CHAPTER I

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Ralph Ellison is a black writer who has used the black experience to symbolize the American predicament within the larger human situation in the Modern Age. It is this uniqueness of perception that has been widely acclaimed. Ralph Ellison wrote and published *Invisible Man* in 1952, and since then it has been translated into fifteen languages. In 1953, the book won the National Book Award and the national Newspaper Publishers Russwurm award. In a book week poll in 1965, two hundred authors, editors and critics selected *Invisible Man* as the most distinguished novel published by an American during the previous twenty years. In 1969, he was awarded the Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honour by President Lyndon Johnson. In 1970, he was awarded Chevalier de L'Ordre des Antes et Lettres by Andrew Malraux, the French Minister of Cultural Affairs. In 1978, *Invisible Man* was identified as the most important novel published in the United States since World War II, in a Wilson Quarterly Poll of professors of American literature. Other honours bestowed on him are the American Academy Rome prize in 1955, the National Medal of Arts in 1985, the Co-ordinating Council of Literary Magazines General Electric Foundation award in 1988, Ph.D in Humane Letters, Tuskegee Institute in 1963 and Litt. D, Rutgers University in 1966. The list of his achievements and participation is endless. He was associated with various universities in versatile pursuits. Harvey Curtis Webster says of Ellison's treatment of black experience:

Many Negro writers of real distinction have emerged in our country...... But none of them except, sometimes Richard Wright has been able to transcend the bitter way of life they are still (though diminishingly) condemned to, or to master patiently the
intricacies of craftsmanship so that they become the peers of the best white writers of our day. Mr. Ellison has achieved this difficult transcendence.  

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in Oklahoma, on 1st March, 1914 to Lewis Ellison and Ida Millsap Ellison. Lewis Ellison was a native of Abbeville, South Carolina. He operated an ice cream parlour until his going to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he joined a construction firm as a foreman. Later he started and ran his own ice and coal business. Ida Millsap was from White Oak, Georgia. She was nick named "Brownie". She was a political activist and canvassed for Eugene Deb's Socialist party. She lost her husband Lewis Ellison in an accident when her son Ralph was three and his younger brother, Herbert only four months old. Undeterred by the calamity that had struck her, she bravely went forth and vowed to give all she could to her two sons. She worked as a domestic help in the white homes and served as an apartment house custodian. She brought home old discarded magazines and books from the homes where she worked. These were a window to the world for young Ralph. She managed to supply her sons with chemical and electric sets, a phonograph and records, a roll top desk and chair and a toy typewriter. Ralph never felt deprived in terms of material goods or spiritual heritage. His mother was a pillar of strength and one who inspired independence and the exploration of possibilities.

Ellison had many white friends and he did all that he wished to do even though Oklahoma had a white supremacist governor "Alfa Alfa Bill" Murray with his own policies. Ralph and his friends dreamt of being Renaissance men by conquering all realms of knowledge. They vowed to become bold, open, complete men. He would not be confined to prescribed roles and was forever busy in his varied interests.
Ralph was always with books, sheets of music, or more scientifically, building up crystal radio sets. Ellison says:

My friends and I, were exploring an idea of human versatility and possibility which went against the barbs or over the palings of almost every fence which those who controlled social and political power had erected to restrict our roles in the life of the country.²

It is this young hearts' belief that later helped Ellison make a place for himself in America's prejudiced society.

There is a tension in Ellison's work between the concept of geography as fate and the concept of human volition as destiny. One's geography presents some raw materials which individuals accept passively or dynamically transform by an assertion of their human will. Ellison was aware of the limitations upon his freedom of action as he was a Negro, yet felt these to be unjust. He felt no inferiority in himself and his race and knew that he could get what he deserved out of life. He says:

As a kid I remember working it out this way : there was a world in which you wore your everyday clothes on Sunday, and there was a world in which you wore your Sunday clothes everyday - I wanted the world in which you wore your Sunday clothes everyday. I wanted it because it represented something better, a more exciting and civilized and human way of living. (SA, 6)

Apart from his determined mother, the other influences in his early age were the men he met in shops and the jazzmen and blues singers Jimmy Rushing and guitarist Charlie Christian. Ellison was an ardent musician. He played the trumpet and the soprano saxophone. There was a band, orchestra, a brass quartet, glee club, chorus and European folk dancing in school, but, Ellison learnt music from Ludwig
Hebestriet, conductor of the Oklahoma City Orchestra. Ellison could not afford this private tuition, but, paid by mowing Hebestriet’s lawn. At this time the family’s financial circumstances were tense and Ellison worked at various odd jobs like newspaper boy, elevator boy and soda jerk. His music education continued against all odds. He loved jazz and felt that jazzmen transcended segregation and racial prejudice. Love of music brought together all blacks and also whites and integrated them even as the drum, trumpet and saxophone were played together to create harmonious music.

On the same page of an essay that talks of church music, folk dances, Irish jigs and Scottish flings, Ellison writes:

You see jazz was so much a part of our total way of life that it got not only into our attempts at playing classical music but into forms of activities usually not associated with it: into marching and into football games, where it has since become a familiar fixture. A lot has been written about the role of jazz in a certain type of Negro funeral marching but in Oklahoma City it got into military drill. There were many Negro veterans from the Spanish American War who delighted in teaching the younger boys complicated drill patterns, and on hot summer evening we spent hours... learning to execute the commands barked at us by our enthusiastic drill masters. And as we mastered the patterns, the jazz feeling would come into it and no one was satisfied until we were swinging. These men who taught us had raised a military discipline to the level of a low art form, almost a dance, and its spirit was jazz. (SA, 11)

Ellison left Oklahoma City in 1933. He was then nineteen years old and had been studying music for twelve years. He left to join Tuskegee Institute in Macon Country Alabama. It was the best place for a Negro to study music. He had been awarded a scholarship by the state of Oklahoma. He reports:

Supposedly on merit, but the scholarship programme itself was a device through which the state hoped to circumvent application by
Negro students for enrolment in the state Universities of Oklahoma.3

Ellison majored in music and music theory and expected to become a professional musician. While studying under William L. Dawson, he aspired to write a symphony by the time he was twenty six equal to anything Richard Wagner had written by that age. Apart from music, he read widely and also starred in the school play as a sophomore. Many writers have pointed out that Tuskegee is the inspiration for much of the early part of *Invisible Man*, with its hypocrisies, its rigid standard of behaviour, and its legendary "Founder", who suggests Booker T. Washington.

The other important figure in Ellison's life at this time was Professor of Music, Hazel Harrison, who was a good pianist and was as well trained as any white in the country. She knew Alain Locke, the black Rhodes Scholar who had played a very important role in the 1920's as one of the philosophers of the Harlem Renaissance. Ellison read his book, *The New Negro*. Ellison thus had a lot of exposure to the modern musical and intellectual trends of the time.

Literature was an old passion and he kept it up even though labouring at music. Hemingway's fiction cast an inexplicable charm around him. He always sought to find the fictional characters in his real world. As he significantly remarks, he began quite early;

> to connect the worlds projected in literature and poetry and drama and novels with the life in which I found myself.4

Destiny had earmarked the field of Literature for Ellison. One of the most important books that he stumbled upon was T.S.Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922), which he read in 1935. With his discovery of Eliot, Ellison realised that the humour,
energy, and creativity of black Americans, so clearly evident in their music, churches and daily life had been left unexplored and ignored completely in poetry and fiction. His attitude to literature had a lot of similarity to his perception of music. He reminisces:

I went to Tuskegee to study music, hoping to become a composer of symphonies and there during my second year, I read *The Waste Land* and that, although I was then unaware of it was the real transition to writing ............ I was intrigued by its power to move me while eluding my understanding. Somehow its rhythms were often closer to those of jazz than were those of the Negro poets, and even though I could not understand then, its range of allusion was as mixed and as varied as that of Louis Armstrong.  

Unlike the protagonist of his novel, *Invisible Man*, Ellison was not expelled from Tuskegee, but went to New York in 1936 to earn money. He arrived in New York with only seventy five dollars and he stayed at the Harlem YMCA, where he got a job behind the food counter. On his second day in New York, Ellison met Alain Locke and Langston Hughes. Hughes gave him two books to be passed on to a friend - Andre Malraux's *Man's Fate* and *Days of Wrath*. Ellison read the books and *Man's Fate* had a profound effect on him.

To support himself, Ellison worked as a receptionist in a psychiatrist's office and this job inspired him to read Freud and understand the symbolism of dreams. He would later use this information. The challenge to write was given by Richard Wright, whom Ellison had met through Langston Hughes. Ellison began his literary career by writing a review of Waters E.Turpins' *These Low Grounds* for the autumn 1937 issue of *New Challenge* edited by Wright. Ellison contributed a short story, "Heines Bull", to the winter issue but the magazine folded and the story never got printed. Richard Wright taught him to become a "conscious" writer and asked him
to study thoroughly the prefaces of Henry James and Joseph Conrad. He studied carefully William Faulkner, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain and Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Ellison kept up his jazz even as he shifted his career goals to writing. He kept meeting Lester Young, Hot Lips Page, Ant Tatum, Ben Webster, Charlie Christian and Jimmy Rushing. As Robert M. Cruden claims,

If you listen very hard, you can hear all of them playing in *Invisible Man.*

and again,

If we open *Invisible Man* with music on our minds, we find ourselves in the world of the great jazz trumpet player Louis Armstrong. He likes to play over and over again the old Fats Waller Tune, "What Did I Do to be so Black and Blue?"

Ellison joined the Federal Writers Project in 1938 and received $103.50 per month. Sterling A. Brown was the editor of Negro affairs and Ellison was given a number of assignments which required research and writing. He submitted reviews and essays for publication. Ellison never joined the Communist Party:

he always insisted that art should never be subverted by the dictates of partisan politics. Even in his earliest critical commentaries he expected the artist to exemplify a dauntless integrity and independence and to master the techniques of his or her craft.

Ellison began publishing his short stories though the earliest ones reveal him only as an apprentice writer. The first short story that was published was "Slick Gonna Learn" and it appeared in the September 1939 issue of *Direction.* "The Birthmark" appeared in *New Masses* on 2nd July 1940. The themes of these two short stories were a direct protest against police cruelty and harshness. Ralph
Ellison's next three stories show a marked change in style and are a preparation for the novel that follows. They are around dialogues between two young boys, Buster and Riley, and deal with the irrepressible spirit of adventure, and the hopes and aspirations that have a place in spite of a suppressing environment. These three stories are "Afternoon" (*American Writing*, 1940), "Mister Toussan" (*New Masses*, 4, 1941), and "That I had the Wings" (*Common Ground*, Summer, 1943).

After serving as Managing Editor of the *New Quarterly* in 1942, Ellison returned to story writing and produced his two most famous, successful and widely anthologized stories before *Invisible Man*: "Flying Home" (*Cross Section*, 1944) and "King of the Bingo Game" (*Tomorrow*, Nov. 1944). "King of the Bingo Game" seems a rehearsal for *Invisible Man*, in that, it has a nameless hero, the theme of search for identity, and that it is rich in symbols and surrealistic techniques.

In 1944, Ellison met Fanny McConnell in New York City and married her in 1946.

During World War II, Ellison produced one patriotic story, "In a Strange Country" (*Tomorrow*, July 1944) and served as a cook in the merchant marine. In 1945, he thankfully went to recuperate on a friend's farm in Waitsfield, Vermont, where the idea for *Invisible Man* began to germinate. He was reading Lord Raglan's *The Hero* and contemplating about the nature of Negro leadership in America, when the first paragraph of *Invisible Man* was written. Many accolades followed the publication of *Invisible Man* by Random House in 1952. It created waves in literary circles due to its freshness of approach and the skill and perfection in its narrative technique.
After *Invisible Man*, two more pieces showing the character of Mary Rambo appeared: "Did You Ever Dream Lucky?" (*New World Writing*, 1954) and "Out of the Hospital and Under the Bar" (*Soon, One Morning*, 1963), the second of which had originally been intended to be part of *Invisible Man*. In 1956, Ellison published one of his best stories, "A Coupla Scalped Indians," (*New World Writing*), which in the vein of the early Buster and Riley stories revolves around two boys. It is a story with insight:

The familiar Ellisonian theme, initiation into manhood, plays itself out against an encounter with the sphinx-like Aunt Mackie, portrayed alternately as appealing and repugnant, young and old, angel and devil, seductress and seduced - in short, a symbol of human experience. 9

*Shadow and Act* appeared in 1964 - a compilation of essays and interviews written over a period of twenty-two years. The title was taken from T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men" (1925). The essays are arranged according to three themes: the first part deals with folklore and literature; the second part with music, blues jazz and their artists; the third part deals with the relationship of the Negro subculture to the culture of the nation. In addition to presenting his formulation of what the novel is and what it should attempt to do, and offering a celebrated definition of the blues, Ellison argues for the interrelatedness of all experience and proclaims that, at least on the level of the imagination, integration has been achieved in the United States.

In addition to being a world-renowned author-*Invisible Man* was translated into fifteen languages- Ellison was a gourmet cook, a photographer, a musician, an art collector, a builder of hi-fi sets, and a designer of his own furniture. Wouldn't one say that Ralph Ellison had achieved his childhood ambition of becoming a Renaissance Man?

In addition to his ongoing efforts to finish this work of fiction, Ellison completed Going to the Territory (1986) - a collection of sixteen speeches, reviews and essays written since 1957. It is elegantly written, and in it he continued to analyze America's uniquely pluralistic culture.

Along with his writing, Ellison joined and worked in various academic institutions. At Bard, he taught Russian Literature and American Literature (1958-1961). At Bard from 1962-1969, he taught creative writing and comparative literature. He went to the University of Chicago as Alexander White Visiting Professor in the winter of 1961. From 1970-1979, he served as Albert Schweitzer Professor, in the Humanities at New York University. Ellison also lectured at Yale, at Columbia University, at the Salzburg Seminar in Austria and at dozens of schools.

Ellison was a dropout in college, but his incredible contribution to literature invited many honours. He was awarded Honorary Doctorates from Tuskegee (1963), Rutgers (1966), University of Michigan (1967), Grimell (1967), Williams College (1970), Adelphi (1971), College of William and Mary (1972), Wake Forest (1974).

Ellison's reputation underwent a metamorphosis over the years. His liberalism was considered out of step with the times by the New Left and Third World spokesperson of the late 1960's and 1970's. In 1975, *Invisible Man* was declared the most remarkable work in the field of fiction since World War II. This judgment was arrived at by the Book Week Poll of two hundred (mostly white) authors critics and editors. This antagonised people and it was clear that Ellison was on the wrong side. He had to face adverse criticism and blatant allegation that he was not concerned with the suffering of the blacks, though he was a black himself.

With time, of course, minds change and so do attitudes. Many young black writers who had distanced themselves from Ellison had come around to realizing their error. Quote:

Refusing to be co-opted by white critics who analyzed *Invisible Man* in formalistic terms, black critics increasingly marvel at Ellison's treatment of Afro-American life; they find his monumental novel a profound examination of the richness and beauty and heroism of the black experience.10

Ellison's books have inspired and motivated many young writers. The list is endless. On Ellison's 80th birthday - 1st March 1994, David Reminick interviewed him. He appreciated the gentleness, the style and the depth of this old man, who he said looked fifteen years younger than he was. He was burdened by the heavy task of his second act, his second novel, though his composure and royal carriage did not betray the anxiety and tension of the task ahead of him.
His novel and writing have inspired talents as various as Charles Johnson, John Edgar Wideman, Leon Forrest, James Alan McPherson; the critics Shelby Steele, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Stanley Grouch and the poet Michael S.Harper:

When Johnson for instance received the National Book Award in 1990, for his novel *Middle Passage*, he devoted his entire acceptance speech to a celebration of Ellison. Johnson said he hoped that the nineteen nineties would see the emergence of a "black American fiction" that takes Ellison as its inspiration, "one that enables us as a people, as a culture, to move from narrow complaints to broad celebration."

This is what Ellison stood for - a broad celebration. Through his novel he wrote of experiences that not only were universal but which celebrated just the being of man. Even at the age of 80, he lived life in peace and style, and continued working at his second novel. He was teaching at New York University and was also a visiting scholar at Rutgers, Yale and the University of Chicago.

Ralph Ellison passed away on April 16, 1994. The cause was pancreatic cancer. Mr. Joe Fox, his editor, claimed that the second novel did exist, and it was very long, but it was not a sequel to his first novel, *Invisible Man*. He said that Ellison had said that he was facing problems in transition which covered nearly thirty years. Part of the work had been destroyed by a fire. The incident had been traumatic for Ellison. Yet the one novel *Invisible Man* has assured fame and a permanent place in the History of Literature for him. At his death, Saul Bellow hailed:

What a great thing it is when a brilliant individual victory occurs, like Mr. Ellison's proving that a truly heroic quality can exist among our contemporaries... (the tone) is tragic, comic, poetic, the tone of the very strongest sort of creative intelligence.

We bow our heads to this literary and humane giant. Let us hope that his theory of oneness of universal problems and the individual's unique way of dealing
with them, lives on after him. He taught through his work, artistic transcendence. It is a tonic for success and tranquillity in this chaotic world. His spirit remains immortal through his books and his works. It is this fervent, yet calm and composed spirit that has magic in its still, mysterious depths that his novel *Invisible Man* is made of. It is this spirit that attracts scholars and critics to his work and the work on his work gains in height. New enlightening interpretations of his symbols have made their way into various research libraries.

We shall now attempt to discuss and reveal the socio-cultural milieu that shaped Ellison as a writer. Here we shall confine ourselves to those incidents in his life time that helped him in sharpening his sensibilities and shaping up as a writer. There is an autobiographical strain in the work of any writer for one cannot be compartmentalised separately and away from one's life experiences. His background and many incidents in his life shaped him as a writer. Vignettes of certain characters in his novels seen to be very similar to people whom he knew and lived with. The information on him has been mainly based on his interviews and his essays. He has throughout been very candid as a person and there is ample information available.

The earliest influence on Ellison seems to be that of his parents. His father died when Ralph was only three years old, but he says that from the time he began to walk at six months, till three years, they had been constant companions. As Ralph grew, his mother kept the memory of his father alive by constantly relating stories about his father, how he had always wanted to do something and had had a varied career. His father had been a professional soldier and had been in Cuba, Philippines and China. He had a relentless determination and was always trying to get at something. His mother kept the picture of his father very vivid in his memory.
It was Ralph's father who dreamt of making Ralph a poet. He had named him Ralph Waldo, after the American philosopher and poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Later Ellison would understand his father's love of reading. He says:

Much later, after I began to write and work with words, I came to suspect that he was aware of the suggestive powers of names and of the magic involved in naming. (SA, 151)

As a young child, Ralph hated his middle name, as people always tended to call him by the poet's name Emerson. In school he hid his middle name in an innocuous 'W' and swore never to read Emerson. However after some years he did read Emerson and was quite influenced by him. He tried to understand "The American Scholar" and imbibe some of the ideas in it.

When Ellison was a small boy there were no libraries for Negroes in Oklahoma City. It was all due to custom, and there was no law as such preventing Negroes from entering the library. Then, fortunately for Ellison, a Negro library came up with a Negro librarian, two small rooms, hastily put up shelves, and a hurried stocking of all and every type of book available. Ellison quickly flew through the fairy tales, junior fiction, detective novels, westerns and was soon into reading the classics. *Vanity Fair* and *The Literary Digest* which his mother brought home were also regular reads.

His adopted grandfather J. D. Randolph was the custodian of the law library of the Oklahoma State Capital. Ellison had access to the world of legislation with him. He also was surprised at the regular visits of the white legislators, who came seeking advice of Randolph. Ellison viewed all this in awe and listened attentively to the answers given. All these influences left their mark on young Ellison's mind.
Writers in their formative years absorb into their consciousness much that has no special value until much later. These remain in the blood and come out in rich imagery later. Apart from reading Shaw, Maupassant and many others, Ellison writes of the rich oral literature which throbbed in churches, school yards, cotton picking camps, barber shops - all the places where folklore and gossip thrive. Ellison unknowingly was influenced by speech rhythms, Negro voices and idioms, circuses, minstrel shows, prize fights, vaudeville, moving pictures, baseball and football matches. All this were part of the social and cultural background of his childhood. He was interested in and impressed by husky male singers and shrill women singers, by preachers, by funerals, public dances and jam sessions. The smell of flowers, the aroma of food, the cool taste of ice cream all left an impact on him. He listened carefully to fortune tellers and says,

I was fascinated by old ladies, those who had seen slavery and those who were defiant of white folk and black folk alike; by the enticing walks of prostitutes and by the limping walks affected by Negro hustlers, especially those who wore Stetson hats, expensive shoes with well starched overalls, usually with a diamond stick pin (when hot in luck) in their tireless collars as their gambling uniforms. (SA, 158)

We can easily see these characters in Invisible Man as Mary Rambo, Rinehart and Sybil. Thus the writers mind is always alert to influences and absorbs all that it can, through long periods of time.

Ellison was always fascinated by literature. He had loved Wuthering Heights; but The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot seized his mind, and attracted him immensely.

Ellison could not understand Eliot and had to look up references in the footnotes of the poem and thus began Ellison's conscious education in literature. The
Ellison could not understand Eliot and had to look up references in the footnotes of the poem and thus began Ellison's conscious education in literature. The library at Tuskegee was well equipped. He turned to study literature and then to criticism. As Ellison had studied in a disciplined manner the technique of music, he found the process of learning poetry quite familiar. As he studied literature consciously, Ellison felt that he had had a brush with it all before. The details of his background seemed more prominent and as he read, old forgotten conversations and dialogues would be remembered and came flashing upon his memory. Many values and trends he had not given importance to earlier seemed very important now.

In 1937, Ellison went to Dayton, Ohio where he and his brother hunted and sold game to earn their living. He had studied Hemingway to learn his sentence structure and organisation. In the fields, Hemingway's description of hunting seemed very real and Ellison felt that all Hemingway wrote about were from real life experiences as though "he's been there".

Another important influence on Ellison was Malraux and his novel *Man's Fate*. Malraux was at the time being claimed by the communists. Yet, Ellison discovered that the heroes of *Man's Fate* were not Marxists in their thought, but profoundly intellectual. Malraux was the artist revolutionary when he wrote *Man's Fate*. He was a humanist. Ellison realised that a novel like *Man's Fate* lives on not because of the political position embraced at the time but because of its larger concern with the tragic struggle of humanity. Most of the writers of the time were concerned less with tragedy than with injustice. Ellison on the other hand was concerned more with art and less with injustice. Malraux had a deep effect on
Ellison's writing.

Of literary influences on him, Ellison gives a lot of credit to many writers. In an interview with Heresy he says that Joyce and Eliot made him aware of the "playful possibilities of language". Of Malraux, Ellison says:

Malraux's concern with the individual caught up consciously in a historical situation, a revolutionary situation, provided insight which allowed me to understand certain possibilities in the fictional material around me. Some writers, say, Dostoevsky, or even Tolstoy will make you very much aware of what is possible in depicting a society in which class lines are either fluid or have broken down without the cultural style and value on either extremes of society being dissipated. From such writers you learn to explain the rich fictional possibilities to be achieved in juxtaposing the peasant's consciousness with that of the aristocrats and the aristocrats with the peasants. 14

Richard Wright's work has been thought of to be of special importance to Ellison's literary development because of their close friendship during the first stages of Ellison's writing career. Ellison waxes eloquent about Wright's most important achievement:

He has converted the American Negro impulse towards self annihilation and 'going underground' into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America. 15

Many critics have claimed that the prototype of the narrator's subterranean room in Invisible Man is found in Wright's novella, The Man Who Lived Underground.

Ellison accepts that the main perspective through which a writer looks at experience is that provided by literature. Ellison looked at the subject of his novel through Dostoevsky's great novella, Notes from Underground (1864), whose
anonymous first person narrator sits alone in his room brooding and thinking, tells the story of how he got to be where he is, and ends, like Ellison's protagonist by suggesting that at some deep level he speaks for the reader.

Hemingway, Ellison considered "true father-as-artist" for himself and many other writers who were writing in the late thirties. From other novelists Ellison picked up the line of American humour particularly the line that runs from South Western humour through Mark Twain and on to William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell, whose Tobacco Road made Ellison aware of the liberating potential of extravagant laughter. In Invisible Man not only do we see comic motifs but at places it is very funny.

William Faulkner also influenced Ellison's fiction. The most important aspect of Faulkner is the importance he gave to the moral tradition and Faulkner believed deeply in what the creative activity of novelists could achieve:

He was born, Ellison has said, "with all the anti Negro clichés of deep South white society, but as he continued his own work, he discovered the human reality that lay behind these stereotypes. In the end, he wrote more deeply about Negroes than most Negro writers. I'd like to achieve the same kind of freedom as a Negro and as a man". 16

The effect of William Faulkner on Ellison was deep and immense. Ellison appreciated the humanity of the characters of William Faulkner. These characters were of all time and they rose out of their regional, geographical and social class's situation and became universal. It was the universality and the portraiture of man as a creator who fought and transcended his situation, which appealed to Ellison.
As we know, and which Ellison has expressed, that the primary social role of fiction,

is that of seizing from the flux and flow of our daily lives those abiding patterns of experience which... help to form our sense of reality and from which emerge our sense of humanity, and our conception of human values.\(^{17}\)

and again,

to contribute at once to the growth of literature and to the shaping of the culture as he would like it to be.\(^ {18}\)

Through Ellison's writings, one feels a strain of conscious thought running in his works. He constantly ponders as how the best American novel should shape up. His black background made him sensitive to the needs of his people. He said that the most serious American fiction deals with the blacks and their status. At the moral core is the concern about the contradiction between professed ideals and the actuality of conduct. The Negro works in the guilty conscience of America. He was a slave but after he became free from the shackles of slavery he was reduced to a strange ambiguous state.

Ellison had a deep understanding of the history of America and what American culture was all about and where it had its roots. He was seriously involved in tracing out the origin of the American novel. In his quest, he discovered that American culture was something that had developed much before America was a nation; it was developing in Europe and Africa - the origin was elsewhere. What had started here was that Americans had made a formulation of what they were, who they were and where they were going - all this was written down in the Bill of Rights, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. The whole process was
achieved through the spilling of blood and so it was deified. It was a burden on literature that it should be specifically American.

The motives of American literature were to show what Americans were, their origin, their past and their future. Ellison was aware of this burden. Literature had to be conscious of the diversity of one section of society from the other and at the same time the whites had the burden of conscientiousness of moral duty or responsibility for the health and welfare of the society.

Ellison's grand parents had been slaves and it was not so far away. Their experience, aspiration, torment and confusion were very vivid in his psyche. Though he never went to the cotton fields, he heard and listened avidly, even as a child to the various stories and jokes that were brought from the South. American literature could not ignore the black - in fact it dealt with the interaction of the slave and the white man. So, the effect of his grand parents from both sides, who had been slaves, affected Ellison's writing. The grandfather plays a very important role in *Invisible Man*, and reveals the suppressed cadences of the slave culture.

Ellison had decided that he would not ignore the racial dimensions so vibrantly active in America, but, he would give it a human perspective. No wonder, the hero of *Invisible Man* keeps passionately trying to prove himself within the limitation of a segregated society. He was aware that America needed to offer initiation rites for the young. The Battle Royal scene of *Invisible Man* depicts it, but these rites of passage were not enough for the wide and varied freedom of experience that was available to the young. How ideas developed, grew and passed from one to another were the tremors within the society.
The cultural developments that take place at the lower level of society can rock the whole society. Ellison felt that all writers were in compulsion to react to the emotional, political and intellectual pressures of society. Ellison felt it his moral responsibility to show that his people, the Negroes were humans and so the Negro black experience could well become a metaphor for all human experience.

Folklore that was so black so Negro and so American left a profound impact on Ellison. He felt that folklore:

preserves mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of any given group. It describes those rites, manners, customs and so forth which insure the good life or destroy it; and it describes those boundaries of feeling thought and action which that particular group has found to be the limitation of the human condition. It projects the wisdom in symbols which express the group's will to survive; it embodies those values by which the group lives and dies. These drawings may be crude but they are nonetheless profound in that they represent the group's attempt to humanize the world. 19

Folklore helped black writers to serve up what they felt rather than serving up what they were supposed to feel. In the shaping of Ellison as a writer folklore offered new possibilities of language, the resonances of Afro-American speech and idiom, chants, jokes and sermons, rhyming games, slave songs, the blues - all of which have given a rare vitality to American literature. Folklore helped Ellison in his two fold responsibility - literary and social. Folklore, myth and rituals have been used by Ellison to present the psychological state of human relationships and the irrational and chaotic aspects of human behaviour. A black's resentment of the harassment meted out to him by white society could be expressed through folklore.

While it is true that Ellison was attracted towards communism, he did not join
the Communist Party. His admiration was for the theoretical precepts of Marxism which held sway over most of the writers of the 1930's - it seemed to be the only ideology which held promise for the exploited and the downtrodden classes. On the threshold of his literary career, Ellison drew strength from his knowledge of this ideology. It gave him a larger perspective from which he could look at the black reality in America and thus depict it artistically in *Invisible Man*. Ellison uses his knowledge of Communism to view black reality with a greater understanding. Consequently, Ellison touches upon some important aspects of black experience and uses the ideology as a weapon to attack American Capitalism. As in most black fiction with Marxist undertones, whiteness and capitalism become synonymous; the white man is the exploiter, and the black man, the exploited. Ellison reveals the black American's attraction to and disenchantment with Communism through the protagonist of *Invisible Man's* association and also disillusionment with the Brotherhood.

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison echoes - Booker T. Washington's theory of "separate but united states" when he says, "America is woven of many strands...." Ellison aims at declaring the low theme of unity in diversity - hoping to get due and proper recognition and getting the same opportunities and privileges as those of white Americans. Ellison shows the dreams and aspiration of the blacks through the spoken idiom of the people. He believed that the spoken language betrayed the innermost thoughts, feelings and values. Thus there were various factors in the environment in which Ellison grew, which shaped him into a writer. Many people, many novelists, poets and writers were responsible for his growth. His earliest sensibilities were shaped and moulded by his mother and the teachers of the school he attended. The Tuskegee experience also shaped Ellison's writing - the intellectuals he met there like
Wright and Langston Hughes helped him in his early apprentice pieces. His touch with jazz, the blues, the tales he heard all went into framing him as a writer. An attempt has been made to outline the socio-cultural milieu that shaped Ellison's writing.

An entire opus of criticism exists on Ralph Ellison. Since the release of *Invisible Man* (1952) which catapulted him into fame, (to his sad demise in 1994, to this day) critical research and enquiry into his work continues. A writer such as he who left an indelible mark on modern times, modern society and literature, still continues to bask in the centre of critical attention. It is a cause of joy to Ellison fans that this trend will continue in the years to come.
CHAPTER-I : REFERENCES


3. Trudier Harris, 39.


6. Ibid., 50.

7. Ibid., 51.

8. Trudier Harris, 41.

9. Trudier Harris, 50.

10 Trudier Harris, 53.


13 Ibid.


18 Ibid., 57.

19 Ibid., 58.