



# Portrayal of Female Characters in Ralph Ellison's Fiction: An Existential Approach

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Women are markedly different from men in their biological appearance and psychological framework. They have always struggled to exist in the human society. Women are considered as second sex from the primitive ages and are being suppressed and oppressed in the patriarchal world. The nineteenth century women have focused on overturning legal inequalities, particularly their suffrage. Mary Wollstonecraft has published one article on feminist treatises, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and advocated the social and moral equality. The twentieth century brought numerous changes in women's life. Several feminist movements emerged, which tried to reduce the patriarchal pressure, and became successful in giving rights to the women.

Historically the term 'feminism' first appeared in France and Netherland in 1872, in the Great Britain in 1890s, and in the United States in 1910. Some feminist writers of eighteenth century, who propagated their views on female subordination, were Margaret Cavendish, Jeremy Bentham, and Mary Wollstonecraft. In the nineteenth century, also women were not allowed to write and publish their works. The best examples are of Charlotte Bronte, Mary Ann Evans, and Amandine- Lucile-Aurore Dupin, who published their works with their pen names. Virginia Woolf comments; "Currer Bell, George Eliot and George Sand, all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of man" (Woolf 57). It is man who designated woman as a homemaker, the person of the house and restricted her existence to the four walls and to the domestic affairs.

Existentialism tries to find out the untold story of the human life. For existentialists, an individual is not a conceptual reality but a concrete reality, and “its concreteness, moreover is not that of an object or thing but is that of subject” (Srinivasan 487). As a concrete subject there are numerous possibilities in human life; possibility to choose, to reject, to accept, or to decide etc. therefore an individual may be a writer, a philosopher, a scientist, or an artist. It is up to him/her to decide what he/she likes to be and how.

Ellison presents only two female characters; Mary and Sybil in his novel *Invisible Man* that plays very short and supportive roles. Both of them are presented as representative of the women of mid-twentieth century America. When Ellison wrote this novel, the America had recently faced Great Depression and World War II and this obviously affected human society. In the scenario, men as well as women began to re-build society with expectations. Women were expected to identify as wives and mothers. Many women who were working outside had to give up their jobs and return quietly to domestic life.

Mary is presented as a symbol of African-American poor women. Genuinely, black women in America suffered more as compared to white women. Claudia Card, in her book *Simon De Beauvoir* (2003) aptly comments; “Beauvoir sees women’s situation in relation to men as similar to African-Americans’ and to the Jews’ situation in relation to Christians” (Card 39).

Throughout Mary’s character, one can recognize the passive side of black women of mid-twentieth century.

Mary appears in the novel as a humble woman who feels pity for the Narrator and gives him a place to stay. Ellison describes her too kind who always helps any black person without expecting anything in return. She always encourages the Narrator to take some strong action and to fight against the injustice meted to the black community.

She says to the Narrator; “It’s you young folks what’s going to make the changes,” she said, “y’all’s the ones. You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher” (Ellison Invi 255). She becomes the source of inspiration for the Narrator. Her words inspire him. The change in him can easily be seen throughout his own words:

***“Other than Mary I had no friends and desired none. Nor did I think of Mary as a ‘friend’; she was something more- a force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face” (258).***

Mary is described as motherly figure for blacks. She acts passively and does not think about her rights as a black woman. She only acts for her race rather than for herself. Ellison leaves her in dark and pretty much invisible after letting her play a short role. However, within such brief description, she looks more aware of white peoples’ treachery and racism. Therefore, she separates herself from them. Her words “I’m in New York, but New York ain’t in me” (255) clearly points out her choice. Choice plays an important role in the philosophy of existentialism. She is well aware that like a free individual, she has choice to accept or reject anything. In this case, she gets attached with blacks by detaching herself from whites.

Ellison portrays her as a poor woman. She represents black women who lived in poverty facing identity crisis. When the Narrator gives her hundred dollars, her excitement and worries to receive it, confirms that she has seen such huge amount for the first time in her life. She expresses her excitement in following words;

***“But that’s a hundred-dollar bill. I take that an’ try to change it and the white folks’ll want to know my whole life’s history.” She snorted. “They want to know where I was born, where I work, and where I been for the last six months, and when I tell ‘em they still gonna think I stole it. Ain’t you got nothing smaller” (325)?***

Her reaction over hundred dollars bill forces one to imagine the poverty of black women. Mary stands for black women’s struggle for existence as well as she represents their socio-economic status in the society. Living in poverty, the black women lost equal status in the society. As Ellison presents them, it seems that the main aim of their existence was to stand firmly back to their men and encourage their men to act, while hiding them in invisibility.

Ellison also describes the story of Trueblood where he depicts the downtrodden status of women and their incapability to fight against patriarchal system. Trueblood, a black individual rapes his own daughter. His wife allows him to live in the same home with his daughter only because he is the sole earner. Ellison presents black women completely dependent on men. In this regard, no place remains for them to stand independently and to feel their existence.

Ellison also presents Sybil, the second female character with a brief role to play in the novel. She is described as a wealthy white woman and feels neglected by her husband. Her husband is always busy so her loneliness makes her the perfect victim. The traditional views of patriarchal society are adverse for women. Women have been losing their psychological and rational existence.

To exist on a physical level is not the real existence but in a patriarchal order woman is forced to exist biologically only. One of the principles of traditional patriarchal society is that, a woman should always be a faithful daughter, wife, and mother in any condition. She should maintain her purity and loyalty. She is not permitted to have relationship with other men except her husband. It is apt to note the views of R.K. Narayan that beautifully expresses the existence of a woman's body through the female character Rukmini's words;

*I don't possess anything in this world. What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father's, her husband's or son's" (Mishra 25).*

Sybil is seen as a representative of subjugated women who lived in a patriarchal society in mid of the twentieth century. As a modern woman, she releases the burden of subjugation by allowing herself to have extra marital affair with the Narrator. When the Narrator invites her to his apartment, showing her sexual desire without concern, she asks the Narrator to rape her. She uses her body as a tool to exist and therefore sees the Narrator as sexual object.

As an individual, she highlights the social position of women by commenting; "Men have suppressed us too much. We're expected to pass up too many human things" (Ellison Invi 519), while her idea is not discussed later in the novel. She becomes the representative of white women who are being subordinated in mid-twentieth century. It also becomes clear that her role is simply to represent those wealthy white women who wish to be sexually subjugated by powerful black men that have been subjugated by white society all along.

Comparatively, she does not look more conscious about her existence as Sartre's character 'Lizzie'. Lizzie in *The Respectful Prostitute* (1946) is an American white wealthy woman who unlike other feminists has nothing to do with whites or blacks. She fights for her own existence. She is well aware of the truth that, the Negro did not rape her. However, she turns against him for the sake of her physical existence in the white society:

**NEGRO.** *They think I harmed you, ma'am.*

**LIZZIE.** *Do you know why they are after you?*

**NEGRO.** *Because they suppose I wronged you, ma'am.*

**LIZZIE.** *Do you know who told them that?*

**NEGRO.** *No.*

**LIZZIE.** *I did...what do you think of that"? (Sartre 269)*

However, Sybil does not turn against the Narrator rather she offers him her body. Moreover, she eventually fails to exist before her husband as well as before the Narrator. Giving injustice to female characters by presenting them with brief roles, Ellison wants to draw attention toward patriarchal social system existing in mid-twentieth century America where man is the primary authority figure and controller of the social organizations that marginalizes women in every sphere of life.

Unlike *Invisible Man*, Ellison fails to give females main role to play in *Three Days Before the Shooting*. The two female figures, Laura and Sister Georgia have a considerably very short appearance in the novel. They are placed in the novel with minor and as supportive figures. They are often secondary, with very short appearances and very superficial interventions. Moreover, the few times they do interact with each other and the subject of the conversation is none other than men.

However, Ellison presents third female character named Maud with short but an impressive and feminine role. Maud is only female character in the novel who raises existential questions for women. Unlike Laura and Georgia, she is presented as a black woman. She highlights racist nature of whites in the novel. Ellison describes the scene where Rockmore is murdered and the police suspect McMillan, a black man as murderer. Hickman too arrives there and observes the incident. He realizes that the police are forcing McMillan to confess the murder. However, Maud as a neighbor of Rockmore comes forward and defends McMillan. She raises questions like;

*"What I want to know is how long are our colors men going to stand for these here white police to always be coming around dragging their nasty, filthy minds into the places where we colored folks are forced against our own free wills to live" (Ellison Three 446)?*

Surprisingly, she fights with other neighbors to defend McMillan. She reveals the blindness of blacks by saying, “We been in it so long that we’re blind and I want to be taught to see” (448)! She plays an active role in the scene and takes complete responsibility of her actions. She shares her dream, which is very important in the novel. She says that she gave birth to three coloured babies and “One of them was black and one was white and one was riney red” (448). She feels proud of being mother of three coloured babies however; people laugh over her and call her a liar.

Truthfully, Ellison reveals here that there should not be any discrimination based on colour in the country. She lifts up existential questions for women by asking, “What do you know about the woman’s role in life” (449)? In her dream, she says that someone steals her coloured babies. Here Ellison unveils the fact that whites do not want an America, which is colorless. People call her a bitch because she gave birth to babies without having husband. In response to this, she asks for justice. She questions:

*“...does the good earth have to be married before it can give birth to spring? And if it doesn’t, then tell me why I have to be? Because aren’t all of us genuine, nitty-gitty black women the daughters of the earth? Of the rich, black, fruitful earth, who is the mother of us all, including that little nasty white rookie cop down there? And aren’t us black women supposed to be natural like the earth, our mama” (451)?*

She represents free black women of modern America who fight hard in order to achieve status in the society. Furthermore, she diverts Hickman’s attention towards her speech to get his favour and asks, “Was I wrong...I mean when my own folks scorned me and called me a bitch” (453)? Her speech focuses on America, which is colorless, impresses Hickman. He thinks, “...she’s touched me and touched me hard” (453).

It seems that Ellison wanted to expose worst situation of black women, and therefore he presents all three females as black in *Three Days Before the Shooting*. Just as Narrator’s ideas get refresh by Mary’s words in *Invisible Man*, in the same way, Hickman becomes more active for his actions after hearing Maud. The black women faced double torture in the country; on the one side, they are born as women who are considered passive human beings while on the other, they are born in black, powerless and subjugated community.

Remarkably, Maud becomes the source of inspiration for Hickman as well as for the whole country. Her dream reflects future of the country that is like three coloured baby born from a single mother. However, she is unable to exist individually. No one cares when she speaks on behalf of women. Finally she needs Hickman's attention to find her identity and status. Her character brings out the reality of passive black women who are subjugated under the patriarchal order.

The role and purpose of female characters in the novel is never found notable. The two female figures, Laura and Sister Georgia have a considerably very short appearance in the novel. They are placed in the novel as minor characters and as supportive figures. They are often secondary, with very short appearances and superficial interventions. Moreover, the few times they do interact with each other and the subject of the conversation is none other than men. However, Maud is given short but an impressive and feminine role. She lifts up existential questions for women. She represents free black women of modern America who fight hard in order to achieve status in the society.

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