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Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: A Novel of Social Protest and Hope

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Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison, a prolific twentieth century American Negro writer, underlines chiefly the sufferings and humiliations of negroes or blacks and through it exposes the false claim of civilization. It gives expression to the writer's resentment and indignation against this injustice and oppression existing in American society of his time. However this research paper reveals how *Invisible Man* despite describing the trauma of humanity, does not exclude completely the hope for future – the hope for the world as a better place to live in.

This social protest is self explanatory in *Invisible Man* which is not only a story of a negro thrown as a shuttlecock from one place to another 'but is an allegory of the black struggle in the American history'. It shows that negroes have always been living on the razor's edge of time for having been treated mercilessly by the whites. It captures the grim realities of racial discrimination and presents a stark account of racial alienation. The novel is, to use Alfred Kazin's words, "... , a demonstration of the lunatic hatred that America can offer, on every face of its society, to a Black Man"²⁴⁵. Through the fanatic behavior of the white society, Ellison effectively reveals how a so-called civilized society is still characterized by the racial division between man and man. The novel depicts how the colour of skin overpowers man's fellow-feeling and human compassion.

Whites, no doubt, claim to be the 'cultured human beings' and the 'believers of equality' but they are actually not willing to give an equal status to negroes. Their concerns for the welfare of blacks are mere false appearances made only to retain themselves in the dominant position. Whereas whites nourish this old racial hatred in their hearts, negroes too are not much able to abandon their notion of inferiority. They take their humiliation as a matter of their destiny and as an outcome of the social system. It is more than clear when Trueblood describes to Norton his dream about a white woman pursuing him. He explains:

I tries to talk to her, and I tries to git away.
But she's holdin ' me and I'm scared to touch
her cause she's white.⁵⁶

It shows how much a negro is conscious of his being black. In fact, the consciousness of both of the sides is still the same. This stereotyped behavior of both the races is rooted not only in their conscious but also in their unconscious minds.

During the course of the novel, we find that the narrator who is a representative of the negro cause, is denied the basic amenities of life and even a human status. He is treated as a slave and more pathetically as a thing devoid of all human passions and emotions. The society is so contemptuous about and indifferent towards him that he is not sure of even his presence in the world and is compelled to think:

I am invisible man ... simply because people
refuse to see me ... they see only my
surroundings, themselves, or figments of their

imagination—indeed, everything and anything
except me.⁷

The protagonist is invisible simply because people see in him what they want to see, not what he actually is. He is almost a non-existent only because he is ‘a cause’, ‘an abomination’, a black abstraction’ dehumanized by racists or by reformists. There is no human identity, no human recognition, no individuality and even no name for him and, obviously, for all persons like him. And this invisibility makes the narrator and all other negroes like him feel a sense of alienation in the selfish world of whites.

The politics of ‘equal rights and freedom for all’ which whites practice in the name of negroes only to maintain their social standing is again socially and even morally unjustifiable crime against the basic humanity of man. It shows only the corruption of society and the degradation of human values. The institution namely Brotherhood though working for the cause of racial harmony does not ascribe any rights or any individuality to its comrades. It hires the narrator only like a slave bought and sold without any consideration of his own human identity. Without caring for the feelings and choice of the narrator, he is asked to reside at a place where the party’s policies can better be materialized. Moreover, his name is changed and he is stripped off all his creativity. Irritated by the deliverance of a funeral oration by the narrator which is a sign of his independent thinking, Jack says, “You were not hired to think” 405. And again, “You were hired to talk” 406.

In such a social system, negroes are considered by their socially superiors only as a source of entertainment and pleasure. The blind-folded negro boys staging a Battle Royal in which they hit each-other to the drunken shouts of whites and negro boys picking coins off an electrified rug are some instances given by the author to present a horrid aspect of the society. The black boys are abused if they watch the nude blonde dancing (a kind of entertainment called Smoker) and abused if they do not look at it. In fact, the Smoker is nothing but an unacceptable and hateful swirl of ‘negro terror and white brutal vulgarity’. GE Kent gives an appropriate commentary on all this saying:

In terms of blackness , the ritual is to stamp upon
them the symbolic castration they are supposed to
experience in the presence of a white womanThe
American flag tattooed upon the nude woman’s belly,
is a satire upon American corruption of sexuality 166.

Again, for white women, negroes are mere means of getting sexual gratification. Sybil is exactly this kind of woman who is almost obsessed to get sexual satisfaction from the narrator – “come on, beat me, daddy—you-you big black bruiser. What’s taking you so long?..... Hurry up, knock me down” 451-52. This morally corrupt element of the society also reveals a social reality that the white men remain busy in their works and in their own fulfillments without bothering much about the needs of their women. There is a pungent satire on this social formation in Sybil’s words when she says that George (her husband) “talks a lot about women’s rights, but what does he know about what a woman needs?” 451. But here it is more than clear that negroes are treated only as a pleasure-giving object rather as an individual by both – whether it is a whiteman or a whitewoman.

Whenever a socially inferior race tries to rise high, the superior one takes it as a threat to its domineering position and hence, tries to subdue that race by all possible means. Similar is the case with negroes whose progress can never be acceptable to whites. It is evident when the

narrator wants to make a speech about the humiliation of negroes during the Battle Royal, he is being interrupted, scolded and laughed at along with the warning, "We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times"³³. In fact, whites cannot tolerate negroes and always try to demoralize and dishearten them. When the nameless protagonist working for Brotherhood becomes popular in Harlem locality, he is envied by other members of the party and he receives an anonymous warning letter:

Do not go too fast... you are from the South and you know that his is a whiteman's world... They do not want you to go too fast and will cut down if you do. Be smart ³³².

Thus, for whites, negroes should always be relegated to their socially and economically inferior position with no status and prestige. In such a dismal scenario, it seems that the growth of negroes cannot at all depend upon their sincerity, virtue and hard work but on the will and intention of whites.

In the novel, we confront with a society marked by the racial cynicism prevailing between blacks and whites. Here, it becomes necessary to know what blacks themselves think and how they react to this problem. Their mental agony is well-reflected in the grandfather's advice given to the protagonist's father. He says that their life is a war and blacks should overcome whites through their very humility, undermine them with smiles of joy and bring them to the death and destruction through obedience. They should make their position strong and continue their war but with a silence. However, the narrator-protagonist tries to go the other way round but after his failure as a hard-worker and as a sincere man, he also realizes his mistake. This points out the survival strategies of negroes in a society where men not only overpower their fellow-beings but also snatch from them their very identity as a human being.

Besides this, Ellison points out another way of protest too represented by Ras the Exhorter who later becomes Ras the Destroyer. Ras follows direct paths of violence and racial riots to express negroes' anger and to destroy their enemies, that is, whites. He also condemns negroes like the narrator working for the Brotherhood just as an instrument of whites and not really asserting their racial requirements. Here, it is not unfavorable to say that Ras acts as the real conscience of the black race. He tries to make blacks aware of not having sold themselves for white women and money or for a white cause. In fact, the grandfather, the narrator and Ras present different ways of thinking and diverse means of protest but for the same cause, that is, negroes' problem of 'invisibility' in a white-dominated society.

This research paper depicts that the novel is, no doubt, depressing and saddening but inspiring and cheering also. In fact, hope constantly renews itself in man's heart after his disappointment and can never be totally extinguished. This feeling of hope always blooms in the heart of the narrator also from the very beginning of his journey of self - discovery. The narrator gifted with the quality of oratory appears to be hopeful at every new step undertaken by him. It includes his admission in a Negro College, his getting of a bunch of letters of recommendations by Dr. Bledsoe, his job at a factory called Liberty Paints, his joining of Brotherhood at Harlem and some further successes as an orator etc. However his high expectations are being diminished and shattered every time which leaves him more dejected and more disappointed than earlier. In fact, the narrator remains oppressed and controlled by white men throughout his life much due to his fogged vision. So, in the end, when he realizes his invisibility and decides to come out from it, he thinks to develop his own identity. It makes his vision clarified as well as establishes a sense of optimism in readers' minds. He decides to pursue the conception of his own identity

that honors his complexity as an individual without ignoring social responsibilities. In the Epilogue, the protagonist makes some very deep observations and remarks, “Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat”. Thus the novel conveys a great message in explicit terms in the Epilogue.

In fact, the issue of racial discrimination presented by Ellison has wider social implications. Through the particular example of America, the novel reveals the universal truth applicable to every culture and civilization practicing apartheid. The irony of this problem is that whites in escaping blackness are becoming blacker everyday and blacks in striving towards whiteness are becoming quite dull and grey. Nobody knows who he is or where he is going. Thus, *Invisible Man*, ‘a novel of social protest’, lays bare the conscience of the entire black race through strivings and sufferings of an invisible negro amidst the cruel social forces. In view of Alfred Kazin, “*Invisible Man* endures because it is representative, truthful, “real” ...so much of the whole modern urban negro experience is included in the life-cycle of the hero”²⁵⁴. By highlighting the negative impacts of the social hatred on the social system and more particularly on the human dignity, the writer, in fact, warns humanity against such practices and advocates the need for harmony and compassion – ‘brotherhood’ in the real sense. However, the novel does not present a totally desperate scenario as it tries to give the possible solution of this problem and, that is, to struggle continuously even in the face of certain defeats. Precisely, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* with a wide social concern suggests that the life can be lived in diversity and the acceptance of this diversity is necessary to avoid confrontations.

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