
The Struggle for Equality in the Face of White Supremacy in Ralph Ellison's *The Black Ball*

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Abstract

Racism in the United States of America originates in the colonial era and it continues to be a pertinent issue in the American society even today in the 21st century. Despite the enactment of laws against racial discriminations against African-American communities, racial segregation and injustice are still widespread in the US. "The Black Ball" is one of the four lyrical short stories of Ralph Waldo Ellison (1914-1994), the other being "Boy on a Train", "Hymie's Bull", and "In a Strange Country", which concern the issues of identity, racism, discrimination, and opposition stoking up the struggle for equality. The racial discrimination is faced and its stigma is deeply experienced by John, an African-American, and his four year old son in the white dominated American society of the 1940s. The reactions and responses of the two succeeding generations show how a father protects his son from realization of the crude facts of life in a racist society and the ugly side of the racial discriminations but there is also hope because of their struggle against racism and their emerging spirit of resistance against the white supremacy. This paper seeks to explore the different layers of racial discriminations as presented in this story.

Keywords: Black-Ball, Union, Identity, White-Supremacy, Black-Resistance, Racism, Discrimination, and Humiliation.

Introduction

John, the protagonist in *The Black Ball*, is an African-American man who, despite certain odds clings to his job in a hotel to save his child from the onslaughts of racism. He is a hardworking man who struggles throughout his life. John, while living during the civil war, has to face much hardship and many complications in his life only because he was an African-American. He prefers being American to being black or white because he feels that the blacks, despite being not considered equal to others, can still retain some hope in life. So he is initially wary and suspicious of the intentions of a white union organizer and hence wary of pursuing the matter raised by him, but a confrontation between his son and white supremacy changes his mind. This change is only as a result of the oppressive white supremacy of his employer, Mr. Berry. When John's hands sting from the wound, he is reminded of the Union man's fried hands and feels that it is time for the business card to be used to insure some hope after all. It is then that he tries to feel for the Union man's card in his pocket with the suggestion that interest has just become victorious over concern. Mr. Berry's obnoxious behavior may have just ironically ensured that he will soon have to deal with the power of a union.

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Main Text

Ellison's *The Black Ball*, according to John F. Callahan, is "perhaps the most subtly crafted and realized of the unpublished stories" (1996: xxix). The story is narrated in the first-person and focuses on an African-American father who is raising his four-year-old son in a racist society. The dominant concerns of the story teller are struggle against racism and discrimination and quest for hope, identity and equality. One comes across the theme of racism in the very beginning of the story when the small boy struggles with the issues of racism. The involvement of John's son and his plight highlight the prevailing cruelty and injustice in the society. An innocent child subjected to racial discrimination demonstrates that it is not an emerging problem but a vice prevailing for generations. The child is verbally bullied because of being black even though he is too young to understand it.

The narrator of the story is John. He is a black man. He and his son live in the Southwest part of America. Born and brought up during the civil war, he faces difficulties and challenges as an African American. As he works, his son asks him "Am I black?". In fact, Jackie, one of his son's friends, had told him that he was black. John replies that he is not black, but brown. The little boy then asks his father, "Brown's much nicer than white, isn't it Daddy?" and his father concedes that some people think so but expresses his favour for national and democratic identity saying, "But American is better than both, son" (87). He means to say that one's national identity is more important than colour. According to Dermot, "It is as though John is attempting to instill into his son a sense of identity that is not dictated by the colour of a person's skin" (2018:1).

John is a menial worker in a hotel. He performs his work, devoting extra time in polishing the brass which must always look shining to Mr. Berry, the manager of the hotel and his employer. Mr. Berry's interaction with John and observation of his work reveal that judging a person on the basis of his colour of skin is not real but superficial. John says, "I gave special attention to that brass because for Berry, the manager, the luster of these brass panels and door handles was the measure of all my industry" (88). While at work, John says that he has to be very careful because "two fellows had already been dismissed because whites wanted their jobs". It is obvious that white men always enjoy the first preference in the matter of jobs and black men are destined to live in uncertainty getting or losing their job. John mentions that Mr. Berry hates "that damned educated nigger" (88), which implies that John has the potential of challenging the society's discrimination. John himself has high aspirations, but because of the colour of his skin he has no option of any occupation other than menial labour. He thinks that his child must learn his own limitations in the American society i.e. to consider himself as inferior to white. John has been trying his best to educate himself in order to better

his position to achieve the American dream. But Mr. Berry's attitude that he doesn't like the "damned educated nigger" indicates the continuation of discrimination and the hostility of the white towards the education of colored people which may better their station in life.

The question-"Daddy, am I black?"- raised by John's son in the beginning of the story is significant as another child had referred to the colour of his skin. This incident highlights the issue of the deep awareness of color in the society. John replies to his son's question, "But American is better than both, son." Aims at making his son understand that a person's colour does not matter; what matters is his character. Besides, he wants let his son know that his national identity as good citizen of America is more important than his identity as an African-American. John wants his son to understand that the conventional standards do not make his real character.

The story takes a new turn, when John's fellow worker and a Union man, heading a local labor union approaches John strikes a conversation with him. The union man is striving to unionize the African-American employees. He asks about John's job and John immediately feels threatened and finds himself on edge. Though the Union man seems to have John's interest at heart and intends to offer John an opportunity for equality, yet John's first expectation is that he wants the job- and he fears it, too, because the man is white. Being upset with John's dismissive response, the Union man hurls a few insensitive remarks towards John. The incident shows the trust deficit amongst own fellows in an unjust racial society. John has faced such a great deal of racism in his life that he has become suspicious of the intention of his own fellow-the Union man. An aspect of this may be seen in the following exchange:

"When they did have something to say to us, they always became familiar".

"Not used to anything like that, are you?"

'Not used to what?'

A little more from this guy and I would see red.

'Fellow like me offering a fellow like you something besides a rope' (88-89).

The last remark of the Union man highlights how ingrained such views are in the society, to the point where these words come naturally in conversation. The Union man invites John to smoke some Durham but John does not oblige. He shows interest only when the Union man volunteered to offer something really worth. In fact, he wanted to organize all the workers engaged in the building service in the district. His union intended to improve their working conditions by reducing their workload, shortening their hours of work and increasing their wages. He then offers John a position at his union. John finds it hard to believe him for unions do not usually recruit African-Americans. He expresses his suspicion to the Union man:

“What you really mean is that you’ll get in here and bounce me out. Unions don’t want Negro members.... Your damn unions are like everything else in the country-for whites only” and puts hard questions to him, “Whatever caused you to give a damn about a Negro anyway? Why should you try to organize Negroes” (90)?

John’s worry that his job might be stolen by the white Union man originates from his feeling of insecurity as an African-American. He continues to answer curtly, attempting to hide his annoyance. John responds with anger and frustration. This stirs the Union Man who reveals his hands to show scars all over them. He tells John about his black friend who had been falsely accused of raping a white woman- despite the fact that the friend and the Union man were shopping together fifty miles away from the crime spot at the time. The friend was lynched and his house was burnt down, and the Union man’s hands were injured when the mob set it on fire with gasoline for siding with a black man over a white woman. Since then he had to suffer and leave his life as a cropper in the countryside and move to town. He joined the union first at Arkansas and then shifted to this place for union’s work. It is only after seeing his scarred hands and listening to the story behind it that John becomes more receptive to his idea. He then hands John a card with a number and 8 p.m. sharp written on it, telling him: “There’s going to be a series of meetings at this number starting tonight, and I’d like mighty much to see you here. Bring any friend along you want to”(91). The Union man then disappears swiftly. John F. Callahan finds a pattern in Ellison’s stories as he writes, “Hearing the story and seeing the man’s hands, John feels his suspicion ebb. Here and elsewhere in the early stories, Ellison’s African-American characters show a persistent willingness to overcome their hostility to whites, suspend their disbelief, and perhaps join efforts toward brotherhood, in this case a union trying to organize black and white building-service workers” (1996: xxix).

The Union man’s burned hands are a very symbolic part of the story and his recollection of the incident with his friend is heart-breaking, because an innocent man had been blamed for no fault of his. This episode goes to show that African-American community had been excluded from society- if someone supported them, that person would be ostracized as well. The conversation between John and the Union man does give the readers an insight into just how difficult circumstances might have been for African-American in the 1940s.

That evening, when John goes back home, his son eagerly shows him his toy truck and talks about wanting to be a truck driver. But John is not able to concentrate as his mind is filled with thoughts. He sits on the sofa and looks out of the window, watching the children play while the nurse watches over them. It shows children playing together in a group- something John’s own son cannot do. One of the children, Jackie, is the white gardener’s son who had

earlier told John's son that he is "too black". The nurse forbids the other children from playing with Jackie, so Jackie pulls his toy back into the garage, quietly stealing a flower from the bush. John's son joins his father at the window, too, asking if he can go out to play with his ball. John allows his son, telling him to keep away from the other kids, not to go out and not to ask too many questions: "You stay in the back of everybody's way, and you mustn't ask anyone a lot of questions" (93). The reason for this is because it lowers the risk of the young boy being blamed for something he did not do. If he stays away, there would not be any trouble for him. The readers will feel a sense of sorrow here that a child must live with such conditions due to the misconceptions and cruel discrimination of society.

An atmosphere of suspense is created in the story when, after some time, John goes out to water the lawn and he cannot find him. He searches everywhere to no avail- but just as he sits down, defeated, his son's crying face appears in front of him, telling him that a big white boy had bullied him to throw him his ball and then the bully had taken his ball and thrown it up into that window before running away. Unfortunately, that window is Mr. Berry's. John looks up just as Mr. Berry appears at the window. He is upset and angry because the ball had gone into his private office. After seeking confirmation that the boy was John's son, he accuses him of ruining his plants with his ball and makes it clear to John that his son has no business around here in front of his house. Mr. Berry refuses to hear any explanation and shouts at both father and son. He warns John: "Well, if I ever see him around here again, you're going to find yourself behind the black ball. Now get him on round to the back and then come up here and clean up this mess he's made" (95). Mr. Berry is opposite of the Union man. Whereas the Union man is inclusive and wishes to take John in his fold, Mr. Berry is exclusive and he lets John and his son know what he perceives to be their place. John, accustomed to living in the society of white supremacy with its ups and downs resembles Alonzo Zuber Hickman in *Juneteenth* (1999), who has accepted blackness as his fate and is learning to live through smooth and the rough patches of life but the responsibilities of cultivating his prodigal son, Bliss Hickman, would change his course.

When Mr. Berry uses the term "black ball" on John and his son, the son, in his innocence, does not understand it. The two walk home in silence. The evergreen plant cuts John's hands. His son is still crying, but after washing his face and steeling himself, he asks his father what the Manager meant by a 'black ball'. The racism has been so ingrained in society that it has been internalized by the oppressed themselves. This is what John tells his son as he tries to explain to him Mr. Berry's warning: "He meant, son, that if your ball landed in his office again, Daddy would go after it behind the old black ball" (95). John's son reminds him that his ball is white and expressed his doubt if the white man can see very good, claiming, "Anybody can see my ball is white" (95). But John unwittingly uses the same language used

by his white employer. He relates it to the physical toy ball and wonders why one would call it black when it is more of a white one. His son does not understand the larger meaning in the adult's words. He innocently asks his father whether he will ever play with a black ball, and John thinks that he already is, that he is already learning the unpleasant rules of the game of white supremacy and racial discrimination: "Yes, he was learning the rules of the game already, but he didn't know it. Indeed poor little rascal, he would play until he grew sick of playing. But I'd begin telling him the rules later" (95-96). This alludes to his son already facing racism and discrimination for the first time, with many more to come in the future. John F. Callahan observes in this context; "He [John] is aware that no matter what he does, the boy will have-indeed, already has begun to have-his initiation into 'the old ball game' of crooked ground rules" (1996: xxix).

The story ends with a sense of hope. John's feeling his pocket for the Union man's card indicates that he will put his old fears aside and join the Union and things may improve for him and his son as there is every possibility of there being Union's support behind him. It may take some time but surely, the future of John's son will be better than his own. Thus his thinking changes in the end and he concludes that he will always be 'behind the black ball'. John F. Callahan sums up the total effect of the last incident in the story in the following words: "John's memory of the white organizer's burned hands, together with his boss's threat to put him behind the black ball and his little boy's wise-fool's questions, nudges him towards the thought that 'maybe there was a colour other than white on the old ball' " (1986:xxix-xxx).

The theme of relationships has been portrayed in the story in both personal and public lives of the character. The intimacy of the father-son duo lends a greater depth to the intensity of discriminatory practices that these two individuals face. John is a responsible father who takes care of his son, loves him and is alarmed when he goes missing, although momentarily. Similarly, his relationship with Mrs. Johnson (who is good to his boy) and the newly forged relationship with the Union man which rests on a common cause goes on to show that one needs support of well-wishers to sustain oneself in a wholesome manner. Contrary to this, his relationship with his employer is of a transactional nature which only aggravates the racial divide between the two. Further, the importance given to the son's viewpoint is a very clever addition, as it showcases the different perspectives of the same situation- how an inquisitive child understands his world as compared to how his weathered, unfortunately accustomed father deals with it. It presents a ray of hope, but at the same time a tinge of sadness is registered as we realize that the son's bright naivety will soon fade as he experiences more and more prejudice

It is worthy to note that Ellison approaches the theme of racism and struggle in the story through an interaction-based first-person narrative. Ellison blends dialogue and description, and uses situations and conversation to emphasize key elements in the piece. He also uses some important literary techniques like symbolism, foreshadowing and parallelism not only to add to its literary value but also to elevate the readers' understanding and experiences. Symbolism has been used to add meaning to the story beyond the literary meaning while foreshadowing has been used to raise the readers' curiosity and create suspense. Parallelism holds the readers' attention by making comparisons to bring in clarity and maintain balance.

The title of the story, *The Black Ball*, is itself a dominant symbol in the story. The phrase in title "Black Ball" is associated the son's toy and it creates a fascinating metaphor-to-object representation. The ball symbolizes of his childhood and identity which is first used by a white bully and is then given a racial label by Mr. Berry. Being 'blackballed' means that one is being shunned, or kicked out of a group. The term 'blackness' has been referred throughout the story. There is a difference between being a black ball and being behind a black ball. Being behind the black ball means you are in sticky situation, like it could go good or bad. In other words Mr. Berry's "You're going to find yourself behind the black ball" is a veiled threat of his dismissal from the job.

Another dominant symbol in the story is 'hand'. The "fried hands" of the Union man, which he got for siding with his coloured friend against a white woman, represents solidarity and John is reminded of him when his own hands are scratched and wounded as he stumbles into the evergreen plants towards the end of the story. The Union man has burned hands in support of his black friend who was wrongly accused. John has got a cut on his hands while taking his son home after the son was falsely blamed. It burned when he put iodine on it. These scarred hands are symbolic of the struggle for equality. Physical wounds represent unfair racial treatment. It may also act as a link between them- John and the Union man- emitting a new ray of hope and a reminder to John that despite what society says, they are both equals. This hope is reflected in John's digging his hand into his pocket to reach for the card. His action indicates that he will attend the union meeting that night and cast his vote to ensure a free and equal life for his posterity.

It is worthy to note that the word "hands" has been used as a synecdoche to represent manual workers working in big firms. The story foreshadows a future possibility when the "hands" could unite and fight for better conditions of living. And for this, John and the Union man equally need each other. There is all possibility that the status-quo of class and color may be challenged by the united workers fighting for their just cause. Obviously, their meeting in the

first part of the story is a symbolic event in this context. Their encounter represents an encounter of two hands, two social identities of color and class.

Foreshadowing has been employed by Ellison in many instances of the story. Thoughts and actions of certain characters in the story do give indication of what is to come later in the story. One such instance is Mr. Berry's gazing into the brass before entering his office: "He stood gazing into the brass like the wicked queen into her looking glass in the story which the boy liked so well" (91). This line foreshadows the event when the same Berry, like the wicked queen of the story which the boy liked so well, will label his identity with a racial slur. John's comment which he makes while his son is looking for his lost ball before going out to play, foreshadows the inevitable end of the story: "But he couldn't find the ball; I would have to find it for him" (93). This line becomes significant when one compares it to what he has to say in the end inevitably brings in the comparison with this line: "Indeed, poor little rascal, he would play until he grew sick of playing. But I'd begin telling him the rules later" (95-96). Here, the physical ball and racial discrimination come together and the literal and the figurative fuse into one another.

Parallelism has been employed as a literary device to create a definite pattern by enumerating a series of similar incidents and experiences in respect of racism and discrimination. In the first part of the story, John listens to the account of the Union man's experiences of the injustices of the world but in the later part of the story when he finally finds his son looking up into a window with tears on his eyes, learns what had happened, and faces the wrath of Mr. Berry, he realizes that he has experienced the injustice of the world. In the Union man's story, his black friend was blamed for a crime he had not committed. John's son, though on a far smaller scale, is also blamed for something he did not do— something a white boy had done. Such instances also present the idea of assigning blame to the marginalized groups and finding scapegoats for the faults of powerful ones, and the pages of history are replete with them.

The story draws attention to the inter-generational impact of white racism prevalent in the American society. John, the father, and his four-year old son belong to two different generations but they face the same racial discrimination—one white bully threatens John to fire him from his job and another white blames his son for the wrong committed by a white bully. But John's constant struggle for equality and his persistent efforts to better his position mark the end of this lingering racial discrimination and ensure a brighter future for his son. Moreover, the Union man's struggle to improve and ensure good working conditions for the laborers consolidates this possibility

The story seeks to present man's struggle for equality in social fault lines of color and class, as well as his personal and public life. These parallelisms represent the society's outlook and treatment towards African-Americans, facing the same discriminatory for several generations. Such parallelisms not only emphasize the prevalent racism and discrimination against the African-American but also present the message in digestible terms.

The title of the story *The Black Ball* is apt and significant because it captures the central idea of the entire story. The 'ball' in the title is a literal ball played with by the narrator's son who is black. His ball is white. But when an older white boy asks to play with it, and the black boy immediately throws it through a window, he learns the phrase "behind the black ball" used by Mr. Berry. The phrase "behind the black ball", seeks to emphasize that the black ball is like a game of pool, but the meaning in this story is that it is bad to be behind the black ball, the African American's had to play a game, like pool to stay out of trouble and John's son mentions towards the end of the story that Mr. Berry is possibly blind because he had mistaken his ball for being black when it is white. The white ball in pool often was used to dominate or eliminate the other colours and the whites told others to do that. The ball, despite being more of a white ball is stupidly called black (according to the son), becomes the symbol of the ignorance which leads to blackballing as a means of maintaining racial domination. The white ball is used as a racial slur by Berry to refer to the game of racism that the black boy is a part of.

Conclusion

The Black Ball is an intimate account of one's first-hand experience with racism. The story deals with the struggle along with equality, hope and connection and frequently used phrase of the title 'black ball' symbolizes the difficulty of being a black person, the struggle and humiliation and discrimination of being a Negro. Ellison uses symbolism of the black ball to portray the difference between the life of whites and blacks. The story vividly presents an account the impact of racism on man's life, his world view, and his relationships. But the hope lies in the fact that invisible strength of one's character is more important than one's visible black colour of skin. And if the men of characters join hands and work together for the betterment of their members, they can challenge to the status-quo of racism, eradicate it and ensure better life for the succeeding generations. It is worth noting that John, the narrator of this story, also pledges allegiance to America and the ideals for which it stands. John is a tender loving father who believes in the American Dream. The story anticipates Ellison's concepts of white people superiority, the struggle of the African-Americans for their true existence, their true identity and their recognition by white people as an equal human being, he deals with extensively in *Invisible Man*.

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