
A Critical Exploration of Social, Financial and Environmental elements in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

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Abstract:

The present paper explores the four major areas i.e. social, financial, hereditary & environmental through which the protagonist of Invisible Man learns his identity as an invisible creation. The word invisible is well emphasized and explains the longings of the protagonist in a very subtle but also in a firm and strong manner. The research paper discusses the responsible factors of his invisibility and his struggle to strive against the odds to register his presence as a human being in the society and most importantly in the country. The visible elements prevailing in the country that are against the Blacks are well exhibited and are trying to be portrayed in the paper.

Keywords: Social, Identity, Racial, Invisible, Black, White, Longing

Introduction:

Much has been made of the 'Negro culture' that it can never be 'fused' with the American culture. 'But as Horace R. Cayton points out, very little of African culture was brought to the United States and that to which the Negro did retain was isolated and died a rapid death. The so called American Negro subculture is purely a product of the Negro's experience in America. (Ideological Forces in the Work of Negro Writers,40)

Among the most crucial and fundamental forces affecting the Negro writer, and by extension the Negro hero, have been those of psychology and social sciences. The crises of the self as identity crises as it is popularly called need not connote an impending catastrophe. Allen Wheelis in his **The Quest for Identity** writes: Identity is a coherent sense of self, it depends upon the awareness that one's endeavors and one's life make sense, that they are meaningful in the context in which life is lived. It depends also upon stable values, and upon the conviction that one's action and values are harmoniously related. It is a sense of wholeness of integration, of knowing what is right and what is wrong (self-realization) and of being able to choose. (The Quest for Identity ,38)

The invisible man is a member of a race that has no roots anywhere, a race whose lot is unenviable. They cannot be at home in Africa nor can they make America their home. Slavery has been abolished in America-legally, but 'nameless' Afro-Americans are still there. America has a dream of freedom, but a Black in America at a very early age becomes aware that he would always be a Black and that Blacks would always be under privileged and stigmatized, a group of people set apart, a lesson in his own 'invisibility' which he learns a bit late in his life, but never too late. Ellison says that the American society itself "started out with a divided mind if not with a divided conscience." The great idea of forming a free, open society for all the people of America, but it was only projected on the upper most layer while going deep into it, was not entirely free from the concept of slavery. Therefore, the system was straight away contradicted to its own whole concept of freedom and democracy.

Racial Identity in the lives of Blacks is the major hindrance towards their progress and development. It not only affects their growth but also impacts negatively on their psyche. The elements of culture which includes value, appearance and beauty give the indication of the type of preference and choice as per the socially accepted norms and laws in America. The following lines well state the preference and priority of American culture: American culture places high value and appearances, and beauty- by all means one must be beautiful-must conform to the stereotyped norms of so called Anglo-Saxon beauty and appearance. (Ideological Forces in the Work of Negro Writers,41)

Along with this appearance, comes the puritan ideology, engulfing one in attitudes such as "cleanness is next to godliness". So the Black, as can be expected, is made to feel dirty and consequently evil- this is the racial stigma of a Black. The sense of Shame of one's being a black originates even when the child is eight or nine years old; it makes him evaluate his own racial group membership in comparison to others. He learns that 'black' is 'dirty', 'bad' and 'ugly' and 'white', 'clean', 'nice' and 'good'. Soon he starts thinking of white as superior to his own racial group; to the invisible man, they are the 'white fathers', though he can afford to be ironic when he writes about it later. The black child now starts rejecting his own race and wants to identify himself with the white majority which surrounds him. Though this tendency decreases with age in most men, the acceptance of race does not eliminate the fundamental conflict involved in the development of his self-identity. What he is and can never hope to be as a Negro is less than what he would be or could ever hope to be, if he were White. (Color: The Nature and Meaning of Negro-Self-Identity,176)

This conflict which is not conspicuous at first in the invisible man is truly present in him. Before having a realization of his own self and getting hold of his consistent life philosophy, he too reflects his race. These childhood experiences and longings or "passing for white" which are revelations into the nature of the society around him, though not explicit in the fiction, must be the basis of his youthful feelings of shame at his

grandfather's slavery, embarrassment at the raw narration of Trueblood, the poor black sharecropper and at the vet's behavior (though in this heart he cannot help but admire his guts). The same feeling of his own inferiority is the basis for his college mates and his contempt towards the black belt around them, his attitude of superiority and hatred towards the other participants in the battle royal and the initial revulsion for Tarp's leg-shackle and Mary's grinning piggy bank. The acceptance of his cultural identity or social heritage and race, and his 'good' distended African nose (*Invisible Man* 74) is the first step towards self-knowledge. One critic remarks that: Ellison's protagonist desires good education, success, recognition, and achievement, material needs, a stance similar to the one adopted by any other white American. (Ralph Ellison in *Black American Literature*, 172)

One of the basic essentials of leading a normal and respectable life is education which is an undeniable fact. The protagonist of *Invisible Man* even yearns for that and lack of education makes him further deprive of success, recognition, achievement, and material needs that he strongly deserves. As per the above statement just being a Black is enough for all such pains and deprivation, but the color white provides the license in America for leading lavish and pleasant life and this portion of fact has been focused by the writer in the selected fiction and very well showcased. The color does play a very important part in this man's achieving those things, he has to struggle a bit harder than the ordinary white man. Ellison himself in an interview has pointed this out:.....being white, the Irish were above the threshold of social hierarchy, therefore they had a possibility of moving upward and many of them did. But for us it was otherwise. Even the emancipation did not break the pattern and race is still a most important principle in the drama of American social hierarchy. (*The Essential Ellison*, 138)

The present paper not only talks about social identity, but also focuses on the economic condition and environment of the Black that affects his further growth and influences the Black or any man to a great extent. It consists of society and the social institutions-the establishment. The environmental forces bombard the self, thus causing division. A.H Maslow says: The environment is no more than the means to the person's self-actualizing ends "another way of saying" appropriating space to one's own desires. (*The Corrosion of the Self*, 203)

At a very young age itself, the protagonist learns about the reality of the Black's existence: his inferior house, his limited opportunities for achievement, his low status and his treatment from the larger society. The invisible man's growing up in a poor agricultural family in the south has a vital learning about the formation of his personality. It is his good intellect that leads him out of this situation, but to another fire. The American success myth makes him hope that if he takes up 'social responsibility' instead of 'social equality' as his motto, and follow the Founder's policy of humility, he will be able to fulfill his ambition of becoming great and famous. In spite of all his conscious and unconscious

knowledge regarding race relations, he, as the vet at the Golden Day says, becomes, "... a walking zombie.... He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negatives." This is what the Whites want to: 'The mechanical man.' (Invisible Man 74)

The third dimension of the paper focuses on hereditary and environmental facts. The racial, national, and economic status of an individual depends on hereditary and environmental facts, there are specific characters that represent heredity. The black hero's "Brer-rabbit"- grandfather who tells him something about the black -white division for the first time, causing confusion in his simple mind, plays a very important role in the protagonist's search for self. Later he meets many Brer-rabbits in his life-Bledsoe, Trueblood (in a way, as he knows how to please the Whites to get things done) and Rinehart. But the deepest impression is made by his grandfather's words: "I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swallow you till they vomit or burst wide open." (Invisible Man 393)

He had been the "meekest of man"but the protagonist is aware that "he was an odd old guy... and I am told I take after him" (Invisible Man 13). The words of his grandfather recur again in his nightmares, the meaning of which he is able to understand only very late. Trueblood, the old Black blues- singer, represents the Black folk culture. Another hereditary factor that has a sharp effect on the southern Black may be the best that is steeped in a history of slavery; a history of more than three hundred years of slavery, when thousands of slaves were pushed into the slave markets where they were auctioned off like inanimate objects. In fact, the protagonist's grandparents were slaves who were later given the so called freedom. As long as they stayed, "stayed in their place, worked hard", they were free (Invisible Man 13).

The nameless black man instead is played upon by the society around him, a truth which he states in the epilogue: "I was pulled this way and that for longer than I can remember. And my problem was that "I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself." (Invisible Man 444). So when at last he comes to know of his invisibility hefinally rebelled." (Invisible Man 444)

The force of environment starts working on him right from his birth as a Black in a poor, southern agricultural family, thus mingling heredity and environment. The eviction of an old couple causes him to break into a passionate speech- it is this oratory that brings him to the 'folds' of the Brotherhood. Although Ellison's hero has gained some insight into his life since coming north, he has yet to discover his 'invisibility', and it is his experiences in the Brotherhood that leads him to this final discovery. His meeting with Mary Rambo who thinks him to be a liberator of the race has great bearing on his decision to join the 'Brothers'. Initially, he is distrustful of Brother, Jack and his group as he fears that he may again be used to someone else's advantage. But his distrust soon gives way to

optimism about his role in the group as an instrument to save his race. He is given his 'new identity' (Invisible Man 239) defined by someone else, designed to keep this Nigger-Boy running" (Invisible Man 27). He makes speeches for the cause of the Brotherhood, dances like a sambo doll, to the tune of its members. Only after the funeral of his friend, Tod Clifton, does the protagonist realize that brotherhood does not really see him or Harlem. They give more importance to rules and regulations and let him know that he was 'not hired to think' but to talk: ".....outside the Brotherhood we were outside history, but inside of it they did not see us. (Invisible Man 386)

All this search for a place in the white society is thus futile. The Brotherhood calls for the sacrifice of Harlem, but the narrator sees that "... for them it was simple, but hell, I was both sacrificer and victim. That was reality..... (they). He did not have to put the knife blade to (their) his own throat(s)"(Invisible Man 392). Enraged by the Brotherhood's (white) policy of divide and rule, the invisible man looks for another alternative. His next initiation is his meeting with Ras (the Exhorter). Destroyer and Rinehart represent other ways of living for Blacks, which he could choose. His one-right transformation into Rinehart has made him recognize that "the people who define him are blind and because they were blind, they would destroy themselves and (he) I'd help them" (Invisible Man 393). Once his mind accepts the absurdity of the world, he is able to see himself as he really is- that everyone had been forcing down their own picture of reality upon him, not caring for what he thought: "I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used... now I recognize my invisibility" (Invisible Man 393). But it is too late to be a Rinehart. The truth will be out and it bursts out violently in the riots at the end of which the hero falls down into his final initiation underground- the warm hole where he hibernates.

The first stage in this final initiation involves the black person's separation from the dominant white society. Ellison's invisible man making his 'underground' retreat reports: I tried to find the usual ladder that leads out of such holes, but there were none. I had to have a light. (Invisible Man 440). So he burns all his certificates that connect him to the upper world. In the second stage, the black ignition and receives ancestral wisdom. Grasping his own black timely timelessness through his wisdom, he negates a dominant society's perceptual by re(w)riting (and righting) history, what results is his recognition of the irreversibility of rites of the black (w)hole. (Ideology and American Literature: A Vernacular Theory,144)

The third and final phase of the conventional rites of passage is aggregation. The marginal initial and is reintegrated, with a new status, into the society from which he has separated. In the rites of the black underground, there is no return to a renewed plenitude of origins. The rights are irreversible. Having passed the event horizon into singularity of (w)holeness, the initiand and his experiences are irretrievably transformed. (Ideology and American Literature: A Vernacular Theory,145)

Thus, once he learns the lesson of his own invisibility, the nameless hero gains insight into his own self-its unity and diversity- and his attitudes towards the society around him. I believed in hard work and progress and action, but now after first being 'for' society and then 'against' it, I assign myself no rank or limit..... But my world has become one of infinite possibilities (Invisible Man 446).

He still believes in democratic ideals, but in his own case, he is 'the individual' in a struggle for existence, his only aim, survival. At present, at the end of the final initiation in the black hole, it is self-expression.

Though the invisible man is conscious of 'spring and death' he is optimistic, he still believes in democracy. He now realizes the 'division' in the society and is ready to struggle for his existence in an indifferent world. He has reached almost an amoral stance as he says that in the hole he finds no differentiation between 'good' or 'evil', 'honesty' or 'dishonesty' (Invisible Man 443). He says: I condemn and affirm I denounce because though implicated and partially responsible I have been hurt to the point of abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility. And I defend because in spite of all I find that I love. In order to get some of it down I 'have' to love. I sell you no phony forgiveness. I am a desperate man, but too much of your life will be lost unless you approach it as much through love as through hate. So I approach it through division. So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love" (Invisible Man 467).

He is no longer a fool, whom anyone can lead or take advantage of. He could not be still, "Because damn it, there's the mind, 'mind'. It would not let me rest, dreams were not enough. Books were not enough. My belated appreciation of the crude jokes that had kept me running was not enough. And my mind revolved again and again back to my grandfather" who advised his father to beat the whites at their own games, to survive. Now he knows that "men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health" (Invisible Man 446).

The question which attacks on his mind and makes him to compare himself with others, "How does it feel to be free of illusions?" (Invisible Man 442) and by raising such queries the narrator wants to liberate his protagonist from all the puzzles and perplexing situations. In addition, the frustrated and defeated invisible man can only scream with intense ferocity which is well stated in the following line, "painful and empty, painful and empty" (Invisible Man 442).

In the end the protagonist realizes that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play as he makes himself ready to face the situation by breaking his inner bindings and confinements. He decides to make his plight universally known in order to protect others of his own race thus his self-becoming the self of every (Black) man, all mankind.

“Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you? (Invisible Man 450) is the protagonist directive to common readers. Ellison seems to express the popular dictum that man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.

Through this research paper the author tried to compel the readers to ponder and examine the significance of identity in relation to Social, Financial and Environmental aspects in one's life. Ellison emphasizes on self-reliance, self-containment and self-motivation to fight the darkness and oppositions. He also states that the darkness is nowhere outside but it resides within themselves. In all, at one hand the present fiction gives us numerous ways to comprehend and realize the trauma and pain suffered by the protagonist of Ellison and on the other hand it teaches us how to counter those problems and troubles in order to emerge even stronger.

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