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IMPACT AND RELEVANCE OF ETHNICITY IN RALPH ELLISON'S 'INVISIBLE MAN'

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ABSTRACT

'Ethnicity' commonly refers to the physical, social, or cultural distinctions a group of people share because of their ancestry and place of birth. Ethnic qualities include physical appearance, language, religious beliefs, or social customs in any combination. After the World War II, the prominent American black writers like Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alex Haley, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen Claude McKay, Paule Marshal and James Baldwin came to be ranked among the top writers in the United States. The concerns and issues in their writing such as the role of African – Americans in the larger American society, their culture, racism, slavery, ethnicity, freedom, equality and sense of home and more find prominent place. Ralph Ellison along with other black writers has achieved international fame and recognition for highlighting the relevance of ethnic factor in global literature and more precisely for enriching American literature. He has succeeded in presenting the ethnic perspective without any bias or prejudice against any race, religion or nation.

This research article aims to show the impact and relevance of ethnicity in American Literature especially to bring out its far reaching impact on American novel writing and to show how ethnic concerns have introduced an element of psychological realism in American fiction. Ellison reveals the complexes, fears and hopes of the blacks living in America.

Key words: Ethnicity, racism, slavery, exploitation and identity crisis.

Introduction

Invisible Man is identified as the most important novel published in the United States since World War II. Although the novel is chiefly about the blacks in America and their troubled relationship with the whites in that country, yet it has wider implications too. The protagonist in this novel may be regarded as representing the sense of alienation and of loneliness of the modern man in general; and he may also be regarded as representing a common man's desperate yearning to establish his own individuality and his identity as a human being. But the novel deals primarily with the black man's problems in America and is particularly based on Ellison's own experiences as a citizen of that country. The *Invisible Man* is a powerful novel which depicts the plight and condition of a common American negro struggling to achieve a respectable social status and economic stability with a reasonable degree of self-respect in an overwhelming white population which looks down upon the blacks as an inferior racial stock. The title of the novel is highly

symbolic and suggestive. Ironically the name of the protagonist is never mentioned and very often in the novel he is sneeringly referred to as the 'nigger boy' showing that he is a non-entity or 'nobody'. The story of the novel centres around a young and a promising negro student who wants to rise in estimation in the eyes of his black teachers as well as the white benefactors hoping that someday he shall be able to walk in the streets of America with his head high in dignity and self-esteem. But what he experiences, opens his eyes to the sordid reality of life and his black identity strikes him with full force and his disillusionment and euphoria is shattered once for all.

Discussion

In fact through the consciousness of a young and enterprising negro the problem faced by the blacks such as racial segregation, alienation, identity crisis, loss of culture and language, psychological oppression and ethnicity come to surface showing that they have not gained total acceptance in the American society. By internalizing the white society's definition of black behaviour, the protagonist tries to conform to one role after the other but each successive social role or persona furthers his alienation and loss of freedom. The novel is written in a retrospective first person narrative like *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby*. The prologue and epilogue are central to understanding the structure and meaning of the *Invisible Man*. In the prologue, the protagonist, presently living in a well-lighted but hidden basement, establishes that all he is about to relate has already happened and exists now in his consciousness. The novel recounts the happenings from the time of narrator's graduation from high school to the point at which he began to live underground. The invisibility of the unnamed protagonist is because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of others. He states: "they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed everything and anything except me" (p. 3).

By glorifying and accepting the white man's concept of a 'good nigger' who remained a non-entity and never asserted his identity as a man, the grandfather of the young fellow had ensured his survival. Unconsciously possessed by his curse, the protagonist tries to conform to various images which the white society has of black behaviour. Consequently he tries to adopt the 'persona' as approved by the dominant culture of the white people and even plays the social roles of a student, a worker, a speaker, a fornicator and even a tricker in search of a stable identity. It only results in creating a series of sub-personalities that are shattered one by one till all his illusions come to an end and he discovers his true self.

The members of the Brotherhood are pseudo-leaders or false prophets who only seek to mislead and deceive him and keep him in a state of deluded enchantment. The young woman who seduces him and the white woman who entices him are the temptresses or the negative anima that tries to cloud his judgment. Ras the Exhorter symbolizes dangers of the turbulent physical energy that seek to destroy the higher self. He symbolizes the danger which becomes inevitable when physical energy is misdirected, just as the Brotherhood stands for misdirected intellectual power. Finally the manhole where he hibernates and gets an insight, symbolizes a cave or 'temenos' where the 'self' encounters the truth. As a high-school graduate he is invited to deliver his valedictorian address on 'humility' as being the "very essence of progress" to a gathering of the leading white citizens of the town. But before he is allowed to do this, he along with other negro boys, have to observe the dance of a nude blonde whose face is set in a plastic smile and "fixed smiling lips." Then he is blindfolded along with the other boys and are told to fight one another. During the fight one of the white spectators calls the black boys as black sons of bitches who should be thrashed soundly by one another. Another man shouts that a particular black boy should be torn from limb to limb. Metaphorically speaking, this scene poignantly enacts the racial exploitation by the white masters and psychological oppression of the negroes as they blindly hit their own 'selves' to entertain the whites. Ironically, this is followed by the protagonist's speech expressing the value of humility. The protagonist reminds the audience of the inspiring words of a great leader and educator who preached friendship and mutual understanding between the blacks and whites in the southern states of America. He speaks about social responsibility of all the people and especially that of the blacks in the country. The speech actually glorifies internalized oppression by prescribing, in a manner reminiscent of Booker T. Washington, black accommodation to white supremacy. The subversive shadow personality causes a slip of the tongue when the protagonist mentions "social equality"

instead of “social responsibility.” This causes an explosive reaction from the irate white audience forcing him to recant immediately. Satisfied with his surrender, the school superintendent presents him with a leather briefcase containing a scholarship to the State College of Negroes.

However the unconscious continues its own subversive discourse as the following night he dreams of his grandfather who is in a morose mood. On his grandfather’s direction he opens his briefcase to find a series of official envelopes within envelopes. His grandfather tells him that they signify time, “them’s years,” one of them contains a document engraved with gold letters reading, “Keep this nigger-boy running.” In Analytical Psychology such a dream is called a prospective dream as it foreshadows the events to come. Thus the message contained in the unconscious is that there is no escape from the historic facticity of racial identity. The protagonist thinks that education will free him from the shackles of white oppression and help him realize his cherished goal of individual identity in a democratic society which echoes Ellison’s eventual concern. The second major incident concerns the protagonist’s expulsion from college. In the pastoral paradise of the college, he aspires to pursue his ego-ideal of being an educator and he experiences a projected identification with the college President Bledsoe who is a collective father surrogate for the ‘good niggers’ – “a coal-black daddy.” One day the protagonist inadvertently drives a white trustee Mr. Norton to old slave quarters where he curiously inspects the log cabins of the black people and is outwardly shocked with the narration of Trueblood but inwardly is pleased. He asks again and again about the incestuous act of Trueblood with his daughter and gives him money out of sympathy. Hearing his account, paralleling his own repressed fantasies, Mr. Norton feels faint and requests some alcohol. This incident shows how evil has its own attraction. Men are allured by the pleasures that can accrue from acts which are forbidden by society and decent culture.

Dr. Bledsoe is greatly infuriated when he learns that the boy also showed the notorious den to Mr. Norton: “You’re black and living in the South. Did you forget how to lie? . . . the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie. What kind of education are you getting round here?” (p. 139) Dr. Bledsoe also calls the boy a “nigger.” This retort of Bledsoe shows his racial subjugation, who himself is a negro but hates his own community. The journey motif is very important in the hero’s quest for self-realization, maturity and growth. The narrator like Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* learns from his experience, especially from his mistakes which enable him to have a glimpse of reality when the people around him are exposed and reveal their true character. Whereas Stephen learns about his psychological self, the young negro learns that most influential people, whether black or white tend to be selfish and exploitative. When the narrator goes to meet Mr. Emerson with Bledsoe’s letter of recommendation, the son of Mr. Emerson shows him the contents of letter which echoes the letter his grandfather had shown him in his dream –“keep this nigger boy running.”

Psychologically speaking, the journey motif is exceedingly important for the maturity and development of a hero who wants to move from ignorance to knowledge, from weakness to strength and from dependence to self-reliance. The protagonist is not an archetypal quest hero like Somerset Maugham’s Larry of *The Razor’s Edge* or Herman Hesse’s Sidhartha of *Sidhartha* but a quest hero looking for better prospects for himself in a comparatively more liberal New York and gives expression to his views and feelings and thereby earn respect and recognition not only for himself but for all young negroes like himself having the same quest or yearning. He becomes aware of the powerful coalition of Bledsoe and Norton and understands that his struggle from now onwards is both with black and white. In fact Bledsoe’s letter to Emerson serves as an eye-opener to the protagonist. While working with the other black men in the Liberty Paints factory, he is considered as educated and thus is a threat to the survival of the workers because he does not know his place and may offend the white masters. At factories like Liberty Paints, hierarchies are created to place the negro ideologically. The very name of the company suggests that the American freedom means one thing to the whites and another to the blacks.

In the hospital the specific humanitarian dimensions of the white doctors toward him is seen when he is discharged after treatment and the narrator’s black identity is subdued and a white mask is imposed on him. However, he discovers that the question of the historicity of his identity is tied with his quest for freedom and there is no way he can run from his past: “I could no more escape than I could think of my identity.... . the two things are involved with each other.... when I discover who I am, I’ll be free” (p. 198). He moves to a boarding

house run by Mary Rambo and withdraws from society into the elementary feminine realm of the motherly Mary and introspects on the nature of his dilemma and discovers, "I had accepted the accepted attitudes and it had made life simple" (p. 267). Inspired by Mary's warm memories of her native southern town, he steps out of Prufrocian self-doubts and asserts his racial identity in the simple but metaphorically seminal, gesture of eating a yam, a food associated with country negroes. Ellison here seems to highlight the hopeless condition of an average American black negro who seeks to rise in life by hard work and education. The unjust and forced eviction of an old negro couple by the callous white men moves the young boy very deeply and he addresses the people that they are law-abiding and peace-loving people but must get united against such injustices and cruelty of the white men. Brother Jack, the leader of the white-controlled Marxist Brotherhood, makes a recruitment offer to the narrator which he accepts by joining the brotherhood. Ironically, his entry into history is at the cost of denying his own past as he is given a new set of clothes, a new family and even re-christened. He is lodged in a different locality and thus acquires a new identity which is a pseudo-identity imposed on him from outside.

The first speech of the young protagonist as the Harlem 'spokesman' of the Brotherhood is devoted to the theme of injustice, racial subjugation, ill-treatment, dispossession and eviction of the black people by the white men. After his training, the narrator is sent to Harlem district as chief spokesman of the Brotherhood. Tod Clifton, another black youth leader of the organization functions in Harlem district and he is bitterly opposed to Ras the Exhorter who stands as a champion of the black people and supports violence to fight against the injustices of the white masters. When the narrator declares that the Brotherhood stands for the welfare of all the people including the blacks, Ras the Exhorter opposes it tooth and nail. The narrator receives an anonymous letter urging him to go slow with his work of upliftment of the negroes. Brother Tarp narrates to the young fellow a moving story of his life and how he was imprisoned for nineteen years because he refused to part with a piece of land in the south. He wore chains and fetters in the prison, suffered physical torture and mental agony and is still embittered by his experience.

The racial segregation of the blacks can also be seen in the ideology of the whites in sexual politics especially of white women like Mrs. Sybil who seduces the protagonist and entices him to indulge in sexual pleasure when she was impressed by his speech. She casts the black protagonist in the stereotypical role of a rapist and condenses him to the icon of a powerful black phallus. The psychological patterns of the black and the white sexuality can be analyzed from the Freudian viewpoint showing how the raw savage sexuality of a black man is an object of attraction for the white women despite their aversion to the colour of the skin. In a poignant scene Tod Clifton is found killed at the hands of a white policeman. This symbolic association between death and freedom gives a macabre hue to the negro dilemma – a dilemma where Tod Clifton's are forced to "fall outside of history." At times, the glorification of the negro seems to be prompted by humanitarian motives but in reality this practice as followed by the Brotherhood is an epitome of the policy of neo-colonial powers in international affairs. Betrayed by the Brotherhood, the narrator seeks alternatives in two choices within the black world, i. e. the Black Nationalist Ras the Exhorter and the Machiavellian Rhinehart. Ras is an extreme type of black identity and his speeches carry the subversive power of negro unconscious. He believes that the whites want to maintain their supremacy in the relations of the two races in the city. He appears to be the champion of the negro problems, hence fascinates the narrator but the identification breaks down when he becomes Ras the Destroyer. Such a purely black identity, though it ensures visibility, is born of hatred and violence and is chaotic and self-destructive. Ras the Exhorter, who is aware of the duplicitous power of the colonial discourse, is cast into the subordinated role of a black rabble-rouser by the ideologues of the Brotherhood but he significantly undermines their power by his powerful antagonistic discourse.

Brother Hambro tells the protagonist that the workers of the organization should work with the formula of 'sacrifice and leadership,' which means that the interests of the black people must be sacrificed to the interest of American society as a whole. Hambro's attitude towards the negro community reflects his racial subjugation and subordination to the master class. He appears to be a traitor to his own community and works as an agent of the Brotherhood. The young fellow realizes: "Well, I was, and yet I was invisible, that was the fundamental contradiction. I was simply a material, a natural source to be used" (p. 508). Having rejected

the ideology of the whites, the black protagonist has a possibility to play another stereotypical role, that of Rhinehart. In assuming his mask, the protagonist wonders: "Still could I be all of them: "Rine the runner, Rine the briber, Rine the lover and Rhine the reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart?" (p. 498) Thus we see this trickster figure ultimately exposes the negro's duplicity, his ultimate diffusion and loss of self. Rhinehart is the master of disguise and assumes multiple identities. His personas range from gambler, pimp, lover, briber to reverend. He awakens the narrator to the liberating aspects of role playing. He survives by manipulating the illusions of society, an archetypal trickster. While Ras 'yesses' blacks only, Rhinehart 'yesses' everybody.

To escape the hostility of Ras and his men, the narrator wears a hat and dark glasses as he is constantly mistaken by the people on the street for Rhinehart. These misidentifications awaken the narrator to endless possibility of social definition and history and the impossibility of plunging outside history. He now decides to explore his invisibility and agrees with his grandfather's words that a black man should continue to agree with the whites by saying "yes" to them and take them in this way to their death and destruction. The Brotherhood expects sacrifice from them therefore he decides to lull the leaders to sleep with a misleading impression that the blacks agree with the programme of the organization. This leads to the transformation of the narrator's personality as he accepts his 'past' and recognizes 'invisibility.' He discovers his true identity "knowing who I was and where I was." Chased by white racists, he falls into a cellar where he burns the pieces of paper in his briefcase. The briefcase is a metaphor for his unconscious while the pieces of paper represent his various identities or pseudo-identities. At a collective level they signify the various historical roles of the negroes. The briefcase contains the figure of a minstrel negro (economic exploitation) his high-school diploma (the educated upstart), Clifton's sambo doll (the minstrel role of dehumanized subordinate), Jack's letter identifying him as Brother, the threatening anonymous letter, Tarp's leg chain (slavery) and Rhinehart's glasses. The protagonist comes to know that the anonymous letter urging him to go slow for the upliftment of the negroes was written by Brother Jack, who is a deceiver and a double dealer. In a nightmare he finds himself a prisoner in the hands of Brother Jack, Old Emerson, Bledsoe, Norton, Ras the Exhorter and the School Superintendent. They hold him by the hand and refuse him to release until he accepts the role of an obedient subordinate. The invisible man protests that he is finished with their illusions. At his refusal they cut off his testicles and thus rob him of his manhood. Castration in the dream represents the loss of virility, manhood, power, individuality and ego and symbolizes surrender, defeat and subordination.

Sigmund Freud has shown how an aggression of libido determines a person's assertive ego in society and lends him the qualities of leadership and dynamism and even masochism whereas a regression of libido which often happens out of a psychological fear of sex and castration can reduce a person's virility and assertive will. All these tokens of his identity, the protagonist carries throughout his racial journey serve as homelier reminders of his heritage, his past which needs to be integrated into his personality to move towards racial awareness. By invoking thus the history of oppression, he wants his people to remember their past. His terrifying ordeal in the world of experience has brought him closer to the truth of his being. He is determined to continue his journey which will surely enable him to assert his individuality and freedom some day and see that racial identity does not bar his way to equality with his oppressors.

Conclusion

In fact the literary talent and excellence of Ellison functions on two levels. At one level he is the spokesperson of his community and race who describes graphically and authentically the pain and trauma of racial discrimination and persecution suffered by his community, and on the other and higher level he acts as creative writer pre-occupied with the drama of life, the complexity of character and the intricacies of human relationships. He has a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural, economic and political scenario of the twentieth century's modern life which has influenced communal relations in society and is conscious of his social responsibility. Ralph Ellison believes that division of society and cultural diversity is essential and desirable but he is at the same time a strong advocate of socio-political unity which is a commendable feature of the American society. Ellison's *Invisible Man* bears an imprint of his keen intelligence and insight into the

socio-cultural and political issues afflicting the American social life which he portrays in this remarkable novel with a poignant sense of irony and sarcasm.

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