HIDDEN FIGURES BREAKS BARRIERS OF RACE AND GENDER

by CASEY COLLINS

Image courtesy of huffingtonpost.com

Underrepresented; deigned to play waitresses, maids, mistresses, wild party girls, and domestic housewives. Despite the progress seen in recent years concerning the portrayal of women in film and the involvement of women in the film industry, Hollywood continues to miss the mark on sharing the spotlight between both men and women.

The underrepresentation of women in film is obvious based on results of the Bechdel test, which numerous of the 2017 Academy Award nominated films failed. The Bechdel Test has three requirements: the movie must have at least two named female characters; the female characters must speak to each other; and the topic of their conversation cannot be a man. According to Global Citizen, four of the nine Academy Award nominees for Best Picture fail the Bechdel test, and both the 2016 and 2017 winners for Best Picture, "Spotlight" and "Moonlight," respectively, do not pass the test.

Movies like "Spotlight" and "Moonlight" are undeniably high-quality and award worthy, but their lack of recognition of women on screen is appalling. How can two movies that are considered to be the best of their year achieve this legendary status while almost entirely ignoring half of the world population on the basis of gender exclusion? This exclusion of women time and time again in the annually chosen best films has repeatedly left me feeling empty and frustrated, which is why I was so excited to see "Hidden Figures" repeatedly appear on the lists of award nominees for 2017.

"Hidden Figures" did an outstanding job of portraying women realistically with intricate character development and an incredible representation of the historical wrongs committed against women, especially in the context of ignoring female contribution to the fields of math and science. Watching Taraji P. Henson play the character of Katherine Johnson with equal parts grace, passion, and intelligence allowed me to better understand the reasons behind the decisions that Johnson made while working within segregated NASA in the 1960s.

The characterization of Johnson and her counterparts Mary Jackson and Dorothy Vaughn by the "Hidden Figures" cast and crew appeared to be planned very carefully to incorporate humor that would balance the often uncomfortable seriousness of the discrimination that these women faced. Addressing topics of racism and discrimination can be a great challenge for both filmmakers and actors, especially considering the current social climate of the U.S., but by making the characters realistic and relatable, "Hidden Figures" was able to bridge existing gaps between social and racial divisions to unite moviegoers across the country in support of African American women attempting to succeed under seemingly impossible circumstances.

More importantly than any technical or conventional cinematic achievements, "Hidden Figures" drew men, women, and children out of the woodworks to watch previously unknown stories about strong and powerful women who were singled out, but managed to prevail in spite of the odds stacked against them. With a feel-good and inspirational ending that left me walking out of the movie theater with high hopes for the future of women in fighting to close the gender pay gap and promoting female workers in male-dominated fields, "Hidden Figures" was the perfect film to represent the power of women across the span of numerous generations.