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## 22. Ralph Ellison: A Writer and Social Reformer

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Ralph Ellison writing with the same zeal and responsibility of struggle to establish the African Americans in America as equal citizens used forceful and logical style of writing. His writing proved to be path finding for the further course of action. In 1952, on the eve of Civil Rights Movement, *Invisible Man* was published. It remained on the best-seller list for sixteen weeks, and had been translated in more than fifteen languages of the world. [Creech, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Portuguese, Slovak, Spanish, and Swedish] It is the novel of segregation; in which he has achieved perfectly; the historical truth of the African American culture, and artistic vision. It won "National Book Award," for its balanced presentation and universal touch of theme. It also achieved him various academic positions that enabled him to complete another work, a collection of essays *Shadow and Act*, published in 1964. His novel helped bring social reformation up to the equality by law and in practice.

In spite of his great achievement as a writer; his novel *Invisible Man* has been criticized by various critics for its lacking of immediate emotional impact of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Ellison's novel is based on a set of symbols, on the conscious use of myths and on historical allusions. Hence, it becomes very essential to go through the history of American society, to judge *Invisible Man*, appropriately. His intellect and artistic imagination goes beyond the mere presentation of anger and militancy.

The very title of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, symbolizes an average African American man in America. The title is not The Invisible Man, to represent a specific African American with his own recognition and unique identity; but a very common, unseen, uncounted and invisible being of flesh and bone. The very first paragraph of the epilogue of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is suggestive of the African Americans' position in American society:

I am an invisible man. No. I am not a spook; like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe. Nor am I one of your Hollywood movies ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible



simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus side shows. It is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, destroying glass. When they approach me they see only my surrounding— or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything, except me. (*Invisible Man* 3)

His protagonist is anonymous, "Invisible Man". During the course of plot more than eight times his name is asked, but nowhere is it mentioned. In an article entitled, "The Ivy League Negro" (1963) William Melvin Kelley states:

To be a Negro in mid-twentieth century America is to be a man waking up in a hospital bed with amnesia. He asks doctor who is he, what is his name? The doctor tells him, but the name means nothing to the man. He will take the name anyway, simply because it is better to have a name, even one which held no meaning, than to have no name at all. (63)

Ellison has presented his unnamed protagonist confused, unable to answer; as all other African Americans in American society were unaware of their identity or no identity at all. Even though the protagonist is anonymous; it portrays the African Americans as the symbol of all men, and their aspirations and frustration with the archetypal theme of self-realization. Ellison takes his protagonist one step further to the Wright's protagonist. As Wright's protagonist asks himself "What I killed for, I am!" But Ellison's protagonist searches his identity, and he deliberately hides his "invisibility", as identity. He says: "I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is a part of my invisibility any way you face it. Responsibility rests up on recognition and recognition is a form of agreement." (*Invisible Man* 11) As the protagonist lies on the operating table following his accident, at the Liberty Paint Factory, doctor asks him: "What ... Is ... Your ... Name? Who ... Are ... You? Invisible protagonist cannot tell his name. He says. When I discover who I am, I'll be free." (*Invisible Man* 243)

The title itself is suggestive of the theme. The hero of the novel represents the condition of African Americans. Jerry Bryant says of the *Invisible Man*: "Invisible Man appears to us as if beneath a magnifying glass that exaggerate reality but does not misrepresent it." (689) One has to agree with the view of Jerry Bryant because Ellison has perfectly maintained historical and artistic balance. He has exaggerated realities to some extent. The African American man is shown invisible, having no separate existence or identity. But historical records and the condition of the African Americans up to the first half of twentieth century was no better than shown in the



novel. He has used first person pronoun 'I' to his protagonist that indicates everyman of his race, experiencing the same invisibility. To catch the pulse of the reader, and demonstrate his culture and social discrimination he has shaped it with artistic skill.

One may say his *Invisible Man* is more forceful than Richard Wright's *Native Son*, because it exhibits the realities in sugarcoated ways, and that is appreciated by Whites also. The plot of the novel and some events of Ellison's life go hand in hand. He learned music at Tuskegee institute, founded by Booker T. Washington, and went to New York; experiencing financial difficulties. He wished to earn money in summer of 1936, in New York, and return for his senior year, although he never did. Ellison has used the same anecdote to his protagonist; with artistic touch. His protagonist learns at Tuskegee institute in junior years and wishes to take further education; but expelled from the school. Before his expulsion from the school he works as a chauffeur to Dr. Bledsoe; the president to Tuskegee institute, like Richard Wright's protagonist Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*.

When Ralph Ellison was asked in interview with Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard (1955), "Would you say that the search for identity is primarily on American theme?" He answered: "It is the American theme. The nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are. It is still a young society, and this is an integral part of its development." (89)

He says that when he is invisible, refused to see, or touch or uncounted how could he do anything? Even though he is so, he could see them, hear and move. He is not dumb and blind. Such hopefulness stirred the emotions of youngsters. The African American students' sit-ins started in February 1960, spread rapidly over the South. They were aided by the Congress of Racial Equality, another direct action, non-violent, interracial organization founded By James Farmer and others in 1942, during Second World War, the NAACP, and SNCC (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured people and Students Non-violent Coordinating Committee). "The sit-ins and non-buying boycotts which often accompanied those desegregated hundreds of restaurants in Southern cities" (Kaiser 1977). In 1962, law was made against housing discrimination, but it was on paper only. Federal Housing Administration declared. "If a neighborhood is to retain stability it is necessary that properties shall be continued to be occupied by the same social and racial classes." (168) The African American social movements were trying to establish equality, and bring 'desegregation' in schools, houses and in the public places.



But white associations and segregationists were trying to establish 'Re-Segregation' in South America. Eric Sandquist observes: "The phrase 'social equality' is like a savage war hoop [that] arouses the deepest venom of race, which slumbers only skin deep beneath a thin veneer of civilization." (87)

Marginalization of the African Americans by whites, to some extent is understood, but even American laws supported them. The African Americans were restricted to enter white's restaurants, libraries, buses, parks, theatres and all public places. In the buses and theatre they had to seat in back sections, reserved for coloured people. Government spends differently on the African Americans and whites' education. In 1935-36- 37.87 dollars was spent for the white pupil per head in Southern State and 13.09 dollars for the African American pupil per head. In North, Negro schooling was considerable good. Salary of white and the African American teacher was also varying. Church colleges, private endowed colleges and in public colleges, everywhere segregation was found. It is reported that in 1935, "only 83 out of 565 libraries were providing services to Negroes." (Hope 1974)

### Summing up

To sum up, Ralph Ellison has used his effective and convincing unique style of writing that helped appeal not only to the conscience of the African American people for agitation against injustice inflicted on them by the White people; but also to the Whites for applying humanitarian approach towards them. He made his people understand the strength and great cultural heritage of the African descent by singing Jazz and knowing them such other things. He tried to maintain oral traditions in written form through his writing like *Invisible Man* so that coming generations may know it in original form. His balancing and logical presentation of the marginal status of his people, role of the Tusgee Institute and the search of identity in the white mist of America is appreciated by white people also. In short, his *Invisible Man* helped keep burning the issue. It added fuel to the literary movement run by Richard Wright's through *Native Son* and *Black Boy* and other writers.

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