

Vision Versus Illusion: A Symbol of Reality in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Professor Emenyi Abang¹ & Dr Kalu, Kalu Obasi²

¹ Department of English University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

² Veritas University Abuja, (The Catholic University of Nigeria), Bwari Area Council, FCT, Abuja, Nigeria

Correspondence: Dr Kalu, Kalu Obasi, Veritas University Abuja, (The Catholic University of Nigeria), Bwari Area Council, FCT, Abuja, Nigeria

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Abstract

Vision Versus Illusion: A Symbol of Reality in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* attempts to x-ray Ralph Ellison's portrayal of the struggles and experiences of the Negro in the American society. The work examines his plot, characterization and his artistry which are all geared towards the success of the novel. The paper examines the role of these literary elements employed by Ellison to dissect the American society showing the conditions and plights of the Negro living among the whites in America. America is in the midst of chaos. Her oppression and antagonism of the Negro has resulted in a blindness that is contagious, and everybody is affected. This work attempts to unravel the state of incompatibility hinged on racism and exploitation as practiced in America against the Negroes. This has been the hallmark of literary expression of the 1960s and beyond among nations that have experienced exploitation and oppression. The nations notably include: South Africa, Kenya, Zambia, and other West African countries. These conditions have engendered literary reactions among scholars across the Globe.

Keywords: Vision, Illusion, Invisible Man

1. Introduction

The quest for self identity by the Blacks anywhere in the world where racism is practiced is valuable to the Negro. Identity, actualization and social equality is the crux of the concern of the Blacks, be it in America, South Africa among natives and the diaspora. *Invisible Man* is Ralph Ellison's novel which exposes him to the literary lime light. Published in 1952, Ellison in this novel attempts, candidly, to relate the experiences of the black folk living in America in the midst of racial discrimination. The book is a note for the Black man in his quest for self identity, consciousness and motivation. The dream of the Negro has been a quest for self identity, placement and recognition as an individual capable of existence like any other person in the world. The Negro passes through a period of naivety in life he struggles covertly or overtly to shake off through his aspirations for the attainment of the American dream. In the blinking snow of reason, he is not seen in any way as equal with the white American counterparts. This startling and humiliating situation is the bane of the Negro in the American World. This position and condition place the Negro in juxtaposition with the dream of what he is and the quest for consciousness and reality. The average Negro in America finds himself in identity fixing crisis, like an adolescent in role playing for recognition. *Invisible Man* is Ellison's calculated measure to trace the process of growth, inner conflict, disillusionment, self-discovery and definition of the Black man in a world where racism is a pervasive reality. *Invisible Man* reminds readers of Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky in his experiences which critics claim and assume to be the source of Ellison's literary works. All his novels have a relationship with his experiences in life. This then links his works to the expressive theory of art. Also reflections are addressed to Franz Kafka, a Jewish writer who presents events in his novels to reflect the reality of the Jewish society at the time. As a Jew, Kafka sees the World as a system which is incomplete in itself, traversed by fissures through which we glimpse something that for a moment seems to hold out the promise of a transcendent justification of all things and of ourselves. In *Invisible Man* Ellison sees America as a world that is disconcerting, harsh, incurably ambiguous and a site of logically impracticable conviction that life is worth living but not accessible to the Black Negro and that the reality of Black freedom and integration in America is farce and illusionary.

2. The Motif of Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in Oklahoma city, South of America in 1914. He is a descent of ex- slaves whom he regarded as “Strong Black People” who resisted the oppression of the Southern Whites. His father, Lewis Alfred Ellison, an adventurous youth had traveled to China in the Spanish-American war, an intellectual adventurer as well as an avid reader, named his son Ralph Waldo Ellison. He exposed young Ellison to books while he was still a toddler. Ralph thus was influenced by his father to be a man of letters. He was also influenced by music, particularly jazz created by his personal friends such as Jimmy Rushing and Charlie Christian. His stay in Oklahoma, full of segregation and racial discrimination instilled in him the sense of possibility and creativity. These have great contributory influence in his literary exposure and work. Also his creative impulse was accelerated by his contact with Richard Wright, having admired one of Wright’s poems. He was introduced to Wright by Langstan Hughes in Chicago in 1937 and he became exposed to the literary works of Henry James, Dostoesvsky, Joseph Conrad and Joseph Warre n Beach. Also his experience at the Tuskegee College in Alabama contributed to inspire his literary interest in producing *Invisible Man*. Moreso, Ellison was influenced by the folklore he had gathered from the time he lived and worked in the Black community. According to Hillegates, Ellison’s:

Metamorphosis into a writer of stature relates to (these experiences) and more especially his own creative genius to synthesize personal and historical events into meaningful monologues... (portraying) much of the conflict of The American myth or dream and the reality of American life (6).

Invisible Man (1952) reminds readers and critics of Dostoevsky and Karfka. The hero of the novel *Invisible Man* lives a secluded life. He lives in a cellar putting himself away from the sight of others who see a projection and reflection of their own existence. Trying to run away from the race riot in Harlem, he seeks a hibernation in a cellar. The Invisible Man is used as an object of caricature and of cruel experiments. Contemplation is made to castrate him. He is blind like the scientists and demagogues and gradually begins to realize himself and those around him. The novel depicts the experiences of the Black folk in a race dominated tendencies in America. It flows on the tenor that colour prejudice is due to man’s failure to recognize the diversity of nature. The novel *Invisible Man* is informed by Ellison’s exposure to cultural and political conditions of America at the time. The “Battle Royal” is symbolically the inevitable state of struggles of the Blacks in the face of the draconian tendencies of the White folks against the Blacks in America. It shows what and how the white leaders define the status and positions of the Blacks. Blacks are exposed to the ugly reality of fear, chaos, and assaults. The Blacks are mocked as they are exposed to fight each other for money – coins on a rug that administers a severe electronic shock. The fighters do not exercise any control of the coin and the pain they incur. The Black hero is limited to what to say and words to use. He is not to use “big words” but words with three syllables. Convoluted words like other big things are reserved for the Whites only – power, control of the economy. The only way to circumvent the White man is to be a “yessing to death”. The book *Invisible Man* is a social commentary of the challenges of the Black man in America at the time of Ellison’s literary expedition.

3. Plot Summary

Invisible man is a work about a nameless man who is invisible and who lives a secluded lifestyle in a cellar, putting himself away from sight of others who see a projection and reflection of their own existence. The Negro is hated and rejected by the Whites living together with him in the same society. The narrator begins with something akin to being confused:

It goes a long way back, some twenty years.
All my life I had been looking for something
And everywhere I turned someone tried to tell
Me what it was... (IM, 1.)

Here the problems of the Negro in America are introduced by the narrator. The Negro is hated and rejected by the White folks who order the Black youth to strike his fellow Blacks thus:

see that Black boy over there?
... I want you to run across at the bell
And give it to him right in the belly.

If you don't get him, I'm going to get you.

I don't like his look. (IM, 22.)

Black youth are exposed to a horrible sight, a black blonde is presented stark naked and a black youth is forced to gaze at her nakedness in the presence of a watching prominent personalities of America, including even a clergy. The Black boys are forced to fight each other. They are blindfolded. The narrator informs us that:

But now I felt a sudden fit of blind terror.

I was unused to darkness. It was as though

I had suddenly found myself in a darkroom

Filled with poisonous cotton mouths.

I could hear the bleary voices yelling

Insistently for the battle royal to begin. (IM, 22)

The author uses the 'Battle Royal' to usher in the travails of the Black Negro – plot of blindness and darkness, loss of personality which is envisioned from darkness, a state of groping and bobbing guesses, through which the hero sails to the land of self discovery at the end of the story. The story exposes the reader not only to the plight of the Negro but also to the fate of the Whites. It emphasizes the significance of blindness and lies. Barbee, a blind speaker, leaves a lasting impression in the protagonist through speech, and Dr Bledsoe emphasizes the value of lie as, "the only way to please the white man" (IM,116). The entire book is a picture of the challenges, experiences of the Black and impression, as well as attitude of the Whites toward the Blacks in the same society.

4. Shades of Vision and Illusion in *Invisible Man*

'Vision' implies the hope and expectation of something that is not seen in the physical realm. It is fantasy beholding the expectation of something likely to come to reality. It is something occurring as a dream or trance. A vision could portend a reality. This also means to having a mental picture of a possible situation or condition of existence or life, with an imagination of how things could become different in the nearest future.

'Illusion' on the other hand is a contemplation of fantasy, dream state and or something which is unrealistic within human expression. The novel *Invisible Man* presents a picture of a wide array and plethora of vision juxtaposed with illusion in many ways.

Ellison presents the vision of the American state as a pure blood as illusionary. The illusion of Blacks and Whites in the novel is a derivation of the historical stand of the Blacks in America. In a more concise way, the composition of America after the abolition of slave trade makes it impossible for America to be of pure blood. This position is justified in the historical phenomenon of slave trade and slavery, the outcome of which populated the American nation. This results also in the Black man's primitive ancestry and the pigmentation of skin. Harris Dwight in his work *The History of Negro Servitude in Illinois* states that "the black is described as savage, sub-human... an animal responding to firm discipline... and capable of any treachery" (24). Thorpe Butler remarks that America's racism is a "specific manifestation of fundamental intractable infirmities" (316). This implies that America has lost grasp of reality. She is sick of blindness and cannot as a result come to terms with reality. The narrator's invisibility becomes a reflection of the blindness inherent in the American society.

The foregone position of Harris and Butler introduces us to the major issues in *Invisible Man*, which is the systematic isolation of Blacks from Whites thus increasing the live current and voltage of invisibility in the novel. America's standardization initiates a conflict between desire and reality. This snowballs into 'The Battle Royal'. The Battle Royal is the first part of the novel where there is a condensed rehearsal of the roles that the Invisible Man has to play or act. The scholarship to the Southern College takes him away through the process of physical isolation and exposes him to illusion designed or marked by "pieces of papers" (IM ,112). While the narrator dreams to sail into prominence through the process of education, just like Dr Bledsoe, he drifts into contact with True blood. This situation marks the beginning of an end to his visions and he is thrown into a life of painful realities. He sees himself being expelled from the institution as "parting of flesh" (IM 112).

Vision and Illusion according to Thomas Vogler in his work "*Invisible Man: Somebody's Protest Novel*" "are from father surrogates, like the founder, Bledsoe, Norton, and Brother Jack", (134) (allow as corrected). Hence, invisibility and blindness are predominant features of the novel because the basis of existence is telling lies to the White man to satisfy him and have your peace. Lies issue from the mental scope and horizon of the liar and is directed towards the ignorance and gullibility of the recipient. The narrator emphasizes repeatedly the significance of blindness and lies.

Barbee, a blind speaker leaves a deep mark on the protagonist through his speech, and Dr Bledsoe underscores the value of lies when he says “the only way to please the White man is to tell him lies”, (IM 115-6). The Invisible narrator declares “... the conscience of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record... our task is that of making ourselves individuals” (IM,286). He sets out a number of vision and illusions which include that of shaping “the destiny of his people through education” (IM,112).

This dream draws him away from his roots. He wants to become like the founder of the Tuskegee School – Booker T. Washington. The ‘empty eyes’ of the founder of the college show a level of blindness while the bird’s excrement is symbolic of a vision which stands to be ridiculed, it is a vain gesture. This institution is an “Uncle Tom’s College established to emasculate the Blacks through a more efficient “blindness” (IM,81). The veteran in the Golden Day reveals the truth. He says “invisible man is a walking (corpse) zombie, the mechanical man” (IM,81), while his boss is an exalted man, a God, a force... (IM,82). It is ironical that neither of them sees each other but the Golden Day and True blood episode initiates a confrontation between them. Norton’s enthusiasm in the story of True blood is a mixture of ‘envy’ and ‘indignation’ as “True blood has looked upon chaos and is not destroyed” (IM,46).

Houston A. Baker Jr holds in his article “To Move without Moving: Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison’s True blood Episode” that “this incest is an aspect of Freudian Psychology which portrays man in a pre-social and unaccommodated state” (227-2 28). By this temper, Ellison explores the Afro-American sexuality within the myth of black primitivism. Robert Bone sees Ellison as the “unspoiled child of nature, the noble savage who is care-free and spontaneous” (51). In the True blood episode the incident is seen as essential commodity for the dominant Anglo-American society. However, Ellison destroys this social fact through Mr. Norton by suggesting that sexual spontaneity is not a peculiar attribute to the Black man. Significantly, Trueblood’s blindness is motivated by his ineptitude to perceive and understand his role in the White man’s world. He declares ignorantly that “I am nobody but myself” (IM,25). By this self assertion, he is not just accepting himself as stereotype but as accommodating expressiveness as a means of economic advancement.

The Invisible man clashes with the power structure of the college Principal, who in spite of the mask of pity which is characteristic of saints has the greatest desire to keep the Black man invisible. Bledsoe expresses the fact that the narrator’s dream is an illusion because while he pretends to please the White man, he actually controls him. He has power in “self-confidence, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self- warning and self- justifying” (IM,119). Still, he is a blind man whose manipulation of White America’s “infirmities” has built a temporary castle for his survival. This distortion of reality is sustained by Rev. Homer Breden when he analyzes the sacrifices of the Founder in a sustained eulogy. He succeeds in whipping up sentiment in the narrator to really appreciate the worth of the College, which is a lost paradise, a lost hope and desire. The fact is that the fervent sermon is based on speculation or deception because like the classical Homer, the preacher is blind.

Unfortunately, as the first illusion is shattered, he immediately accepts another one. This comes from Bledsoe, and it is the prospect of business possibility in New York. Each of the seven letters in ‘Liberty’, the introductory word is meant to keep him far apart as possible from the college as possible. Also, the Invisible Man’s contact with the Cart man singing blues on his way to Liberty Paint Factory evokes a sense of repulsion because he represents the part of his psyche which has been suppressed in order to exist in a predominantly White society. Ellison by this temper draws a relationship between Liberty Paint and America. The name has some bearing and resemblance with America as a democratic nation, while the trade mark, a “screaming eagle”, is synonymous with what holds in the United States of America.

The motto of this establishment is “keep America Pure with Liberty Paints” (IM, 160), and the finished product is “Optic White”, (IM,160). The narrator’s duty is to put ten drops of a black substance into each bucket of mixture before the final product. This is symbolic of the coital relationship to fertilize an ovum to produce a foetus to become an embryo, a new baby. Russel G. Flestcher in his work “Invisible Man as history” sees this condition and situation as a “symbolic representation of the main racial composition of the United States...the ten black drops symbolizing the percentage of Negroes in America” (IM,351). Basically, America cannot be purely a white population. This is because ten million blacks have dissolved into her population. Again, the labour of these Blacks has contributed to her politico-economic status as a nation even though she remains indifferent to this glaring fact and situation. This gives credence to Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* when he states that “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World. The wealth which smothers is that which was stolen from the underdeveloped people...” (80-81). Lucius Brockway personifies the alienated, exploited and un-accommodated Black man on whose labour and sweat America has been built and sustained. Brockway confesses that, “we are the machines inside the machine” (IM,177). This is a mechanical structure in a technical society.

5. Symbol of Reality in Vision versus Illusion in *Invisible Man*

'Vision versus Illusion' underscores the facts of reality, the truth of the circumstances that exist in America. These stand out as a glaring image and symbolism of the experiences of the Black man in America as well as the White man's population. A symbol according to Walter Benjamin is:

an object of interpretation and is assigned the role of opening
up the possibility of meaning and the status of inexhaustible
source of awareness that can never be codified (156).

A symbol is an object, figure, idea or action which stands for something else. It is a representation of reality, something that is seen and felt. In *Invisible Man* there are façade of reality that are symbolically expressed by the narrator. It is evident in the novel that in the midst of material prosperity in America, the Blacks suffer and die of poverty. Trueblood is compressed into one room cabin with other members of his family. This stems from the discriminatory tendencies enshrined in racism simply by the pigmentation of the skin. This condition is also evident in Brockway. His blindness shrouds him throughout his world, and this does not give him the ability and strength to assess the condition he finds himself in. He is rather resolute to retain his position and function within the machine.

Also, the condition of service and existence in America represents exploitation. It is thus evident that America thrives in exploitative tendencies. After the exploitation, the Invisible Man passes through a conscious attempt to strip him of his identity in the factory hospital, just in the same way the person of Derek Walcott's "Laventville" experiences a "terrible amnesia" which causes him to destroy his identity. It is after this traumatic experience that he is recognized as fit to be a White American. When he wakes up in Mary Fambo's house, his second illusion is destroyed. Mary Fambo becomes a stabilizing force and nurtures him fit till he comes in contact with the next illusion.

Each phase of his life draws him closer to reality. He has a feeling of nostalgia when he comes upon a man hawking yam. This matures into reality as he "wolfed" down the tubers of yam. A sense of freedom creeps into him. This informs the realization that his humanity is independent of racist restrictions and attitudes. This is confirmed in his statement that, "I am what I am" (IM, 215). However, it is evident that the awareness and awakening disposition is short lived, it is ephemeral because like W.B. DuBois' comment in *The Soul of Negro Folk* the narrator has a "double consciousness". It is a man of two souls, two thoughts, and two un-reconciled strivings, two warring ideas in one body" (IM,214) which Du Bois explains in *The Soul of Negro Folk (1961)*. This dilemma is significant and relevant to the consideration and acceptability of the comment of the fact that this is the most elaborate and comprehensive of all his illusions after the eviction speech in Harlem the Brotherhood. This completeness is depicted by its conferment of a new identity on the narrator. From now onward, he has "a new name and a new problem" (IM,256). The Brotherhood is a direct reference to the Communist Party which Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and many other Black writers thought was once relevant to the Black man's cause in America. The idea of the brotherhood was abandoned when they were convinced that the need could not be realized. At the peak is Brother Jack who is blind in one eye, while the narrator is their celebrated speaker. In his myopic vision he declares, "I feel suddenly that I have become a man... I feel that here, after a long and desperate and uncommonly blind journey, I have come home" (IM,279). His statement that "I am what they say I am" (IM 283) implies that he is an actor who acts out a role designed for him. It is the reality of the West posing imperially as the imperial master of the World who dictates the pace for other civilizations and economies to follow.

At the death of Tod Clifton, the Invisible Man declares that he is a dreamer but this is "the only historically meaningful life that I (he) could live. If I (he) left it, I'd (he'd) be nowhere" (IM,384). He does not know that the Brotherhood is operating under the canopy of blindness. This is captured by Houston Baker when he states in his essay that the struggle is "devastatingly transformed into an ass struggle" (230), this stems from the fact that the narrator's voice and oratory are replaced as ideological agents for "his penis". (230) A white lady invites him home and passionately seizes his biceps saying "Teach me, talk to me. Teach me the beautiful ideology of Brotherhood". (IM,234) J. Saunders Reddings echoes this argument in his essay "On Being Negro In America" when he affirms that, "Communism is a rare rose through which the White people pursue more pleasurable activities" (69). His personal responsibility over Tod Clifton's funeral brings to awareness the fact that he has been misused and abused. He rejects the roles of his god fathers and takes the Rinehartism which Edward Margolies in *Native Sons* describes as Ellison's word for the "alienated Urban Negro who deliberately endeavours to manipulate the fantasies of Whites and Negroes to his own advantage" (133).

Saunders Reddings realizes at this point that the “World is possibility and that he is invisible. He parades Rinehart as a lover, gambler, minister, seer, and a “yes man”. Yet, he is also a fraud who exploits the chaotic situation in his environment to his advantage. The creation of Ras the Exhorter who develops into Ras the Destroyer reflects another level of illusion and reality. This is a symbol of the Invisible Man’s effort to remove the blindfold which covers the understanding of Ras the Exhorter from his mind. Ras’s struggle is prompted not by the mind but by emotion. This situation agrees with Hillebrand as he states that

The fight in which all of the participants are blindfolded, become the symbol of the entire novel and of all the struggles of the narrator... the blindfold is directly related to the realization that he is an invisible man who must discover his own identity. (14)

Also the character of Ras the Exhorter echoes the philosophy of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Party. Like most Separatists, Ras is suspicious of any alliance between the members of both races because the White man will exploit the continuous degradation and humiliation of the Black man. Although he creates a new consciousness of blackness, violence as a dimension of assertion is not realistic just as the vision of Mass Expatiation to Africa. This action therefore is a symbol of futility. Even as the narrator can invert his identity from the exploited to the exploiter with the multiple vision of Rinehart, he refuses to thrive on chaos. Dr Bledsoe’s remark that the Black must learn to “accept responsibility for their acts and avoid becoming bitter” (IM, 124) manifests in the philosophy of the Brotherhood which is “against violence and terror and provocation of any kind, as well as being aggressive” like Ras the Exhorter,

Ellison is of the view that the existence of Blacks like Dr Bledsoe, who must maintain his economic and social status, even if it means against the wishes of the Whites, destroying other members of his own race, should remove the struggle from Blacks versus Whites battle to that of oppressed versus oppressor encounter and mentality. This is the end of all his illusion. He stops running for and from men and goes into hibernation because nothing external can give him authentic identity. Hence, the destruction of the content of his brief case is the final and complete rejection of the roles he has been acting. This existentialist tendency is the basis of reality, a symbol of the individual’s ability to impose order on chaos, this forms the essence of existence and reality.

6. Conclusion

Ralph Ellison’s literary exposure in his lone novel *Invisible Man* stems from his strategic mastery and articulation of his artistry. He has a good dream for the African –American folk in America. This is the vision of integration in the fight to establish a voice and identity in the voiceless and invisible cosmos of the oppressed. His success is not without the use of visible artistry. Most pronounced is his use of suspense. The hibernation of the Invisible Man leaves the audience in doubt of what he may be up to. He comes out in full realization and understanding of who he is by self recognition and identity. Hence the Negro tradition becomes a thing of value as well as a weapon. These he transforms into his literary artistry.

Again Ellison’s ability to expertly borrow meaningfully the styles he admires is contributory to his literary achievement in *Invisible Man*. These he weaves into his novel. His use of the Negro tradition is a style which speaks of George Eliot. Also, the background of the plot of *Invisible Man* echoes the story of Richard Wright’s *The Man Who Lived Underground*. He also makes use of a narrative technique that gives life and immediacy to the novel. He uses the first person point of view narrative style. The use of the personal pronoun ‘I’ in the novel is a call to the reader’s and audience’s imagination of the reality of his story and the experiences of the Negro. This makes the reader follow the rhythm and tenor of the plot in all its dives and swerves. These techniques make the audience excited emotionally by seeing the Invisible Man as a phantom and the possibility of the Negro growing in that state of being in his own cosmos.

Further to these is his use of dialogue and monologue. The application of these techniques gives credence and acceptability to the rendition of the novel. These styles make Ellison gain the sustained emotion of the reader when the protagonist is asked by the doctor “What is your name” (IM,194), the Doctor assumes the position of his ancestors. This situation turns the scene into a dramatic one, dialogue and monologue ensue. His use of symbolism is creditable and gives value to the novel. The running-but-never- arriving status of the Invisible Man symbolized by the letters given to him by Bledsoe to deliver in New York is the Negro and his desires in the American society. This shows that the Negroes’ desire for integration into the main stream of America’s socio-political affairs is far removed from what the expectations of the protagonist. His expectations and aspirations incite fun and pity on the reader who watches his struggles for recognition and acceptance.

The portrayal of the Brotherhood which is the hope of the Negro for sustained survival symbolizes unreality, farce and illusion because it cannot survive crisis, hence the defining factor of the American society. Hence, Ralph Ellison in this single novel of his x-rays the viscera, the American society, probing the psychology of the Negro. He plays through the struggles, experiences, expectations and search for identity of the Negro to the self realization, understanding of himself and the society where he purportedly belongs. Also, Ellison's characterization and language are commendable. These are used to garnish his artistry and are contributory elements to the success of the novel.

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