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Voice for the Voiceless in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*

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ABSTRACT

Ralph Ellison, the winner of the Booker Prize is one of the prominent writers in the field of African American literature. In his works he documented the sufferings and humiliation of the blacks. He attacked the racist ideology in America. His *Invisible Man* (1952) is a masterpiece in African American literature which narrates the untold miseries of the black youth. The unnamed protagonist tries to survive in mainstream white society. However, all his efforts are in vain. In the end, he wants to be invisible in order to save himself from the subjugation. Richard Wright, an American writer is a powerful voice in African American literature. His *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1941), *The Outsider* (1953) are the masterpieces where he raised his voice against the racial discrimination of the blacks. Both Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright have similarly portrayed the humiliation and exploitation of the blacks by mainstream white society. The present paper studies Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) Both the writers have given voice to the voiceless in their respective novels. The attempt is to show how both the writers have revealed the social reality in contemporary society.

Keywords: Racism, Discrimination, Protest, Identity, Consciousness, etc.

African Americans have a long history of exploitation, humiliation and marginalization on the account of race and class. They were treated as

secondary and were denied basic human rights of equality. Rosenblatt rightly states, "For centuries African American families have lived in a racial system that made life difficult for them. Even today, 150 years after the end of slavery, and with economic, educational, occupational and other advances for many African Americans, racism remains a reality" (Rosenblatt, 1).

Ralph Waldo Ellison was an African American novelist, literary critic and one of the intellectuals in the literary tradition of African American protest literature. His notable work *Invisible Man* (1952) reflects upon the racial subjugation of the blacks and their identity crisis. He also wrote *Shadow and Acts* (1964) a collection of political, social, and critical essays. His *Juneteenth* was published after his death. Ellison struggled for establishing a new identity of the blacks. As a black writer he exposed the sufferings and humiliation of the blacks at the different stages of life. The problem of identity was very crucial in his *Invisible Man* where being unseen he speaks the truth in a very different way. The novel is unique in its own manner. As Michael D. Hill and Lena M. Hill remarked that "Despite the passing years, this omnibus novel retains its prominence, existing like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) as a much admired, yet incompletely understood work... the book has inspired spirited dialogue" (Hill vii). The characters in the novel represent the reality of contemporary society. Dr. Khamis Khalaf Mohammad remarks about the novel, "*Invisible Man* is characterized by its distinguished style, satirical temper and surrealistic tone; it is a most powerful novel. It treats

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the racial environment on the symbolic level, giving it a fabulous character and a universal meaning. It is a story of the Negro myth and Man, both submerged in invisibility.” (03)

In the beginning of the novel racial discrimination is visible. Dr. Bledsoe, a white man who is the president of the narrator’s southern black college, betrays the hero and expels him from the idyllic campus. He is an influential spokesman for the race as well as becoming a mediator between the college and the white board of trustees. When the narrator antagonizes one of the trustee members, he incurs the wrath of Dr. Bledsoe, who reveals both his true beliefs—“the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie” The episode at a boxing match or “battle royal” is very suggestive. The battle is among nine black roughs and, the boys learn on entering the ballroom, a striptease. The moral leaders of the community, drunk, force the black boys to stand in front of a naked blond dancer as she tantalizes them with her movements. The narrator is forced to participate, and all ten youths are blindfolded and egged on with racial slurs in a crazed battle, which ends with the narrator getting knocked out. They are then urged to collect their prize money from a pile of cash strewn on a rug, which turns out to be electrically wired. They were pushed by the drunken audience; they were repeatedly shocked with intolerable volts of electricity. Only after this wild manhandling is the narrator asked to give his valedictory address. All this shows the treatment given to the blacks by the white people. The blacks were treated badly without any fault due to their color. It narrates the sorrowful condition of the blacks through the character portrayal of a nameless narrator who does not find his existence in the racist American society. In the prologue, the narrator recalls his life journey. His life experiences reveal the ugly reality in contemporary society. He speaks to his audience from his underground hideout in the basement of the Whites only apartment. Being in his 40s, the narrator reminisces about his own life when he was a young man. The story starts with the narrator’s

pronouncement, “I am an invisible man.” (03) The narrator’s path also represents the path of the thousands of Negroes in the South who moved to the North in order to find better opportunities. The novel shows the narrator’s journey from an ordinary youth to the enlightened youth amidst the social condition of racism. The structure of the novel is similar to the structure of a Jazz composition. The experiences of the narrator are told through various episodes. The different characters in the story stand for different cultures as well as history. The narrator’s encounter with the different characters brings some awareness to the narrator about his own identity in the society. He says, “When I write, I am trying to make a sense out of chaos” (Ihab Hassan 3).

The nameless protagonist of *Invisible Man* shows the unseen reality of the blacks. The protagonist, being a narrator, unfolds his experiences of injustice, humiliation and exploitation in the racist society. The people he encounters “see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination -- indeed, everything and anything except me” (IM 3). He ridiculed the white people describing them as blind. He wants to remain invisible in front of the whites because they cannot see him as a human. The white people look at the blacks with different lenses. They look them down upon and exploit them in every manner. Since he is neglected and marginalized in mainstream white society he wants to remain invisible. The circumstances compelled him to leave the racist South. But coming to the Northern city of New York also does not change his condition. His encounter with the white people is disgusting as he writes, even when “[...] they all seemed impersonal.. by begging my pardon after brushing against me in a crowd. Still, I felt that even when they were polite, they hardly saw me” (IM 130). He tries to connect himself with the larger society. However, his attempt failed due to the narrow confining walls of prejudices in the society. Therefore, his voice is unheard. Throughout the novel his experiences depict the futility of his efforts to communicate with the larger white community. The white people

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always show him his inferior status being black. In one episode the narrator accidentally bumped into “a tall blond man” with the blue eyes in the darkness. The white man used a very insulting name for the narrator. The narrator got angry and attacked him and demanded an apology. He threw the white man to the ground, pulled out his knife. He wanted to slit the man’s throat. But he came to his senses. He realized that the white man insulted him because he could not really see him in the darkness. The next day the incident appeared in the Daily News where the white man described it as mugging. The narrator remarked ironically, “mugged by an invisible man.” Therefore, the protagonist’s quest is for his own meaningful identity. His role is defined by mainstream society where his role is inferior and unauthentic. At the end he finds himself helpless in front of the racist society. And finds a shelter in an underground cell in the basement of a big old building rented to whites. He lives in the hole to heal his wounds and wants to gain new vigor to face challenges in the society. It is very ironic that he is invisible even while living in the light of 1369 electric bulbs. The social condition questions his identity wherever he goes. He remains invisible there in the basement shows his unwillingness to live in the white society which denies his existence. One’s identity is very central to one’s existence. It gives him some purpose to live in life. Erik H. Erikson rightly remarks that a sense of identity means “a sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops; and it means, at the same time, a sense of affinity with a community's sense of being at one with its future as well as its history - or mythology” (Erikson 27-28)

Being black, the protagonist does not find any recognition. Therefore, he asks himself a very relevant question, 'What did I do to be so black and blue?' As he repeats hearing Louis Armstrong's song “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue” -- all at the same time (IM 6) This song Ellison has shown the great influence of black folklore, jazz and the blues on the hero’s sensibility.

As Harold Bloom asserts,

The novel attempts to construct its own universe, based on its own imperatives, the central ones being the shaping of a personal vision, as in the blues, and the celebration of a collective vision as represented by the living culture. And it is the living culture, with all of its shifting complexities, which constitutes the essential landscape of the novel.(38)

Ellison has successfully shown the sufferings of the African American community. He has tried to give voice to the voiceless. The novel exposes their racial, social, political victimization in a true manner. More than three centuries the blacks were denied basic human rights and they lived in subhuman conditions. Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* was published in 1945 with its subtitle as *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. *Black Boy* is a memoir which unfolds Richard’s journey of life from his childhood to youth. It documents his struggle being black in white racist society. It has been segregated into two parts as “Southern Night” and “The Horror and the Glory” which significantly tells the life story of the protagonist Richard in the light of racism.

The whites had the full authority to touch a black woman. But if a black woman unconsciously touched a white man, it would be considered a crime. She would be punished for that. Miserable condition of black women is rightly portrayed by Tylor as follows:

About white men’s sexual exploitation of black women, Wright is as much critical of black women as of white men, because black women expect and readily condone white men’s behavior. Once, a black maid who had been slapped playfully on her buttocks by a white night watchman told the indignant Wright who had witnessed the incident; “They never get any further with us than that, if we don’t want ‘em to. (Taylor, Douglas, 174)

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The story begins with the scene when Richard is just four years old and his grandmother is on the verge of death. Richard sets fire out of his mind. He was beaten badly by his family members over his misconduct. This incident had a very negative impact upon Richard's psyche. Richard belongs to the poor family which resides in Memphis. His father works as a guard and runs the family. The blacks lived in a very unhygienic condition due to their poverty.. The worst condition of the rented house is pictured by Richard in *Black Boy* as follows:

We rented one half of a double corner house in front of which ran a stagnant ditch carrying sewage. The neighborhood swarmed with rats, cats, dogs, fortune tellers, cripples, blind men, whores salesmen, rent collectors, and children . . .

There was an eternal hissing of stream, the deep grunting of steep engineers, and the tolling of bells, smoke obscured the vision and cinders drifted into the house, into our beds, into our kitchen, into our food, and a tar like smell was always in the air. (BB, 57, 58)

Richard's life becomes more miserable when his father deserts the family out of frustration. His mother starts working for the family. In one episode Richard is beaten badly by the white boys when he goes to the grocery shop. When he tells all this to his mother she gives him confidence. She advises him to go back and defend himself and hands over a stick to him. The role of an African American mother is very well reflected here who teaches her children how to survive against racial discrimination. When Richard does not want to go back to the boys and fight his mother warns him in a harsh language and says, "Take this money, this note, and this stick.....Go to the store and buy those groceries. If those boys bother you, then fight....Don't you come into this house until you

have gotten those groceries" (BB, 15). Richard follows her mother's instructions and defends himself against the group of white guys. He feels extremely victorious after fighting with the white boys. He states, "On my way back I kept my stick poised for instant use, but there was not a single boy in sight. That night I won the right to the street of Memphis' (BB, 16).

Richard's mother becomes sick and unable to perform a job to run the family. Unfortunately, he has been sent to the orphanage. Richard does not want to live there and tries to flee away from there. But his attempts fail. Then, his mother decides to send him to her sister Elaine in Arkansas. Shifting is a metaphor used to show the unstable life of the blacks. His travelling from family to orphanage and later to Arkansas is tiresome. As the narrator writes,

"At last we were at the Railway Road station with our bags, waiting for the train that would take us to Arkansas; and for the first time I noticed that there were two lines of people at the ticket window, a "white" line and a "black" line...When I boarded the train I was aware that we Negroes were in one part of the train and the whites were in another. . . . notice that my mother became irritated when I questioned her about the whites and blacks and I could not quite understand it. I wanted to understand these two sets of people who lived side by side and never touched, it seemed, only in violence. (BB, 44, 45)

Richard faces racial discrimination in Arkansas too. His uncle who runs a liquor business is killed in one tragic incident by the group of white people. Due to this incident Richard and his family again move to the new place in Arkansas to save themselves from the attacks of the white people. His uncle's fault was nothing but he was doing well in the liquor business. The whites did not want the blacks to lead a stable life. They did not like them to prosper. Therefore, The blacks remain in the

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working class community. They struggle throughout to survive in society.

If a white man had sought to keep us from obtaining a job, or enjoying the rights of citizenship, we would have bowed silently to his power. But if he had sought to deprive us of a dime, blood might have been spilt. Hence, our daily lives were so bound up with trivial objectives that to capitulate when challenged was tantamount to surrendering the right to life itself. The lunch hour would pass and we would go back to work, but there would be in our faces not one whit of the sentiment we had felt during the hour of discussion. (BB 251, 252)

Richard and his family suffer a lot because of their social condition which is a product of their skin color. Being blacks, they remained economically poor and became victims to the domination of the white people. Richard completed his schooling and later completed his graduation from Mississippi in 1925. During his education Richard develops his anger towards the system which discourages the blacks. In one incident the principal asks Richard to read a speech given by him. But instead of reading it Richard himself prepares a speech of his own and does not hesitate to read it in front of all. All this shows his anger as well as rising consciousness towards the injustice meted out to the blacks. He successfully raised his voice against the racial discrimination. The most important influence on Richard is the writing of H.L. Mencken. But Richard is too poor to buy the books. He takes help from white library patron and reads the books. It is Mencken's writing that gives him confidence. He gets excited to see the use of words that debunked white hypocrisy. Later he decides to pursue writing as a career. It is a significant decision in his life. He wants to move to the North in order to fulfill his dream. But due to lack of money he is not able to do so. Even he does not hesitate to steal money but later he realizes that his act of crime will not solve his problem. He decides to do some good deeds which will benefit the society and eventually

he becomes a writer. He goes to Chicago to pursue his dream. He struggles a lot to achieve stability in life however the mainstream white society does not allow to do so. Richard's working for a cafe; his joining in the insurance company and his passion for becoming a writer all signify the rising consciousness of a black youth for establishing a new social order despite all odds.

To conclude, Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Wright's *Black Boy* genuinely reflect the social reality of contemporary America. They give a powerful voice against the white supremacist society.

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