Racism Should be Eliminated: Critical Analysis of Ralph Ellison’s Battle Royal

Nowadays, most people are educated to respect the cultural differences among different races and learn about the importance of developing intercultural sensitivity. It is a way to eliminate racial superiority and racism from our society. However, during the very early stages of the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans were severely suffering from racial discrimination. Many Black writers tried to depict their struggles for attaining racial equality in their great works. For instance, in Ralph Ellison’s “*Battle Royal”*, the narrator was recalling back to his youth when he was not aware of being “invisible”. The narrator was “invisible” because most White people refused to see him. He used to misinterpret his grandfather’s dying words that Black people should be obedient and submissive in order to earn a living in the White-dominated society. The narrator gained a pseudo respect for having this mentality among the Whites. Lately, he figured out by himself that the mentality of killing the Whites with kindness was completely wrong. Throughout the novel, Ellison shows that the White community wishes to keep the Black people obedient and under control. In the critical analysis, how the author manages to use symbolism to deliver his messages of promoting racial equality and eliminating racial discrimination will be comprehensibly discussed.

The first symbol in the novel is the idea of “wearing mask”. Ellison uses symbols and metaphorical tools to express the difficult situation that the Black people have to pretend to be obedient in order to survive in a White-dominated society. For instance, the dying words of his grandfather shows that the Black people have to wear masks in order to survive in the “lions’ mouth” by showing loyalty and obedience to them (p1). Here, “lions” is a metaphor to show that the White people are predators in the society. Their position in the social hierarchical order is much higher than other racial minority groups. As such, the narrator’s grandfather suggests that the Blacks should flatter the White people with “yeses” or “grins” in order to survive as if they are “spies” in an enemy country(p1). Even though what his grandfather actually means is that the Black people should internally resist racial inequality and only show meekness at a superficial level, the mentality of being obedient and submissive is not a viable solution to eradicate racial discrimination. Another example of “wearing mask” can be found in the description of the dancer, “The hair was yellow like that a circus kewpie doll,..., the color of a baboon’s butt” (p3) and “They caught her just as she reached a door,...I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror”(p4). It shows that the stripper is forced to give the nude performance. She also wears a mask and pretends to be obedient to the White crowd. The author describes that she has “fixed-smiling lips” but “disgust in her eyes”. The situation of the stripper is exactly the same as African Americans during that time. They were bullied and humiliated by the Whites.

Moreover, another symbol used in this novel is “invisibility”. The author emphases the idea that the White people tend to make other social minority groups invisible in his novel. For instance, “I [narrator] wanted at once and the same time to run from the room,...where below the small American flag tattooed upon her belly her thighs formed a capital V”(p3). Here, the “blonde” or stripper in the novel serves as a symbol for invisibility and corruption of the White-dominated society in the U.S. The White people tries to make the Black people and females invisible to the general public. In the novel, the stripper is objectified and forced to perform a nude dance for the White people. Instead of giving a honored speech, the narrator himself has to fight with other Black boys to entertain the White audiences. The “national flag” in the above-mentioned citation implies that all men should be equal as it is the cornerstone of how the country was founded. By right, the Black people and women should receive an equal amount of opportunities and treat equally but it is not so in the real world. For instance, even though the Black boys admire the blonde, they are not allowed to have any sort of relationship with her. It shows that the Black people can admire the material success of the country but cannot achieve as they are not the Whites from higher social status.

The Last symbol is the White “blindfold” which represents the Whites’ control over the Black community. For instance, in the novel, “I [narrator] felt myself going over, my head hitting the floor. Streaks of blue light filled the Black world behind the blindfold”(p5). The word “blindfold” keeps appearing throughout the novel. It symbolizes how the Whites mislead the Black people in the American society. Boys are made to fight wearing White blindfolds. They are told that the enemies are each other rather than the White crowd. The dream and the envelop mentions in the last part of the novel express very similar ideas. In the dream, the narrator and his grandfather are at a circus. The narrator’s grandfather did not really laugh as he felt that the Black people are at the same position of the clowns who tries to entertain their audiences but they are actually under the control of the crowd (p7). The words inside the envelop says that “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running”(p12). It actually implies that the Whites want to keep the Black people under control by keeping them busy. In fact, the narrator is never treated equal as he attends only a Negro college. He does not receive equal educational opportunities with his White counterparts. The symbol, White blindfold, implies that when the Black people are under control and obedient, it is possible for the Whites to enjoy living in a society with racial superiority and high stability as the Black will not start rebellions.

In conclusion, Ellison is very successful in using symbolism and other literature tools to reveal the problem of racial inequality and discrimination in the White-dominated society. “Wearing mask”, “invisibility” and “blindfolds” are all symbols to unravel how the Black people are treated unequally in the U.S. The grandfather’s dying words initially seem to be contradictory as a man has to make a success through being submissive to the White. Lately, when I read that his grandfather does not laugh in the circus performance, I realize that the Black people are mentally hurt and traumatized by the cruel racial discrimination. Then I begin to understand what he actually means. All in all, racism and racial discrimination should be thoroughly eradicated from the U.S society.