

Relationship between the Self and Society in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

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Abstract

The present paper explores the relationship between the Self and Society in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The novel begins and ends in a small room, situated somewhere underground in a "border area". It is in this underground room that the nameless narrator (nameless because he is depicted as invisible on the upper surface) organizes his memories, experiences and tries to construct his life. Ellison's basic concern is with Black experience, the life of the Black community, both educated and uneducated, and the relations between Blacks and Whites. The novel is an account of events but more than that and more importantly it is about what the consciousness of the narrator has managed to make of those events and how his consciousness has changed because of them. The major concern is working out the desirable relationships between the self and society and the whole problem of identity.

Keywords: Invisible Man, Self, Society, Relationship. American System, Identity.

The novel, *Invisible Man* begins and ends in a small room, situated somewhere underground in a "border area". It is in this underground room that the unnamed narrator (unnamed because he is depicted as invisible on the upper surface) organizes his memories, experiences and tries to construct his life. The novel is an account of events but more than that and more importantly it is about what the consciousness of the narrator has managed to make of those events and how his consciousness has changed because of them.

Invisible Man examines the challenging relationship of the protagonist to the American system in which the protagonist thinks that life is not as we all take it as fiction or some super system, it is different and we encounter it once we come out of the social confinements. Then we realize that life is no superstructure but it is the natural reality created by man himself. The hero thinks he might simply step out of. He thinks that outside all systems and fictions, freedom and reality may be found. He yearns for freedom badly.

The novel *Invisible Man* is an abiding dream where the unnamed protagonist feels that an unpatterned, unrestricted life is possible in which an individual's activities, quietness, selections and rejections are all his own. It is a long-lasting fright that someone else is planning his life and there are all sorts of unseen plans taking place to deprive the individual of his independent thought and action that is present everywhere. This fear is visible not only in the subject matter of the novel but also in its storyline. Storylines are full of unknown beliefs, concealed plots, underground establishments, wicked schemes, and all sort of intrigues. Ellison uses language in such a manner that it draws attention to itself because of its originality. He releases himself and discovers the potentialities of his own cognizance through *Invisible Man*.

Ellison's work is unique in theme, form and tone among contemporary American writers, both Whites and Blacks. Ellison's basic concern is with the Black experience, the life of the Black community, both educated and uneducated, and the relations between Blacks and Whites. Irving Howe in the issue of *Nation*, (May 10, 1952) has this to say of Ellison's treatment of Black experience:

For all his self-involvement he is capable of extending himself toward his people, of accepting them as they are, in their blindness and hope. (Modern American Literature, 349)

Also notable is the fact that in *American Visions*:

The Magazine of reviewers of Ellison's *Going to the Territory*. (1986), designated him as The dean of black American culture. (Afro-American Writers, 52)

The important factor of *Invisible Man*'s popularity is that it is about one's identity as Black in a society dominated by Whites and still it is not merely a book based on grievances. It has nothing to do with a hard-luck story but what is important about the novel, is the courage of the main protagonist in facing all the problems in a white dominated society. It undoubtedly talks about color the way 17th century writers talk about mortality and death. *Invisible Man* seems to be a part of the human circumstances that he has to live by.

Ellison reveals that his major concerns as a writer are with the relationship of Afro-American to Euro-American culture and the responsibility of the Black artist to his people and his craft. *Invisible Man* is a monumental book of extra ordinary intensity and richness in structure, setting, renowned characters, ironic theme, use of varieties of languages. The novel is a spiritual odyssey, but it surpasses in imaginative scale and epic power. In fact, more than any other Black novel, it deserves to be considered as an incomparable modern Black epic.

Ellison's application of imagination to the story of the modern picaro is, in fact a major achievement as *Invisible Man* is a culmination of a period in Afro- American literary history that had as its motif the vision of a double consciousness, described by W.E.B. Dubois in 1903 as a state where in:

One ever feels his twoness- an American, a Negro... two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Trudier Harris,45)

By liberating his invisible protagonist from the ideals that, like an alien force, had invaded his ego, Ellison has prepared his narrator and those who, through influence, sympathy, or coincidence, will follow him to live within a more unified consciousness of themselves in the world.

Ellison's reputation has undergone a remarkable metamorphosis over the years. His liberalism was considered out of step by the New Left and Third World spokespersons of the late 1960s and early 1970s. He incurred their displeasure in 1965 when he participated in President Johnson's White House Art Festival, a function which Robert Lowell conspicuously boycotted. The selection of *Invisible Man* that same year as the single most distinguished work published since World War II in a Book Week poll of 200 (predominately Whites) authors, critics, and editors was taken as further evidence that Ellison was "on the wrong side". By contrast, a Negro Digest poll in 1968 of Black writers indicated that Richard Wright was their number one choice, Ellison and James Baldwin tied for third place behind, second place Langston Hughes. As Black militancy grew in 1960s, and Le Roi Jones assailed Ellison in *Philistinism and the Negro Writer* for silently, "fidgeting away in some college" while the ghettos burned. The editors of the *Militant Black Writer* (1969) pointed out that "black self-consciousness has travelled (since the publication of *Invisible Man*) from self-knowledge to self-determination." Perhaps the most virulent diatribe was launched by Ernest Kaiser, who charged:

Ellison has become an Establishment writer, an Uncle Tom, an attacker of the sociological formulations of the civil rights movement, a defender of the criminal Vietnam war of extermination against Asian (and American Negro) people, a denigrator of the great tradition of Negro protest writing and, the worst of all for himself as a creative artist, a writer of weak and ineffectual fiction and essays mostly about himself and how he became an artist. (Trudier Harris,52-53)

Even though Langston Hughes, James Baldwin and James Farmer continued to speak well of his work, Ellison was often the victim of the Black militants' wrath.

With the change in time, came the change in attitudes. Many black writers who dissociated themselves with Ralph Ellison earlier wondered at Ellison's treatment of Afro- American life. They found his monumental novel a profound examination of the richness and

beauty and heroism of the Black experience. According to John Wright, by the late 1970s, in reaction to the black arts movement, Ellison had become a "reluctant father figure of the new generation of black writers." The 1980 'Carleton Miscellany' entitled *A Ralph Ellison Festival* contains only glowing tributes from fellow Black writers and critics.

Ellison has a modern sensibility. He portrays the dilemma of man in modern America through the black experience. Thus, black experience reflects modern man's anxiety, the confusion of values, the pressures of the industrial culture making exploitation inevitable, the crises of the self, and the search for identity and so on. These are not the problems peculiar only to the Blacks although they are dealt with through Black consciousness. They are the problems of modern man. In short, they spell out the 'being' of man in today's America or perhaps in today's industrialized world.

Ellison not only follows innovation but here reconstructs its overall determination within a dark historic perception and organization of sentiments. As a result, the inner history of Black literature has followed its own reasoning, contrasting to the mainstream of American Literature. The experiences of the Blacks seem traditional in their own wishes, themes, and recognized agreements in contrast to the leading American literary developments because Blacks had to fight older American battles of self-liberation all over again. Heinrich Heine spoke of the "traditionalism of the excluded" in *New Essays on Invisible Man*.

Like his chosen ancestors, however, Ellison practices a literature of consciousness as a value that deserves to be applauded. Indeed, consciousness gives values to unconsciously lived lives. In Ellison's words:

It might sound arrogant to say so, but writers, poets, help create or reveal hidden realities by asserting their existence. I do not find it a strain to point to the heroic component of our experience, for these seem to me truths which we have long lived by but which we must not recognize consciously. (*New Essays on Invisible Man*, 108)

Some values like social equality, diversity and forbearance can be clearly seen in his work. This basic attitude embodies a concept of culture that is partially Modernist, partially Black American. Ellison has a deep commitment to the invisible hands of culture as a symbolic system of checks and balances and a way of honing and shaping experience, all of which works itself out in language. He writes a very conscious, modernist prose.

A highly disciplined artist (craft to me is an aspect of morality) and something of a perfectionist, Ellison has been working on his long awaited second novel for more than a decade. He revealed to McPherson that he now has enough typed manuscripts to publish three novels, but is concerned how the work will hold up as a total structure. Ellison has been extremely reticent about its expected date of publication. Richard Kastelanetz notes

that the one friend said that Ralph Ellison is highly aspiring writer. He actually writes at a skyrocketing speed but would not release his work until he is self-assured that it is the greatest piece of writing.

Although Ralph Ellison has published only one novel but his reputation as a major American novelist is assured. It is clear that his novel is a remarkable work. He never published another word but his *Invisible Man* is secure as a classic of literature, as it not only displays an extraordinary command of language but also specifically deals with the truths and feelings of Black people.

In summing up, it may be noted that Ellison is unique in several respects. He writes from a Black base, in spite of whatever he may have said. He writes from the point of black experience and is always conscious of himself as a Black person. His work is quite comprehensive in that it presents all the important images of Black life in America as compared to the other writers on Black experience who confine themselves to their preferred images. Very few actually provide the deep insight into Black experience. We have already seen black experience in his writing. Hence, the novel's great appeal to readers outside the black community and outside America. The novel, *Invisible Man* is a "protest novel":

The protagonist protests the agonies of growing up, the problem of trying to find a way into a complex, intricately structured society in a way, which would allow him to behave in a manly way and which would allow him to seize some instrumentalities of political power. (New Essays on *Invisible Man*,108)

The novel contains the sophisticated political games played by these in power, and the struggle of the individual against the Establishment. The experiences of the protagonist in the society makes him angry young man who protests but fails. Ellison has declared:

I could not violate the readers sense of reality, his sense of the way things are done, at least on the surfaces. My task would be to give him the surface and then try to take him to the informalities, take him below the level of racial structuring and down into those areas where we are simply men and women, human beings living in this blue orb and not always living so well. This is what I tried to do (in the novel). (New Essays on *Invisible Man*,108)

Invisible Man has been called "a bildungsroman":

That successfully co-ordinates realism and expressionism, it is the story of a young black man's disillusionment first with American Capitalism, then with Socialism. (Contemporary Author,269)

Man, as is always being pointed out as a social animal. He is dependent on others for his survival. As he is influenced and affected by the society around him, his attitudes and actions are guided by those of the society. Knowing one's own true position in a society is called gaining self-knowledge, which is the goal of the quest for identity. More than any other theme, it is this question of the interaction of the self with the society, which is the main concern of Ralph Ellison.

The self of black American becomes that of 'Man' in general as he is in society. This is one of the reason that the novel gained almost immediate praise after publication. The theme of social pressures and its effects on man is subtly combined to the modern man's alienation in the novel. The black man is segregated by the society due to his color. The black man's identity is discovered through the acceptance of his culture. In modern scientific society where man has no time for each other, loss of the sense of identity is a common factor. As the invisible man expresses it, "You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful". (Invisible Man 3-4)

The novel portrays the fate of man whether black or brown in a society which still clings on to the old sense of social hierarchies and which tries hard not to 'see' a man as an individual with his own feelings and desires. It shows how the man is in search of a place in this society, almost 'creates' an identity for himself. For this, first he should know his own self and also the society what he is and what he wants in life.

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