

The Representation of Whiteness in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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ABSTRACT

Racism has always been a never-ending issue in society; one specific racist act is whiteness. The issue of whiteness is still considered an inevitable issue that is still happening until today, and it gives negative impact on the non-white. The issue of racism is often analyzed as a form of prejudice, stereotype, and discrimination. However, the issue of racism is a general issue. Thus, the present research attempts to portray the specific act of racism, which is whiteness. The novel *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison brings the issue of racism. By using Garner (2007) theory of whiteness, the issue of racism that is present in the novel is analyzed under the four themes of whiteness to provide an alternative understanding of the issue of racism through the lens of whiteness. This research entitled "The Representation of Whiteness in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" attempts to reveal how whiteness is constructed as a racist act in the society which becomes the central issue of the novel. This research employs Young's (1999) theory of representation and Garner's (2007) theory of whiteness to provides another perspective of whiteness by portraying the themes of whiteness, and how it is constructed in society. The findings show that the issue of whiteness is dominantly exercised through terror and supremacy, and it makes the non-white feel inferior to the White.

Keywords: *whiteness, white privilege, white supremacy*

INTRODUCTION

Until today, the issue of racism is still happening. Back into the age of slavery, White enslaved the non-white. The aftermath of slavery can be seen in how society was then constructed. White define themselves as “The Self” and assign the non-white as “The Other”. White is influential because they have the advantage to define people of different skin color as a result of the construction of their whiteness; they exercise their power to discriminate the non-white. As history shows, White used to enslave the non-white and also used to colonize other countries of the non-white. Nowadays, although the colonial era has ended, discrimination to the non-white are still happening. Some of the White still think that they are superior because they are white. It is apparent that White is giving unequal rights to the non-white. This issue is often raised in the literature, as “Literature is one of the most interesting and significant expressions of humanity,” (Barnum, 1866, p.13) express that literature is one of the mediums to

raise humanity issues because everyone can relate to literature.

One such work is Ralph Ellison’s (1952) *Invisible Man*, which brings the issue of racism by showing the discrimination towards Black in American society. Set in New York City, the major center of African-American culture. The narrator, who is a black man, is portrayed as the invisible man. The term “invisible man” in the novel does not refer to a person who is physically invisible or has the power to be invisible in front of other people. It refers to someone who is invisible in the eye of the majority members of the society who are White. His invisibility is mainly because of his skin color.

White, in the story, exercise their power of being White by discriminating Black through racist acts which dehumanize them as a human. They look down upon Black and treat them as non-human being. The issue of racism, which is done by White in the novel has attracted the writer to conduct research on this issue because the issue of racism done

by White is interesting to be further investigated. A particular term used in this issue is Whiteness.

Whiteness is the idea of being white and of having inherent privileges of being white. This privilege of being white has created inequality or injustice among other races in society. More specifically, the practice of racism done by white is called as white racism as coined by Hill (2008). White racism refers to practices of racism which is done by White, and it is not only a mere American history, but it is organized by white-dominated institutions and White as an individual.

White racism is derived from the construction of whiteness in society, and it leads to a racist act. Glasgow (2009) states that the racism derives from disregard, more generally, as a form of ill will towards the other races. Thus, racist actions will be hostile and disrespectful for the victims. Berman and Paradies (2010) note that racism can be expressed through stereotype (racist beliefs), prejudice (racist emotions/affect), and discrimination (racist behaviors and

practices). According to Rosado (2012), disregardful actions are only classified into prejudice and discrimination because prejudice already includes stereotype. As this novel raises the issue of racism done by White toward the Black, the theory of Whiteness is best implemented to show how the novel represents Whiteness. Garner (2007) categorized the kinds of Whiteness into four forms: Whiteness as terror and supremacy, Whiteness as a kind of absence, Whiteness as contingent hierarchies, and Whiteness as values, norm, and cultural capital.

This research also employs the theory of representation in examining the data regarding the issue of whiteness. Hall (1997) explains that representation is the process of meaning-making by which meaning is produced between members of a culture; the process of the meaning-making itself covers the use of language, signs, and images which represent an object. The theory of representation is best applied to support the research in examining the representation of whiteness as it helps

to establish a better understanding of the issue. Young (1999) states literary works can also be a source of knowledge through the theory of representation. He further explains there are three types of literary depiction that helps to examine the represented issue. Thus, the use of the theory of representation helps to portray how whiteness in the novel *Invisible Man* and to present understanding of how the issue of whiteness is exercised in society.

There have been many researchers who conducted studies on the issue of racism that is represented in literary works. Wilson (2014) found that there remains the overrepresentation of White and invisibility of racial minorities as an impact of racial representations in children's picture books. Szulkowska (2017) studies the relationships between White character and Black character in Katherine Stockett's *The Help*, specifically about racism experienced by African Americans. She then found that through *The Help* people are aware of the problem of white supremacy and the damage of

racism towards the Black. Rezazade and Zohdi (2016) analyze color blindness in the case of racism in Nelle Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* and found that being color-blind is one of the solutions to the issue of racism, as color-blindness is the ability to see with the transparent eyeball and preventing the act of racism. Pfeifer (2009) found that the white and black function as a profound metaphor or binary opposition. Pfeifer found that the Dark Continent is an explicit symbol of the opposition between forces of 'civilization' and images of 'savagery' and dark primitivism. These symbolisms presume the dualistic splits of White/non-white.

Meanwhile, the novel itself has been analyzed by some researchers. Lamm (2003) analyses the issue of visuality and Black masculinity, which focus on the visual representations of the black male. Wilcox (2007) analyses the issue of Black power, which leads to the idea of the prototype for a Black cyborg subject. Another research regarding the novel is Widyana's (2006)

research on the issue of discrimination. She focuses on the race relationship between White and Black. Most of the researchers focus on the issue of invisibility, discrimination, and racism. None of the research specifically focuses on racism done by White.

The previous studies on this novel have already examined specific issues that are raised in the novel. It includes

METHODOLOGY

In order to analyze the representation of whiteness in the novel *Invisible Man*, this study used textual analysis approach. This approach was chosen since the data of the representation of whiteness is based on the text in the novel. According to Bernard and Ryan (1998), textual analysis involves the examination of words, sentences, paragraphs, ideas, meanings, paralinguistic features, documents, and another aspect that is missing in the text. Subsequently, the researchers should interpret, mark, retrieve, and count the information they have gathered based on the text

racism in general, identity, alienation, color blindness, and the impact of racial representations. As most of the previous studies only focus on the issue of racism in general, the main focus of this research is the issue of whiteness. The research is expected to provide information on the issue of whiteness, which is represented in the novel by showing its construction in society and how it is exercised as a racist act.

by using numerical and interpretative analysis.

In relation to Bernard and Ryan (1998), textual analysis, according to McKee (2003), is an approach where the researchers gather information about how people make sense of the world. In other words, textual analysis is a method where researchers make an “educated guess”; the interpretation is created based on the analyzed text. Furthermore, he explains that textual analysis is not used to find a single correct interpretation. There are many interpretations that may be considered closer to be treated as ‘the true

interpretation' in certain circumstances. The approach offers a different conclusion since the point of view of the researcher is also considered as unique. Thus, between one researcher and other researchers may have a different conclusion as it based on the theory they use to evaluate the text. Textual analysis approach aims to give an insightful and thoughtful reading to help the reader understand the text in a new and refreshing manner.

Thus, the writer believes that this approach is suitable for the research since it focused on analyzing the representation of whiteness based on the text of the novel by finding the features that support the existence of whiteness.

Summary of *Invisible Man*

Invisible Man is a novel written by Ralph Ellison during the World War II (1945), and took five years to complete the novel with one year off; the novel was published in 1952 by Random House. Ellison straddles two important literary movements which are the Harlem Renaissance and

Black Arts Movement. It happens that most African American novels are written as a form of social protest. Besides the literary movements, the novel is also intended to raise the social issues in America which happened in that era. One of the major social issues that the novel raises is the issue of racism. Thus, looking back at America in that era, Black was socially-discriminated. It can be seen how the society of America unfairly treated Black through the right segregation. Through *Invisible Man*, Ellison is the first African American who wins the National Book Award.

Invisible Man is a story of a black man struggling in a white-dominated society. He was a southern educated black man who then in the story moved to the North. As he himself experienced a racist act from the society, he chose to join the Brotherhood, a multicultural organization. From the Brotherhood, he expected to make racial equality where no one is discriminated. However, the leader of the Brotherhood, who is named Brother Jack did not even care about racial equality. The Narrator finally chooses

to be an invisible man. He chose to be an invisible man not because he was physically invisible; his invisibility happened because society refuses to see him.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Whiteness as Supremacy

Whiteness, as it gives advantages to White, is mainly about the superiority of White toward other races. Garner (2007) states that whiteness as terror and supremacy is about a structure of domination in terms of the power of naming, defining, decision making, and the use of physical and symbolic violence. The next evidence shows how the presence of whiteness can bring terror to non-white through the use of physical and symbolic violence. One night The Narrator took a walk, and he accidentally bumped into a white man. He experienced an unpleasant reaction as the white man reacted rudely to him.

One night I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness **he saw me and called me an insulting name.**

I sprang at him, seized his coat lapels and demanded that he apologize. **He was a tall blonde man, and as my face come close to his he looked insolently out of his blue eyes and cursed me, his breath hot in my face as he struggled.** (p. 4)

The Narrator clearly describes how the man he bumped into look like. He is a tall blonde man and with blue eyes. The interesting point of this literary depiction is about how the white man reacts toward The Narrator; in this case, the white man reacts rudely. From the reaction of the white man, it can be seen how the physical and symbolic violence of whiteness works. The presence of whiteness gives privilege to White, which gives them advantages in their presence in society.

The evidence shows how one's state of mind plays an essential role in the presence of whiteness. The Narrator himself directly describes the physical appearance of the man, and from his descriptions, it can be pictured that the man is a white man

based on his physical appearance. In this case, the state of mind of The Narrator shows how he personally sees the white man; he sees the white man through his physical appearance.

Whiteness as a Kind of Absence

The presence of whiteness in society constructs a central point; in other words, everything is related to White or about White. As Garner (2007) states that white is the point from which judgments are made, for example: if white is normality then the non-white is an abnormality, if white is beauty then the non-white is ugliness, if white is civilized then the non-white is barbaric. The idea of White as the point from judgments are made, create the idea that the non-white needs qualifications and need to pass the qualifications if they want to be recognized. In other words, the presence of whiteness defines the identities of the non-white. Whiteness is invisible to White because they think that whatever happened to them is what happens to everyone else; whiteness is visible to others because whiteness defines their identities. The

Narrator himself feels the presence of whiteness and aware that whiteness defines his identity, of who he is. The Narrator introduces himself with a detailed description.

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor I am one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. **I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.** 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.**

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a 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. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.** (p. 3)

It is interesting how The Narrator introduces himself. The Narrator begins with the main point of his identity is that he is an invisible man. The Narrator's invisibility is not physical invisibility but social invisibility. The Narrator emphasizes that the cause of his invisibility comes from his society and not come from himself. This evidence proves that whiteness defines the non-white identities; in this case, the identity of The Narrator as the invisible man is constructed because the society refuses to see his presence. It also proves that whiteness also defines what a human is, and to be a human need to pass the qualification of whiteness. In other words, everything

else except white is acknowledged as deviant. The idea of the qualification construct the power relation of White over Black; if white is human, black as the binary opposite is deviant.

Whiteness as Values, Norms, and Cultural Capital

Whiteness embeds its values in society; the values that are embedded transform into norms and cultural capital. Garner (2007) states that whiteness takes its position in society as the polar opposite of non-whiteness. Whiteness as polar opposite applies such as whiteness without blackness. In other words, white against everything that does not suit their values. The novel *Invisible Man* shows how the value of whiteness exists in society through the common sense of and the politics of White, and white as the point that is being mimicked by the non-white.

A small dry mustached man
in the front row blared out,
"Say that slowly, son!"
"What, sir?"
"What you just said!"
"Social responsibility, sir," I
said.

“You weren’t being smart, were you, boy?” he said, not unkindly.

“No, sir!”

“You sure about ‘equality’ was a mistake?”

“Oh, yes, sir,” I said. “I was swallowing blood.”

“Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to do right by you, but you’ve got to know your place at all times. All right, now, go on with your speech.” (p. 31)

The conversation happened when The Narrator slipped the word equality instead of responsibility in his speech after the battle royale. It is interesting how the crowd ignore him while he delivers his speech, but then pay attention to him when he slips the word “equality”. One of the White questions what The Narrator means by equality, and it can be implied that there is no equality between White and Black, and the white man confirms the idea of whiteness as the polar opposite of non-whiteness. It means that when there is equality

between White and Black, it will destroy the value of whiteness since if whiteness exists, then blackness is not.

I passed on to a window decorated with switches of wiry false hair, ointments guaranteed to produce the miracle of whitening black skin. **“You too can be truly beautiful,” a sign proclaimed. “Win greater happiness with whiter complexion. Be outstanding in your social set.”** (p. 262)

Another value that is known as the value of whiteness is about the concept of beauty, which means white is the definition of beauty. Fanon (1967) states that whiteness affects the psychological of the non-white, and it leads them to mimic whiteness. The evidence confirmed that being white is being beautiful, and being black is the opposite. The value of being white is beautiful is embedded in society as the evidence shows that having whiter complexion can bring happiness and being outstanding in the social set. It can be implied that

The Narrator does pay attention to physical appearance, as same as when he describes the white man that he bumped.

Whiteness as Contingent Hierarchies

The presence of whiteness in society is structured and in the form of hierarchies. It means that white is at the top of the hierarchy, and the non-white is the subordinate. The interesting part about the hierarchy of whiteness is that not every white is considered as white; some of the white is considered as less white. The novel *Invisible Man* also shows that not every white is considered as white. In other words, it shows that not every White is considered as White. The evidence shows that the northern and the southern White is different.

“I was sent here by a friend of his. You read the letter, but still you refuse to let me see him, and now you’re trying to get me to leave college. **What kind of man are you, anyway, What have you got**

against me? You, a northern white man!” (p. 189)

It is interesting about the transition of place in the story, especially that is experienced by The Narrator. The Narrator is a southern black man moves to the North. It is known that society in the North is different compared to the South. The difference is in terms of racist acts. For Black, moving from the South to the North is considered as the road to freedom; the South rigidly segregates Black from White, while in the North is divided into predominantly society. Based on The Narrator statement, it can be seen that he emphasizes “northern white man” as a northern white man is whiter than the southern white man.

“Y’all’s the ones. You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher. **And I tell you something else, it’s the ones from the South that’s got to do it, them what knows the fire ain’t forgot how it burns. Up here too many forgits.** They finds a place for themselves and forgits the

ones on the bottom. Oh, heap of them *talks* about doing things, but they done really forgot. No, it's you young ones what has to remember and take the lead. (p. 255)

Mary's statement about the Southern Black shows what she is thinking about her race and the northern people. Based on the finding, it portrays that contingent plays an essential point in defining race. Mary says that the Black from the South should lift their race a little higher. In the novel, it is known that the Black from the South experience more racist acts rather than those who are in the North.

Discussion

Invisible Man has shown that whiteness is an issue in society. Its presence has brought terror and supremacy to the non-white. This present research has analyzed the issue of whiteness in the novel, and found that whiteness is dominantly represented through verbal depiction; it becomes the dominant evidence in the novel because the novel is narrated by a black man which lives

in a white-dominated society. As mentioned before, verbal depiction represents the state of mind of the characters in the story. The novel shows that every Black character in the story sees whiteness as a terror and supremacy. On the other hand, the White characters' state of mind in the story represents their superiority toward the non-white. For example, the findings have proved that the presence of whiteness brings terror by giving negative labels to the non-white as shown in the novel; Black in the novel is disadvantaged by the negative label.

It is proved that whiteness is dominantly about terror to the non-white and supremacy to White. This study has provided several different perspectives toward the issue of racism by using the lens of whiteness. Terror and supremacy play a dominant role in the presence of whiteness, even though whiteness is complexly constructed in society and control many aspects of society such as by the terms: visibility, invisibility, values, norms, cultural capital, and contingent hierarchies. The presence

of whiteness exists to advantage White through white privilege by the movement of white supremacy. Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that the presence of whiteness means no equality to the non-white.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze the representation of whiteness in the novel *Invisible Man* by using the theory of representation proposed by Young (1999) and Whiteness by Garner (2007). As the aim of the study is to analyze the representation of whiteness, Young's theory of representation is used in this study to find the textual evidence of the representation under the category of three literary depictions. The literary depiction then is connected to the theory of whiteness which covers four whiteness themes: (1) Terror and supremacy, (2) Absence, (3) Values, norms, and cultural capital, (4) Contingent hierarchies. The result of the study shows that the issue of whiteness in the novel is dominantly represented through verbal depiction with the theme of terror and

supremacy. Through the verbal depiction evidence that is found in the novel, it can be concluded that the effect of whiteness is dominantly manifested in the state of mind of an individual.

Whiteness is not limited in terror and supremacy. Furthermore, it covers many aspects of society. One to mention is its functions as a framing position that makes White able to define the identity of the non-white. The presence of White defines the Narrator's identity, and the white-dominated society he lives in; he then defined himself as the invisible man—not because he is invisible, but society refuses to see him. Whiteness also roots their values in society, which for sure to advantage White. Throughout the novel, White is treated as the superior being to those who are not white; everything related to White, which has the value of White, is seen as the right thing. From the study, it can be seen that whiteness is the most specific act of racism.

As the final point, this study is conducted to provide an alternative

understanding of the issue of racism. Whiteness is a more constructed act of racism which covers many aspects that advantage White; it is in the form of white supremacy and white

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