

Understanding Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man* In The Light Of Contemporary Post Structural Critical Approach

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ABSTRACT

By being in one's own society, moving in flesh and blood on par with the so called, assuming high profiled communities, is a disgrace. It is a social and intellectual issue entangled with individuality and personal identity. Ellison began with invisible man to dispel the disillusionment of bourgeoisie concept of identity. He addressed many of the social and intellectual issues facing African Americans early in the 20th century, including black nationalism, the relationship between black identity and Marxism and reformist racial policies in a very free following delivery. Ellison always believed in his Invisible Man that his invisibility is not a physical condition - he is not literally invisible - but is rather than the result of the refusal of others to see him. The contention of Ellison is to ascertain the aspirations of Afro-Americans, irrespective of their clans, tooling under the yoke of humiliation and persecution having no identity living like invisible man and unknown citizen. The theme of invisibility, originally hinted at by the vet in Chapter 3 (page 81) and introduced in the Prologue to the novel, is developed in this chapter, with the protagonist realizing that the leadership of the Brotherhood is not willing to recognize his identity as an individual. In this context, the protagonist writes:

Key Words: Invisibility, Humanism, Race, etc.,

Introduction:

Understanding Ellison's *Invisible Man* in the light of contemporary post structural critical approach makes one to realize that there is a good deal of African American literary theory before the advent of recent theory. In order to advance the appropriate mode of African American creative expression W.E.B. DuBois, Locke and Richard Wright had created a space for the Black Arts movement. In the beginning of the 20th century the concept of Negritude initiated by Aime Cesaire and Leopold Sedor Senghor that stood for the Black pride has inspired African literature and the writings from Black people across the globe. Though the writers like Wole Soyinka have disagreed with the ideological representation of Negritude on the ground that it is a mere reiteration of the stereotypes created by White men, it has remained largely an influential theoretical frame from which the best writings from the Blacks have come. Though Afro American writings could be traced from the early mid 19th century, the writings like Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1900) and Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), diagnosed the African American cultural identity as a source of double consciousness. They succeeded in providing theoretical base. Alain Locke's essay 'The New Negro' (ed. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*) argued for the confident stride into modernity. 'The New Negro' is regarded as the manifesto for Black intellectuals and artists. This has paved the way for Harlem Renaissance.

Mid twentieth century saw the fierce contestation between literary militancy and appeasement. Richard Wright with his seminal essay 'Blue print for Negro writing' (1973) vehemently criticized the attempts of black writers to pander the white tastes. His 'Native Son' (1940) amplified the notion of African American social consciousness and the responsibility to lay bare the skeleton of society. Ellison's 'Invisible Man' devised a new of brand of African American writing. In a complex philosophical mould, it offered a run through of African American race thinking in a satirical vein. Achieving the classic stats, 'Invisible Man' has parodied white mythologies, Lies & mechanisms of white society. It has offered a distinctive articulation of racial problem and identity. Subscribing to the common theme of Commonwealth literature of Search for an Identity, the novel has established that the inner strength of Blacks lies in their humility. Though this perception has remained incomprehensible, it has lucidly illustrated through its narrator and protagonist the philosophical perception of 'Invisibility.' Exposing the dehumanizing codes of white society American upward mobility, the novel has proved that the invisibility is the cultural creation of White society. By offering a review of the experiences of the Protagonist, the novel has consolidated the precept that the superior strength not inseparable from disability. In the process of constructing a refusal to accept Whiteman's myth of guilt and pollution Ellison adopts a different perceptibility that remained in comprehensible to the Afro Americans for a long time. The very aspect of 'Invisibility' in its philosophical sense engaged critics for centuries. It is only in the light of Post Colonial criticism promulgated by Frantz Fanon in *The wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin & White Masks* a better reading and understanding of *Invisible Man* is realized. 'Invisibility' in its critical sense is perceived as psycho analytical aspect. It compels the people to go for a serious understanding of the psycho analytical perspectives of Whites and Blacks. Fanon's psycho analytical perspectives that marks 'schizophrenia' as an essential character of the Blacks imposed by colonial mentalities seems to have originated in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. It is pertinent to observe that the post colonial prescriptions are foretold by Ellison. In this way, he is considered as the front runner of all the Post colonial critics that tried to answer the questions of Post colonialism. The Derridian notion that 'there is nothing outside the Text' finds its complete realization in this novel. Ellison indulges in philosophical and psychological subversion of preconceived notion of 'Race' & 'Class.' Ellison's very understanding of the problems of 'racial discrimination' gives the impression that he has initiated alternative History almost paving the way for New Historicism. Critics are kept in caution to be aware of the Feminine accusation that these Narratives are Masculine in Nature. Though Ellison is not an exemption from this, his philosophical approach towards the racial problems provided him neutrality. So the absence of Feminist representation has acquired legitimacy in the world of Ralph Ellison's invisibility.

The post World War era saw the white American society formulate the Black code of Invisibility by habituating its visual perception to the optical illusion of the 'colour line.' Creating optical illusion by blurring the vision to render a specific object invisible is a common adolescent trail wherein a child experiments with the creative power of visual perception. But when such is exercised by mature adults in a social perspective it can result in the denying of the fundamental right of visible existence. Visual perception is an important faculty which plays a crucial role in the formation of the various perspectives on which a society bases its claims of being civilized perception is based on the ability to distinguish between the diverse colours and their assorted shades particularly the formative colours of black and white. Colours though distinct from each other evolve from combination. Human rationality and sensibility thus depends on seeing things in 'black and white'. Seeing things solely through the narrow confines of the 'colour line' leads to flawed perception, perspective and judgment leading to the desecration of the sacredness of human personality. Invisibility is a very commonly and widely used metaphor for the kind of situation where people are not seen as fully human. In contemporary society its parameters encircle whites, women, homosexuals etc anyone who finds himself or herself at the margin of society who is voiceless; whose humanity is not acknowledged. In the context of the black experience of white code of Invisibility operates on the epidermalisation of colour i.e. black skin.

Ellison's protagonist in the "Invisible Man" encounters the white racist code of Invisibility in the episode of the paint factory. Ironically the protagonist is instructed by the white supervisor Kimbro to mix a 'black' whitener to enhance the whiteness of the paint. "Slowly I measured the glistening black drops, seeing them settle on the surface and become blacker still, spreading suddenly out to the edges." (IM, 152) The protagonist is bewildered when the white supervisor is oblivious to the glaringly visible grey tinge in the white paint. "Let's see", he said selecting a small sample. "That's it, as white as George Washington's Sunday-go-to-meetin' wig and as sound as the all-mighty dollar! That's paint that'll cover just about anything! ... White! It's the purest white that

can be found. Nobody makes a paint any white.” (IM, 153) The illogicality of the white man’s self delusive statement is clearly evident in the protagonist’s attempts to comprehend it: “I looker at the painted slab. It appeared the same: a grey tinge glowed through the whiteness, and Kimbro had failed to detect it. I stood for about a minute, wondering if I were seeing things, inspected another and another. All were the same, a brilliant white diffused with gray... I had a feeling that something had gone wrong; that either I had played a trick on Kimbro or he was playing one on me....” (IM, 156)

In an earlier chapter as the protagonist enthusiastically boards the train bound for New York, he is advised on how to play the white man’s game of invisibility. “For god’s sake, learn to look beneath the surface... come out of the fog, young man. And remember you don’t have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don’t believe in it – that much you owe yourself. Even if it lands you in a strait jacket or a padded cell. Play the game, but play it in your own way – part of the time at least. Play the game, but raise the ante, my boy. Learn how it operates, learn how you operate.... We’re an ass-backward people, though. You might even beat the game. It’s really a crude affair. Really pre-Renaissance –and that game has been analyzed, put down in books. But down here they’ve forgotten to take care of the books and that’s your opportunity. You’re hidden right out in the open – that is, you would be if you only realized it. They wouldn’t see you because they don’t expect you to know anything, since they believe they’ve taken care of that....” (IM, 118)

The protagonist’s grandfather’s deathbed utterance symbolizes the common black man’s response to the white man’s code of invisibility. “Son, after I’m gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine them with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.” (IM, 14) If his grandfather’s advice insults his blackness then the white man’s aversion to his blackness and sensitizes him to the hypocrisy of the white man’s self delusive interpretation of his whiteness. The bizarre scene in the ballroom of a leading hotel where the effluent member of the white community gets their kicks by forcing a sexual fantasy play between black and white, is a case in point. The story of the incestuous relationship of the black Trueblood with the members of his family and his white neighbors condescending response to this stereotyped blackness sensitizes him further to his blackness. “Things got to happening’ right off. The niggus up at the school come down to chase me off and that made me mad. I went to see the white folks then and they have me help. That’s what I don’t understand. I done the worse thing a man could do in his family and instead of chasin’ me out of the country, they gimme more help than they have any other coloured man, no matter how good a niggus he was.” (IM, 52) This shows how the white man applies religion to interpret the black man’s ‘blackness’ as the epitome of evil and thereby justifies his code of invisibility. The white trustee Mr. Norton’s fascination with the incestuous Trueblood, infact reveals the white man’s own obsession and fascination with the darker side of ‘his’ personality which he extricates from himself by attributing it to his black part and claiming his racial purity and supremacy.

The Principal Dr. Bledsoe confirms to the white man’s estimate of his blackness to serve his own vested interests. He explains his philosophy to the protagonist and the ‘wisdom’ of confirming to the white man’s code of invisibility. “Who Negroes? Don’t control this school or much of anything else – haven’t you learned even that? No, Sir, they don’t control this school, nor white folk either. True they support it, but I control it. I’s big and black and I say ‘Yes, Suh’s as loudly as any burrhead when it’s convenient, but I’m still the king down here. I don’t care how much it appears otherwise. Power doesn’t have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring. Self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying. When you have it, you know it. Let the Negroes snicker and the Crackers laugh! Those are the facts, son. They only ones I even pretend to please are white folk, and even those I control, more than they control me. This is a power set-up, son, and I’m at the controls. You think about that. When you buck against me, you’re bucking against power, rich white folk’s power, the nation’s power – which means government power...! And I’ll tell you something your sociology teachers are afraid to tell you,” he said. “If there weren’t men like me running schools like this, there’d be no South. Nor North, either. No, and there’d be no country – not as it is today. You think about that, son.” “With all your speechmaking and studying I thought you understood something. But you... All right, go ahead. See Norton. You’ll find that he wants you disciplined; he might not know it, but he does. Because he knows that I know what is best for his interests. You’re a black educated fool, son. These white folk have newspapers, magazines, radios, spokesmen to get their ideas across. If they want

to tell the world a lie, they can tell it so well that it becomes the truth; and if I tell them that you're lying, they'll tell the world even if you prove you're telling the truth. Because it's the king of lie they want to hear..." "You're nobody, son. You don't exist-can't you see that? The white folk tell everybody what to think-except men like me. I tell them; that's my life, telling white folk how to think about the things I know about. Shocks you, doesn't it? Well, that's the way it is. It's a nasty deal and I don't always like it myself. But you listen to me: I didn't make it, and I know that I can't change it. But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am."

"I mean it, son" he said. "I had to be strong and purposeful to get where I am. I had to wait and plan and lick around... Yes, I had to act the nigger!" I don't even insist that it was worth it, but now I'm here and I mean to stay-after you win the game, you take the prize and you keep it, protect it; there's nothing else to do... A man gets old winning his place, son. So you go ahead, go tell your story; match your truth against my truth, because I've said is truth, the broader truth. Test it, try it out... when I started out I was a young fellow..." (IM, 109, 110)

The Brotherhood (communist party) also try to confine him to operate within his "blackness" as propagated by the white man. The need to step out of it, out of the white formulated history of the black peoples is made clear to the protagonist by another black spokesman of the Brotherhood Tod Clifton. Clifton sheds his invisibility and makes himself visible in response to the exhortation of Ras the black militant leader of Harlem. "Me crazy, mahn? You call me crazy? Look at you two and look at me - is this sanity? Standing here in three shades of blackness! Three black men fighting in the street because of the white enslaver? Is that sanity? Is that consciousness, scientific understanding? Is that the modern black mahn of the twentieth century? Hell, mahn! Is it self-respect-black against black? What they give you to betray-their women? You fall for that?" You contaminated but he real black Hahn. In Africa this mahn be a chief, a black king! Here they say he rape them godahm women with no blood in their veins. I bet this mahn can't bear them off with baseball bat-shit! What kind of foolishness is it? Kick him ass from cradle to grave then call him brother? Does it make mathematics? Is it logic? Look at him, mahn; open your eyes," he said to me. "I look like that I rock the blahsted world! They know about me in Japan, India-all the colored countries. Youth! Intelligence! The mahn's a natural prince! Where is your eyes! Where your self-respect? Working for them dahm people? Their days is numbered, the time is almost here and you fooling round like this was the nineteenth century. I don't understand you. Am I ignorant? Answer me, mahn" "You t'ink I'm crazy, it is c'ase I speak bahd English? Hell, it ain't my mama tongue, mahn, I'm Africn! You really t'ink I'm Crazy? "You believe that?" "What they do to you, black mahn? Give you them stinking women?"

"Women? Godhahm, mahn! Is that equality? Is that the black mahn's freedom? A pat on the back and a piece of cunt without no passion? Maggots! They buy you that blahsted cheap, mahn? What they do to my people! Where is your brains? These women dretgs, mahn! They bilge water! You know the high-class white mahn hates the black mahn, that's simple. So now he use the dregs and waht you black young men to do his dirty work. They betray you and you betray the black people. They tricking you, mahn, let them fight among themselves. Let'em kill off one another. We organize organization is good-but we organize black. BLACK! To hell with that son of bitch! He take one them strumpets and tell the black mahn his freedom lie between her skinny legs-while that som of a gun, be take al the power and the capital and don't leave the black mahn not'ing. The good white women he tell the balck mahn is a rapist and keep them locked up and ignorant while he makes the black mahn a race of bahstards. "When the black mahn going to tire of this childish perfidity? He got you so you don't trust your black intelligence? You young, don't play you'self cheap, mahn. Don't deny you'self? It took a billion gallons of black blood to make you. Recognize you'self inside and you wan the kings among men! A mahn knows he's a mahn when he got not'ing, when he's naked - nobody have to tell him that. You six foot tall, mahn. You young and intelligent. You wasn't them t'ings you be dead, mahn. Dead! I'd have killed you, mahn. Ras the Exhorter raised up his knife and ried to do it, but he could not do it. Why don't you do it? I ask myself. I will do it now, I say; but somet'ing tell me, 'No, no! You might be killing your black king!' And I say, yas, yas! So I accept your humiliating action. Ras recognized your black possibilities, mahn. Ras would not sacrifice his black brother to the white enslaver. Instead he cry. Ras is a mahn-no white mahn have to tell him that - and Ras cry. So why don't you recognize your black duty, mahn, and come jine us?" (IM 281, 282).

Clifton pays a heavy price for reinterpreting his blackness. At his funeral the protagonist describes the diabolicality of the white code of invisibility. “Tod Clifton’s one with the ages. But what’s that to do with you in this heat under this veiled sun? Now he’s part of history, and he has received his true freedom. Didn’t they scribble his name on a standardized pad? His Race: colored! Religion!: unknown, probably born Baptist. Place of birth: U.S. Some southern town. Next of kin: unknown. Address: unknown. Occupation: unemployed. Cause of death (be specific): resisting reality in the form of a 38 caliber revolver in the hands of the arresting officer, on Forty-second between the library and the subway in the heat of the afternoon, “Such was the short bitter life of Brother Tod Clifton. Now he’s in this box with the bolts tightened down. He’s in the box and we’re in there with him, and when I’ve told you this you can go. It’s dark in this box and it’s crowded. It has cracked ceiling and a clogged-up toilet in the hall. It has rats and roaches, and it’s far, far too expensive a dwelling. The air is bad and it’ll be cold this winter. Tod Clifton is crowded and he needs the room. Tell them to get out of the box, that’s what he would say if you could hear him. Tell them to get out of the box and go reach the cops to forget that rhyme. Tell them to reach them that when they call you nigger to make a rhyme with trigger it makes the gun backfire.” (IM 345, 346)

It is brother Tarp who passes on the ‘black’ legacy of African manhood by gifting the protagonist his most treasured possession, an iron link in the chain that had imprisoned him as a slave. Instead of displaying it as a symbol of the African’s suffering Tarp interprets it as symbol of Afro-American’s racial pride and indomitable courage and resilience in the face of denial. However instead of responding militantly like Ras the militant black leader of Harlem or Wright’s protagonist in “Native Son” the Invisible Man responds by using the white code of invisibility against the white man himself. Like the Doestoevskian protagonist he conveys himself to an underground cellar quietly pondering on his experiences and arranging the jig-saw puzzle to find a solution to the black predicament which is at once the predicament of the white man. “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible; understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imaginations-indeed, everything and anything except me. Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a bio-chemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you’re constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It’s when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel 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. (IM, 3)

The protagonist seems to find his solution in militant integrationism, a militant pursuit of the establishment of black and white fraternity. This is evident in his narration of his confrontation with a white man during his period of voluntary invisibility. “Most of the time although I do not choose as I once did to deny the violence of my days by ignoring it) I am not so overtly violent. I remember that I am invisible and walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones. Sometimes it is best not to awaken them there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers. I learned in time though that it is possible to carry on a fight against them without their realizing it. For instance, I have been carrying on a fight with Monopolated Light & Power for some time now. I use their service and pay them nothing at all, and they don’t know it. Oh, they suspect that power is being drained off, but they don’t know where. All they know is that according to the master meter back there in their power station a hell of a lot of free current is disappearing somewhere into the jungle of Harlem. The joke, of course, is that I don’t live in Harlem but in a boarder area. Several years ago (before I discovered the advantages of being invisible) I went through the routine process of buying service and paying their outrageous rates. But no more. I gave up all that, along with my apartment, and my old way of life: That way based upon the fallacious assumption that J, like other men, was visible. Now, aware of my invisibility, I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a selection of the basement what was shut oil and forgotten during the nineteenth century, which I discovered when

I was trying to escape in the night from Ras the Destroyer. But that's getting too far ahead of the story, almost to the end, although the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead. (IM 4, 5)

The protagonist further explains that his voluntary isolation is only temporary, a period of constructive self analysis and a brief retreat awaiting an opportune time to surface. "Please", a definition: A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action. Besides the drug destroys one's sense of time completely. If that happened. I might forget to dodge some bright morning and some cluck would run me down with an orange and yellow street car, or a bilious bus! Or I might forget to leave my hole when the moment for action presents itself. (IM, 11)

The Invisible Man uses invisibility to deconstruct the visible white code of invisibility to reveal the truth of the black man's fundamental and constitutional right to be treated as equal, to be recognized and identified as an American and the freedom to contribute the riches of his African Americanism to the prosperity of the American nation. As Ellison told writer Roger Rosenblatt in 1973, "That the Invisible Man writes a story at all makes a social statement. The protagonist's story is his social bequest. And I'll tell you something else. The bequest is hopeful."

Conclusion:

Johan Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* is an account of White man becoming a Black Man through medication. The epidermalisation of identity has led to the historical attempt of Howard Griffin's physical metamorphosis. This has remained as an exemplary action of the White man's attitude towards understanding the problems of Black Man. The very action of Howard Griffin is understood to have been inspired by the moral indictment that Ralph Ellison's has carried in *Invisible Man*. Ellison has compelled the white society the urgency reexamining project of "Humanism" upheld with pride since time immemorial. It was only in the 20th century there is a radical revision of "Humanism" that tried to accommodate the problems of Race, Class & Cast.

Particularly the issue of "Race" has received tremendous concentration and critical attention from every dimension of knowledge. Literature that addressed the problems of "Race" has become the alternative History and Discourse. Particularly African writers and Afro American writers have acquired tremendous significance worldwide. African Literature with Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, Dennis Brutus etc., dismantled the hegemony of British Literature. Afro American writings deriving inspiration from African writings created a cultural awakening and consciousness. Harlem Renaissance created a space of its own within the framework of American Literature and succeeded in drawing the attention of the whole world towards realizing the importance of the problem of "Race". The creativity and the articulation exerted by Afro American Literature has influenced the evolution of American society significantly. It is permanent to observe that every Afro American writer evolved his own approach in the light of their experiences. There are writers who subscribed to militant literary nationalism with aim of discontinuing from the so called accommodative spirit of Americanism.

There are also writers who adopted a low profile compromising attitude. Apart from these literary congregations, theorists like W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Richard Wright argued for a cultural transformation. Ellison's for his complex philosophical theme of "Invisibility" is disowned by Blacks and the White Society. Though the novel is misconstrued during the times of its publication, eventually it has gained the intellectual and philosophical acceptance of the White Society and Black Society. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that the advent of recent cultural and critical literary theory, has further illustrated and consolidated the perspective of Ellison. Failure to understand the concept of "Invisibility" in its true and complete sense in the way that Ellison wants it to be understood still haunts the American Society. It should also be well remembered that the absence of "Intellectuality" in the Black world is totally challenged and fulfilled with Ellison's "Invisible" representation. So, Ellison cuts above all the Afro American writers in representing the issues of Race and in bringing everlasting pride for Black culture and identity.

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