

RESEARCH ARTICLE



THE MUSIC OF INVISIBILITY IN ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

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ABSTRACT

Invisible Man is a novel by Ralph Ellison addresses many of the social and intellectual issues facing African-Americans early in the twentieth century, including black nationalism, the relationship between black identity and Marxism, and the reformist racial policies of Booker T. Washington, as well as issues of individuality and personal identity. Ellison brings out the problems of identity crisis along with Marxist ideals. He focuses on how the whites manipulate the blacks and employ their division policy among the blacks so that the blacks never fight against the white oppression. Ellison criticises both the whites and the blacks in the same manner. In *Invisible Man* itself he criticizes the white man who tries to exploit and manipulate the black man. At the same time he criticizes the black people who meekly follow the whites without thinking of their thousands of suffering black brothers. These blacks may justify themselves by saying that it is because of the strategy and power that they are forced to follow the whites. But the blacks should know how to deal with the white if not he will exploit him. Invisible man has much to say to this world from his experiences. But the simple message “keep this nigger boy running” should be analysed closely. The whites want the blacks always running. Ellison criticises both the whites and the blacks in the same manner. In *Invisible Man* he criticizes the white man who tries to exploit and manipulate the black man and also criticizes the black people who meekly follow the whites.

KEYWORDS:racism,whites,brotherhood,invisible man

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INTRODUCTION

Ellison in *Invisible Man* presents racial and identity crisis in a political way. The identity crisis has been a problem of the blacks in America for centuries. The whites never consider the blacks as Americans. That means the blacks in America belong neither to America nor to Africa. Racial discrimination is also a major issue. There are even separate schools, hospitals and churches for the blacks. All these kinds of segregations push the blacks to the margins in every aspect.

The white strategy to influence the blacks is very important in the novel. The whites under the guise of being a ‘brother’ to the blacks, in the real sense segregate them. Actually, both the protagonist and Ras the Exhorter belong to the same black ethnic group, but, in the novel both are set against each other. The brotherhood’s aim is to divide the blacks, when Ras works against the Brotherhood, invisible man works against Ras. These are the white man’s strategy to manipulate the blacks into their party.

The grandson of slaves, Ellison was born in 1914 in Oklahoma. As a young man Ellison developed interest in jazz music. Ellison himself studied instruments and played them. In 1933 he left Oklahoma to begin to study music. He joined the institute named Tuskegee University which was founded by Booker T. Washington, one of the foremost black educators in American history and which later became one of the most popular black colleges. It later served as the model for *Invisible Man*. Later he left the University for Harlem where he settled. As an employee of the Federal Writer's Project, Ellison befriended many of the most important African- American writers of the era, including Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. Ellison won a Rosenwald Fellowship, which he used to write *Invisible Man*.

Major of Ellison works are *Juneteenth*, *Shadow and Act*, *Going to the Territory*. *Juneteenth*, his novel is based on the incident that happened at Texas when the southern revivals or union troops entered Texas and offered a tribute discourse on race to Abraham Lincoln, their fourteenth president who was 'one of us'. The novel tells the story of Rev. A. Z. Hickman the Black preacher. Senator Adam Sunraider was a bliss, an orphan taken in by Hickman and raised to be a preacher like him. His history encompasses camp meetings where he becomes the risen Lazarus to inspire the faithful. And behind it lies all mystery: how did this chosen child become the man who would deny everything to achieve his goals? The story's process is based on this mystery. The novel is a great work regarding the discourse on race.

CONTENT

The novel begins with the narrator's claim that he is the "invisible man". His invisibility he claims is not physical- he is not literally invisible- but is rather the result of the refusal of others to see him. He says that because of his invisibility, he has been hiding from the world, living underground and stealing electricity from the Monopolated Light & Power Company. He burns 1,369 light bulbs simultaneously and listens to Louis Armstrong "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue" on a phonograph. He says that he has gone underground in order to write the story of his life and invisibility. In the beginning of the book, the narrator lives in a

Southern town. He is a model student even named a valedictorian by his school. Having written and delivered a speech about the requirement of humility for the black man's progress he is invited to give a speech before the whites. But before delivering the speech he has to fight the 'battle royal' which is too humiliating, with other black boys. The battle royal consists of the black young men fighting blindfolded in a boxing ring. After delivering the speech, he receives a scholar ship to study at the Tuskegee University.

During his junior year at the college, the narrator takes Mr. Norton, a visiting rich white trustee, on a drive in the country. The incidents that happen there lead to his doom. It marks the end of his career at the University. He is forced to leave the college. He is expelled from the college by the president, Mr. Bledsoe because he feels that the college's funds will be jeopardized by the incidents that happened. While the invisible man once admired to be like Bledsoe he realizes that the man has portrayed himself as a black stereotype in order to succeed in the white- dominated society. Bledsoe gives him several letters of recommendation to help him find jobs. He later realizes that the content of the letter is to "keep this nigger boy running". His dream to return to the college is shattered.

He eventually gets a job in the boiler room of a paint factory renowned for its white paints. The man incharge Lucius Brockway, is extremely paranoid and thinks that the narrator has come to take his job. A fight occurs between them and Brockway tricks him into turning a wrong valve and causing the boiler to explode. Narrator is hospitalised after this incident and loses his job. He is taken care by Mary who is more a mother figure to him. He joins the Brotherhood, an equality minded organization with obvious communist overtones. Their leader, Brother Jack, who had witnessed his speech, recruits him and begins training him as an orator with the intention of uniting New York's black community.

He gives several speeches and is soon promoted to head the Brotherhood at Harlem. He soon encounters trouble from Ras the Exhorter who believes that the brother hood is controlled by whites. Soon the name of the narrator's name is all

over Harlem and he is interviewed by a magazine. When the article comes out he is criticized for taking personal credit of the work and the ruling committee decides to take him out of Harlem and send him to work in a new part of town. Later when he returns he finds that Tod Clifton has left the Brotherhood out of disillusionment. He is shot dead by a police officer in a scuffle. At Clifton's funeral he delivers a speech but he is censured by the Brotherhood for praising a man who would sell dolls (Sambo dolls). Walking along the street one day he is spotted by Ras and roughed up by his men. The novel ends in a riot and the narrator is forced to flee. He decides to live underground, invisible. *Invisible Man* presents the picture of the victimization of the blacks by the whites. The narrator or invisible man (unnamed) tries to understand the situations by hiding in a hole. There he thinks of his experiences that he had many years ago. Now he knows that it's all result of the discrimination of the whites. Tony Tanner comments:

The odyssey which the narrator, with the aid of 1369 light bulbs, looks back on, takes place on many levels. His travelling is geographic, social, historical, and philosophical. In an early dream he finds inside his briefcase an envelope which contains an endless recession of smaller envelopes, the last of which contains the simple message "keep his Nigger-boy running" (Tanner 80).

The travel of invisible man is not confined to a particular area but it has many sides of visions. In that case it is not only a black novel. It is far more than that. Invisible man has much to say to this world from his experiences. But the simple message "keep this nigger boy running" should be analysed closely. The whites want the blacks always running. If only they get a place to sit and think they will think of the sufferings they face every day. If they get the time to think so, they will naturally turn against the whites for their freedom and equality. If it happens the blacks will no more be the slaves of the whites. So it is necessary for the whites to keep the nigger boy running. According to Irving Hoe: "*Invisible Man* is a record of negro's journey through contemporary America from south to

north, province to city, naïve faith to disenchantment and beyond." (36)

Ellison criticises both the whites and the blacks in the same manner. In *Invisible Man* itself he criticizes the white man who tries to exploit and manipulate the black man. At the same time he criticizes the black people who meekly follow the whites without thinking of their thousands of suffering black brothers. These blacks may justify themselves by saying that it is because of the strategy and power that they are forced to follow the whites. But the blacks should know how to deal with the white if not he will exploit him. The day *Native Son* appeared Ellison said:

American culture was changed forever. . . .
. . . .a blow at the White man, the novel forced him to recognize himself as an oppressor. A blow at the black man, the novel forced him to recognize the cost of his submission (Warren22).

The narrator is not named in the novel but he calls himself invisible man. He says that no white man can see him without the lights. What he means is that the white man does not want to see or consider a black man who has no affinity or relationship with a white man. But with the help of light he can see him means, if the black man is attached to white man, he will be able to see him. Here the lights symbolize the white people. Invisible man feels that it is very difficult to live as an invisible man. In the epilogue of the novel Norton sees the Invisible man but cannot recognize him. Because it is a long way back that he had seen the Invisible man. Now he lives in a hole as a disguised man without an identity. He does not want to face people till he gets an identity of his own. Tanner comments:

His title may owe something to H. G. Wells's novel *The Invisible Man* for the alienated Griffin in Wells's novel also comes to realize "What a helpless absurdity Invisible Man was- in a cold and dirty climate and a crowded city" and there is a very suggestive theme in which he tries to assemble an identity, which is at the same time a disguise, from whigs masks, artificial noses, and clothes of omniums, the large London store (Tanner 80).

Invisible Man tells the story of the American blacks; especially the blacks living in Harlem. The blacks or Negroes constitute a large population in America. But the sort of segregation that they have undergone is beyond imagination. This separation is at the mind of the whiteman. So the blacks cannot fight against it. They have their own culture and civilization as Saul Bellow comments: "Negro Harlem is at once primitive and sophisticated; it exhibits the extremes of instinct and civilisation as few other American communities do." (29) Here we see the life of Negroes in Harlem. No white community can both be primitive and sophisticated. The blacks still keep their African primitive culture but they are also accepting what the modern fashionable society has offered them. There lies the difference between the whites and the blacks. If the whiteman comes to an African's country he will try to destroy the sole African or black culture and establish his own culture and civilization. But in Harlem the blacks accept both and they know how to manage things. Haymann comments: The aim of the *Invisible Man* was "to explore the full range of American negro humanity"; if I succeed even partially in that great aim, no reader, negro or white remains altered by the book (Haymann 40).

American Negro humanity is very well portrayed and explored in *Invisible Man*. The characters like Mary Rambo, Tod Clifton, Ras the Exhorter, Bledsoe, Brockway et al are examples. Here we see that each character represents a collective characteristic of the whole race. For example, Mary Rambo represents the humane part of Negro life and we get an idea that among the blacks there are very good characters like Mary Rambo. The characters are types in the novel. In spite of the white's exploitation, the blacks love them and are ready to live with them in perfect harmony. That itself shows the humane nature of the blacks in America. Larry Neal says:

For Ellison, Black people did not exhibit a tradition void of hopes, memories and personal attachments. They were, instead profoundly human and blessed with a strong, spiritually sustaining culture (Larry 59).

On the superficial level the reader may think that the *Invisible Man* is a Negro novel. But if we go deep into the novel and to its settings, we realize that it is something different and more. The element of Negro culture and life is of course there. But we cannot confine the novel only to that. The journey of the Negroes from place to place is very well depicted in the novel. The whites always keep them moving. The white elements in the novel are very evident. People like Norton represent the white humanity. Ellison has never tried to present the whites as victimizers. But instead he is just giving the reader the life of a group of people including blacks and whites.

Invisible Man is a novel which has many readings. This concerns the blacks in the novel and the sort of victimization of them by the whites. Even the narrator's assumption that no white man can see him is the result and part of the white oppression. The blacks have been suffering of it for centuries. They represent the fate and the reality of the life of the blacks who live in America. Ellison always doggedly affirms his identity as a Negro- American, a product of the blending of both cultures. "I don't recognize any white culture," he says.

I recognize no American culture which is not the partial creation of black people. I recognize no American style in literature, in dance, in music, even in assembly- line process, which does not bear the mark of the American Negro (Volger 133).

We see pain of victimisation and how the blacks have suffered it. They longed for freedom from this ill fated life. But they fear that the whites will lose their domination over the blacks. As the narrator of *Invisible Man* struggles to arrive at a conception of his own identity, he finds his efforts complicated by the fact that he is a black man living in a racist American society. Throughout the novel, the narrator finds himself passing through a series of communities, from the Liberal Paints Plant to the Brotherhood, with each microcosm endorsing a different idea of how blacks should behave in society.

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