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VISIBLE MADE INVISIBLE: EROSION OF BLACK IDENTITY IN THE *INVISIBLE MAN* BY RALPH ELLISON

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Abstract

The Civil Rights period was a time of struggle of the African Americans in USA. Many Black-American writers concentrated their efforts to reflect the racism and discrimination that their fellow community members suffered from, among them was Ralph Ellison. Ellison's *Invisible Man* made an effort to define the meaning of the experience of the narrator that is taking place in their days and will lead to the differentiation in the community. The narration will succeed in identifying the identity and making the transformation in the protagonist's naivety that will be leading to the rediscovering of the values of the American and African heritage. It will make the blacks able to get the life they deserve. The research will make the explanation of the narration and its associated concept in different sections.

Keywords: Identity, transformation, American-African heritage, racism, stereotypes

About the author

Ralph Waldo Ellison, took birth on the first of March 1914, in Oklahoma City, in the house of Lewis Alfred Ellison, who was by profession a construction foreman. Ellison's father died when he was only three years old. Ellison's mother, Ida Milsap was a church stewardess. She used to bring Ellison books she borrowed from the houses where she used to work. Ellison got admitted to Frederick Douglass School in Oklahoma City where he received lessons in symphonic composition. When Ellison was eighteen years old he attended Tuskegee Institute in Montgomery, Alabama, where he studies music from 1933 to 1936. During that period, he did part-time jobs. To keep himself alive, Ellison also became a game hunter, a skill that he learned from reading Hemingway's works.

Ellison after studying music for three years at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute which is now known as now Tuskegee University lefty the institution in the year 1936 and migrated to New York in the same year, where met eminent black writers like Richard Wright and Langston Hughes, which made him to try his hand at fiction and triggered his move to Harlem where he resided for more than forty years with his spouse, Fanny McConnell. A well-known novelist, short story writer, and critic, Ellison taught at several colleges and universities and lectured at prestigious institutions such as Yale University, the Library of Congress, and the U.S. Military Academy. Ellison sometimes called himself a dropout from college. Surprisingly, he went on to receive twelve honorary doctorate degrees from such renowned institutions

such as Tuskegee Institute, Rutgers University, the University of Michigan, and Harvard University.

In the year 1970, Ellison was appointed Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at New York University, where he taught until the year 1980. He also went on to receive the esteemed Chevalier de L'Ordre des Artes et Lettres, one of the highest honors which France bestows upon a non-French writer. In the year 1982, he was appointed Professor Emeritus at NYU, while he taught for several years while carrying on his writing. As early as the 1940s, Ellison began writing a novel based on a captured American pilot in a Nazi POW camp. In the summer of 1945, when Ellison was visiting his friends in Vermont during his sick leave from the Merchant Marine, the opening lines of *Invisible Man* came to him, which prompted him to write a completely different novel.

*Invisible Man* published in the year 1952, is Ralph Ellison's first novel that won National Book Award for fiction in 1953. Containing a Prologue, twenty-five chapters, and an Epilogue, it shows the narrator's search for freedom and self-definition in a heavily color-conscious society. 'Invisibility' here refers to the condition of the African-Americans, who were not accepted as individuals but as stereotypical savages by the white, racially prejudiced Americans. In this novel, invisibility happens when the white folk in the United States decline to see the narrator as an individual but as a stereotypical black boy to be humiliated and used for fun. This situation resulted in the loss of his identity. Peter B. High points out, "The hero is ... invisible because ... whites cannot see blacks as individual people". Through the experience of suffering, humiliation, and violence, the narrator understands that he has to reassert his individuality. He also understands that in order to institute his identity and conquer suffering, he has to prove himself by exercising his power. Then he decides to make an offering to society as a complicated person, in his own way; he refuses to comply with social sites available to him. So, he acts on his own discarding the authorized stereotypical roles and institutes his self-identity. *Invisible Man* narrates the tale of a young African American man who shifts towards the north during the Harlem Renaissance and

encounters many trials as he strives to find a position in society. This book is a candid portrayal of life for Black Americans before the Civil Rights era, displaying the hardships and prejudices that are often disregarded in retrospect but were very much real for Blacks during that period. It is frank, pensive, and straightforward; often unnerving and worrying. The central theme of Ellison's book is the idea of blindness and how it influences identity. The protagonist is left bewildered and misplaced as a result of the blindness of those he faces, trying to fit into the expectations of others until at last, he understands that he is, and has forever been, "invisible" to society. With this disclosure, the invisible man, finally, discovers his self-identity.

#### **Background of the project**

Ralph Ellison's novel explores the concept of racism with the thoughts and exemplary ideology to see people in the society. The concept is narrated that is talking about that what is happening in the past. In his narration, there is a mention that as per the scientific concept he is visible and alive but in the mind of people he always seems to be invisible as people refuse to accept them due to his dark complexion (Dodge, 45). That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. This is all about the matter of construction of their inner eyes; those eyes are which they are looking through are physical eyes that are very far from reality. Black young men make the narration of things that are happening to him when people refused to see them and how he becomes unaware of their invisibility (Toussaint, 825). The struggle and pain of the narrator are reflected in the story showing prejudice. One line that is shared is I am invisible simply because people refuse to see me that is due to the stereotypical mindset of there toward the black race (Simpson, 80). The project will make the exploration of the incident that happened with the narrator Ralph Ellison and will present the idea that what is the viewpoint of society that is making a visible man an invisible one. In the *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, a great effort is made in the field of behaviour and struggle that is faced by the black people in the race of whites (O'Brien, 80). It also talks

about the eyes that are seeing the outer appearance not the inner beauty of an individual.

### Literature review

Dodge and Arnold's research present the view on the inability to "see" one another, a simple fable will make a good reflection on what Ellison wants to portray with their narration. A traveller travelling from America where everyone is wearing yellow glasses went to Japan (45). There he notices that people were wearing blue sunglasses. At that point, he decides to put out the yellow glasses and wear blue ones that will contribute to their understanding of Japanese culture. During the two months of their stay in Japan, he concluded that the culture of Japan is green. The moral that is convicted with the fable is that every time, a new situation or circumstance presents a challenge. It is up to one how they are going to show their receptiveness. Before we can open up to other cultures, one cannot truly see what they like and what they are following. Seeing everyone with the same lens will make others invisible which is leading to the propagation of the difference at the social levels. The modern black diaspora will show the problem that might occur due to invisibility and namelessness that can be better understood by the fact that blacks are having relatively low power and making another human act a complex human being. Making one invisible for the sake of their complexion will lead to the bombardment of thought that is imposing a negative influence, and shows regressive stereotype that is put forward by the white supremacist ideas. White people enjoy baking in the white society which makes them the legitimate participants in the social settings. The perspective not only impacts the adults but it makes an impact on children as well. As they are invisible in the classroom that is somewhere taking the opportunity to learn new facts.

O'Brien et al. start their narration with the stanzas that don't let me trick you, there is a death in the smell of spring that smells of me and if nothing more than invisibility taught my nose to classify the stench of death. The 2008 financial crisis came, which made the U.S market creep the recovery(80). The recorded rate for the fallen economy involves 3.6 per cent which is making the productivity and the

stagnated a negligible thing. In this era, still, black unemployment remains the highest which is twice as compared to the other groups. Racial gap and discrimination become the chasm that is that showing that rights of black are taken away due to their physical appearance of theirs. All of these will lead to the skyrocketing in the sky that makes the violence happen in the society. In 2015, it is noted that the black Americans is likely to be killed 9 times more than the non-black American which is sowing the disparity with the race that is making the riots happen for the right of the black ones. At this time triangulation of black unemployment, anti-black police violence and the spread of riots at that moment will lead to the suggestion that the financial crisis is happening due to the racialization that is making the accretive processes to produce the sociological categories. The concept will make the idea that what sort of the relationship is existing in the sociological categories and will lead to the naturalisation the dispossession. With the help of the article, it is found that black employment is responsible for the financial crisis that is faced by the country that is making the violence to get originate and will concert in the riots that are discriminating against the black community. Hudson's study will through the light on the fact that how impotence and insignificance of human beings are seen in the universe that is shaped by the malign power and force that is greatly created by humans for another human. The nature and surrounding that is created by human will impact other in terms of the way of living and pursuing the society that is resulting in the discrimination to go on and will get reflected in the survival that is not happening at the end of the black race. It will lead to a distance from the society that requires the acknowledgement of them and make them feel they are part of society. Aniemeka and Hudson show the point of view on identity and self-repatriation characterization of black people. Black diaspora is located in the multilayered gamut that is leading to the quest for the identity and explaining self that why there is an atmosphere of racism and slavery lies. The struggle of the black diaspora is not untangled by the discussion of the struggle, self-assertion and cultural survival that is making them difficult to live in the society of whites (Nosková).

The above evidence shows the elaborative way of the narrated story by Ralph Ellison that is making the things able to see with a variety of lenses.

#### **Research Methodology and Question:**

For the research, the data is collected with the help of databases and articles have been selected. For the sake of the above research, an idea originated that is leading to the decision of the research question:

- How much significance does the narration by Ralph Ellison hold in the current situation?
- Facts that are showing that the white and blacks terms still exist in society?
- What are the consequence and impact seen in the community that is happening due to the whites and blacks? For instance, discrimination and lower employment rates

#### **Ideology gained with the literature and narration by Ralph Ellison**

The portrayal that is presented in the literature is a simple character but having a complex character that seems to be affected by their life experiences. The experience that happened in the black and white community will lead to the discovery of the identity. The narrator explains how their psychological growth is impacted due to the social roles that are making him hinder to identifying his self-identity (Brahimi, Khaoula). Identifying self is one of the important things present for any individual that is leading to the motive to live the life with dignity and peace. But the way society is behaving is very irresponsible which is making the hindrance to happen in the evaluation of the self-identity (Toker,23). To better deliver the context and make an outstanding understanding about how society is going to present their view about blacks is explained with the help of the incident that is happening in the college days. He explained that they are forced to participate and fight in the royal battle in which they are against the black men to obtain the scholarships (Kormilitsyna, 2). The narrator is punished by the college president in which the president wrote the letter in regards to

not give any job (Reader Xavier G). Racial mindset, one incident that is happened with the narrator in the hospital depicts the racial mindset of whites that are showing that whites are the cruel one who does not have any sort of sympathy and empathy( Mocombe,83). One incident that explains the stereotypical mindset of white is that I was sitting in the cold white rejected chair and one person is seeing with the third eye that is referring that how cruel they was in terms of an injured person. the doctor who is there to attend to him gives an electric shock and enjoyed it and said that seeing that blacks had a dancing rhythm that is a very devastating feeling for me that how someone reacts in this manner (Filardo, 33). All these happening are showing the major incidence of raciest that is faced by the narrator that is showing the mindset of the people living around. With the incident, one very clear thing is that no one is going to look for the inner beauty of an individual it is the physical beauty that is leading to the separation from the society (Güven, 1). Critical race theory is the reformation that has taken place in the united states of the critical legal system. Critical race theory is there to find the fault in the dominant discourse of the race and racism that is shown in the relation to the law (Coleman). Critical race theory claims that law is not neutral and does not make the accomplishment to the main objective that is the resolving disputes. CRT scholars will show the need and how important the things are that indicate the need to make a revisit the law (Tiwari, 203). It will raise the very important question that the law is differently experienced by the minor in comparison to the privileged community that is getting benefits from the law (Espitia, 135). The race critique that is there in the formation of the law is demanding the justice that is making the equality to get rooted in the society (Ellison, 144).

#### **Conclusion**

*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison speaks out for all people and against all those who were trying to place their ideologies and identities over others. It is the effort to make the invisible man appreciable and his book is acting like a reference that is showing what sort of racism is rooted in the American society in the old days that is acting as the loss of identity for

one. *Invisible Man* tries to draw the conclusion how the universal human has been struggling since the last time that is making a significant impact on the lives of the individual. Along with these, it also makes them focus on the very important point which is the critical race theory that is there to make the reflection on the approaches that are there in the society. The work provides an exploration of the perspective of society and its views.

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