

Impact of Racism in Ralph Waldo Ellison's novel Invisible Man

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Abstract

Invisible Man is a novel by Ralph Ellison published by Random House in 1952. Ellison was an American writer best known for his novel Invisible man which won the 'National Book Award' in 1953. This novel is a milestone in American literature which deeply discusses the social problem of racism in America. This novel is a Bildungsroman novel where the narrator (main character) begins as a bright high school student, is intelligent, and matures into a man who understands the nature of the world in the later part of his life. It is also considered to be a Universal novel as it is based on a quest to know oneself. This paper focuses on how racism impacts the narrator's identity and his struggle to find himself in society among whites. Racism does not affect the narrator in particular but also the whole society in general at both physical and psychological levels. Existentialism is also implied in this novel as the narrator struggles to find his identity. Racism evolved in America not only after the immigration of Blacks but also after the slave era and colonial era. Black people were brought to the USA for slavery. Slave trade had happened and they suffered a lot from hunger, disease, etc. In 1865, after the civil war, Black slavery was abolished in the USA, but its legacy is going on still.

Keywords: Racism, Power, Invisibility, Identity Crisis, Racial Discrimination.

Zena Kamal Ibrahim's article 'Blindness and Sight in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man' analyses the novel Invisible Man, through the blindness and sight of the characters. Natalja Chestopalova's paper 'Fantasizing Agency and Otherness through Voice and Voicelessness in Ellison's Invisible Man' focuses on voice, voicelessness, and silence as structuring components in the formation of subjectivity. Komal Yadav's paper 'Representation of Race and History in Invisible Man' attempts to delineate the politics of representation of history and race in the novel. Bruna de Juana Ferre's paper 'Female characters in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: Role and Purpose' examine the role and purpose of female characters. Dr. Usha V. Kaushik's paper 'Impact of Racism on Identity in Ralph Waldo Ellison's Novel Invisible Man' also aims to examine the social phenomenon of racism, its characterization, and its aspects in American society.

Black people cannot find their true identity in America due to segregation by white people based on racism. This novel contributes to American literature by ensuring the American culture and its history. So, it became famous right after its first publication.

The title of the novel is confused with H.G. Well's novel *The Invisible Man*. Ellison doesn't mention the article 'The' in front of the novel's title because the phrase 'Invisible Man' doesn't represent one man, in particular, it represents the whole black community who was oppressed by the native Americans in the USA. It gives voice to the whole black community who were immigrants to the U.S.

The narrator was the protagonist of the novel. He was unnamed and it reveals his loss of identity. Though the narrator was intelligent and highly gifted with language, he was humiliated by whites and remained unnoticed. This novel speaks about the struggle of an individual in search of his identity during the late 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s.

The narrator is a young Negro whose experiences in life show the racial discrimination in America and was not accepted by society and so he was affected both physically and mentally. His life experiences represent the sufferings of the whole black community. As a human being, he must have been given equal rights and freedom but he was denied his rights among white. He wishes to be a visible man, but American society neglects him for his race and so he became invisible. He says, "Still I was more afraid to act any other way because they didn't like that at all". (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 18)

The narrator was a black nameless young man living in South America. When he was going to give his graduation speech in front of prominent white people, he was shocked to know that he has to fight with a group of young black men just to amuse white men. After the Battle Royal was over, he realized his true identity and delivered his speech swallowing blood. He was expelled from the college and eventually he was moving to New York City. While on the bus, he was humiliated as he had to sit at the end of the row. To achieve his dream, he went to the North but there also he experienced the same inequality. He got a job in a paint factory with the help of Emerson, the son of a trustee. He read a sign saying, "Keep America Pure with Liberty Paint". (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 160) Liberty was the name of the factory. He worked hard in that factory to achieve his dream. There he made a mistake and was sent to the basement as a worker. Misunderstanding existed between him and his master who was an old black man and he conflicted with the labor union.

He says that "Everybody wanted to use you for some purposes". (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 294) 'Optic White' was the trademark of the Liberty paint. To make the paint pure white, a few drops of black chemicals are mixed into it. Here pure white represents the white people and that dark drops represent the image of black people. When the dark drops are mixed with the white paint, they become pure white and the stain has vanished. Likewise, black people's efforts to rise the nation will not be remembered by anyone and their hard work was hidden under white people who were referred to as the optic white paint. The slogan of the factory was "If It's Optic White, It's the Right White". (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 177)

The narrator was taken to the hospital when he met with a boiled explosion accident. In the hospital, white doctors gave an electric shock to him so that he cannot run away from the hospital. They made him an object for their experiment. Due to severe electric shock, he forgot his name. After he became all right, he doesn't get any job in the American industrial society as he was an injured black man.

For the narrator's inspiring speech, he was rewarded with a briefcase. Throughout his journey, he carried the briefcase with him which consisted of his high school diploma certificate, and Clifton's Sambo doll. When he tried to escape from white men, he fell into a manhole. The narrator was sealed underground by the white men. He was forced to come out of his past dark life. At last, the narrator feels ready to end up his hibernation and come out of his invisibility.

Conclusion

One should emerge out of his invisibility and rise to attain his/her rights and freedom wherever they go. Racism should not act as a barrier to human unity among people from different places.

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