

## American Dream for African-American Women: A Reality or an Illusion- The Case Study of Theodore Melfi's Film *Hidden Figures* (2016)

Dr. Zoulaikha Elbah  
elbahzoulikha@gmail.com  
Faculty of Letters and Languages,  
University Abbes Laghrour, Khenchela, (Algeria)

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### Abstract:

The purpose of the current study is to shed light on the ethos of the American dream in Theodore Melfi's Film *Hidden Figures* (2016) which depicts the struggle of African-American women to achieve their American dream. This study is based on two main hypotheses. The first states that for African-American women, the American dream is nothing but an illusion. The second hypothesis states that African-American women can achieve the American dream through hard work and determination. To analyse the on-screen discourse, we have adopted Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which enables us to identify explicit and latent patterns and themes. The analysis of on-screen discourse reveals that the first hypothesis is refuted, while the second is confirmed.

**Keywords:** American Dream; Reality; Illusion; African-American Women; Segregation.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

American Dream has always been one of the most popular issues in American on-screen discourse (Winn, 2007). It is the belief that everyone in the United States, regardless his social class, race, gender, or any other condition, can achieve success through hard work, courage, and determination. The term 'American dream' was first coined by James Truslow Adams in his book entitled *Epic of America* (1931). This latter describes the term stating:

The *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. ... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (p. 404)

The American dream is supported by the belief that America is the land of equality, freedom, and democracy. Bloom (2009) explains that "The

earliest promises of America were based on the idea of fresh opportunity-to escape the oppression of history to a virgin land where one could make oneself anew” (p. 59). Worthy of mention, the term ‘American dream’ has received a variety of conceptualizations some of which are explored by Cullen (2004) referring to their origins, dynamics, and ongoing relevance. The ethos of the American dream is reflected in Americans’ everyday life including onscreen discourse. One of the films which tackles the American dream as a central theme is Theodore Melfi’s film *Hidden Figures* (2016) which depicts the American dream for African-American women. This takes place as this category suffers both racial discrimination and gender-based segregation. Now, being found in such hard situation, we wonder whether African-American women have an American dream that they try to achieve. To answer this question, we have adopted Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyse the on-screen discourse in question.

## **2. Thematic Analysis**

### **2.1 Definition**

Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) defines Thematic Analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data”. They also stress the importance of Thematic Analysis claiming that it is the first qualitative method to be learned as it provides researchers with “core skills that will be useful for conducting many other kinds of analysis” (2006, p. 78). Another important feature assigned to this method is being a flexible and useful research tool as it is “essentially independent of theory and epistemology, and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches” (2006, p. 78). Braun and Clarke (2006) adds that there are many methods within thematic analysis. However, they are all poorly demarcated. For that, they have proposed a framework to fill “the absence of a paper which adequately outlines the theory, application and evaluation” (2006, p. 77). Their work offers a detailed framework for doing thematic analysis that enables the analyst not only to trace patterns and themes, but also to interpret and make sense of them.

### **2.2 Semantic vs Latent Themes**

As a given text can provide a large number of themes, focus is to be put on those interesting ones which address the research question(s). Also, one should distinguish between semantic themes and latent ones. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 84) state that looking for semantic themes takes place “within the explicit or surface meanings of the data and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written”. In contrast, looking for latent themes, the analyst should look beyond what has been said “to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations - and ideologies - that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

### **2.3 Steps of Thematic Analysis**

Braun and Clarke (2006) provide a step-by-step guide for those who want to conduct a deliberate and rigorous thematic analysis. This framework includes six phases (see the table below):

| Phase                                    | Description of the process   |
|--|--|
| 1. Familiarizing yourself with your data | Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.  |
| 2. Generating initial codes              | Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.  |
| 3. Searching for themes:                 | Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.  |
| 4. Reviewing themes                      | Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.  |
| 5. Defining and naming themes:           | Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.   |
| 6. Producing the report:                 | The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. |

**Table 1.** Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

### 3. Thematic Analysis of *Hidden Figures* (2016)

As stated above, searching for themes and patterns should consider the research question which is whether the American dream for African-American women is a reality or an illusion. As such, the analysis of on-screen discourse considers African-American women's pursuing of their American dream, and foregrounds the obstacles they face, especially those related to their ethnic belonging. Also, as the topic signals an ethnic conflict between Self and Other, we do expect a number of latent themes to be read between the lines. Now, before tackling semantic and latent themes, we should first have a short summary of the story.

#### 3.1 Summary of the Film

*Hidden Figures* (Melfi, 2016) is based on a book, under the same name, written by Margot Lee Shetterly and depicts the struggle of three African-American women to achieve their American dream. In spite of being brilliant figures, these women face discrimination and racial segregation because of the colour of their skin. *Hidden Figures* explores the biographies of these women who won over engineers and mathematicians at NASA. Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson have considerably participated in one of the greatest operations in the American history which is the launch of astronaut John Glenn into orbit. The film received a nomination for Best Picture at the 89th Academy Awards. It has also received many other nominations and awards.

#### 3.2 Semantic Themes

##### 3.2.1 American Dream

American dream is a central theme in the film. In the context of this

*American Dream for African-American Women: A Reality or an Illusion*  
*The Case Study of Theodore Melfi's Film Hidden Figures (2016)*

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story, it is linked with Space Race which was a 20th-century competition between the two Cold War adversaries, the United States and the Soviet Union, to achieve greater spaceflight capability. Throughout the film, NASA employees are working hard to make it successful. They are in a war against a strong enemy. They have to forget about their families and children and focus on this great mission. One of the major motives states that America is a great country; greater than any other one. Americans cannot accept to be beaten by the Soviet Union. For that, NASA White sector was obliged to renounce arrogance and collaborate with the Black sector to win the competition. Yet, it was not that easy for many Whites to accept African-Americans, or Blacks as they call them, as equal peers.

### **3.2.2 Segregation Between Black and White**

In addition to struggle with an exterior enemy (USSR), Whites are having another struggle with what they consider an inferior compatriot i.e., African-Americans. These latter are dehumanized and badly treated by their counterparts. Wherever they go, the sign of “Coloured” reminds them not to cross the line for they can never be equal to their compatriots (white people). There is a separation between both groups in entrances, seats, restaurants, work, etc. even in toilets. As such, it is not allowed for African-Americans to use any of the spaces meant for white people. Also, whatever their intelligence or capacity, they cannot enjoy the same privileges. Taraji Penda Henson, playing the role of Katherine Johnson, portrayed how this category was degraded and disrespected in spite of being hard workers and loyal citizens.

Being an intelligent mathematician, Katherine Johnson was allowed to let in the white sector to help her white colleagues calculate the trajectory for the space flight. In spite of working in the same space, she cannot “touch” their coffee pot or use their toilet. “Coloured” is a prejudiced ticket that she has to accept not only on her separate coffee pot, but also in the eyes and the unfair treatment she received from her unwelcoming white colleagues. She also can't access sensitive information just for being a “black” woman who might be a spy. Dorothy Vaughan (played by Octavia Spencer) and Mary Jackson (played by Janelle Monáe), the friends of Katherine Johnson, also work in NASA and receive the same treatment of an African-American. Dorothy Vaughan is an American mathematician and human computer. She is the head of the West Area Computers. She leads a group of African-American mathematicians. This woman is struggling to be promoted as a supervisor in NACA's (National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics) program. Mary Jackson, for her part, is a smart mathematician who struggles to obtain the title of an engineer. The stories of these three women depict how their struggle for their American dream was associated with struggle against segregation at NASA. These latter have also to struggle for women's rights.

### **3.2.3 Segregation Between Men and Women**

It seems that ‘Struggle’ is an essential topic in this film. However, it takes place with different considerations depending on who is struggling and what social goods he is struggling for. Along Whites-African-Americans struggle, there is also a gender-based struggle. Katherine

Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson have to struggle against men who underestimate their potentials. Being Whites or African-Americans, men do not acknowledge woman's intelligence and capacity to handle important issues, let alone an African-American woman. At NASA, sensitive positions and important decisions are assigned to white men, not women. Even white women, who are superior than African-American ones, cannot enjoy the same privileges. At home, the three heroines do not find the support they are looking for from African-American men either. These latter do not believe in their capacity to bring about a change.

#### **3.2.4 The Revolt Against Segregation**

In front of discrimination and underestimation, African-American women choose to fight rather than to surrender. One of the greatest scenes, for which Taraji Penda Henson (playing the role of Katherine Johnson) was given an Oscar, depicts how hard it was to live as an African-American during the sixties. After being blamed by her superior for going out for some time every day, Katherine Johnson confronts everyone with the miserable reality. In front of her white supervisor and colleagues, she shouts to express her anger and grieve for being treated with prejudice. She shows them how terrible and arrogant they are. She says she is not allowed to use their toilets because they are white and she is black. She painfully expresses how she has to run every day back to the West sector (African-American sector) just to use 'Coloured' toilets

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

And as she is assigned too much work, she continues to work even inside the toilet cabinet. She is doing a great work on which she cannot even put her name. It is thanks to her revolt that a new reality has taken place. Now, she stands courageously and asks for her rights just like any other white worker.

Dorothy Vaughan, for her part, is finally able to take a courageous step and say 'no' to segregation. In one of the scenes, she confronts her fears and refuses the new mission assigned to her because she has to let down her team. She has even confronted her white female supervisor Vivian Mitchell with her racist attitude. Vivian Mitchell (played by Kirsten Dunst) is a fictional character representing the opinions and attitudes of some white women in the 1960s. Finally, Dorothy Vaughan is able to get her deserved promotion and becomes the first African-American supervisor in NACA's (National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics) program. Also, Mary Jackson has to file a complaint to the court to join a White school, a needed condition to obtain the title of an 'engineer' at NASA. This intelligent woman makes an incredibly intelligent speech to convince the judge, and changes the history of America being the first African-American female engineer:

I plan on being an engineer at NASA, but I can't do that without taking

## *American Dream for African-American Women: A Reality or an Illusion* *The Case Study of Theodore Melfi's Film Hidden Figures (2016)*

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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. Your honor, out of all the cases you gon hear today, which one is gon matter hundred years from now? Which one is gon make you the first?

Other African-Americans have chosen to strike or to participate in peaceful demonstrations to ask for their rights. In short, each has chosen a way to say "No" to racial discrimination.

### **3.2.5 Determination and Courage**

Success is a dream of everyone. This dream cannot come true unless one shows some courage and determination. Of course, individuals do not confront the same sort of obstacles. Some are born in very difficult circumstances that necessitate to fight on different fronts. In the context of this biographical film, the three women are African-Americans working at NASA. They have to fight against racial discrimination and gender segregation. Of course, witnessing the cold war between US and USSR, they have also to work hard as loyal citizens so as their country wins the space race. NASA white workers are also aware of the importance to win against USSR. As such, just like their African-American fellows, they show great determination and sacrifice their families and children to make the space trip a possible dream. Each time they fail, they insist more to win. Bloom (2009, p. 221) states that "the American Dream always involves teetering on the thin edge between success and failure". In short, both White and African-American employees were put under pressure, but African-Americans females (the heroines) have shown courage, determination, and sacrifice more than any other NASA employee.

### **3.2.6 Walking Hand-in-Hand**

As stated above, the inclusion of the heroines into the white sector was a necessary step to overcome failure. The three of them have been brilliant figures in their work. No one does the work better than them. Their white fellows have finally recognized that there is no time for internal conflicts, especially racist ones. Everybody should focus on the mission of launching the astronaut John Glenn into orbit and making sure he had a safe return. This new non-racist attitude is set thanks to the Al Harrison character (played by Kevin Costner). As a matter of fact, his role is largely based on Robert C. Gilruth, the head of the Space Task Group at Langley Research Center and later the first director of what is now the Johnson Space Center in Houston. Al Harrison's famous quote "Here at NASA we all pee the same color" has changed the status quo in NASA. In an audacious move, he destroyed the "white toilet" and "colored toilet" signs that discriminate between Whites and African-Americans. He was sending a message to racists that Whites and African-Americans should work hand-in-hand to build a powerful country and reach the American dream. Of course, his opinion has not been welcomed by all Whites. The confrontation between Dorothy Vaughan (played by Octavia Spencer) and her white supervisor Vivian Mitchell (played by Kirsten Dunst) has shown that some Whites cannot get rid of their racist ideology easily.

### **3.3 Latent Themes**

Along the semantic themes, there has been a set of latent themes that

were addressed indirectly through the actors' voices, gestures, and acts. These include:

### **3.3.1 A Racist Court**

Ironically, the court which is supposed to be the symbol of fairness, equality and non-judgmental attitudes is represented as a discriminating space as well. In other words, even at the level of the court, African-Americans cannot have the same entrance as Whites. Also, inside the court, they have "Coloured" seats. This move is meant to criticize the law which establishes and supports the racist ideology. It is also a call for a radical change that should start with changing the politics of the country towards African-American citizens. Also, filing a complaint to the court to join a 'white' school is a form of satire on the American policy. However, responding to Mrs. Jackson's demand to join a white school confirms that the Court is the supreme power which can challenge a given status quo and establish a new one.

### **3.3.2 Multi-Ethnicity is a Sign of Power, not Weakness**

Describing the African-American daily life has the lion's share in this film. African-Americans are depicted as adorable people who care about their: Wives, husbands, mothers, children, friends, fellows, and any other one. The three heroines are, for instance, real friends who always stand by each other. African-Americans care about their country. They are not less loyal than white citizens. Also, in spite of being underestimated and dehumanized by Whites, African-Americans have not restored to violence to ask for their rights. As such, racists are invited to reconsider their negative attitudes towards this category because having a different skin colour doesn't make them non-human. They are normal human beings who love, work, eat, cry, celebrate, travel, sacrifice, fear, etc. just like any other human being. In short, referring to African-American ethnicity describes U.S. as a rich country with different potentials. This positive description is meant to signal one reality: Multi-ethnicity is a sign of power, not weakness.

### **3.3.3 Racism Destroys the American Dream**

One of the main claims of this film's discourse states that racism is a negative and unsound attitude that is based on wrong assumptions. Racism brings but negative consequences. Racists are socially ill and bigoted people who never get inner peace. They are not happy individuals. They spread but hate and aggression, and brings out the worst in people. In the context of *Hidden Figures*, racism is depicted as one of the main obstacles to the American Dream of space exploration. Only when Whites got rid of their racist attitudes that this dream came true. This film then stresses the importance of establishing a non-racist ideology to build a powerful nation. Also, although *Hidden Figures* addresses racist ideology practiced by Whites against African-Americans, it is meant to address racism in general. In other words, it claims that future achievements depend on adopting a positive attitude towards different ethnicities. Also, believing that citizens with different ethnic backgrounds have different potentials is a necessary step to reach success and win over enemies.

### **3.3.4 Being White Doesn't Make You Clever**

Another important theme that is read between the lines and deduced

*American Dream for African-American Women: A Reality or an Illusion*  
*The Case Study of Theodore Melfi's Film Hidden Figures (2016)*

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from the actors' reactions and behaviors states that being white doesn't make an individual an intelligent one. Said another way, one of the main wrong assumptions on which racist ideology against African-Americans is based states that white people belong to the supreme race. They enjoy positive characteristics including intelligence, bravery, determination, hard work, leadership, beauty, cleanliness, etc. that cannot be found, at least together, in another race (Cullen, 2004). Also, referring to African-Americans as "Blacks", which is exactly the opposite of "Whites", implies how different both groups are i.e., how positive is one and negative is the other. *Hidden Figures* comes to refute this claim. It foregrounds the African-Americans as heroes (heroines in this context). Their particularity doesn't stem only from being originated from an underestimated race. As mentioned above, these African-American females had to deal also with gender-based discrimination. So, in spite of being found in a highly conflictual environment, these heroines were able to solve issues that their white colleagues couldn't handle. Worthy of mention, working in NASA necessitates dealing with sophisticated mathematical equations that need a brilliant mind. So, Dorothy Vaughan (played by Octavia Spencer) and Mary Jackson (played by Janelle Monáe), and Katherine Johnson (played by Taraji Penda Henson) have proved that intelligence has nothing to do with skin colour, but it has to do with personal character traits.

### **3.3.5 One Country, One enemy**

Another interesting theme states that African-Americans are U.S. citizens. They belong to that land as much as white citizens do. This is displayed especially in choosing a peaceful revolt to gain their rights rather than violence and destruction of public amenities. Also, they cannot think to harm their white compatriots. Doing so, African-Americans are sending a message that states that Whites and African-Americans share the land. It is their country which they love and care about. Both are ready to do whatever it takes to protect this land against external enemies. They believe in settling a policy of peace and brotherhood. As such, it's time for 'Whites' to admit African-American to equal citizenship and equal rights.

### **3.3.6 Hidden Figures**

As stated above, *Hidden Figures* is the title of both the film and the book on which it is based. One might question what this title refers to. A possible answer can state that the word 'figures' might refer to numbers as NASA's great achievement was to calculate a trajectory for a space flight. To do so, mathematicians try many mathematical equations until they get to a successful one. This necessitates a great work and talent from their part. We, as observers, see only the final result; an astronaut flying in the space. However, foregrounding African-American characters as an oppressed category implies that 'Hidden Figures' might refer to African-Americans. They are referred to as 'hidden figures' because Whites treat them as less, or non-human, because of their darker skin color. Being hidden means that their presence, as human beings, is unseen. Yet, they are human beings. This also implies that many great works realized by African-Americans have not seen light, at least under the names of their original achievers, because of a racial discrimination policy. The heroines of the film confirm



this assumption as they have been invisible workers in spite of being brilliant mathematicians. It was only thanks to their strong personality, determination, and having faith in their own potentials that they reached success, excellence, and leadership.

### **3.3.7 I am Negro**

One of the main latent themes read between the lines is that of having ‘a Negro identity’. Said another way, African-Americans of the sixties do realize that they are referred to as Negroes. They, themselves, use this term not because they enjoy the term, yet to refer to this racial discrimination policy practiced against them by the Whites. The first scene in the film shows the three heroines having a car trouble. These women were questioned by a white officer who couldn’t believe they work in NASA. After fixing their car, he suggested to open the road for them so as not to be late for work. His positive attitude stems from recognizing the importance of what they do, as NASA employees, for the future of U.S. This implies that everybody focuses on winning the space race against the Russian enemy. Of course, he would not have done that if they have not been working in NASA. Here is a part of the conversation they had with the officer:

State Trooper: Not a great place for the three of y’all to be havin’ car trouble.

Mary Jackson: We didn’t pick the place, Officer, it picked us.

State Trooper: [Glaring at Mary] You bein’ disrespectful?

Mary Jackson: No, sir.

State Trooper: You have identification on ya?

Katherine: We sure do. We’re just on our way to work. At Langley. NASA, sir.

[Mary, Katherine and Dorothy all display their NASA ID cards.]

Dorothy Vaughan: We do a great deal of the calculating getting our rockets into space.

State Trooper: All three of ya?

Mary Jackson: Yes, Officer.

[The State Trooper studies Mary’s ID card for a few moments.]

State Trooper: NASA. That’s somethin’. Had no idea they hired...

Clearly, he was to say ‘Negros’. However, regarding the importance of the task they were doing, he took back the word. Saying “Damn Russians are watching us right now”. Then asking them about the astronauts Alan Shepard and John Glenn confirms how important was to win against Russia. The Space Race is a shared American Dream. When the officer offered his services, everybody was astonished. The following quotes of Mary Jackson (played by Janelle Monáe) confirms how large the gap between a White and a “Negro” is:

Mary Jackson: Oh, I’ll tell you where to begin: Three Negro women chasing a white police officer down a highway in Hampton, Virginia in 1961. Ladies, that there is a God-ordained miracle!

In another scene, the same character explains how impossible for a “Negro” to be equal to a White:

Karl Zielinski: Mary, a person with an engineer’s mind should be an engineer. You can’t be a computer the rest of your life.

Mary Jackson: Mr. Zielinski, I’m a negro woman. I’m not gonna entertain the impossible.

***American Dream for African-American Women: A Reality or an Illusion***  
***The Case Study of Theodore Melfi's Film Hidden Figures (2016)***

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However, what the three heroines did to realize their dreams confirms the aforementioned assumption that inside each one of them there is a voice that tells them that they are as human as white people, and it is not the skin colour that decides for someone's life or future profession. Choosing to fight and winning the war should re-assign a new conceptualization to a term like that of 'Negro'. The heroines should be proud of being Negroes as, at least in the context of this film, to be a 'Negro' is to be a great fighter.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The analysis of *Hidden Figures* (Melfi, 2016) reveals that just like any other American, African-American women have had their own American dream. Struggling to achieve this dream had never been that easy as they had to confront a racist ideology practiced by Whites against them. Also, being women, they had to face a gender-based segregation practiced by men, including African-Americans. However, having a strong personality, courage and determination, these women have finally achieved their dreams. In short, the analysis of on-screen discourse refutes the first hypothesis which says that for African-American women, the American dream is nothing but an illusion, and confirms the second one which states that African-American women can achieve the American dream through hard work and determination.

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