RALPH ELLISON'S INVISIBLE MAN: A CULTURAL RESISTANCE

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Abstract: African-American writers of fiction have always been pre occupied with racial themes and cultural legacies. This is due to their history of enslavement and colonization. The variety of races thrown together has created a melting-pot and the writers often tend to focus on racial prejudice and colour hierarchies. They have been subject to some of the worst fonts of physical, political, social and educational deprivation. It is comparable to the Dalit and tribal situation in India. Many African-American writers are tend to examine the link between race and politics. The experiences of deprivation are often manifested in their fiction. The novel Invisible Man deals with the quest of an unnamed Black youth for personal/racial identity as he travels from South to North, from innocence to experience, from self-deception to knowledge, from spurious visibility to existential invisibility. Ellison's nameless hero, an existentialist underground man, learns that identity exists not in the eyes or others but in the creation of a self through violation and will .His vision has its sources in Fyodor Dostoevsky's insight into the "underground man", the alienated, isolated, neurotic child of disorder and chaos. But Ellison's expression of the theme is wholly American .Folk-materials, evangelical favour and the language of the jazz, and especially the blues endow the narrative with nervous, rhythmic energy. All of these techniques combine in Invisible man to render what Ellison has called "the bright magic of the fairy tale".

Keywords: Identity, Culture, Racial Discrimination, African-American

1.0 Introduction

The African-American literature is undoubtedly a declaration that fights against racial discrimination, marginalization and societal prejudice. At the beginning of the twentieth century, African-American writers confronted a surfeit of serious concerns: race and class disparity: disputes over morality and religion; questioning political nationalism and cultural lineage: they come across the dilemma of how to attain an exact African-American self in the face of obscuring assortment. The pursuit for a definite African-American identity led to the expansion of numerous chronic subjects such as revival and restitution, the "self-made man", and the multiculturalism that have disseminated in American literature since its beginning. The African-Americans have occupied an ironic space of concurrently inclusion and exclusion in the history of national literature. Even though they are undeniably Americans and have played a vital role in developing the United States' in to a world power, the bequest of slavery and the fragmentary, systemic racism have exclude from Americans of African descent from the existing definition and privileges of the American self.

The conflict in modern society is a cultural conflict or a cultural tension; some cultures are hailed as predominant while others are subordinate. In that way, cultural politics is very much related to the identity politics. One can review the apparent visible racial identity as a cultural identity as race is a cultural tool abused by the Whites to segregate the Blacks. Cultural politics is a politics of segregation which involves the denial of equality to the oppressed. Race is a cultural entity abused by the institutionalized power structures to subordinate certain people and deny them equity. The cultural politics of marginalization and segregation creates imagined peripheries dividing culturally oriented communities. All these elements of cultural imperialism, a king of interior colonialism, are aimed at literally liquidating the tribes and even native cultures. Indeed, "nation-ness" is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time. But, the "end of the era of nationalism" so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Nationalism, "nation-ness" and nationality have proved to be an uncomfortable anomaly for many literary theorists as they are cultural artefacts of a particular kind (Anderson). To understand them properly, we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time and why, they command such profound emotional legitimacy. An exhortation of a "counter culture" or "alter-nation" can be traced in their works, as they give our age a new metaphor for social alienation. Their definition of "invisibility", so much a part of the culture and language, like a coin handled by millions, is automatically invoked when we talk about the situation of American Blacks, or any social group we refuse to see.

2.0 Identity As Resistance:

The years since World War II have produced several outstanding novels by African-American writers: Richard Wright's *Native Son* and James Baldwin's *Go, Tell It on the Mountain* are two of the best African-American novels. But, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* cannot be classified simply as a novel by an American Negro about American Negroes. It retains a broad political focus on both racial consciousness and national culture by redefining the terms of social reality. Ralph Ellison's style of narration decidedly illuminates the African-American culture. He is profoundly original in putting his sophisticated technique and literary education to serve his vision of the racial and human condition in America.

The protagonist is a simpleton, who grows up into realization of how the world really functions and then, as a result of several setbacks, becomes capable of acting on his own condition. This is the unique vantage point of the protagonist as a Black man, and Ellison as a Black writer, determined to make a room for his own fiction. In experimental and democratic attitude, the exuberant, Hegelian movements gracefully blend diverse literary genres and traditions, from slave narratives to surrealistic, Kafkaesque parables, from Black folklore to Carl Jung. In spite of the complexity of the novels technique, the ideology of the author, which is nothing other than the cultural and identity politics, is transparent in the surface structure of this novel.

The most remarkable feature of the text is the explicitly first person narrative voice: the autobiographical "I". This makes the text a self –referential narrative. Ellison skilfully establishes the aesthetic distance between his protagonist and himself, between the matured "I", telling the story and the "I" who is victim, the mute, suffering through his strategic narrative technique. It reflects the assertion of an articulating African-American identity. Ellison is at the vanguard of African-American identity. This articulating identity is a paradigm of their ideological struggle which is a part of their racial unconscious.

As the narrator hails from African-American Community, he virtually belongs to a subculture. For as long as there has been a "mainstream" culture, there have been those who have stalked their position outside .There, they fashion out their own identities and communities, customs and styles and through these artefacts, they construct a "culture" of their own. Stuart Hall observes that subculture can provide a place to test out new identities, ideas and activities that deviate from the status quo. As they are self constructed, subcultures grant their constituents the power of creation and then a sense of ownership over what they have created .Subcultures are cultural resistance. This is the dialectic of cultural struggle. There are moments of resistance: there are also moment of suppression .In our times, it goes on continuously, in the complex line of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation, which make the field of culture a sort of constant battle field .A battle field where no once-for-all victories are obtained but where there are always strategic position to be won and lost. They turn out to be rebels as Hall remarks, to deconstruct the popular through the articulation of their cultural identity. This cultural identity which withstands the onslaught of political nationality is symbolic of their cultural distinctiveness.

The predominant theme in the works of Ellison is the quest for cultural identity. Although he does not realize this himself, the protagonist of Invisible Man seeks identity not as an individual, but as a Black man ill a White society. He encounters and combats the problem Ellison has identified in an interview with three young black writers in 1965:

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

The Invisible Man searches for self-definition in terms of the sense of life and values gained from the unique African-American experience.

His quest ends in the conviction that the Black experience is a different one: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for?" (IM). Cultural identity becomes indistinguishable from the human condition. Ellison promotes a broader view of identity which has its roots in "invisibility." For him, identity is a cultural construct used by ethnic and sexual groups to organize cultural resistance to the cultural hegemony practiced by dominant groups. The modern Black problematic of invisibility and namelessness can be understood as the condition of relative lack of Black power to represent themselves to themselves and others as complex human beings, and thereby to contest the negative, degrading stereotypes put forward by White supremacist ideologies. The initial Black response to being caught in this whirlwind of Europeanization was to resist the misrepresentation and caricature of the terms set by uncontested non-Black norms and models and to fight for self representation and recognition. Every modern Black person, especially cultural disseminators, encounters this problem of invisibility and namelessness. The initial Black response was a mode of resistance that was moralistic in content and communal in character (West). That is the fight for representation and recognition highlighting moral judgements regarding Black "positive" images over and against White supremacist stereotypes. These images

"represented" monolithic and homogeneous Black communities, in a way that could displace past misrepresentations of these communities.

By any measure, this one great work of Ellison is the most complex, multi-layered and challenging novel about race and being and the preservation of democratic ideals in American literature. His novel can be enjoyed as a thrilling odyssey that a native but ambitious young man undertakes through an entire universe of unforgettable characters and events. There is Mr. Norton, one of the White founders of a Black College, a "trustee of consciousness," who believes Negroes are his "fate" and discovers his deepest fears and desires mirrored by Jim True blood, a Black sharecropper who has committed incest. No less stirring is Dr. Bledsoe, the sinister administrator of a school that features a "bronze statue of college founder, the cold Father symbol and his hands outstretched in the breath-taking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave". Lucius Brockway, the Black labourer is installed in the bowels of Liberty Paints, the "machine within the machine"; Brother Jack is the leader of an organization "working for a better world for all people", and Ras, the Exhorter, a Harlem demagogue encapsulates in one powerful figure the Afro-centric thought from Marcus Garvey to Malcom X. Ellison says that all of them are blind to his protagonist's visibility. He gives a new definition of "invisibility" which is part of the culture and language.

Ellison's Invisible Man is a representation of Black identity politics. Racism, ideologically spelt as identity politics, is an oil-shoot of cultural politics, where the individual identifies with the native culture. Ellison feels that unless human beings recognize the mutual identity shared by independent individuals, no one can universalize these desires for identity into a true human vocation. As the novel's central motif indicates, the protagonist's painful but enlightening journey from the state of visibility to invisibility is a dominant metaphor in the life of the African-American. It is suggestive of the imposition of an alien culture on the African whose culture is devalued and whose identity is blotted out. Invisibility also suggests the plight and trauma which a man suffers when his fundamental rights are violated and his psyche is subdued by the dominant cultural group. He is forced to live in a hostile environment that makes him sterile and timid. He is stripped of his basic human dignity and is made to live under the threat of annihilation of his culture. In this regard, Todd M. Lieber remarks:

> In the formative stages of any culture, writers tend to participate in dialogues regarding issues or dominant concern. Often... The dialogue produces its own particular literary forms (conventions, images, metaphors and so forth) through which the cultural debate becomes the manifest in art... In Black American literature, one of the moat persuasive of these terms has been the metaphor of invisibility which attained wide spread recognition with the publication in 1952 of Ralph Ellison's much acclaimed novel *Invisible Man*.

His remarks unveil the notion of invisibility as of dominant concern. Ellison's fiction is concerned with people who, in terms of their ancestry, are displaced, dispossessed and separated from their identity and their cultural legacy or "history". But there is a strong conviction throughout the work that the identity and "history" should not be considered stable or essentialist. There are imaginative boundaries and limits which are perceived as signifying spaces in which cultural, political and economic powers are contested, negotiated or reaffirmed. This is not to say that there is no sympathy for the past; in the context of the instability and unpredictability, the present becomes a locus for an imagined community. A fantasy of identity and belonging turns on the notions of origins, roots, unarticulated histories and shared heritage.

In every society there is a culture of the colonizer which is dominant and politically elite culture. This is represented as the real culture. Subaltern culture is represented as "the Other", that which is subaltern culture is the "cultural Other" of the ruling culture. Post-Colonialism marks the end of colonialism, which never improved the condition of the colonized. The colonizer is replaced by native rulers. They are politically or culturally identical to formal rulers. Colonialism exists in a new form, with a difference that there are no foreign rulers, or invaders. This is a situation of Neo-colonialism which is experienced by all the Third world Countries like Nigeria and India. These nations are virtually plundered or looted by their own rulers.

African-American novels are generally regarded as the national narratives. They are understood also as the intra-colonial narratives. But for the African-Americans and their community, it is a subaltern narrative. The African-Americans consider their novels part of their identity and therefore, their narrative is a symbol of their identity. For the White readers and the readers of the other continents, it is a nationalist narrative. Ellison's novel, Invisible Mall is a representation of cultural politics practiced in America. Ellison attempts to evolve an identity in the context of this cultural politics. The protagonist of the novel, at first, tries to evolve a Black identity in consensus with the Whites. Cutting of his ancestral roots, later he conforms himself to the White American identity. Finally, he forms an identity of his own which is evolved from his African past and the American present. Thus African-American identity is part of the cultural resistance to negate the White attempts at cultural Othering. Black culture, of course, is a hybrid culture. The question of a dual national identity

emerges in their case as with immigrants and the Diaspora. But African-American culture is a unique culture and the protagonist finds an identity which negates the White American concept or the Black.

The White man considers the Blacks as the "cultural other" of the Whites. The stimulus here is the xenophobia; cultural Othering is a strategy which is part of cultural defence or cultural resistance. As part of the strategy, some mystique is attributed to the "Othered culture". The mystery that surrounds the Black culture is the figments of White Americans which are primarily rooted in the fear of African culture. In fact, fear of the races (xenophobia), especially fear of the alien nature of races, leads the dominant groups to the "cultural othering" of the subaltern cultures (Said). The White Americans practise a "cultural othering" of African-American culture. But the Black man considers his identity as something unique, which has evolved from his cultural ancestry and political nationality. An African-American is an amalgam of culture and politics, a hybrid of the cultural past and a political present. The protagonist's race or ethnicity is part of his culture and in that sense; his experience is a cultural discrimination rather than the racial discrimination.

The protagonist's encounter with the Brotherhood is, in fact, a cultural encounter with the Brotherhood is, in fact, a cultural encounter. No White protagonist can have a similar encounter in the world of fiction. The Communist perspective of slavery is that it is an economic issue; but it is not the reality. It is both an economic and ethical issue. This is why he leaves the Brotherhood. Here slavery is a part of his ethnicity and culture. His encounters provide varied experiences which form, add or subtract certain characteristics of his identity. Thus, identity formation is a process of resisting or even negating the "cultural othering" of the Blacks by the Whites. The African-Americans refuse to accept the contention that they are the "cultural other" of the Whites because "othering" is always related to marginalization.

Another strategy adopted by the Whites is to generalize or universalize the problems the problems of the Blacks. There is a political motive behind this process. Any attempt at homogenization or universalization is an attempt to depoliticize their experience. This is true in the case of subalterns because their identity is framed on a principle: "the personal is the political". It is the political agenda by which the agents of power structures try to generalize everything. This attempt at depoliticisation is again resisted by the subalterns. Black identity formation is an attempt to resist the White strategy of generalizing and universalizing issues and depoliticizing their problems.

The Blacks are called the "visible minorities" or the "coloured people". Even though the Black man is not physically invisible, he is culturally and politically invisible. This identity formation is a political process to subvert the strategic depoliticisation of the Blacks. The protagonist of the *Invisible Man* tries to foil the strategic attempts to depoliticize the complexity and ambivalence of African-American identity by the Whites. Any notion of the "real Black community" and "positive images" are value-laden, socially loaded and ideologically charged. Stuart Hall has rightly called this encounter "the end of innocence or the end of the innocent notion of the essential Black subject... the recognition that "Black" is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category." This recognition is facilitated and unleashed by new political possibilities and cultural articulations among formerly colonized people across the globe.

3.0 Conclusion

Ellison exploits all the cultural symbols from the African-American history, folklore, rhetoric and music to affirm and uphold the dignity and identity of the African-Americans. He devotes himself to identify and preserve the diversity in American experience which is essential to the Blacks as they have their own stream of culture flowing with the influence of the mainstream American culture. For African-Americans, novel is a subaltern narrative and the narrative is a symbol of their identity. American experience offers the possibility of contributing not only to the growth of literature but to the shaping of the culture also. The American novel, in this sense, is a conquest of the frontier, as it describes our experience and creates it. *Invisible Man* epitomizes the essence of being an African-American by recreating his cultural image aesthetically and contributing to the creative development of both the African-American culture and the American novel. It is a unique representation of cultural politics practised in America. Ellison's *Invisible Man* gives the most comprehensive treatment of Black predicament in twentieth century fiction. Invisibility is the absence of social reality felt by the Blacks, whose colour prevents them from being seen by others as individuals. The novel depicts the heartlessness that vitiates social reality as something neither White nor Black, but purely American. He makes the Negro an Invisible Man, a Black American everyman.

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