

INVISIBLE MAN: AFRICAN-AMERICANS' STRUGGLE FOR VISIBILITY

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Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls, Into that heaven of freedom, my Father let my country awake.¹

...says Rabindranath Tagore in a song of *Gitanjali*, where he expresses his concern for the entire humanity. The line has a universal significance, since it throws light on the fact that society is always divided on the basis of caste, class, color, religion, gender, etc. The humanists, in all times and climes, have a desire that equality, fraternity, unity, and social justice should be the foundations of society. However, the world has been observing a hostile picture to this expectation. Violence, corruption, inequality are the characteristic features of all societies in all times. Literature reflects the faithful image of human life. The life projected in various literary works is full of contradictions but it is real. It gives a type of jerk to the readers and makes them introspective. So, their outlook becomes broadened, sensibility sharpened, and vision clear.

Mrs. Indira Gandhi opines:

Education is a liberating force and in our age, it is also a democratizing force cutting across the barriers of caste and class smoothing out the inequalities, imposed upon us by birth and other circumstances.²

By and large her statement sounds true, but contradictory, when it is examined in the light of the novel *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. Writers, like Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin have a deep longing for the complete integration of the blacks with the mainstream of the American life. They have a dream of creating a society which is characterized by unity in diversity. But the emotional integration is not something easily accessible. Evil is always tempting and man derives a sadistic pleasure in inflicting miseries on others. Victim-victimizer relationship is a perennial relationship characterizing all societies in all times. The society is fiercely competitive, where the weak are ruthlessly crushed by the strong. So, to win all civil rights in the real sense, the blacks in America must fight against the hostile forces with all their moral, intellectual, and organizational vigour. If the blacks are not reckoned by the white Americans as their equals, they will lose their identity in America. It is observed that they have desperately always been in search of an identity. The American blacks have no past; they will have no future either. They will be always caught up into a dreadful nightmare. Dr. Martin Luther King says, "Every black man is a little white, and every white man is a little black. And the fact is that there can never be a separate path to power and fulfillment that does not intersect white routes."³ America has to realize this as well as accept this, if she wants to survive as a nation with her democratic creed.

Ralph Ellison is one of the most powerful American novelists who has emerged after the post-world war. His genius is characterized by unusual creativity, powerful expression, sharp incisive sensibility, profound psychological insight, and comprehensive vision. As a Negro writer, Ellison's theme is the Negro-subculture, which is the product of American history. One cannot separate it from the American culture. On the contrary, it is an integral part, one of the ingredients of the main stream of American culture. According to J. M Waghmare, "Ellison seems to emphasize the Negro subculture, adding that the mainstream of American life should feel the rhythm of the Negro life. That the American Negroes have helped to build the superstructure of American civilization is a broad truth of history."⁴ Although the interrelationship of the whites and the blacks has created a cultural dualism in the American life, one cannot deny the fact that the black subculture is as much American as the white culture. R. P. Warren states " I defend the subculture, because, I have to work out of it, because it is precious to me, because I believe it is a vital, contributing part of the total culture."⁵

As a writer, Ellison is in the search of a unity in the diversity of American life and civilization. In his words, he seems to ask the question to himself: What is America to me? For him, America is a dream, a reality, a hope, and a promise. She means a pain, too. He has found his identity in America and believes: "the identity of Negro is bound irrevocably with the identities of white Americans"⁶ This is the central theme of the novel *Invisible Man*. Here, in this novel, he has defined himself as an American writer, blacks as Americans, and America as a civilization with all her pains and pleasures, her illusions and realities, her diversity and complexity.

Invisible Man is considered to be one of the best American novels published during the last fifty years. It won Ellison national recognition with the national book award in 1952. It is a novel of the Negro myth and a man, both submerged in invisibility. It delineates a protagonist who is in the search of identity. So, the novel is mainly concerned with the identity of a black individual who suffers a painful alienation and loss of individuality. His is the world of nightmares. The prologue of the novel throws light on the baffling situation in which the hero is caught in his encounter with his tragic destiny.

The invisible man in the novel is the narrator of the story. He refers to himself as being invisible but not in the sense of being a spirit or a ghost or a freak created by the scientist. In the prologue to the novel, the narrator makes it clear that he has a visible body, and that he is made of flesh and bones like everybody else, but that he is invisible in the sense that people take no notice of him and pay no heed to him. He is underestimated by them. They think of him to be too unimportant an entity to be recognized as really having any identity. Therefore, he appears to be the representative of the majority of the people in every country who do exist in a physical or bodily sense, but who receive no attention from others.

The novel deals with the relations existing between the blacks and the whites in the United States of America. It depicts the attitudes of the white people in general towards the blacks in America and that of the blacks towards the whites. However, it simultaneously throws light on the efforts of certain individuals to promote a mutual understanding between the two races in that country. The present relationship between the whites and the blacks in the U. S. A. is not really a satisfactory one because the blacks look upon the whites as the oppressors, while the whites treat the blacks as their inferiors. It is a known fact that, for a long time, the blacks worked as the slaves of the whites who had purchased them. Slavery was for a long time an established and well-entranced institution in America; and it was more widespread and more deeply rooted in the Southern States than in the Northern States of the country. With the civil

war, under the leadership of Abraham Lincoln, the slavery in America came to an end in 1865. The narrator of the story in this novel is a Negro, who comes from a family of slaves liberated in 1865. His story begins, when he has attained the age of twenty. It throws light on the plight of the Negroes in the USA even after they had formally and officially been liberated from slavery. The whites continued to look upon the Negroes with contempt, and the Negroes continued to suffer the agony of the humiliations to which they were subjected by the whites although a number of associations and societies kept trying all the time to bring about a mutual understanding between the two races. The narrator in the story himself takes no sides. He appears to be a detached observer. However, the silent compassion of the narrator towards his black fellowmen runs like an undercurrent throughout the novel.

The novel is a running commentary on the contemporary situation in America since even today, nearly sixty years after the publication of this novel, the blacks suffer from many disabilities in America although constitutionally they are recognized as American citizens and, therefore, are entitled to all the rights which the whites enjoy.

The story of the novel begins, when the narrator is about twenty years old. Although the time span of the story from its beginning to its end has not clearly been specified, it can be understood that the events of the story from its beginning to its end cover not more than a couple of years. The story starts with the narrator as a student at school and it ends with the narrator in a state of mingled hope and despair after having gone through a series of painful, shocking experiences over a period of two years or so.

The prologue to the novel sets the tone. It starts with, “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe’s nor am I one of your Hollywood movie 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, understand simply because people refuse to see me.”⁷

These words express the predicament of the protagonist. He is invisible in spite of his being a man of flesh and fiber, blood and bones. His black color is the main reason of his invisibility. Throughout the novel, it is suggested that blackness is an antithesis of visibility. One’s visibility is the recognition of one’s individuality. But the protagonist’s color has threatened that recognition. Sitting in the dark hole, he philosophizes his invisibility and, at the same time, re-evaluates his past life.

The novel starts with the Battle Royal episode. The protagonist is invited by the superintendent of his school to deliver a speech at a ceremonial gathering attended by the prominent businessmen of the town. The invitation gives him the sense of self-importance and he regards it as a triumph for the whole Negro community of the town. However, he is modest and humble, since he believes that humility is the secret of success; it is the very essence of progress. He comes to the place to deliver his speech. But he is forced to participate in the Battle Royal a vulgar and brutal ritual along with a group of other Negro boys. They are all confronted with a dancing naked blonde in a battle room, a magnificent mirrored hall filled with cigar smoke and whisky smell and high-pitched music. This naked blonde, beautiful ‘bird-girl’ arouses in the mind of this young man feeling of love and hate, anger and admiration, attraction and repulsion. This violent, sensuous, obscure, exciting, erotic, and hysterical scene is followed by the Battle Royal in which the colored boys are forced to fight against each other for the amusement of the white spectators. Meanwhile, the protagonist is humiliated and severely beaten. The vulgar ritual at Battle Royal is symbolic of the degradation and the dehumanization of the Negro in the white society. The battle royal ritual is an off-shoot of the institutionalized slavery. But the Negro takes pleasure in this ritual, however degrading it might be. At the end of the Battle Royal, the

protagonist, despite the humiliation that he confronts at the hands of the brutal white businessmen, delivers his speech. As a reward of his speech, he receives a scholarship to study in a Southern Negro College. But along with this reward, he is also given an inscription in his briefcase: “To whom it may concern: Keep this Nigger boy running”. The society strictly follows it like a guideline, since the novel depicts the protagonist’s desperate running across the landscapes of nightmare.

The youth, with the advancement of the scholarship, joins the Negro institution in the south. He has the feeling of gratitude as he thinks that now he has become a part of the great institution which works for the welfare of the Negroes, which is the part of the American Dream. However, before completing his education, he is expelled from that institution by the black president, Dr. Bledsoe, for an indiscretion which he has committed. This indiscretion consists in having taken one of the distinguished white trustees of the college, named Mr. Norton, to a shabby and dilapidated Negro dwelling at some distance from the college campus, and from there, to a house of ill-fame, known as the Golden Day. Br. Bledsoe, although a black, has neither sense nor sensibility, neither compassion nor consideration. On the contrary, he believes that white is right. The ‘white mightology’ is widely prevalent in the south and Dr. Bledsoe knows this reality. The boy is asked to leave the institution the very next day. Bledsoe is of the opinion that the Negro people always remember that they must accept the responsibility for their acts and that they should avoid becoming bitter. Hence, he advises the protagonist, “Son, if you do not become bitter, nothing can stop you from success.” After this expulsion, the protagonist goes to the Northern city of New York in the quest of a job in order to earn money with the help of which he can resume his studies, since Bledsoe has given him some letters of recommendation with a vague promise that the young man would be readmitted to the institution after some time. But these letters of recommendation are later found by the protagonist to be just the opposite of what they had seemed to be, because he receives no help from any of the distinguished white men to whom the letters are addressed. Somehow, he manages to get a job at a paints factory called “Liberty Paints”, but is, soon afterwards, badly let down by his immediate boss, Lucius Brockway, who is himself a Negro but who cares for nobody and nothing except his own self and his ego.

The Negro youth has no security of job. He lives in filthy conditions. However, his success theory still guides him and gives him hope to brighten his future. He takes every precaution for the sake of his job. He keeps himself away from the activities of the union-workers. But one day, he loses his temper with the union and is involved in a quarrel with a worker. It results in a heavy blast in the factory. He finds himself in the factory hospital to undergo a hard, unusual, precarious treatment.

The treatment is quite successful and he is declared to have been born again. It is, of course, a symbolic rebirth. He is prepared to accept a new identity. He realizes that he has no alternative but to accept the effects of the antagonistic industrial civilization. He is conscious of the fact that his individual liberty is at stake. When asked, the protagonist could not answer these questions: What is your name? Who are you? Who is your mother and what is her name? He has no name and nothing is known about his parents. It is in the factory hospital that he becomes serious and confronts the problem of identity. He is told that he is born again and, therefore, must accept the new life.

The protagonist is enlisted as a member of an organization called the Brotherhood by the chairman of this organization named Brother Jack due to his eloquent and impassioned speech at a protest gathering. This organization works actively for a mutual understanding between the

whites and the blacks in the city of New York. The protagonist begins his work on behalf of the organization sincerely and zealously. He feels that he has plunged himself into the broad stream of history. Never before has he felt about the grievances of the people so much as he does now. He acquires an intellectual stature and understands the ideological meaning and purpose of the Brotherhood. He becomes a powerful voice of the people. The Brotherhood offers him an opportunity to explore the possibility of transcending the racial limits.

The protagonist works first in Harlem (a part of the city inhabited wholly by the blacks), and later downtown, where he is required by the leaders of the organization to lecture to the people on the rights of women in the USA. In Harlem, he tries to restore the confidence of the people in the organization. They are under the influence of Ras the Exhorter, who misleads the people by telling that the main purpose of the organization is to perpetuate the supremacy of the whites in America. The protagonist has tried his best to put a new life into the organization but soon he alienates the top leadership of the organization by his action in arranging a public funeral for Tod Clifton, the black man, who had suddenly disappeared from Harlem and who is later shot down by a white policeman in a public street, where Clifton, disguised as a hawker, has been found selling toy dolls and attracting the crowd by this display of the dancing dolls, contrary to the regulations.

The protagonist is now directed by his leaders to contact the Brotherhood's theoretician, Brother Hambro and receive from him the proper guidance for his future work. Brother Hambro advises him to subordinate his own views to "the collective wisdom" of the Brotherhood. So, the protagonist comes to the conclusion that the Brotherhood is an organization of a communist type which gives no importance to the individual and wants the orders and directives of the top leadership to be obeyed by all the office-beaters and members under all circumstances. Therefore, all the members including him are invisible men in the sense that he has to carry out the Brotherhood's orders and directives without having any real identity in the eyes of the top leaders of the organization.

Meanwhile, riot takes place in the streets due to the inflammatory speeches of Ras, the Exhorter, who also tries to hit the protagonist. He incites the blacks against the whites. The frenzied mobs of the blacks have begun to loot the shops and stores of the whites. The protagonist takes shelter in a manhole in a sewer and, falling asleep there because of sheer fatigue, sees a dream in which he is castrated by Dr. Bledsoe, Mr. Norton, Brother Jack, Brother Hambro, Ras, and others. Waking up, he decides to stay on in the man-hole as long as necessary. But he has a hope in his mind that some sort of understanding between the blacks and the whites would emerge in the course of time, as America is one though woven of many strands. It is only by a harmonious interweaving of the diverse strands, and not by a merging together the various cultures, races, and beliefs, that a satisfactory living can be achieved by the nation as a whole.

Invisible Man depicts the tragedy of the young generation that fails to reach the goal in an advanced, developed, civilized, and most powerful country like America. As he is the spokesman of the young black youths and since his dream is the part of the American Dream, his tragedy is the tragedy of his nation. Suffering is their lot, the badge of their tribe. Like the gentleman in Robert Kipling's poem titled "If", he is "not tired of waiting". "Endurance is his strength, humanity is his shield. He progresses from illusion to illusion and in the end, disillusionment is the only reality he discovers. Self exiled in the dark coal cellar, he contemplates his 'uprootedness' his 'nowhereness', and his 'lostness'".⁸ However, like Sisyphus, he is not tired of pushing the stone up towards the top of the mountain, though it always rolls back downward.

The entire tone of the novel is one of pessimism, but it ends on an optimistic note, since the protagonist thinks that America will be one in the years to come. The novel throws light on the protagonist's desperate struggle to achieve an identity in the hostile world that is not ready to take a cognizance of him. He goes on shifting his role by changing his places and his work. Being exhausted totally he falls asleep and dreams of being chased and besieged by his enemies.

The novel is of the picaresque type. It contains a detailed account of the adventures and the mishaps which the protagonist encounters at various places in different situations. The novel is episodic in structure and consists of a series of the events and happenings which are not interwoven or even interlinked. Throughout the novel, the protagonist is presented as a man who has been trying to find an identity for himself but, instead of getting it, he has lost whatever little of it he possessed in the beginning. And toward the end of the novel, he is a man without any identity. It is for this reason that he describes himself as an invisible man. The protagonist appears to be a cursed spirit of Sisyphus since, in the epilogue, he declares that he has not given way to despair and is, on the contrary, quite hopeful that things would take a favorable turn not only for himself but for the entire American people including both the whites and the blacks. Like Hemingway's Santiago, he appears to remain invincible. He is limitless, and has a longing to go beyond horizons. He is a dreamer.

The sense of alienation pervades the protagonist's entire life. He experiences a sense of alienation from the people around him at all the subsequent stages of his career. The novel depicts the black man's search for his own identity in a society that mechanically denies it to him. He is an intellectual even though he has failed to pursue higher studies in the formal sense. Throughout the novel, there are intermittent references that he has an extraordinary reasoning power and oratorical talent. He has his own ethos and a personal code of ethics. He has a living conscience that never allows him to give up his individuality for any material gain. The society that consists of the blacks and the whites succeeds in humiliating and exploiting the protagonist and fulfill its promise of "keeping this nigger-boy running". In consequence, he is at last totally alienated. However, he does not make any compromise with his faith, conscience, and convictions. He truly and fairly represents the voice of the Negroes, the people who are primarily honest, sincere, and modest. No doubt, he has two identities: the racial (being a black) and the American (being the American citizen). In spite of having this dual identity, he becomes invisible, for the one is lost and the other denied. Though a progressive society, the nation rejects him totally— his citizenship and his humanity on the ground of being a black. Yet he is undaunted and stands erect with both his feet firmly planted on the ground. So, one is justified in supporting Waghmare's remark on the novel. It goes thus: "Historically, he is uprooted, socially, he is segregated, and psychologically, he is alienated. Yet his utopian optimism crowns his tragic destiny."⁹

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