

REPRESENTATION OF RACE AND HISTORY IN *INVISIBLE MAN*

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Abstract:

*Set in the racial conflicts of the 1920s America, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) is a bildungsroman and a protest song of a black man. The story chronicles the journey of a Nameless narrator from his subservience and disillusionment to self-realisation. The paper will attempt to delineate the politics of representation of History and race in the novel. It contends that by using the fictional space as a site of the protest, Ellison recuperates the subversive cultural history of blacks and debunks the illusion of equality, by exposing the racism prevalent in the guise of benevolent institutions. The paper engages closely with the narrative techniques of Ellison to understand his reformulation and problematisation of official documented history on blacks.*

Key Words: *Subservience, disillusionment, fictional space, illusion of equality.*

What is History? Is it the neat sanitized figure given in the official recorded history written by the person in a position of power or an individual's recounting of what he has experienced? Ralph Ellison, through his masterful use of the narrative techniques, has posited history as an artefact which is in the process of making. Through the repeated use of the metaphor of loop, Ellison highlights the circularity of History with its interconnectedness with past, present and Future. It is his questioning of history through a first-person narrative, Ellison highlights the prevalent Racism in the country obfuscated under the guise of social equality. Let us try to probe the themes of Race and the problematisation of the dominant version of history as presented in *The Invisible Man*.

Benjamin pointed out that the past should be and can be retrieved because it is a pool of 'unrealised possibilities'. It is an amalgamation of crushed revolution, failed rebellion and much more. So, by playing with the 'gaze' of the readers, the nameless narrator acts as a post-colonial writer who is engaged and concerned about presenting history from below. It is evident from the fact that the novel is literally written from the basement. Two opposing versions of history are presented before us. One is the official documented history which is a delineation of glorified accounts of some heroes told in a linear and coherent pattern. But this version of history is problematised by our eloquent narrator, who mulls over the question of authorship of history. He ponders why only the survivors get the chance "to lie about it afterwards (237)?" However, the narrator makes explicit that human life is full of uncertainties and ups and downs, so it is not plausible to narrate history straight like 'an arrow; he wants it to resemble a 'boomerang' like a spiral and wants it to be discontinuous and formless like the actual living world. He wants the history of Blacks to sound like "a song with turgid, inadequate words (239)".

The repeated metaphor of 'invisible' is used for the Black community. Ellison goes to the extent of describing what he understands by invisibility in the novel. To him, it indicates the people who are either not taken into account or are 'plunged outside' it- since their mundane, monotonous everyday life is not considered worthy to be incorporated in the official version of history. The novel begins with the narrator asserting his existence 'I am invisible man...made of flesh and blood'. Ellison not only places the story of the invisible narrator as a part of fictional rewriting of history, but also allocates him all the power to recite it from the first-person account. The entire novel is a soul-searching mission of the nameless narrator to learn and unlearn the true depiction of history. It is at the end of his journey in the novel where he learns to

accept the “beautiful absurdity of his past (302)”. The pertinent issue which Ellison raises is that official version of history showcases the African-American life as only full of tragedy. It does not trace the saga of the heroism of Black people in very adverse situations.

The narrator swings back and forth down the memory lane to narrate his experience as a black man. We witness the conditions of southern Africa as well as Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s. Ralph Ellison's continuous emphasis on the movement of the narrator is a noteworthy strategy which specifies the mobility and richness of African-American culture as opposed to the traditional assumption of it being static and stagnant.

In the first part of the novel, the narrator dwells in ignorance about his true self. In the prologue, his grandfather forewarned him about this situation- 'agree them [whites] to death and destruction'. But, without considering the implicit meaning in his grandfather's message, the narrator starts believing that the only way to become a part of history is to follow the person in power. Narrator perception of power stands symbolically in the person around him who can control and manipulate history. In his attempt to become visible, the narrator is ready to compromise with his past and undo his idea of true democracy. It is evident from the scene where the narrator is delivering a speech in front of a group of white people totally in tandem with Booker T. Washington 's idea of 'social responsibility'. Ellison understates the irony behind the situation by inadvertently making the narrator to use 'social equality' in place of social responsibility. It was the narrator's naïve understanding that he “felt that only these men could only justly judge my ability (87)” which made him just another pawn in the hands of the whites.

Ralph Ellison artfully constructs the episodes of 'the battle royal' and that of Jim Crow college to highlight that the psychology of white male is based upon the foundation of interracial and intraracial conflicts. From the depiction of Blacks fighting against each other, to their struggle to catch golden coins from the electrocuted blanket, this episode exposes the blindness of blacks as well as whites. The blacks blindness is stated when they refuse to see the irony of the situation and willingly submit to whites to please them. The fact that the boys are blindfolded by a white cloth metaphorically indicates white's blindness. Ellison uses the metaphor of invisibility to contradict the whites. He addresses them as “sleepwalkers” and “blind fool[s]”. The paradox of the situation is indicated when the whites who refuse to see the narrator in daylight can see him at night. By recording these petty incidences in his fictional history, the narrator is interrogating the glorification of one event over the other.

Around this time the writers like Alain Locke, Ralph Ellison spoke openly against the romanticised image of Negroes. They foregrounded the idea of new Negro man who not only will 'speak for Negroes but will speak as a Negro'. A need is asserted for the introspection and self-questioning among Negroes. Ellison's commitment to this ideology gets reflected in the college episode. This episode is a comment on the gaps that exist between the economically stable blacks in the state of power and between have not's, thereby, undermining Booker T. Washington's idea for vouching for economic stability instead of political equality. The fact that the founder's statue is soiled with bird's leftovers and the fountain in front of it is dry impels us to read it as a metaphor for the lack of motivation. The founder figure is reduced to an abstract symbol that is no longer capable of inspiring his fellow citizens for the struggle. Similarly, the church bishop is depicted as a blind man who instead of guiding people is all praiseworthy of college's founders. The call here is for the revolution, at the individual level.

With the use of characters like Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe, Trueblood, the nameless narrator underlines the failure of education policy of Jim Crow College. The college perpetuates hierarchical ideology, where the individual talents and thinking are prohibited. Dr. Bledsoe who stands as "an example to his race" is presented as an opportunist black man who sustains his authority by perpetuating the prejudice of whites about blacks. His stand gets clearer when he says “I'll have every negro in the country hanging on tree climbs by morning if it means staying where I am (80)”. While, Mr. Norton is depicted as a self-aggrandizing patriarch who sees his 'fate connected to that of the narrator' while on the other hand, he

satisfies his ego by listening to the True Blood 's voyeuristic story of incest. By naming his character as Trueblood, Ellison is playing with the stereotype of Black man with excessive sexuality. The only character who inspires the narrator to be his true self, like his grandfather, is the figure of the veteran. Veteran arouses the narrator to “become his own father.” He is the one who sees through the falseness of Mr. Norton's behaviour. He attempts to dismantle the narrator's acceptance of the pre-ordained role of black men by asking him to “look beneath the surface” and to “learn how you operate.”

There is a constant interplay of lightness and darkness in the novel. In the prologue, the narrator defines that his invisibility is the refusal of the people to consider him as an individual. The novel can be read as the narrator's struggle to make visible the invisible existence of his life. On the literal level, it is highlighted in his action of stealing light from the Monopolised light company. He ironically states that 'since he is invisible, he needs light more than anyone else does.' Unlike, his contemporaries who employ this condition to gain sympathy or use the emotions of people to appeal to the cause, Ralph Ellison presents his narrator with all agencies to articulate and initiate the process of struggle at the individual level. As Ellison points out “if the negro, or any other writer, is going to do what is expected of him, he has lost his battle before he takes the field, I suspect that all the agony that goes into writing is borne precisely because the writer longs for acceptance- but it must be acceptance on its own term”². This stance of Ellison makes him stand tall among his contemporaries. He modifies the way a Negro looks upon himself and offers the pragmatic ways to tackle the problems before them. Ellison uses the condition of uncertainty to his advantage to bring out the ambivalences around the Negro problem in social and political spheres.

The shift in setting in the second part to Harlem again foregrounds the motif of movement. This part of the novel is significant as it underscores the realisation of the narrator of his true self and acceptance of his past which he was trying to evade so far. This section mirrors the narrator's articulation of his grandfather's advice to overturn the colonialist by the appearance of agreement. This validates the narrator's comment in the prologue that “the end is at the beginning (34)”, thereby bringing to the forth the circular nature of history as compared to the linearity.

Throughout the novel, the task of the first person narrator is to uncover the painful reality underneath the surface. The novel unmasks the traditional assumption that migrating to North is an escape from the racism. The Liberty paint company stands symbolic of the existing discrimination which remains obfuscated in the guise of economic opportunities. The motto of the company “if its optic white, it is right,” resembles the traditional stereotypes, that 'if you are white, you are right'. The fact that black colour is mixed with white to look whiter indicates that white manages to look whiter in comparison to blacks. The white paint is used to cloak the rampant racism in North America. The ironical situation is made more apparent when the narrator confides to his readers that the paint is going to be applied to a government building, envisaging the subscription of government authorities in this discriminatory practice. It also suggests the failure of Washington's idea that economic prosperity will nullify social inequality.

The resurrection of the narrator in the hospital gives him a different perspective of the situation around him. It is here; the narrator realises that “they have been there all along, but somehow I had missed them. I'd missed them even when my work has been successful. They were outside the grooves of history, and it was my duty to get them in, all of them... were this all that would be recorded? Was this the only true history of the times, a mood blared by trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid, inadequate words (271)”. The episode of joining The Brotherhood, not just provides him with an opportunity to dwell deeper into his quest for identity. He also utilises this to scrutinise certain political alternatives available to Blacks. The Brotherhood, is an organisation which is socially active for the people “who have been disposed” from their heritage. The narrator describes this organisation “natures too ambiguous for the most ambiguous words.” The Brotherhood digress the narrator from his identity quest by forcing him to speak on 'the woman question' instead of utilising his talent to radicalise the masses for revolution against the shackles of the race. The narrator unmasks the anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic

interests of The Brotherhood when Jack says “Our job is not to ask them but to tell them” (238). The fact that the narrator is given a new identity while joining indicates that the organisation does not commemorate his individuality but rather wants to keep him running, as the narrator earlier dreamt “Keep this nigger boy running”. Emma's comment on the narrator that “ain't you think he should be blacker for this (243)”, underscores the hypocrisy of the institution. Like the founder figure in the college, the narrator is reduced to an abstract symbol of his race. The blindness of 'The brotherhood' is further foregrounded when the narrator briefs them about the shooting of Ted Clifton by the cops; Jack's glass eye falls at this movement to signify the insensitivity of the brotherhood to the cause of blacks. This incidence awakens the narrator to the truth that “Freedom “ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head (130)”. By declaring itself as an organisation based on scientific structure, 'The brotherhood', as the narrator realises, stands for the methodical rejection of humanity.

The narrator defiance of 'The brotherhood' and the defence of true self are interrelated. His questioning of the authorities is a pathway towards achieving higher goals. For example, Ralph Ellison's alternate version of history takes into account the death of Ted Clifton as an important moment in history. It is then the narrator introspects and interrogates his disillusionment. “I could see it now; see it clearly, and in glowing magnitude, It was not suicide but murder. The committee had planned it, and I had helped, had been a tool (299)”. The narrator presents him as a hero who died fighting for justice, while 'The brotherhood' describes him as “a traitorous merchant, of vile instruments of anti-negro, anti-minority a racist bigotry” (287).

The characters of 'Ras the Destroyer' and Rinehart are the only political alternative available before black people after 'The Brotherhood'. Ras whose name phonetically resembles 'race the destroyer' stands for Black Nationalism in the novel. Ellison underlines the irony in the agenda of nationalism by stating that Ras considers Blacks as a category like 'The brotherhood'. Ras attains power by adhering to the prescribed identities weaved by others. He even propels people to follow it thereby hampers the progress and empowerment of the Black community. In sharp contrast to this, Rinehart inhabits numerous identities that of a pimp, preacher etc. Rinehart represents an alterable conception of identity in which a person's identity is a function of a situation. It brings to the fore the imposition of manufactured identities by society on the individuals. It is due to the clash of these two ideologies which results in a deadly riot at the end of the novel. Thus, Ellison invites the reader to introspect the pragmatic alternatives suitable to them, without intruding them in decision making.

Throughout the novel, Ellison has employed powerful symbolism of imprisonment to capture the trauma and sense of entrapment amongst his people. During the entire course of the novel, the narrator is seen with a briefcase in which he has gifted the scholarship for the college. From his 'Brotherhood' identity cards to the broken pieces of the stereotypical piggy bank in the shape of a black man, the narrator keeps all the documents in it. The narrator attains symbolic freedom when during the riots he burns down all the documents to get some light. Another potent symbol is the leg chain of brother Tarp which he gave to the narrator. The narrator “neither wanted it nor knew what to do with it (203)” indicating narrator's ambivalence towards it. The chain achieves greater significance as a symbol of chaining the dreams and aspirations and black people abilities. As Pen Winther points out that during his lecture at 'women question', the narrator says, “I felt in my pocket for leg chain, at least I hadn't forgotten to take that along (263).” At this stage, the chain provides a commentary on the invisible man's reduction as a hostage to 'The brotherhood' rather than depicting the narrator's anger against them.

Lastly, Ellison efficiently uses the Blues as an important factor in the recuperation of cultural history. With frequent references to Louis Armstrong's music of protest, to narrator encountering a cart puller singing Blues in Harlem, Blues plays a very important role in the novel. Ralph Ellison pointed out that the “Blues... are an art form and thus a transcendence of those conditions created within the Negro community by the denial of social justice.” He envisages that the Blues incorporates the total way of living

of Black people. The novel follows the AAB' pattern of Blues as it starts with a prologue, ends with an epilogue, and in between is enclosed the history of an invisible narrator. His underground room acts as the stage for the Blues singer. As the actual effect of Blues is felt when we experience them. Similarly, the Blues are sung to the narrator in the first half of the novel; it is only when he experiences them in Harlem, he can discern the true meaning of them.

The novel is full of instances where either there is a direct mention of Blues or the episode somehow represents the Blues songs. For instance, when Trueblood recounts his story, he says "I think and thinks; until I think my brain gonna bust, about how I am guilty and how I ain't guilty (74)". The chaotic scenario of True blood's dream, as well as stories, recreate before the readers the chaos like situations which Blues songs describe. Another example, when the narrator is going for the interview at Mr. Emerson's office, on his way, he meets a Blues singer pushing a cart full of blueprints. The narrator does not understand the song of that cart puller, it is only after knowing the reality of the matter about his letter of recommendation he can understand his song "they picked poor Robin clean." Similarly, in the hospital when the invisible narrator is given shock therapy, the nurse says 'he indeed has got a rhythm' indicating the African-American culture association with music. The therapeutic nature of music is indicated when the narrator after the shock treatment says "when I discover who I am I'll be free (133)".

The narrator, like Blues, is full of possibilities and contradictions, limitations and freedom, a shifting changing thing with humanity. At the end of the epilogue, he realises that by the singing blues for us, he has "tried to give a pattern to the chaos which lives with the pattern of your certainties (310)". The narrator has sung his song of struggle to create an awareness of chaos as well as his mastery in moulding it into a pattern.

Thus, the narrator's mission of searching the self and recovery of the suppressed history ends with the completion of the novel. After having made a pattern out of a chaotic and everyday life of black men, Ralph Ellison in the epilogue indicates the need to now delineate history from outside. As Ted Clifton said, sometimes it is better to 'plunge outside history' because it provides an opportunity to break the pattern. So, the narrator decides to come out of his underground world, "I've overstayed my hibernation since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play (312)." In the end, by breaking the pattern, the narrator indicates that his history cannot be moulded into boundaries- it does not follow a formulaic writing pattern. He attempts to delineate the experience of blacks so that the readers could grasp the reality on the ground. The novel envisages the need to question as well as accept both the reality of the past as well as the present. Since past of African-American people has become the inevitable part of their identities. That is why the narrator proudly concludes "They are my birthmark, I yam what I yam (266)."

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End Notes:

- 1 The given reference is from Ellison's essay "Twentieth-century fiction and the black mask of humanity", published in a collection of essays entitled *Shadow & Act* (1964).