"Up From the Past that's Rooted in Pain I rise:" Contemporary African-American Women Narratives

Šestak, Tajana

Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2019

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:106665

Rights / Prava: In copyright / Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-11-29**

FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET
SVEUČILIŠTE JOSIPA JURJA STROSSMAYERA U OSIJEKU

Repository / Repozitorij:

FFOS-repository - Repository of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Osijek

zir.nsk.hr

SVEUČILIŠTE JOSIPA JURJA STROSSMAYERA U OSIJEKU

dabar
DIGITALNI AKADEMSKI ARHIVI I REPOZITORIJI

Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet Osijek

Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost

Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i hrvatskog jezika i književnosti – nastavnički smjer

Tajana Šestak

„Uzdižem se iz prošlosti utemeljene na boli“: Suvremeno afroameričko žensko pismo

Diplomski rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

Osijek, 2019

Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet Osijek

Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost

Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i hrvatskog jezika i književnosti – nastavnički smjer

Tajana Šestak

„Uzdižem se iz prošlosti utemeljene na boli“: Suvremeno afroameričko žensko pismo

Diplomski rad

Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti

Znanstveno polje: književnost

Znanstvena grana: anglistika

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

Osijek, 2019

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Study Programme: Double Major MA Study Programme in English Language and Literature – Teaching English as a Foreign Language and Croatian Language and Literature - Teaching

Tajana Šestak

“Up from the Past that's Rooted in Pain I Rise:” Contemporary African-American Women Narratives

Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, Assistant Professor

Osijek, 2019.

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Study Programme: Double Major MA Study Programme in English Language and Literature – Teaching English as a Foreign Language and Croatian Language and Literature - Teaching

Tajana Šestak

“Up from the Past that's Rooted in Pain I Rise:” Contemporary African-American Women Narratives

Master's Thesis

Scientific area: humanities

Scientific field: literature

Scientific branch: English studies

Supervisor: Dr. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, Assistant Professor

Osijek, 2019.

IZJAVA

Izjavljujem s punom materijalnom i moralnom odgovornošću da sam ovaj rad samostalno napravio te da u njemu nema kopiranih ili prepisanih dijelova teksta tuđih radova, a da nisu označeni kao citati s napisanim izvorom odakle su preneseni. Svojim vlastoručnim potpisom potvrđujem da sam suglasan da Filozofski fakultet Osijek trajno pohrani i javno objavi ovaj moj rad u internetskoj bazi završnih i diplomskih radova knjižnice Filozofskog fakulteta Osijek, knjižnice Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku i Nacionalne i sveučilišne knjižnice u Zagrebu.

U Osijeku, datum

13.09.2019.

JMBAG: 0122213713

Tajana Šestak

ime i prezime studenta

Table of Contents

Abstract

Throughout the history and development of literature, many people have been writing about human rights in various shapes and forms. Probably the most researched and discussed are African-American and women rights, especially in the U.S. The main point of this thesis is to portray the hardships of African-American women by presenting their sides of the stories. That will be done by comparing four different pieces of literature/art: a speech ″Ain´t I A Woman?″, a poem ″Still I Rise″, a novel *The Help*, and a movie *Hidden Figures*. The authors of these works are very political in their trying to present their characters as subordinated in two ways: as being women and as being members of African-American community. The aim is to showcase the inequality that African-American women had to face each day due to both their race and gender throughout the past century in American society, starting from Sojourner Truth´s speech and ending with the very recent product of 21st century cinematography.

Key words: women, African-Americans, human rights, sexism, racism, segregation

Introduction

This thesis will focus on gender and racial issues, or the phenomenon of sexism and racism. These two phenomena will be discussed based on four different works: a speech ″Ain´t I A Woman?″ by Sojourner Truth, a poem ″Still I Rise″ by Maya Angelou, a novel *The Help* written by Kathryn Stockett, and a movie *Hidden Figures*. The aim of this thesis is to depict everyday's struggles of African-American women and their subordinated position in America in the 19th and 20th century.

In the first part the theoretical and historical background will be presented, starting with the development of women rights movement and racial segregation, in order to contextualize the chosen works.

To begin with, in her speech Sojourner Truth tackles some of the important issues and ideas of modern feminism and shows their relevancy even in the 21st century. The poem ″Still I Rise″ shows the perspective of an African-American woman, who is proud of her heritage and, despite all the hardships that she must go through, finds the way to get up after every fall. The novel *The Help* presents two African-American maids who, in order to survive in the middle of racist American South, have to serve white families and raise their children. The third woman is a young, white, Southern girl who aspires to become a writer, but is faced with many prejudices and has to fight them. In that way she gives support to her African-American friends, who are, apart from being disrespected as members of the colored community, also disrespected as women, beaten by their husbands and forced to work and earn money at a very early age. In the movie *Hidden Figures* three women work for NASA during the space-race. They have crucial roles in the project, but due to the fact that they are African-American women, they deal with many stereotypes and are not being treated with enough respect. They have to work much harder than their male colleagues and white women around them, but with hard work and professional approach they show that anything is possible.

In conclusion, this paper outlines how regardless of their education and social status, all women presented in these works went through many hardships due to their gender and race.

1. Women Rights in the U.S.

The beginnings of the women´s rights movement in the United States during the late 19th and the whole 20th century brought about great changes and advances in human rights and economic opportunities for women. For many years, women have felt the lack of respect and opportunity to succeed in, what it seems to be, the ″man´s world″. As stated in the article ″The Rise and Fall of Women's Rights: Have Sexuality and Reproductive Freedom Forfeited Victory?″ the goals such as giving women the same opportunities as men, paying them equally, and ending discrimination against women have not yet been reached (Kohm and Holmes 381). Therefore, one could say that women are to this day not gaining as much ground as they had hoped or expected. For example, that same article suggests: *″In 1998 - less than two years before the dawn of a new millennium - women working in 'pink-collar' positions continue to be paid significantly less than men in 'blue-collar' jobs. Women's work is still worth less than equivalent work by men″* (Kohm and Holmes 381, italics in original). When we look at this burning subject from today´s point of view, even women who have more power and influence, such as celebrities or politicians, are not doing enough to emphasize the problem of underpayment and inequality. It seems as if women have been told that they have already made a huge progress in the history of fighting for their rights, and that they cannot achieve significantly more than that.

The woman suffrage movement started in 1848, when a women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. Even though The Seneca Falls meeting was not the first in support of women's rights, it was later viewed as the event that initiated the suffrage movement. (″The Woman Suffrage Movement″). Over the next fifty years, woman suffrage supporters worked on educating people about the importance of woman suffrage. Some women seen as the leaders of the movement are Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others. In the 20th century, the management of the suffrage movement was passed to two organizations: The National American Woman Suffrage Association and The National Woman´s Party. (″The Woman Suffrage Movement″). Due to the combined efforts of NAWSA and NWP the 19th Amendment was finally ratified in 1920. Although the 19th Amendment prohibited the states from denying the citizen of the U.S. the right to vote on the basis of sex, it failed to enfranchise women of other races.

Furthermore, women´s position in the society has not changed the way it was expected. As Lind informs us, "Men's forms of dominance over women have been accomplished socially as well as economically, prior to the operation of law, without express state acts, often in intimate contexts, as everyday life″ (111). From the moment they were born, women were considered less capable in every aspect of life. In the mid-nineteenth century terms such as ″woman´s sphere″, ″domestic sphere″, ″separate sphere″ and ″private sphere″ were coined. Those terms indicated that men and women should have different zones, or spheres, of existence and activity. Men were to be masters of and active in the public world of trade, commerce, and politics, while women were to be secluded in the home away from the corrupt influences of the public domain, where they could realize their true nature and value as mistresses of the household, wives, and mothers (Lind 115). The main result of this idea was to, obviously, decrease women's freedom, mobility, and power in general. Women were seen as almost separate species, with a limited cognitive capacity, unlimited emotional capacity, and a natural fitness for reproduction and mothering (Lind 113). The main goal was not to expose women to any ideas and exclude them from access to education.

When it comes to education, the 19th century brought very significant improvements. Public schools were widely established, as well as many colleges. Unfortunately, women were often excluded from this democratization of educational opportunity, based on the fact that their primary role was to stay at home and start a family. Accordingly, they did not need the skills provided from education. Although women made inroads in receiving rudimentary schooling in this period, they still struggled to gain higher education (Majumdar 2132). In the 20th century some universities permited women to enroll in their degree programs. Still, in college, women were thoroughly supervised and segregated from men (Madigan 12). Even though some progress had been made, women still did not have the choice when it came to their education and future career. ″Despite the expansion of women's role in society, through the mid- 1960s girls were channeled into occupational choices that were limited to four categories: secretarial, nursing, teaching, or motherhood″ (Sadker and Sadker 58).

Altogether, one can say that the process of women getting their rights was very long, exhausting, challenging, and far from over.

1.1. African-American Rights in the U.S.

In 1868, the 14th Amendment to the Constitution gave African-Americans equality under the law. In 1870, the 15th Amendment granted African-American men the right to vote. These changes to the law made white people extremely dissatisfied, especially in former slave states. For that reason, the ″Jim Crow″ laws were established in the Southern States in the late 19th century. The official policy of these laws was ″separate, but equal″ and they were used to marginalize African-Americans and to control their progress in the society dominated by the whites: ″Jim Crow Laws codified discriminatory practices and provided the legal framework necessary for the unequal treatment of African-Americans. This inequality was pervasive and extended to the way individuals lived and functioned within society″ (Edwards and Thomson 145). African-Americans, therefore, were not allowed to attend the same schools, use the same facilities, or even live in the same cities as whites. In addition to that, the interracial marriage was illegal. Finally, African-Americans could not gain the same education and pass the voter literary tests, which disabled them from exercising their newly obtained right. Danns and Purdy claim: ″White southerners, who once valued educated laborers´ efficiency and production, grew to oppose literacy for the enslaved workers for fear it would deem them unfit for slavery and inspire revolt″ (573).

Back in the 1940s, most African-Americans were either factory workers or low-wage farmers. President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an order which opened national defense and other government jobs to all Americans regardless of race and national origin. Despite the fact that many African-Americans served in World War II, they were far from equal in getting the acknowledgement for their service after the war.

The civil rights movement was a fight for social justice which took place during the 1950s and 1960s for African-Americans to gain equal rights in the United States. Even though the Civil War had officially abolished slavery, the discrimination against African-Americans was far from over. They kept facing the effects of racism, especially in the Southern states. After many years of violence, prejudice and other methods of severe racism, around the mid-20th century they started the biggest fight for their equality which lasted for almost two decades. In 1954 the United States Supreme Court declared segregation illegal in public schools. In 1957, a group of nine African-American students, also known as the Little Rock Nine wanted to enter one high school to attend classes, but were stopped in their attempt. They were thrown out, but tried a couple of weeks later, unfortunately with the same result. Finally, president Eisenhower intervened by ordering

federal troops to take Little Rock Nine to classes. Despite all of that, they were constantly harassed: ″While some individual African-Americans had educational opportunities equal to those of whites, as a group, African-Americans were denied equal access to public education because it was viewed as a threat to white supremacy″ (Danns and Purdy 575). Their efforts, however, made a huge progress in the process of fighting for African-American educational rights.

In 1955, a great improvement was made by an act of a single woman. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat for a white man, after which she got arrested. Without even realizing it, Rosa Parks became one of the crucial figures of modern-day civil rights movement. Barack Obama remembered Rosa Parks in one interview, saying: ″Our nation was forever transformed by her refusal to give up her seat, advancing our journey toward justice and equality for all . . . and by the time she died in 2005, Parks had become an American saint″ (*The New York Times*). After that event, African-American community leaders formed the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) led by Baptist minister Martin Luther King Jr. The MIA decided to organize a boycott of the Montgomery bus system: ″The MIA initially asked for first-come, first-served seating, with African-Americans starting in the rear and white passengers beginning in the front of the bus. They also asked that African-American bus drivers be hired for routes primarily made up of African-American riders. The bus companies and Montgomery officials refused to meet those demands″ (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). The boycott lasted for 381 days, and as a result the Supreme Court made a final decision that segregated buses are no longer allowed.

Probably one of the most famous events of the civil rights movement happened in 1963. It is known as the March on Washington and was organized by A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King Jr., and other civil rights leaders. More than 200,000 people, both black and white, joined the peaceful march with the purpose of giving the same rights and job equality for everyone. The highlight of the march was Martin Luther King´s speech ″I Have a Dream″ which quickly became a slogan for freedom and equality.

In 1964 president Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act which assured equal employment for all and guaranteed the integration of public facilities. By signing the Voting Rights Act in 1965 president Johnson took the Civil Rights Act to another level. The law was based on banning all voter literacy tests. In the late 60s, two of the civil rights movement leaders were assassinated: Malcolm X, known for his militant approach, and Martin Luther King, one of the idols for many African-Americans during his peaceful fight for their rights.

Throughout the 60s, many laws and acts were passed, slowly granting African-Americans more and more equality. However, none of them helped to prevent the level of inequality that they had to face in everyday life, coexisting with white people in, what seemed to be the fact, a very racist America.

The following decades were, compared to the 60s, a lot more peaceful. Later, however, due to social media and its influence many young people wanted to carry on their grandparents and great-grandparents legacy and started being more vocal about racism on various platforms. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is an international activist movement which ensued in the African-American community (Roberts). This movement fights against violence and racism in general towards African-Americans. Police brutality, racial profiling and inequality in the United States criminal justice system are some of the main issues the movement is speaking out against (Roberts). The movement began in 2013 with the use of hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media after the shooting of African-American teen Trayvon Martin in 2012:

> #blacklivesmatter has influenced our contemporary moment and given us a framework for imagining what democracy in action really looks like. Whether it be transforming how we talk about police violence or transforming how we talk about "abolitionism," the BLM movement has succeeded in transforming how Americans talk about, think about, and organize for freedom. (Roberts)

To conclude, African-Americans have been fighting for their rights over the past two centuries and one could say that many improvements have been made. Barack Obama became the first African-American president of the U.S. and therefore left an extraordinary impact as the representative of the African-American community. However, despite the fact that people nowadays have the freedom to choose their beliefs and be open-minded, racism is still engraved into the American society as a social construct that will hardly be erased soon.

1.2. African-American Women Rights in the U.S.

Ever since the beginning of American nation, African-American women were treated, at least to say, differently than other women. Women of color have never been perceived as white women, fitting into the perfect woman, wife and mother role. They have always been seen as working force, more so manly than lady like. That attitude towards women of color devaluated their role of gentle and caring wives and mothers. Only twenty years after first African-Americans arrived in Jamestown in 1619, the colonies started to accept slavery as a way of life. Many laws brought at that time referred specifically to African-American women:

> The decree also mapped enslaved women's sexual exploitation and, in effect, monetarily incentivized the acts, as their offspring would swell planters' coffers—a prospect boon to countless rapes and instances of forced breeding. Colonial rape laws compounded black women's subjugation by excluding their sexual assault. As Steve Wilf makes plain, ″the rape of black women was not acknowledged by early American law. (Gross 26)

Virginia´s laws distinguished colored female labor from white female labor by referring to colored women as ″field laborers with a productive capacity equivalent to that of men″ (Gross 27). There is an example of a woman of color who was executed after killing her rapist. Therefore, Gross claims: ″Such instances mark the cruel hypocrisies of American justice: black women would be denied protection under the law, only to be fatally condemned by it″ (27). Later, sexual violence upon African-American women continued in the form of rapes organized by Ku Klux Klan. So, Gross concludes that ″even after emancipation black women's bodies would be the terrain upon which white men aimed to reinscribe old racial hierarchies″ (27).

Most women of color lived in poverty, since they were limited almost exclusively to agriculture and domestic service. At the same time, they would have to work long hours and perform the same tasks as men, but were less paid because they are women. Another point is that African-American women would always be found guilty in the court, simply because white judges would more often trust white employers than women of color. Gross claims that African-American women were ″better prepared to defend themselves, because they knew they could not rely on law enforcement and the courts, which were less likely to try to protect black women against domestic violence″ (30).

In the 20th and 21st century one could say that African-American woman´s experience with racism has not changed drastically. If one compares women of color and other women in the U.S., the first group is, regardless of their age or marital status, unquestionably more present in the labor market:

> Differences in black and white women's labor participation were due not only to the societal expectation of black women's gainful employment but also to labor market discrimination against black men which resulted in lower wages and less stable employment compared to white men. Consequently, married black women have a long history of being financial contributors - even co-breadwinners - to two-parent households because of black men's precarious labor market position. (Banks)

During the 20th century most employers would hire only African-American women in domestic service work. The biggest irony is that these women were not able to raise their own children and clean their own house, because they had to work and make money, but were mostly employed in the low-wage jobs such as cleaning, cooking and care giving. Also, they would work exclusively for white families, which, in their minds, had to resemble some type of slavery. Despite African-American women´s importance as breadwinners, the state failed to protect them as workers – they are underpaid, lack health insurance, so as paid sick and maternity leave.

Nevertheless, the number of African-American women in higher education today looks promising. That number is showing that colored women are as capable, intelligent and hardworking as white women, if they are given the chance to reach their full potential:

> Collins suggests that black women have the ability to embrace the ″creative potential of their outsider within status″ and use it wisely. In doing so, they move themselves and their disciplines closer to the humanist vision implicit in their work - namely, the freedom both to be different and part of the solidarity of humanity . . . As more Black women enter the academy in pursuit of higher education, hopefully, fewer will be forced into the "outsider-within" category. (Bertrand, Wilder, Osborne-Lampkin 33)

All in all, one can say that African-American women have been fighting for their rights for the past two centuries, and even though their status has improved, there are still many working positions and careers lacking strong and independent women of color.

2. African American Women Narratives

Once African-American women gained the right to express their opinions and when what they had to say began to matter, they started writing about their experiences and portraying characters whose lives depicted hardships they went through. They spoke about the society surrounding them, their relationships with men, and stereotypes they would face each day.

One of the first activists for women and African-American rights was Sojourner Truth who escaped slavery and became one of the first women in the late 19th century who spoke about human rights in general. She is best known for her speech about racial inequality ″Ain't I a Woman?″

Another well-known African-American author is Gwendolyn Brooks who wrote about people from her community and their everyday struggles. She won Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and therefore became the first African-American to receive the Pulitzer. One of her most famous poems is ″the mother″ which speaks about abortion and is very relatable, not only for women of color, but every woman who has experienced it and went through the emotions of pain, grief and depression.

After Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African-American to win the Pulitzer, Lorraine Hansberry became the first female African-American to have a play performed on Broadway in 1959. Her play *A Raisin in the Sun* talks about the colored family living in Chicago in the era of racial segregation. Unlike many other works of that time, women in the play are presented as the ones who run the family, are dominant and courageous, sometimes even very progressive.

Lastly, one of the most respected African-American female authors of the 20th century is Toni Morrison. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* showcases two different types of racism, internalized and institutional, while her probably most famous novel *Beloved* deals with slavery, identity, and recovery. *Beloved* brought her, next to the Pulitzer, the Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the first African-American to receive it.

This short overview of African-American women writers clearly shows the importance of their works since they were the first African-Americans to receive such renowned prizes for their art, even though the number of male African-American authors was significantly higher. Whether writing speeches, poems, novels or plays, all of the above-mentioned authors were private, confessional and political in their works. They projected their own insecurities and struggles as being African-American women while writing about experiences and stereotypes

that all members of African-American community could relate to. At the same time, they were also political in a sense that they wanted to emphasize the inequality that racial segregation brought to the U.S., aiming to reach white population and show them a different prospective which might change their attitudes and behaviors.

The following chapters of the paper will focus on the analysis of the speech ″Ain´t I a Woman?″, the poem ″Still I Rise″, the novel *The Help* and the movie *Hidden Figures* in order to show the multitude of difficulties that African-American women experienced over the last 150 years in the U.S. By providing historical and geographical facts about both slavery and racial segregation, and by depicting subordinated African-American women, the writers wanted to draw attention to these matters and emphasize that the injustice has eternal effects. Since they rely on (auto)biographical elements too, all these works are, at the same time, personal and political.

3. ″Ain´t I A Woman?″- A Timeless Speech On Feminism

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) was an African-American abolitionist and women's rights activist well-known for her improvised speech on racial inequalities and female rights, ″Ain't I A Woman?″, delivered at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851. She was born into slavery but managed to escape with her baby daughter. She fought for both abolition of slavery and female rights.

First, before analyzing Truth´s speech, the term intersectionality must be defined and explained. In Cambridge Dictionary intersectionality is defined as a way in which different types of discrimination (unfair treatment because of a person´s sex, race, etc.) are linked to and affect each other (″Intersectionality″). The term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a professor at Columbia and the University of Columbia, Los Angeles, who spent most of her professional career studying civil rights, race, and racism. Throughout the years, feminists have tried to answer the question of what it means to be a woman under different historical circumstances (Brah and Phoenix 76). Apart from that, one´s race, gender, sexuality and social class strongly affected the treatment and standards that person would have to face. Brah and Pheonix, therefore, claim that the speech ″Ain´t I A Woman?″ by fundamentally challenging all ahistoric or essentialist notions of ″woman″ - it neatly captures all the main elements of the debate on intersectionality (76). Even though the first women´s antislavery society was formed in 1832 by colored women in Massachusetts, at the Seneca Falls Anti-Slavery Convention in 1848 mainly the white middle class women participated. Brah and Phoenix state many important questions due to that fact:

> What, for instance, are the implications of an event which occludes the black female subject from the political imaginary of a feminism designed to campaign for the abolition of slavery. What consequences did such disavowals have for the constitution of gendered forms of ″whiteness″ as the normative subject of western imagination. How did events like these mark black and white women´s relational sense of themselves? Importantly, what happens when the subaltern subject – black woman in this case – repudiate such silencing gestures? ″ (76)

At the beginning of the speech Sojourner Truth says:

> That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?

> Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (510)

Brah and Phoenix conclude that this paragraph deconstructs major truths about gender in a patriarchal slave society (77). There was, and still is, a social construct that women should be treated differently than men. However, for Sojourner that has always been just a myth. She has never felt a kind, respectful and helpful approach from anyone. As an African-American woman, she has not been treated as a white, middle social class woman. She also tackles the idea that women should be seen as weaker. She can work as hard as men and eat as much as men. Also, she mentions her mental and emotional strength that kept her alive while watching her children being sold to slavery, the strength that only African-American women can understand and empathize with. Another thing Truth focuses on is intellect. She claims: ″What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full? ″ (510). In other words, one should be able to use their intellectual abilities to grow and succeed regardless of their gender or race. No one's mental capacity should be disregarded or controlled in any way. Furthermore, Truth in a way blames the traditional religious institution for creating certain stereotypes:

> Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him. If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back , and get it right side up again! (Truth 510)

According to her, if anything, women should be and are known as carriers of life and creators of mankind in general.

To sum up, Sojourner Truth managed to tackle all the ideas and issues that today´s feminists are discussing and trying to solve. She dived deep into the psychological and sociological stereotypes about women, especially African-American women, which, truth be

told, haven´t changed to this day. Brah and Phoenix proclaim this speech to be relevant even in today´s modern, 21st century society by saying:

> There are millions of women today who remain marginalized, treated as a ″problem″, or constructed as the focal point of a moral panic – women suffering poverty, disease, lack of water, proper sanitation; women who themselves or their households are scattered across the globe as economic migrants, undocumented workers, as refugees and asylum seekers; women whose bodies and sexualities are commodified, fetishised, criminalized, racialised, disciplined and regulated through a myriad of representational regimes and social practices. (77)

Thanks to Sojourner Truth and many more female activists who came and spoke out after her, women are finally to be seen as heroines, warriors, and survivors who, despite all the hardships and inequality that they still have to face daily, manage to raise their voices and live their lives righteously.

4. ″Still I Rise″ - An Ode to African-American Women

Maya Angelou was an African-American poet, singer, memoirist and civil rights activist. She published many autobiographies, books of essays and books of poetry. Most of her books deal with the problems of racism and identity. She was known as a spokesperson for African-Americans and women. ″Still I Rise″ is alongside with the poem ″Phenomenal Woman″ the most popular poem in her third volume of poetry *And Still I Rise.*

The poem ″Still I Rise″ is a hymn of all the African-American women throughout the history and an homage to their struggle. In her article ″An Explication of Self-discovery in Maya Angelou´s Still I Rise,″ Sangeetha S states: ″According to African-Americans, Maya Angelou states that no matter what white Americans (slave owners) say or do to African-Americans (slaves) they can still rise up to make a better life for themselves and their race as a whole″ (6). At the beginning of the poem, Angelou focuses mostly on sexism, not necessarily racism. She does not specify that the ″rising″ woman is African-American. Angelou first compares women strength to moons, suns and certainty of tides. She asks those who disrespected, bullied and underestimated women and their capability: ″Did you want to see me broken? / Bowed head and lowered eyes?″ (13-14). One could conclude that she is referring to men, because she asks: ″Does my sassiness upset you? (5) / does my haughtiness offend you? (17) / Does my sexiness offend you?″ (25). After asking all these questions, she explains that these traits are helping her to survive in the world full of injustice. In the sixth verse she says, almost like she is reliving it all over again: ″You may shoot me with your words, / You may cut me with your eyes, / You may kill me with your hatefulness, / But still, like air, I'll rise (21-24). These gradual, very visual metaphors show the seriousness of the mistreatment she went through. Towards the end of the poem, in the last two verses, she specifies and intensifies female struggle by adding another attribute – her skin color: ″I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide, / Welling and swelling I bear in the tide″ (33-34). In his article ″Exploring the Theme of Self-Actualization in Maya Angelou´s poetry″ Juan Du says: ″In the poem, the narrator compares himself to a black ocean which is the source of endless energy and courage empowering the dominated people to survive, triumph over oppression and to achieve positive self-identity″ (68). Therefore, she takes into consideration the endurance of slavery as a form of life for African-Americans through history: ″Out of the huts of history's shame / I rise / Up from a past that's rooted in pain / I rise″ (29-32). Finally, in the last verse she concludes that she is leaving behind nights of terror and fear and, thankful to her ancestors, she will fight against racism and make them proud. She will for once and for all win and rise, as the dream and the hope of the slave.

It is the poem about confidence, pride for being who you are and will to fight and show everyone your strength, despite all the sufferings in life. As Sangeetha suggests: ″´Still I Rise´ is an African-American woman's response to those who wish her hard and hate her. An inspirational poem symbolizing defiance and her strength to overcome negative criticism and oppression″ (6). Also, this poem can be seen as a message to all who must overcome pain in order to show their strength, no matter which gender or race they belong to: ″Parallels can be seen between (black) slavery, drug addicts, and other groups that face constant thrashing by oppressors. ″Still I Rise″ has the uncanny ability to incite these groups to rise, and stop pining in sorrow while another tries to bury their soul″ (Sangeetha 7).

5. *The Help* - ″Change Begins With A Whisper″

The Help is a 2009 novel written by Kathryn Stockett. It tells the story of Eugenia ″Skeeter″ Pheelan, a white Southern woman who aspires to become a journalist. The novel also presents two African-American maids, Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, during the Civil Rights Movement in 1963 Jackson, Mississippi. Being raised in a very rasist environment, Eugenia decides to publish a compilation of stories written from maids´ point of view, in order to expose white families they are working for. Colored domestic workers in 1960s America were known as "the help", which served Stockett as an inspiration for the name of the novel. The story is written from three different perspectives – Eugenia´s, Minny´s and Aibileen´s – and therefore provides the readers with three different experiences of African-American women and their struggles with racism and sexism within the private and professional environment.

5.1. Civil Rights Movement in Jackson, Mississippi

Many protests happened in Jackson during 1960s. In March 1961, nine Tougaloo college students and members of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) Youth Council started a planned sit-in at the whites-only Jackson Public Library on North State Street (*Mississippi Encyclopedia*). After explaining to the librarians that the books they needed could not be found at the colored section of the library, they were arrested. Any time protests would happen, the police would react with clubs, dogs and tear gas. The Tougaloo Nine sit-in represented “the change of tide in Mississippi” (*Mississippi Encyclopedia*). From that event on, many more sit-ins were organized at various public spaces, among them Jackson’s buses, parks, and swimming pools. Freedom Riders started arriving at the Trail ways Station in Mississippi and most of them were jailed. Nonetheless, the process of desegregation of universities actively began in the American South. Students of color distributed leaflets and held speeches in churches of different cities. As it says in Mississippi Encyclopedia: ″. . . the desegregation of Jackson’s public accommodations and businesses occurred through federal law and reluctant local compliance . . . In July 1964 Jackson Chamber of Commerce leaders called on the city’s businesses to comply with the new Civil Rights Act″ (Lyon).

Another important event for Mississippi is the assassination of Medgar Evers, a civil rights activist, the secretary of the NAACP, and a World War II veteran who served in the US

Army: ″Evers was assassinated in 1963 by Byron De La Beckwith, a member of the White Citizens' Council, a group formed in 1954 in Mississippi to resist the integration of schools and civil rights activism″ (*Mississippi Encyclopedia*). He was shot at his front door, in front of his wife and children, after he came home from a meeting. ″The loss of Medgar Evers was a serious blow to the civil rights struggle across the state. Gone were his imposing presence, compelling oratory, and committed leadership. In a mere eight years, Evers had advanced the civil rights struggle in Mississippi from a fledgling organization to a formidable agent for change″ (Davis).

The novel depicts extremely segregated American South by presenting Jackson citizens´ day to day life. It also implicitly mentions the scene of Medgar Evers´s assassination. All in all, it gives the readers an insight into the historical background of Jackson, Mississippi, during 1960s.

5.2. Racism and Sexism Within The Private Environment

At the beginning of the novel the reader meets Eugenia Pheelan, a young and ambitious woman who wants to become a writer. Even though she is not African-American, she still struggles as a woman in a sexist society. Being born and raised in a traditional, Christian Southern family, that is not expected nor encouraged. Her mother wants her to marry and start a family as soon as possible. She finds that the only role of a Southern girl in her twenties should be to find a hardworking, controlling husband and become a devoted wife and mother. Eugenia, therefore, struggles with finding the right partner, since she is surrounded by conservative men who feel intimidated by her attitudes and ambitions. She is very progressive and critical of the situation happening in her town, Jackson, as she realizes that racial segregation is in its full bloom everywhere. Her own personal experience (having a black maid as help in her and her friends´ houses) compels her to collect and publish their stories in order to raise social awareness about the racism in her home town.

The first African-American woman the readers meet is Minny Jackson. She and her large family live in horrible conditions. All five of her children sleep in one room and have to take care of each others, since she has to work long hours as a maid in white families. Minny never had a chance to choose what she wanted to do in life, because the only fit job for African-American women in the South was that of a hired help. Moreover, her fourteen-year-old daughter already has to start working, because that is the only way for them to survive. On the other hand, her husband Leroy does not care about the well-being of their family. In fact, he

mistreats them and beats Minny every day for no reason. He is an alcoholic who expects her to bring the money into the house so that he can take it to the bar. All of that is making Minny feeling very miserable and aware of the problem. However, when Aibileen asks her to make a change in her life, Minny responds: ″We don´t talk about me leaving Leroy. Plenty of black men leave their families behind like trash in a dump, but it´s just not something the colored women do. We´ve got the kids to think about″ (366). No matter how much she and her children have to suffer, it is expected of her to stay in that marriage. She probably thinks of the consequences that divorce would have on his mental state, which would potentially cause him being more aggressive towards the children and her. That is why she has to accept the life full of both physical and verbal violence and not say a word about it to anyone. Despite all of that, once Minny starts working for Miss Celia Foote, who offers her the best job of her life, she questions her position and finally wants to make a change: ″I was trapped in the corner of the bedroom like a dog. He was beating me with his belt. It was the first time I´d ever really thought about it. Who knows what I could become, if Leroy would stop god-damn hitting me″ (486).

Aibileen is another African-American maid who raised altogether seventeen children. She lost her own son, Treelore, and by raising them she tries to heal that wound. She feels as if her son was brutally taken from her, but finds comfort in being able to teach white children how to be respective and kind towards everyone. Since she has no husband or children, her main purpose in life becomes shaping white children´s personalities. Her boss is Mrs. Elizabeth who has two children, a girl Mae Mobley and a little boy later on in the novel. Mrs. Elizabeth is quite a detached mother, not particularly caring, and she more often than not raises her voice, instead of actually talking to her children. Mae Mobley is, as she is getting older, becoming aware of her mother´s harsh words. Since Aibileen is the one who gets to discipline Mae Mobley and spends most of the day with her, she is trying to teach her the right values: ″Mae Mobley″, I say cause I got a notion to try something. ″You a smart girl?″ She just look at me, like she don´t know. ″You a smart girl.″ I say again. She say, ″Mae Mo smart.″ I say, ″You a kind little girl?″ She just look at me. She two years old. She don´t know what she is yet″ (107).

5.3. Racism And Sexism Within The Professional Environment

Even though all of her friends are already married with multiple children, Eugenia Pheelan aspires to become a writer. She wants to write about relevant topics such as social injustice. However, most of the employers refuse to let her write about her own interests, but

rather give her columns about cooking and cleaning. Again, it is believed that these are the topics that an average woman from the South should write about and be interested in reading. One of the breaking points in Eugenia´s life was the moment when she found out that a maid who raised her, Constantine, got fired by her mother because she embarrassed her in front of her white friends. Unfortunately, when Eugenia found out, her beloved nanny and friend already died of sadness. Her heart broke after her white boss told her to leave. Her mother´s cruel mistreatment of a woman who practically raised her and taught her everything she knew encouraged Eugenia to make a change and publish a collection of stories where she would share the experiences told by African-American maids.

Before sending her daughter into her first white family where she will be working as a maid, Minny remembers some of the rules her own mother taught when she first started working, and passes them on her:

> ″Rule Number One: You keep your nose out of your White Lady´s problems, you don´t go crying to her with yours – You can´t pay the light bill? Your feet are too sore? Remember one thing: white people are not your friends. They don´t want to hear about it. And when Miss White Lady catches her man with the lady next door, you keep out of it, you hear me?
>
> Rule Number Two: Don´t you ever let that White Lady find you sitting on her toilet. I don´t care if you´ve got to go so bad it´s coming out of your hair braids. If there´s not one out back for the help, you find yourself a time when she´s not there in a bathroom she doesn´t use.
>
> Rule Number Three: When you´re cooking white people´s food, you taste it with a different spoon. You put that spoon to your mouth, think nobody´s looking, put it back in the pot, might as well throw it out.
>
> Rule Number Four: You use the same cup, same fork, same plate every day. Keep it in a separate cupboard and tell that white woman that´s the one you´ll use from here on out.
>
> Rule Number Five: You eat in the kitchen.
>
> Rule Number Six: You don´t hit on her children. White people like to do their own spanking.

> Rule Number Seven: This is the last one, Minny. Are you listening to me? No sass-mouthing... You sass a white woman in the morning, you´ll be sassing out on the street in the afternoon. (46)

Clearly, this advice comes from a hard-won experience and immediately points to their second-class position in the community. Moreover, any time they would have guests over, Miss Elizabeth would warn Aibileen: ″And I can´t have you serving us like that, with your - your legs showing″ (458). She wanted to hide as much of Aibileen´s skin color as possible by making her wear white socks, so that her guests would not be offended by her presence.

In addition, Minny also reveals the subtle and sophisticated cruelty of their women masters, suggesting that there is no women solidarity when it comes to different race:

> Women´s, they ain´t like men. A woman ain´t gone beat you with a stick. Miss Hilly wouldn´t pull no pistol on me. Miss Leefolt wouldn´t come burn my house down. No, white womens like to keep they hands clean. They got a shiny little set a tolls they use, sharp as witches´s fingernails, tidy and laid out neat, like the pick on a dentist tray. They gone take they time with em. (220)

What she is trying to say is that white women always get what they want, but without them looking bad in front of their husbands, friends and the rest of the society. They only turn out to be merciless and cruel in front of their maids, which is their intension in the first place. Then she goes on explaining what happens when they lose their jobs. As the time goes on, even the maid´s family gets affected by the white lady´s revenge. She wants to make sure that everybody finds out about what happened, so that nobody hires them ever again. Finally, the great realization comes in the life of every maid working for a white family: ″It´ll be a knock on the door, late at night. It won´t be the white lady at the door. She don´t do that kind a thing herself. But while the nightmare´s happening, the burning or the cutting or the beating, you realize something you known all your life: the white lady don´t ever forget. And she ain´t gone stop till you dead″ (220). If the white lady feels betrayed, disappointed or in any way embarrassed by her maid, she will make sure that that maid suffers until the end of her life. Sometimes she does not have to do any of these things. Sometimes white ladies just like to keep themselves entertained.

Finally, after being found guilty of stealing silver by Mrs. Elizabeth and Mrs. Holly, Aibileen leaves her last white home and decides to start a new life: ″I walk out the back door, to the terrible sound a Mae Mobley crying again. I start down the driveway, crying too, knowing how much I´m on miss Mae Mobley, praying her mama can show her more love . . . Mae

Mobley was my last white baby″ (523). Seeing that close connection between maids and children and waiting for it to be ruined by the stupidity of their white ladies is heartbreaking. Those maids give their entire lives, hopes and dreams to children who will, one day, forget about them, and mistreat their own maids. It is a never-ending, vicious circle

5.4. Racism As A Social Contruct

Another reason which made Eugenia even more determined to show the world a real face of Southern America was the way the entire Jackson´s population treated African-American community. One day she found a booklet named ″Compilation of Jim Crow Laws of the South″. She started reading it and highlighted certain laws:

> *″No person shall require any white female to nurse in wards or rooms in which negro men are placed.*
>
> *It shall be unlawful for a white person to marry anyone except a white person. Any marriage in violation of this section shall be voided.*
>
> *No colored barber shall serve as a barber to white women or girls.*
>
> *The officer in charge shall not bury any colored persons upon ground used for the burial of white persons.*
>
> *Books shall not be interchangeable between the white and colored schools, but shall continue to be used by the race first using them″* (202, italics in original).

After that, she read her friend Hilly Holbrook´s Home Help Sanitation Initiative which says that separate toilets should be made for the help, because they carry different diseases than white people. A few days later, she visits Hilly´s house and overhears hers, Aibileen´s and Miss Elizabeth´s conversation: ″Aibileen, you like having your own toilet, don´t you?″ ″Yes, ma´am.″ Separate but equal,″ Miss Hilly say back to Miss Leefolt. ″That´s what Governor Ross Barnett says is right, and you can´t argue with the government″ (218). Eugenia starts to notice things and realizes that Hilly raises her voice about three octaves higher when she talks to people of color and Elizabeth smiles like she´s talking to a child, although certainly not her own (183). She concludes that there is no difference between Jim Crow laws or Hilly´s bathroom plan. After the realization that everyone around her is racist, she was desperate for the world to see their perspective:

> Well″ - I took a deep breath – I´d like to write this showing the point of view of the help. The colored women down here. ″I tried to picture Constantine´s face, Aibileen´s. ″They raise a white child and then twenty years later the child becomes the employer. It´s that irony, that we love them and they love us, yet. . . ″I swallowed, my voice trembling, ″We don´t even allow them to use the toilet in the house.″ . . . ″Because no one ever talks about it. No one talks about anything down here. (123)

Minny tells the story of how once the bus driver treated the colored people in the bus: ″Colored people off, last stop for you. White people lemme know where y´all need to get to. I´ll get you close as I can″ (227). People of color in the bus do not even react to that, because they face that kind of behavior every day.

The novel also relies on some historical events such as the murder of Medgar Evans and the manner people learned of the event: ″I don´t know, some nigger got shot. Where you headed?″ (227). The matter-of-fact tone suggests that to shoot African-Americans in front of their children is of no importance. These events would appear on the news, the newspapers wrote about them, but white people did not care. Instead, they would continue with their day without any compassion or empathy. Unfortunately, these kinds of events became an everyday occurrence in Southern states. Therefore, Agata Szulkowska portrays:

> The book clearly depicts the fear of death and brutality that African-Americans experienced after Medgar Evers' assassination. When the black inhabitants of Mississippi find out that he was killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan they are scared to death and avoid leaving their homes for fear of being shot. The situation is even more dramatic because of the fact that Evers, the black field secretary for NAACP who fought against the Blacks' exploitation, was shot in front of his house right before his children's eyes. Therefore, the Blacks realize that their lives are always under threat just because of their skin color. (43)

Aibileen set herself a goal to teach Mae Mobley that all people should have same rights, regardless of their skin color. For that purpose, Aibileen invented a story that she tells her before going to bed:

> Once upon a time they was two little girls,″ I say. ″One girl had black skin, one girl had white. ″Little colored girl say to the little white girl, ´How come your skin

> be so pale?′ White girl say, ′I don′t know. How come your skin be so black? What you think that mean? ″But neither one a them little girls knew. So little white girl say, ′Well, let′s see. You got hair, I got hair.′ ″Little colored girl say, ′I got a nose, you got a nose.′ ″Little white girl say, ′I got toes, you got toes.′ ′So we′s the same. Just a different color,′ say that little colored girl. The little white girl agreed and they was friends. The End (234).

Aibileen feels that it is her duty to stop her little girl Mae Mobley from becoming racist: ″I want to yell so loud that Baby Girl can hear me that dirty ain′t a color, disease ain′t the Negro side a town. I want to stop that moment from coming – and it come in ever white child′s life – when they start to think that colored folks ain′t as good as whites″ (112). Unfortunately, as soon as Mae Mobley starts school, she is faced with a white teacher, who probably also has her African-American maid, and a lot of prejudices about people of color. Mae Mobley comes home from school and says that Miss Taylor told them that African-American kids can′t go to their school because they are not smart enough and that black means having a dirty, bad face. At this particular moment, she can still make Mae Mobley believe that Miss Taylor is wrong, but soon enough Miss Taylor will win and little girl will turn into her mother and become just one of the many racist white ladies who has a maid of her own.

Finally, at the official Benefit where all the raised money was supposed to go to Africa to help those in need, Hilly, during her speech, says: ″Let′s give a special round of applause to the help, for all the wonderful food they cooked and served, and for the deserts they made for the auction . . . In their own way, they are helping the League reach its goal to feed the Poor Starving Children of Africa, a cause, I′m sure, dear to their own hearts as well″ (383). The irony of people gathering to raise money for African Americans, while their own maids are being mistreated, disrespected and killed at their front door makes Eugenia revolted.

To conclude, both Minny and Aibileen go through many hardships in their lives due to the fact that they are African-American women and cannot change their color or status. Their only way to live and survive in 1960s America is to be maids to white families and raise their children. As mothers, they have to provide for their own families and learn to live with the mistreatment coming from their husbands. In addition, as second-class citizens they are not allowed to use the same object or facilities as white people. Their only role is to serve them, which in a way resembles slavery. On the other hand, Eugenia Pheelan is not blind to the racial issues in her community and decides to fight for a better America by exposing the hypocrisy and

cruelty of white women masters and the rest of the society. Furthermore, she fights against the sexist society and its norms.

This novel successfully portrayed extremely racist Southern America throughout 1960s and 1970s. It showed normality of treating African-Americans as slaves and not being ashamed of it or punished for it either. The political system of that time regulated the relationship between white people and people of color and the policy ″separate, but equal″ brought nothing but inequality for the entire African-American community. That ironical motto served as a tool to justify whites´ acts and to, therefore, control people of color and their rights. In the same way that Eugenia Pheelan´s book served as an eye-opener for many people of that time, this novel also serves as a reminder that those times should never repeat, but should always be remembered as the times of severe racism, injustice and hatred towards the African-American community.

6. *Hidden Figures* - The Story Of Women Who Wear Glasses

Hidden Figures is a 2016 American biographical drama film loosely based on the non-fiction book of the same name by Margot Lee Shetterly. It tells the story about African-American female mathematicians who worked at NASA during the space-race. The author of the book was born and raised in Hampton, as well as some other members of the team working on the movie. Moreover, the author´s father also worked for NASA, which gave her a lot of insight into the events happening around that time. Unlike in the previous chapter, the African-American women here are highly educated and math- prodigies, which is all but traditional and expected in 1960s U.S.

Katherine Johnson (Goble) was one of three African-American students to attend West Virginia´s graduate schools. Many people would consider that fact as one of their life´s biggest achievements, but that was only a beginning for that incredibly talented and hardworking woman. Ever since she was a little girl, her brilliance when it comes to dealing with numbers showed, so she studied mathematics and became a professor at an African-American public school in Virginia. The interesting fact is that her mentor was actually the third African American to earn a PhD in mathematics (″Katherine Johnson Biography″). In 1952 she found out about opened positions at the all-black West Area Computing section at NASA, headed by her future colleague, West Virginian Dorothy Vaughan. She later on worked on trajectory analysis for Alan Shepard´s mission Freedom 7, America´s first human spaceflight. After that, she was called to do the math for the orbital mission of John Glenn. Also, she worked on the project Apollo 11. In 2015, at the age of 97, president Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America´s highest civilian honor. Currently, at the age of 101, she is working on her own biography, which will be published in September this year (″Katherine Johnson Biography″).

Dorothy Vaughan is the name not enough mentioned when it comes to NASA´s pioneers. She was the head of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics´ (NACA´s) segregated West Computing Unit from 1949 to 1958, as well as a respected mathematician and NASA´s first African-American manager. Dorothy Vaughan joined the Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory in 1943, during World War II (″Dorothy Vaughan Biography″). The Laboratory started hiring African-American women to work with and process aeronautical research data. However, Jim Crow laws required African-American workers to be separated from the white ones: ″Dorothy Vaughan was assigned to the segregated "West Area Computing" unit, an all-

black group of female mathematicians, who were originally required to use separate dining and bathroom facilities″ (″Dorothy Vaughan Biography″). As the time passed, due to their proficiency, African-American NASA´s employers from the West Computing Group gained all the rights.

Mary Jackson graduated from Hampton Institute in 1942 with a degree in Math and Physical Sciences and became a professor at all-black school in Maryland. She changed a couple of positions, until she finally became a member of the West Computing Group at NASA´s. After some time, Mary Jackson got an opportunity to work as an engineer, prior to which she had to graduate: ″Trainees had to take graduate level math and physics in after-work courses managed by the University of Virginia″ (″Mary Jackson Biography″). Since the classes she had to attend were held at segregated Hampton High School, Mary needed special permission from the court in order to enter the classroom. Mary, as expected, successfully graduated and in 1958 became NASA's first African-American female engineer: ″Mary Jackson began her engineering career in an era in which female engineers of any background were a rarity; in the 1950s, she very well may have been the only colored female aeronautical engineer in the field″ (″Mary Jackson Biography″). Frustrated because women did not have the same rights and could not achieve everything that they wanted, she ″left engineering and became a Langley's Federal Women's Program Manager. There she worked hard to impact the hiring and promotion of the next generation of all of NASA's female mathematicians, engineers and scientists″ (″Mary Jackson Biography″).

6.1. Racial Segregation And Sexism In *Hidden Figures*

In the movie there are plenty of scenes in which one can see examples of racism. Three African American women - Katherine, Dorothy and Mary are on their way to work at NASA. Mary complains about the old car, and Katherine jokes, saying: ″You can sit at the back of the bus, if you want to″ *(Hidden Figures* 00:03:51-54). Here one can already see the seriousness of racial segregation in the South at the beginning of 60s. They got pulled over by a white policeman, which at the time meant danger for all African-Americans. Still, the policeman agreed to help them get to the NASA´s office. While driving behind him, Mary yells: ″Three Negro women are chasing a white police officer down the Highway in Hampton, Virginia, 1961. Ladies, that there is a God ordained miracle″ (*Hidden Figures* 00:06:41-49). As one can imagine, that scenario was not an everyday occurrence, taking into consideration the year and the location.

More often than not, African-Americans, especially men, would be considered suspicious. In her work ″African-American Men as Criminal and Dangerous″ Mary Beth Oliver claims:

> Why might an individual be mistakenly assumed to be threatening or violent? Naturally, a host of variables may play contributory roles in priming thoughts of danger or aggression, including age, dress and gender, among others. Nevertheless, the frequency with which black men specifically have been the target of mistakenly placed police aggression speaks to the undeniable role that race plays in false assumptions of danger and criminality. (3)

Another clear sign of racism at NASA´s is shown when young marines, including John Glenn, come to visit the workers. The way they are organized to meet them says a lot about the hierarchy. African-Americans are separated from white workers. Even though the marines are not allowed to come to greet the African-American workers, and most of them do not even bother to do so, John Glenn comes and shakes the hand of every African-American woman, acting very nice and polite, making jokes and laughing with them. As soon as the others notice that, they tell him that the itinerary is very tight and that they have to leave. They presume that, since all the marines and colonels are white, they would not even want to be put next to women of color.

Another very important scene which serves as a proof of racism begins with Dorothy and her two sons walking down the street. They see some protestors holding signs such as: Segregation hurts us all! Segregation is morally wrong! Equal rights for all! There are white policemen with dogs barking on the protestors. One little scene shows a mother and a daughter drinking water from the tap. Next to the tap is the one for peple of color, and when one African-American man approaches the tap, the mother rushes her daughter to leave. Ironically, behind the taps there is a huge poster of President Kennedy on the wall, watching over what is happening in his America. Dorothy enters the part of the library aimed for the whites, searching for a specific book that cannot be found in the African-American section, since nobody believes that people of color can be educated enough to use scientific literature. As soon as she takes the book from the shelf, there is a white librarian on the other side of the shelf who says: ″We don't want any trouble in here″ (*Hidden Figures* 00:49:43-45). The next scene that we see shows Dorothy and her sons being thrown out of the library by the white policeman. Maurice Wheeler and Debbie Johnson- Houston are in their work ″A Brief History of Library Service to African-Americans″ describing African-American access to public libraries:

> The legal foundation for segregated libraries was established by the landmark

> Plessy v. Ferguson U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1896. For the next 58 years, the practice of separate but equal governed the establishment and operation of public accommodations, including libraries. However, prior to Plessy v. Ferguson, libraries were not segregated; African-Americans were simply excluded altogether, except to either return or collect materials for white patrons. (42)

In the bus, at its back with the rest of the people of color, Dorothy explains the situation to her sons: ″Separate and equal are two different things. Just cause it´s the way doesn't make it right″ (*Hidden Figures* 00:50:19-26). Despite what the lady said, she took the book she wanted. It is obvious that Dorothy is used to that and similar kind of treatment, but is forceful enough to fight it as much as she can, and, what is more important, wants to make her sons aware of the situation in the country.

When the girls arrive at NASA, Dorothy goes to the West Computing Group, which is a section for women of color only. Katherine, however, works in the East Computing group, surrounded by white people exclusively. Therefore, she is not allowed to use the bathroom everybody else uses, but the one on the other side of the building, in the West Computing Group. Above the toilet doors it clearly said ″Colored Ladies Room″. So, every time Katherine would need to use the toilet, she would have to run for a long time. Furthermore, one day she wanted some coffee and went to the coffee station in the office, poured herself some in the cup, and when she turned around, everyone in the room looked at her furiously. She realized that what she has done was wrong, but she probably expected that at least at NASA people should be treated equally. The truth is they are not, and Katherine has to deal with that every day. The next day Katherine goes to get herself some coffee in the office and is shocked. There is a separate coffee pot on which it says: COLORED. No one cares if the pot aimed for a woman of color is full or empty. It is nobody´s business, as long as she does not drink ″their″ coffee. Finally, there came the day when Katherine stood up for herself and the African-American community:

> 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 my knees and my heels. And a simple string of pearls. Well, I don´t own pearls. Lord knows you don´t pay coloreds enough to afford pearls! And I work like a dog day and night, living on a coffee form a pot none you want to touch! So, excuse me, if I have to go to the restroom a few times a day. (Hidden Figures 1:01:56-1:02:29)

After the speech, Mr. Harrison takes the note Colored from the pot of coffee in front of everybody. After that, he takes the hammer and demolishes Colored Ladies Room sign and says: ″There you have it! No more colored restrooms. No more white restrooms. Just plain old toilets. Go wherever you damn want, please. Preferably closer to your desk″ (*Hidden Figures* 1:03:58-1:03:07). That scene is very symbolic. He is standing right in front of the toilet doors. On one side of the hall there is his assistant Ruth and the rest of the white men from the office, while on the other there are African-American girls from the West Computing Group. By taking off this sign, it seems that he took of the differences, separation and inequality between his workers. He took the sign and started dragging it on the floor down the hallway, saying: ″Here at NASA . . . We all pee the same color″ (*Hidden Figures* 1:04:23-29). This sentence in a way represents the victory of the African-American community working at NASA.

After Dorothy proved to be the most capable person at NASA working on the IBM machine, her boss tells her: ″Despite what you may think, I have nothing against ya´ll″ (*Hidden Figures* 1:34:53-57). Again, Mrs. Mitchell keeps trying not to look or act racist, but an experienced and wise African-American woman whose everyday life is a struggle due to people like Mrs. Mitchell sees through her. Dorothy replies: ″I know. I know you probably believe that″ (*Hidden Figures* 1:34:59-1:35:04). However, one cannot blame Mrs. Mitchell as an individual for her racism. It was a part of everyday life and perspective of white people at the time. In their work ″Racism in the Structure of Everyday Worlds: A Cultural-Psychological Perspective″ Salter, Adams and Perez conclude: ″. . . Measuring racism only as overt individual bias may systematically understate the ongoing significance of racism. A cultural-psychology approach adds to this discussion by considering racism as a set of ideas, practices, and materials embedded in the structure of everyday cultural worlds″ (2). Therefore, racism could be considered a social construct of the 1960s.

On the other hand, there are many examples of sexism in the movie as well. The biggest sexist is Katherine´s colleague Paul Stafford. He would find ways to make her do extra work because he felt that she could make him look less capable, and that, according to him, should not be the case, because he, as a man, is the superior one. She does not let her name be written next to his in their calculations. After starting to work on John Glenn´s project, Katherine wanted to attend the Pentagon Briefings during which the data about John Glenn project changes, because everything she does becomes obsolete in a few hours. When she asks Paul if she can do that, he replies: ″There´s no protocol for women attending″ (*Hidden Figures* 1:20:20-23). Swim, Mallet

and Stangor provide a definition of sexism: ″Sexism can be defined as discrimination based on gender or as a set of attitudes, conditions, or behaviors that promote stereotyping of social roles based on gender″ (Rodgers 6). They claim that if sexism becomes a less socially desirable trait people will less likely admit their attitudes about it. Rodgers also suggests that they are less likely to believe they are sexist if their sexism usually manifests itself subtly. For example, a person may not agree to the above statement, however they may behave in such a way in their personal lives as to promote such an attitude.

After being pulled over by a white policeman, his first reaction was a surprise because they are women on their way to NASA: ″I had no idea they hired…″ (*Hidden Figures* 00:05:04-07). Katherine, Dorothy and Mary had to show him their accreditations and therefore prove that there are actually quite a few women working in the Space Program.

Furthermore, before Katherine could enter her new office, Mrs. Mitchell had to explain her some rules. Her skirts must be worn past the knee, sweaters are preferred to blouses and she should not wear jewelry, apart from a simple pearl necklace. She also should not talk to Mr. Harrison, unless he talks to her. All these rules, of course, were not mandatory for her male colleagues.

On one Sunday in church, Katherine meets Colonel Jim Johnson, her soon to be husband. When she tells him what her job is, his reaction disappoints her a lot: ″They let women handle that sort of . . . Not what I mean″ (*Hidden Figures* 00:36:30-35). Katherine then puts him into place:

> ″I will have you know, I was the first Negro female student at West Virginia University graduate school . . . There are 20 bright, highly capable Negro women in the West Computing Group, and we´re proud to be doing our part for the country. So, yes... They let women do some things at NASA, Mr. Johnson. And it´s not because we wear skirts, it´s because we wear glasses.″ (*Hidden Figures* 00:36:56-00:37:28).

Another very symbolic and women empowering scene is the one in which Mary finds herself surrounded by her male coworkers. She enters the room looking up, carrying a lot of books in her hands, showing her seriousness and work ethic. The importance of this project, that will from now on lay in the hands of an African-American woman, is accentuated by showing a scene form a frog´s perspective, while the camera is turning around the machine and Mary is touching it, while her eyes are sparkling from excitement. All of a sudden, the testing of the

machine starts and Mary finds herself alone in the room. All the other men are looking at her behind the glass. When she tries to leave the room, one of her heels gets stuck in the metal on the floor. She tries hard to take it out and rescue the heel, but she has to leave her behind. Finally, she enters the room full of men who cannot hide their surprise. The scene ends with one woman of color in a dress and plenty of white men in white shirts watching the testing behind the glass. That is the moment when Mary realized that she is alone in a dangerous and unpredictable situation, monitored by in every way superior men. Every day is going to be a struggle, but her goal should be to try to save the shoe. That shoe could be seen as a burden of being an African-American woman aspiring to become an engineer. If we put aside the hardships that come with the fact that Mary is, as she says, a Negro woman, being just a woman in the scientific, especially engineering field at that time was pretty rare. In her work "The Relationship Between Sexism, Feminism, and Attitudes Toward Premarital Sex" Rodgers explains how Rosabeth Moss Kanter claims that women might be reluctant to enter a field with very few other women students because they might fear being a ″token″ female. The token status – being one of the few women in a setting – results potentially in women being regarded by peers and superiors as ″different″ form the male majority, and being subjected to stereotypes about their gender (77).

Finally, one part of the movie which combines both problems of racism and sexism is Mary Jackson´s fight to become the world´s first African-American female Aeronautical engineer. At first, when her mentor Mr. Zelinski told her that she would have to attend extra classes and get a degree, her reaction was quite expected: ″Mr. Zelinski. I´m a Negro woman. I´m not gonna entertain the impossible!″ (*Hidden Figures* 00:15:18-23). Mr. Zelinski asks her whether she would like to be an engineer if she was born male. Mary then, realizing what he wants to say, answers: ″I wouldn´t have to. I´d already be one″ (*Hidden Figures* 00:15:45-49). Katherine, Mary and Dorothy find out that for those that cannot attend classes at the University of Virginia, advanced extension courses are available at Hampton High School. The problem is that that school is still segregated. In her work ″School Desegregation and Educational Attainment for Blacks″ Sarah J. Reber writes about segregation in schools: ″In 1954, the Supreme Court declared separate schools for black and white children to be “inherently unequal.” But neither the 1954 Brown decision nor the 1955 Brown II decision was specific about what districts were required to do to comply with this new doctrine, and little progress was made for several years″ (4). Therefore, Mary went to the court to try to convince the judge to let her attend the classes at all-white school:

> The point is, your Honor, no Negro woman in the State of Virginia has ever attended an all white high school. It´s unheard of. And before Alan Shepard sat on top of a rocket, no other American had ever touched space. And now, he will forever be remembered as the US Navy man from New Hampshire. The first to touch the stars. And I, sir. I plan on being an engineer at 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. Your Honor, out of all the cases you´re going to hear today, which one is going to matter in a hundred years from now? Which one is going to make you the ″first″? (*Hidden Figures* 01:12:01-51)

The judge lets her to take night classes only. After the teacher tells her that the curriculum is not designed to teach women, she replies: ″Well, I imagine it´s the same as teaching a man. I don´t see a colored section. Should I just take any seat?″ (*Hidden Figures* 1:31:22-33). Since he does not reply, she simply sits in the first bench and starts her fight to become an engineer that she deserves to be.

To conclude, it is hard to believe what these three brilliant women had to deal with, as if getting an education and such remarkable jobs was not already challenging enough. Their status and education definitely did not save them from the most significant issues in American South during 1960s – the consequences of racial segregation. Also, unlike most women of their time, they did not accept their fate and decide to spend the rest of their lives being only wives and mothers, nor accepted a low-paid job at a near factory. Mary graduated and became NASA´s and America´s first female African-American Aeronautical engineer, Dorothy Vaughan became NASA´s first African-American Supervisor, while Katherine continued working in Space Task Group on some of the most famous NASA´s projects (″Katherine Johnson/Dorothy Vaughan/Mary Jackson Biography″). They fought each day of their professional careers to be noticed, respected and valued in the right way. They had to prove themselves both as capable women and as capable members of African-American community. They managed to become ″the firsts″ at what they were doing and set up some really high standard for young and ambitious, yet by the racist and sexist system frightened women, who later on saw them as role models and real heroines of their time.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the analysis of four works and shown how much and how long it took African-American women to raise their voice and deserve their right to equality. Starting with Sojourner Truth´ famous, improvised speech, she emphasizes women´s crucial role in this world and warns men that women should not be seen as a weaker sex. Also, she focuses on the horrible fate of African-American mothers who still managed to prevail in the world full of hatred towards anyone who is not male or white. Furthermore, the woman in the poem ″Still I Rise″ concludes that others (men) wanted to see her miserable and on the ground because she is a woman, but they wanted to see her even more miserable because she is a woman of color. However, the strength and pride for being who she is that she has within herself keeps pushing her forward and rising up. Next, the African-American maids in the novel *The Help* had to tell their side of the stories in secret and in that way let the people know about the injustice towards them. Also, they had to sacrifice their own families in order to survive and get beaten by their husbands before they decided they had enough of mistreatment. Finally, the four women in the movie *Hidden Figures* had to prove everybody that they are smart and proficient enough to be working in the same office as men. They had to accept the consequences of racial segregation and sexism and use them as a motivation to succeed.

To conclude, all African-American women mentioned in these works struggled enormously to show the racist and sexist society around them that they are worthy of succeeding and fighting for what they believe in. Due to their courage, strength and hard work they should serve as role models not only to the female members of the African-American community, but to every human being in this world, because they have risen above pain, inequality, injustice and thrived.

Works Cited

Banks, Nina. ″Black women's labor market history reveals deep-seated race and gender discrimination.″ 19 February 2019, www.epi.org/blog/black-womens-labor-market-history-reveals-deep-seated-race-and-gender-discrimination/. Accessed 23 June 2019.

Brah, Avtar and Phoenix, Ann. ″Ain´t I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality.″ *Journal of International Women´s Studies.* 5(3), 2004, pp 75-86.

″Intersectionality.″ *Cambridge Dictionary*, www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/intersectionality, Accessed 28 June 2019.

Davis, Dernoral. ″Medgar Evers and the Origin of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi.″ *Mississippi: History Now*, 2003. mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/53/medgar-evers-and-the-origin-of-the-civil-rights-movement-in-mississippi. Accessed 22 June 2019.

Dionne Danns and Michelle A. Purdy. ″African American Education, Civil Rights, and Black Power″. *The Journal of African American History*. Vol. 100, No. 4, 2015. pp. 573-585.

″Montgomery bus boycott.″ *Encyclopedia Britannica, inc.* 14 March, 2019. www.britannica.com/event/Montgomery-bus-boycott. Accessed: 27 August, 2019.

Frances L. Edwards and Grayson Bennett Thomson. ″The Legal Creation of Raced Space: The Subtle and Ongoing Discrimination Created through Jim Crow Laws″. *Berkeley Journal of African-American Law and Policy*. 12 Berkeley J. Afr.-Am. L. & Pol'y 145. 2010. pp. 1-25.

Gerhard Sonnert and Mary Frank Fox. ″Women, Men, and Academic Performance in Science and Engineering: The Gender Difference in Undergraduate Grade Point Averages.″ *The Journal of Higher Education*, 2012. pp. 73-101.

Hidden Figures. Directed by Theodore Melfi, 20th Century Fox, 2016.

Angelou, Maya. ″Still I Rise″ *Poetry Foundation*. www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise. Accessed 5 July 2019.

Juan Du. ″Exploring the Theme of Self-Actualization in Maya Angelou´s Poetry.″ *English Language and Literature Studies*; Vol. 4, No. 3; 2014. pp. 65-70.

Kali Nicole Gross. ″African American Women, Mass Incarceration, and the Politics of Protection.″ *Journal of American History*, Volume 102, Issue 1, June 2015, pp. 25–33.

Lind, JoEllen. ″Dominance and Democracy: The Legacy of Woman Suffrage for the Voting Right.″ *UCLA Women's Law Journal*, 5(1), 1994. pp. 104-210.

Lynne Marie Kohm and Colleen Holmes. ″The Rise and Fall of Women's Rights: Have Sexuality and Reproductive Freedom Forfeited Victory?″ *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law*. Volume 6, Issue 2, (2000). pp. 381-421.

Lyon, Carter Dalton. ″Jackson Civil Rights Movement.″ *Center for Study of Southern Culture, Mississippi Encyclopedia.* 11 July 2017, mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/jackson-civil-rights-movement/. Accessed 26 June 2019.

Madigan, J. C. ″The Education of Girls and Women in the United States: A Historical Perspective″. *Advances in Gender and Education.* 2009. pp. 11-13.

Maurice Wheeler, Debbie Johnson-Houston and Billie E. Walker. ″A Brief History of Library Service to African Americans.″ *American Libraries*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2004. pp. 42-45.

″From Hidden to Modern Figures – Dorothy Vaughan Biography″. *NASA.* 2018. www.nasa.gov/content/dorothy-vaughan-biography. Accessed 27 July 2019.

″From Hidden to Modern Figures – Katherine Johnson Biography.″ *NASA.* 2018. www.nasa.gov/content/katherine-johnson-biography. Accessed 27 July 2019.

″From Hidden to Modern Figures – Mary Jackson Biography.″ *NASA.* 2018. www.nasa.gov/content/mary-jackson-biography. Accessed 27 July 2019.

Nell, Irvin Painter. ″Mother of the Movement.″ *The New York Times.* 29 March 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/03/31/books/review/the-rebellious-life-of-mrs-rosa-parks- by-jeanne-theoharis.html. Accessed 2 July 2019.

Oliver, Mary Beth. ″African American Men as "Criminal and Dangerous": Implications of Media Portrayals of Crime on the "Criminalization" of African American Men. ″*Journal of African American Studies.* Vol. 7, No. 2, 2003, pp. 3-18.

Roberts, F.L. ″How Black Lives Matter Changed The Way Americans Fight for Freedom.″ *ACLU*. July 13, 2018. www.aclu.org/blog/racial-justice/race-and- criminal-justice/how-black-lives-matter-changed-way-americans-fight. Accessed 4 July 2019.

Rochona Majumdar. ″History of Women´s Rights: A Non-Historicist Reading″. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 38, No. 22, Jun. 6, 2003. pp. 2130-2134.

Rodgers, Larisa. *The Relationship Between Sexism, Feminism, and Attitudes Toward Premarital Sex*. *Honors Scholar Theses*. 2005.

Sadker, M., and Sadker, D. *Failing at Fairness: How our schools cheat girls.* Touchstone. 1995.

Salter, Phia and Adams, Glenn & J. Perez, Michael. ″Racism in the Structure of Everyday Worlds: A Cultural-Psychological Perspective.″ *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. Volume 27, Issue 3, 2018. pp. 150-155.

Sangeetha S. ″An explication of self-discovery in Maya Angelou´s ″Still I Rise″.″ *International Journal of English Research*. Volume 2, Issue 4, July 2016, pp 06-08.

Sarah J. Reber. ″School Desegregation and Educational Attainment for Blacks.″ *NBER Working Paper*. 2007. pp. 1-54.

Stockett, Kathryn. *The Help*. London: Penguin Books Ltd. 2009.

Szulkowska, Agata. ″The problem of racism in Kathryn Stockett´s novel *The Help*.″ *A Journal of English Studies.* 2017. pp. 41-53.

Sojourner, Truth. ″Ain´t I A Woman″? *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, edited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 3rd ed., W.W.Norton & Company. pp. 510.

″The Woman Suffrage Movement: The Most Significant Achievement of Women in the Progressive Era.″ *National Women´s History Museum (NWHM)*, www.womenshistory.org/resources/general/woman-suffrage-movement. Accessed 5 July 2019.

Wilder, Jeffri Anne; Jones, Tamara Bertrand; and Osborne-Lampkin, La'Tara. ″A Profile of Black Women in the 21st Century Academy: Still Learning from the "Outsider-Within″, *Journal of Research Initiatives:* Volume 1, Issue 1, Article 5. 2013. pp. 27-38.