppressed indignation. Gender role theory highlights how women are often expected to endure hardship silently, especially in male dominated institutions. Katherine's endurance reflects not weakness, but strength, the strength to hold her ground without compromising her identity or her value, even when her presence is structurally disregarded.

Something similar also occurs with another main character, Dorothy Vaughan, in the context of leadership in the workplace. Dorothy Vaughan is denied the title of supervisor, despite already performing the role in every functional capacity. Her leadership, mentorship, and technical oversight are acknowledged in practice but not in name. Still, she does not walk away or yield to resentment, instead, she remains steadfast in her commitment to her team and her work. Her decision to continue leading without formal recognition becomes an act of quiet resistance, a refusal to accept the erasure of her contributions.

Dorothy's determination shows a common issue of gender-based exclusion, where women's leadership is used in practice but not formally acknowledged. Instead of confronting the system directly, she responds by working hard, learning new skills, and adapting, eventually teaching herself and her team the FORTRAN programming language to prepare for future changes in the workplace. Through this, she not only supports her team but also proves her value to the organization. Her choice to keep pushing forward, even without recognition, shows her strong stance against a

system that often overlooks or devalues women's collaborative leadership.

Dorothy Vaughan: *"I'm doing the work of a supervisor, haven't been given the title or the pay."*

(Sequence: 00:40:50 – 00:43:10)

This situation highlights the idea of invisible labor doing the work of a leader without being given the official title. While her efforts are needed and used, they are not formally recognized. Gender theory describes this as a way that patriarchal systems take advantage of women's work while refusing to give it proper credit or status.

b. Gender Roles in Education

Education is often viewed as a pathway to equality, yet it remains shaped by deeply embedded gender norms and systemic barriers. From the subjects students are encouraged to pursue to the opportunities they are granted, traditional gender expectations continue to influence academic trajectories and professional futures. These biases intersect with race, class, and institutional power, often limiting access for those who fall outside dominant social categories. One example of this dynamic can be seen in *Hidden Figures*, where Mary Jackson's journey to become an engineer reveals how gender roles and racial discrimination intersect to restrict educational access.

Supervisor: *"Mary, a person with your intelligence should be an engineer."* Mary Jackson: *"I'm a Negro woman. I'm not gonna entertain the impossible."*

(Sequence: 00:47:10 – 00:48:30)

This moment reflects the tension between personal potential and systemic restriction. While Mary's supervisor recognizes her intelligence and urges her to pursue engineering, the reality of segregation and entrenched gender roles renders that path nearly impossible. Her response *"I'm not gonna entertain the impossible"* reveals her internalization of the social barriers that have long defined access to education for Black women.

From a gender theory perspective, this scene illustrates a systemic form of deterrence, where qualifications are presented as merit-based and

race- or genderneutral, but are in fact conditioned by discriminatory access. The expectation that Mary must attend a whites-only institution to qualify for an engineering position highlights how institutional requirements often mask inequality under the guise of objective standards. These hidden barriers reinforce a patriarchal and racially segregated structure within education, where women particularly women of color are systematically excluded from advancement. Mary's experience exemplifies how gender roles in education are not just personal or cultural, but deeply embedded in the structures and policies that shape who gets to learn, qualify, and succeed.

Throughout history, access to education has been heavily influenced by gender roles and institutional power dynamics. Women, especially women of color, have often been required to work harder to gain the same educational opportunities afforded to their male counterparts. These struggles are not just about gaining entry into classrooms, they're about confronting the broader social structures that determine who is deemed worthy of learning, leading, and excelling. Traditional gender expectations often portray women as passive, deferential, or unqualified for leadership in academic and scientific fields. However, many women have had to subvert these roles through resilience, strategic communication, and deep emotional intelligence to navigate spaces not built for them. *Hidden Figures* portrays these dynamics powerfully through the character of Mary Jackson, whose journey to become NASA's first Black female engineer is filled with moments where she must assert herself not only intellectually but strategically, challenging both gender and racial barriers.

Mary Jackson: *"Out of all the cases you will hear today, which one is going to matter 100 years from now? Which one is going to make you the first?"* Judge:

"You've made your point."

(Sequence: 01:01:20 – 01:04:00)

This scene shows how Mary takes control in a situation where the system is clearly set up to keep her out. Instead of simply asking for permission or accepting her position, she speaks to the judge in a smart and persuasive way. She doesn't make the

moment just about her own needs— instead, she presents it as a chance for the judge to make a meaningful decision that could be remembered in the future. By doing this, she changes the dynamic of the conversation and puts herself in a stronger position.

From a gender perspective, Mary's actions demonstrate how women often use communication skills, emotional awareness, and strategy to get past barriers in institutions that are not built for them. Rather than confronting the judge aggressively, which could have backfired, she uses respectful but impactful reasoning to challenge the idea that women should remain silent or submissive. Her approach pushes back against traditional gender roles and shows that leadership doesn't always have to be loud or forceful, it can also come through confidence, intelligence, and the ability to influence others thoughtfully. This moment is not just about going to school; it represents a bigger fight for access, respect, and the power to change things from the inside.

c. Gender Roles in Leadership

Leadership is often seen as something connected to typically "masculine" qualities like being assertive, competitive, and focused on individual success. People usually expect leaders to be strong, commanding, and in control. However, this view doesn't consider the many other ways leadership can be shown, especially by women. Feminist ideas about leadership highlight teamwork, understanding, and working together toward common goals instead of just giving orders. Even so, women leaders often face difficulties because their leadership styles don't always match these traditional expectations. These gender stereotypes can make it harder for women to get leadership roles or be recognized as leaders, particularly in fields like science and technology where men dominate. Dorothy Vaughan's story in *Hidden Figures* is a great example of how women have led through cooperation and smart planning, even when they don't get official titles or credit.

Dorothy Vaughan: "*Ladies, the IBM is here. If we don't figure this out, we'll all be out of jobs.*" (Sequence: 01:12:30 – 01:14:15)

This scene illustrates Dorothy Vaughan's initiative in a subtle yet impactful way. When a new IBM computer arrives at NASA, she

realizes that her team's jobs are at risk unless they acquire the skills to operate it. Although not officially recognized as a supervisor, she takes the initiative to secretly learn the FORTRAN programming language and then imparts that knowledge to her colleagues in the department. Her leadership is not characterized by control or competition, but by a commitment to lifting everyone up collectively and ensuring that no one is left behind.

From a gender role perspective, Dorothy's approach challenges the prevailing notion that leadership and technology are largely male domains associated with competition. Rather than viewing the situation as a contest, she sees it as an opportunity for collective learning and growth. This is in line with feminist perspectives on leadership, which emphasize teamwork, mutual support, and forward thinking. Dorothy's focus goes beyond her individual interests; she ensures that her entire team is prepared for the changes that are coming. Her determination, strategic foresight, and understated leadership illustrate how women often lead in significant yet less visible capacities. This scene underscores that authentic leadership can be inclusive and considerate, even when there is no formal recognition.

CONCLUSION

This conclusion is derived from the analysis presented in the findings and discussion section. After a thorough examination of key scenes and character actions, the researcher summarizes the key findings in this section. Each point in the conclusion reflects insights gained during the research process.

The analysis reveals that the women in *Hidden Figures* face unfair treatment stemming from rigid gender expectations; however, they consistently demonstrate resilience, determination, and professional excellence. Their actions challenge norms that seek to limit their roles, thereby creating opportunities for themselves in an initially hostile environment. Ultimately, the study concludes that when individuals from marginalized groups persist in the face of systemic inequality, they not only achieve personal success but also contribute to broader societal transformation. The characters' narratives serve as a powerful reminder that rejecting gender-based constraints can redefine

societal standards and pave the way for future generations.

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