



IDENTITY CRISIS OF NEGRO YOUTHS IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S NATIVE SON AND RALPH ELLISON'S INVISIBLE MAN

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Abstract

Negroes' racial roots repeatedly create obstacles in their search for identity. Though identity crisis is much debated issue in literature but it carries special implication in the case Native Son and Invisible Man. Mr. Wright exemplifies identity crisis to great extent in Native Son. He explores how identity crisis leads dehumanization and self-destruction for its young Negro protagonist. He said. "Men can starve from a lack of self realization as much as they can from a lack of bread" (Wright, 1). The above remark is applicable for condition of Bigger Thomas in Native Son. Bigger is the protagonist who is possessive of his identity and suffers by thinking of his Negro origin. He is a twenty year's black uneducated Negro youth craving for his social acceptance in the American society. He is trapped in puzzle where he is considered inferior because he is black. Invisible Man reflects identifiable irony of social identity through painful efforts and experience of re-identification. Mr. Ellison uses the first irony in not naming his character. His protagonist is fatherless and because of his fatherlessness he expects help in the process of re identification. He meets various characters whom he assumes as supportive and fatherly figures. Many of them exploit the protagonist. Dr Bledsoe spoils protagonist's career as a Negro student. Mr. Norton did nothing for stopping protagonist's expulsion. The protagonist realizes that Mr. Norton pretends to be liberal but in reality he does not value identity of Negroes. Protagonist's expectations for liberty from Mr. Norton end with arousing frustration in him. In the next stage protagonist's confrontation with Vet (madman) shows ironic importance because Vet has victimized by the fake assurance of freedom by Mr. Norton. His insanity suggests ironical implication of broken expectations of Negroes and effects of identity crisis.



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Introduction: -

The present research paper deals with identity crisis of Negro youth in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* are milestones in Afro-American literature. Mr. Wright and Mr. Ellison are frontrunners novelists of modern Afro-American literature. The objectives of the present research article are to investigate efforts and futility of Negro youth for their identity. The research paper also analyzes Negro life which is full of ambiguities and predicaments. The other objective is to substantiate common aspects of identity crisis in their selected novels. The hypothesis of

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research paper are assumed, that their novels present identity crisis as dehumanizing factor for social status of blacks in America. The Negro youths are caught in an unpleasant situation which is difficult to escape. The researcher has used research methodology of MLA 7th edition for citation. The descriptive, interpretative and analytical research methodology is used. The original texts of the select novelists are used as primary source for the study. The critical books of well known authors are used as secondary source for the study. *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* present oppression of Negro youths in the context of American society.

The problem of their identity crisis is basically related to their social status, economical status and racist environment. Erik Erikson a psychologist has coined the term identity crisis.

Identity refers to our sense of who we are as individuals and as members of social groups. Our identities are not simply our own creation: identities grow in response to both internal and external factors. To some extent, each of us chooses an identity, but identities are also formed by environmental forces out of our control. (Erickson, 16-19)

Negroes' racial roots repeatedly create obstacles in their search for identity. Though identity crisis is much debated issue in literature but it carries special implication in the case *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*. Mr. Wright exemplifies identity crisis to great extent in *Native Son*. He explores how identity crisis leads dehumanization and self-destruction for its young Negro protagonist. He said. "Men can starve from a lack of self realization as much as they can from a lack of bread" (Wright, 1). The above remark is applicable for condition of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. Bigger is the protagonist who is possessive of his identity and suffers by thinking of his Negro origin. He is a twenty year's black uneducated Negro youth craving for his social acceptance in the American society. He is trapped in puzzle where he is considered inferior because he is black. The gulf between two communities creates a fear in his mind and due to it he faces a strange situation. He is victimized by the racial superiority of the whites. Mr. Wright voices the urge and necessity of an individual through the protagonist. The identity crisis is found in Bigger's journey that lacks stability. The researcher found requirement of self definition in the life of Negro. He represents the sense of belongingness of the blacks. The roots of slavery intensify his problem of identity. It makes

him directionless to decide his actual identity. The poor economical and shrewd political conditions are the other crucial obstacles in defining his identity. Mr. Wright's portrayal of his protagonist explore that his identity is defined by color of his skin. Mr. Wright criticizes parameter of color for judging his identity. The racist prejudices regard blacks as intellectually and socially inferior. The example of this fact is seen, when Bigger's act of killing Mary, a white girl is blamed by the judge prior before hearing side of Bigger. The accidental and unintentional killing of Mary makes Bigger as a professional murderer in the eyes of white society. From the very beginning of the novel Bigger desires for dignified identity. Bigger is not satisfied by the subaltern treatment given to the blacks. He is deprived of human affection which extends dejection and isolation in his mind. He realizes to be is lived in an incomplete world. His economical condition contributes to his struggle. His family is living in the narrow room. The narrowness of room highlights narrowness of Bigger's identity in the big white world. It suggests that his identity is suppressed by the big and rigid walls of discrimination. The example of search for identity is investigated in social grouping. "Social grouping among poor urban black males was a strategy meant to ease psychological anxiety and to make a sense of a world filled with racial terror" (Nejad, 653-658). The above remark describes condition of Bigger. His anxiety enforced him for joining the gang of Negro boys. He assumes social grouping to be a shelter for him for securing his identity but it didn't work. His longing for identity is found in another incident when Bigger asks his friend Gus to act like a white. Bigger's act shows his mind is overwhelmed by the impact of whiteness. He realizes subordinate status for being Negro. Bigger is aware about the power of white who controls everything including their (Negro) life. Bigger knows that his identity is worthless without power. The black boys' playing white gives them temporary identity. The black boys consider it more effective, smarter and affluent than their Negro identity. Bigger is trapped between white and black identity and he is confused in his mind. It shows how the question of identity corrupts his mind and forces him to imitate their oppressor. Bigger's perception of white as a strong and black as a weak is another reason for identity crisis. Bigger's action shows his sleekness of power, which is dramatically fulfilled in his unintentional killing of Mary Dalton, the white girl. Though he accidentally kills her but his later action is intentional and well planned. It was the foremost offense of him against the

whites that intensified his longing for power. Bigger feels released from his constant fear from whites after killing Mary. Bigger's identity is interpreted as a new and violent identity after Mary's murder. His lawyer Max explains circumstances of Bigger in court for justifying worse and trapped condition of Bigger.

This is the case of a man's mistaking a whole race of men as a part of the natural structure of the universe and of his acting toward them accordingly. He murdered Mary Dalton accidentally, without thinking, without plan, without conscious motive. But, after he murdered, he accepted the crime, and that's the important thing. It was the first full act of his life; it was the most meaningful, exciting, and stirring that had ever happened to him. He accepted it because it made him free, gave him the possibility of choice of action, the opportunity to act and to feel that his action carried weight" (NS, 422).

He plans to earn money from the Dalton's family by her supposed kidnapping. It suggests his strong desire for becoming powerful that draws his life at risk. When his secret is disclosed to his beloved Bessie, he kills her for saving his life. This is unjustifiable act of Bigger that hints universal problem of securing individual identity. He takes various irrational steps. Finally he realizes his unnoticed and unimportant existence in the white society. He is identified and justified only as a Negro. His journey ends in misery with bringing death penalty for him.

What I killed for must've been good!' Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. 'It must have been good! 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...It's the truth, Mr. Max, I can say it now, ' cause I'm going to die. (NS, 453)

Thus *Native Son* has explored how Bigger lost in his journey for getting identified. Bigger's loss suggests how, the dominance of the white world causes the process of his dehumanization which intensified his identity crisis as a Negro. He has not been accepted and considered as a native son of America.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* also presents identity crises of Negro youth in. It presents journey of the protagonist for social visibility that ends in realizing self invisibility. Mr. Ellison has depicted a journey of nineteen years nameless Negro youth. Ellison's said. "It

[identity] is the American theme. The nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are. It is still a young society, and this is an integral part of its development” (Maroney, 1-2). This remark of Mr. Ellison is applicable to the protagonist of *Invisible Man*. He is caught in self determined identity and social identity. Mr. Ellison points out that white American society restricts Negroes from their social identity. He blames on the nature of American society which is responsible for identity crisis in Negroes. The protagonist struggles and suffers for forming actual identity. His ancestry, ethnic roots, race division, gender and sex become responsible factor for his identity crisis. The white society does not allow the protagonist to think his individual identity. His namelessness itself shows worthlessness of identity as a Negro. “I am invisible man ... I am invisible; understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (Ellison, 3). He confronts various situations for knowing his existence in the white world. He moves from self sense to social sense to seek his exact place in the society. The social barriers often remain superior over his determination and overcome his self sense. The opening scene portrays the narrator’s living in underground room surrounded by hundreds of electric bulbs highlighting his desire for identity and social recognition. The Battle Royal scene also presents an example of identity crisis. The protagonist and group of black boys are blindfolded and controlled by the white officials. The whites compel him to fight with a group of black boys in which the blood comes out of his mouth. He delivers a speech pointing about social responsibility. The fighting of black boys shows Negro youth’s struggle for identity, which is a means of entertainment for white officials and audiences. The protagonist is interrupted many times while delivering a speech. Further Dr. Bledsoe expelled him from the college. His expulsion from the college suggests his failure in obtaining social identity as a Negro. His expulsion developed a sense of disillusionment and helplessness in his mind. He continues his struggle for identity and goes to Harlem. He joins Brotherhood Organization and gets impressed by the ideology of brotherhood organization. The protagonist realizes positive feeling for his self identity. This sense of social grouping encouraged him to move ahead. The social groping suggests social groping in *Native Son*. The protagonist experiences new identity as a member of organization and uses his oratory skill for motivating the black youths of Harlem to unite in the fight of Brotherhood organization. He is accorded new name and identity by the organization. He

assumes it as an option for self and social identity. But he realizes hypocrisy of organization after the death of Tod Clifton the former member of Brotherhood. This new identity proves deceptive for him. The protagonist finds himself in identity crisis again and gets confused. His illusion of self identity is shattered by the reality of social identity.

Invisible Man reflects identifiable irony of social identity through painful efforts and experience of re-identification. Mr. Ellison uses the first irony in not naming his character. His protagonist is fatherless and because of his fatherlessness he expects help in the process of re identification. He meets various characters whom he assumes as supportive and fatherly figures. Many of them exploit the protagonist. Dr Bledsoe spoils protagonist's career as a Negro student. Mr. Norton did nothing for stopping protagonist's expulsion. The protagonist realizes that Mr. Norton pretends to be liberal but in reality he does not value identity of Negroes. Protagonist's expectations for liberty from Mr. Norton end with arousing frustration in him. In the next stage protagonist's confrontation with Vet (madman) shows ironic importance because Vet has victimized by the fake assurance of freedom by Mr. Norton. His insanity suggests ironical implication of broken expectations of Negroes and effects of identity crisis. Jack and Hambro the leaders of Brotherhood who speak for class free and race free society but they too remained false figure for the protagonist. The Brotherhood organization has not thoroughly fulfills invisible man's desire for social identity. Ras is another false figure of invisible man. He views everybody and everything from racist lenses. The protagonist examines Ras as ill advised and manipulative. Ras is proved another fake figure for the protagonist. These characters remained deceptive to the protagonist in the way of his journey for identity. The social difficulties of his identity create disputes between him and society. The challenges and difficulties contribute for his gradual frustration. He realizes social perception of Negro identity. His realization of self invisibility is reflected in the following extracts.

And now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure they were much the same each as tempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things look to me. I was simply a material a natural resource to be used. I had featured from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the

Brotherhood and it all came out the same except, I now recognized my invisibility.
(IM, 409-411)

Thus his search for identity remained traumatic, and illusionary. His journey which was began for visibility ends in realizing his invisibility as a Negro youth.

Conclusion:-

In this way the researcher found identity crisis as dehumanizing factor for Negro youths. The marginalized Negro youths found themselves helpless before oddity of white world. Their efforts for their social identity and survival is neglected and rejected by figurative blindness of American society. White men's superiority complex drove them in the crisis of identity. The effect of racist attitudes on Negro youths even after the end of slavery is effectively depicted by Mr. Wright and Mr. Ellison. It is found that such discrimination creates feelings of revolt and violence in Negro youths in the select novels. Bigger presents revolution and violence while nameless protagonist presents solution and peace. Though they are different in their response to their social environment but both failed for bringing significant and meaningful identity as Negro youths. They are haunted by the memory of slavery and inhuman treatment which intensified their identity crisis. The racist approach of society critically affected the psychology of Negro youths. The validation of objectives and hypothesis are obtained in finding research conclusion that, the predicament of the protagonists is an outcome of social structure of America. Such bias atmosphere creates pointlessness and invisibility in Negro youth ignoring individual traits. Thus Negro youths in the select novels have been presented as a victim of the American society of particular era. The Negro youths have faced identity crisis due to the attitude of the society towards them in which they live. The Negro youths in the select novels realized a vast gulf between their Negro aspiration and social reality. Their identity crisis didn't resolve rather realized them utter failure and futility being Negro youths. It is found that Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* realistically carries issue of Negro youths' identity crisis.

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