CHAPTER - VI
CONCLUSION

Diverse conceptual elements have gone into the making of *Invisible Man*, including folk elements and music. Ellison put together these aspects in order to formulate an outlook of literary culture that is constant, with a view to socio-political and economic upliftment of the blacks. Ellison insists that the black man must identify himself not only as a black man living in America, but as an American who is black. This comes about from the fact that throughout *Invisible Man*, Ellison not only focuses on the Invisible Man’s quest for an identity, but on the idea of re-inventing identity in order to re-establish himself as part of a society that is so diverse.

In an effort to subvert the invisible status of the Invisible Man in the American society, the author of *Invisible Man* presents himself as a historian arguing that only from a rootedness in the past that the protagonist can derive the strength in handling his responsibilities, while moving back into the past and looking forward to the future. Ellison here is not talking about connecting the past with the present in some magical fashion. His perception is more immediate and tangible, in the sense that he looks at America, as his homeland, trying to understanding the reasons for being a black American.

*Invisible Man* is rich in portraying a wide assortment of blacks, their lives and confrontations with both elemental life and racism. The graphic depiction of the many characters in the novel, apart from the protagonist, is always in relation to the development of the self. The
various symbols employed in the novel operate at certain levels - as mirrors of both the vigour and the unsteadiness of the self's innocence and its independent vibrations in the context of black life.

The theme of *Invisible Man* presents itself as an epic statement about black identity and self-definition. The protagonist, characterized as a representative black man, on an identity quest, discovers himself only when he gives up his white master's definition of reality and follows the black folk tradition. The invisible man encounters and combats the problem Ellison identified in an interview with three young black writers in 1965:

> Our lives, since slavery, have been described mainly in terms of our political, economic and social conditions as measured by outside norms, seldom in terms of our own sense of life or our own sense of values gained from our own unique American experience.¹

*Invisible Man* chronicles three stages in the protagonist's life - education, employment and political activity - framed by his entry into the life of society through high school graduation and his exit from it through disillusionment with political organization. Each stage in his personal history corresponds to an era in the social history of black Americans. His sojourn in the southern black college modelled on Tuskegee Institute corresponds to a reconstructed parody of Emancipation. His exit from the college under compulsion, in the company of a disillusioned World War I veteran, represents the Great Migration. His first few weeks in New York - job hunting, working in
the paint factory, encountering unionism and undergoing electric shock treatment – contain the elements of the hopeful twenties, when industry was growing and self-reliance became its gospel. His experience in the Brotherhood reflects the Great Depression, where dispossession was the common complaint and communism the intellectual’s cure. His disillusionment with the Brotherhood parallels the general post-Depression retreat from communism. And the riot he drops out of sight in the novel – suggests the Harlem riot of 1943.

The protagonist enters each stage hopefully, but is discussed forcibly. His hopes are based on faith in the word or belief or method that each historical stage has offered as a solution to the difficulties blackness has always presented. In school and college, it is the principles of Booker T. Washington, as quoted by the protagonist in his graduation speech, used by the Rev. Homer Barbee in his gospel-service account of the Founder’s life, and practised by Dr. Bledsoe in the administration of the college. In the business world, it is capitalism, individualism and Emersonian self-reliance. In politics, it is “brotherhood”, whether of class or of race, as insisted by his competitor, the Garveyesque Ras the Exhorter. Reliance on these conventional principles leads the protagonist into chaos that propels him from one stage to another – from the Battle Royal, to the melee at the Golden Day, to the paint factory explosion, to the Harlem riot. And the proponents of these principles – Jack Norton, Emerson, merged in the protagonist’s mind by the end of the novel “into a single white figure”.
Opposed to the conventional and stoical doctrines of the white world are the forms of experience of the black folk tradition, which expose the falseness of the white view of reality and offer an alternative vision offered by the protagonist’s grandfather, the nineheart man, the Vet, and ironically, Bledsoe and Emerson Jr. Each of these characters has some link with the folk past. The grandfather has been a slave, the push cart man talks about rhymes and fables, and sings the blues, the Vet, though educated and erudite, is connected in the protagonist’s mind with the push cart man (p. 132). Bledsoe is modelled on Booker T. Washington, a real life reflection of the conventional trickster. Even Emerson Jr. is a traditionalist, who frequents Harlem nightclubs, collects African art and reads Totem and Taboo. These characters are linked to each other and advise the protagonist in his dealing with blackness.

The principle of emancipation through accommodation is refuted by the folk storyteller Trueblood: “I done the worse thing a man could ever do in his family and instead of chasin’ me out of the county, they gimme more help than they ever give any other coloured man, no matter how good a nigguh he was (p. 52)”. The principle of emancipation through capitalism is punctured by the folk rhyme the protagonist remembers when he hears of Bledsoe’s treachery. “They Picked Poor Robin Clean” explains not only what Bledsoe has done to him but what Liberty Paints has done to Lucius Brockway and will do to him, what capitalist industry generally strives to do to all its workers. The irony of Brother Jack’s betrayal is sharpened by the background of the John-and-Old-Master tales. “Brother Jack”, whose name echoes of “Brother John”,

reminds the protagonist of "Old Master", a bulldog he "liked but didn’t trust" as a child (pp. 255-561), and becomes in the end "Master Jack" (p. 357). Even the Brotherhood, which as both abstract philosophy and political movement, promises the ultimate liberation – offers only the same old oppression.

While the folk perspective substitutes for the "rational" programs in ordering chaos it also underlines acceptance of chaos as reality. Under the stream of conventional advice on how to deal with blackness runs a current of counter-advice distilled in the protagonist’s grandfather’s death-bed dictum: "overcome ‘em with yesses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction (p. 13).” The grandfather, the Vet, the push cart man, Bledsoe and Emerson offer a vision of reality based on contradiction in that yes is no, freedom is slavery, things are not what they seem. The push cart man sings the characteristic contradiction of the blues:

She’s got feet like a monkey
Legs like a frog – Lawd, Lawd!
But when she starts to loving me
I holler whoooo, God-dog!
Cause I loves my baabay,
Better than I do myself....

The protagonist is left to wonder whether the song expresses love or hate and whether he himself is hearing it with pride or disgust (pp. 134-35).

"Play the game but don’t believe in it", counsels the Vet (p. 118). "You’re black and living in the South", exclaims Bledsoe, "Did you
forget how to lie (p. 107)?”. “For God’s sake, learn to look beneath the surface”, Exhorts the Vet (p. 118). “Are’nt you curious about what lies beneath the face of things?”, asks Emerson Jr. (p. 143). What lies behind the face of things is, like the black dope in the white paint. The inclusion of Emerson Jr. and Bledsoe as spokesmen for the “folk”, as well as for the white point of view, is not self-contradictory, but illustrative of the simultaneous sway of opposites that Ellison sees as the heart of folk wisdom.

In the 20th century, arguments over fate and free will were lively, and the tentative answers just as hard-won. History, culture and chance rule the century. The self which is merely mundane is caught up by circumstances, but the transcendent self wills as it chooses. For this very reason, Ellison asserts that the free self takes care not only of achieving its aims, but sticks to its successful outcome like glue. In order to gain success of being, the hero must choose not to stop short of perfect action, but to stop short of perfect observation. In a world of fatality, the Invisible Man struggles between two further choices – to be great or to act it. What the Invisible Man understands is that being great is reality, even if he exists in a world where acting great seems the only evidence.

Still there is no reprieve for the Invisible Man. He does not know how to overcome the hurdles in front of him, undermine the real world he found himself in and agree to what he is yet to understand. He could sense that involvement is the need of the hour, but his invisibility makes it hard for him to precisely explain the dimensions of what he has to believe in.
There is another channel through which the Invisible Man re-establishes his identity. In order to act out his greatness, not only for the sake of his own individuality, but for the identification of his own people, he has to turn to that other channel which is his own legacy, his musical heritage.

However musicologists unlike the historians believe that interpretation of music is possible in linguistic terms. The stylistic devices apart, *Invisible Man* interprets music in the context of black history. The folk merges into the contemporary through different musical styles that encompass the totality of black life past and present. Music has been the only means for the black to transcend the brutalities of history. Ellison has his training in music and the *Invisible Man* carries the stamp of a musician as a novelist in the most sophisticated way.

It is through the things that can be called his own, like music, dance and myths, that the protagonist of *Invisible Man* was successful in creating a world of his own, while transcending the brutalities of slavery, historical contingencies and economic marginalization. Writing in the *New Negro* in 1925, Alain Locke assured his audience that the day of Aunties and Uncles, Toms and Sambos were over. *Invisible Man* tells us now, that the days of darky entertainers, parodying dolls and sweet yams, if not over, are numbered that an excursion into the cultural past can provide images by which people can measure themselves. It tells us that in the protagonist’s search for an identity in order to re-invent a new image, it was history and culture, that exemplified those values by which men throughout the history of the world have lived and died. And that
these values found their greatest expression in the Western World in the South, in the first home away from home for the Afro-American. It is there, where men and women having undergone the racial holocaust and survived, the best examples of a viable re-invention of identity is possible through the continued renewal of black literary and cultural traditions.
REFERENCES: