CHAPTER - IV

QUEST FOR SELF : INVISIBLE MAN
With a single, but commanding masterpiece, a 'Soul Novel', a modern classic, 'Invisible Man'

Ralph Ellison is in the forefront of all American novelists today. An Afro-American Writer but with a universal outlook he is in the line of James Joyce, Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Faulkner, with a loyalty to the ethics of classic modernism. Nathan A. Scott Jr. is of the opinion that Ellison and above writers intend to shape vast panorama of anarchy, and try to create a space of human effort with a vision of new life. They look forward for a future - a future where the human soul can flourish in the new forms. He is more in the Joycean style in warbling forth, but not like those such as William Grass, Johan Barth, Saul Bellow, Malamud who believe the novel to be a mode of feigned history, city of words, creating a verbal universe. Neither he tries to achieve more by muted voice and by withholding instead of saying. He embodies the
tone of centre with a deep involvement with verifiable world of facts.

Ellison is bold. He fiercely attacks but with a laughter the complex fate of human beings. Uninhibited exhilaration, suppleness of texture distinguishes him from other writers. Hailing from a comparatively freer and richer background, having the access to great literature much before he gave a thought to writing, and having good education, and keen interest in music (Ellison wanted very much to be composer) Ellison has a better understanding, a different approach to racial problem, and this difference distinguishes him from other Afro-American writers. His pervasive idealism, his optimistic attitude add a different colour to his works.

He is without doubt terribly race conscious but not in the line of protesting Wright, or all loving Baldwin. He acknowledges proudly that he is a Negro and repeatedly asserts that without Negro, America is nowhere. He is proud that his race's rich culture,
idiomatic and racy language, its Blues, spirituals, all these "add colour to America."¹ He urges the negro writer to "explore the full range of American Negro humanity and to affirm those qualities which are of value beyond any question of segregation, economics or previous conditions of servitude."² He underscores the Negroes' difficulties and he optimistically says that "Our strength is that with total society saying to us No, No, No, No, we continue to move forward toward our goal."³ He looks upon the Negro writers' fate as that of a Jazz musician who should operate within and against the group without losing his individuality. He dedicated himself to Negros' freedom without turning to protest and without losing his complex sense of life. Complex identity in as well as with the group is the lot of Negro writers. As a Negro writer he always feels that he had a double obligation to the past and he must be familiar with folk tradition, with literary culture which he shares.
Ellison is primarily an artist. The theme of racial identity, literary technique of irony and symbolism, fantasy - which reflect in short stories reach an artistic fruition in his novel, *Invisible Man*. He has dramatized the recurrent idea - the need for the whites to recognise the Negro identity in all its complexity. His short stories 'That I had Wings,' 'Slick Gone Learn,' 'Afternoon', 'In a Strange Country,' 'Flying Home,' 'Did you Ever Dream Lucky,' 'And Hickman Arrives,' - approached the same ideas from different points of view. 'Flying Home' 'King of Bingo Game' are his finest short stories which reflect his thinking about racial issue that foreshadows *Invisible Man*.

*King of Bingo Game* is an excellent introduction to the novel as it employs techniques of gothicism and macabre humour. It develops the themes of protest, identity, pride, freedom. When he wrote the story he fully realised his full creative powers.
poised delicately between the grotesque and realistic, between the illusory and actual, madness and seeming sanity. Ellison sums up the feeling that runs through his stories and his novel *Invisible Man*: "If I cannot look at the most brutalized negro on the street even when he irritates me and makes me want to bash his head in because he is goofing off I must still say within myself "Well that is you too Ellison" - and I am not talking about guilty of an identification which goes beyond race."

This universal outlook, this broader perspective enables him to stand apart. *Invisible Man* speaks for all who are honest, good natured, fairly intelligent, eager to get along, credulous of democratic hopes. "*Invisible Man* of Ellison and *The Outsider* of Wright hold a pivotal place in passage of black writer throbbing with a felt alienation to a profoundly imaginative engagement takes an empirical view of the liabilities of colour as less than quint essence of living or being. This change
betoken the emancipation of mind from chains.”

Invisible Man, Native Son, Wilson Harris' The Place of Peacock, Samuel Selvious Turn again Tiger, are different in sheer frequency of violent action and make us look beyond the handy label. "Invisible Man of Ralph Ellison, The Radiance of the King by Camera Laye - in depth, in complexity, in sheer power of expression take a positive step beyond so compelling a figure as W.E.B. DuBois and Wright in Native Son."

Critics have thrown light upon various sources, rather forerunners of Invisible Man. They often claim that Ralph Ellison was quite familiar with H.G. Wells’ The Invisible Man, Dostoevsky’s The Notes From the Underground, Wright’s The Man who lived the Underground.

The title itself with the article 'The' missing, is a deliberate invitation to the readers to see the novel in the light of its forerunner The Invisible Man by Wells. Ellison once explained: "I guess I will just have to fight old H.G. Wells for it and if I am
lucky people will see how much more I am trying to
do with that metaphor."  

Ellison was intrigued by Griffin's (Wells' hero)
predicament when he becomes invisible by his will as
he hoped that invisibility gives him power, instead
it results in segregation, chasing, and discrimination.
These very aspects are depicted in Invisible Man.
Ellison shared the idea of Wells' regarding the burden
of invisibility. Ellison was challenged by Wells'
revelation which impressed him with its allegorical quality
of the hero's invisibility. He was tempted to go be-
yond the moral implications which Wells touched and
left. Ellison's hero is a threat to the order like
that of H.G. Wells, but he is not destructive. Wells'
hero is a misfit and he blames the society but in
Invisible Man Ellison internalizes the conflict in
Freudian style. It is not the society against the
individual. Wells' novel is about invisibility and
Ellison's novel is a journey towards visibility. He
enlarged the idea of 'invisibility to man's invisibility to himself which is the 'American theme'. Ellison impressed by Wells' idea, explores it to the maximum.

Clifford Mason's reproach that Ellison insists "on giving structural credit for Invisible Man to William Faulkner, Earnest Hemingway, and Feodor Dostoevsky and T.S. Eliot and James Joyce and god knows who else when its plain as it can be that he owes the basic design of the book to Richard Wright's short story - called - The Man Who Lived Underground gives us an idea of another fore-runner of Invisible Man. The Man Who Lived Underground of Richard Wright is a direct source for the novel. It is the source for the novel's metaphor. Both heroes are Negros and both go underground. It is all about Negro life in mid-century of America but the differences are many. In Wright's novel the underground is Sewer but in Ellison its a coal mine, the first symbolizing the rat
infested ghetto and the later is associated with light, power, perception.

Wright shows a whole congregation as dispossessed whereas Ellison shows one old couple. Again Wright describes in detail how the hero hides in the coal pile suggesting that white man is used to exploit black resources without even recognizing his presence, whereas Ellison in such similar coal pile scene indicates that the hero is likely to be harmed both by whites and blacks if he comes in their way. Ellison cleverly avoids black white confrontation: "Wright illustrates the exploitation of the Negro, Ellison the refusal of America to let the Negro participate, contribute." 9

Moreover Ellison's hero is chased into bin not by Cops like that of Wright but by Ras's thugs, where by Ellison wants to suggest that any deprivation of Negro results only in weakening of America. Wright does not exploit the significance of the hero meeting the corps whereas Ellison explicits it fully where
he makes the hero use the body for a study. Both
steal the power - light. Wright's hero finds only
the limited use of it but Ellison's hero finds to
the fullest. His hero got chance for choice. Ellison
though a successor to Wright he outdoes him with his
mastery over the art. Again there are quite a few
who could trace the origin to Dostoevsky's *Notes from
Underground*. Ellison is found mentioning "No, I had
enough alienation of my own to draw on. I am not
certain whether I had read Kafka before I wrote
*Invisible Man* though I certainly have read. But the
most direct treatment of alienation which I know ....
was Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*."^{10}

*Notes from Underground* explored the lower depths
of human personality. All those contentions of
Dostoevsky's novel i.e. the question of reality, the
human possibility, man's social responsibility all
these found their way into *Invisible Man* but in a
lighter vein. Both are concerned with individuality
and antirationalism. Both present abstract state of
invisibility and concrete experience. Both present abstract heroes as non-heroes. Both the stories are first person narrations. Both are paradoxical, ambiguous and both suffered intense shame, Ellison agreed that one gets an insight of American contradiction through writers like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy. Impressed by Dostoevsky’s perspectives Ellison used many of the former’s scenes, incidents in his novel. The very first line of Invisible Man "I am an invisible man" is a replica of Notes from Underground - 'I am a sick man'. The prologue and epilogue of Invisible Man are like that of part-I. in Notes From Underground, and the body is like that of part-II. The conclusion is similar to confession of the underground man. Both the writers comment on other alternatives to going underground such as Piano-key in Notes from Underground, Sambo Dolls in Invisible Man.

But the major difference is in their reaction. Underground man ends in despair as he realizes his inability to love and to have a social life but Ellison’s
hero says "So it is that now I denounce and defend, or feel prepared to defend. I denounce because though implicated and partially responsible I have been hurt to the point of abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility. And I defend because in spite of all I find that I love, I tell you no phony forgiveness. I am a desperate man - but too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost unless you approach as much through love as through hate so I approach it through division. So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love." Ellison is no doubt much impressed by Dostoevsky but retained his perspectives, his ideas. He used Dostoevsky only as a foil.

Like any genuine artist Ellison has freely borrowed from number of other great writers. His book is replete with allusions (even far fetched) from works like Dante's *Divine Comedy*, T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land" and "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock," Voltaire's *Candide* and Sophoclean trilogy and *The Bible*, Melville's *Moby Dick* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberryfin*, James
Joyce's *Ulysses* and of course from Negro folklore, Blues, Spirituals.

He improvised the achievements of 19th century writers. He believes in spontaneity, constraint, freedom, discipline. His writing is not a simple extension of Jazz and Blues. They reinforce one another. Jazz taught Ellison to respect limits even when enjoying liberties. He knew that freedom is never absolute. He learnt from it to assert his individuality without antagonizing the group. Blues enabled him of an assertion of irrepressably human all over all circumstances to confront reality with a spiritual discipline.

Being a highly conscious writer, and being an Afro American, Ellison gives priority to theme of identity. In the treatment of this, and in the approach of it Ellison departs from all the other previous writers. Often critics try to pin him up as a follower of Richard Wright, but Ellison, acknowledging him as a great writer, never misses a chance to assert that he never is in-
debted to Wright as a writer. He emphatically says in his essay, "The World and The Jug," "No. Wright was no spiritual father of mine, certainly in no sense I recognize -- nor did he pretend to be, since he felt that I had started too late. It was Baldwin's career, not mine, that Wright proudly advanced by helping him attain the Eugene Saxton fellowship, and it was Baldwin who found Wright a lion in his path," and again in the same essay he says "I respected Wright's work and I knew him but this is not to say that he 'influenced' me as significantly as you assume. Consult the text. I sought out Wright because I had read Eliot, Gertrude Stein and Hemingway and as early as 1940 Wright viewed me as a potential rival."  

Wright lived, in his own words, in "a world of balked emotion." He constantly lived in shadow of fear of punishment for any deviation from the set pattern of living. He is always reminded of his low lying life by whites. But Wright discovered that he has emotions, denied to him by others. He was not
allowed to have a new self, a new life. And he also realized that fiction is a means to establish the new identity. Through writing he can preserve himself a real self, and stop affirming the black stereotype. It is a weapon with which he can fight and defend his personal independence, defy both whites and blacks. *Native Son* is one such effort. The hero Bigger Thomas, does not affirm the black stereotype as mistaken by critics but brings into light what all that is repelling and frightening. Bigger goes to a new self by relieving the past wounds. "*Native Son* is a fiction designed to elicit "a total emotional response" by plunging the reader into a hitherto unexplored mind to bring to the reader a realization of the actual felt texture of that mind's world. *Native Son* implies that for both black and white the first step towards such a realization, such a new consciousness is the facing of old fears, the admission of their existence in order that a reconstruction of the larger American mind might begin." It enters the psychic domain
which other earlier writers never tried.

Wright's shortcomings are many. Revenge against whites is the only sustaining element in him. He is crude, and blunt. His novel is not symbolic. Bigger's discovery of self is presented without artistic sophistication. It is melodramatic like crime stories of low standards. He lacks the philosophical bent and the artistic detachment of great writers with whom Ellison can be clubbed. Wright could not leave the nightmarish past and could not see his life distinct from white America.

Wright is all alone always and desperate. To him the world is totally unjust and hurting. And he believes only in passionate attack. The evil is identified with the society. Wright identified himself with masses oppressed by poverty and the rebel is to spite the society. Bigger is not given any place in the society and the struggle is for visibility which he gets of course in a negative way. He loses life to
establish himself. His quest for self removes him away from the world for ever. By achieving his self Bigger loses the way to cope up with society. He is visible but only as a criminal. He realizes himself only through destroying others.

Wright is an honest but a lonely furious embittered voice. He is totally convinced that the country does not listen unless it is punched. He tries to find his way through militancy. Creating a Bigger Thomas to him is nothing but releasing violence that is pounded into him by society and the society cannot escape of the Biggers and Wright wants to establish that "If one lives too long with beast one can love it, and the mark of ones authenticity becomes the virulence of one's rage. The only real Negro is black crazy."¹⁵ Wright feels that the hate cannot be let out and it becomes unbearable as it forces the Negro to act as per the expectations of the Whites. All these native sons have nothing but hate and nowhere to go with it and they are forced to claim their birth right only through
paralyzing rage. Only guilty anguish remains, and there is place for destruction - of self or of others. American racial injustice leads to guilty black self destruction. Its all assault and not with-drawal. He believed that "there are certain categories which constitute black experience and others' white, and these white and black categories are ascribed, with you when you are born and cannot be shaken by individual's will." 16

The pity of it is Wright accepted the definition of Negro writer which puts him in a fix. As a Negro writer he could rage but the same label turned him into an outcast. He could not portray an intelligent creative Negro as his ideology clamped him which made him believe that creating what white thought is more important than creating what a Negro actually knows. He was afraid to define a Negro life broadly as it would stop to be a Negro life as supposed by whites. The ideology is a reason for his crude style. His prose lacks the lustre of humour. He often tends to explain as his creations are subhuman, thus hindering the reader's
involvement. It is a pity that Bigger's tragedy was only due to his failure to see and it's a tragedy that Wright failed to recognize it.

Ellison, on the other hand laughs at the bleak picture of Negros, and the hero is every man and not just a Negro. Sense of possibility is at the centre of his art. His hero is not a victim. He becomes invisible only when he is ill of affirmation, tired of saying yes when he actually means no. He hibernates only to find himself and comes out with a conviction that even as invisible he got a responsibility towards the society, let the society be what it may. The story is a journey, a journey unaware of accepted limits. It is a romantic pilgrimage to self. "Hero is like those of Amos Tuthola's Simbi and the Satyr of the Dark Jungle, Camara Laye's The Radiance of the King. The system of disruption that unfurls around the hero helps him to define the universe and to project the difficulties in which he has to struggle with and struggle without to become himself."17
This major "Festive Novel" shows that Ellison's perspective as organized around the self. Ellison and Saul Bellow insist "That living in the present is a communal activity and identity is the sum of individual and social experience. Their heroes expand to mythic dimensions in order to accommodate the social realities of our times. At the end of *Invisible Man*, *Adventures of Augie March*, *Handerson the Rain King*, the hero is the gigantic generic I of *Song of Myself*.\(^{18}\)

The hero searches for his self discarding all earlier accepted norms and relations indulging in riots only to come back to them at the end. (Bigger does not have this luxury). Ellison equates invisibility with Negro which robs him of his real self. One has to fight against this invisibility by accepting a responsible role but the Negro is not given such a chance. Only violence helps him to achieve visibility, though not a negative one like the *Native Son*. Violence, which is here in the form of riots represents death
and rebirth where the hero tears down those established institutions like education, industry which failed him miserably as he believes that the new man has no past. Hence he rejects his grandfather (Yes saying but meaning no) and the Blues. Violence is here educative. The riots are human response to chaotic inhuman conditions. They are a form of refusal of debased origin and a part of American revolution. They help the hero to realize the human dignity and to come to terms that freedom is in recognizing one's limits. The hero understands that the life is worth living in spite of all its absurd contradictions. This sense of possibility, this grasp of complex human fate, and this hope of a better future are not to be seen in Wright. Ellison's greatness is in his ability to show the varied complex American experience along with its brutality and ugliness. He beautifully renders an account of what it is to be a Negro and to be an American. The novel is a celebration of knowledge, love, sacrifice as weapons to fight against injustice of life. Negro or no Negro it is the same.
A closer look at *Invisible Man* reveals that the novel is symbolistic, allegorical, lyrical odyssey of self with a grasp of universe, a keen ear for music and a rich awareness of culture, of literary tradition and Negro folklore. The novel thus becomes an engaging study of art of survival with a concrete material of black experience. It is picaresque and indirect satire, classic drama and an epic in prose, a realistic and three dimensional novel. And no need to say that it is ironic, surrealistic too. It's a tragi-comedy and a novel of absurdity and anti-Hero.

Eliot's influence can be seen in the novel's symbolism. The emotions which are so direct in *Native Son* are presented through symbols in *Invisible Man*. The blind folded Negroes' fight in the battle royal, the narration of True Blood (the negro father with incest relation) hospital scene, and the hero going underground, burning all his certificates, the college campus where the hero was a student, Sambo
dolls, are some best examples for symbolistic technique. The whole process of a novel - the hero trying to survive in different guises or different identities, failing and hibernating in the underground tearing away all the old associations and hoping to come out again with a new awareness - is symbolic of black American history, as per Richard Kostalanetz. Ellison successfully shaped a novel with the symbolic treatment of Afro-American history as he believed that the artist's purpose is "converting experience into symbolic action."  

The college where the hero studies is associated with Tuskegee Institute and the insistence of cleanliness is a symbolic white wash of Negroes and whole of his behaviour is that of Negro's if he has to be accepted by whites. Battle royal where the hero is coerced to fight is symbolic of whites propelling blacks' force onto their own race as the whites can safely supervise it. The electrified rug on which the money is placed to be collected by the Negro is an indication
of unwanted hazards that a black has to overcome before earning his pay - which is nothing but dehumanizing him. The hero is awarded a prize after the speech is to be understood that the black is applauded only when he succumbs to white, that too willingly.

True Blood, the peasant with incest relation with the daughter stands for the primitive past which white-washed Negro community wants to forget. Here again True Blood receives charity from whites and it illustrates that white America is happy with a debased Negro as he appeases the guilty white by his hideous crimes. (The root cause for crimes is conveniently hoodwinked). True Blood can be equated to the modern hero who is above the myth by recognizing the unconscious motive. Ellison suggests through this that "the heroic act is in the casting off of pretense."

The saloon to which Mr. Norton was taken due to his heart attack after hearing True Blood is another symbol. The hospital superintendent stands for obedient Negro, Negroes' collective super ego, suppressing
the fellow blacks to be patted by white master. The
veterans stand for the sadistic white impulse to crush
any talent in the blacks. Bledsoe, the college President
who resembles Booker T. Washington, asserts that Negro
is only a second class man by punishing the hero for
doing his duty instead of being deceptive with the white
master. Rev. Homer Barbee, the blind Chicago visitor
with all his optimism stands for Negro's quest which
got no other alternative but being blind. Therman B.
O'Daniel says that a critic has found all the symbols
of Walt Whitman's 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard
Bloom'd', in Homers A Barbee's eucology. 'All the
Whitman Symbols (he writes) are there - the "lilac, the
star and the thrush - the bells and the funeral train -
but, and I do not think that this point can be empha-
sized too heavily, Ellison employs them for almost en-
tirely opposite reasons than did the bard of American
poetry. I feel such a critic as Charles Feidelson Jr.
to be correct when he concludes that Whitman was attempt-
ing in his poem to measure the potential mind within
the frame work of the death of the great emancipator,
Abraham Lincoln. But Ellison is much less concerned with poetic potential than with more pessimistic ideas, for the reader is quick to recognise that he uses the same symbols of the lilac, star, and thrush to measure the great irony and bitter disillusion of racial betrayal brought after death of another great fighter for emancipation, the beloved Pounder - Ellison's picture of a black mythical Lincoln."^21

The hero migrates to North and the factory where he works is a symbol. The factory uses black paint to make white whiter showing that it is so of America where the black culture is used as a foil to enhance the whiteness by losing its own identity. It stands for interplay of racial colours and any wrong measure of mixing them up results in white fury as it is made to see the ugly white and thus the hero once again is punished for his ignorance of this unjust colour pattern.

Emerson, the businessman of New York whom the narrator meets stands for the liberal whites who are
torn by doubt and a wish to help the Negro. The hero's unwilling joining of the union again shows that the union is allowed to exist by whites and the Negros are given only menial jobs as they are made to be fit only for them. The hospital where the hero undergoes an operation is a major symbol. It assures a complete transformation of personality of a Negro to whites satisfaction. After emerging from the hospital totally changed he develops a scorn for all that old loyalty. Without his efforts he is accepted by brotherhood - the fictional equivalent of communist party of the country. The hero sees "The possibility of being more than a member of race" but fails to realise that this being more is symbolic of rejecting the Negro past. The hero breaks the kinky iron head in anger and collects the scrap into a briefcase of the southern businessman and tries to dump it in garbage. But he is forced to take it back by the owner of the plot. The whole scene symbolizes the hero's trials to reject his past, his character and the inevitable fact that nothing, not even
brotherhood can separate the American Negro from his past. The brotherhood has no awareness of needs of individual negro and the realities of American life. His return to Harlem and his rejection by others symbolize that he is no more owned by blacks, as well as whites.

Ras, whom the hero encounters is the political shelter for American Negro. Ras is for counter violence but that will be only self-destructive. Ras (The Harlemite) is not prepared for a real battle with whites and in the fight when it is waged, it is only Negroes who were killed and harmed. Rineheart, in all disguises stands for all possibilities in Negro's life and the anonymity that is offered by North. The final act of jumping into a manhole stands for dark night of the soul. Its a nightmare into which others tried to throw him and the emergence from it reminds the immense possibility.

The novel is a Blues journey, a lyrical symphony, Ellison, in an interview says, "My sense of artistic
form is musical basically my instinctive approach to writing is through sound. A change of mood, mode comes to me in terms of sound. One of the things I work for is to make a line of a prose sound right for a bit of dialogue to fall on the page in the way I hear it aurally in my mind. The same goes for the sound and intonations of a character's voice .... 23 confirms this.

And again he says "It was either live with music or die with noise .... If I was to live and write in that apartment it would be only through the grace of music" 24 "perhaps in the swift change of American society in which the meanings of ones origin are so quickly lost, one of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation in time. In doing so it gives significance to all those indefinable aspects of experience which nevertheless help into make what we are," 25 such statements are enough to prove that the novel is musical with the melody of Blues and Jazz.
The hero tries like a Jazz singer to assert himself within and against the group but the difficulty arises as his groups change. His assertions are misplaced as the group conspires against him. He lives in confusion and chaos. Instead of giving honour he is humiliated and he is given a shock when he is to be given money. His scholarship disappoints him instead of promoting, still he goes further. Thus the whole of his life is in pattern of Blues which is an "art of ambiguity, an assertion of the irrepressibly human over circumstances." He was asserting himself against the groups and even abstract ideas. Like Louis Armstrong he has trouble with the concept of time. He says, "sometimes you are ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift, and imperceptible following of time you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That is what you hear vaguely in Louis' music." Thats why he does not know the time for his appointments. And
so he fails. The hero learns "to step inside the opponent's sense of time" as he was shut out of white man's time. (Invisible Man)

The blending of circumstancial fear and possibility of saving laughter is characteristic of Blues. Blues neutralize one emotion with other. They are an expression of personal emotion saving the group's need. Ellison found an artistic code and a framework for his novel. In Blues there is celebration of life which creeps into his novel. Like Blues he tries to restore a sense of wholeness of life. And he imbibes the love for paradox and ambiguity from blues. "There is a mystery in whiteness of blackness, the innocence of evil, and the evil of innocence initiates Negroes expression of the joke of it in blues." This is the reason for shifting styles in Invisible Man which are based on the principle of modulation. The changes in speed, abruptness gave an idea to Ellison to express the "fluidity and discontinuity of American life."
Blues "Offer the opportunity to soar free of tradition of all ties and they expose the limits of this freedom. They are a joke at the core but a joke that mocks and transcends the very meaning of it. They are a human assertion and they sing of the flux and variety of the human soul, they cry despair, hopes, joy, sorrow, love, loneliness, pride and disappointment all in one glorious ambiguous voice. The Blues present challenge, success, hope and defeat and always promise possibility and the possibility is there for the performer to seize"\textsuperscript{30} and by offering all these they become the symbolic meaning of \textit{Invisible Man}.

We hear Blues in True blood's confession "Finally one night, way early in the morning I looks up and sees the stars and I stand singing." All I know is I ends up singing the blues, ..... and while I am singing then blues I makes up mind that ant nobody but myself and are not nothin. I can do but let whatever is gonna happen happen."\textsuperscript{31}
And again we get the glimpse of Blues when the hero in New York happens to listen and fails to understand. He is reminded of old blue song "They picked a poor Robin clean" when he refuses the job prospect, which is once again understood only surfacially. Still innocent he blames others for his failures and once again listens a blues song in which innocence of guilty, guilty of innocence are joked about. "The hospital scene too takes place again with background of music Beethoven's Fifth, and then the Blues."³²

The hero makes it clear that understanding Blues is understanding himself and the world. His first understanding of Blues occurs when he associates with brotherhood, the second is when the white girl sings with a black woman's voice and the third is at the end of the novel when he gets the perception of reality. Ellison clearly illustrates that realizing the Blues is realizing yourself. "Invisible Man was par excellence the literary extension of the blues. It was as if Ellison had taken an every day twelve - bar blues
tune (by a man from down south sitting in a manhole
up North in New York singing and signifying about how
he got there) and scored it for full orchestra. It was
a first rate novel, a blues odyssey a tall tale about
the fantastic misadventures of one American Negro which
was at the same time a prototypical story about being
not only a twentieth century American but also twentieth
century men, the Negro's obvious predicament symboli-
zing every body's essential predicament. And like the
blues, it ended on a note of promise ironic and ambi-
guous, but a note of promise only.  

Folklore, which is an index to Afro-American and
then to general American past is a key to Ellison's
fictional world. -- In Ellison's fiction folklore is
styled and transferred by modernist techniques, and it
gives special resonance and power to his language as it
frees its character to fly toward the moon become
"Invisible and sail through the air unseen. The verna-
cular and the symbolist traditions in American literature
converge. The folklore itself is heavily metaphorical. Ellison links up the central question of identity to that history and folklore.\textsuperscript{34} For him the Negro culture spots the place where the American culture, the mainstream runs the deepest to the sea.

The novel being an odyssey to self goes into complexities of search for identity. Ellison, being a true American cannot ignore it as it is the American theme. The identity crisis is a must in any American quest be it a Negro or a Jew or something. Making the Negro a hero but going beyond the colour line, Ellison extends Wright's idea that 'Negro is American metaphor. The story is simple - transformation of southern Negro during his journey to north. "But Ellison transforms the story into a parable, breaking with the predictable patterns of social protest novel by blending fantasy and naturalism moving without transition from one level of ideas to another skilfully telescoping the episodes of the novel by concentrating closely on his protagonist's spiritual and psychological evolution.\textsuperscript{35}
The individual is erased and made invisible by the cyclic pattern of death, rebirth. The task of the novel is perception of obvious that is not seen. It is an effort to understand oneself (the Hero) and the society around him. It is a psychological quest and journey of the soul. It is a journey from innocence to experience.

The hero i.e. Invisible man, in the beginning was an ideal student at Tuskegee institute (a white washed Negro college) whose sole aim was to emulate Bledsoe, (Head of Tuskegee) modelled on Booker T. Washington. He confronts life for the first time when he expelled from the college for being what he is instead of being what he has to be. Still believing in the false ideology he goes to north in search of a job with a blind belief in Bledsoe's ideology. He fails every where and is penalized for no fault of him. He indulges in riots, enjoys being Rineheart but ultimately plunges into dark pit to discover the realself.

The quest for self initially involves in tearing away all the filial bonds symbolically shown by tearing
away all the papers in the bin. He rejects all those identities given to him by others. While rejecting all this he rejects even the Negro past. He gives a deaf ear to his grandfather's advice of saying 'yea' when meaning 'no'. He was blind to the meaning of and significance of Blues. Its only when he is in the coal mine that he realizes his stupidity. He now realizes the depth and knowledge that is there in Blues, the philosophy of life, the rich negro culture of past which is educative and the artful way of dealing with the tyrannical society. He comes to terms with himself and with the world. He achieves visibility by accepting a social role.

Thus the story is a feast of self in which the hero runs away from the society only to come back to it. He gets the grasp of present in trying to relate the past with the future. His grandfather (past) is the beginning and end of his search. As per his grandfather's advice he plays various roles like chauffer, boiler keeper, party-member, but in all these he loses
the game. He is used by others. Disappointed he plunges into invisibility. Invisibility is a temptation and miserable reality. This invisibility can take the form of Rineheart which is going from bad to worse. Rineheartism is a dangerous option that lacks communication and is not a real solution. By burning away all the papers he shreds to understand and to evaluate. He realizes the fullness and richness of Negro identity, living in this world for him is celebrating the Negro self in all its contradictions, defeats and humanity like Blues. The hero understands the ambiguity, the complexity of life. He understands his grandfather now in a new light and now he is ready to come out to play a social role and to be visible. He is exactly like his grandfather and also far above him as he understands the life to be a bundle of contradictions. He approaches life through double vision. He denounces, defends, hates and loves.

While stressing the point that Negros in America are not different from white Americans, Ellison says
that American Negro culture is like any other sub-culture in America which is an alloy of European and native American culture. "Negro folklore, evolving within a longer culture which rejected it as inferior was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him. His experience is that of America and West and is as rich a body of experience as one would find anywhere." 36 Ellison first got the insight of value of this folklore through Eliot, Joyce, Hemingway. And he gladly incorporated this rich folklore in his novel. The artist's ability lies in raising the rituals to the level of art. Rituals are nothing but superstitions, reasoning, governing our behaviour and are expressed in social forms.

Negro culture and folk tradition is found in a simple form of situations, symbols, blues, spirituals, and rhymes. In his essay "The Art of Fiction : An
Interview" Ellison says, "Well there are certain themes, symbols and images which are based on folk material. For example, there is the old saying amongst Negroes: if you're black, stay back; if you're brown, stick around; if you're white you're right. And there is the joke Negroes tell on themselves about their being so black they can't be seen in the dark. In my book this sort of thing was merged with meanings which blackness and light have long had in western mythology: evil and goodness, ignorance and knowledge, and so on. In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility. He leaves the south and goes north; this as you will notice in reading Negro folk tales, is always the road to freedom - the movement upward. You have the same thing again when he leaves his underground cave for the open,"37 and again he says "Take the Battle Royal passage in my novel, where The Boys are blind-folded and forced to fight each other for the amusement of the white observers. This is a vital part of behaviour
pattern in the south, which both Negroes and Whites thoughtlessly accept. It is a ritual in preservation of caste lines a keeping of taboo to appease the gods and ward off bad luck. It is also the initiation ritual to which all Green horns are subjected, this passage which states what Negroes will see I did not have to invent; the patterns were already there in society, so that all I had to do was present in a broader context of meaning."³⁸ Such comments help to confirm that folklore forms the core of the novel, giving a base to the story to evolve.

Ellison with his apt perceptions, keen observation, his erudition, and exploitation of folklore, Blues, in a way literary tradition, takes the quest for self, a racial theme to universal heights. His love for mythology, symbolism, and the culture enriches his style that cannot be found in others, leave alone Wright. He bubbles with Mark Twain's humour, Eliot's erudition and writes the novel perfetiong himself on Henry James, Heming Way, Joycean techniques. His
novel cannot be branded into any single category. It is apt to end this with a remark by Jerry Bryant: "If *Native Son* helped to release black writers from the ugly image of Bigger Thomas, *Invisible Man* showed that they need not become so passionately involved in their subject that they become imprisoned in advocacy and propaganda, but could establish that necessary detachment from their own emotion needed to maintain their perspective and give form to their vision."\(^{39}\)

And it goes without saying that Wright lacked the above qualities of a great writer.
NOTES


4. Ibid.


6. Ibid.


9. Ibid.


14. Ibid.


21. Ibid.

22. Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man.

23. Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act in Post war American Fiction.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
30. Raymond M. Older Man, 'Ralph Ellison's Blues and Invisible Man'.
32. Raymond M. Olderman, 'Ralph Ellison's Blues and Invisible Man'.
33. Albert Murray, 'Something different, something Mine' from *Anger and Beyond*.
34. Robert O. Mealy, 'The Craft of Ralph Ellison'.
37. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*.

38. Ibi.

It is more than a century's struggle, yearning, and aspirations that gave us this enchanting, ensnaring dark darling - the Afro-American novel. The Negro novel may be lopsided, may be very personal, may lack that depth, universality, and that vision of its European counterpart. The causes for this are already mentioned. If these glaring white spot-like defects in the black novel are kept aside one can see the novel throbbing with life, seething rage, deep anguish, gnawing misery, burning hatred and a philosophical outlook, and all loving sympathy, mirth and laughter. The novel mirrors the life of those unfortunate Negroes but with unyielding courage, upsurging ambitions.

Negro novel in the beginning, like a toddler was a simple narration of folklore. But soon it began to voice the feelings and emotions of the writer serving as an emotional purgator. Within no time it has become
a weapon in his hands with which he can lampoon the society. Wright and his followers used it as a scourge.

As times changed the black writer envisaged the potency of the novel and used it as a platform to express his ideas, used it as a means to reach his end, the end being political, religious, racial or personal salvation. Hence a variety of attitudes, moods and tones are to be seen in the novel. Some of them are militant (Wright, Malcom Marshall). Some are of racial segregation. Some novels even advocated total separation of blacks merging them with their far away once native place — Africa. These writers differed in their outlook, concepts and so also their novels. Thus their novels are intensely personal and the writer loses and gains due to these restricted areas in which he is forced to write, and the restricted feelings with which he is bound to write. Harlem renaissance gave rise to such potential
writers with such varied interests resulting in a rich variety of themes, and treatments.

Novel has become perfect in the hands of writers like Ellison. He took the Afro-American novel beyond colour, country, race thus hinting a new horizon to the novel, not Afro-American novel, nor American novel, but the novel itself. Writers like Ellison crossed the colour boundaries successfully. The novel is universal where the problem is that of Man and his race. The hero suffers or flourishes not due to his colour or race, but only due to the world around and the conditions surrounding him. The novel has become a symbolic journey, a search or a struggle of man and not a black or white or yellow man. Gone are the days where one can label Afro-American novel as amateur, lopsided, colour biased. Some of the writers can stand on par with great European writers in vision, expression, emotion and depth and intensity.

It is the critics and the readers who are colour blinded and not the writers any more. It is deplorable
that even today we compare and contrast a black writer with another black writer as if a black writer can contend and compete with the fellow black writer only. That is why we have black literature, black magazines and black anthologies. Ellison, Leroi Jones and others attacked this attitude proudly claiming their worth as Americans and not as Negroes. Ellison in his *Shadow and Act* emphasized his attitude again and again. He and his fellow black writers or black artists are Americans first and blacks next. They will never allow themselves to be trodden or to be adorned because of their colour.

Their effort is to bring in the colour and life into the pallid stream of white.

The world will soon realize their worth and in future their work would be evaluated more for its merits and demerits than for their colour. They survive if they are worth, if not perish.