CHAPTER VI

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Ralph Ellison's major concern in his essays and his novel has been the Negro American experience. He is deeply involved in the past, present and future of his people. He defies the concept of blacks, as given by the sociologists and historians. The image of the Negro that emerges at the hands of these is a terribly lopsided one. Afro-Americans, Negro Americans or Black Americans, whatever one may call them, have a unique identity. This identity is one at which he has arrived after many rigorous painful attempts at self definition. Ellison understands the trauma of these attempts. Ellison pronounces his identity, as also the identity of his people with power and wisdom. Ellison, one realizes is not only a self identifier but also the source of self definition in others. Not only identification, but creation of self is another Ellison characteristic. His people too have created themselves out of their vast, deep and varied experiences. They are not a product of only what the whites have made of them. "Can a people", Ellison asks,

Live and develop for over three hundred years simply by reacting? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them? Men have made a way of life in caves and upon cliffs, Why cannot Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man's dilemma? (SA, 316)

Ellison's indignation at the whites description of his people is evident throughout his novel in his invisible hero's myriad attempts at self definition. Many obstacles come in his path but he jumps above each with a war-cry, to emerge triumphant in the end.
Folklore and music are very important to Ellison. He claims to have learnt a lot from the study of music. Jazz has a special place in his heart. True jazz, he says, is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment...... springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity; as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. (SA, 234)

And so the true artist Ellison also is one who was propelled by ambition, exuberance and talent, like the jazzmen, to creative expression as a means of self definition. Writing was for Ellison and extension of his love for reading as "a source of pleasure, escape and instruction" (SA, XII) It turned him slightly away from music, which was his first love and aspiration. Ellison was deeply concerned with art and the intricacies involved in the creative process. All art is personal and to an extent autobiographical. The greatness of the artist depends on transforming his personal thought that come from his experiences and from the tranquility or the turbulence of his mind and heart, into something that has universal cadence. True art touches each man. Art by its very nature, is social. Writers and artists of other genres try to perform a social function by their creative pieces. As Ellison says,

in its genesis the work of art, like the stereotype, is personal; psychologically it represents the socialisation of some profoundly personal problem involving guilt (often symbolic murder - parricide, fratricide- incest, homosexuality, all problems at the base of personality) from which by expressing them along with other elements (images, memories, emotions and ideas) he seeks transcendence. To be effective as personal fulfilment, if it is to be more than dream, the work of art must simultaneously evoke images of reality and give them formal organisation. And it must, since the individual's emotions are formed in society, shape them into socially meaningful patterns (SA, 39)
The work of art rises out of a deep personal necessity that seeks transcendence. Once the work of art, however, reaches the society, the writer loses all control over it and it starts pulsating with the meanings, emotions and the interpretations the audience brings to it. Art, therefore, which is a vehicle for the personal freedom of the artist becomes a vehicle for the freedom of the audience. In it the audience seeks transcendence even as the artist had sought his.

Ellison felt very strongly "a personal moral responsibility for democracy" and he stressed that each American black or white should be aware of this. The whites had to learn to be magnanimous in offering democracy. The blacks too had the moral responsibility to rise to the occasion and grab democracy. They had to bury their evil of fawning cringing servitude and stand proud and straight as democratic individuals. Only with the efforts of both could American democracy have any meaning. Ellison sought through his work to constantly encourage his people. By making a place for himself in society he demanded attention and respect from the white community that would otherwise have ignored him.

Here an attempt has been made to delve deep into the works of Ellison and come up with a critical evaluation of his work. The essays of Ellison, compiled in *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory* have been of great help in understanding the writer and presenting a proper assessment of his work. Research work done on Ellison's work has been referred to analyse his fiction. The task of going through Ellison's fiction and the critique on him was monumental. A modest effort has been made to express in depth the writer's point of view, as derived from his creative pieces as well as his candid expressive essays and interviews.
The invisible narrator of *Invisible Man* lives in a world that seems unreal. He lives, speaks, acts, changes rules many times yet everything seems to be in a haze. As Ellison says bitterly of the blacks condition:

> The phrase "I'm nowhere", expresses the feeling borne in upon many Negroes that they have no stable recognised place in society. One's identity drifts in a capricious reality in which even the most commonly held assumptions are questionable. One "is" literally, but one is nowhere; one wanders dazed in a ghetto maze, a "displaced person " of American democracy (SA, 300)

This theme of invisibility and identity is the main theme of Ellison's fiction. After making a brief study of Ellison's life, works and the influences that shaped him as a human being and a writer, we probed into the main themes of Ellison's fiction. Ellison's concern is with the black individuals dilemma in a prejudiced society. He analyses the black and outlines, in Emersonian tones that self reliance, self discovery and independence are means to a solution for the problems of the blacks in America. The Ellisonian hero and the Emersonian ideal often merge into one another. The sexual theme highlights the sexual stereotypes of the black that lives in the minds of the white. It is this image of black as potent and evil that causes a deep fear in the whites and leads to discrimination. It is, the white feels, necessary for him to suppress the black, if he wants to live in peace. The black on the other hand is suppressed by the white due to his dominating him in numbers and also due to the image of superiority he displays.

The comic theme carefully brings important matters to the forefront. The comic approach in the Golden Day chapter where the mad veterans speak bluntly reveals many truths. The Trueblood episode, which is shocking in it centring on incest, is made light and yet made to probe deep due to the comic treatment. The
hero's escapades and the situation in which he is placed are mock serious. The scenes in which the white women try to seduce the hero are tinged with an unreal comic colour. In Ellison's short stories again the comic approach colours poignantly the terrible situations and the deep unfulfilled aspirations of the blacks through the carefully delineated characters. Old Jefferson's hollow boast that he was the strongest angel in heaven, and could fly swiftly even with a harness, rings a sorrowful note. The struggles of the black is a dominant theme. The theme of using folklore and culture to transcend one's situation is again a powerful thematic concern of Ellison. Self identification leads to freedom and freedom helps in creative expression is yet another important theme.

The experience of the black in America is a deep concern of Ellison. The squalor, the torture, the hunger, the disillusionments through which the blacks live have been highlighted. Ellison's sympathetic approach can be felt through his novels and his short stories. His portrayal of black characters is very sensitive, touching and insightful. His love for his people is seen in his black characters and the love with which Ellison paints their pen pictures. The evicted black couple, Mary Rambo, Peter Wheatstraw and Trueblood are unforgettable. They are shown with their strengths and their weaknesses, in all their humanity. Ellison was deeply anxious about the whites denying their humanity to the black people. The labyrinth of problems the black travels through makes him lose further his sense of direction.

The strategy of survival that the black adopts is an important concern. Both positive and negative strategies are used by the blacks. Religion, folklore, artistic expression are some positive efforts to rise above them situation. Use of masks, making a buffoon of themselves, fawning and flattering the whites are the negative
methods. These negative schemes to help ease their pains lead the black deeper into the mire of his invisible identityless, sorrowful existence. The evils of black life are the filth they live in, the flattering habit and immorality. The hopes and dreams, identity, recognition, a dignified existence, economic stability, freedom and social equality are their aspirations.

The fate of Tod Clifton, in *Invisible Man* and the emotional eulogy the hero gives at his death outline the sad plight of the Negroes. The repetitive speech with Tod Clifton's name taken ten time as "His name was Tod Clifton" underlines the futility and the disillusionment in life that is the due of the blacks. The fall and the death of Clifton reverberates with images from the crucifixion of Christ. It is as unjustified and heinous a killing. Clifton is a sacrificial lamb. His death redeems the hero and makes him see the world and reality. He cries,

His name was Tod Clifton and he was full of illusions. He thought he was a man when he was only Tod Clifton...... the blood ran like blood in a comic book killing, on a comic book street, in a comic book town, on a comic book day in a comic book world. (IM, 345)

Tod Clifton's death brings many changes in the hero. Earlier he used to try to please everyone and lived as others desired, like Tod Clifton. With Clifton's death the narrator realises that he had to free himself of his illusions by himself and make a determined conscious effort to create himself out of his experiences. Tod Clifton's death transforms the hero. This scene in the novel turns the invisible hero towards a decision and a conclusion. Aptly it needs a mention here.

The narrative technique of Ellison is strangely his own. Ellison believed that the novel was a literary genre which in America was tied down to the idea of
nationhood because it dealt with the changes in human personality and human society. The novel form, according to Ellison, brings to the fore all those values, dilemmas and patterns of conduct which make up the human predicament. The tentative and open form of the novel associates with the democratic philosophy; its morality confirms an identity between democracy and fiction. The novel symbolically depicts human experience. In a paraphrase of Kenneth Burke, his favourite theorist, Ellison says that the words evoking democratic principles are:

charismatic terms for transcendent order..... being forms of symbolic action, they tend through their nature as language, to sweep us in tow as they move by a process of linguistic negation towards the ideal. As a form of symbolic action, they operate by negative nature as a given and a moral condition, creating endless series of man made or man imagined positives. In this way..... man uses language to moralise both nature and himself.¹

Ellison's fictional technique always highlights the democratic moral. The freedom of expression in itself is a gift of the democratic ideal. This freedom to express oneself has been so polished by Ellison's technique that his subjective vision is easily given an objective rendering. Ellison's language rings alive with songs, rhymes and music. The different tones of people from different backgrounds are well expressed. The language often reaches poetic heights. Some descriptonal passages are very vivid and evoke images much beyond the words. In passionate moments the invisible hero of *Invisible Man* rises to a rhetorical excellence. The narrator's fascination with words and his desire to use words powerfully is very similar to Ellison himself. The joy of language is seen in Ellison's short stories too. The rhymes and spirituals make his short stories vibrate with the joy of the young chanting boys or the tranquility of the mother figures.

Ellison draws heavily on the imagery involved with sight, visibility and
invisibility and colour symbolism of black and white forms an important component of his creative arsenal. The metaphor of flying is reiterated in Ellison's short stories. Flying for the blacks, is a means of escape, a means of fulfilling one's aspiration and a psychological upliftment from the inadequacies of life in America. Black and white images dominate Ellison's work. Whites in America feel that the presence of blacks casts a shadow over America. Black again as a contrast to whites highlights the characteristics of both. Sight and lack of it again creates many images in Ellison's fiction. Namelessness is a metaphor for the identityless existence of most blacks.

The modern age with industrialization and machines is well described through symbols. There are many symbolic deaths and rebirths for the Ellisonian hero which in turn shows the various thwarted attempts of the blacks towards a better life. Imagery and symbolism are used to bring out the theme of sexuality. The use of colours red, gray, silver dominates *Invisible Man* giving it deep symbolic interpretation. Ellison shows the writer's and the narrator's mode responding with the reader's own narration of his themes. Ellison also employs the narration used in oral story telling. The effect of this technique on his novel leads to the enhancement of the themes.

The human condition is very close to Ellison's heart. He endeavours to speak for all humanity through his works. The function of literature is to "remind us of our humanity". (*GT*, 58) Ellison's characters though black are essentially like any human being, irrespective of race or creed. The Modern Age with its hectic life of competition, ambition and materialism as painted in Ellison's fiction is very real. The Running Man metaphor used in *Invisible Man* encapsulates all men running after a name and place in society, economic stability, identity and away from the
turbulence, the depravity and the evils within which they are helplessly caught. Man, today is caught in a labyrinth of ideals, philosophies and in his own personal concepts. Disillusionment is the ultimate fate of man in today's world. This fast machine age is one where no one cares for others. Ellison's narrator decides that he both loves, hates and defends. This is again a universal situation. In spite of all the trouble and tribulations man goes through he loves, hates, defends and forgives. Ellison's quip at the end of *Invisible Man*, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" is very thought provoking. The invisible hero's predicament touches each heart and becomes The Predicament of Man.

Conclusively we would like to encapsulate Ellison as a writer. Ellison's main pursuit is the identity of the Negro American. Anger and art come together in this pursuit. Ellison who has the formal sense of a blues singer and jazz musician knows that anger and agony are transient without art. Any turbulence in the political life of man means a denial of the dignity of man. To acknowledge and accept the innate dignity of a human being is to reconcile the idea of freedom as promised by the founding fathers of America with the Harlem race riots. This action can be achieved only by the mind. The Negro question thus becomes a question of determining the essence of the human in a way that the questioning and tortured mind can accept. The struggle over the Negro question continues through the novel, each step gaining in tension and momentum. Critics have said that a great flaw of *Invisible Man* is that it keeps coming to an end; to be energetically revived by Ellison in the next scene which is more intense. The movement of the novel constantly exerts that the hero does not exist, and, the author keeps resurrecting him for the next adventure. In a series of negations Ellisons cleverly covers all the aspects of the black experience. He leaves out nothing. Ellison has created a negative
metaphor, invisibility that is fully analytic and inclusive and holds together and expresses the chaos that Ellison sees in this world.

In another analysis, the novel *Invisible Man* gives an apolitical understanding of the modern world. The first half shows the hero's disillusionment with American capitalism which he notices in the institutionalization of the Negro College. The second half treats the hero's disillusionment with Stalinism or communism, which he encounters through a revolutionary organization called the Brotherhood. Ellison thus portrays sensitively two potent political ideological truths of our time.

Ellison again takes his naive and gullible hero through a series of initiatory experiences to make him learn, in shocked horror, the ways of this world. Here *Invisible Man* can be called a novel of passage, though the action takes place between the unchartered regions of the conscious and the verges of reality and the external world. Ellison's world is at the same time, real and surreal, comic and tragic, grotesque and normal— it is our world seen in its essentials and not in its externals. The novel shows the black American in all his complexity. There is realism, pessimism, disillusionment and hate; but there is also love, hope and humour. The protagonist of *Invisible Man* is not only a black man but also a complex American or a complex human being, searching for a reality of existence in a technological society characterized by swift change. Ellison's hero is essentially the best example of the multifaceted complex men who live in this world today.

Though Ellison's *Invisible Man* is made up of a series of episodes, the screaming crescendo is that on which the book opens and ends. The hero in the Prologue and Epilogue is seen in a Harlem cellar, all the stolen lights ablaze,
collaring the reader and forcing him to hear him out. What he wants the reader to hear is of his experience, placed at the absurd extreme end of racial discrimination. He cries out that there are millions like him waiting to be heard, millions who constantly struggle and realize again and again that the world is just out of their reach.

Another very important achievement of Ellison is the clarity with which he describes the philosophical position of his invisible hero. As John M. Reilly says,

His application of imagination to the story of the modern *picaro* is in fact, a major achievement, for he has done nothing less than bring to its culmination a period of Afro American literary history that had as its motive the sensation described by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1903 as a double consciousness wherein "one ever feels his twoness - an American, a Negro..... two warring ideals in one dark body". By liberating his invisible protagonist of the ideals that like an alien force, had invaded his ego, Ellison has prepared his narrator and those who, through influence, sympathy, or coincidence, will follow him to live with a unitary consciousness of themselves in the world.²

Many people do not find *Invisible Man* fully satisfying both as narrative and as ideology. This is because the writer uses negation as a narrative technique. There are certain flaws which cannot be ignored - overwriting that happens occasionally; stretches of confused wavering thought; the inability to balance between realism and surrealism. However, these flaws do not hamper *Invisible Man* from being a great work. Ellison's achievement is in the peculiarity and originality of his concept. As Richard Bone comments,

Ellison is a writer of the first magnitude - one of those original talents who has created a personal idiom to convey his personal vision. It is an idiom compounded of fantasy, distortion, and burlesque, highly imaginative and generally surrealistic in effect.

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It possesses at the bottom a certain mythic quality..... He was striving, he recounts, for a prose medium "with all the bright magic of the fairy tale".

With great relish and joy, Ellison shows the concrete richness of Negro life—the tremendous variety of its speech, its music, its food, even its perversities. The greatness of Ellison lies in the fact that from the limited experience of a Negro, his creative genius transforms his work to universal dimensions. His works grow and expand to include all mankind.
CHAPTER VI: REFERENCES


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