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## **RALPH ELLISON'IN *INVISIBLE MAN* ROMANINDA TEN RENGİNE DAYALI AYRIMCILIK**

### ***COLOURISM IN RALPH ELLISON'S INVISIBLE MAN***

**Doç. Dr. Aydın GÖRMEZ**  
Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi  
Edebiyat Fakültesi  
İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü  
aydingormez@hotmail.com

**Bayan Ahmed MOHAMMAD**  
Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi  
Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü  
İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı ABD  
Tezli Yüksek Lisans Öğrencisi  
duhok3620@gmail.com

### **Öz**

Ten rengine dayalı ayrımcılığın edebiyatta yansıtıldığı gibi gerçek yaşamda ırkçılıktan daha kötü olduğu düşünülür. Bu tür ayrımcılık insanların ten rengine dayalı olarak yapılır. Ten rengine göre ayrımcılıkta insanlar tenlerinin daha açık ve daha koyu olmalarına göre kategorize edilirler. Nispeten daha açık tenliler özgür bir iradeye sahip olarak kabul edilirken koyu tenliler çok fazla engele ve haksızlığa maruz kalırlar. Bu tarz ayrımcılık yeni bir kavram değildir ve kökeni çok eskilere, kölelik dönemine dayanır. Afrikalı Amerikalı bir yazar ve İnsan Hakları Hareketi aktivisti olarak Ralph Ellison insanları ten rengine göre değerlendiren insanlara karşı öfke duyar. Ellison'ın *Görülme-yen Adam* romanı bu türden ayrımcılıklara bir tepki olarak yazılmış ve koyu tenli insanların yetenek ve becerilerine dikkat çeker. Ten rengine dayalı ayrımcılığın sorunlarını gözler önüne sermek için görünme ve

görünmezlik temaları yazar tarafından kasıtlı olarak seçilmiştir. Bu makale, yaşama ayna tutan ve edebiyatın önemli bir türü olan romandan somut örnekler vererek Ellison'ın ten rengine dayalı ayrımcılığı ne denli çarpıcı bir şekilde işlediğini incelemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ralph Ellison, Ten rengine dayalı ayrımcılık, Afrikalı Amerikan, görünmezlik.

### **Abstract**

Colourism is thought to be worse than racism in real life as reflected in literature in general. Such discrimination is based on the skin colour of human beings. For colourism, people are divided into lighter and darker skins. The lighter one has free will, but so many obstacles face the darker ones. Colourism is not a new concept, and its origin dates back to the slavery era. Ellison as a prominent African American novelist and writer of Civil Rights Movement is angry with those who evaluate people in view of their skin colour. *Invisible Man* was written by Ellison as a reaction to such discriminations and to draw attention to the capability of those with dark skin. The themes visibility and invisibility are deliberately chosen by the novelist to depict the troubles of colourism. This paper studies how strikingly Ellison handles the issue of colourism giving concrete examples from the novel as a mirror held for the real life of oppressions.

**Keywords:** Ralph Ellison, Colourism, African American, visibility, invisibility.

### **Introduction**

The term “colourism” began to be used only recently although the practise itself exists for ages dating back to periods of slavery and colonization. Discrimination has been rampant in many societies around the world since ancient times. However, it has been applied in different forms. One of the most common domestic forms of discrimination, specifically among African Americans is colourism. Skin colour has been defined something superior or inferior when comparing whites to other colours. Colourism refers to discrimination based on skin colour. Human skin colour varies from person to person. It ranges from a very dark skin to virtually yellowish pink one. While the former is seen among Africans, Australian Aborigines, and Melanesians, the later among northern Europeans. It was also seen as a sign for economic condition of the individuals. Some research has linked colourism “to smaller incomes, lower marriage rates, longer prison terms, and fewer job prospects for dark-skinned people” (Wilder, 2015: 7).

In the last period scholars have tried to find the visible and invisible impacts of the historical background of racial colourism and only recently began to explain the impacts of colourism in the

minority populations, especially among the African American community. Almost all research which knocked the issue of colourism and racism have touched upon Blacks versus Whites. They find that skin colour is obviously linked with black Americans' educational status, household income, occupational position, and even the skin colour and educational status of their spouses. Skin colour stratification among black Americans continues well into the 21st century (Keith, 2001: 1313-37).

Colourism has been defined as a social structure based on skin colour between different racial/ethnic groups. Light skin is deemed more valuable than dark one. The skin colour also determines the social status of a person (Maddox, 2002: 232). However, it is significant to know that skin colour is related to "other physical appearances, such as eye colour, hair texture, hair length, hair colour, the shape/size of the nose, the shape/size of the mouth, and shape of eyes" (Chase, 2004: 533-564). Colourism is categorised as a division under the umbrella of racism, but the former one is more dangerous than the later one. African Americans particularly tend to distinguish themselves from each other in the absence of whites. In addition, colourism is very complex because of its ambiguity. Unlike racism that is publicly displayed, the colours are more secret and hidden.

Colourism is seen to be the reason for some troubles within "affected ethnic groups, specifically native Brazilians, native Hindus of India, African Americans and African Cubanos, etc." (Glenn, 2008: 281). Colourism was first observed among slave owners in their treatments toward the slaves. Later this practise led to the emergence of new social classes among African Americans. This is an example for intraracial colourism, which is the social distinction that one attempts to classify members of the same race merely due to skin colour. For African Americans, colourism is a danger practiced by "members both inside and outside the race" (Harris, 2013: 178). Skin colour is observed as a criterion among the African communities of black skinned people with which they try to make basic changes in order to gain social privileges of the lighter skinned individuals by marrying lighter skinned person, and in some cases even resorting to skin changing procedures (Glenn, 2008: 282).

### **Colourism and Slavery**

Colourism among African Americans who live in the United States has historical effects emerging from slavery. Hatred and racism performed by white people toward black begins with the seventeenth century. Native Africans were unlawfully moved from their

homeland and distributed to the different areas; their skin colour was clear markers. Some colourist practices made the white skin superior whereas the dark skin inferior. Together with other negative treatments, dark skin colour served to make Africans more subjugated to colonizers' control (Fanon, 2008: 150).

Many slave owners during slavery era cooperated with each other to take blacks under control and fight the rebellious slaves. One of the slave owners Wille Lynch suggested finding differences between slaves in order to categorise them and subsequently control them for a long time. For Lynch "the list of differences included: age, skin colour, sex, hair texture, positions within the familial structure (son vs. father, wife vs. husband, etc.), the geographic location and size of the plantation they lived on, their social status as a slave":

Now that you have a list of differences, I should give you an outline of action, but before that I shall assure you that distrust is stronger than trust, and envy is stronger than adulation, respect or admiration. The Black slaves after receiving this indoctrination, shall carry on and will become self-re-fueling and self-generating for hundreds of years maybe thousands. (qtd. in Michael, 2007: 24)

The Belgian colonizers drew upon Lynch's idea. They provoked Hutus against the Tutsis and in turn Tutsis against Hutus by finding physical differences like colour, height, width of nose...etc. There is still "divide and conquer" policy for discrimination among Europeans. Raping black women by their owners resulted in a new category called "mulatto". This group had some privileges compared to black skinned people. First, they had respectable duties such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. The second benefit was that lighter-skinned would "have higher social statuses and more educational opportunities than darker skinned African Americans" (Russell, 2011: 49). Therefore, skin color has been an important sign of self-fulfillment for black men. Lighter-skinned blacks know the challenges of having a black skin in America, but they learn early in their lives that the gaps and privileges or disadvantages of having darker skin are graver. When they are young, lighter skinned people have better job prospects, and appear less dangerous for whites. In contrast, those with darker skin feel intimidated, powerless and even unhappy. Black culture in America is varied, and a kind of cast

system of skin tones exists, which is of great influence on the prospects and emotional experiences of blacks.

### **Civil Rights Movement**

The Civil Rights Movement emerged in 1963. With the emergence of the movement, the international community and the American public were shocked by the news when police used violence with dogs, fire hoses and other means. The demonstrators were abused, most of whom were teenagers. Martin Luther King's speech in this crowd was one of the most famous, influential and powerful speeches in America's history. His speech marked the beginning of a new era for the United States and the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King proved with his rhetoric and actions that the masses are capable of fulfilling their dreams through enthusiasm and patience to continue the struggle, and that the role of the leader lies in spreading much more enthusiasm and power within them. His famous phrase "I have a dream..." became one of the most famous mottos in the history of America and the history of civil rights movement. After that, Martin Luther King was arrested and jailed. There, he wrote his resounding speech which incited civil disobedience and revolution against laws and injustice in society. The protesters marched in huge cross-border from California to New York and headed straight to Washington (Holland, 2007: 35).

The Civil Rights Movement changed the history America. Several cooperations developed between the human rights community in America and human rights organizations. So, it was necessary to have cohesive and united ranks to strengthen the thorn of the case and the defenders. The alliance between several organizations is not all the same agenda or policies, but it was a cautious alliance. These alliances included a long list such as James Farmer of the Racial Equality conference, Martin Luther King of the southern Christian leadership conference and many other movements which demanded more rights, the most important of which were legislation of laws guaranteeing civil rights, the elimination of ethnic segregation in schools, protection of demonstrators from police brutality, a planning programme for public jobs to eliminate unemployment, legislation to prevent ethnic discrimination in employment programmes and autonomy for the predominantly black province of Colombia (Dwyer, 2008: 48).

President John F. Kennedy was frustrated and pessimistic at that time, fearing that Congress would be irritated if they sensed the danger of that march. So members would vote against the civil rights movement as a whole and fight against equality. But the march toward

Washington was continuing, and President Kennedy was a supporter of that movement. After walking toward Washington as a threat to racial groups, many white groups and movements showed their clear hostility against this movement. On the other hand, the traffic movement toward Washington did not succeed in gathering all the black and oppressed people around it. Some human rights activists saw a lack of accuracy and justice and a lack of ethnic balance within it. Malcom X called it “Walking to Washington” (Ness, 2015: 229). On August 28, 1963, huge numbers of demonstrators moved and gathered at Washington monument, then toward the Lincoln memorial upon the invitation of leaders and civil rights movement. There were a quarter of a million demonstrators, most of whom were white. Despite the harassment and threats that faced the southerners when they moved toward Washington and threatened by the police and other racist groups. Finally the movement came to an end. The demonstrators were peaceful and civilized so there was no violence or sabotage (Ness, 2015: 183).

### **Colourism in *Invisible Man***

*Invisible Man* was written by a famous African American novelist Ralph Ellison born on March 1, 1914, in Oklahoma. He was a grandson of slaves. Ellison’s father Lewis Alfred Ellison was a construction foreman. He died when Ralph was three years old. His mother Ida Millsap was a domestic servant. Ralph showed an abiding interest in Jazz music. In the late 1930, he won a scholarship to study music, so he left Oklahoma to join the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee. In 1936, Ellison left the Tuskegee and moved to New York City and settled in Harlem, where he studied sculpture in addition to photography. Ellison met the most important figures of the African-American literature, such as Richard Wright, who is considered the main figure in Ellison’s career as a writer. Ellison started writing his novel *Invisible Man* in the late 1940s in which he tried to represent the life of black people by viewing a new picture of black protagonist in the United States especially in the south of America.

The famous black author Richard Wright was too close to him but their description of characteristics of the protagonists was different. Fluent, educated, hard-worker and capability were the main characteristic for describing the black protagonist by Ellison. In this point, being uncultured, poor, uneducated and angry were the main features of the black protagonist by Wright. Therefore, those features were related to the black protagonist by the community. Wright’s works had a big impact on Ellison especially on his masterpiece

*Native Son*. For Ellison, Wright's writing style was directed in the way of protest novelists in conveying issues of blacks. Protest novels, notably social protest novels deal with a key social problem, such as class prejudice, race, and gender and highlights its impact upon characters of the novel (Humann, 2017: 108).

In general, oppression and violence between two races and the associations of human are their main themes. African American protest novels are primarily knocking the matter of social injustice, slavery, identity crisis and racial segregation problems. All over the world, the protest novel appears in order to reflect their problems by writers. For example, in England, it appears through the works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley and George Orwell, in France it reflects through the works of Victor Hugo and Émile Zola.

In general, protest novels describe black as victims of whites and that is why their works mostly restricted their visions among white audiences and readers. Inversely, Ellison broke such a slight image regarding blacks' case and moved beyond the line of protest novels and supposed a narrator whose life was not defined strictly by his race alone but his aims to include individual responsibility to picture his life.

An informal lyric style was used by the novelist to present the novel especially Jazz lyrics that were regarded as fundamental criteria of black cultures. As a result of that, Peter Boysen stated that "the reader feels like he or she is riding down a river, rather than sitting on a chair" (qtd. in Høglund, 2015). The novel *Invisible Man* is rich in metaphor, symbolism, flashbacks, irony, multiple tones and style. In tones, the novel extended from tragedy to wicked satire to near-slapstick comedy, from realism to intensive surrealism. "[Ellison] achieves his extraordinary power through artistry and control, through objectivity, irony, distance he works with symbol rather than with act" (Høglund, 2015).

Modernist techniques were handled by Ellison like flashbacks and interior monologue (Porter, 2011: 76). With the tone of reflection and contemplation, he tried to question the conventions and values of community in order to express his highlighted message. Furthermore, the mixture of 'I', 'You' and 'who' reveal hope and the opportunity for a conversation pervaded with new perspectives and subjectivities (Irvine, 2008: 103). As the novelist points out

'Agree 'em to death and destruction,"  
grandfather had advised. Hell, weren't they their own  
death and their own destruction except as the principle

lived in them and in us? And here's the cream of the joke: Weren't we part of them as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died? I can't figure it out; it escapes me. But what do I really want, I've asked myself. Certainly not the freedom of a Rinehart or the power of a Jack, nor simply the freedom not to run. No, but the next step I couldn't make, so I've remained in the hole'. (Ellison, 1995: 575)

His novel having been published, Ellison turned into a famous figure and interviews followed suit. His rank stretched to Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and Herman Melville. *Invisible Man* has become as a phenomenon especially in 1965 when a group consisting of (200) educated authors, critics, editors, and writers consider *Invisible Man* as the most brilliant American novel of the last twenty years. The universality and popularity of Ellison's notable novel grew more when the novel was translated into fourteen languages around the world (Nelson, 1999: 145).

American community consists mainly of two nations concerning skin colour: white and coloured. Although slavery abolished by the Federal Government, its consequences went on decades later. Basically, the phrase "if you are white, you are right, if you are black, you're way back" has occupied the mind of all black society especially in the southern part of the United States and classified as a factual cultural model (Ribeiro, 2005: 7). Accordingly, almost all blacks from black farmers to the educated ones tried to oppose the ongoing process of whites' full dominance concept in one hand and treating blacks as a sub-class citizen on the other hand. In view of such superiority, generality of writings was categorized as main obstacle for the whole authors and figures inside American Literature (Ribeiro, 2005: 8).

Ellison touches on the conception of invisibility and visibility due to peoples' aspiration to behold or not to behold the biological conditions in his works. The opening words of the prologue conclude the narrator's identity which is unobserved to the public. Additionally, the very beginning section discovers the nature of the protagonist's invisibility neither physical nor out of an accident but he still fleshes and bone as he states. Since the narrator is depicted as a young black character living in a white ruling community, such community declines to regard him as a human being unaware of his enthusiastic will to live. Such concept marks him unseen by the community. He regards himself as a figure so as to draw attention of the society:



I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I 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. (Ellison, 1995: 3)

By that explanation in which the narrator describes himself and his nation tend to depict the struggle of that conflict with those who has power and rule others. The first step of colourism and its influence is clearly given when the writer announces the troubles about the narrator in the prologue, and this is the story of the tall blond man. On one occasion, the narrator is moving along the street beneath the darkness of the sky, he falls on somebody accidentally. That person says much of offensive words which are degrading and humiliating to the narrator about his nation which hurts his emotional state. Then, the narrator apologizes to the tall blond man. Later he attacks the narrator and fights him. That tall blond man has been beaten up until he collapses severely on his knees by the narrator. In spite of his condition and his mouth bleeding, he continues to curse and constantly utters insulting words not meaning the narrator alone but all those with black skin. After that, to stop his offensive phrases the narrator pulls his knife and intends to cut his head to stop him. Eventually, the narrator recalls his situation which is his invisibility metaphorically. Here the implication is that any person becomes invisible by others when he/she is denied in that community. The most astonishing assessment about such an accident is that the following day a newspaper highlights the event as "The next day I saw his picture in the Daily News, beneath a caption stating that he had been 'mugged.' Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man!" (Ellison, 1995: 5). It underlines the blind decoration media that continually helps deepen colourism, placing blacks in circle of colourism and revealing the blacks as "mugged" which means robbed. What disturbs the writer most is the blind media which serves colourism and enlarges gaps between the two colours in justifying the action of blond man and accusing the narrator.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude the concept of colourism and its echo upon blacks in the United States of America, shedding light on the emergence and details about the word colourism is important. Colourism is defined in American literature in general and African American Literature in specific as discrimination based on the skin colour of human body. In other words, the colour of man determines his/her personality, efficacy, citizenship and even humanity. Due to such definitions, American community is divided, and lighter colour dominates the whole society in the country. Then they regard dark skin people as despised and inferior. Such discrimination sounded among the whole American community. Black authors, critics, writers and artists attempt continuously to evade such discriminations which are based on skin colour. They start to write works of art such as short stories, novels, poems and plays to show their peoples' condition and declare the impact of colourism.

Ellison, grandson of slaves, is one of the most important African American figures who started to picture colourism in his masterpiece novel *Invisible Man*. At the very beginning he concentrates on the notion of visibility and invisibility as a reference to the desire to see or ignore others. While people ignore the role and existence of blacks that make blacks unseen, Ellison tried to determine the role of dark skin people. White people do not see blacks and they want to make blacks even unseen inside their own community. To highlight the issue, Ellison uses many symbols and modern techniques to show the influence of colourism upon his people showing the terrible results if the whites keep on going on the same track.

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