

# QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE NAMELESS BLACK PROTAGONIST IN RALPH ELLISON'S INVISIBLE MAN

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses the struggles faced by American Negroes trying to establish themselves in the white society at the time of World War II. It also portrays Negro's intellectual enthusiasm and subsequent disillusionment with the communist party and the realization that the world is controlled by white man and the black must follow the accommodation policies of the Founder. This paper also talks about the myth of the Negro sexuality through the hero's experience with women in the Brotherhood and with Sybil. Communism is just a pastime for the whites, while the poor are all very serious about it pinning all their hopes on it for an equal status in society or at least a comfortable future. The paper tracks the journey of the hero, how he claims and knows and acts as a perceiver of infinite possibilities and finally becomes an intellectual rationalist who hates and loves good and bad alike.

**KEYWORDS:** American Negro, intellectual enthusiasm, disillusionment, communism, equality.

*Invisible Man* examines the problematic relationship of the protagonist to the American system in which he finds himself and the fictions which surround him. The protagonist of the novel at one point of his personal growth tries to find 'self-fulfillment' in the impractical ideas of communism. In down to earth terms, he tries to realize his ambitious dreams of becoming leader in the society.

Ellison has stated that in writing *Invisible Man*, he did not identify the Brotherhood with the communist Party. (*Invisible Man as History*, p.359)

Yet several elements in the novel strongly suggest that the Brotherhood does indeed represent the Communist Party. Jack, the leader of the Brotherhood, with his red hair and his habit of breaking into a foreign language when excited, indicates the Russian domination of the Brotherhood.

The third section of the novel is a portrayal of the Negro's intellectual enthusiasm and subsequent disillusionment with the party. Although the protagonist is at first cautious about the Brotherhood, his carefulness soon gives way to great enthusiasm: "For the first time I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race. It was no dream, the possibility existed. I had only to work and learn and survive in order to go to the top." (*Invisible Man*, p.287). But in this idealistic world too, there is the hierarchy of class and race. The whites dominate this world of "brothers" and the Negro is just a voice, which they use to keep themselves in power, and the blacks in their place. So the nameless hero is again in, his usual "sacrificial merry-go-round. Everywhere I've turned somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my good only they were the ones who benefited." (*Invisible Man*, p.407). He receives an anonymous letter that informs him that the world is controlled by white man and suggests that he must follow the accommodation policies of the Founder.

Here, the white becomes the capitalist exploiter and black, the exploited. The black hero's speech in the eviction scene in the street of Harlem is an attempt to make people aware of this fact. The exploited start contemplating militancy as means of their deliverance. Considering the novel from this angle, critics have argued that *Invisible Man* contains some elements of the proletarian novel. But the subsequent disillusionment of the hero suggests that:

The political systems, capitalism as well as communalism invariably oppress and exploit the Negro, while the basic problem of finding fulfillment as a social individual remains unsolved. (*Black American Literature*, p.157)

Another difference between the treatments of the ideology, is as J. Saunders Redding, a Negro writer who had some personal familiarity with the communist in New York, writes, many of the white people he met in Harlem who called themselves Communist were more interested in sex than politics. The black narrator proves this to be true when he talks of his experiences while lecturing on the Women Question: "... it was as though many of the sisters were agreed among themselves (and assumed I accepted it) that the ideological was merely a superfluous veil for the real concern of life" (*Invisible Man*, p.338-39). The myth of the Negro sexuality is also portrayed here through the hero's experience with women in the Brotherhood and with Sybil. So, communism is just a pastime for the whites, while the poor are all very serious about it pinning all their hopes on it for an equal status in society or at least a comfortable future.

As discussed earlier, the crises of the self for Ellison's hero goes to a higher, metaphysical level, thus becoming the self of Man. A close reading of the Prologue and Epilogue proves this fact and the question of good and evil selves of man are definitely discussed there. Then the *Invisible Man's* is a journey to knowledge. In the prologue, we have him say, "...I might even be said to possess a mind (self). "That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes (white) of those with whom I come in contact." (*Invisible Man*, p.7). He describes his encounter with a white man on whom he accidentally bumped. A fight ensues as the white man had insulted him. He almost kills the white man, when suddenly he realizes that the man had not "seen" him, a man almost killed by a phantom. "It unnerved me ... Then I was amused. Something (self against self, may be the evil self in white man) in this man's thick head had sprung out and beaten him within an inch of his life" (*Invisible Man*, p.8). Such a vein of thought can be traced through the whole of the Prologue and Epilogue.

In *The Enigma of Ellison's Intellectual Man*, Floyd Ross Horowitz comments: "As a man the hero is the symbol of America's moral duality." "When one is invisible he finds such problems as good and evil, honesty and dishonesty, of such shifting shapes that he confuses one with the other, depending upon who happens to be looking through at the time" (*Invisible Man*, p.461). Sitting in his whole isolated hole (mind) which is full of light (inner light... "effect of his intellect, tempered and steeled by experience") (*The Enigma of Ellison's intellectual Man*, p.130) he finally affirms his most consistent philosophy: "... the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which (that) pattern was conceived." (*Invisible Man*, p.468). This is against the Brotherhood content that life is all pattern and form. He knows that hypocrisy is rife in the world that deception pays off as is seen in life of Rinehart. But in his hibernation he wants to discover a philosophy, though he cannot find the full implications of his grandfather's advice, "he finds identity as strength of ego". (*The Enigma of Ellison's intellectual Man*, p.131). Thus, he can claim and know and act- that he is what he is a perceiver of infinite possibilities. Thus he becomes an intellectual rationalist who hates and loves good and bad alike.

The entire process of his mind has been to emotionally identify with such a humanity (containing good and bad). "So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love" (*Invisible Man*, p.467). He is ready to acknowledge the plurality of the America "which is women of many strands." Though he acknowledges the presence of duality in others, it is thought for himself the survival of the individual that makes him ready to stage a comeback.

Ellison wanted to write a fiction, "leaving sociology to the scientists, can arrive at the truth about the human condition"... He says:

We tell ourselves our individual stories so as to become aware of our general story. (*The Essential Ellison*, p.155). *Invisible Man* can also be read as a literary interpretation of the history of the Negro American during the first forty years of the twentieth century. (*Invisible Man as History*, p.339)

Ellison indicates his concern for history in the epigraph itself, especially the one from Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*: "You are saved, cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained, 'you are saved'. What has cast such a shadow upon you?" Benito Cereno's reply to this question, not quoted by Ellison is "The Negro".

Ellison had great admiration for Melville who like Twain dealt with the Negro as the central moral concerning American Society. (*Invisible Man as History*, p.367)

Ellison's hero assumes three major roles in the novel: first, as a student at a southern Negro College; second, as an industrial worker in the north, and third, as a political organizer in Harlem. Each of these roles is played within a historical context. Thus, the first section is permitted with the Philosophy of Booker T. Washington, who from 1895 until his death in 1915 was recorded by Whites as the chief Negro spokesman. Washington's was an accommodations philosophy, which was revealed in his speech at Atlanta in 1895. He placated the White South by renouncing social equality for Negro and accepting white supremacy, to pave the way for attaining an improved economic position for Negro. Ellison makes use of his exact words in his prologue where he says that free Negro's will be "separate like the fingers of hands", "yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress"(Washington). Washington had actually used the phrase 'social equality', when he said, "The wisest among my race understand that the agitation for question of social equality is the extremist folly". The protagonist who had in his "pre-invisible days thought himself to be a potential Booker T. Washington, also uses the word in his speech after the battle royal, though with a difference"(*Invisible Man*, p.11).

The protagonist's college resembles Tuskegee Institute; the one which was founded by Booker T. Washington and the one which Ellison attended. Looking back on his college year, the narrator wonders about the statue in the front of college whether the veil of ignorance was "being lifted or lowered more firmly in place", whether it was a "revelation or a more efficient blinding"(*Invisible Man*, p.34). The same statue stands at the entrance to the Tuskegee campus. Many southern Negro colleges are financially dependent upon northern white multi-millionaires for their existence. Tuskegee was dependent upon Washington's ability to obtain funds from them. Similarly, the college in the novel relies upon Bledsoe's ability to manipulate "on those multi-millionaires" (*Invisible Man*, p. 34).

A group of Veterans from the nearby hospital play an important role as living proofs of Washington's philosophy. Many of these men had held upper and middle class positions in the society and had taken part in First World War, to make the world safe for democracy. Ironically, it was same war that was followed by the outbreak of many race riots and lynching in the United States. In reality, Tuskegee, Alabama, is also site of U.S. veteran's hospital for Negro's, founded in 1923 with the help of Washington successor, Russa Morton. Bledsoe is the symbol of everything that the hero wants to become influential, famous and rich. He accepts and believes "the black rite of Horatio Adger" that is performed for the students by Bledsoe, the blind Barbee and the white millionaires. The main feature of this rite is the dramatic sermon given by the black Minister, Homer A. Barbee. The whole speech is an epic retelling of Booker T. Washington's autobiography, up from slavery.

When the narrator describes Bledsoe, his "coal -black daddy's power, he was a leader, a statesman and in those days past he had conducted the president himself about the campus". (*Invisible Man*, p.98) One is reminded of the actual event of Booker T. Washington conducting President McKinley around the place in 1898; he aimed with the President Roosevelt at the White House in 1901. The second section of the novel deals with the hero's experience in the north:

The trip follows the major emigrational pattern of Negro's in the United States, which began about 1910 and continues to the present day. (*Invisible Man as History*, p.349)

It is really as the vet says, "out of the fire into the melting pot" (*Invisible Man*, p.126). Because, in the north it was not segregation, but indifference that was meted out to the blacks. The hero's experience at Liberty Paints also has historical significance, for incoming north; most Negroes were making their first encounter with labor unions. The company in which the narrator works represents white American as is seen in the name 'Liberty Paints' and trade mark, same as that of the United States- A screaming eagle. The company's motto is "Keep America pure with Liberty Paints" (*Invisible Man*, p.160) and that paints should be "optic white", Ellison's hero, like the usual blacks who have migrated from South and are in desperate need of a job, is hired by the employer because he will not have to be paid union wages, naturally gaining the displeasure of the white workers. The unions dominated by whites are highly racist. The eviction of the old couple (which is the hero debut into the Brotherhood) was quite a common event in Harlem during the depression.

Moreover, American Negroes were profoundly affected by communism. Soon after the World War I, (the crises of the Depression), the communist sought the report of the black workers in the North. But as Prof. Wilson record reports, the Negroes refused to succumb to them, though they were greatly influenced by the ideas of equality among all races and classes.

The Negroes could never trust the working class nor did they want a separate black nation as the communists promised them in 1928. (*The Ideological Forces in the work of Negro Writers*, p.40)

They knew the work of men like Dubois though they had never heard of Marx or Lenin and also, they were fundamentally loyal Americans, despite their second class citizenship. During the depression, several Negro intellectuals and writers such as Claude McKay, Hughes and Wright turned to communism and Ellison had been among them-his writings used to appear in a communist periodical, 'New Masses'.

The third section of the novel is the hero's sojourn in the Brotherhood which is the communist party. Ras, the Exhorter, the Black Nationalist in the novel resembles, Marcus Garvey, who led the greatest mass movement of Negroes the nation, had ever seen. Ras's appeal like Garvey's is based upon racial pride and African nationalism. Both the nationality and appearance of Ras suggest Garvey- the former is described as a short, squat man who speaks with a west India accent, while the latter was short and stocky and came from Jamaica.

The riot that erupts in the last chapter of the novel has a counterpart in the Harlem riot of 1935. The anger of the Harlemites, which the narrator feels at Tod's funeral, finally erupts in the form of riots. A story appearing in the 'New York Times'; March 20, 1935, mentions that the outburst belief of the Harlem people, that a ten years old boy had been beaten to death by a white store proprietor for stealing a candy bar. An account of the riot in the 'Daily Worker', March 21, 1935 also includes the same and also that a woman who tried to defend him was beaten too. In Ellison's novel, Scofield recounts one version of how the riots started which somewhat resembles the events in the 'New York Times' and 'Daily Workers' accounts. "About eight o'clock down on Lenox and 123<sup>rd</sup> this paddy slapped a kid for grabbing a Baby Ruth and the kid's momma took it up and the paddy slapped her and that's when hell break loose" (*Invisible Man*,p.434-35).

Ellison has played down the melodrama and made it more realistic. Another link between the Harlem riot of 1935 and the riot in Ellison's novel is the involvement of the communist party. When the New York Attorney blamed the communist for the riot of 1935, the Negro leaders pointed out that it was overlooking the real causes which were the poor economic and social conditions of the Harlemites. In Ellison's novel, the hero realizes that the people of Harlem are able to act on their own initiatives and do not need to be led by the Brotherhood.

Thus in his various roles, Ellison's nameless hero has experienced three major epochs of Negro American history from Reconstruction to the Second World War. The novel is primarily involved in a quest for identity. It is ultimately, the same- a search for a place in society and for an assurance that one is a human being too.

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