

**RACISM AND IDENTITY IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON* AND RALPH
ELLISION'S *THE INVISIBLE MAN***

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**AN ESSAY SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERATURE,
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CERTIFICATION

I certify that this project titled: **Racism and Identity in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*** is carried out, under my supervision by Gift Dominion OHIORHENUAN (MISS) with Matriculation Number ART2000225 in Department of English and Literature, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State.

PROF H.O OKOLOCHA
(Project Supervisor)

Date

DEDICATION

This project work is dedicated to God Almighty for his grace and the strength during the course of this journey; to my parents, Mr and Mrs Ozogo who laid the foundation for this journey, without whom I would not have made it this far.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the themes of racism and identity in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. It seeks to uncover instances of systemic racism and the issue of identity in both novels. This is to uncover how both Richard and Ralph portray the issues surrounding racism and identity in the Northern and Southern part of America.

1.2 Scope of Study

The study is limited to the theme of racism and identity in Wright's *Native Son* and Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. It analyses how Richard and Ralph portray racism and identity inherent in the social systems through the characters and dialogues. It focuses on the instances of systemic racism, identity in both novels and the effects of racism. These books were chosen because they reflect racism and the effects of it on individuals.

1.3 Methodology

The research work employs qualitative methodology. Information used is gotten from relevant literature reviews, focusing on a literary analysis of Wright's *Native Son* and Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. The primary method involves close reading and textual analysis of both novels. This analysis will be guided by critical race theory which focuses on how laws reflect the issue of racism.

1.4 Theoretical Background

The study employs the use of Critical race theory. In the 1970s, critical race theory emerged as a response to the stagnation and potential rollback of the US civil rights movement.

Activists and legal scholars sought to understand the reasons behind this stagnation and developed a framework that highlighted the deep-seated, systemic issues in the legal system that perpetuated racial oppression and white privilege. They emphasised the need to examine the broader structural and institutional factors that maintained racial inequality, rather than just focusing on individual instances of discrimination.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an academic discipline that examines the intersections and power dynamics between race, ethnicity, and the social, political, and media structures that shape our society. It analyzes how race and ethnicity are constructed and represented in laws, policies, and media, and how these constructions impact social justice and equality. A key CRT concept is intersectionality. The way in which different forms of inequality and identity are affected by interconnections of race, class, gender and disability (Gilborn 278). Deckha "Intersectionality and posthumanistic visions of equality " intersectionality as a powerful tool for understanding how different aspects of our identities - like gender, race, class, sexuality, and more - intersect and overlap to produce unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. This framework recognizes that our identities are complex and multifaceted, and that they can result in both advantages and disadvantages. By examining these intersections, we can gain a deeper understanding of how social and political identities shape our lives and opportunities

Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholars contend that race is a socially fabricated concept, devoid of any scientific or biological foundation, social constructs are widespread and diverse, including ,the value we assign to money ,our understanding of self and identity , beauty standard e t c These constructs form the fabric of our society, often operating beneath our conscious awareness. they argue that race is a product of cultural, historical, and political forces that have created and perpetuated racial categories to maintain power dynamic. According to Orbe ,What

separates CRT from other forms of racial critique is that, “Unlike most of the earlier genres of race scholarship, critical race scholarship does not treat race as an independent variable; rather, it regards race as a site of struggle” (Orbe 209).

The position of Derrick Bell is salient to this study. He is widely regarded as the founder of Critical Race Theory (CRT). While the discipline is relatively new, it builds upon earlier examinations of race in America. Bell describes CRT as “a body of legal scholarship...ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by law” (p. 898). According to Bell, a manifestation of our humanity which survives and grows stronger through resistance to oppression, even if that oppression is never overcome” (378), he is attributed with a theory known as interest convergence dilemma. This theory of interest convergence suggests that because racism is beneficial to white people they have little incentive to eradicate it. Using the lens of interest convergence, critical race theorists argued that both civil rights gains and changing attitudes towards people of colour regularly coincided with changing needs and desires of white people.

Bell argues that given the systemic and entrenched nature of racism in the United States, people of color should, Abandon the pursuit of equality, as it is an unattainable ideal instead, actively confront and challenge those who perpetuate racism and oppression acknowledge and assert their own power and agency in the face of systemic oppression. In other words, this suggests that people of color should shift their focus from seeking equality which may be an unattainable goal to taking action, claiming their power, and confronting the systems and individuals that perpetuate racism.(898)

Bell also argues that when fighting for racial justice, advocates will only be successful when their aim aligns with the needs and desires of privileged white people in society. Bell also

believes in the permanence of racism and the persistence of white supremacy, due primarily to what he referred to as the interest-convergence dilemma. the interest-convergence dilemma, Bell posits that racial progress for nonwhite people in the United States is only possible if the goals of the racial justice movement were the same as those of the white-dominated power structure.(255) In conclusion, critical race theory serves as a framework for analyzing both novels ,the theory reflects racism and how it is embedded in the social system which is one of the element present in both text.

1. 5 Review of Scholarship

Some critics have examined Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. Shakir Mutaz opines that, in *Native Son*, the denial of identity and alienation that young black men (to say nothing of the women who are almost always worse off) face that precipitates tragedy (344). This means that due to how marginalized and alienated the blacks were they felt lost not knowing who they really were or what they are capable to doing this feeling is what led to the protagonist downfall.

Nagy Alex argues that social position worked for him negatively. In the novels, social and physical environment make alienate violent and passive stranger who never gets a meaningful life (3). The society Bigger lived in contributed immensely to his tragic end. It is seen in the novel how blacks are limited in the area of education, employment and even the healthcare sector.

A society is supposed to equip or help an individual greatly but the protagonist own segregated him. Anna Gee says that *Native Son* demonstrates that violence is perpetuated by white objectification of blacks. In treating black as objects, white create an environment that precludes black identification as human (14). What she is trying to say is that, due to how the

environment or society is constructed, the blacks no longer see themselves as human but as an object.

She goes further to say that suppression of Bigger's human identity renders him indifferent to the suffering of other human beings (15). Due to how bigger and his people were treated by the whites, He feels suppressed both physically and mentally thereby making it impossible for him to feel sympathetic after the murder of both Bessie and Mary.

According to Ayan Meryem since the white men had received educational opportunities denied to Bigger on the basis of race and since their linguistic environment would increase the possibility of their detecting Bigger's deviation from Standard American English, they fail on an intellectual level" (125). This means that bigger was denied the right to quality education thereby making it difficult for him to acquire standard English ,due to the environment he grew up in ,unlike the whites who were highly educated but

Alan Bourassa says that, in doubting his own existence, the invisible man is staking a claim to personality, to character, to being the center of an experience, however invisible it may be Ayan tries to make it known that the white are still not better than the black because, no matter the knowledge they acquire, their failure to not feel sympathy towards the blacked makes them a failure.

Erfin Baharina Santika argues, in *Native Son*; Wright says that Black do not have freedom as the Whites do. It also describes Black movement to show their protest against the White policies in America. The novel, *Native Son*, talks about how caged the blacks are, how subjugate, marginalized and thingnified they were feeling. It explains how all the feelings led to the death of three individuals. It is like a wakeup call which asks the blacks to show their protest against racism. The title of this book is ironical because, the name Native son refers to the son of

a soil, that is a man who belongs or who is from that land, who deserves to enjoy the benefits of being a son of the son, but we get to find out that the protagonist experiences the direct opposite.

Khamis Khalaf Mohammad opines that *Invisible Man* is characterized by its distinguished style, satirical temper and surrealistic tone. It is a most powerful novel. It treats the racial environment on a 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 (3). This equally means that the novel *The Invisible Man* is distinguished by its unique style of writing. It uses satire to criticize or laughs at the ills in the society, giving a detailed description of the environment by the use of symbols .It tells the story and experiences of the Negroes.to others (the invisible man, must note, is never invisible to him). *The Invisible Man* as the name implies feels he is invisible to others but in the real sense, he longs to be noticed by others that us why he claims invisibility.

Nathan Scott justifies the actions of the invisible man comments that all his reversals have been due to the blackness of his skin: so now, at last, he decides to stay in his cellar where, by way of a tapped line, he will steal the electricity for his 1,369 bulbs from Monopolated Light and Power and dine on sloe gin and vanilla ice cream and embrace “*The Blackness of Blackness*” (Scott,106) .Scott tries to justify the actions of the invisible man ,indirectly emphasizing on the fact that all of these is as a result of his he is treated.

Beulah Jeyashree opines that the protagonist is tossed between too many negatives. The sense of dispossession, the unconscious racial chauvinism, the ideology of life, and his own identity in this world. He starts to question himself and is depressed by his loss of sense of direction. (350) .However this describes the emotional and psychological state of the protagonist. He is caught between too many negative forces, feeling disconnected from the society, loss of

identity and internalized racism are all forces that weigh down the protagonist .thereby leading to him questioning his own identity.

Emenyi Abang and Kalu argue that the quest for self-identity by the Blacks anywhere in the world where racism is practiced is valuable to the Negro. Identity, actualization and social equality are the crux of the concern of the Blacks, be it in America, South Africa among natives and diaspora. *Invisible Man* in Ralph Ellison's novel which exposes him to the literary lime light (15). Basically, the invisible man revolves around the protagonists search for identity, which is part of what the Negroes struggle to fight for freedom and their identity. Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* strongly revolves around this central idea and it was this book that made the author known.

1.6 Thesis Statement

Through the experiences of the characters, Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* demonstrate the instances of Systemic racism and Identity in the novels, to establish the issues surrounding racism and Identity in Wright's *Native Son* and Ellison's *The Invisible Man*.

CHAPTER TWO

INSTANCES OF SYSTEMIC RACISM

2.1 Introduction

Systemic racism exists when a society's institutions and systems perpetuate racial disparities and inequalities, resulting in unequal access to opportunities and unfair treatment. It also refers to how laws, policies and institutions perpetuate racism.

2.2 Systemic Racism in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*

Wright's novel *Native Son* tells the heartbreaking story of Bigger Thomas, a young black man living in 1930s Chicago. After a moment of panic, Bigger commits a tragic crime, murdering a white woman. Published in 1940, amidst heightened racial tensions in America, owing to the Jim Crow' laws evident in the society. Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man* tells the story of an unnamed protagonist who recounts his experiences from when he is a young college boy to when he becomes an adult. He struggles with racism and tells how he struggles to find his identity in a world that chooses not to see him as something due to the systemic barriers and racism. This book serves as a powerful wake-up call, shedding light on the harsh realities of racial inequality and discrimination coupled with how the social system plays a vital role in the escalation and the tragic event that took place in the areas of Education, Employment, Housing, Health care and in the Legal system.

2.2 .1 Education

Education is the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, values, and critical thinking abilities through formal or informal learning. It plays a crucial role in personal development and societal progress by fostering intellectual growth, social mobility, and economic opportunities.

According to Oladele Taiwo, the total efforts of a community to raise its economic, social and political standard of life (iv). In other words, it is the duty of the society or community to give sound education to its people, failure to do so will bring about disaster to the economic, social and political standard of life.

As a result of systemic racism, the protagonist is denied his full right to education. He stopped going to school at eighth grade this is seen in his conversation with Mrs Dalton.

"How far did you go in school, Bigger?"

"To the eighth grade, mam" (92)

The above conversation symbolizes that there were limited educational opportunities for the Bigger, He is not even able to attend high school. As such he could not earn a degree due to poverty which is as a result of the way blacks were segregated and racism also as a contributing factor that were present in the educational system. He is limited to having a good job and is not able to achieve his dream this is also seen in his conversation with Gus his friend,

"I could Fly a plane if I had a chance; Bigger said."

"If you wasn't black and if you had some money and
if they 'd let you go to that aviation school ,you could
fly a plane,' Gus said"(46-47)

This conversation proves that if given a chance to attain full education Bigger's life would not have taken a tragic end. but due to how the social barriers in Chicago. Bigger goes further to tell us how badly he wanted to be an aviator

"I wanted to be an aviator once. But they wouldn't let me
go to the school where I was suppose' to learn it .They
built a big school and then drew a line around it and said

that nobody could go to it but those who lived within the line. That kept all coloured boys out "()

It took a lot before he opened up to Mr Max on what he wanted to do but never had the chance to .this quotation clearly shows that a wall was built over the aviation school separating the whites from the blacks, making sure the blacks will not be able to attend this school. This is a clear illustration of how racism is embedded in the educational system from not being able to complete his education to not being able to attend aviation school.

Ellison's novel *The Invisible man* tells the story of an unnamed protagonist who recounts his experiences from when he is a young college boy to when he becomes an adult .He struggles with racism and tells how he struggles to find his identity in a world that chooses not to see him as something due to the systemic barriers and racism .

As stated earlier that education is the process of acquiring knowledge through formal and informal settings .the narrator struggles with systemic barriers although ,unlike the protagonist in Wright's native Son ,he is given a chance to fully attend school but this is cut short as a result of Dr Bledsoe who internalized systemic racism and chooses to appease the white benefactor over genuinely helping or uplifting his student.

"Don't you know we can't tolerate such a thing ? I gave
gave you an opportunity to serve one of our best white
friends, a man who make your fortune .But in return you
dragged the entire race into the lime"(131)

This extract illustrates how Bledsoe prefers to gain the favour of the white benefactor, paint a fine picture of what the Blacks are going through and most importantly expels the protagonist over something that was not his fault. This shows that Blacks have internalize

systemic racism, to the extent of discarding someone of his race. Prior to this incident. The narrator tells his experiences on how he attained the scholarship while fighting in the battle royal with his classmates to be able to fully deliver his speech which led to his scholarship.

"Everyone fought hysterically.it was complete anarchy"(22)

Even in this moment of pain ,anxiety and struggle the narrator still remembers his speech he is suppose to give ,hoping he is recognized ,accepted and honoured.

"The harder we fought the more threatening the men became.

And yet , I had begun to worry about my speech again .How would it go ? Would they recognize my ability? What would they give me?"(23)

After fighting hard to attain the scholarship ,he ends up being betrayed by the college president who conforms to white supremacy .

2.2.2 Employment

In the area of employment, there is a laid down pattern followed by the people. The blacks are only allowed to work in designated places, they are only privileged to carry out menial job, they are not allowed to venture into services which the white people have ventured into.This is seen in the conversation between Mr Max and Mr Dalton during Bigger's trial

"Have You ever employed any of the Negroes you helped to educate?"

"Why, no"(357 _358)

From the above reply from Mr Dalton, it is seen that when a Negroes is still educated, the chances of being employed are slim. They are employed only to carry out menial jobs like Mrs Dalton who through the opening scene we discover that she washes people's clothes all in a bid to survive.

"Buddy, get up from there! I got a big washing
on my hands today and I want you -all out of here"(33)

The protagonist wanted to work in the army also but living in a society still controlled by Jim Crow laws, he gives up this idea without trying.

"Hell, it's a Jim crow army.All they want a black
man for is to dig ditches .And in the navy ,all I
can do is wash dishes and scrub floors"(383)

We can see that the protagonist never really had a chance to venture into what he really wants to do, he is constantly constrained.

Restrictions is also made in *The Invisible Man*, when the nameless narrator travels to New York with dreams, hope and aspirations ,He discovers that the north too is still not better than the south even though the Blacks are treated more humane here than the south . He struggles to secure a job after sending out the letters written by Dr Bledsoe, who promises him a job on his arrival, but he later realises that he is being betrayed. This serves as a turning point in this novel.

"I'll give you letters to some of the school's friends to see
that you get work "he said. "But this time, use your
judgement, keep your eyes open ,get in the swing
of things ! Then, if you make good, perhaps ...well
perhaps ... It's up to u "(135)

The above clearly shows that in order to get a job you need the connection of the white men .in the area of employment restrictions were made when entering a New York he is given letters of recommendations to enable him acquire employment easily although the content in the letter is different.

2.2.3 Housing

This is also another area where racism is embedded in. A house is meant to be a home, a place comfortable where one has peace of mind and it is your right to choose the area where you want to live in. In the novel, segregation is witnessed. The area inhabited by the Blacks is different from where the whites live.

"Mr Dalton, doesn't the policy of your company tends to keep
Negroes on the South Side, in one area? "(357)

Mr Dalton owns a real estate company building, which the Thomas family lives in, and he gives houses to Negroes only at designated places. His company also refuses to rent houses to Negroes if the houses are in other parts of the city. According to Mr Dalton, this is an old custom (357), which indicates that this laws are not just made recently but they been in the system for a very long time. Also, the house given to the Blacks are in a terrible condition and they have to pay high rental costs unlike what the White pay.

"Why is it that you charge the Thomas family and other
Negro families more rent for the same kind of houses
than you charge white ?"(356)

How and where the protagonist lived contributed greatly to his tragic end Everyday he feels chocked and helpless. He also hates how his family lived and his inability to do anything about it.

"He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering
and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that if he
allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the
shame and misery of their lives ,he would be swept out of

himself with fear and despair."(40)

The Protagonist even compares his house with that of the Dalton's own. making him realise that perhaps maybe they have to live this way because they never did anything that really mattered.

"There was no rug on the floor and the plastering on the walls and ceiling hung loose in many places. There were two worn iron beds , four chairs, an old dresser, and a drop-leaftable on which they ate .This was much different from the Dalton's home.Here all slept in one room ;there he would have a room for himself alone.He smelt food cooking and remembered that one could not smell food cooking in Dalton's home ; pots could not be heard rattling all over the house. Each person lived in one room and had a little world of his own .He hated this room and all the people in it , including himself .Why did he and his folks have to live like this? What had they ever done ? perhaps they had not done anything. Maybe they had to live this way precisely because none of them in all their lives had ever done anything, right or wrong , that mattered much "(135)

He indirectly implies that the negroes did nothing.order to survive, they must live doing nothing.and they stay where they are asked to stay, eat what they are asked to eat and do what that are asked to do. All their lives revolves in one circle with the whites at the top of the food chain and in other to survive they must live doing nothing.

2.2.4 Legal System

Racism is also perpetuated in the legal system. This includes ways in which laws, policies and verdicts are unjustly passed, and instances of maltreatment, segregation or separation. When Bigger is on the run, a cordon of five thousand police are in search of him unlike what would have happened if it was only a Negroes he killed or if it was a white person that committed the crime.

"FIVE THOUSAND POLICE SURROUND BLACK BELT."(273)

Due to the manhunt, many Negroes are attacked and their windows are destroyed, including cars, bus and trains. They raid homes of Negroes and some are beaten up..

"Reports were current that several Negro men were

beaten in various North and West Side neighborhoods"(275)

During the jury trial at the inquest ,all the jury's were all whites.A black boy murders a white woman and a black woman ,the members of the jury is supposed to include both races so as to ensure a fair trial but this was not the case. Due to the verdict given Mr Max rejects another jury trial by the grand jury.

"Dare I, deeply mindful of this boy's background and

and race ,puts his fate in the hands of a jury (not of

his peers,but of an hostile race)"(413)

In jail Bigger's segregation between prisoners in different cell blocks and where white offenders stays is different from where the blacks stays .This shows how Systemic racism has eaten deep into the legal system. This indirectly implies that even in jail regardless of the degree of crime committed the whites are still better off than the blacks ,so they should be separated and be in different blocks.

"The fact that even here in the Cook County Jail Negro
and white were segregated into different cell-blocks"

2.2.5 Health Care

Health Care should entail providing essential medical services, treatments to patients and support to families which will help in improving the health of individual. This is not the case of the Nameless narrator in Ellison's *The Invisible Man*.

When the accident in the factory happened , instead of the Nameless narrator to be fully treated on account of his injury ,upon waking up, seeing the faces of the doctor he feels relieved, not knowing that he will be used as a 'Lab rat ' .

"They would care for me .It was all geared towards
the easing of pain. I felt thankful"(217)

Unknowingly, to him, the people or institution he feels will ease his pain ends up increasing it.

"The pulse came swift and staccato, increasing
gradually until I fairly danced between the nodes
my teeth clattered . I closed my eyes and bit my
lips to smother my screams .warm blood filled
my mouth".(220-221)

This shows that the pains he is going through, An hospital is supposed to care for you, ease your pain and heals you but this is not the case the white doctor uses him as an experiment .The doctor justifies his action by saying he wants to transform the narrator.

"the result is as complete a change of personality
as you'll find in your famous fairy_tale cases of

criminals transformed into amiable fellows after
after all that bloody business of a brain operation".(220)

The narrator is already labelled a criminal even before he commits a crime. Instead of waking up in an hospital bed he wakes up seeing himself in a different manner.

"I discovered that, I was not lying on an operating table
but in a kind of glass and nickel box, the lid of which
was propped open .(217)

It is evident that both novels reflect how systemic racism leads to the escalation of racism ,showing how the different sectors suppose to help the characters ,serves as a tool for further destruction

2.3 Effects of Racism in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*

Racism brings about various devastating effect in the life of the protagonists due to the segregation and marginalization made bigger suffers both mentally and physically, from Fear, Hatred , Violence, Death , Dehumanisation, Invisibility and Poverty. Although there are other effects this will be the main focus of this essay.

2.3.1 Fear

Fear makes Bigger to internalize racist views. This feelings ends up sinking deep into him which eventually leads to his downfall. On his way to Mr Dalton's residence, he feels afraid of entering the house through the front door.

"Would they expect him to come in the front way or back? it was queer
that he had not thought of that."(74)

As a result of the Jim crow laws it is strange or a Black man to be seen in a white neighborhood and also for a black man to enter a white man's house through the front door, so

bigger is scared because there is no back door in the Dalton's residence but he eventually conquers his fear and enters.

Bigger is not used to being close to the White, during when Mary is drunk he feels afraid if being seen with her in that state because he might be misunderstood.

"As he picked it up he wondered what a white man would think seeing him here with her like this . Suppose old man Dalton saw him now? Apprehensively,he looked up at the big house .it was dark."(113)

He feels fear when he is alone with Mary and her mom comes inside as a result of this he places a pillow over her face.

Bigger held his breath.Mary mumbled again; he bent over her, ,his fist clenched in fear.He knew that Mrs Dalton could not see him ; but he knew that if Mary spoke she would come to the side of the bed and discover him, touch him.He waited tensely ,afraid to move for fear of bumping into something in the dark and betraying his presence.(116)

This shows how the accidental death of Mary occurs, Biggers environment conditioned his mind. And he experiences fear when his gang plans to rob Blum because Negroes can rob Negroes but when he crosses the boundary of robbing a white man it is considered death ,this Bigger tries to avoid but ends up committing a greater crime all this as a result of racism

The nameless narrator also lives in fear of being judged, rejected or punished because of his race. This fears drives most of his early decisions and interactions after his grandfather's speech he is in a dilemma about how he should act and who he should be loyal to.

“Even though they were fooled and thought they wanted
 Me to act as I did .it made me afraid that someday they
 Would be lost Still I was more afraid to act any other way
 Because they didn’t like it at all. The old man’s word were
 Like a curse”(17)

From this excerpt we can deduce that his grandfather’s speech puts him in dilemma. He is confused as to how he should act when praised for his good conduct. He feels he should be mean to the white folks but his torn as to how he should act.

Conclusively, we see the stark difference between how wright portrays racism in the north and how Ellison portrays racism in the south.

2.3.2 Poverty

This is also an effect that accompanies racism. The Blacks stayed in the black belts living in houses not conducive to live in. They have no choice but to stay there because that is the only available space for Blacks. The protagonist lives in a single rat infested room that is cramped with no good furniture to write home about this is contrast to how the Dalton's live despite their financial situation they are charged more.

"Why is it that you exact an exorbitant rent for
 of eight dollars per week from the Thomas family
 for one unventilated ,rat -infested room in which
 four people eat and sleep ?"(356)

In addition, the only job available to Negroes is menial jobs like cleaners, chauffeur, nanny etc. Racism ensures that the Black is excluded from wealth thereby making them dependent on the white for survival.

2.3.3 Hatred

Bigger hates both himself his family and the white men he internalizes racist stereotypes thereby which makes him feel less of himself. It makes him hates how his family lives thereby making him feel powerless and eventually succumb to violence.

"Everytime I think about it I feel that somebody is poking a red hot iron down my throat "(49)

This is how he feels whenever he thinks about the kind of world he lives in ,he feels restricted and caged not being able to do the things he wants to and all this feelings are as a result of hatred.

2.3.4 Violence

Bigger becomes violent in an attempt to cover his fear ,he feels if he is violent he will be feared and respected .During when his gang were planning Blum's robbery, Bigger intentionally becomes violent in order to cover up his fear of robbing a white man .

"Mixed images of violence ran like sand through his mind dry and fast , vanishing.He could stab Gus ith his knife; ,he could slap him; he could kick him; he could send him sprawling on his face .(57)

This were all the emotions he was feeling and eventually he attacks Blum inorder to cover up his fear and also to cancel the robbery.

2.3.5 Death

Bigger is sentence to death in the electric chair ,it happens as a result of the killing of Bessie and Mary ,he is sentenced to death ,this is also a result of racism ,the segregation made between both races makes it possible to become one and when bigger becomes too close to Mary

he feels scared upon seeing her mom and ends up accidentally killing her .so it is not wrong to say that he kills Mary because of racist stereotypes and he purposely kills Bessie in order to cover up his crimes.

2.3.6 Dehumanisation

The narrator experiences humiliation,he is used as an entertainment for the white ,which symbolizes how racism is responsible for dehumanising the blacks .

“Uppercut him! Kill him! Kill that big boy !”(23)

These are the words of the spectators watching the battle royal. The school children were used as a form of entertainment for them. They are seen as animals and no more humans. The narrator becomes more concerned with the speech he is supposed to deliver. he did not feel the pain he is supposed to feel but ends up paying more concern to his speech .

“The harder we fought the more threatening the men became.

And yet.I had begun to worry about my speech again .How

Would it go? Would they recognize my ?what would

They give me?”(23).As a result of racist ideologies the narrator

This shows how he has internalized racist ideologies forgetting about his self as a human. He ends up believing that success involves conforming to white societal expectations.

2.3.7 Invisibility

Racism renders the narrator invisible. This is because society views him through stereotypical ideologies rather than acknowledging him as an individual. Humanity is overshadowed by conceived notions tied to his race .people refuses to see him thereby making him to accept this notion.

“Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of biochemical accident

To my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because
 Of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come
 In contact.”(3)

The narrator tries to explain why he feels he is invisible thereby making the readers understand how he is viewed in the society. As a result of this invisibility he enjoys free light in his underground house which is rather ironic that someone who is considered invisible lives in a place filled with lights.

2.4 Conclusion

Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* offer powerful explorations of the pervasive influence of systemic racism on African Americans. Through the characters of Bigger Thomas and the Nameless narrator, both authors expose how racial oppression shapes individual experiences, distorts societal interactions, and limits opportunities.

Wright's portrayal of Bigger Thomas highlights the devastating consequences of systemic racism, which fosters conditions of poverty, fear, and violence. Bigger's inability to envision a life beyond his oppressive environment reflects the psychological toll of living in a world that views Blackness as inherently criminal. His descent into violence is not a personal failing, but a consequence of systemic forces that deny him dignity and humanity.

In contrast, Ellison's *Invisible Man* offers a distinct exploration of racism's effects, emphasizing the psychological and existential struggle of being rendered invisible by a society that refuses to acknowledge Black individuals as fully human. The narrator's journey from naive hopefulness to self-awareness reveals how racial prejudice distorts his sense of self, forcing him to confront societal structures designed to erase Black identity.

While Bigger is entrapped by systemic violence, Ellison's narrator achieves a form of liberation through self-definition, even if it means retreating into literal and symbolic invisibility. Together, these narratives underscore the profound consequences of systemic racism, highlighting different paths to survival and resistance.

Ultimately, Wright and Ellison's works reveal how racial oppression not only limits opportunities for Protagonists but also shows the effects of racism. Through their distinct yet complementary perspectives, they provide powerful commentaries on the enduring legacy of racism, thereby challenging readers to confront its dehumanizing effects and indirectly envisioning a world of racial justice and equality.

CHAPTER THREE

IDENTITY IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON* AND RALPH ELLISON'S *THE INVISIBLE MAN*

3.1 Introduction

Identity has become one of the major concerns for mankind in every society. The question of who they are? and what defines their sense of self? .the search for identity is one of the overriding themes in both novels ,we get to see how both protagonists were able to find themselves in a world filled with hatred. This chapter seeks to analyze how societal forces shape individuals sense of self, particularly in a racially segregated society.

The title *Native Son* has already identified the protagonist, this title means a son of the soil, or we can say a person who is a true citizen of a given place. This directly implies that Bigger is a descendant of America which means he should be awarded and treated equally but this is not the case .From the beginning of the novel, we were introduced to a twenty year old boy who struggles to find is place in a world cramped with racism. He lives with his mom and siblings in a single rat-infested one room apartment. Mrs Dalton struggles with menial jobs in order to provide for her family her only comfort is the church she attends, but Bigger on the other hand chooses violence as a way of not allowing his present situation subdue him and ironically, it takes the killing of two women to discover his self.The invisible man is a novel which chronicles the narrator's journey of self-discovery as he struggles with societal expectations and that stereotypes associated with his skin colour. The title of the novel 'The invisible man' clearly illustrates an identity which is 'invisibility ' ,This word reflects how the society views him as someone not seen. This novel is a journey of a man's quest for identity. He journeys from being blind to being enlightened and being disillusioned.

3.2 Self Identity

This type of identity refers to how one sees or views himself/herself. The identities of African Americans is constantly shaped and defined through systemic racism, economic oppression and societal expectations. This is evident in Bigger struggling to have an identity. He has always wanted to do things but the external forces limits him to achieving all this leading to a fractured sense of self. He experiences this fragmentation due to the oppressive environment he grows and lives in. He has dreams and ambitions but becomes limited due to his environment:

"Nothing, I reckon. Nothing. But I reckon I wanted to do what other people do."(382)

His identity is being shaped by fear of white society and his fear of failure. After committing the crimes Bigger feels a distorted identity. He sees himself as someone different, someone free, and someone who has full control of himself and there is this sense of pride that controlled him because for ones he fights back against those that oppresses him, this he uses to comfort himself.

Bigger categorizes himself as a thing and he hates his skin including his family, his life and everything around him. He refuses to allow the reality of his life and the way his family lives. As a result of this, he becomes violent. He uses violence to suppress his fear and anger. He feels that if he looks hard, strong and violent he will not sink deep into the realism he tries to avoid.

"He hoped the fight with Gus covered up what he was trying to hide"

He intentionally becomes violent with Gus in order to hide his fear of robbing a white man .Taking a close look at this novel we discover that fear made the protagonist to identify as a violent person. He feels that violence hides fear. This is the reason he accidentally kills Mary

with a pillow because upon hearing the voice of Mrs Dalton he becomes scared and he chooses to be violent towards Gus in order to hide his fear of robbing Mr Blum a white man.

The road to self-discovery was not a rosy one for the protagonist. He realises himself only after he has committed murder, faced trial and sentenced to death for him to fully understand his self.

"When a man kills, it's for something...I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em..."(453)

At this point, he realises that he killed for himself ,killing makes him see himself as someone who is alive, which is ironical because by killing death befalls him but it's funny how he becomes truly alive when dead.

The novel initially begins in the south but most of the action takes place in the North. The protagonist tries to identify himself as someone who is invisible as a result of racism. He tries to find his identity. This is seen in the opening paragraph of the novel ,where the protagonist tells the reader how he has been looking for something and everywhere he went someone always tries to tell him what it was ,he was looking for himself ,in the process he ends up asking the people around him questions which only him has an answer to.

Ellison also tries to examine the struggle of finding ones identity while using the nameless narrator who lives his life in a world were one feels useless, dispossessed and abandoned. The narrator tries to be a model and humble student in schools hoping that on the long run his hardwork will be acknowledge, but upon showing a white trustee how the blacks lives he is unknowingly to him, he is expelled from the school, from here on his journey to self-discovery begins.

He travels to New York hoping to achieve an identity to achieve a dream of heading the college when he eventually achieves his dream of becoming successful in New York, but he never gets to achieve this identity.

"Then I'd be sent South again to head the college"(155)

Invisibility is also an identity the narrator identifies himself with. This invisibility is as a result of the society's refusal to acknowledge him as an individual. Lieber sees invisibility as "the situation of men whose individual identity is denied "(86) this means that a man whose individual identity is denied becomes invisible and blackness also refers to invisibility. Bledsoe action of expelling the narrator is one of the reasons that render him invisible to his own self.

3.3 Racial Identity and Societal Perception

Racial identity refers to how individuals define themselves or how people define others; as a result of their racial background. Many scholars have come to acknowledge that one's identity can be majorly defined by what surrounds them in their environment. Racial stereotypes and societal labels have, over the years, challenged many Black individuals' sense of self by altering their self-perception, limiting their opportunities, and restricting their ability to navigate society freely. These labels often shape how others view them, making race a significant marker of identity in ways that go beyond personal choice or individual qualities. The weight of these societal constructs can create an internal struggle, as individuals may find themselves battling the limitations imposed by the expectations of others. Bigger is constantly reminded of his race, every action Mary and Jan makes made him more aware of the difference between their skin and this he ends up hating

"He was something he hated. The badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black sin."(98)

This excerpt shows how Bigger internalizes the way the white view his skin, which to him is a "badge of shame". They identify the Blacks mainly by their skin colour and not by what they stand for as individuals. They ascribed different stereotypical views to blacks or African Americans, beliefs like, if a black man wanders in front of a white man's house that means he is trying to steal or rape someone.

"Suppose a policeman saw him wandering in a white man's neighborhood

like this? It would be taught that he was trying to rob or rape somebody."(74)

This excerpt clearly shows how the blacks in general were identified, as rapist and as thieves. During the Manhunt for Bigger he is already pronounced a rapist even though he did not rape Mary.

"To hint that he had committed a sex crime was to pronounce the death

sentence, it meant a wiping out of his life even before he was captured (273)

The authorities assume that Bigger both raped and killed Mary without concrete evidence. They instantly imposed this identity on him and throughout his trial the state attorney continued with this assumption. As a result of the systemic oppression, poverty and racism, an identity which Bigger cannot escape is imposed on him. These factors dictate how he sees himself and how others perceive him. It is not wrong to say that the accidental killing of Mary is as a response of the stereotypical views he grows up to meet and the killing of Bessie, though not accidental but to escape the penalty that comes with this stereotypes.

In Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, the protagonist identity is constantly tied to racial stereotypes. Expectation is placed upon him by both the whites and blacks, during the battle royal. The narrator and the school children were objectified and they are used as an object of

entertainment for the white men. Their pains and cries were sweet melodies that ignite laughter on the men and all this happens as a result of racism.

The narrator's Grandfather urges the narrators' family to live with two identities. He sees himself as a spy and urges his family to "live with their head in the lion's mouth"(16). He urges them to agree with what they say and also "undermine them with grins"(16) which means that they should obey but never forget themselves or where they are from. This causes dilemma in the narrator's life because he is torn between his grandfather's words and the manner in which the society he grows up

The narrator lives his life trying to please people from being a devoted student to being a worker and to being a revolutionary leader but he later realises that they are all identity imposed by others, he is never really able to achieve what he wanted although he eventually becomes an orator but he is still exploited by those he holds in high regard.

In conclusion, we get to see that the narrator being nameless shows that he does not have a stable identity from being nameless to being an expelled student to being a factory worker who is used as a test subject to being an orator and to being invisible shows that the journey of self-discovery is not an easy one. He constantly struggles to resist societal expectations, but before the end of the novel, he embraces his invisibility.

3.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is seen that different identities were imposed on the protagonists, the white society views them based on their skin colours. The white society views Bigger as a black person who is meant to be segregated in the Black belt ,and he is not allowed to be in the midst of a white woman. All this identities makes Bigger feels less and eventually succumb to the feeling he has kept bottled up inside him. Likewise, the nameless narrator also has a stable

identity , from being nameless,to an expelled student, to a factory worker who is used as a test subject ,to an orator and finally invisible.This shows that the journey of self discovery is not an easy one ,he constantly struggles to resist societal expectations .But before the end of the novel he embraces his invisibility. This chapter highlight the issues of identity, focusing on the protagonists Perception of themselves and also how they are viewed racially viewed in the society.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Racism and Identity is a social dilemma .it concerns itself with criticising how racism is depicted in the society through the lens of critical race theory, in other to create change . By focusing on systemic racism and looking at how identity is portrayed in both novels the novelists directly tries to advocate for change in a racially constructed society.

Chapter two, looked at how racism is depicted in the novels focusing on systemic racism ,this racism looks at how laws, policies and how different areas or institutions in America led to the escalation of racism ,the effects of racism are looked at ,these are , fear , invisibility, poverty, violence , hatred , dehumanisation , and death , references s shown on how this effects re depicted in the novels.

Chapter three ,also looked at the issue of identity ,how both writers portrays this issue . Bigger and the nameless narrator had a common goal which is the search for identity ,they struggle to find themselves in a racially constructed society . Wright and Ellison's works carefully portrays how racism is seen in different areas (North and South) thereby showing the plights of African Americans.both authors writes about the after effect of slavery and the after effects of the Jim crow law,using the characters experiences to further highlight this idea .By writing on racism they have successfully depict how systemic laws causes more harm than good thereby perpetuating racism.

The Novelists have carefully a major issue in the society ,which is that of segregation , marginalisation, dispossession and among others ,both authors feels broken with how the African Americans were treated in the society and as a result,they use literature to make known their

pains by Creating a character with a name but is denied his rights as a native son and a nameless character who ends up with a fragmented identity.

The Authors carefully portrays how the laws is limited to Africans indirectly satirizing the social construct that makes up a society . Wright shows the effects of systemic racism in individuals who internalises racism as a result of racist stereotypes and with the employment of critical race theory we see how laws perpetuate racism in both novels .This study is important because it uncovers racism through the experiences of both protagonists.

In conclusion, this research was done in other to make known the plights of Africans who experienced both physical death and internal death due to the laws practiced in America ,this is done through the help of critical race theory hich laid the foundation for this research.

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