

## **How Black is Black? The tragedy of being Black in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.**

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**Abstract:** Colour difference has been one of the most powerful tools for racial segregation and identity-formation in colonial spaces. One of the central engagements of postcolonial literature has been to challenge and dismantle this process of identity-formation based on half-truths or no truths and prejudiced notions of race/ethnicity, nationality and colour. When it comes to racial segregation on the basis of colour, African-American literature stands as an important tradition in challenging the stereotype of the Negro created in white-centric discourse.

This paper intends to examine two landmark novels in African-American writing, viz. Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in order to demonstrate how the dark colour of the Negro skin becomes the ultimate criterion for the segregation of an entire race of human beings by another, thus marginalizing, criminalizing and dehumanizing millions in the process. The paper attempts to analyze the various socio-economic, cultural and political factors that function behind this insidious process of segregation and also highlight the threat(s) such treatment may create in future. Also taking into account the conflict between the policies of assimilation and assertion, the paper probes into the white American society's attempt to eradicate the native identity of the Negro and turn him/her into a non-entity and the reasons behind such intention.

**Keywords:** Domination, identity conflict, Negro, racial prejudice and segregation.

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### **I. Introduction:**

There is a white construction called "the black". This construction is told that if he or she really is human, then he or she could go beyond the boundaries of race. The black can supposedly "really choose" to live otherwise a form of social being that is not black and is not any racial form or designation. [1]

African-American writing has from its very inception sought to challenge the prejudiced image of the Negro in racial discourses created by the Whites. Whether it is history, literature or the arts, the Negro has always been represented in negative terms, and in rare cases, if he is presented as good, it is only to show that he has become so by imbibing the ideals and ideologies of the white masters – as in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [2]. Such literary representations of the Negro were aimed at cultivating the virtue of obedience and loyalty among them, thereby reducing the risks of problems in the plantations. Such negativity in the creation of the image of the Negro can be traced back to the days of their transportation from their homeland to the cotton plantations in southern America. Over time, such representations degenerated into the more insidious form of the stereotype of the blacks which began to affect all the social, economic, political and legal aspects of Negro life. In fact, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is also read as a novel which helped to establish some of the stereotypes of the Negro. The stereotypes grew so powerful that even the Negroes lost all perception of themselves as individuals and began to erroneously search for their reflection in the distorted pictures of their race presented by the whites and came across monstrosities that were far removed from the real image of the Negro. Yet, all this was founded on only one basic distinction – the distinction in terms of skin colour. The fallacious logic of the superiority of the white race was based on the simple yet dangerous binaries of white = good and black = evil. At another level, this opposition between white and black thus becomes the opposition between good and bad. Blackness, thus, becomes synonymous with everything negative and hence inferior to anything white, and the blacks, consequently, as racially inferior. The heaping up of images of black inferiority in various forms of white discourse successfully, yet unfortunately, blackens the blackness of the blacks to such extent that the reader is faced with the question of determining how dark black can become; all the while black remaining synonymous with evil in white discourse.

This paper, through an analysis of Richard Wright's *Native Son* [3] and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* [4], tries to examine how the politics of racial differentiation operates primarily on the basis of colour and how various strategies are adopted to ascertain that the Negro is segregated to the maximum in American society. Situating the colour problem in the historical perspective, the paper also attempts to show how these strategies of segregation are to a great extent responsible for pushing the Negro towards a life of crime and confinement

and how the Eurocentric racial discourse aims at either the dehumanization of the Negro or the eradication of the native African identity through assimilation by establishing a racial equation based on binary opposites. The reason for choosing Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* results from the fact that both the novels are considered as landmarks in African-American writing in their approach towards the theme of Negro identity.

## II. Politics of segregation and criminalization:

Published before Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, *Native Son* was taken as the ultimate Negro novel. Richard Wright's *Native Son* views the problem of racial segregation as lying at the root of criminalization of an entire race on the basis of face value. In *Native Son*, being born a black is getting automatically branded as a potential criminal – a sorry fact which Wright shows through the predicament of his protagonist, Bigger Thomas. This disturbing novel projects beyond doubt how the ghettoization of the blacks in unhygienic and inhuman conditions remains one of the most powerful factors behind their indulgence in criminal activities. In the absence of even the minimum of sustenance, the blacks are either pushed into menial jobs or into petty crimes like mugging and stealing. In the face of such social truth, the small acts of charity and social reform lose their value, for they appear as mere pittance doled out in exchange for the discriminatory treatment meted out to the blacks in a society dominated by the whites. As the novel begins, Bigger Thomas and his friends plan to carry out robbery at a shop owned by a white. But the fact that the shop is owned by a white and not by a black makes them review their plan several times and they are filled with a sense of fear and foreboding. Through their thoughts and discussions it is made known to the readers how even the thought of trying to rob a white is an 'act of great daring' since it may bring down the entire police force after them. On the other hand, if they were to rob a black man, the police would not care much. In fact, there is the ironical observation that it was considered quite normal for a black man to rob another black man. In the eyes of the law too, thus, there existed two standards. This duality of law becomes more pronounced when Bigger Thomas commits murder and his trial brings to the fore several issues related to the evil consequences of racial segregation.

A close reading of *Native Son* presents a vicious cycle of exploitation firmly rooted in the American social order. This vicious cycle operates on all fronts – social, economic, legal and political; thereby leaving very little space for the exploited to think of an optional order. In fact, the intensity of the cycle is so deep and the duration so long (when one considers the period from when the blacks were brought to America as slaves to serve in the cotton plantations) that it negates the possibility of having any option at all. Centuries of exploitation has succeeded in sapping the Negro of the desire to rebel against the social order imposed upon them. The helplessness of the situation is repeated again and again by Bigger's mother when she constantly reminds her children of being black and at the same time, ironically, to be thankful to the whites for allowing them to continue existing in their present condition. A feeling of servility born out of utter helplessness is evident in her words. Her assessment of the predicament of the Negro is representative of the entire black race victimized under the exploitative social order continuing through centuries. Metaphorically, it is the blackness of their skin which pushes the blacks into their dark existence. So, identity for the blacks is racially determined. Gordon's observations on the construction of racial identity become very relevant here:

Racial constructions are leeches on all manifestations of human ways of living: language, sex, labour (material and aesthetic), socializing (reciprocal recognition), consciousness, and the "soul". [5]

It is observed that throughout the novel, the black characters are constantly aware of their inferior social position where as the whites expect the blacks to behave as 'things' or sub-human species different from and inferior to them in rational and behavioral aspects. It is a continuation of the master-slave relationship generated during the period of plantation in the South.

The description of Bigger Thomas's trial is a reenactment of the notorious process of lynching in a legalized form. While in past days of slavery, it was done without the mockery of pushing a human being through the humiliating process of arrest and trial, in the novel the racial attitude towards the Negro remains the same as it had been then. Bigger is already 'convicted' even before the actual trial begins. The riotous mood of the crowd gathered at his trial exhibits racial hostility at its extreme and there are intermittent demands and references to lynching with the plea that it is necessary to dissuade other blacks from committing such acts. The editor's report from Mississippi conveys the same sentiment:

"Down here in Dixie we keep Negroes firmly in their places and we make them know that if they so much as touch a white woman, good or bad, they cannot live." (italics mine) [6]

Thus, the punishment for the erring nigger is predetermined. Also, Bigger's attempt at dodging the law and his subsequent hunting down by the police is similar to the running away of slaves from the plantations and their subsequent hunt by the owners. As much as Max may try to draw the attention of the people to the real factors behind the criminalization of the Negro, the people gathered at the trial refuse to face the truth. They would rather choose to hide behind the comfort of shifting all the blame on Bigger for being a Negro. It is not unclear

that if the same crime would have been committed by a white then the standards of justice and mode of prosecution would have surely differed.

Similarly, the effect of the embittered attitude of the whites towards Bigger, and in extension to the entire black community, has a numbing affect. Bigger is more or less sure what the outcome of the trial would be. He finds himself helpless before the ocean of white faces demanding death for him. There is a touch of the tragic in the manner in which he slumps down and adopts a detached attitude towards the world since he no longer considers himself a part of it.

It is not difficult to note that in Wright's novel, 'black' (both as a word and term) is always in the derogatory sense. Whether as noun or adjective, the word black always carries mean and negative associations, coupled with a sense of helplessness. It is the blackness of the Negro skin that allows entrepreneurs and landowners like Mr. Dalton to huddle them in unhealthy quarters and dilapidated buildings infested with rodents (and some even on the verge of collapse). The irony is that the Negroes have to pay higher rent for these unhealthy dwellings in comparison to their white counterparts who live in better parts of the city under better conditions. When asked why Mr. Dalton charges higher rent for these poor quarters in the overcrowded sections of the city, the answer is that the demand for homes in these parts is more than other parts of the city and the higher rent is the result of the operation of the market forces of demand and supply. The unspoken truth remains that the whites would just not tolerate the presence of blacks in their areas of settlement. The predicament of the blacks faced with racial prejudice in terms of housing and accommodation is very similar to that reflected in Wole Soyinka's poem, *Telephone Conversation*. The belief is that by segregating the Negroes, crimes can be lessened, as the following extract from the novel suggests:

"Crimes such as the Bigger Thomas murders could be lessened by segregating Negroes in parks, playgrounds, cafes, theatres, and street cars. Residential segregation is imperative. Such measures tend to keep them as much as possible out of direct contact with white women and lessen their attacks against them." [7]

But the events in the novel expose how this attempt itself is at the root of most problems.

One important point in the novel is that throughout it, references are made to the charitable works done by the Daltons in order to 'uplift' the condition of the 'unfortunate' and 'underprivileged' Negroes; the most powerful instance being that of Mr. Dalton offering the job of chauffeur to Bigger Thomas so that he can contribute financially to the betterment of his family. This point becomes one of the leading arguments that go against Bigger and then the entire black community, since his act of killing Miss Dalton is projected as an act of ungratefulness and the already prejudiced white community is highly incensed. The other factors responsible for the act of Bigger are conveniently thrown into the backdrop and only the stereotyped image of the Negro as a rapist, a killer and a potential criminal is highlighted. The situation here is not very different from the case of Trueblood in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the black who rapes his own daughter and makes her pregnant. In Ellison's novel, the deviant act of Trueblood is used by the whites to further the tarnished image of the blacks in racial discourse. In this way, Wright's Bigger Thomas turns out to be the true victim of racism:

Wright's essential Bigger Thomas was not so much a particular character caught in a specific episode of criminal activity as a crime waiting to happen; all the elements to create Bigger's mentality were historically in place in America. [8]

The schematized segregation of the blacks and the crude fact that they do not really have much choice when it comes to profession or earning and consequently turn to anti-social activities is overlooked. When a Negro errs, the only treatment is to punish him/her so that it becomes a deterrent to other Negroes. The basic factors are not taken into account and the issue remains unaddressed. In fact, the issue begins to loom from large to larger with the passage of time. In Bigger's case too, the real factors like deprivation, segregation and exploitation are not taken into account; what is highlighted is only his impulsive act.

Indeed, it is very important to note how the acts of Bigger Thomas, born of an acute sense of insecurity and fear, are impulsive in nature. It is clear that whenever he thinks and tries to analyze events and his position in them, he is always grounded by the weight of his being a Negro. All his thoughts and feelings are conditioned by his black skin. It is his fear of being discovered in the bedroom of his white employer's daughter that leads him to stifle her voice with a pillow and unwittingly suffocate her to death. Though drunk, Bigger was conscious that his getting discovered in the bedroom of Mary Dalton would surely lead him to be charged with attempt to rape the girl, and Mary's being white would provide him with no scope to put forth the truth; and even if he were allowed to put his side of the story, the already prejudiced law would put it all aside and proceed with its own course. This fear of Bigger is not completely unfounded since what he feared materializes during the trial. It is not for nothing that Book One of the novel is titled 'Fear'.

Similar is the state of his mind when he beheads the body of Mary and burns it in the fireplace. Though it is undeniable that the act of Bigger's disposal of Mary's dead body is brutal, it is necessary to keep in view the psychological compulsion which drives him towards it. This psychological compulsion is the creation of the environmental, economic, social and political conditions that surround him – a condition whose historical

determination is rooted in the days of transportation and slavery. It is not the average criminal's fear of being discovered that leads Bigger into his acts, rather it is the fear of a helpless person pitted against an overpowering force which drives him forwards. The feeling of being pushed into a tight corner is always in his thoughts and so Bigger acts like a hunted animal desperate to save itself. It is the simple rational for survival in an ever-enclosing and crushing world that dictates his actions. As Arnold Rampersad observes:

Among black, the centuries of abuse and exploitation had created ways of life marked by patterns of duplicity, including self-deception, as well as something far more forbidding and lethal. Slavery and neo-slavery had led not simply to the development of a psychology of timidity, passivity, and even cowardice among the African American masses. [9]

His throwing down the body of Bessie Mears into the air duct after smashing her face with a brick is also the product of his fear. Though he plans to escape with Bessie, he later begins to see her as a hindrance to his free movement and out of the fear of arrest, plans to kill her too. His can be studied as a case of one who cannot now turn back and must see it to the end. Further, the feeling that sooner or later he will be nabbed by the law and sentenced to death leads him to act in the manner of a hardened criminal. In the absence of any hope of relief, he can only try to postpone the final moment of his arrest. Fear, resulting out of his black skin, pushes him into unspeakable acts of crime and horror. Bessie's death tightens the noose around Bigger because he is now charged with two crimes of almost the same type, and more importantly, turning him into criminal in the eyes of both the races. The image of the Negro as sexually perverted is strengthened by the twin murders.

During the trial Bigger's predicament is similar to that of a caged animal, hurt and powerless. However, this feeling of being caged is not particular to the trial period alone, for this claustrophobic feeling exists throughout his living experience as a black, and it is not only Bigger but the entire black community that is shown as undergoing this caged, claustrophobic experience in every living moment. The white society weighs heavily upon them crushing and incapacitating them from any action (and/or even thought) that goes beyond the immediate need for survival. In other words, the white society does succeed in turning the blacks, at least at the psychological level, into sub-humans. In fact, the stereotype of the Negro is constructed with the deliberate attempt of projecting the Negro as less human, the roots of this deliberate representation again going back to the days of slavery in the southern plantations where the Negro was not a human but a piece of reproductive machinery devoid of any right over life or property. Nothing could be nearer to truth than the trial of Bigger Thomas which was moving towards his death sentence from its very beginning, as the demand from the crowd during his trial rises for his lynching:

The moment the killer made his appearance at the inquest, there were shouts of "Lynch 'im! Kill 'im!" [10]

It is also not incorrect that Bigger Thomas had, although in a subdued manner, erotic desire for Mary Dalton, which is evident in his fantasizing of her in the cinema hall and in his kissing her when she is drunk, yet all the while he is goaded by the racial difference that stands between them. There are moments when his touch both elates and depresses him. In fact, there is a mixture of desire and fear in his approach towards her created out of the sense that the white society would never approve of such feelings for a white girl from a black man. But such sense of disapproval is absent from the desire of a white man for a black girl. During the final phase of the hunt for Bigger, he overhears one of the members of the search team telling another that he would have gladly stayed there if a black girl whom he found appealing would let him make love to her:

"Say, did you see that brown gal in there?"

"The one that didn't have much on?"

"Yeah."

"Boy, she was a peach, wasn't she?"

...

"Boy, if she'd let me stay here I'd give up this goddamn hunt." [11]

This is what may be termed as the 'sexual economy of desire' in the words of Robert Young:

In this characteristic ambivalent movement of attraction and repulsion, we encounter the sexual economy of desire in the fantasies of race, and of race in the fantasies of desire'. [12]

It is also important to note the white society's change of view regarding Mary Dalton after she is killed. The prodigal daughter of the Daltons now becomes the object of innocence and generosity for the whites and the plea made in the trial of Bigger Thomas is that in order to save other such innocent girls, Bigger should be awarded an exemplary punishment. It is also important here how Wright places Bigger's 'crime' in the socio-political context of American society:

Wright makes it clear that Bigger's harsh upbringing has left his sexuality contaminated with feelings of aggression and violence toward women, black and white. Because the sexuality of white women is flaunted in movies and magazines but absolutely forbidden to black men, Bigger and men like him sometimes develop a potentially murderous fixation on these women. Rape may then acquire the illusion of being a political act; but the underlying threat to women is real and deadly. [13]

But it is not that only the Negroes are referred in terms of colour, Jan and his communist friends are also referred in the newspapers collectively as the 'reds', a term that for the capitalists like Mr. Dalton constitutes the element of discord. Even Bigger's lawyer Max, is one of the 'reds'. It is equally interesting to note that those who are considered as discordant elements are referred in terms of their colour; Negroes by their black skin and the Marxists by their red flags. Thus, colour differentiation is used to mark the 'other' and create conflicting discourses in the novel. In the theatre when Bigger asks Jack "What's a Communist?", Jack answers – "Damn if I know. It's a race of people who live in Russia, ain't it?" [14] The disapproving attitude of the capitalist American society towards communism is well reflected in how Mr. Dalton and the media continuously denounce the Communists and any association with them is taken as derogatory to their social status. However, a detailed analysis into the complications that the presence of communism makes in the novel will be a deviation from the main thread of argument that this paper proposes to do. The Communist angle can be probably briefly summed up by holding that the Communist approach to the Negro question fails to take into account several other factors related to their exploitation and segregation besides the material aspect. Almost a similar predicament is seen in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* where the narrator's dissatisfaction with the working of the Brotherhood reflects the latter's disillusionment with the movement. Both the writers probably wanted to express the view that the issue of racial segregation in American society requires much more than a singular approach owing to its complex nature.

The significance of *Native Son* regarding the presentation of racial discrimination has very appropriately been summed up by the acclaimed cultural historian Irving Howe in the following words:

The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. It made impossible a repetition of the old lies [and] brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture." [15]

### III. Visibility, recognition and responsibility:

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) takes the Negro question further from the point where Wright had left it. Ellison, in a very subtle manner, tries to convey the need for strategy for the Negro to survive in a nation divided on the principles of race and colour and the answer he provides is the tactic of subversion. While Richard Wright's *Native Son* lays bare the politics of segregation and criminalization of the Negro on the basis of skin colour, *Invisible Man* focuses on the rejection of identity of the entire Negro race on the basis of epidermal differentiation.

*Invisible Man* projects how blackness is not merely a different type of pigmentation of the skin in comparison to the Whites but a much complex metaphorical label for existence. Ellison's narrator begins by pointing how his blackness accounts for his invisibility in the eyes of the whites, thereby drawing a reference to what Frantz Fanon views as the problematic of "an epidermal schema". The surrealist portion of the 'Prologue' in which Ellison's narrator finds himself entering and descending into its depths, carried into a congregation of blacks where a black priest prepares to read his sermon titled 'Blackness of Blackness', hints at the different racial and social issues connected to the predicament of being black in an environment hostile to blacks. The following extract from the 'Prologue' amply hints at the existential crisis faced by the blacks:

*Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the "Blackness of Blackness".*  
*And a congregation of voices answered: 'That blackness is most black, brother, most black...'*  
*'In the beginning...'*  
*'At the very start,' they cried.*  
*'...there was blackness...'*  
*'Preach it...'*  
*'...and the sun...'*  
*'The sun, Lawd...'*  
*'...was bloody red...'*  
*'Red...'*  
*"Now black is..." the preacher shouted.*  
*'Bloody...'*  
*'I said black is...'*  
*'Preach it, brother...'*  
*'...and black ain't...'*  
*'Red, Lawd, red: He said it's red!'*  
*'Amen, brother...'*  
*'Black wil git you...'*  
*'Yes, it will...'*  
*'...an' black won't...'*  
*'Naw, it won't!'*  
...  
*'Black will make you...'*  
*'Black...'*

'...or black will un-make you.' [16]

In the passage the association of the colour red and the statement that black 'wil git you...' juxtaposed against 'Naw, it won't', and again 'Black wil make you...' against '...or black will un-make you' refer to an uneasy presence of unspoken, yet subtly acknowledged, potential for threat and violence. These statements provide us with diametrically opposite views connected to cultural perceptions regarding blacks in the racially segregated American milieu. The first is the white-centric view which has constructed a prejudiced and stereotypical image of the 'Nigger' as a potential threat to white safety and society, thereby criminalizing the Negro in the eyes of white law. However, underlying this sense of threat there is the simultaneous presence of the fact that the making or un-making of the American nation too lies upon the blacks.

It should also be noted that at the beginning of the passage, there is an attempt at countering the racial representation of blackness as essentially evil and to project it as a necessary beginning of all things. In this sense, it may also be read as a desire to establish the presence of blackness as much before the Euro-Christian story of the Creation begins. This would amount to the deriving of all forms of life from that core of blackness, which Christian scriptures term as Chaos. It is a historically established fact today that humanity first began in the heart of the African continent from where it spread to other parts of the globe. Obliquely, it would mean that if all things are derived from blackness and since it existed before everything, it cannot be essentially evil and that the 'Nigger-ification' of the Negro is a much later Euro-Christian phenomenon and a violation of the natural order of things. In other words, the blackening of blackness by the whites is a racial construct. The injustice of the phenomenon is raised by the narrator when he refers to the song sung by Louis Armstrong "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue?" [17] The phrase "Black and Blue" is marked by a double entendre here. On the one hand it refers to the sorry state into which the singing voice has fallen for being a black and on the other hand, it may also refer to the physical atrocities carried out on the Negroes as a result of racial prejudice. It may also be noted that the Blues as a tradition are rooted in memories of pain and sufferings of the blacks. Even the sermon 'Blackness of Blackness' is structured like a rap song with the voice of the black priest and the congregation alternating each other.

As Ellison brings to the fore the predicament of being a black in the United States of America – the land so highly hailed as the torch bearer of independence and liberty, the unnamed protagonist (who is also the narrator) begins with the statement that "I am an Invisible Man" and immediately goes on to qualify his invisibility as "A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through physical eyes upon reality". This invisibility is so troublesome to the narrator that he begins to "doubt if you really exist" [18]. In other words, the narrator, and in turn, the entire Negro race in America is pushed into an existential dilemma pertaining to their visibility in the eyes of the white Americans. The effect of this cloak of invisibility cast upon the black race amounts more than just negating their human identity; it amounts to an attempt at a willful negation of the very existence of the blacks in America. It is this very invisibility thrust upon the blacks which the narrator holds as responsible for much of the potential for violence associated with the blacks, as reflected in his attacking the white man who bumped against him because the latter could not see the narrator. As the narrator says:

Take the man whom I almost killed: Who was responsible for that near murder – I? I don't think so, and I refuse it. I won't buy it. You can't give it to me. He bumped me, he insulted me. Shouldn't he, for his own personal safety, have recognized my hysteria, my 'danger potential'? He, let me say, was lost in a dream world. But didn't he rule me out of it? And if he had yelled for a policeman, wouldn't I have been taken for the offending one? Yes, yes, yes! Let me agree with you, I was the irresponsible one; for I should have used my knife to protect the higher interests of society. Some day that kind of foolishness will cause us tragic trouble. All dreamers and sleepwalkers must pay the price, and even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all. [19]

The fearful fact that someday in future all this pushing and jostling of the blacks into invisibility would result into a dreadful catastrophe is stated here. Even the definition of 'hibernation' that the narrator provides contains the germ for future violent action:

"A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action". [20]

It is precisely the problem of the Negro being branded as a potential criminal and the heavy toll it takes on the Negro psyche that Richard Wright's *Native Son* had set out to address through the character and actions of its protagonist Bigger Thomas.

The prejudiced notion of the blacks as sexually licentious and how stray incidents go into reinforcing this stereotype of the negro is evident in the episode when the narrator unwittingly takes Mr. Norton, one of the important trustees of the College to the black neighbourhood at the outskirts of the college where they encounter Trueblood, a black man who has raped his own daughter in a state of drunkenness and impregnated her. Such act of Trueblood only helps to reinforce the already existent prejudiced notion of the black male as sexually debauch. It is a process which is not much different from what Edward Said discusses about the creation of Oriental scholarship in his celebrated work *Orientalism*. Further, the malicious intent associated with the

creation of the stereotype as discussed by Homi K. Bhabha in his essay on the creation of the stereotype also finds its resonance here. It is indeed important to note here how the whites who had earlier either ignored Trueblood or treated him with disdain now ply him with drinks in order to listen to this 'act' and even leave some dollars with him, which Trueblood in his ignorance cannot understand why. It greatly puzzles him why the whites should offer him beer and pay him for recounting an act which by his own standards is as low as low could be. He fails to perceive how beneath the seeming benevolence of the whites lies the sly, smirking smile of a race which has again found a trophy which it can hold up and yell to the world proclaiming its superiority over the other race which it has for centuries decried as savage. Trueblood's act only deepens the blackness of the blacks in the eyes of the whites. It allows the whites to again affirm the fallacious view how the Negro is not a human being but a 'thing to be kept in place'. In other words it is used as a proof to establish how black is essentially and irreclaimably evil in nature and the black/evil and white/pure/good dichotomy is established. The metaphorical connotations of blackness thus supersede the level of colour and become a tool for a prejudiced construction of racial and cultural identity. Thus, the eyes and mind of the beholder learn to identify blackness as evil and take recourse to either criminalize it or negate its presence, thereby developing an ostrich's approach and messing up things further.

The problem of identifying blackness with negative things and qualities is a complex phenomenon which includes several tools for building and strengthening of the stereotype. For Frantz Fanon, it is a process which takes the help of several agencies like literature, fairytales and the more common information passed from word of mouth (agencies that in Althusserian terms would be termed as the ISAs). The "epidermal schema" that Fanon mentions in his essay 'Fact of Blackness' is the ultimate result of the stigma that is forcefully connected to the dark colour of the African skin. Blackness is thus deepened as a result and the identity of the Negro is split severally – a racial phenomenon which Fanon explains in the essay cited above. [21]

In order to focus on the forced 'invisibility' of the blacks under the white gaze, Ralph Ellison describes the process of manufacturing a special paint in *Invisible Man*. This special paint called 'Optic White' is manufactured by the Liberty Paints factory where the protagonist goes to work. The special paint is used on important monuments and official buildings and is manufactured by mixing three drops of a mysterious black liquid in a bucket of white paint, which is then processed under high pressure at high temperature. It is the mixing of the black chemical that gives Optic White its unique identity. It is a symbolic indication of how the larger white population in America aims at the total assimilation of the Negro into white culture resulting in a total loss of their original identity. But the greater question remains as to whether the whites would ever accept the blacks as an integral part of American nation even if they were assimilated or rather, dissolved like the three drops of black paint in the manufacture of Optic White paint? Further, what would be the repercussions of such an attempt? The answer is again provided by Ellison through the explosion of the boiler at the factory which, due to a technical glitch caused by the narrator, undergoes an explosion. Ellison seems to point out here that such an attempt would result in violent unrest and may jeopardize the national American identity.

A contradiction can, however, be perceived in the American approach towards the issue of the assimilation of the Negro. It lies in the fact that while the whites want the blacks to lose themselves in the so-called greater white American identity, they would not like to recognize them as an integral part of the American nation. The reason that Ellison cites in this regard is that "Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement." (16) Recognition would again, in turn, make the blacks eligible for equality, which is unpalatable for the whites. The Battle Royale instance brings this point to the fore when the narrator causes a furore in the crowd by mispronouncing 'responsibility' as 'equality' in a moment of panic:

The room filled with the uproar of laughter until, no doubt, distracted by having to gulp down my blood, I made a mistake and yelled a phrase I had often seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in private.

'Social...'

'What?' they yelled.

'...equality--'

The laughter hung smokelike in the sudden stillness. I opened my eyes, puzzled. Sounds of displeasure filled the room. The M.C. rushed forward. They shouted hostile phrases at me. But I did not understand.

A small dry moustached man in the front row blared out, 'Say that slowly, son!'

'What Sir?'

'What you just said!'

'Social responsibility, sir,' I said.

...

'You sure that about "equality" was a mistake?'

'Oh, yes, sir,' I said. 'I was swallowing blood.' [22]

As a subversive text, the strategy to counter the refusal for social equality to the blacks in a society dominated by whites is advocated as lying in the use of subversion, as the old grandfather discloses to the narrator's father on the former's death-bed:

'Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grin, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open'. [23]

The narrator's father does not pay heed to the words of the old man, taking it to be that he had gone senile in his last days but for the narrator these words had opened up an entirely new way of looking at the relationship that existed between the two races; and true to his realization in the later stage of his life, he leads a subversive life.

The incidents at the Liberty Paints factory are very significant for understanding the attitude of the whites towards the blacks in American society. The process of manufacturing the special Optic White paint which is used to paint government buildings and monuments is a symbolic representation of the American desire to completely assimilate the blacks in the larger white milieu of American society so that their original/native identity is completely submerged. The paint in question 'Optic White' is obtained by mixing three drops of a mysterious black liquid in a bucket of white paint. Nothing could be more symbolically pronounced regarding the strategy for assimilation than this mixing of black and white paints, where the final product does not carry any trace of blackness. The logic behind the entire process can be very well summarized by quoting Lewis R. Gordon:

Antiblack racism presents whiteness as the "normal" mode of "humanness". [24]

But the explosion which occurs in the factory is indicative of the explosion that awaits the white society in future unless some immediate and effective solution is found for the so-called Negro problem – a fact which Richard Wright shows in *Native Son* – the fearsome fact that if the white American society keeps on turning a blind eye to its insidious process of creating Bigger Thomases, then the society itself should be ready to face them in near future; and the overwhelming question that can the American society really face such a situation? *Invisible Man* poses the same question when in the 'Prologue' the narrator narrates his account of almost having killed a white man who refused to see him, or in other words, acknowledge his presence. The experiences of the unnamed narrator in the novel lead to the final realization that in order to survive in a nation based on racial divide and apartheid, subversion can be a possible way out. However, in his experiments with assuming several identities, he also realizes that subversion is impossible without involvement and action and the end of the novel finds him in hibernation, waiting for a resurfacing and resurgence.

#### **IV. Conclusion:**

Blackness, thus, complicates the very essence of Negro identity. It becomes the determinant for the creation of racial identity markers in terms of skin colour and contributes towards the creation of racial segregation and differentiation on the basis of binary opposites, resulting in the construction of the stereotype of the Negro as 'Nigger'. Metaphorically, the dark hue of the Negro skin seems to symbolize the darkened existence that they undergo as victims of a malignant social order. While in *Native Son* Wright's prime motive was to show how the policy of segregation adopted by the whites failed in containing the Negro from becoming a social threat, it also served as a warning towards the future of the American nation in case more Bigger Thomases were to adopt the same recourse driven out of fear and the sense of inadequacy. The novel has very well thrown light on the fallacious logic of the white-skinned Americans who adopt the policy of segregation and concentration of the Negroes in unhygienic neighbourhoods in an attempt to keep them away from causing harm to their white counterparts. As a scathing remark on racial policy based on differentiation, the novel proves beyond doubt how in the white mindset black is inseparably linked to whatever is negative and evil. It does not provide any solution nor any hope in the American society on the question of the emancipation of the Negro.

The situation is not much different from the polite refusal that the sophisticated English landlady provides to the narrator in Wole Soyinka's *Telephone Conversation*. Though the spatial context in Soyinka's poem is England and not America, yet the desire of the whites to segregate the blacks is not less prominent:

... Voice, when it came,  
Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled  
Cigarette-holder pipped. Caught I was, foully.  
"HOW DARK?" ...I had not misheard..."ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?"

It is clear that the lady is keen on knowing the degree of blackness of the narrator. Further:

Considerate she was, varying the emphasis-  
"ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT" Revelation came  
"You mean-like plain or milk chocolate?"



Her accent was clinical, crushing in its light  
Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted  
I chose. "West African sepia" – and as afterthought.  
"Down in my passport." [25]

The emphasis of the prospective landlady on the possible variation in the skin tone of the narrator is important since it does help to bring to light the difference in treatment meted out to the Negro according to the variation in the tint of their dark skin. The poem also brings into focus the difference in the English and the American approach towards segregating the Negro. While the enmity towards the Negro is open and publicly acknowledged in America (as is evident in *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*), it is subtle and disguised in England, as Soyinka's poem points out. E.R. Braithwaite, the author of *To Sir, With Love* [26] laments the English attitude towards the Negro and expresses the view that such disguised racial prejudice is more dangerous than open enmity since in the latter case one is at least sure who one's enemy is.

*Invisible Man* enquires into the issue of blackness from the angle of social invisibility of the Negro. For Ellison, the dark epidermis of the Negro accounts for the desire of the white populace to push them into the abyss of social invisibility so that the question of social responsibility does not arise, for recognition entails responsibility. While the protagonist in *Native Son* has already accepted the identity thrust upon him by the whites, the protagonist in *Invisible Man* is on a quest for the real Negro identity. Read as a 'protest novel' for decades, *Invisible Man* is a negation of the imposed identity of the Negro in a racially determined society. It serves as a pointer to the misled search of the Negro for his own identity through the eyes of those who would gladly and purposefully present him with distorted images of his self. Also, the novel does not deny the possibility of violence erupting out of the process of exploitation and tries to present subversion as a solution to the predicament of the Negro caught in the web of identity conflict. Besides addressing the question of the racial difference arising out of skin colour, the novel is also a bold analysis of the problem of the determination of Negro identity on the principles of assimilation and assertion and the problems arising out of the contradiction between these two opposing principles.

At the end, it can be held beyond doubt that the dark colour of the Negro skin becomes a very potent tool in stereotyping the Negro in the arena of racial discourse generated by the whites with the ultimate objective of creating and maintaining an imbalance in the equation of power between the two races. Unfortunately, this attempt at subordinating the Negro by the creation of a relationship based on binary opposites takes on an insidious turn and becomes the marker for exploitation, persecution and execution of the Negro. All said and done, though the two novels taken up for discussion in this paper bring into focus several of the issues related to racial discourse the racial question surrounding Negro identity remains unresolved.

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