Volume 18 Issue 43
Originally issued as H7



Global Journal of human-social science: H Interdisciplinary
Volume 18 Issue 7 Version 1.0 Year 2018
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460x & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

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GJHSS-H Classification: FOR Code: 111799



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The Rise of the Disabled Superman: A Parallel Reading of *Invisible Man* and *Blindness*

Aneha Hepzibah Solomon [α] & Dr. Susan Mathew [σ]

Abstract- **Attributing new dimensions to existing definitions paves the growth of every field of study. A comparative reading of the novels *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison and *Blindness* by Jose Saramago is conducted with an aim to equate the disabled individual to the notion of Superman as suggested by Nietzsche. The various dimensions of disability are analyzed under the concepts of Foucault and Althusser to identify whether a disabled superman can be evolved to save the world from its malice.**

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I. Introduction

"My disability has opened my eyes to see my true abilities" is the verdict of Robert M. Hensel, a man who transformed the defect of his spinal cord into his strength which earned him a Guinness World Record. The determination in his words reverberate an emotion that has molded the world as it is today. Affliction is a degree which has compartmentalized human beings into various strata, often negatively. But the evolution of the term and its implications has deconstructed the earlier notion that paves the way for new interpretations.

The paper entitled, " The Rise of the Disabled Superman: A Parallel Reading of *Invisible Man* and *Blindness*" is a parallel reading of the novels, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison and *Blindness* by Jose Saramago focusing on the disability portrayed in the characters. The attempt is to understand the various dimensions of disability narrated in the novels. The concept of interpellation proposed by Althusser that functions in them which results in the formation of the disability discourse. This notion is equated to the *Übermensch* concept propagated by Nietzsche to understand the ability of human beings to rise above all restrictions.

Invisible Man and *Blindness* are two books written in the 20th century but in varied scenarios. The context of Ellison's novel is in the World War decade, while Saramago has opted for a post-war setting. An analysis to understand the subtle essence of human existence to defy defeat even in adverse circumstances is the ultimate aim of the authors. American in origin and recipient of the National Book Award in 1953, Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man* renders an intriguing tale of an unnamed narrator who ultimately chose to be an invisible man in the new land. Experimental in style, Nobel laureate Jose Saramago's novel *Blindness* renders the tale of a nation which is suddenly struck by an epidemic of sightlessness.

II. Individual Suffering

In its dim-lit milieu both the novels depict about the despised human existence forced to lead a life of misery in a setting designed by the authority which is later disrupted and retaliated by the determination and execution of the individual will. On the onset, the loathed individual or the group of people are visualized as underprivileged or categorized as the disabled. Many such references are traced in both the novels. One such example is a comment made on the black community by Mr. Broadnax in the *Invisible Man* degrading them to the core with a single statement. He says, "they just nigguhs, leave 'em do it" (45). The notion spread by the verdict is that, the community into which they are born is the cause for their demeanor or in this case their disability.

In *Blindness,* their physical state is what tags them as unwanted, and this makes them vulnerable to manipulation. The cold response of the military towards the needs of the blind internees seen in the text exemplifies their weakness and showcases the practice of dehumanization by those in command. Another instance is as follows, "The sergeant's only comment was, it would have been better to let them die of hunger when the beast dies, the poison dies with it" (80). The white plague which has struck the community attributes them the adjective beast, and thus they are denied of a human rank.

Alan Foley, Associate Professor at School of Education, Syracuse University states that:

> Disability Studies generally refers to the examination of disability as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon. In contrast to clinical, medical, or ther apeutic perspectives on disability, Disability Studies focuses on how disability is defined and represented in society... a construct that finds its meaning within a social and cultural context. (Foley)

Both the novelist narrates how the current situation constructs their respective communities and

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connects the social status and cultural dimension of the group. A greater force creates an ideology that appears to be appealing or acceptable initially, only because this force takes advantage of the subject's situation. Pramod K. Nayar in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* states that "Ideology constructs the individual as a subject because it makes the individual accept reality, understand it, and live with it" (134). Thus, the ideology is created in a way to take advantage of their disability. In the novels taken to study all the individuals are made subjects, and hence they perform what Althusser termed 'interpellation':

> Interpellation is the process of consenting to ideology, accepting it and not being aware of it. It makes the subject believe that s/he is an independent being and not a subject at all controlled by outside forces. In other words, ideology interpellates the individual as a subject but makes her/him believe ... is a free agent (135).

Ellison's, as well as Saramago's characters, are subject to interpellation. The journey of the unnamed narrator to New York and his activities with the Brotherhood are instances that showcase the phenomenon in the *Invisible Man*. The character is deceived brutally of his independence by giving him a notion that he is performing greater things for the welfare of society on his own accord, but in reality, it was just the opposite. The triumph in his words, "I'm going to New York to work" (117) seems ironic because, of the lack of awareness he posses on reality. Instead of individual gain, he is about to be a victim of the onslaught of ideology. The hypocritical nature of the letters comes to light when finally he reads one of them. His determination not to go for favors is the first glimmer of the rebellion he projects, but the betrayal does not end there.

The second occurrence in the novel that shows interpellation are the activities of the narrator in the brotherhood. The organization projects an idea that they function as the voice of the voiceless and this gains the trust of the narrator. But a public display of the belief by the narrator alters the situation. The group that made him feel important, makes him feel empty all of a sudden. The assigned task of the orator is taken off from him, and he has "the choice of becoming inactive in Harlem or accepting an assignment downtown" (306). His urge to retaliate against the forces is what makes him an outcast in his society. It is his disability which is manipulated by those in authority. The acceptance of the order from those in power shows his submission to the forces or his disabled reaction. But, the story does not end there. Yielding to the committee of brotherhood is the penultimate event and the final decision made turns his disability into 'Superman' proportions.

Unlike in the *Invisible Man*, where disability is social, culturally and psychologically constructed, *Blindness* narrates a tale of a physically disabled group of people. They lost their ability to see without any specific reasons, and those who turn blind are confined to a mental asylum. In this novel, the loss of sight causes the formation of the ideology that is lived by the characters presented by Saramago. The physical disability affects the psyche and thereby constructs a social order for the disabled community. The forced confinement is the first ideology propagated. The individual determination to make themselves comfortable in the circumstances is an act of interpellation. They all accept the injustice enforced on them mistaking their endurance for determination.

The most striking moment in the novel that displays the act of interpellation as well as manipulation of the disabled occurs when women are demanded as the price for the goods the internees need to help them survive. The atrocious behaviour exhibits total degradation of the human brain, and the act discloses the most brutal side of a human being. The verdict of the first blind man's wife in response to this is "I'm no different from others, I'll do whatever they do... stop giving orders; they won't do much good here, you're blind as I am..." (162). It shows the extent of the suffering and how the disabled is "inserted into the ideological scheme" (Nayar 135).

III. Disability Discourse of the Individual

Michael Foucault defines discourse in his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* as "the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for some statements" (80). Disability attains the status of the criteria into which these individuals are placed because the narration meets the definition. The general aspect that delivers the disable status to the characters in both the novels arises from the physiological factors. In the *Invisible Man,* the actuality that he is born into a race of black origin, attributes him the status of the disabled while, the inexplicable phenomenon of turning blind gives the characters of *Blindness* their title as the disabled.

The individualizable quality of statements in the process of discourse making occurs by giving the physical subsistence a cultural, social and psychological facet. The general discourse intensifies as the personal way of living transforms into a practise of the newly established order for the disabled. The transition of a general set of statements to a regular practice for a target group is the narration of both the novels. But, the established order does not last long in both the books. The situation alters or in other words the discourse changes.

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IV. The Rise of the Disabled Superman

Foucault has given another decree on the discourse in the same book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge.* He states:

> We must be ready to receive every moment of discourse in its sudden irruption; in that punctuality in which it appears, and in that temporal dispersion that enables it to be repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, utterly erased, and hidden, far from all view, in the dust of books. Discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin but treated as and when it occurs (25).

The sudden irruption in an established system is the aftermath of the individual will. The audacity to challenge the order and a decision against victimization of ideologies is an instance of retaliation. The personage free will to attain psychological satisfaction projects the potential to provide for the community. All these are the major events accounted in the books. Amidst numerous occurrences, both the stories come to a halt, and from there a intrepid change in the course emerge.

In the *Invisible Man* the narrator boldly states to himself, "that's enough, don't kill yourself. You've run enough; you're through with them at last," (429). The intensity of the moment is tremendous because the narrator decides to take a firm stand on his future than waiting further to see what life has in store for him. He chooses his "strategy" to hibernate to pause and teaches the world that "both men, real or fictive, hibernate in the interiors of the story of their memories..." (Jackson 31).

In *Blindness* the act that changes the course of the story is through the doctor's wife, who takes the disabled status and audaciously decides to allow her identity to be revealed, to end the humiliation she is subjected to. The tranquillity in her words, while answering her husband, "Yes, I killed him, Why, Someone had to do it, and there was no one else, and now, Now we're free, they know what awaits them if they ever try to abuse us again..." (184). She decides the limit of endurance and evokes in everyone a sense of dignity blindness seemed to steal from them. She chooses a new dawn.

The Narrator and the Doctor's wife live the concept of the modern man described by Nietzsche as stated by Tony Davies in his book *Humanism.* They undergo the "heroic transcendence, through the exercise of a 'will to power' that drives every individual to the fullest possible realisation... the *Übermensch* or the superman" (35). Just like the poetic quality of Nietzschean Philosophy, the authors through their characters succeed in convincing the reader that with the will to power limitation is what the individual decides and nothing else.

Nietzsche in his *The Will to Power* speaks about the individual as follows.

The individual is something quite new which creates new things, something absolute; all his actions are entirely his own. Ultimately, the individual derives the values of his acts from himself; because he has to interpret in a quite individual way even the words he inherited. His interpretation of a formula at least is personal, even if he does not create a formula: as an interpreter he is still creative (403).

Thus, Ellison and Saramago gives the world with two creators, the Invisible Man and the Doctor's Wife. They act on their own accord and derives values by allowing them to face follies. They interpret and create formulas. The narrator in the *Invisible man* states, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (3) is a verdict after intense deduction and understanding. The Doctor's Wife says, "I don't think we did go blind, I think we are Blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see" (309), is a statement that cannot be beautifully and strikingly described any further.

V. Conclusion

Dejection, confinement and despise are the experiences of the characters in the novels. Though both belong to the fictional genre, the realistic description and intense actions assures the reader that the depiction of such tales holds more philosophical insight than imagination. The nameless characters are symbolic because their experience is a universal phenomenon. The fulfilment a reader receives at the end of these tales is boundless. The wisdom spread is never to pause in life but to play the part one decides for oneself. Thus isn't the enunciation of the Bard of Avon in *Hamlet,* "What a piece of work is man... (Shakespeare 2.2.303-304) True?

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