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**ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*: EXISTENTIAL STRUGGLE FOR BLACK IDENTITY**

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**Abstract**

This research paper is mainly focused on Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* which deals with the crisis of identity of the main character called *Invisible Man*. The injustice and exploitation of whites over black had pushed the existence of black into darkness. Although slavery was legally abolished in the USA, the white continued to exploit the Negroes badly. The blacks were the victims of injustice, exploitation and even their existence was ignored. So, blacks began to revolt against this injustice for their search for existence and identity. In this novel, the protagonist tries to establish his identity and existence as a human. The whites treated him as an invisible man, but the protagonist sees visibility in him. He feels life is difficult in the world of whites, and starts his struggle for existence and identity in the USA. As a qualitative research, the researcher has taken the novel for the primary source to interpret it by using the theoretical tool of existentialism.

**Keywords:** invisibility, identity, existentialism, struggle, freedom

**1. Introduction**

The aim of this research is to explore the question of human existence in the popular novel *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. Existential theorists answer the fundamental questions of human existence in a subjective and ideal way. But Marxists take it in terms of objective and socialist realism. Human existence is not independent of social relations. Existence through struggle in such a society is the Marxist concept. The struggle between the exploiting class and the exploited class is an eternal affair, because each one fights for its own existence and victory. Marxists believe that after the final overthrow of capitalism by the proletarians, the men will be free and get real existence in a classless society. But Sartre and other existentialists reject Marxist thoughts and claim that man is not the simple resultant of the material and social conditions. But the existentialists assume that human beings are not the passive product of the context.

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The novel *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison is a famous in semi-autobiographical novel. The unnamed protagonist of *Invisible Man* represents the author himself in many ways. Like the protagonist, Ellison's life was also marked by the poverty in his early days. His grandfather Alfred Ellison was an illiterate ex-slave of South Carolina. He was born on March 1, 1914 in Oklahoma City. Ellison's father, who ran small ice and coal business, died in an accident when Ellison was three years old. In the following years Ida supported Ralph and his brother by working in a Church. Ellison developed an early interest in music and books and he did well in school and won a scholarship too. It is similar to the protagonist who has won the scholarship of a Negro college. After a year at Tuskegee institute Ellison went to New York and remained there.

The novel *Invisible Man* has prologue, epilogue, and twenty-five chapters. The unnamed narrator says that he is an invisible man. In the USA, White's power system has dominated the society. So he is invisible for everyone. The opening sentence, "I am an invisible Man", of the book, refers to its title. It becomes clear that the title refers to the narrator. The metaphor of invisibility and blindness indicate the effects of racism and whites power on the victim. The narrator is conscious about the effect of white's power system upon blacks, but he doesn't resist against it at first. He also believes that if blacks worked hard and

proved themselves, whites would grant them equality. So the narrator is used by the whites as a doll. Some characters like Ras, resist against whites and even attack upon the narrator.

*Invisible Man*, the novel, was almost instantly recognized as a classic in American bourgeois society. *Invisible Man* has been widely praised as it won several prizes, including the National Book Award for 1953. The novel spent sixteen weeks in the best seller list. Ellison has said that his task has revealed the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American.

The ideology of Ellison is conveyed in the novel through its protagonist. Ellison tells a story of an Afro American man who is losing his sense of identity in the world of prejudice and hostility. He sees darkness everywhere and to fill the space with light he burns 1369 bulbs. Before becoming free from all illusions, the nameless narrator makes a journey through his experiences in a segregated community to the North of the USA.

### **1. Review of Related Literature**

Some critics claimed that *Invisible Man* is the most important American novel after world war-II. Different critics have focused their ideas differently over this fiction. Commenting on *Invisible Man*, critic Howe (1952) argues that *Invisible man* is a Negro novel searching for an identity in the white dominated American society:

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What man could ever have written it? It is drenched in Negro life task music: it tells us how distant even that best of the whites are from the black man that pass them the streets; and it is written from a particular compound of emotions that no white man could possibly stimulate. To deny that is a engross novel is to deprive the Negroes of their own basic right; the right to cry out their difference. (120)

It means this novel came as result of White's exploitation over blacks in the USA. Blacks were ignored and compelled to struggle for their identity in the society. If someone is not regarded as human being, he struggles to get his existence.

Taking Invisible Man as a great novel, Barnes (1967) analyzed it from the perspective of psychological realism. The novel is taken as the explosion of anger as the desires were repressed inside. The protagonist suppressed mentality comes in the form of volcano, he says;

. . . That invisible man was a great novel although also not without its artistic flaws said to say . . . stylistically unrolls in a volcanic flow of vivid sometimes of lived imagery a tour de force of

psychological realism". (178).

From the concept of power politics, Bone (1966) says that the politics of white society exploits the human value. With their power, whites exploit black and they don't recognize them as human beings.. So, this idea is similar to Foucault's ideas of power and discourse. Because of their difference in ethnicity, blacks struggle against whites. So in the novel, Gates (1969) also finds ethnic difference, which made the protagonist struggle against white. The African Americans, having different ethnic identity, go against the authority and tyranny of the whites:

The threatened obliteration of the African Americans also sharpens awareness of ethnic difference. Against to manifest authority and tyranny of the whites, ethnicity ensures a certain dignity and identity a more radical response takes the form of a proclamation of African American power. . . it has cut itself from the portent force of the African American phallus; it is divorced from the pulsing mystery and promise of human felling and being. (139-240)

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Another critic Meally (1981) takes the invisibility of the protagonist as his conscious knowledge of his individual, cultural and national history. He says: "We see in this the evolution of a central theme; in his the evolution of a central theme the more conscious person is of his individual cultural and national history the freer becomes" (American Writers). 22

The afro-mentioned critics have interpreted the novel in different ways. The researcher tries to analyze the fiction from existentialists' point of views. As the norms and values the protagonist was exploited by the whites, the existence of black was thrown into darkness. His life is meaningless and he is invisible ; so he struggles to establish his real existence in the society.

**2.Theoretical Framework: Existentialism as a Tool**

Human existence became the major issue in the western world after the great destruction of the First World War. Following the same disordered and chaotic situation, people had to face the devastation of the Second World War. Then, they couldn't believe in old concept like unity, rationality, morality and value and even in Christianity. From this context, the concept of existentialism was born. The industrial revolution, the race for armaments, large scale manufacture of nuclear weapons and the indiscriminate political quarrels raised the question over human existence. In the background of such a scrappy and cynical

situation, many writers and philosophers tried to focus on condition of modern man. Existentialism came as the most dynamic and appropriate philosophical movement to focus on the anxiety, absurdity and the uncertainties of human existence of the time.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement which studies about the existence of human being. In this context, the famous existentialist theorist Sartre (1965) says "existence precedes essence" (13). Sartre himself clarifies, "it means that first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene and only after wards defines himself" (15). So, man's existence is prior to his essence. Man makes his nature by his own efforts; and he thus, determines his own essence. For Sartre, existentialism is a doctrine through which human life has been running and without it our life is impossible and the human subjectivity is created by the truth and action.

Existentialism focuses on the individual's existence. It takes man is free from any natural or human standards in terms of which he must act and be defined. Sartre (1965) says, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (15). Man is responsible for what he is. It puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence upon his own shoulders. Existentialism is connected with human existence, as with man's experience of death, anguish and anxiety, despair and

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guilt. Soren Kierkegaard is considered as the father of existentialism and his concepts were followed later in the movement of literature. Nietzsche and Heidegger developed this term in more modified form. After then this term developed, Camus and Sartre took it upto the height of zenith.

In the Myth of Sisyphus, Camus (1959) posits the world is void, meaningless, irrational and absurd. He further says, "For the existentialists the meaning of life is the most urgent of all those questions [.....] suicide is nothing but merely a social phenomenon" (12). Here, Camus gives priority to human life which is the most urgent of all those questions. He prefers suicide rather than meaningless life.

In existential philosophy, the concept of existence is focused to the existence of man. The existence of human being is differentiated from the existence of other things in the world. Other things 'stand out' there in the world, but only man exists. Thus for existentialist, trees and mountains just 'are' but they do not exist, what exists is only man. Heidegger (2002) writes:

The being whose manner of being existence is man. Man alone exists. A rock is, but it doesn't exist. A tree is but it doesn't exist. An angle is but he doesn't exist. God is, but he doesn't exist. Rock, tree, angle, God just 'are' they do not exist, what exist is only

human being (qtd. In Macquarrie 29)

The existence of all things is thrown into being except man's. Other things don't exist but man exists. Other entities stand out there in the world, what exists is only man. Man's existence is not simply in 'standing of' there in the world like other entities in the sense that he is open to become what he is not. What counts for his existence is, thus, possibility of his going beyond himself.

In his Twentieth Century criticisms, the critic Wellek (1991), explains "existentialism as a last and vital trend in this century. It has dominated the French and German intellectuals' discussions after world war II" (82). Man exists, turns up, appears on the scene and only afterward defines himself.

In the context of human reality, man's existence is prior to his essence. Man makes his nature by his own efforts; and he thus, determines his own essence. Sartre (1965) further says, "by existentialism, we mean a doctrine which makes human lives possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and human subjectivity" (16). Here Sartre says

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subjectivity is created by the truth and action. Sartre highlights existence rather than essence. "Existentialism is primarily concerned with human existence, especially with man's extreme experience; the confrontation with death, anguish and anxiety, despair and guilt" (589-90)

For them, Pain, frustration, sickness and death of human beings, became the essentials features of human realities. It means, the problems of individual is central and that they stressed man's real existence, his certain nature, his personal freedom and his responsibilities for what he does and makes him to be.

2. **Textual Analysis**

The narrator of the novel is a nameless college educated black young man, who is also the main character of the novel Invisible Man. The plot of the novel goes around the adventures of the narrator.

As the novel begins, the narrator arrives at the hotel and he is forced to fight in brutal blindfolded boxing match. He is used as the source of entertainment at evening for the white "smoker". They also made to dance a naked woman and the boys are forced to watch it. The boxing match is followed by a humiliating event. The narrator was bruised and bleeding for their entertainment. At last, he was told to give his speech in front of the drunken whites

ignored him. The narrator boy struggles to get his existence, but he is not successful in his struggle. He starts his journey form South Carolina for scholarship and arrives at New York City.

In the novel the protagonist is in crisis of his existence and identity. He does different works, goes to different places in search of his identity. But he is not successful either. His decision to move form one place to another shows that he wants to live, he wants to exist. But he is not successful. So the novel Invisible Man can be interpreted from the point of existential philosophy and search for identity.

The narrator, as his monologue, says:

I am invisible; understand simply because people refuse to see me like the bodiless heads you see some times in lives side shows it is though I have been surrounded by movers of hard destroying glass. When they approach me they see only my surrounding, themselves or figments, of their imagination indeed everything and anything except me. (07)

Throughout the novel, the narrator makes the mental and physical journey to get his 'true identity'. The narrator's life is full of mental traumas. The biggest

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psychological tension is his identity. Though he tries different identities, his true identity is as he realizes as an invisible man. The identity given to him by white does not reflect himself, but he fails to recognize that identity just as a mirror that reflects the surrounding. The viewers make the narrator's identity.

Lucius Brockway, an old operator of the paint factory, saw the narrator as he is threatening his job, but the narrator is sent there just to assist him. Brockway repeatedly questions the narrator about his purpose there but never asks his name.

At the first brotherhood meeting, he posits "I am a new citizen of the country of your vision a native of your fraternal land" (328). He says that identity is transitional yet he does not accept it himself. Dr. Bledose, the principal of the black Southern University where the narrator studies, took the narrator as a petty black educated fool. For Mr. Norton, a rich white trustee of the Black University, the narrator is a mere somebody. For the organizers of the Brotherhood, Jack Tobit and others the narrator is what they designed him to be.

The narrator Invisible Man sees the meaning of identity as the universal perspective of a person. He acquires fame and recognition with impressive role and thinks everyone will regard him as having good brotherhood. He greeted two black fellows in a bar, as his feeling of brotherhood, but they look at him oddly.

For them, his fame is his notoriety because they do not like his race philosophy. The narrator works for an ideology that promotes equality among all humans between black or white, male or female.

The protagonist thinks himself as he is as human being as other. But what he sees of himself is not what others see of him. He cannot decide for others how to see him. Invisible man lives in a hidden underground space. But to prove that he exists, at last he himself has lit his underground room with lights. He is invisible for the then contemporary society. He has been used for their benefit; he is used only as a tool for their success, but his identity is ignored. He says:

I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. ....I am responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement. (16)

For him, he is compelled to be irresponsible because his visibility has been ignored. There is no meaning of being of responsible. Responsibility rests upon recognition. The narrator has been searching his true existence and place in society. He takes his life is like a journey to find out something he says:

I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself, .....nobody but myself. (17)

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The narrator has been used as tool for entertainment by the whites. He is forced to go in battle royal. The boxing match is followed by a humiliating event. In the same time he is bound to watch a sensuous dance by a naked woman. As he was participating the boxing match, even if he won the match the whites did not visualize his superiority. He feels being humiliated. From here he creates feeling of disgust with white people.

After being humiliated and ignored in every activity; the narrator dares to give the final interview for job with Dr. Bledsoe who has no any sympathy towards the narrator. He stands in the dark doorway to prove his future and thinks about where to go if he was expelled. He tries to escape from there because he is only the matter of fun for the white people. Arriving in New York, the narrator came into the world of the liberty paints, which achieves financial success. Later, when he joins the brotherhood, he believes that he can fight for racial equality by working there. There also he felt himself insulted, he found people laughing at him, and he does not want to go home to be humiliated.

As he talks about his right and he is in the state of confusion that whether to use his right or leave it. In this critical situation one fighter's son consoles and suggests him to go to New York, for the summer and save pride and money. While listening to

the boy he is in confusion whether to go to New York or not, he was in dilemma.

He feels his life impossible in this world, so, he is in search of new world, he is living in a dream world, he wants to be far from this unreal world. He is in search of job, he has been carrying recommendation letter, which is packed or sealed tightly, he doesn't know what is the content; he is searching for someone who could give the proper refecton of this importance. He dreams of spreading the letter upon the dresser like a hand of high trump cards. He knows that the letter is concerned to him and is addressed to some of the most important men in the whole country.

He wants to establish equal identity with whites, but his mission was against the notion of whites. He tries to be near with white people, tries to act according to them, and eats food with them in the same cafeterias this is all he does for the establishment of equal identity. He tries to be as equal as whites doing the activities done by the whites.

He faces economic problem, he is unable to pay train fare in his journey. In this critical situation at any cost he has to find a job to tide him over. He was in that miserable condition but he didn't say about it to anybody. He says: "My money was almost gone and anything might happen. I had been so confident that I had failed to put aside the price of train fare home I was



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miserable and I dared not talk to anyone about my problem” (141).

He has been struggling himself to create his identity and place in society. So, he is bound to work in a factory. In the factory, he thought his body is circulated like that machine. He had no desire to destroy himself he wanted freedom not destruction. First he had to discover who he was and only he could be free, as he posits:

Perhaps if I shifted my body about so .....was no getting round it. I could not move escape then I could think of my identity. (198)

The narrator says that whites’ invisibility to see is their prejudice. But prejudice against others is not the only kind of blindness; they also refuse to acknowledge truth about themselves of having blindness. Thus, the boys who fight in the "battle royal" were blindfolds, symbolizing their powerlessness to recognize their exploitation at the hands of the white men.

He says that the world is full of blind men and sleepwalker who cannot see him for what he is. He describes himself as an “invisible man”. He means to say the whites are blind as they couldn’t see him and he becomes invisible for them. The invisibility is dealt heavily in the novel. One becomes invisible because another is blind. While the novel always portrays blindness in negative way, it treats

invisibility much more ambiguously. Invisibility can bring disempowerment, but it can also bring freedom and mobility. He feels free as he becomes anonymous and tells the whole story of invisibility.

**3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, in the novel Invisible Man, the identity of the protagonist has been ignored by the contemporary American society in a particular sense; but it symbolically indicates the whole race of Afro-American or black identity was ignored by the whites in the USA. To create his authentic identity, the protagonist struggles through the numerous of problems. His main aim was to exist authentically but not just to be the puppet or doll of whites in his world. The narrator initially tries to overthrow the stereotype imposed over black people in the USA. He determines to come out from his underground "hibernation" to prove himself as visible in the world of whites. He acts to be invisible to everyone to presents how the white power structure overshadowed the identity of blacks in American society. For this quest, he makes journey and does different works for his existence. His identity remains in crisis when he is restricted from acting according to his own will for his visibility, recognition and protection. Racism causes the crisis of personal identities. His desire to be visible means he wants his identity in his society.

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