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The Negro Problem Of Identity And Existence In The Novel “Invisible Man” By Ralph Ellison

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to study the Negro problem of identity and existence in the postwar American novel. The core of this study tackles the desperate quest, this man is living in a blind and racist American world, which denies his existence, and reduces him almost to a non-entity making him ever more restless, possessed and exhausted.

KEYWORDS

Invisibility, Negro life, black man, satire, imagination, society, racial discrimination, fate, identity.

INTRODUCTION

Ralph Ellison(1914-1994) was the grandson of slaves. He is the author of a number of works such as “The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison”(1955),”Flying Home and Other Stories”(1997),”Juneteenth”(1999) and he was awarded with Medal of Freedom in

1969,Chevalier de l’Ordre des Artes et Lettres in 1970,National Medal of Arts in1985.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The book “Invisible Man” was written by Ralph Ellison, one of the well-known American writers. Its genre is a novel. The novel was published on April 14th, 1952 by Random House. The “Invisible Man” was a popular and critical success. The book consists of 581 pages. The writer didn’t publish any books after “Invisible man” in spite of demands and suggestions. So, “Invisible man” is the only novel written by Ellison. The novel soon became popular and best-seller and won the award “National book” in 1953. Even the book is included in the Modern Library, in the list of 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century. Moreover, former U.S. president Barack Obama modeled his memoirs called “Dreams from my father” on Ralph Ellison’s novel. After “Invisible Man” a number of works were created by Ralph Ellison such as “The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison” (1955), “Flying Home and Other Stories” (1997), “Juneteenth” (1999) and he was awarded with Medal of Freedom in 1969, Chevalier de l’Ordre des Artes et Lettres in 1970, National Medal of Arts in 1985.

The novel stresses on many social and intellectual problems encountered by the African Americans in the early twenties. In the novel, black nationalism and racism are included. The “Invisible Man” is about the process of overcoming lies and different illusions in order to reach the truth. The author wants to find the truth, to find himself. The novel is concerned with a humanity and individuality of a black man. This man remained to the centre of Ellison’s imagination. Ellison had extraordinary imagination and amazing expression. His anxiety and quest were to oppose the unknown realities in the Negro life and to

explore his psyche so as to describe him with his humanity and importance. As a black writer, Ellison tried to define the complicated fate and individuality of American Negro.

Critics noticed that Ellison had neglected, for clear reasons, the art-as-weapon theory and strongly criticized and disapproved of the sociological approach to creative writing. “Words are not rifles” he says. (Callahan, 2003: 175). He thinks that a creative writer is not and should not be a sociologist. He has also criticized the critics who support the sociological approach to literature. “Critics who do so”, Ellison says, “should abandon literature for politics” (Ibid., 160). He believes that a novelist is neither a social determinist nor a social reformer; he is an artist even though he has to work in a society:

... If a Negro writer is going to listen to sociologists... he is in trouble because he will have abandoned his task before he begins. If he accepts the cliché to the effect that the Negro family is usually a broken family... if he believes that Negro males are having all these alleged troubles with their sexuality, or that Harlem is a ‘negro ghetto’... Well, he’ll never see the people of whom he wishes to write... He will never learn to use his own eyes and his own heart, and he’ll never master the art of fiction (Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, 1995: 109-110).

The “Invisible Man” is not ordinary novel because of its style, because of strong satirical temper and because of imaginary tone.

The title of the novel itself is very suggestive and conveys the symbolic meaning of the protagonist’s life. Invisibility is indeed a metaphor of the black America. The nihilistic

and indifferent world around the protagonist denies his existence, reducing him almost to a non-entity. His deep awareness of his existential condition keeps him awake and alive. He has no name going about in the world. One's name is the first thing, among all others, that gives one a sense of one's identity. As the protagonist of *Invisible Man* is nameless, this restates the fact that he has no identity. Sitting in the hole in the basement of the old building, the protagonist feels that he is a phantom in a nightmare. Like a sleepwalker with anguish in the heart, agony in the soul and ache in the conscience, he travels into the past. He is isolated from the whole world, and takes shelter in the state of hibernation. This hole is profusely illuminated by his invisibility, and though the light of 1369 electric bulbs confirms his reality, but the blind world cannot see and recognize him. Thus, he is put into a tragic and absurd situation.

The author's purpose to escape the society and to be invisible is that he wants to show that people around him are blind who cannot see his nature, his true being. They only see what they want. He becomes invisible because the narrator thinks people are sleepwalkers and live in dreams in which the author doesn't want to appear.

Quotations

"People see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed everything and anything except me".

The people in Ellison's society see him only as in their imagination. They cannot see his real nature, his deep feelings but only black skinned man.

"I am an invisible man. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a

mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me".

The author is only seen and respected because of money, because of fame, because of position. Yet, everyone neglects his social status. No one pays attention to his heart, to his thoughts.

"What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do?"

The author feels sorry for wasting his life to please others, to be a person they wanted. He spent time not doing the things he himself had wanted, he himself had hoped. And for this, he had lost a lot.

"The world is a possibility if only you'll discover it. When I discover who I am, I'll be free".

It is natural for our society that everyone is avoided knowing who they are. The author feels as if he was living as a captive. One day he'll be free from everything if only he discovers himself, he realizes his true being.

"Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat".

Life is given to live not to control it, however, everyone in life lives under the control. They consider others' opinions about them. They are afraid of what people may think. Thus, they lose life not doing anything for themselves, eventually.

CONCLUSION

Negro Americans' fate was painful. They are the most unfairly treated nation in the world. They were racially, politically, economically, socially and even culturally disgraced. Their culture was destroyed. Their languages were made

extinct. They were restricted ruthlessly for more than 3 centuries. Almost all of them were slaves. They lost their history, heritage, identity because of white men, destitution and poor destiny. You and I cannot feel these. But Ralph Ellison could deeply feel, suffered, pitied and tried to explain these feelings to the readers by means of literary work and imagination.

Ralph Ellison's only novel the "Invisible Man" is the most impressive work by an American Negro. Ralph Ellison doesn't look like other writers who become successful by dominating their readers with documentary details. He is a novelist who has the ability of using words with great skill. "Invisible Man" is a sensational and emotional book. It strongly impresses readers. It doesn't matter what final conclusion on "Invisible Man" may be, it is the appearance of a richly experienced writer. Maybe therefore, the novel has found an infinite way in readers' heart, has taken a special place in everyone's bookshelf. The novel makes much sense and provokes inner thoughts.

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