Creative Saplings, Vol. 01, No. 05, Aug. 2022
ISSN-0974-536X, https://creativesaplings.in/
Email: editor.creativesaplings22@gmail.com
DOI: https://doi.org/10.56062/gtrs.2022.1.5.5

"If you're white, you're right": Bone of Contention between the Black and the White as Reflected in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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ABSTRACT

Racial discrimination can entail overt, direct antagonism from the white community to those who belong to unrepresented racial groups. Discrimination can also be subtly planned out and sneaky. Racism in its subtlest manifestations is evasive and confusing. Many countries, especially Europe and North America, have intense institutionalized racism. Ralph Ellison's popular book Invisible Man, which won the Pulitzer Prize, captures the attitudes of many white Americans against racial rights (1952). The 1952 book *Invisible Man* describes how the so-called white American culture deliberately and cunningly continues to ignore black people. More so than their Native American identification, it is because of their socioeconomic or cultural differences. We'll talk about the second book from the perspective of cultural racism. Harper Lee also examines the unreasonable attitude toward race and class in her ground-breaking book *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). The incidents in this book have implications for the author's life.

Keywords: *Black and the White, Racism, Nazism, Ralph Ellison, Native American.*

Even after the death of Nazism and the process of decolonization, racism still is a growing global phenomenon. Racism is the cultural practice of discrimination, at all levels of society, from a personal slur to colonial oppression on the basis of race. There has been a spate of scholarly debates after the 1950s regarding the names and characteristics of races. The famous Marxist critics Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, through their noted book titled *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (1991), challenge the commonly held belief of racism as a continuation of the xenophobia of the past societies and communities. They analyse it instead as a social relation inextricably tied to contemporary social structures—the nation-state, the division of labour, and the rift between core and periphery—which are themselves

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Received 08 Aug. 2022; Accepted 18 Aug. 2022. Available online: 25 Aug. 2022.
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constantly in a flux: "…racism is not an "expression" of nationalism . . . but always indispensable to its constitution" (Balibar & Wallerstein 54).

Racial discrimination can involve explicit, immediate hostility expressed by the white community towards members of a non-privileged racial group. Discrimination can also be cleverly contrived and insidious. Subtle forms of racism are indirect and ambiguous. Racism is deeply ingrained in many societies, particularly Europe and North America. Ralph Ellison sums up the views of many white people in America toward civil rights in his acclaimed novel Invisible Man (1952). It starts with an ironic greeting: "To Whom It May Concern: Keep this Nigger-Boy Running" (Ellison 35). This idea is reflective of the intolerably bleak situation Afro- Americans had to face in America. The narrator of this archetypal black existential novel introduces himself as an "invisible" man at the very beginning of the Prologue:

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. 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. (Ellison 7)

The narrator explains that his invisibility owes not to some biological deformities but arises out of the recalcitrance of the white race to take notice of him because of his black complexion. It is as though in their world; he is not a tangible reality. The narrator says that his invisibility can serve as a vantage point and bondage. His invisibility sometimes makes him introspect whether he is tangible or not. He describes his desperate need to make others feel him and realizes that such attempts rarely succeed. When he thinks of himself as invisible, he not only means to say that other people do not bother to see him but also that no one thinks of him as an individual entity. He is bereft of his true identity. His identity is constantly negotiated within the white racist community. The narrator ironically says in the "Prologue" that "I am not only invisible but formless as well, and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility" (Ellison 10). The way the narrator tries to understand his self is based on what others perceive of him.

Racism is a 'total social phenomenon', observed the French philosopher Etienne Balibar. Segregation in a racist society is articulated around marks of otherness, viz, class, creed, skin pigmentation, religious practices, etc. Balibar's concept of "neo-racism" later came to be known as "cultural racism". People generally no longer claim to have a superior race but a superior culture. That's why Balibar also called it "racism without race" and "meta-racism." Balibar defines this racism by pinpointing that it does not have in its core genetic inheritance,

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"but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but 'only' the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of lifestyles and traditions" (Balibar et.al. 21).

The novel *Invisible Man* (1952) depicts how the so-called white American society consciously and insidiously keeps on ignoring the blacks. It is more for their class or cultural difference than their indigenous identity. The noted political thinker and historian Benedict Anderson contends in his path-breaking book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) that "The dreams of racism have their origins in ideologies of class, rather than in those of nation" (Anderson 149). The bildungsroman is a telling narrative of an anonymous young South American black man's odyssey from innocence to experience as he gropes, first in South America and then in North America, to posit himself in the world. One of the reasons the narrator is invisible is that Ellison feels white people ignore to see black people. Ellison's predecessor Richard Wright in his novel Native Son (1940), also made use of the metaphor of black invisibility. Wright in his book Pagan Spain (1957) elaborates, "I have no race except that which is forced upon me. I have no country except that to which I'm obliged to belong. I have no traditions. I'm free. I have only the future" (Wright 21).

In Ellison's novel, much of the protagonist's sufferings, pangs, and trauma come from the white racist people and those poor black people who sweat for their white masters instead of money. From this point of view, the narrator may be seen as a representative of the black community in America. When interviewed about his so-called "invisible" narrator, Ellison tried to bring home the point that his hero could not be strait-jacketed into any specific spatio-temporal territory; instead, he was universal. He may be equated with any frustrated person groping for self-discovery in the political turmoil, angst, and existential crises of the-then America. The novel lays bare absurdity, anxiety, and alienation vis-à-vis the experience of the black folk in mid-1900s America. The anonymity of the main character of the novel, a figure loosely based on Ellison's own life, points to the trauma of black people receiving racist names (like Jack Crow) that were forcefully bestowed on them.

From the angle of 'Neo Racism,' it can be stated that black people are trapped in immutable stereotypes. In an episode, blindfolded big black boys are coerced into fighting one another for the sheer entertainment of the drunken white spectators. After the battle, black entertainers are further debased by having to creep on an electrified carpet to pick up coins. The blindfolds can

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also denote the black boys' symbolic blindness—their incapability and powerlessness to see through the false veneer of goodwill that hardly hide white men's racist motives as they force the boys to comply to the stereotyped definition of the black man as barbaric, uncouth, and virile. It is too late when he unveils the falsity of the gold coins and cunning generosity of the white folk.

An important point of 'neo-racism" (also termed as 'new racism,' 'cultural racism' etc. by different thinkers) is that it portrays ethnic and religious background as intrinsic and strait-jacketing people in apparently unchanging categories, as if they are not capable of keeping abreast of new reality or transforming their own lives. The narrator of the novel Invisible Man (1952) also falls into this trap of social stratification. The narrator, metaphorically blind in many respects, has not yet inculcated the habit of seeing beyond the veneers held by white society.

Failing to secure a job after being dismissed from school, the narrator is sent to work under the guidance of Lucius Brockway. Brockway, the black man, is the real manufacturer of the Optic White paint that he takes pride in, but the naive young narrator fails to decipher the irony of the situation. The advertising tagline for the paint is, "If It's Optic White, It's the Right White" (Ellison 190). Here white paint is used as a metaphor for white society. The slogan equates whiteness to purity, implying the moral superiority of the white class. The slogan reminds the narrator of an old South American maxim: "If you're white, you're right" (Ellison 190). The "Liberty Paints" workshop is a macroscopic metaphor for racial instability and disequalibrium rampant in America. The method of gelling the base elements with dead black chemicals to give birth to the luminous white paint tries to show, in a way, that the luminosity of whiteness also needs blackness. The supremacy and prerogatives of the white class is the end-products of the subjugation and exploitation of the black labourers. The white community cannot claim its dominant position indicating "purity," "liberty," and "rightness" sans exploiting/toppling the black community.

The novel *Invisible Man* (1952) is afflicted by the theme—the struggle to secure a sense of identity, an identity closely related to an idea of liberty that Lincoln addressed in his famous "Gettysburg Address" (1863). The furious narrator feels frustrated at his inability to execute anything productive. He wears a pair of sunglasses as a strategy of disguise, and he suddenly discovers that he has resorted to another novel identity, that of Rinehart, a fraudster. According to Balibar, cultural racism demonstrates that when two different groups concurrently exist in

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the same geographical location, it "naturally" gives birth to a clash. In this novel also, the narrator has to pass his days surreptitiously in the white majority area.

The advocates of "cultural racism" believe that attempts at gelling various ethnic and cultural groups themselves give way to prejudiced partiality. Ellison endorses an axiom of Heraclitus in his book Going to the Territory (1986) that "Geography is fate" (Ellison 198). Ellison declares that no amount of diligence on the part of black Americans will make them eligible to attain equal social, cultural, or political status. Patterns of behaviour among individuals or between individuals and society have different levels of analysis, and this is a key to decipher the connecting cord between man and society.

The narrator finally realizes his stupidity by thinking what a moron he has been all the years and realizes that he has, to white people, been metaphorically unseen all these times. He takes solace in the advice of his grandfather, and begins "yessing them to death," meanwhile surreptitiously thinking about his stratagem. The narrator narrowly escapes being killed by Ras, a savage black rebel who has accumulated black people to rage war against the white class. He rides on a black horse and is donned as an Ethiopian leader. He dives into a maintenance hole to avoid an assault by a group of white thugs and falls fast asleep. Ellison's novel can also be linked to Dostoevsky's novel *Notes from Underground* (1864) by the common use of another racial metaphor, the 'Underground Man.' During his hibernating period, the narrator has tried to search for the meaning of his life without interference from the white class. He discards his "Brotherhood" identity. The different masks he voluntarily puts on during his odyssey reflect somebody else's idea of him. As the novel ends, the narrator remains unsure and flabbergasted regarding his identity. Identity is understood within cultural studies as a critique of any autonomous and essentialized self. The novel ends with an Epilogue in which the narrator decides in favour of coming out of his den. In this sense, the novel is a covert critique of white supremacist politics. He is now ready to rejoin "Brotherhood" because he comes to understand himself better now and wishes to rebel against the system... This reminds the readers of the narrator's comment in the Prologue: "A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" (Ellison 16). The novel thus comes to an end as he begins afresh.

Now, the second novel will be discussed from the angle of cultural racism. In her revolutionary novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Harper Lee also explores the irrational attitude to race and class. The events in this novel have biographical reverberations. In 1931, when Lee was five-year-old, she read in the newspaper report that there was an outrageous accusation against nine

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young black men of raping two white women near Scottsboro, Alabama. After lengthy and rancorous trials, five out of nine men were sentenced to rigorous and long prison terms. Many prominent lawyers and a few non-racist American citizens viewed the sentences as utterly unfair, blatant, and propelled only by racial prejudice. It was also presumed that the women who had brought accusations against the men resorted to lying. In appeal after appeal, their claims became more spurious. The Scottsboro Case (as the trials of the nine men popularly came to be referred to) served as a base for the trial that stands at the nucleus of Lee's novel. She completed writing the novel in 1957 and published it, with some revisions, in 1960 in the racially charged atmosphere of America.

According to Balibar, racism is all-pervasive. He studies racism as a multidimensional historical reality whose patterns are updated through the memory of previous forms of racism. He claims that racist violence, as one comes across in Lee's novel, is sponsored by the legal and other ideological state apparatuses. In theory, readers find that America praises unity, liberty, fraternity, and universalism but is racist in practice. He justifies the link between racism and the class struggle because race is but another term for class. Whenever individuals like Tom Robinson and Boo are plunged into the bogs of social indifference, a racist crisis is triggered, nonetheless.

In this novel, readers find that innocent people are getting destroyed by evil forces. Here, the "mockingbird" is synonymous with innocence. Thus, killing a mockingbird is tantamount to demolition of naivety and innocence. Throughout the novel, a string of characters (Jem, Boo Radley, Tom Robinson, Mr. Raymond, Dill, and others) can be identified as mockingbirds—innocent folks who have been psychologically annihilated by coming into contact with evil. In the end, Scout thinks that inflicting pain upon Boo Radley is like "shootin' a mockingbird" (Lee 304). That the surnames of Jem and Scout are Finch (another type of small bird) suggests that childhood innocence is helpless in the racially charged scenario of Maycomb.

Atticus functions as the moral backbone of Maycomb (the small South American town the novel is set in), a person to whom others turn up in times of indecision and problem seeking legal help. Unable to digest the ingrained racial prejudice of the town, he condescends to defend a black man, Tom Robinson, who has been charged with ravishing a white woman of Maycomb. It is interesting to note that when this novel was published in 1960, Civil Rights Movements were beginning to start in the U. S. with sit-ins, marches, boycotts, and demonstrations. Intolerance about racial and cultural differences is found to be rife in

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Maycomb. Because of the brave decision of Atticus to defend Tom, Jem and Scout face abuse and derision from other white children. As the novel moves forward, Scout and Jem understand that their estimate of Boo Radley's personality is unfair and crude. Atticus informs Scout, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee 33). Furthermore, they ultimately recognize the necessity of embracing each individual, irrespective of one's difference from one another.

Balibar thinks that neo-racists might even admit that the behaviour of individuals cannot be gauged by referring to their bloodline or genetic structures, but it can only be truly understood by cultural belonging. He contends that for this 'racism without race' formula, there is bound to be a paradigm shift from nature to culture. In neo-racism, "culture can also function like a nature" and "as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable" (Balibar et. al. 22).

Tom Robinson is also a "mockingbird". This Afro-American rustic guy has convinced Atticus Finch that he is not culpable, but to convince an all-white jury is undoubtedly a titanic task altogether, a different ball game. Finch may make desperate attempts to arrange a fair trial for his client, but the likelihood of Robinson's survival (irrespective of the jury's verdict) was slim in a town rife with racial prejudices. Despite crystal-clear evidence pointing to Tom's sheer innocence, the white jury members nonetheless convict him of the crime. Tom is imprisoned. The blameless Tom later tries to flee from prison, and the police brutally shoot him. Atticus declares during the trial, "To begin with, this case should never have come to trial. This case is as simple as black and white" (Lee 224). A good man, Robinson, is denied the protection of the law because he is not white. The primitive fear of 'otherness' is the root of most of the evils of the world, as reflected in this novel.

Dismissing the general idea that "all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings, that all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women" (Lee 225-6), Atticus delivers a long tirade:

> Which, gentlemen, we know is in itself a lie as black as Tom Robinson's skin, a lie I do not have to point out to you. You know the truth, and the truth is this: some Negroes lie, some Negroes are immoral, some Negro men are not to be trusted around women—black and white. But this is a truth that applies to the human race of men. There is not a person in this courtroom who has never told a lie, who has never done an immoral thing, and there is no man living who has never looked upon a woman with desire. (Lee 225-6)

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Here, one finds that 'cultural racism' helps to generate a climate of hostility towards black persons like Boo and Tom. Balibar argues that 'neo-racism' is a vile product of the worshipping of individualistic and white supremacist culture: "the cultures supposed implicitly superior are those which appreciate and promote 'individual' enterprise, social and political individualism, as against those which inhibit these things" (Balibar et al. 25). The all-white jury in Maycomb holds the same notion against Boo and Tom as if they pose a threat to the social and political structure.

Boo Radley can be said to be another "mockingbird". Radley is a recluse, but no one is sure about the reason. However, when the children of the Finch family need him, he leaves his house to assist them, despite his reasons for literally hiding in his closet all the time. Without a genuine attempt to know/understand him, much of the town has dubbed Arthur "Boo" Radley as a strange monster. While Boo may not have to suffer racial discrimination, the white community nevertheless ostracizes him for being the embodiment of cultural dissimilarity and the diametrical opposition of social compliance.

According to 'neo racism', contemporary racism is more subtle, but it is as bad as traditional racism of colour, creed, and race since its aim and effects are the same. It purports to explain and legitimize biased types of behaviour or hate speech and helps to ignite them. The same thing happens with Boo. Boo is a kind of metaphorical mockingbird whose innocence is damaged by the well-meant act of rescuing the kids from their attacker. In a genuine attempt to do something good, Boo faces scorn for the perpetration of Ewell's death. The sheriff very well aware that Boo, like Tom Robinson, would be misunderstood and likely to be tried. He protects Boo by saying Ewell died by stumbling over his knife. After having a brief chat with Scout, Boo moves back into his dark closet, and Scout does not see him hereafter. The hostile attitudes toward Boo and Tom are born out of racial prejudices and the cold recalcitrance of the white people in Maycomb.

The trials of Tom Robinson and Boo Radley remind the readers of McCarthyism, the practice of imposing false accusations against Communists without solid evidence by Senator McCarthy from 1950 to 1956 in America. It is the practice of making false accusations of disloyalty, especially of pro-Communist activities, in many instances not supported by evidence or merely based on dubious or irrelevant assumptions. Nowadays, the term is used more generally to refer to non-evidential accusations and demagogic attacks on political adversaries. Though the context is different, the repercussion of the illogical trials of the black

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folks in the novel can be related to the baseless trials of the communists in the McCarthy era (1950-56). The readers of this novel find that the all-white court in Maycomb harbours a strong sense of prejudice against the black convicts, tickling the white people's emotions, instincts, and prejudices in a highly manipulative and dangerous way.

The lack of sight in both the books is not used in the literal or physical sense but in the metaphorical sense. The lack of sight can be suggestive of a lack of insight. In both the books, many characters allow their prejudices to get in the way of the tangible truth. In the "Epilogue" of Ellison's novel Invisible Man (1952), accepting his sad state of affairs, the narrator does not put blame on anyone: "I'm not blaming anyone for this state of affairs, mind you; nor merely crying mea culpa. The fact is that you carry part of your sickness within you, at least I do as an invisible man" (Ellison497). The narrator nurses a visionary hope of playing a 'responsible role' in some unspecified future. While the main reason the novel To Kill a Mockingbird (1940) frequently appeared on the chart of banned books is its use of profanity. It has also been challenged for its one-sided depiction of the African American folks as naive folk who need the white people to be-shield them. But most readers think the novel takes a powerful stance against racism.

While both the novels deal with the gravity of the racist problem, they also hint at the golden chances people must grab to uproot the social malady in the coming days. Of course, any hope of dispelling racism requires proper education, information, and a sense of brotherhood among all people cutting across skin complexion, class, culture, ethnicity, creed, race, religion, etc. Along with a sensible bonding, psychological/material support to the groups which are perennial victims of racism is the only way to counter racism and discrimination in all their vile manifestations. There is an idea that history is not only the acceptance of necessity but also the recognition of a plethora of possibilities. Here the strong implication is that, given mutual recognition by the whites and the blacks, the 'invisible man' and Boo would indeed become visible men with a significant role to play in the white society.

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