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## Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: A Quest of Identity

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<b>Keywords:</b> - Invisibility - Quest - Identity - Survival.	<b>Abstract</b> This research paper attempts to study the Negro problem of identity and existence in the postwar American Negro novel with special reference to the saga of survival and invisibility of a nameless young black man in Ralph Ellison's <i>Invisible Man</i> . The core of this study tackles the desperate quest, this man is living in a blind, nihilistic, and a racist American world, which denies his existence, and reduces him almost to a non-entity making him ever more restless, possessed and exhausted.:
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### ألرجل الخفي لرالف اليسون

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#### الخلاصة:

تحاول هذه الدراسة تسليط الضوء على مشكلة الهوية والوجود لذوي البشرة السمراء التي تناولتها الرواية الأمريكية في فترة ما بعد الحرب مع إشارة خاصة إلى ملحمة البقاء وعدم الرؤيا لشاب أسود لا يحمل أسما في رواية الرجل الخفي لرالف اليسون. جوهر هذه الدراسة يتناول رحلة اليأس التي يعيشها هذا الرجل في عالم أميركي أعمى، يرفض الاعتراف بالآخر وينكر وجوده، ويقفل من شأنه الى حد العدم تقريبا مما جعل هذا الرجل غير مستقر ومتعب الى حد الجنون أكثر من أي وقت مضى.

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## Introduction

Ralph Ellison is one of the famous American writers who has dominated the landscape of the contemporary American fiction, after World War II, with his extraordinary imagination, powerful expression and at spoken candor. He is a novelist with a commitment and a quest. Despite the fact that Ellison never published another novel, *Invisible Man*, which is concerned with the identity and humanity of a black individual, appeared in 1952, has immortalized him, and remained central to the American imagination over half a century. In 1953 Ellison won the National Book Award for his work, and polled as the most distinguished book in a Book Week-poll. Two hundred American critics and writers judged *Invisible Man* as one of the best American novels of the postwar era (J. Corry, 1995: 98). His career as a creative writer is a voyage towards meaning and a pilgrimage towards truth. To “find himself”, Ellison believes that a novelist should first of all, know the fundamentals of the art of fiction. He believes that art is an expression of transcendent values (John F. Callahan, 2003:298). His concern and quest have been to confront the hidden realities in the Negro life and to explore his psyche in order to depict him with his values and humanity. The task of the American novelist, Ellison concluded, was to wrestle, as had Odysseus, with Proteus, who “stands for both America and the inheritance of illusion through which all men must fight to achieve reality” (Callahan, 2003: 154). The writer, Ellison states, can extract the 'truth' from the “mad, vari-implicated chaos” of American life (Ibid.). He says, “When I write, I am trying to make a sense out of chaos” (Ihab Hassan, 1961: 3).

As a black writer Ellison has obviously been struggling to penetrate into the ambiguous, enigmatic and ironic forms and meanings, defining thereby the complex fate and personality of the American Negro. The problem of identity and existence has, however, remained at the center of every movement and at the core of every ideological stance of the Negro people. It has passed through different stages and phases of their history, assuming different colours and shades of meaning.

Critics noticed that Ellison had neglected, for clear reasons, the art-as-weapon theory and strongly criticized and disapproved of the sociological approach to creative writing. “Words are not rifles” he says (Callahan, 2003: 175). He thinks that a creative writer is not and should not be a sociologist. He has also criticized the critics who support the sociological approach to literature. “Critics who do so”, Ellison says, “should abandon literature for politics” (Ibid., 160). He believes that a novelist is neither a social determinist nor a social reformer; he is an artist even though he has to work in a society:

... If a Negro writer is going to listen to sociologists... he is in trouble because he will have abandoned his task before he begins. If he accepts the cliché to the effect that the Negro family is usually a broken family...if he believes that Negro males are having all these alleged troubles with their sexuality, or that Harlem is a ‘negro ghetto’....Well, he’ll never see the people of whom he wishes to write....He will never learn to use his own eyes and his own heart, and he’ll never master the art of fiction (Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, 1995: 109-110).

*Invisible Man* is characterized by its distinguished style, satirical temper and surrealistic tone; it is a most powerful novel. It treats the racial environment on the symbolic level, giving it a fabulous character and a universal meaning. It is a story of the Negro myth and Man, both submerged in invisibility. Written in the light of a personal vision, *Invisible Man* is concerned mainly, if not totally, with the identity, existence and humanity of a black individual who suffers from a painful alienation and loss of individuality. Michael D. Hill and Lena M. Hill remark that “Despite the passing years, this omnibus novel retains its prominence, existing like James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) as a much admired, yet incompletely understood work... the book has inspired spirited dialogue” (Hill, 2008: vii).

### **A Quest in a Blind World**

The protagonist of *Invisible Man* is a nameless young black man who is in search of identity through a desperate quest in a world of nightmares. The people he encounters “see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination -- indeed, everything and anything except me” (*Invisible Man* 3, henceforth: *IM*). He portrays himself as invisible and describes people as blind. He explains that his invisibility owes not to any biochemical accident or supernatural cause, but rather to the unwillingness of other people to notice him, as he is black. It is as though other people are sleepwalkers moving through a dream in which he doesn’t appear. Under such circumstances, he leaves the racist South to Northern city of New York, but his encounters continue to disgust him, even when “[...] they all seemed impersonal... by begging my pardon after brushing against me in a crowd. Still, I felt that even when they were polite, they hardly saw me” (*IM* 130). Whenever he attempts 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. All the way through the novel, he finds himself passing through a series of communities, from the Liberty Paints Plant to the Brotherhood, with each situation endorsing a different idea of how blacks should behave in society.

The narrator speaks about an incident in which he accidentally bumped into “a tall blond man” with blue eyes in the dark. The white man called him an insulting name, and the narrator attacked him, demanding an apology. He threw the blond man to the ground, kicked him, and pulled out his knife, prepared to slit the man’s throat. Only at the last minute did he come to his senses. He realized that the blond man insulted him because he couldn’t really see him. The next day, the narrator “saw his picture in the Daily News,” only to find the attack described as a mugging. The narrator remarks upon the irony of being “mugged by an invisible man!” (*IM* 4).

As he challenges to define himself through the values and expectations imposed on him, he finds that, in each case, the prescribed role limits his complexity as an individual and forces him to play an inauthentic part. At the end of this epic quest, he is completely stripped of his identity. As a result of this, he goes to live in an underground cell in the basement of a big old building rented to whites. He lives in the hole to heal his wounds and renew his strength and repose in tranquility after so much travails and tiredness. He is invisible even while living in the light of 1369 electric bulbs.

The title of the novel itself is very suggestive and conveys the symbolic meaning of the protagonist's life. Invisibility is indeed a metaphor of the black America. The nihilistic and indifferent world around the protagonist denies his existence, reducing him almost to a non-entity. His deep awareness of his existential condition keeps him awake and alive. He has no name going about in the world. One's name is the first thing, among all others, that gives one a sense of one's identity. As the protagonist of *Invisible Man* is nameless, this restates the fact that he has no identity. Sitting in the hole in the basement of the old building, the protagonist feels that he is a phantom in a nightmare. Like a sleepwalker with anguish in the heart, agony in the soul and ache in the conscience, he travels into the past. He is isolated from the whole world, and takes shelter in the state of hibernation. This hole is profusely illuminated by his invisibility, and though the light of 1369 electric bulbs confirms his reality, but the blind world cannot see and recognize him. Thus, he is put into a tragic and absurd situation.

To find an answer and to be out of the trap he is caught in, the protagonist is wondering: What is the main reason of his invisibility? He asks himself the wailing question of Louis Armstrong's song at the time he did nothing to be so black and blue. Nature gave him this colour, dyed his skin permanently in universal blackness which filtered deep down and soaked his psyche and soul. One's visibility is the recognition of one's individuality. But his colour has threatened that recognition. Sitting in the dark hole, he philosophises his invisibility and re-evaluates his past life and his whole 'being'. Consequently Ellison's *Invisible Man* is perhaps the answer to the mysterious and existential question the protagonist asks himself, 'What did I do to be so black and blue?' as he repeats hearing the Louis Armstrong's song "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue" -- all at the same time (*IM* 6). Through this song Ellison has shown the great influence of black folklore, jazz and the blues on the hero's sensibility. Traditionally, music is treated as a means of escape as well as transcendence; though in both cases it helps survival without changing the outer reality.

His quest starts with the "battle royal" (*IM* 14) episode and ends with his entering into the dark cell in the basement of an old building. He goes through his life with the burden of the curse of his grandfather, whose eyes seemed to follow him everywhere in his search. And in a nightmare, at the end of this episode, he finds an inscription in his briefcase which reads: "To Whom It May Concern," I intoned. "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (*IM* 27). And this nigger-boy is really kept running like a rabbit. His humility rebound him at every step. He is chased by the grandfather's curse which defines as the course of his life. His fate itself is a sealed letter which contains the inscription: "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running". And yet he does not give up and continues to struggle with a resolute mind. The whole life of this young black boy is a long nightmare which ends in the dark basement cell wherein nothing is visible says his invisibility. It is like "a death alive", he feels (*IM* 439). In that dark underground hole, "Great invisible waves of time" flow over him (*IM* 440). He loses, in fact, all sense of time and becomes an invisible man. An overpowering feeling of defeat takes hold of his mind and as a result of his exhaustion, he falls asleep and dreams of being chased and surrounded by his enemies. His hunger arouses him from sleep the next morning. Sitting in that black hole in the surreal underground world, full of shapeless, meaningless and useless objects, he strikes, in a fit of outrage, a match to burn the papers and other things in his briefcase. He burns his high-school diploma, Brother Tod Clifton's paper Sambo doll, the recommendation letters given by Dr. Bledsoe,

and the slip of paper upon which his Brotherhood name was written by Brother Jack. He burns everything except himself and his invisibility (*IM* 440).

The protagonist's act of burning the papers and the other articles in his briefcase is symbolic. It symbolizes the death of his old self and old world. In the dark basement cell he finds chaos and disorder; but he has to overcome the chaotic situation. In order to be created anew. The old world must first be annihilated and the old relations and identities destroyed. The death of the old self is the protagonist's temporary return to chaos. However, it is symbolized by the darkness and the disorder in the underground cell. The invisible initiate is caught, as it were, in a cosmic night. But he emerges as a new human being with spiritual power. His initiation is a spiritual phenomenon which involves his whole life.

Thus, the protagonist shakes off his old skin. He says that his “hibernation is over” and that he “must shake off the old skin and come up for breath” (*IM* 450). He announces: “I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless” (450). Thus, despite his invisibility, he visualizes a possibility of playing “a socially responsible role” (450). He ends the nightmare and waits for a new dawn in his life. He feels free from illusions at last. The images of “Jack and old Emerson and Bledsoe and Norton and Ras and the school superintendent and a number of others” (*IM* 441) flit to him and make a flickering flight across his invisible world. It comes to his realisation that all of them, except Mary, had used him as a tool as well as a scapegoat. He accepts and faces, however reluctantly, this reality and fact. They come in his dream to urge and demand that he should return to them and their world. And when he protests and refuses, they castrate him in a fit of inhuman anger. That is what they had done in a sense, when he was with them. This is the cruel and unreal act of vengeance. They took the two bloody blobs and cast them over the bridge, and out of his anguish he saw them curve up and “catch beneath the apex of the curving arch of the bridge” to hang there, dripping through the sunlight “into the dark red water” of the river (*IM* 442). The protagonist laughs loudly, in the faces of those who have tried to bring him down throughout his life, in anguish pointing toward his testicles and the dripping blood into the water. The blood spreads in rings on the surface of the dark red water. And he tells his tyrants that his castration is their sun and moon, world and race, reflected in the water. At last, he lays his burden down here in the underground hole:

...now I realized that I couldn't return to Mary's, or to any part of my old life. I could approach it only from the outside, and I had been as invisible to Mary as I had been to the Brotherhood. No, I couldn't return to Mary's, or to the campus, or to the Brotherhood, or home. I could only move ahead or stay here, underground. So I would stay here until I was chased out. Here, at least, I could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet. I would take up residence underground (*IM* 443).

This is how the protagonist's tribulation ends and his quest starts. His quest is to find out the philosophical meaning of the existing state and the import of this invisibility, on the one hand; and, the possibility of achieving a new identity and to confirm and celebrate it, on the other. Sitting in the black cell, his mind goes back again and again to his grandfather's message. His grandfather's ghost, like that of

Hamlet's father, hovers in over the hero and haunts his mind. He had followed his grandfather's advice, but he could not succeed. He was disillusioned. He had followed the principles of accommodation preached by Booker T. Washington. He had followed the "success method" given by Bledsoe. Like every American, the protagonist started out with his share of optimism and believed in hard work, progress and action. He tried to be a conservative. In spite of what happened, still, he had self-assurance in America and in its democratic dogma, in its varied and dream. He knew that America is woven of different ethnic groups and that the fate of all Americans, blacks and whites, should become one, but he failed. Though America is a crucible of identity, he found it very hard to keep his sense of direction there. He says:

Perhaps to lose a sense of where you are implies the danger of losing a sense of who you are. That must be it, I thought -- to lose your direction is to lose your face. So here he comes to ask his direction for the lost, the invisible. Very well, I've learned to live without direction (*IM* 447-8).

Ultimately, the narrator realises that the racial chauvinism of others causes them to see him only as they want to see him, and their restriction of vision in turn places limitations on his ability to act. He concludes that he is invisible because the world, he is living in, is filled with blind people who cannot see his real nature. As a result, he remains unable to act and becomes literally unable to be himself. Although the protagonist initially embraces his invisibility in an attempt to throw off the limiting nature of stereotypes, in the end he finds this tactic too passive. He determines to emerge from his underground 'hibernation' to make his own contributions to society as a complex individual:

The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath.... Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play (*IM* 450).

He tries to use his power on the world outside the society's system of prescribed roles. By making proactive contributions to society, he attempts to force others to acknowledge him, to acknowledge the existence of beliefs and behave outside of their prejudiced expectations.

Accordingly, through the sequence of events in *Invisible Man*, it is noticeable that Ellison is aware of the fact that he belongs to a racial minority - that too an oppressed one - in America. To be an American, as Henry James said, is a complex fate and to be an American Negro is indeed a more complex fate ([www.commentarymagazine.com](http://www.commentarymagazine.com)). He has to encounter diversity and complexity that baffle and bewilder him. "The diversity of American life", Ellison believes, "is often painful, frequently burdensome and always a source of conflict, but in it lies our fate and our hope" (Harold Bloom, 2010: 202). Ellison thinks that it is his moral commitment and obligation to define his black people's and the white compatriots "complex fate" and, therefore, he looks at the whole range of the American history and civilization through the lantern of his vision. He has found his identity, and his people's in

America. He believes that the identity of the Negro is bound irrevocably with the identities of white Americans.

Through this novel, Ellison aims at telling the reader that the Negroes are an oppressed minority in the United States of America. They are the most oppressed and exploited people in the world. They have been oppressed and exploited racially, culturally, socially, economically and politically. Their race has been annihilated, their culture has been ruined, their languages have been extinguished and they have been ruthlessly confined in subhuman conditions of life for more than three centuries. They are the “transplanted” Americans who were completely stripped of their history and heritage. In a word, their identity was forcibly snatched away from them by their destiny and the white men in the New World.

In fact, one cannot neglect that an oppressed minority in any country and culture in the world is more seriously concerned with its identity and existence problem than any unoppressed minority. Its concern for identity is so perpetual and profound that it tortures its soul and strikes its conscience, creating thereby a paranoiac situation for itself. This concern spreads itself on all the layers of its conscious and subconscious minds. The circumstances created by the oppressors do not permit a minority group to have and develop a sense of identity.

Erik H. Erikson, who asserts that America is undergoing an “identity crisis”, remarks that a sense of identity means “a sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops; and it means, at the same time, a sense of affinity with a community's sense of being at one with its future as well as its history - or mythology” (Erikson, 1975: 27-28). These words of Erikson give us an authentic and accurate formula of identity. If we apply this formula to the American Negro and his community, we find that he has not always been one with himself and that he has not always experienced an affinity with his community's sense of being at one with its future as well as its past. His humanity was not accepted by the white immigrants and settlers when they were busy in formulating their American nationhood and a new human identity based on what Erikson has termed as a common species hood. White immigrants and settlers felt the need of creating the image of a New Man in the New World. The Negro was ruthlessly estranged through conscious efforts. An individual can locate his personal identity only in being at one with himself as he grows in a culture and a country: he can discover his social identity and his ethnic identity only in his affinity with his community's sense of being at one with its past and future, with its cultural heritage and racial roots. And this oneness is possible only when it is translated in terms of reality. A true identity, individual or social, should be discovered only in reality.

Accordingly, one can conclude that as identity in other nations is not a “problem”, as it is taken for granted, it is not a conscious obsession with them and an unconscious acceptance, but for the American it is an obsession, a passion and a quest. The problem of identity has always been a great theme of the American literature. In other words, the search for identity is primarily an American theme with its varied association and wide implications. As Ralph Ellison once said, “IT is the American theme” (John White, 2013: 237). And the reason Ellison gives for this is that “the nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are” (Ibid.) and that it is still a young society which has not yet forged its full identity. For

instance, Walter Allen, an English critic, wrote a book entitled *The Urgent West* to find out as to why Americans are so much obsessed over the problem of their national identity. He observes that

This problem of a national identity is obviously not one that bothers people of other countries. An Englishman or a Frenchman does not have to seek constantly to define his Englishness or his Frenchness, to work out painfully what it means to be English or French. It is only at moments of extreme crisis, as in war, for instance, that he finds it necessary to do so (Allen, 1969: 6).

According to Allen, the lack of homogeneity in the American society is the major reason of their concern and anxiety over the problem of identity. And despite their zeal, ambition and efforts, they have failed in creating a homogeneous society because they are a mixture of different races - English, Scottish, Irish, French, Dutch, German and Swedish. Therefore “[t]hey found themselves in a prolonged state of crisis - a crisis in the sense that they were, and remained unsettled” (Quoted by Gerald Daniel Cohen, 2011:157).

### **The Conclusion**

One can conclude that the Negroes' loneliness was simply awful; it was a two-dimensional thing: it had the breadth of unfamiliarity and also the painful depth of isolation. Their migration was a leap into the unknown which caused almost a total loss of the identity where they were caught in a dark seamless web of alienation and invisibility. Like any other modern hero, the protagonist of this novel is a victim of his age with an awareness of his tragic situation and spiritual potential. The root cause of his trouble is the loss of the sense of belonging which is most essential for achieving personal identity. It seems clear that the hero tries hard to push his roots into the American soil, but the others refused to accept him. Like any other Negroes, he found himself in a sprawling wilderness.

Reflecting the influence of the music of the black folklore, he tried to find the definition of himself and of his invisibility in Louis Armstrong song. With the music, the hero descends, like Dante, into the depths of his being and sends back his notes from the underground world. He dives into his past to recollect his memories and experiences. The protagonist, however, becomes withdrawn and extremely reflective to achieve visibility. He realizes that man's life is a continuous conflict between tragedy and hope. He wants to be a man of action as soon as he comes out of the underground cell, as he has made an announcement to that effect in the Epilogue. He decides to come out, to emerge where the novel ends with the note that the protagonist's resolution is to act and in so doing to achieve a new identity.

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