

Identity Crisis in African American Literature

Sheeba Mardhanan

*Assistant Professor; Dept. of English,
Sankara College of Science and Commerce,
Saravanampatti, Coimbatore
Email ID : sheebanambiar86@gmail.com*

Abstract

The African-Americans traumatic experience with slavery aroused another battle with identity along the way. The dominance of the white ideology and culture marginalized totally the blacks and the minorities in general. Many African American writers like Ellison dealt with the issue of identity; either to succumb for the dominant power, or to embrace their blackness and their past as the offspring of the former slaves. This paper visualizes identity from a post colonialist approach and sheds light on African-American literature and its writers who took identity as their central theme, from slavery till the Civil Right movement era.

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

Sheeba Mardhanan

*Identity Crisis in African
American Literature*

Notions June 2020,
Vol. XI, No. 1,
pp.11-13

Article No.03

Online available at :
<http://notions.anubooks.com/>

Introduction

For decades literary works of the canons have been appreciated by their mastery of the language and its artistic side that literature is. However, more recent theorists argued that literature is not innocent from the outer factors that may indeed affect the production of a given literary work. Therefore, literature has been articulated on multiple platforms to convey an idea or to oppose it. African American literature is not an exception to this rule; their literary works have emerged under different circumstances that are peculiar to the African Americans only.

African American literature, in particular, is regarded as an outstanding kind of literature that sprang from the suffering of the blacks from enslavement and ill-treatment of the whites that stripped them of any rights. Therefore their authors at first wrote to challenge the common controversies that the blacks are not able to produce an adequate literary work besides, to claim their rights to be treated as equal human being as it has been stated in the Declaration of Independence “that all man are created equal”.

Racism and search for identity in *Invisible Man*

African American writers have always involved in the theme of identity that came to the surface due to the racial discrimination and racism. Ralph Ellison’s work *Invisible Man*, for instance, depicted the social realities of that of the blacks, and their dilemmas they get encountered within a world dominated by white values and ideologies in which they were marginalized from. The novel took Ralph Ellison a good amount of time to craft his only masterpiece *Invisible Man*. It is known for its richness in black folklore, the use of metaphor and symbolism to depict the racial discrimination in the United States. Due to this, the novel claimed its position in American Literature and became a reference for the African American culture and history.

Ralph Ellison’s portrayal of the protagonist’s journey towards his self-discovery depicts the harsh reality where the blacks have less chance to participate in a society that marginalizes them. The protagonist is a nameless character who claims to be ‘invisible’ in the opening of the story. He then proceeds to narrate his voyage while he adopted multiple identities in order to fit with the system that is ruled by the whites only. The story shows the personal growth of the narrator who first believed in the American dream; which hard work can bring success, but he eventually realizes that a colored man will always find obstacles to grant him success and acceptance in a society that is culturally hegemonic and finally he decides to be invisible man.

Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* is a representation of African American history. It is about the reality of racism and the problem of black identity from the late 1920s until the beginning of 1930s. The key to understanding the *Invisible Man* is through the protagonist's experience with the racist American society and his escaping from the segregationist south to the racist north.

The *Invisible Man* after he immigrated to the north, he believed that by serving the whites which he perceived as superior to him, will grant him success and usher him towards his true being. But he eventually realizes that he is invisible to them, and they are blind to see him without putting their prejudices on him.

"I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me."(03)

Conclusion

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison discussed one of the complex topics that are particular for the Africa-American literature that sprang from the social conditions of racial discrimination, alienation, and searches for identity in a white dominant culture. Ralph Ellison by writing his novel, he challenged the traditional views and ideologies that limited the perception of individual identity in the United States, instead, he wanted to show the universality of identity and it should not be restricted to race or culture.

References

- 1 Ellison, R. (1952). *Invisible Man*. United States of America: Random House, inc. Print
- 2 Baldwin, J. (1998): *Collected Essays*. United States: The Library of American. Print. 04 April 2017