مجلة جامعة دمشق للآداب والعلوم الإنسانية

اسم المقال: العنصرية المؤسساتية في روايتي رالف إليسون الرجل الخفي وهاربر لي أن تقتل طائرا بريئاً
اسم الكاتب: أيهم دهدوني، أ.م.د. باسل المسالمة
رابط ثابت: https://political-encyclopedia.org/index.php/library/2987
تاريخ الاسترداد: 2026/11/02 14:26 +03

الموسوعة السياسيّة هي مبادرة أكاديمية غير هادفة للربح، تساعد الباحثين والطلاب على الوصول واستخدام وبناء مجموعات أوسع من المحتوى العلمي العربي في مجال علم السياسة واستخدامها في الأرشيف الرقمي الموثوق به لإغناء المحتوى العربي على الإنترنت.
لمزيد من المعلومات حول الموسوعة السياسيّة - Encyclopedia Political، يرجى التواصل على info@political-encyclopedia.org

استخدامكم لأرشيف مكتبة الموسوعة السياسيّة - Encyclopedia Political يعني موافقتك على شروط وأحكام الاستخدام المتاحة على الموقع https://political-encyclopedia.org/terms-of-use

تم الحصول على هذا المقال من موقع مجلة جامعة دمشق للآداب والعلوم الإنسانية ورفده في مكتبة الموسوعة السياسيّة مستوفياً شروط حقوق الملكية الفكريّة ومتطلبات رخصة المشاع الإبداعي التي ينضوي المقال تحتها.

مجلة جامعة دمشق للآداب والعلوم الإنسانية
مجلد 39- عدد 1 (2023): 99-107

Damascus University Journal of arts and humanities sciencesVol 39 No.1 (2023):99-107

العنصرية المؤسساتية في روايتي رالف إليسون الرجل الخفي وهاربر لي أن تقتل طائرًا بريئًا

أيهم دهدوني[1]، أ.م.د. باسل المسالمة[2]

1 طالب ماجستير، قسم اللغة الانكليزية، كلية الآداب والعلوم الانسانية، جامعة دمشق.

2 أستاذ مساعد، قسم اللغة الانكليزية، كلية الآداب والعلوم الانسانية، جامعة دمشق.

الملخص:

يناقش المقال التأثير السلبي للمؤسسات في الولايات المتحدة التي يسيطر عليها العنصريون البيض في الأفراد السود. تهدف هذه الممارسات العنصرية إلى الحفاظ على سيادة البيض على المجتمع الأمريكي؛ إذ يستخدم العنصريون البيض السياق المؤسساتي لإخضاع السود وحرمانهم من حقوقهم الإنسانية الأساسية. في روايتي الرجل الخفي لرالف إليسون وأن تقتل طائرًا بريئًا لهاربر لي، تظهر المؤسسات التعليمية والطبية والقضائية بوصفها أدوات لتنفيذ السلوكيات العنصرية الموروثة من زمن العبودية؛ إذ تتعرض الشخصيات ذوات البشرة السوداء لتجارب مذلة في مختلف المؤسسات الأمريكية بسبب لون بشرتها والصور النمطية المفروضة عليها. في رواية الرجل الخفي، يواجه الراوي مواقف عنصرية طوال رحلته ويعاني من كونه أسود البشرة في كل من المؤسسات التعليمية والطبية. في المؤسسة التعليمية يُذَلُّ الراوي وتعتبر مساعيه مصدرًا للتسلية، وأما في المؤسسات الطبية فيصوّر الراوي كمادة للتجارب الطبية. ومن ناحية أخرى، في رواية أن تقتل طائرًا بريئًا، يخضع توم روبنسون للمحاكمة بناءً على ادعاء كاذب باغتصاب فتاة بيضاء. خلال تلك المحاكمة، تُنفذُ سلوكيات عنصرية تؤدي إلى إدانة توم لإشباع رغبات العنصريين البيض.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العنصرية المؤسساتية، امتياز البيض، الحفاظ على الهيمنة، إخضاع السود، التعليم، الصحة، النظام القضائي.

حقوق النشر: جامعة دمشق – سورية، يحتفظ المؤلفون بحقوق النشر بموجب الترخيص
CC BY-NC-SA 04

Institutional Racism in Ellison's Invisible Man and Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird

Ayham Dahdouni[3] **Dr. Bassel Almasalmeh**[4]

3 Master's student, Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Damascus University

4 Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Damascus University

Abstract:

This paper discusses the negative impact of institutions in the United States controlled by white racists on black individuals. White racists use the institutional context to subjugate blacks and deprive them of their basic human rights. These racist practices aim at maintaining white sovereignty over American society. In Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird, educational, medical and judicial institutions appear to be tools that implement racist attitudes inherited from the time of slavery. Black characters encounter humiliating experiences in different American institutions due to their skin color and the stereotypes that are imposed on them. On the one hand, in Invisible Man, the narrator faces racist attitudes throughout his journey, and suffers the consequences for being black in both the educational and medical institutions. The first of which humiliates the narrator through manipulating him and considering his endeavors a tool for entertainment, while the second portrays the narrator as a subject for medical experiments. On the other hand, in To Kill a Mockingbird, Tom Robinson experiences a trial based on a false accusation of raping a white girl. During the trial, racist attitudes are implemented which lead to convict Tom as guilty in order to satisfy the whites' racist desires.

Key Words: Institutional racism, white privilege, maintaining dominance, black subjugation, education, healthcare, the judicial system.

Copyright: Damascus University- Syria, The authors retain the copyright under a

CC BY- NC-SA

Introduction

This paper demonstrates how American institutions have become powerful means of maintaining white supremacy and fulfilling racist tendencies in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird. This paper examines these works by applying the approach of social studies relying on the arguments presented by sociologists and philosophers like Derek M. Griffith, Joe R. Feagin and Lisa Dorr who have tackled this issue through analyzing the reasons why these institutions tend to subjugate African-American individuals, and the ways these institutions use to fulfill the racist whites' policies.

The history of racism in the US includes a plethora of phases where racial inequality is manifested. During slavery times, the whites overpowered the blacks throughout oppression and deprivation of their basic human rights. After emancipation, these oppressive policies have continued through marginalizing black individuals in the different aspects of life. White racists tend to use the American institutions to confirm their white privilege and guarantee their access of power and domination in all fields. Hence, the term 'institutional racism' appears to express how the state's institutions used to verify the exclusion of blacks in the American society. In "Racism in Organizations: the Case of a County Public Health Department", institutional racism is defined as "a systematic set of patterns, procedures, practices, and policies that operate within institutions so as to consistently penalize, disadvantage, and exploit individuals who are members of non-White groups" (qtd. in Griffith et al. 3). Institutional racism is, thus, a term which refers to racial practices done in the state's institutions to maintain dominance of one race over other racial groups. Throughout the American history, blacks have always been oppressed and treated as tools on which white racist practices are applied. This definition reflects the discriminative nature against black people and indicates the racist practices that are implemented to perpetuate white superiority in the United States. In his book Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression, Joe Feagin states that:

U.S. institutions have been thoroughly pervaded by enduring racial stereotypes, ideas, images, emotions, proclivities, and practices. This system of white-on-black oppression was not an accident of history but was created intentionally by powerful white Americans … While significant changes have occurred in systemic racism over time, critical and fundamental elements have been reproduced over this period, and U.S. institutions today reflect and imbed the white-over-black hierarchy. (8)

The institutional environment is thought to be one of the best places to preserve the white sovereignty since it has the potential of replacing the slavery system. To keep racist practices over the blacks, the institutional context appears to be a suitable atmosphere to justify racial profiling because it represents a proper cover for exclusion and marginalization. In addition, institutional racism can be manifested in different ways which cooperate to marginalize and humiliate the blacks' presence in the American scene. The attitude of the institution members and the American institutional environment emphasizes the racist tendency to exclude the black members within these institutions. It is argued that:

Institutional racism explains how oppression can permeate different organizational characteristics and dimensions. At the individual level, racism operates through staff members' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. At the intraorganizational level, institutional racism operates through an organization's internal climate, policies, and procedures. (Griffith et al. 3)

An institution that is governed by racist motives treats its staff unequally; white members are expected to have superior attitudes and humiliate black individuals throughout actions that prove the blacks' unworthiness and helplessness. The racist system that controls the American institutions creates disparities in terms of treatment and opportunities between whites and blacks. White racists also employ the American institutions to assert their white privilege. The obsessive propensity to uphold all means of power and dominance has become the leading element which is used to affirm the racial status quo. In Structural Racism and Community Building, it is stated that "white privilege refers to whites' historical and contemporary advantage in all of the principal opportunity domains, including education, employment, housing, health care, political representation, media influence, and so on" (Lawrence et al. 19). This shows how the institutional sphere is turned into a tool to implement racial policies which keep the whites' upper hand on every field. To deny the blacks' access to the different life fields is to use institutions to accomplish this goal.

On the first hand, in Ellison's Invisible Man, the narrator encounters different kinds of institutional racism throughout his life journey. The novel goes back when the narrator is in high school in the South where the school is run by white men. When he is summoned to give a speech before the white leaders of the school, he is shocked that he has to participate with his black colleagues in the royal boxing match and they all face different kinds of humiliation. Before the match starts, the white leaders show a naked white woman dancing

before the boys. The white leaders believe that by doing so, they can tempt the black boys to fight more violently. The white leaders then force them to fight each other and use electrified rut to make them suffer more. After that, as the narrator starts to deliver his speech, the white leaders become disturbed because he mentions words like "social responsibility" and "equality". One of them stops the narrator and asks him to repeat what he said:

"What sir?"

"What you just said!"

"Social responsibility, sir,"

"You weren't being smart, were you, boy?" he said, not unkindly. "No, sir!" "You sure that bit 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." (Ellison 20)

This quotation reflects the racist attitude of the white leaders while portraying a black figure. A black man is nothing but a tool for entertainment. They cannot tolerate the idea of equality though black people are no longer slaves. What matters is maintaining dominance over the society through objectifying black people. The white leaders control the educational institution that the narrator belongs to, and they insist on performing a racist attitude to demonstrate their white privilege in oppressing and humiliating the black boys. In a book entitled Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America, George Yancy comments on the battle royal through analyzing how the white leaders perceive the black boys. He states that "The battle royal is a site of pain, pleasure, hatred, misogyny, and white myths interwoven into a sadistic and erotic spectacle" (70). The white leaders create an institutional context of their racist practices; through turning the black boys into mere animals struggling for their entertainment, they embody their hegemonic attitudes and practice their racial advantages.

Another example of using the educational institution for racist purposes is shown when the narrator is sent to New York to get a job for his study fees. Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the college, gives him several recommendation letters to help him find a job easily. As the narrator arrives at Mr. Emerson's office, he discovers that he has been tricked by Dr. Bledsoe who expelled him from college. The letters' content shows that Dr. Bledsoe is interested in distorting the narrator's reputation amongst the bosses. Young Emerson unfolds the content of the recommendation letter which states that the narrator must "continue undisturbed in these vain hopes while remaining as far as possible from our midst" (Ellison 104). The recommendation letters reveal another phase of institutional racism in the educational field where black individuals are manipulated for the sake of confirming the whites' supremacy. Dr. Bledsoe sacrifices the narrator for maintaining order in the college after the narrator's unfortunate journey with Mr. Norton, the trustee. The narrator must be punished and humiliated to confirm the college's policy which states the deprivation of black individuals of their opportunities for the sake of white dominance. Consequently, using the educational institution to displace black individuals is clear evidence of the obsessive desire to maintain white supremacy.

Moreover, the novel shows maltreatment based on racist stereotypes in the medical institution. After the explosion accident in the paint factory, the narrator wakes up in a hospital "sitting in a cold, white rigid chair" (Ellison 126). He finds himself surrounded by doctors and nurses who start asking questions, but he is still unable to focus. They also decide to put him in a box for doing some experiments because they believe that his black body can bear the pain. Although the narrator states that there is not enough space for him in the box, they assure him that it is made to treat him instead of doing a surgery. In an article entitled "Dismantling Institutional Racism: Theory and Action", it is argued that "the beliefs about the inherent inferiority of People of Color and the structures that were created to provide inferior treatment to them illustrate how racism became institutionalized in the science and practice of medicine including the US healthcare system" (Griffith et al. 383). This indicates a distortive view of the blacks' inferiority. White racists are affected by the stereotypical image about the black body, and that leads to a degrading treatment in medical institutions due to the racial biological fallacies concerning the black race. The narrator describes the way he gets electrified and the degrading behavior of the doctors:

I was pounded between crushing electrical pressures; pumped between live electrodes like an accordion between a player's hands. My lungs were compressed like a bellows and each time my breath returned I yelled, punctuating the rhythmical action of the nodes. "Hush, goddamit," one of the faces ordered. "We're trying to get you started again. Now shut up!". (Ellison 127)

The description of the narrator's treatment indicates an inhuman attitude that the doctors insist on performing. They start giving him electrical shocks and make some racist views over his body because they embrace a racist ideology that influences their attitude. In Covert Racism: Theories, Institutions, and Experiences, the doctors' perception of the narrator is clarified as they rely on racial biological assumptions that perceive the narrator's black body as abnormal and open to medical experiments. It is mentioned in the book that "eugenicists argued that racial differences were the result of genetic differences. They sought to establish the connection between biology and behavior outcomes, and in this way to connect race with population health" (Coats 72). Being affected by their racist motives, the doctors do not pay attention to the narrator's condition, and they suggest kinds of treatment that show carelessness and cruelty. For the doctors, the narrator's black body is considered a guinea pig that is vulnerable for implementing medical experiments both physically and psychologically:

"But what of his psychology?" "Absolutely of no importance!" the voice said. "The patient will live as he has to live, and with absolute integrity. Who could ask more? He'll experience no major conflict of motives, and what is even better, society will suffer no traumata on his account." … Then, "Why not castration, doctor?" a voice asked waggishly, causing me to start, a pain tearing through me. "There goes your love of blood again," the first voice laughed. "What's that definition of a surgeon, 'A butcher with a bad conscience'?" They laughed. (Ellison 129-130)

The way doctors discuss the narrator's condition and how to treat him reflects the racist view of his black body. He becomes vulnerable to barbaric medical tests since he is seen as a mere physical entity. They intentionally strip him out of humanity because of the inferior look towards his race. Racial stereotypes play a major role in determining the way the narrator's body is portrayed. Not caring about the effects of the electrical shocking on his body and suggesting castration turn the doctors in the hospital, as they represent the medical institution, into a tool which implements discriminative views over black people. The doctors appear to be eugenicists who believe in the superiority of some racial groups over others. This assumption explains why the doctors suggest wicked solutions to the narrator's condition and shows the impact of racism on the medical institution in the USA. In the end, the narrator falls into a dark hole and realizes his invisibility. He states the reason for his invisibility as a construction of the others who deny his existence. He says that "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (Ellison 5). The American institutions represented by white racists refuse to recognize the narrator because of his skin color. He is deprived of humanity because of the institutional attitudes which aim at subjugating him to restore the whites' slave-owner legacy.

On the other hand, in Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird, we can see another type of institutional racism which lies in the judicial system. Atticus Finch is the lawyer of the black Tom Robinson who is accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a white girl. During the trial, it all appears to be a fabricated story done by Mayella and her father, Bob Ewell, to lynch Tom. Tom is a poor black man who works in Mycomb and he is tempted by Mayella to have sex. When he tries to resist her, Bob comes in and Tom runs away. Bob beats his daughter and forces her to accuse Tom of raping her. One possible reason for accusing Tom is that the Ewells are considered 'white trash' in Maycomb's community, and they aim at using their racial privilege to improve their status. Analyzing To Kill a Mockingbird, Charles E. Wilson provides an explanation to the whites' attitude during Tom's trial. He argues that:

Though all the other whites in Maycomb despise the Ewells and consider them beneath contempt, they use the Robinson trial and the Ewells to uphold the myth of white superiority. Even though the Ewells are not respectable people, their whiteness … affords them some protection against perceived black encroachment. (30)

Maintaining superiority over blacks is an obsession that still lingers in the white collective consciousness. The jury members, since they are part of the white community in Maycomb, adheres to the fact that they are responsible for sustaining the racial order. Though Atticus provides clear and undoubted evidence that Tom is innocent and the accusation of rape is nothing but a plot weaved by the Ewells to clear their bad reputation, the all-white jury decide to support Mayella's assumed accusation. Considering the Ewells' accusation and convicting Tom as guilty who has to be punished indicate the effects of racism on the judicial institution.

Moreover, the judicial system in the South is affected by the salve mentality and it believes that a black man is guilty simply because of his skin color. Tom is a victim of the racist community which uses courts to justify their racist attitudes. They portray black people as animals who deserve lynching. In White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race in Virginia, 1900–1960, Lisa Dorr clarifies the impact of social expectations influenced by racism on the judicial system in America. She states that:

Trials themselves were public performances in which white juries usually, though not always, acted out their role as the protectors of white women, adhering to a script of sexual and racial ideologies made familiar through southern rhetoric. Most accused black men were convicted, but they were not necessarily guilty. The verdict of the jury merely indicated which side's version of events better adhered to accepted social realities and expectations. (5)

Since the victim is white, a black man is unquestionably guilty and the evidence is his skin color. The way the white imagery portrays a black figure reveals the white racist American attitudes where black individuals are deprived of equal chances of defending themselves. Tom is portrayed as a monstrous rapist who is supposed to receive a fatal punishment for his crime. This image suits the judicial institution best because it corresponds to the racist ideology that the white American society has been indoctrinated. Dorr asserts that:

Black-on-white rape cases became the cipher for blacks' inability to achieve justice and equality throughout the twentieth century. They came to express something true about the South—the reality of racial injustice, discrimination, persecution, and exploitation—though the individual cases in and of themselves might not always have accurately reflected that larger truth. (9)

Tom's case, hence, reflects the violation of rights that black individuals encounter due to racism which has invaded "the court system" in America. The accusation and trial of Tom aim at confirming the social fallacies about black sexuality. The discriminative policies of the judicial system prove the reality of the racist attitude that the judges perform.

In addition, Atticus clarifies the weak points in the Ewells' accusation and implicitly criticizes the jury for depending on Bob and Mayella's testimonies without doing a medical test to prove the act of rape:

The state has not produced one iota of medical evidence to the effect that the crime Tom Robinson is charged with ever took place. It has relied instead upon the testimony of two witnesses whose evidence has not only been called into serious question on cross-examination, but has been flatly contradicted by the defendant. The defendant is not guilty, but somebody in this courtroom is. (Lee 108)

Atticus deconstructs the Ewells' accusation through suspecting its credibility. He draws the jury's attention that the evidence they gave is not reliable and it is based on a fake scheme that satisfies the racist stereotypical image of a black predator who seeks to fulfill his sexual desires on his white victims. Through his convincing investigation with the Ewells, Atticus proves that their accusation against Tom is meant to erase the evidence of Mayella's fault:

She did something every child has done—she tried to put the evidence of her offense away from her. But in this case she was no child hiding stolen contraband: she struck out at her victim—of necessity she must put him away from her—he must be removed from her presence, from this world. She must destroy the evidence of her offense. (Lee 108)

Atticus demonstrates the way white racists think about blacks who are nothing but tools to be used and got rid of any time they want. The white racist community in Maycomb has been indoctrinated to avoid any kind of sexual interactions with blacks. A black man is supposed to be punished severely when he is accused by a white woman. As a result, Tom's trial is a reassurance to the racist expectations of white communities which portray the black man as a definite threat that has to be removed.

Furthermore, the white judges in the court, since they are influenced by their surroundings, support the whites' claims even if they are not convincing. Maintaining the American racial system is a major obsession for the judicial institution members who believe in the brutal images imposed on black individuals. Atticus mentions this fact while defending Tom. He states that the American judicial institution is controlled by its racist juries:

Our courts have their faults, as does any human institution, but in this country our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts all men are created equal… Gentlemen, a court is no better than each man of you sitting before me on this jury. A court is only as sound as its jury, and a jury is only as sound as the men who make it up. (Lee 109-10)

Atticus implies that the judicial institution is corrupted because the judges embrace racist ideologies which blindfold them from perceiving the truth. Although Atticus, Tom's defense lawyer, proves Tom's innocence, but the jury overlook all that to condemn him. They are not able to bear the idea of setting Tom free because that would deconstruct the racist American system which overpowers the whites against the blacks. Consequently, Tom is shot dead because of the racist ideology that is rooted in American courts. He is a victim of the institution's misdeed that aims at maintaining sovereignty over blacks.

In conclusion, after emancipation from slavery, white racists feel the need of continuing their racist attitudes against black people. Maintaining racism through public institutions is considered a proper way to subjugate

people from African descent and keep white dominance over the whole country. The two works provide a critique to the institutions that defend racist ideologies. These ideologies consider blacks to be scapegoats that are meant to keep up white dominance. Both the invisible man and Tom face dire consequences due to their skin color that condemns them to be punished. Both of them are manipulated to the institutions' interests that serve the American social status quo. The invisible man encounters humiliating experiences manifested in the practices of the educational and medical institutions, while Tom is sentenced to death because of the judicial institution's submission to the Ewells' false accusation.

Works Cited:

1-Coats, Rodney D., editor. Covert Racism: Theories, Institutions, and Experiences. Brill, 2011.
2-Dorr, Lisa. White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race in Virginia 1900-1960.
3-The University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
4-Ellison, Ralph. Invisible Man. Random House, 1952.
5-Feagin, Joe R. Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression. Routledge, 2006.
5-Griffith, Derek M., et al. "Dismantling Institutional Racism: Theory andAction." Am J Community Psychol, vol.39, no. 3, pp. 381-392. doi:10.1007/s10464-007-9117-0. Accessed in 28, October. 2021.
6-Griffith, Derek M., et al. "Racism in Organizations: The Case of a County Public Health Department". J Community Psychol, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 287-302. doi: 10.1002/jcop.20149. Accessed in 1, November. 2021.
7-Lawrence, Keith, et al. Structural Racism and Community Building. The Aspen Institute, 2004.
8-Lee, Harper. To Kill a Mockingbird. J.B. Lippincott, 1960.
9-Wilson, Jr., Charles E. Race and Racism in Literature. Greenwood Press, 2005.
10-Yancy, George. Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race.
11-Rowman &Littlefield, 2008. 2ed