



The Visibility of Racism: A Critical Exploration of Marginalization and Identity in Ralph Ellison's 'Invisible Man'

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Abstract— *Ralph Ellison's highly acclaimed novel, 'Invisible Man', is a compelling narrative that explores the themes of identity and marginalisation within a deeply polarised society. This literary research paper delves into the intricacies of identity development using postcolonial theory and examines the socio-political consequences of invisibility by conducting a thorough analysis of the protagonist's journey. Through an analysis of the novel's socio-cultural perspectives, I explore the process of identity formation as the protagonist, known as the 'Invisible Man,' navigates a society that is divided along racial and political lines. The Protagonist's encounters with deceitful figures of authority, along with his disillusionment within the Brotherhood, expose the manipulation and exploitation that marginalised individuals endure in power structures. This study investigates the mechanisms through which African-Americans experience the dehumanisation of Negroes, which is perpetuated by stereotypes, structural racism, and segregation. Ultimately, this study affirms the significance of 'Invisible Man' in ongoing conversations regarding race, identity, and marginalisation.*



Keywords— *Invisible Man, Race, Identity, Marginalization, power dynamics.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, which was published in 1952, is widely considered to be an important contribution to the literary canon of the United States. It investigates the complex nuances of identity as well as the experiences of marginalisation that the African American protagonist faced throughout the course of the story. The work focuses primarily on the experiences of African Americans living in the United States; however, it is essential to also take into consideration the wider implications of these issues by employing the perspective of postcolonial theory while doing so. When viewed through the prism of postcolonial theory, the primary purpose of this academic research article is to conduct a critical analysis of the novel "Invisible Man" written by Ralph Ellison. This is done with the intention of demonstrating how the experiences of the protagonist can be interpreted as being

representative of the difficulties that people from colonised regions face in a variety of different global contexts.

It is possible to attribute the emergence of postcolonial theory to the fact that it is an interdisciplinary perspective. This is because the theory seeks to conduct an all-encompassing analysis and evaluation of the power dynamics, oppressive systems, and identity formation that occur within nations that have been influenced by colonialism. The colonised are shown to be subordinate and marginalised as a result of this phenomenon, which highlights the mechanisms through which colonisers exercise dominance over the colonised. This results in a process known as "othering." In addition, the theory sheds light on the complex process of negotiating one's identity as well as the various methods of resistance that were employed by the colonial population in order to challenge their subordination. The 'Invisible Man' novel depicts the

protagonist's progression from a state of invisibility to one of self-awareness and resistance. This progression is a parallel to the challenges that colonised individuals face when they are attempting to resist oppressive colonial powers. Through the application of postcolonial theory, the purpose of this study is to investigate the novel's potential to function as a significant critique. This critique will not only cover the issue of racial oppression in the United States, but will also cover broader topics. These topics include colonisation, identity, and resistance.

Within the context of a society that is segregated along racial lines and fails to recognise his humanity, this novel depicts the narrative of a young African American male who has received academic training and is struggling with the challenges of surviving and achieving success. The journey that the protagonist takes in the book "Invisible Man" is told from the first-person perspective within the narrative. The unnamed narrator is the protagonist of this story, which follows him as he goes through a transformational process, both physically and psychologically, moving from a state of profound ignorance to one of enlightened awareness. According to the author, this progression can be described as a movement that goes "from Purpose to Passion to Perception." This development is communicated through a series of flashbacks that are presented in the form of dreams and memories simultaneously. A time period that was characterised by the implementation of segregation laws that denied black Americans the equal enjoyment of fundamental human rights in comparison to their white counterparts is depicted in the novel, which takes place in the United States during the pre-Civil Rights era. However, the majority of the action takes place in the northern region of Harlem, New York, despite the fact that the story begins in the southern region of Greenwood, South Carolina.

II. OTHERING AND INVISIBILITY

The idea of "othering" is a fundamental component of postcolonial theory, which is centred on the investigation of the manner in which dominant groups construct and define the colonised as being fundamentally distinct, inferior, and frequently dehumanised. The aforementioned phenomenon is a strategy that is utilised by individuals who are in positions of authority in order to establish and strengthen their dominance, while simultaneously marginalising and subjugating others who are perceived to be different or outside the norm. The impact of this particular practice extends beyond the scope of this particular historical phenomenon, influencing a variety of manifestations of discrimination and prejudice based on identity. This particular practice plays a significant role within the context of colonialism.

In the novel, the narrative commences with the recollection of the protagonist's high school commencement address, which garnered the interest of the Caucasian school administrator, afterwards extending an invitation for the orator to deliver the same speech at a prominent local hotel, before an audience including the town's prominent white populace. In the event that the narrator arrives at the hotel, he is compelled to take part in a vicious blindfolded boxing match, which is commonly known as the "battle royal," along with nine of his fellow classmates. He eventually comes to the realisation that this event is an essential component of the evening's entertainment during the "smoker," which is a social gathering that is comparable to a stag party. The entertainment programme also includes a performance of a provocative dance by a woman who is not wearing any clothes and has fair hair. The male individuals are compelled to watch the dance. Following the boxing match, a degrading incident takes place when the young people are compelled to hastily gather what at first appears to be valuable gold coins scattered around an electrified carpet. However, they eventually come to realise that these objects are ultimately devoid of any substantial worth and are instead nothing more than brass tokens. After that, the narrator, who is currently suffering from bruises and bleeding, is eventually given the opportunity to deliver his oration in front of an audience that is primarily comprised of individuals of Caucasian descent who are under the influence of alcohol. Regrettably, his discourse fails to capture the attention of the listeners until he inadvertently substitutes the term "social equality" for "social responsibility" when characterising the position of African Americans inside the United States. After enduring a terrible and humiliating experience, the narrator confidently accepts the reward that was bestowed upon him at the conclusion of his discourse. The reward is a calfskin briefcase that contains a scholarship to attend the state college that is designated for those of African descent.

III. DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND IDENTITY

In the seminal work of Ralph Ellison, "Invisible Man," the concept of "double consciousness," as defined by W.E.B. Du Bois, plays a significant role in gaining an understanding of the protagonist's arduous journey of self-identification. The idea, which was initially presented by Du Bois in his seminal publication titled "The Souls of Black Folk" (1903), refers to the psychological strain that people of African descent experience when living in a society that is characterised by racial hierarchy. In his novel "Invisible Man," Ellison investigates the aforementioned idea by depicting the main character's complex and frequently

contradictory self-awareness. This is done through the eyes of the main character. The concept of double consciousness refers to the simultaneous recognition of two identities that are in direct opposition to one another within a single person. As a result of their simultaneous participation in African American society and their exposure to the perceptions and evaluations of the white, dominant culture, African Americans are subjected to a duality that they experience. When individuals maintain a constant awareness of how they are perceived by others, particularly by the dominant racial group, the concept sheds light on the internal discord that results from this awareness.

“Invisible Man,” a novel written by Ralph Ellison, features a protagonist who, throughout the course of the story, grapples with the idea of having a dual consciousness. The individual possesses an awareness of their self-conception, acknowledging their distinct experiences, desires, and objectives. He does, however, have a heightened awareness of the way in which he is perceived within the culture of white people that surrounds him. In the process of attempting to bring together two identities that are very different from one another, the presence of this dual awareness creates a state of tension in the individual. The narrator’s grandfather, who had been a slave during his lifetime, appears to him in a dream one day and gives him instructions to open the bag and look inside it. The narrator’s grandfather had been a slave during his lifetime. It is not the scholarship that is contained within the briefcase; rather, it is a message that reads “Keep This Nigger Boy Running.” The dream provides the context for the situation. The narrator spends the next twenty years of his life bumbling through life, never pausing to wonder why he is always kept running by individuals — both black and white — who claim to guide and direct him, but who eventually exploit him and violate his trust. This happens throughout the entirety of his life. The narrator will continue to experience this throughout the rest of his life.

The fact that he, depending on the circumstances, takes on a different persona is another factor that contributes to the confusion surrounding his dual identity. In order to satisfy the expectations that are placed upon him by the people in his environment, he adopts a variety of personas. For example, he may assume the persona of the submissive and docile “Sambo” or the persona of the charismatic and articulate speaker. A person who lives in a world that does not accept them for who they truly are can use these masks as a means of survival in order to survive. As a result of the friction that exists between how he sees himself and how others see him, there are times when he experiences internal turmoil and self-doubt. This is because of the fact that he differs from how others see him. He is unsure as to whether the prejudices that have been implanted upon him or his

own personal goals are more responsible for defining who he is at his core. This internal conflict is illustrative of the larger African American experience, in which individuals are required to permanently manage a complicated interplay between their own self-identity and the demands of society. This conflict is a representation of the larger African American experience.

IV. RESISTANCE AND REBELLION

The journey of the protagonist begins in a historically black college, where he enrolls in classes with the goal of advancing his social standing through the pursuit of education. His early act of defiance against the limited opportunities that were available to African Americans was his desire to increase the breadth and depth of his knowledge-based experiences. The statements that he makes are as follows: “I desired the liberty to cultivate my capabilities, to acquire knowledge, and to comprehend” (Ellison). Before turning his attention to the events that transpired on a day that would forever change his life, the narrator engages in some introspection regarding his time spent in college. The task of providing transportation for a prominent white visiting trustee named Mr. Norton around the campus was assigned to the narrator after he was given the responsibility. In accordance with Mr. Norton’s instructions, the narrator took Mr. Norton to two locations in a nearby black neighbourhood. The first location was the cabin of Jim Trueblood, a local sharecropper. The second location was the Golden Day, a disreputable pub that served as a halfway house for shell-shocked World War I veterans. On the other hand, Mr. Norton was expelled from his cherished college and sent to New York with seven letters from his dean, Dr. Bledsoe, because the narrator gave him permission to visit these places. He was under the impression that the letters were letters of recommendation; however, contrary to his expectations, they are letters confirming that he will be expelled from the school.

As soon as he arrived in New York, he became a member of Brotherhood, a political organisation that declares its dedication to working towards the objective of achieving equality for all individuals. With the assistance of the Brotherhood and Brother Jack, who is the leader of the Brotherhood, the narrator develops into an exceptional public speaker and a leader of the Harlem District. Brother Jack also serves as the leader of the Brotherhood. However, after the tragic death of his companion Tod Clifton, a charismatic young black “Brother” who was shot by a white police officer, the narrator becomes disillusioned with the disparity between what the organisation preaches and what its leaders actually do at the organisation. When Tod Clifton, the friend of the narrator, is accidentally shot by the

white police officer, this takes place. As a result of this, he comes to the conclusion that he should leave the Brotherhood, which is headquartered in a wealthy neighbourhood of Manhattan. He then goes back to Harlem, where he is greeted by Ras the Exhorter, who is now known as Ras the Destroyer. An accusation of betrayal against the black community is made by Ras.

The protagonist, who goes from being invisible to asserting themselves, is a representation of a fundamental type of resistance against the dehumanising effects of racism. This resistance is represented by the path that the protagonist takes. In the beginning, he employs his invisibility as a means of survival, fooling himself into thinking that it enables him to move through a perilous world without being noticed by anyone. On the other hand, as he grows in self-awareness, he comes to the realisation that the only way to truly resist is to establish his individuality and voice. This is the only way he can truly resist. The moment that he makes the proclamation that will live long in the memory is when he says, "I'm not ashamed of being invisible... What I can't stand is being seen" (Ellison). His comprehension of the idea of resistance undergoes a change as a result of this declaration. His choice is to define himself according to his own standards and to reject the roles that are expected of him by society. He makes the conscious decision not to run away from the outside world but rather to define himself according to his own standards.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has conducted an in-depth analysis of Ralph Ellison's novel "Invisible Man" by employing the framework of postcolonial theory. The results of this analysis have revealed significant revelations regarding the protagonist's experiences with marginalisation and the formation of his identity. The analysis of the concept of 'othering' and the theme of invisibility demonstrated the protagonist's attempt to achieve visibility, which can be understood as being comparable to the dehumanisation that individuals who were living under colonial authorities went through. The examination of double consciousness brought to light the internal conflict that exists between an individual's personal identity and the way in which society perceives them within themselves.

Furthermore, the discourse on resistance illustrated the progression of the protagonist from being invisible to actively asserting themselves, which would serve as an effective mode of resistance. Through an analysis of the novel's thematic connections to historical postcolonial contexts, this research sheds light on the novel's continuing significance. In this study, the author draws parallels

between the themes of the novel and these contexts in order to highlight the novel's continued relevance in broader conversations concerning power dynamics and identity conflicts. The reaffirmation of the value of employing postcolonial theory as an analytical framework for the examination of Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" highlights the ability of this theory to provide a more profound understanding of the realities that are experienced by individuals who are disadvantaged. Through highlighting the pervasive presence of themes pertaining to the marginalisation of others, the construction of identity, and acts of defiance, this study makes a significant contribution to the larger academic conversation that is taking place around postcolonial literature.

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