

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Gender inequality has always been an issue that concerned many women all over the world. Patriarchal society that produces patriarchal oppression is the cause of gender inequality that oppresses women. It teaches the society that men are dominant and superior that they are able to rule women whose role is the subordinate (Hooks 2000, ix). Accordingly, Tyson (2015, 81) argues that patriarchal society is a society that embraces traditional gender roles and believes that men are supposed to be rational, strong, protective, and decisive, while women are emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. Patriarchy refers to male domination and feminists use this term to describe the power relation between men and women (Sultana 2011, 2). Patriarchy is also described as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (Walby 1990, 20).

Politico Magazine (2019) conducted a survey to American women regarding their biggest problems as women, and the results show that male domination and women subordination still exist nowadays. Amy Klobuchar, a Democratic US senator from Minnesota felt that there was still the lack of women in positions of power in politics that hinder the progress on the abolition of gender discrimination. In line with that, Kamala Harris as a Democratic US senator from California also thought that there were not enough women at the table, so most of

the decision makers were men. Patriarchy is one of the problems according to Keisha N. Blain, president of the African American Intellectual History Society. It convinced society that women were less qualified and less competent than men. Due to the patriarchy, women still lack access to equal opportunity according to Ertharin Cousin, former executive director of the United Nations World Food Program. In conclusion, the biggest concern for women nowadays is sexism that makes women have less chances and opportunities.

The lack of chances and opportunities for women in the United States, especially in the workplace is also studied by McKinsey&Company, a business advisor company since 2015 until now (Huang, et al. 2019). It reports that women are underrepresented in the workplace so they need to face the barrier of career advancement. The number of underrepresented women may be decreasing over the years, but the gender inequality remains out of reach. Women in the workplace still receive less support from the managers and sponsorship. Moreover, companies are still being gender biased in hiring and promoting employees. Thus, gender inequality is proven as an issue that is being disadvantageous for women.

Those issues had been raised by the second wave feminism from 1960s until 1980s which focused on the patriarchal practices on politics, work, family, and sexuality (Burkett 2020). Right after the second wave, the third wave feminism emerged in 1980s as a backlash for the second wave since it was only focusing on sexism that happened to white and middle class women. Thereupon, the third wave feminism focused more on the minority women whose gender oppression intersected with race, class, and caste with the more stranded issue

than the second wave (Evans 2015, 22). If women still did not obtain the opportunities and chances that they deserved even after those movements, then women who lived before second wave feminism received worse treatment from the men around them.

In 1908, the Supreme Court stated that women's physical structure and their maternal issue place them at disadvantage so that this brings limitation to what women can do (Schulder 1970, 143). However, that statement was thoughtless and groundless. To prove that groundless statement was absolutely incorrect, there were many women who became the first female of anything in the world. For instances, Lucy Hobbs Taylor (the first woman who earned a doctorate in dentistry in 1866), Raymonde de Laroche (the first woman who received a pilot's license in 1910), Katharine Graham (the first female publisher of a major United States Newspaper, *The Washington Post* in 1946), Valentina Tereshkova (the first woman in the space in 1963), Barbara McClintock (the first woman who won an unshared Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1983), Katharine Jeffrets Schori (the first woman presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States in 2006), and many others. Those names have surely ignited the light of hope for the feminists and made the world seem like a better place as it has finally accepted the gender equality. However, in fact, those names are very little if we are considering them as the representation of the females in the world. There are bunches of males who mastered those fields and showed achievements in this world.

In order to fight against the patriarchal practices that embrace men domination and women subordination, women gather themselves and bond sisterhood. Patriarchy convinces women to believe that they are valueless and they need men to make them valuable since it tells women that they are depending on men and women cannot bond with each other since they are natural enemies (Hooks 1984, 43). By believing and embracing patriarchy, women cannot be appreciated and will always appear as valueless. Thus, women need to prove to the world that they can appear as someone valuable without depending on men.

As they have always been fighting with men and been taught that the other women are their enemies, women started to see that some sort of solidarity between women are needed (Morgan 1970, xx). That solidarity is now known as bonding sisterhood. The original idea of sisterhood is that women with the same oppression bonded with each other to strengthen themselves to fight against the oppression (Hooks 1984, 44).

Recently, sisterhood emerged in the form of #MeToo movement. This movement was started by women and is being utilized to support and encourage other women to speak up about the discrimination that they experienced. It was started by Tarana Burke in 2006 (Murphy 2019, 63). The movement encourages women to speak up about their experiences of gender oppression and sexual harassment. It is popularized on social media and attracted people all around the world. Since the movement happens on social media, it provides women as victims a platform to ventilate their feelings and get social support from others (Gupta, Gupta and Nehra 2019, 176). The efficiency of #MeToo movement can be

seen when the victims of Harvey Weinstein, an American film producer spoke up and he was finally accused of sexual harassment and abuse by a number of actresses over several decades (Murphy 2019, 63).

In a discussion about sisterhood against patriarchy, Margot Lee Shetterly retold the story of the African American women who worked behind the scene and remained hidden in NACA (National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics) in 1930s until 1960s. She poured the story into a novel entitled *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and The Untold Story of The Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win The Space Race*.

The setting of the story ranged from 1930s to the 1960s, in which there were four African American women who were exceptionally talented in math who worked as mathematicians in Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory for NACA (National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics), later known as NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration). They were Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, and Katherine Johnson. These women were geniuses at school and this brought them to be a math teacher, one of the jobs that was promising for black women at that time, even though the salary was still too little to feed the family.

Then, Langley started recruiting black women to work for NACA as mathematicians. Thinking that they would have a better life if they worked for NACA with bigger salary than being a teacher, they applied for those positions. Their talents surely brought them to work for NACA. However, the workplace situation did not get any better than the previous one. Their male coworkers who

were very patriarchal and racists and did not believe on women employees' talents brought these ladies to an underprivileged situation. They were oppressed sexually and racially just because they were women and black. Dorothy, Mary, and Katherine did realized that they were underpriveleged even though they were very talented. They wanted their country, America, to win the competition between America and Soviet, and they were sure that they can be helpful for the team, yet they were underestimated. So, these ladies started to fight against these women oppression and racism in their workplace by showing their true abilities and skills and bonding sisterhood. In the end, they acquired the recognition they deserved as America won over Soviet and these African American women took a big part of it.

The American Dream that is written in the title of the novel refers to the female protagonists' hard work and expectation. It relates to the conception of American Dream which narrates that no matter who you are, hard work leads to tangible result (Dalgo 2016, 40). The female protagonists in the novel are illustrated as embracing the American Dream. They are black women, which are classified as the minority party in America who experiences racial segregation, yet they believe they can achieve education and sustainable source of income if they work hardly and sincerely.

Margot Lee Shetterly is an African American Women who grew up in Hampton, Virginia and knew a lot of families who worked for NASA, and one of them is the protagonist in the novel. Her father was also an engineer in NASA so she was familiar with the struggle of African American women who worked there

as she was surrounded by them and had the chance to listen the story directly from one of the protagonists in the novel. The novel which raised the issue of women oppression and racism in America took many people's interests so that it reached number one in New York Times Bestseller's list in 2017. It was also awarded by Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for non-fiction category in 2017. Anisfield-Wolf Book Award is an American literary award for honoring written works that make important contributions to the understanding of racism, especially in America.

This study applies a feminist theory proposed by Bell Hooks. She is an African American author, feminist, and social activist. Bell Hooks is a pen name, while her real name is Gloria Jean Watkins. She is an African-American author, professor, feminist, and social activist. Being an African-American and a feminist activist, she surely knows much about being the marginalized and know how to fight against the marginalization. Therefore, her books and her statements, especially about sisterhood, fit to be applied as the theory in this study.

Angelia (2017) through *Sisterhood Stands against Patriarchy in Anita Diamant's The Red Tent* adds that women find moral support, secure feeling, by depending on each other and bonding sisterhood. Unlike that study and any other studies that discuss sisterhood in the recent time, this study attempts to fill the gap by studying the sisterhood bonded in the era when feminist movement was rarely heard, or just before the second feminist wave.

1.2 Statement of the Problems

After reading the novel and determining the topic, some questions regarding black feminists issue could be raised. Those questions are:

1. How is patriarchal oppression against women experienced by the female protagonists portrayed in *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly?
2. How is the sisterhood among the female protagonists depicted as resistance towards patriarchal oppression against women in the novel?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

From the questions above, it can be observed that the study aims to:

1. Investigate the patriarchal oppression against women experienced by the female protagonists portrayed in *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly,
2. Scrutinize the sisterhood among the female protagonists depicted as resistance towards patriarchal oppression against women in the novel.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study of feminism on *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race* is expected to make readers mindful that sisterhood is a part of feminist movement that fight for gender equality between men and women. It is not an anti-men movement. In consequence, female readers are also expected to gain

knowledge and learn from the characters in the novel by understanding the moral values embedded in the text in order to fight gender oppression and to bond relations with any other women regardless of race. On the other hand, men are expected not to sleep on women's talents and not to have the mentality of patriarchal programming. Hence, this study is expected to raise people's awareness about gender equality.

Then, this study also aims to contribute to library studies, especially in the English Department Universitas Airlangga. It may be helpful for those who are interested to discuss and do further research on sisterhood in the study of feminism in the future. The issue of the patriarchal oppression towards women needs to be discussed more so that it acquires the attention that it deserves.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

- Patriarchy** : A system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (Walby 1990, 20).
- Racism** : The unequal power relations between the majority and the minority that create systematic discriminatory practices such as segregation, domination, and persecution (L. Tyson 2015, 344)
- Sexism** : An ideology which teaches women that to be female is to be a victim (Hooks 1984, 45)

Sisterhood : Sisterhood is an expression of political solidarity when women shared strength and resources (Hooks 1984, 45).

Women oppression : The oppression towards women when women are beaten down mentally, physically, and spiritually in their daily lives (Hooks 1984, 1).