

Racism and Exploitation in the Novel of Ralph Ellison' Invisible Man

¹M. Vishnu Priya, ²P.Prabhakaran

¹M.Phil Research Scholar, ² Asst.Professor in English
Department of English, Prist University, Thanjavur, India

Abstract:

Nearly a half-century has passed since the emergence in the 1960s of what we now know as African-American studies, at a time and in an academic context when social and material critical concerns began to focus intently upon issues of identity, social practice, and other wrongly neglected aspects of marginalized cultures and categories. In the summer of 1945, just after World War I ended, Ralph Ellison began writing *Invisible Man*. From this fact alone, unmodified by knowledge of Ellison's previous experience, might be drawn the conclusion that the war which produced Sartre and *No Exit* also produced Ellison and *Invisible Man*, another affirmation of the necessity for self-definition in an absurd world. Although the war probably helped bring Ellison to the point of maturity at which he wrote his first and so far only novel, *Invisible Man* was the product of neither a sudden discovery of talent nor a sudden shock of recognition.

Introduction:

The exploitation of blacks is a long-heralded historical occurrence highlighted in the *Invisible Man*, which clearly reveals this type of manipulative deception. Perhaps *Invisible Man* coins the deception perfectly when he states, "Everybody wanted to use you for some purpose". Casually stated, *Invisible Man* does not know the clairvoyance of his remark. In actuality, his statement alludes to the fact that others use *Invisible Man* throughout the novel only for their sole benefit and never his own. The protagonist references his invisibility by stating, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me". This quotation speaks to the heart of his invisibility since the refusal stems from people only seeing what *they* want to see. These blinders allow them to see only that which can benefit them.

Critic James B Lane examines the subject of black exploitation by stating, "Wherever, he went, the invisible man was emasculated and left rootless by

people who either paid no attention to his inner existence or visualized him only as a symbol". Lane justifies this claim by saying, "Ellison's fundamental assumption in *Invisible Man* was that black people became recognizable only when they suppressed their real self and conformed to emasculating parodies of the white man's self-contradictory image of them". The protagonist experiences this type of conformity repeatedly throughout the novel. In essence, *Invisible Man* is rarely treated like a person, but rather treated as an opportunistic object for the sole benefit of others.

Several incidents in the novel thoroughly depict this type of racist exploitation *Invisible Man* being the object of ridicule in the Battle Royal scene, *Invisible Man* becoming the 'primitive' object for the lobotomy experiment at the hospital, the relationship the police have with the black community, *Invisible Man* receiving no respect at his job with Liberty Paints, and *Invisible Man*'s experiences with Jack and the Brotherhood *Invisible*

Man's conversations further highlight the racial divide in society including the 'destiny' conversation with Mr Norton and the encounter with Norton at the end of the novel and his interactions with his landlord, Mary Rambo. Through these experiences, Invisible Man slowly learns to speak out against this type of exploitive oppression, which ventures him further in his quest for equality and helps him become a stronger and mature member of society. Historically, many forces customs, invested interests, geographical location, education work to promote and ensure segregation. Traditional society employs two primary weapons racism and exploitation in their arsenal of suppression to hold black society at bay and prevent progression and advancement. Ellison highlights this strategy of racism and exploitation in his description of busing

[Blacks] were sent forth with straight to the rear, or horizontal zed bottom. Along the way almost anything could happen, from push to shove, assaults on hats, heads or aching corns to unprovoked tongue lashings from the driver or from any white passenger who took exception to their looks, attitude or mere existence. Nor did the penis end at the back of the bus. Often it was so crowded that there was little breathing space.

Ellison's description of bussing depicts the racism whites have towards blacks while exploiting them with 'assaults' and 'tongue lashings' akin to the larger goal of keeping blacks at the bottom of society. Invisible Man's continued march down the path of self progression occurs through his experiences with blatant white on black racism as whites exploit blacks for their own benefit. Through these experiences of racism and exploitation, Invisible Man (unknowingly at first) ventures on a crusade for equality that helps open his eyes to his race's situation in society. This voyage marks a pivotal point in Invisible Man's development as it carries

him on a course to identifying these hindering tactics and allows him to further mold his views on black advancement and recognition that, in turn, help establish his true identity.

CONCLUSION:

Ralph Ellison's epic novel *Invisible Man*, published by Random House in 1952, is the tale of a black youth's search for identity. More than that, *Invisible Man* is an urban novel which traced the passage of its hero from rural innocence and self-deception to cosmopolitan maturity and disillusionment and possible redemption. First as a self-effacing student at a Southern Negro College, next as a naive laborer in a Northern paint factory, then as a radical agitator on the streets of Harlem, finally as a man forced to flee the insane nether world of the ghetto in the midst of a race riot by literally going into the bowels of the city, the protagonist of *Invisible Man* was frustrated on his existential voyage by the absurdities of racism, hypocrisy, and physical and spiritual poverty. Author Ihab Hassan concluded that in Ellison's *Invisible Man* the Negro as victim, rebel, outsider, scapegoat and trickster. *Invisible Man* brought the urban black man into American fiction for the first time as a complex, three dimensional, flesh-and-blood person, full of humor and rage, confusion and nuance, passion and mother-wit, naivety and common sense. There had been silly black characters who danced to the white man's tune and archetypal victims of or rebels against the racist system of colonialism. Perhaps the most powerful forerunner of the invisible man was Richard Wright's *Bigger Thomas*, but the taciturn protagonist of *Native Son* was purposely portrayed more as an inevitable product of an unjust naturalistic world than as an active agent in control of his own destiny. In Wright's social protest novel, the actions of *Bigger Thomas* were in reality reactions, and *Bigger* triumphed over oppression only by a ritualistic act of self-destruction. Ellison, who knew Wright well and read his friend's chapter drafts right after they were laboriously produced, wondered why the urbane author made his hero so simplistic. Wright had his ideological reasons; but, as Ellison perceived, they detracted aesthetically

from his craft. Like Richard Wright, Ellison concerned himself with the problem of black isolation; but unlike his colleague, he believed that ideology hindered self-discovery and distorted inner vision. Born in the frontier town of Oklahoma City in 1914, Ellison was reared in a social environment that was more fluid and individualistic than either the bittersweet climate of the Old South or the injurious poverty of the urban slum. Nevertheless, his personal experiences closely mirrored the struggles of the invisible man. A precocious and talented youth, he studied music and for this purpose attended Booker T. Washington's Alabama show place, Tuskegee Institute, from 1933 to 1936. In the midst of the depression he journeyed to New York City and fell in with a dazzling coterie of black intellectuals, giants of the Harlem literary Renaissance who in some cases were connected with the Communist Party, and in other cases were mavericks unidentified with any political group. Independent and romantic, he had eclectic literary tastes. He savored the writings of Dostoevski and Cervantes, of T. S. Eliot and the existentialists. Also he admired the nineteenth-century transcendentalists, especially Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson (after whom he was named), for their celebration of democracy and personal freedom. For the same reason he rejected the naturalist credo that people were merely pawns caught in a deterministic universe. Rather he believed that man was capable of creating his own reality. The form of Invisible Man resembled the picaresque genre of Cervantes's Don Quixote and Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. Moving in a helter-skelter world, Ellison's hero lived by guile and guise, confronting ever-expanding horizons of experience without adequate armor and with imperfect vision.

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