RE-INVENTING IDENTITY:
ORALITY, TEXTUALITY AND MUSIC IN
RALPH ELLISON’S INVISIBLE MAN

(ABSTRACT)

The decidedly ethnic and cultural configuration of the American literary scene over the past decades has underscored the primacy of the diversity of the American cultural life. Stretching from the late 1920’s into the middle years of the ensuing decade, there came a bright, happy time of great promise, in the field of the arts and intellectual affairs because of the arrival of the “New Negro”. The sudden emergence of a large number of gifted writers, writing fiction, producing plays and composing poems have carved a niche for themselves and enriched Afro-American literature. Afro-Americans of the 20th century attempted to articulate themselves by using their ancestral memories as well as the strange, bitter exactions of their experiences from slavery to the present that the American reality entailed.

Although the novel in America makes its full acknowledgement of all the bitter social realities that are the consequences of racial animus in general, one gets to know the terrifying capacities for violence and cruelty that are resident in the human heart are subtly articulated in Ellison’s work. Ellison’s world view, his sense of the relationship of art to life, his merging of narrative with music, and his deconstruction of race in the context of the American civilization must be understood and recognised if his work is viewed in its true perspective. One may rightly question the critical
understanding and foundation of his views. However, the musical criticism of *Invisible Man* reveals that he accepted his duties seriously, injecting into his work all the knowledge and conviction that he had. The novel as a literary artifact is not merely a reflection of the crossing of the ways; it embodies the complexities of those crossings in the context of literary mythologies of modern history. The fictional works become a primary site for the self's emergence as a historical entity and registers its struggle to define its existence, driven on the one hand, by the will to autonomous meaning and on the other, by the recognition of its origin in the fragmentation of social order and community.

Transforming a historical accident which had become an economic necessity into a providential act, the Southerners defended slavery as their "peculiar institution", and Southern men of letters began to construct a historical schema that would incontrovertibly justify its singularity. Henry James says in *The American Scene* (1907), that the Southern literary mind placed itself under the interdiction of a self-interpreted "new criticism" of history. But before anything worthwhile could be created or appreciated, the existing social and economic ills, must be addressed. Ellison brought his political, social and economic understanding of American reality into the writing of *Invisible Man*, and in characteristic fashion, set out to correct evils by going to their very source. He felt that to bring about reforms in existing distasteful and deleterious situations, he must attack those forces which are responsible for the situation.

Readers of the novel, *Invisible Man* may wish to know about the man Ellison because an author's life is always related to his work. The
protagonist of *Invisible Man* bears some resemblance to Ellison himself. Both are light-brown, of medium height and from the south. Both ended up in New York where life was “deceptively free”, unlike the frontier life of Oklahoma in the 1920’s, where Ellison spent his childhood.

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born on March 1, 1914, in Oklahoma City. His father, Lewis Alfred, was a tradesman and construction worker, and his mother, Ida Millsap, worked as a domestic help. He was musically inclined from childhood and studied classical harmony in the classroom and jazz outside school. In 1933, he went to the Tuskegee Institute and studied there till 1936. He then left for New York City, where he worked for the Federal Writers Project. By 1939, he took to writing seriously.

He received a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1945, which enabled him to write *Invisible Man*. Before the publication of this novel in 1947, he worked on different jobs as a waiter, a musician and also served in the United States Merchant Marine. He edited the *Negro Quarterly* during 1942. In July 1946, he married Fanny McConnell, who is now an executive administrator.

He has received many awards. Apart from the Rosenwald Grant that he received for writing *Invisible Man*, he was also awarded the National Book Award in 1953, for the same work. He has lectured in Austria and Germany, and at the Universities of Yale, California, and has lived and worked in Rome. After lecturing in Rome for two years, he joined the faculty of Bard College in 1958, teaching Russian and American literature until 1961. He has been a Professor at the Universities of Chicago, and
Rutgers, and at numerous other universities. He was awarded Doctor of Philosophy in Humane Letters from Tuskegee in 1963.

His other important publication is a book of essays entitled *Shadow and Act* published in 1964. The essays the work embodies are about literature and folklore, Negro music and the place of the Afro-Americans in the larger framework of American culture. In his understanding of individuality in a modern society, Ellison sees American Negro life "not only as a burden ... but also a discipline ... teaching its own insights into the human condition."¹

Ellison's rise as a writer of stature has its source in his widely read background and more specifically in his own creative genius. The combination of the two helped him to synthesize personal and historical events into meaningful art. He views himself as an artist recording the human condition, and in a sense, becomes an example of the Renaissance man unfolding. To him "the problem of becoming an artist is related to that of becoming a man, of becoming visible."²

Concerned as an author with the American problem in general, and not just the black man's problem, Ellison writes that the American reality should be presented as it is, even though the presentation may look surreal, for he maintains that life is surreal. He carries this conviction into the writing of *Invisible Man*. This novel depicts the emotional withdrawal of a man overwhelmed by the irrationality of society, with an attempt at self-discovery, emphasizing individuality.
The Afro-American slave narratives developed into its classic form and tone between 1840 and 1860, when the romantic movement in American literature was in its most influential phase. Transcendentalists like Theodore Parker welcomed antebellum slave narratives, insisting that "all the original of the Americans is in them, not in the white man's novel." Ellison's celebration of selfhood in *Invisible Man* might easily be read as a contribution to the literature of romantic individualism that is characterized by anti-institutionalism. The antebellum slave narrative was the product of fugitive bondmen, who rejected the authority of their masters and broke away, often violently, from slavery. Since the slave's right to rebel was a hotly debated issue in the 1840s and 1850s, the classic antebellum slave narrative highlights the brutalizing horrors of slavery in order to justify forcible resistance and escape as the only way a black could preserve his or her humanity. Under slavery, civilization reverts to a Hobbesian state of nature. Left to its own devices slavery perverts the master into a monster of cupidity and cruelty, reducing the servant to a helpless object of exploitation and subjugation. Against the process of dehumanization, the antebellum slave narratives raised its voice eloquently, by demonstrating the evolution of a liberating subjectivity in the slave's life.

The world which takes shape in the novels of the 20th century black writers, particularly of the South, is part of Southern history. For thirty years before the Civil War and as many more years following it, the South's obsessed self-interpretation of modern history repressed the participation of the Southern literary mind in the civilizational drama representing the past in the present, and the self in history. After World War I this drama broke out
of its imprisonment in the narrowly historicist cast of the Southern literary mind. A larger vision of Southern history was slowly opening to writers in the South even before World War I. But in the illumination of this cataclysm, the War for Southern Independence and the South’s defeat, the darkness of Reconstruction and the ironic rise of a materialistic New South, appeared as vivid symbols of the Southern participation in the final act of the dramatic transit in Western civilization from the traditional to the modern society.

When the second phase of World War II terminated in 1945, the modern literary subject, the myth of the past in the present, was abandoned and thrown into oblivion and lay in the cultural debris. The atomic explosions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki had blown the past out of the present, rendering obsolete the vision of the crossing of the ways. Novelists must now define the drama of the world and the self beyond the crossing. The common theme of the American novel, Southern or not, became a quest to define a vision of the self’s being in a posthumanist, post-Christian society, in short, in a post-modern world. In this world, the Southern novelist has to struggle to confront the meaning of the vision of existence no longer assured historically.

To Ellison, the so-called rupture between the self and history was not acceptable, for in his understanding, the continuity between the past as it was before and the present as it has been after World War II, are important to a black writer. To put it in other words, in a somewhat paradoxical yet more definite way, Ellison has resisted the effort of the post-modern self to close history on the self by denying its own historical character. This is a
profound embodiment of Ellison’s imagination of history and myth as modes of human representation. Like Ellison, his protagonist is in possession of his own history, myths, along with his contemporary reality. Ellison’s understanding of history embraces the visionary powers of such literary giants like Proust, Mann and Joyce. Ellison realised the possibilities of the Afro-American individual as a representation of the crossing of the ways, and thus created in *Invisible Man*, a compelling drama of *self* and *history*.

One way that Ellison bridges the gap between the uniqueness and the universality of black experience is by using black folklore. *Invisible Man* is filled with folk elements: tales, trinkets, toasts, songs, sermons, jives, and jokes. In his essays and interviews, Ellison has repeatedly singled out black folklore as the source of genuine black self-definition: “In the folklore we tell what Negro experience really is. We back away from the chaos of experience and from ourselves and we depict the humour as well as the horror of our living. We project Negro life in a metaphysical perspective and we have seen it with a complexity of vision that seldom gets into our writing.”

Negro folklore, evolving within a larger cultural domain is regarded as the black man’s own core, and is more than the literal. It announces the Negro’s willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities in defining reality, instead of allowing his masters to define these crucial matters for him. This understanding is implied throughout *Shadow and Act*, that behind “John Henry is Hercules, behind specific folk expression is the long tradition of story-telling...of myth.” So when Ellison uses black
folklore in his fiction, he consciously integrates it with the myths of the larger American and Western cultures.

Music is in many ways central to the slave experience and among Afro-Americans many types of musical expressions are derived from the polyrhythmic subtleties of African drum-language. Music and dancing continued to form an essential part of Afro-American life in the American plantations, where the slaves assimilated the religious songs and hymns of the white man. Afro-American folklore and music evolved within a larger culture and gradually bore its own identity. The evolving cultural identity through music and dance, announces the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibility in defining his reality.

Ellison's world view, his understanding of the relationship of art to life, his merging of cultural history with music, criticism with propaganda, and art with civilization must be understood and recognized in viewing the true perspective of his work. One may rightly question the critical understanding of such views. If one takes Ellison's music as a form of criticism, it reveals that he accepted his duties as a critic seriously, injecting into his work all the knowledge and conviction that he had. But before any "artistic craving" could be satisfied, before anything worthwhile could be created or appreciated, the existing social and cultural ills must be cured. Ellison here, did not leave behind his political, social and historical equipments. Nor did he hesitate in pointing out their importance in the art world. If Ellison's *Invisible Man* speaks to many readers of colour, it is not only because the novel so eloquently records the feelings of rage and
invisibility that are a consequence of living within a racist culture, but also because this work gives voice to a particular intuition about music.

In order to understand the real meaning of black music and the significant role it plays in *Invisible Man*, one has to have a look at the ethos of black music, as manifested in different forms like jazz, blues, rag-time, bossa nova, developing into many other styles of music, until the days of the modern counterparts of rap, reggae and hip-hop. The invisible man’s search for an identity, and his struggles to re-invent it, is closely related to the struggles these musical styles undergo before they can become part of the great American musical scene.

Throughout slavery, the proof of an African heritage was evident in the elements of early Afro-American music. Consciously or sub-consciously, Old Africa, the Mother Country of civilization, remained the most important source of originality for blacks, and eventually, for many musical attempts in American nationalism. For instance, one could recall the multi-tribal formation which enhanced the African social systems. This fact alone assured that great varieties of musical substances would exist in early slave music. When compounded, these innumerable features define the music as a distinctive collection of sounds marked by diverse improvisations in performance with melismatic or ornamental melodies, exciting dances, rhythms, unique harmonies, scales, forms, titles and textures. In Africa, the soul of music evolved from an inseparable combination of the sister arts of music; drama and dance, and became expertly woven into the language and customs of the people. These elements blended according to an event’s appropriateness into the speech of the participants into different age groups.
and into the categories of their sex and status. None of the elements like the instrument, form, peer group, text, dance, and other musical elements could be taken out of the context of the event for which the music was planned, and none of these elements or media could be mixed unless prescribed by tradition.

The oral tradition must be held responsible for the maintenance of the African heritage which miraculously survived through the centuries. When passed orally, music was subjected to change in its generation, transportation and reception. The ornamentation of melodic tones, song forms, and accompanying body movements involved spontaneous change from singer to singer, verse to verse and from locale to locale. Speaking of African music, A. M. Jones notes that there is an identical characteristic of improvisation, in Ware, Allen and Garrison’s transcriptions of *Slave Songs*. This practice of variation marked almost each performance and was often suggested at the will of the master drummer or the lead singer. It must be understood that, in African music, the freedom to vary the structure depends upon the basic underlying form allowing only specific points within a piece to be used for addition or alterations. African languages themselves were musical in the spoken form and demanded that pitches be relatively perfect for correct communication. One notes a similarity between this and the “sing-song” speech of Southern blacks. Even drum idioms attempted high and low imitations of speech intonations, when they are performed on female and male instruments whose small and large sizes denotes levels of pitch sounds. Therefore, the “talking drums” were capable of sending out vital messages which were clearly understood by the population. So
important were the words that they served as the basis around which were formulated the remaining musical elements of melody, harmony, rhythm, form and timbre.

The protagonist of *Invisible Man*, focusing on the black music tradition, underlined the fact that through music the blacks are able to come to terms with themselves after having gone through inhuman suffering. Music has always been a source of reassurance to the blacks for its freshness and lasting beauty.

Ellison's *Invisible Man* has a thesis, or at least an overriding motive driving it; namely, that in recognizing the central contribution made by black American musicians to the history of music itself, the contributions made by white American musicians must not be slighted. His efforts carry the conviction that music may not be so much a black American experience as an *American Experience*, with various racial and ethnic groups playing indispensable and interlocking roles. A good indication of how important music is as an element of the “Newness” is underpinned in the premise that it is a means of discovering one’s identity. Through music, many black musical artists were able to create a name for themselves, forging a reality through the American Dream idea of striving forward to success. The black colour may have been a big drawback, but it is the black colour again, that helped put these artists in the forefront of the musical world. Thus the protagonist of *Invisible Man* was able to identify his own self, and by doing so, he was able to come to terms with everything around him – culture, history, political and economic conditions.
Identity is an important marker of the individual in America. The identification of the American individual is problematic if it is not supported by a consideration of the whole populace of America: a populace that thrives on democracy, includes great men and women – of different colours, creeds, races and most importantly, of different economic backgrounds, striving forward for success and honour as entailed by the American Dream – ideas, which has found ground for a leap of faith and optimism.

The African diaspora as popularly conceived is a denotative label for the dispersed people removed and exiled from a common territorial origin, sub-Saharan Africa. The term diaspora itself was probably not used to refer to people of African descent until the mid-1950s, when it began to be employed by intellectuals involved in pan-Africanism and the effort to raise consciousness and create solidarity among blacks across the globe. Nevertheless, the themes and ideas encapsulated by the term African diaspora had been developed long before the term itself came into fashion. Indeed, the attempt to identify, define and characterise a transitional identity of people of African descent, had already been an important feature of black scholarship.

The work of Ellison represents a middle ground between the ontological essentialism of Afrocentricism and the anti-essentialism of diaspora as hybridity. In his elaboration of what we can refer to as anti-anti-essentialist perspective on these issues, he addresses the question of the unity and commonality of the African diaspora, not only as a political and theoretical problem but also as a social, economic, cultural and racial
problem of the individual, rather than as an ontological given rooted in a presumed racial essence or mythological origin. For Ellison, diaspora refers to the historical stay of his people in America through the old story of enslavement, the creation of different black cultures in the New World, and the contemporary effort to imagine a shared sense of peoplehood in confrontation with persistent systems of racialized terror. Consequently, reinvention is central to Ellison’s aesthetic. One of the problems he recognizes in the black aesthetic is the absence of opportunity for reinvention. That is why, in the epilogue to Invisible Man, the narrator speaks of the “heart of darkness” of the South and he also speaks of his own “disembodied voice”. It is obvious throughout the novel that Ellison is extremely concerned with desegregation and has been angered by Southern congressmen.

The protagonist of the novel must learn through his many experiences, and he must come to terms with and understand the socio-cultural and political reality. In elaborating this theme, Ellison emphasized the practical. Even though the invisible man learns and studies he is not impressed by the sheer fact of learning because he has seen that learning can exist without being useful and that in itself it does not emphasize mental superiority. However, Ellison rescues his protagonist through narrative openness. The mythic quest becomes a journey backward, hitting the open road and coming home to one’s own people. The invisible man goes through the process of initiation only to prepare himself for reinventing his identity as a black man having learnt his lessons about black cultural life.
So we have a man with an identity, but an identity that is invisible. He tells us about his world, his complex feelings and thoughts and how it feels to live in a racist society. His insights are genuine and profound because they are painfully gathered from his own experiences, which he hardly can escape. The novel narrates those experiences while the prologue and epilogue give us Ellison’s view on life and its renewal in deconstructing history.

While stressing the fact that the invisible man was forced by necessity to adopt indigenous language and material practices, Ellison takes a detour in replacing the hero’s African origin, religion, music and dance. In his view, the invisible man occupies a unique status, belonging to the old as well as the new worlds of Afro-American culture. It is to such a world that the author of *Invisible Man* calls our attention: a world of diversity and change, where men and women, seen in the context of historical perspective are paradigms of courage, endurance, grace and beauty. Writing in the *New Negro* in 1925, Alain Locke assured his audience that the days 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 reinvent a new image, it is history and culture that exemplify those values by which men throughout the history of the world have lived and died. These values found their greatest expression 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, that the best examples of a viable reinvention of identity is possible.

In the light of the above discussion the present study attempts to explore the concept of identity as manifested through orality, textuality and music in Ellison's *Invisible Man*.
REFERENCES:


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