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Metaphor of Invisibility as Counter-Hegemonic Discourse in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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Abstract

Throughout history, the trope of invisibility has always been ascribed to black Americans, right from period of intense slavery till twentieth century post-emancipation era and beyond. And for centuries, African American literature has always exposed racist inclinations and identity disillusionment that have characterised blacks as the periphery of the American society. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* encapsulates the postcolonial preoccupations of despotism, racial discrimination, as well as physical and mental subjugation often associated with blacks in American society. Beyond this notion, this paper re-engages invisibility as a metaphor that deconstructs the oppressive stance of racism. It further explores the trope of invisibility not as element of physical and psychological subjugation, but as inherent reconstruction of black assertiveness.

Key Words: Counter-Hegemony Discourse, Invisibility, Racism, Identity and Postcolonialism.

> The history of the Negro in America is the history of America written in vivid bloody terms; it is the history of Western Man writ small. It is the history of men who tried to adjust themselves to a world whose laws, customs, and instruments of force were leveled (sic) against them. The Negro is America's metaphor. - Richard Wright.

Introduction

It can be argued that there is no greater irony in any other history of emancipation of a race except that of the African American people. Years after the official abolishment of slavery in 1865, for which hundreds of thousands of Americans irrespective of race, colour or gender paid the dear price, the African American race was still not *free*. It took almost another century for the African American people, not to actually gain the much

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savoured freedom, but to come to terms with the fact that the freedom they sought was not enough to liberate them completely. Therefore, the twentieth century, bearing in mind complex factors, becomes a significant phase in the African American history, a period that marks the psycho-dynamic reconstruction of not only the black American, but the entire American society.

The collective struggle for the black American emancipation started right after the abolishment of slavery in 1865. The next fifty years or more of the average black American, without doubt, revolved round the tenacious grip of a more complex hegemony, stronger and perhaps more effective than slavery. There was an attempt at redefining the lives of the former slaves both by themselves and more evidently by their 'former' masters. One of the most significant characters in the novel by Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Mr Norton, a trustee of the Tuskegee Institute, lends credence to this assertion. "...Slavery was just recently past. Your people did not know in what direction to turn and, I must confess many of mine didn't know in what direction they should turn either..." (Ellison, 1952: 36).

By this statement, Ellison reminds us of a momentous phase in the history of the American society, by and large few decades after the abolishment of slavery, where the general country becomes overwhelmed by the layers of occurrences which threaten not just the social order, but the very foundation on which the autonomy of the New World then is built. Once again, a revert to history is unquestionable, given the role the African slaves played, directly or indirectly, unwillingly and equally otherwise, in reshaping the New World and re-entrenching the independence and perhaps self-assertiveness which the United States of America, not just a federating state, but a world power, enjoys today.

Horton J.O. & Horton L.E. (2008) recall the historical antecedents of how the 'centre' is born. According to these critics, history reveals that one of the crucial factors which led to the American Revolution in 1775 has its tentacles of the prevailing issue of slavery. In November 1775, the British colonial governor of Virginia issued a proclamation that all slaves belonging to rebels would be received into the British forces and freed for their services. As recorded, tens of thousands of slaves escaped from Southern plantations, and over a thousand fought for the British. In a twist of fate, General George Washington also began to recruit black soldiers, with the same promise of freedom such that before the war was over, thousands of

African Americans served side by side with white slave masters in the Revolutionary Army.

Here, two issues emerged which triggered the consciousness of the African American at that period; first, the intervention of the blacks in preventing the continuation of the tenacious British rule cannot be over emphasised; that is, North America's freedom from the strongest colonial masters at that time, Britain, which symbolically points to their own long expected freedom from slavery and other forms of inhumane experiences. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, the black American's decisive and resourceful contribution to the success of the American civil war also trigger the consciousness of the New World as rightly and partly theirs, having fought and bled for it. The thematic preoccupation of home and self-identity becomes more realistic. The metaphor of reintegration becomes vivid, with a mild but burning question - if the reintegration of African American into the revolution army is possible, what stops the African American to be re-integrated into that same society in which they fought and bled for? Perhaps this assertion lends credence to the historical reality that black slaves fought on both sides in their quest for freedom.

But if by providence there was a stringent division among slave drivers about the humanity of the blacks, even after the civil war, there was certainly, but perhaps unconscious consensus about the status quo of the black Americans, as exemplified, again, in the words of Mr. Norton. As the dust of the Revolution War settles, it becomes impertinent for the spoils of the war to be shared. For all Americans, both blacks and whites, the philosophical question of identity and function arose with this question – If they (blacks Americans) are no more slaves, then, what are they (most especially to us whites)? It becomes pertinent that slavery should not end. For optimum economic benefits, especially the urge not to lose that inherent supremacy, the whole ideology of racial segregation and inequality would perhaps not have resurfaced at a more appropriate period, which further spurred the protest discourse, physical and literary for many decades, with its climax, cascading during the Harlem Renaissance.

Ironically, the ideals of the revolution are never respected. Many African Americans hoped and believed that the men who wrote such lofty words – "all men are created equal" would realise the immorality of continuing to enslave their fellow countrymen. In fact, the issue of slavery was neither mentioned nor addressed in the Constitution written in 1787, but a

compromise was struck, enabling slave trade to continue until 1808, which in fact became more concentrated in the South. Cayton's impatience with such unconcealed hegemony, as expressed in his essay, "Ideological Forces in the Work of Negro Writers", edited by Herbert Hill in the book, *Anger, and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States*, represents the mood of thousands of disillusioned blacks, who or a relative member or more, had participated in the civil war.

> How much time have we to convince the Americans and the world that democracy does not mean white domination? Not much. I believe that the Negro must get himself into positions of power. We need laws and the continuation of picket lines and demonstrations to awaken our people and the whole of American society. (Cayton, 1996:48)

It is during this period that the invisibility of the black man in the American world becomes obvious. However, another destructive analogy was born – it becomes equally pertinent for blacks to find their sense of identity only from the ostensibly vantage position – through the eyes of the white imperialist. This paper therefore re-represents that trope of invisibility not as weakness, but as a weapon of freedom from the clutches of tyranny as well as physical and psychological repression. This theoretical framework is hinged on the postcolonial reactions between the coloniser (centre) and the colonised (periphery), which births the postcolonial concepts of race, identity and class. Albert Memmi (1965:124), cited in Judith Tabron (2003), views "the relationship between colonizer and colonized as the desire of the colonized to somehow take the place of the colonizer, which is an impossibility. It is an impossibility because the colonizer will never accept the colonized into his group". This assertion foregrounds the struggle of black Americans in asserting themselves into a despotic white American society. It is this struggle that is further deconstructed in Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Invisible Man: Racism, Identity Struggle and the Consistency of Invisibility

Invisible Man, according to several critics and much to its ascribed contemporary relevance today, draws out a universal motif of the search for identity, especially for all Americans, alongside race, colour and even gender. In fact, the novel's electrifying sensuality further spreads its inevitable tentacles particularly to the shores of Africa, and the world in

general, as it would be emphasised later on in the course of this work. According to Harold Bloom (2008:8);

> Lurking in the book, underground with its protagonist, is a tragedy, not so much of the African Americans but of most Americans of good will, of whatever lineage. Call it the social tragedy of the United States of America, already two nations if not more, and being driven toward despair and violence by the emancipation of selfishness that belongs to the political age.

If Bloom suggestively ascribed the novel as a tragic representation of the American world, would it not be expedient to draw attention to the root cause(s) of the so-called tragedy, an expression which appears quite inappropriate for the underlining purposeful significance of the novel. The novel proffers a distinctive revelation of the African American society in the mid nineteenth century; a society at the brink of self-destruction due to imminent socio-cultural, political and psychological rebirth or a hitherto suppressive race. Simply put, it was the beginning of a counter-hegemonic stance of the African American race from the clutches of racial suppression, used more as the psychological bludgeon to disintegrate every iota of black assertive to a depressive state of physical and intellectual genuflection.

An absolute focus on the issue of racism would appear as an attempt at flogging an already dead horse, so it seems. But the emphatic precipitation of the novel's description, strictly lending credence solely to the fantasy of a suggestive universal appeal, however correct the assertion may be within the socio-political context of the American world then and now, would suggestively become ambivalent and abstract, when it comes to societal application. *Invisible Man*, like any good work of literature, refracts its immediate environment by portraying the perceptively controversial, but sadly domineering theme of racial discrimination – an obvious but crucial foundation on which the 'legalised' institution of racism - physical, mental and psychological dominion of whites. This is exemplified in the *Jim Crow Law*, upon which the counter-hegemonic literary insurrection began.

Therefore, it is rather expedient for a black writer in the early nineteenth century to be conscious of his role in his work as a liberator of the racist-inclined American society, directly or indirectly. Byerman (2005:2) attests to this value, saying; "the problems of the race were considered so desperate

that to use one's skills for anything other than protest, group assertion, or amelioration was considered wasteful, escapist, and perhaps treasonous." Ellison recognises this indelible historical reality, but rightly, one must admit, focuses on the large vision by articulating the identity search not from a limiting racial perspective but collective unifying responsibility.

Nevertheless, Ellison recognises the danger of just telling half-the-truth. His strong apathy for racism was not evidently conspicuous in the novel, but the author saliently joins in the teeming counter-hegemonic protests of the likes of Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Malcolm X and so on, arguing that the white man, without the black, is equally *invisible* as emphasised by the self-alluding Mr Norton's rhetoric to the young narrator.

> '...I (Norton) had a feeling that your (young narrator) people were somehow connected with my destiny. That what happened to you was connected with what would happen to me...'
>
> I slowed the car, trying to understand. Through the glass I saw him gazing at the long ash of his cigar, holding it delicately in his slender, manicured fingers. 'Yes, you are my fate, young man. Only you can tell me what it really is. (38)

By tracing the exact foundation of the black man's invisibility (lack of recognition) in the American society, it is only then that the significance for a collective search for identity can be appreciative. But however heartbreaking the novel may seem to many critics, among them is Byerman, as a result of the sequel of exploitative and unfortunate experiences of the narrator, the description of the novel simply as a tragedy, as earlier mentioned, is counter-productive. Unlike other African American authors, whose overwhelming experiences, enshrouded in the pathetic historical account of private black individuals, just like Kinta Kunte in Haley's *Roots*, Ellison's novel is a masterpiece of the African American's subtle assertiveness, as contained in the prologue of the novel. The summary of the African American's invisibility is emphasised in the first paragraph of the prologue novel.

> 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-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... When they approach me
> they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of
> their imagination- indeed, everything and anything except
> me. (Ellison, 1952:7)

The significance of Ellison's novel lies in its overwhelming discovery, a revelation of the mutual blindness which has affected the attitude and the collective identity of African American race, such that for decades, black Americans have struggled and toiled for self assertion, only believing that their recognition can only be valid only from the introspection of the white man, thus further entrenching the racial, derogative notion. Ralph Ellison was indeed diplomatic in suggesting this view in the very first chapter of the novel.

The denial of the African American struggle against all forms of repression, while emphasising on the non impressive justification of cultural integration, would perhaps not yield the expected response to the question concerning the significance of the African American identity. In other words, the search for identity begins with the past – precisely what made the average post-slavery African American invisible for more than a century even after the abolition of slave trade.

Saunders Redding (1950) cited in Nathaniel Norment Jnr (2009:154) opens up his argument on a controversial notion, stating that "the thought that the Negro American is different from other Americans is still unpalatable to most Negroes." He immediately suggests one of the most intimidating experiences in the search for self assertiveness lies in the principle of assimilation. But Redding continues, "the Negro is different. An iron ring of historical circumstance has made him so." He ironical adds. "But the difference is of little depth." Ignoring the noticeable taint of cynicism, the very significant point is however made and equally buttressed by Robert Bone (1958), stating "with this balanced view (by Redding), I agree. It is a serious mistake to gloss over or to ignore strong cultural differences, in order to speed up the process of integration."

Therefore, when considering the essence of the *Invisible Man*, one must not be too excited over the prospect of the surface level discourse of re-integration, especially in terms of race because that, no matter the level of condescension and evasiveness in the phizog of the twenty-first century media-toned vibe on equality in America, is the foundation on which the invisibility of the African American in the twentieth century stems from, the characteristics that define the African American as a group of people, according to Bone (1958:2), from "a distinctive group experience in America."

How possible is it for the African American individual to remain blind and nonchalant to this above stated history in the quest for the so-called cultural re-integration, and importantly, in the constant search for individual as well as communal identity? This can be likened to swimming an entire breadth of the river, while hoping and praying not to get wet. Further fuelling the irony, the invisibility of the black American comes from the institutionalisation of a strong complex hegemony – the premise of cultural assimilation, which, hitherto, was structurally prevented by the slave masters. Again, Bone summarised the whole episode in very clear terms.

> When the African slave was torn from his home land and brought to the New World, he was quickly denuded of his native culture. Tribal organisation, language, family structure, religion – all were systematically extirpated. In rebuilding his shattered life, he was compelled to appropriate his materials from a new culture. But his masters permitted him access to Western culture on a very strict basis. Christianity had its uses, but slaves were forbidden by law to learn to read or write. The process of assimilation was deliberated obstructed by the whites. (Bone, 1958:3)

But in the twentieth century, as surreptitiously described in the *Invisible Man*, the process of assimilation was controlled again by the whites. Ellison carefully unfolds layers of the black stigmatisation in the depiction of his characters in the novel. Before venturing into the text, it is imperative to proffer the enabling background to the definition and socio-historical depth of the process of assimilation, as it affects the black American, right from the slavery period till even the late twentieth century. Langston Hughes was brief but concise – "the urge to whiteness within a race." Some notable

writers have explored this concept, out of whom are Abram Kardiner and Loinel Liversey, whose text, *The Mark of Oppression* (New York, 1951), has evidently attempted to define. However, the term suggests a desire to be white, consciously or unconsciously, therefore incessant quest towards appropriating from a dominant culture. But it transcends that mild level, burrowing further into a depth of self denunciation, self hatred. As Richard Wright (1940:3) would put it, "Hatred by whites, and being an organic part of the culture that hated him, the black man grew in time to hate in himself what others hate in him."

Without question, the character of Dr. Bledsoe comes to mind, who recognises his own limitations and takes it out on the young narrator; for example, claiming that the young narrator's actions (or inactions) could have the whole school's reputation. Bledsoe does all necessary to survive in the harsh realities of the American society in the 50s, to remain relevant, especially in the eyes of the white trustees. He sees himself as a black stereotype much to the chagrin of the young narrator, whose principles, initially, were naively conditioned towards the seemingly perfect deceptive ideology of the white man (Mr. Norton, who he eventually finds weak, gullible and incredibly lost as well) and also towards wholesome assimilation of the ostensibly thriving black stereotype (Dr. Bledsoe, who becomes a shocking epitome of deception and narcissism).

Dr. Bledsoe's unconscious assimilation is further revealed when he expelled the young narrator, simply, because 'he' (Bledsoe) felt threatened. Bledsoe believes that the only problem of the white man is the black man, but more interesting, the black man's 'utterances'. His uneasiness escalated about the young narrator's report about the Negro doctor who treated Mr Norton. The veterinarian recognises the metaphor of the white check, definition of blacks as "to some, the great white father, to others the lyncher of souls, but for all, you are confusion..."

The allegory of the Battle Royal scene clearly depicts the American social class order, better still a definition of the black American as a tool for amusement. Ralph Ellison significantly opens our eyes to the reality that the cultural disintegration of the blacks, along the lines of race, religion or any other difference, further strengthens the superiority and intellectual assertiveness of perhaps few white despots, who thrive on the downfall of the blacks, rather than alleviates it. The significance of the Battle Royal must never be ignored. Ellison does not emphasise a switch in role play, a black

superiority. No! He simply opens our eyes to the realities of the society that blacks must come together, reintegrate into a communal force. More importantly, Tatlock's insistence, during the boxing match, to bring the young narrator down, much to the delight of the white present, clearly depicts the psychological brainwash that the best and only way to rise to the level of the white is to ride on the shoulder of another black fellow.

> Then, one a sudden impulse I struck him lightly and as we clinched, I whispered, "Fake like I knocked you out, you can have the prize."

> "I'll break your behind," he whispered hoarsely. " F o r them?" "For me, sonofabitch!" (Ellison, 1952:25)

Certainly, the recurring metaphor of blindness, as emphasised by Ellison, remains foremost when analysing the realities of the black's experience in the 1950s. Just as the boys thrown into the ring were blindfolded by the watchers of the game, to deny the fact that the taint of blindness is not spurred by racial conviction is to deny the obvious. However, we cannot equally close our eyes to the fact that the boys themselves did the throwing of the punches at one another.

By implication, the greater of the two evils remains inevitably the latter. The punches cause the havoc, the discord, the anarchy, not the blindfolds. However, Ellison simply projects the reality of the African American world, such that the white man is never completely white, and his intentions, especially to the blacks, are not universally innocent. The white man, if to say the least, is an irrevocable catalyst to the invisibility of the blacks, arguably up to this moment!

> The men kept yelling, "Slug him, black boy! Knock his guts out!

> "Uppercut him! Kill him! Kill that big boy!" The harder we fought the more threatening the men became... (Ellison, 1952:24)

Ellison here subtly reveals a socio-historical network of dissonance, not essentially predicated on a racial predisposition, but basically centres on the backwardness of the entire American consciousness in exerting an

unhealthy rivalry. Simply put, the author preaches throughout his novel a message of liberation, freedom from the seeming sagaciousness state of the mind of every average American citizen, be it white or black, in trying to assert a definition of a peculiar race, along the line of colour and mental strength.

As evenly emphasised by Mr. Norton in his car, though the young narrator can be likened to "a mere experiment," the result of the experiment is subtle but correctly left in the hands of the young narrator. He is left to decide his own fate.

> So you see, young man, you are involved in my life quite intimately, even though you've never seen me before. You are bound to a great dream and to a beautiful monument. If you become a good farmer, a chef, preacher, doctor, singer, mechanic- whatever you become, even if you fail, you are my fate. (Ellison, 1952:40)

Ellison rightly identifies and condemns the institutionalisation of segregation and racial discrimination, while emphasising the theme of blindness, not only on the path of the black American, but of the whole American nation. He goes further to redirect the searchlight from the concocted face of the ever grinning imperialist back to the African American self. He projects the need to decentralise the hegemonic 'centre' and lay emphasis on African American, standing, waiting on the peripheral for the definition of his blackness, socio-cultural and political identity. Once again, Wright (1941), the prophet of the African American revolt, had clearly laid the necessary foundation to Ellison's rescue years back, by re-emphasising Ellison's downplay of sheer racism, eleven years before the novel saw the light of the day. He also explores the fundamental reality that the quest of searching for identity and self assertiveness, though relevant, transcends the notion of racial discrimination and other tentacles of segregation.

> The difference between black folk and white folk are not blood or color, and the ties that bind us are deeper than those that separate us. The common road of hope which we all have traveled has brought us into a stronger kinship than any words, laws or legal claims. Look at us and know us and you will know yourselves, for we are you, looking back at you from the dark mirror of our lives! (Ellison, 1952:49)

If the problem of the African American individual is simply based on racial discrimination resulting in political and economic subjugation, perhaps the struggle for total emancipation may not take that long. Again, not denying the great influence of white imperialist, it is however imperative to draw explicitly from the lack of unity and strife even among black American. The theme of dissonance rightly started, according to a historical recount documented by Horton J.O. & Horton L.E. (2008), where as far back as the eighteenth century. In sum, there had been discrimination even among the blacks, particularly between the free blacks and their slave counterparts.

Identity and Invisibility: Of W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington
In view of the discourse of division and strife, the intellectual rift between Washington, black educator, and the most influential essayist of the early twentieth century, Du Bois becomes very central, especially in analysing the thematic fissures which permeate the story of the *Invisible Man*. As much as the debate is geared towards finding an instantaneous or remote solution to the rising tide of racial discrimination, Booker T. Washington's reaction, which advocates the policy of racial accommodation, in some quarters, is viewed as a setback to the consciousness and self assertiveness of the African American identity. Du Bois was among the first to adequately respond in his essay entitled "of Booker T. Washington and others".

It is not unusual that Washington got the approval of the South towards his programmes in which the blacks are educated and trained in many capacities but physical and most importantly, psychological subservient. Du Bois re-affirms the black Americans' resentment at the signs of compromise by Washington and his 'nationalists' school of thought while vehemently challenges the notion that the black American's economic and intellectual survival can only be hinged on "surrendering their civil and political rights, even though this was to be exchanged for larger chances of economic development." (30) But Washington's proposal may seem noble and innocuous enough, only responding to the developmental tide of the moment, and perhaps ensuring that the already degenerated status of the black America is noticeably improved upon. W.E.B however removes the mask to show the reality of Washington's argument and expose the quick cynic response of the imperialist.

> It has been claimed that the Negro can survive only
> through submission. Mr Washington distinctly asks that
> black people give up, at least for the present, three things –

First, political power, second, insistence on civil rights, third, higher education of Negro youth, - and concentrate all their energies on industrial education, the accumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South. In these years there have occurred:

1. The disenfranchisement of the Negro.

2. The legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro.

3. The steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for higher training of the Negro.

These movements are not, to be sure, direct results of Washington's teachings; but his propaganda has, without a shadow of doubt, helped their speedier accomplishment. (Du Bois, 1903:31,32)

Thus, Du Bois's response was unquestionable correct and assertive:

The Negro's tendency to self-assertion has been called forth; at this period a policy of submission is advocated. In the history of nearly all other races and peoples the doctrine preached at such crises has been that manly self-respect is worth more than lands and houses, and that a people who voluntarily surrender such respect, or cease striving for it, are not worth civilising. (Du Bois, 1903:30)

Fifty one years later, Ellison re-captures this history and re-emphasises in a sarcastic manner, Du Bois's self assertive message to the African Americans, in response to his own immediate environment, in response to the success rate recorded in the outcome of Harlem Renaissance and to the outburst of black artistic creativity, emphasising, though, that the war to suppress the rights of the black is predominantly on. Ellison simply appeals to the consciousness of the much vibrant African American society in the late twentieth century, in the same quest for black autonomy and civil rights, a battle which has been fought for centuries, with the constant variables of small scale victories and losses, struggling with the slippery instruments (laws and decrees) used by the white dominated oppressors.

Ellison satirises the ideology of Washington and going a step further to warn against the prevalent institutionalisation of the black man's inferiority,

especially to young innocent black children, who are prone to, subsequently, such disenfranchisement. He simply seems to say 'We should wish for people of Washington's immeasurable selflessness but should, at this same time, be wary of his ideology of sacrificing, indeed, a questionable education, at the doorstep of a larger ignorance.' Again, the characterisation of the novel has a figurative undertone. The speech between Bro Clifton, a vibrant leader and representative of the Brotherhood (a false assemblage of a non racial group but whose principles towards the masses are subversive) and Ras the Exhorter (a symbolic representation of Marcus Garvey) becomes handy, as Ras the Exhorter's angry retort spews the deceptive state of the seeming concept of equality and brotherhood.

> What kind of foolishness is it? Kick him ass from cradle to grave then call him brother? Does it make mathematics? Is it logic?...Where is your eyes? Where yourself respect? Working for them dahm people? Their days is numbered, the time is almost here and you fooling 'round like this was the nineteenth century. I don't understand you. Am I ignorant? Answer me, mahn! (Ellison, 1952:302)

'But through this character, Ellison exhorts the need to see the light, as symbolised in the motif of the 1,369 bulbs, emphasising that the truth of the concept of equality can only be revealed when the mind is free from the suggestive clout of ignorance and deception on the part of the black and white leaders respectively.

> 'All men who want a brotherly world,' I said. 'Don't be stupid, mahn. They *white*, they don't have to be allies with no black people. They get what they wahnt, they turn against you. Where is your black intelligence?' 'Thinking like that will get you lost in the backwash of history,' I said. 'Start thinking with your mind and not your emotions.' He shook his head vehemently, looking at Clifton. 'This black mahn is talking to me about brains and thinking. I ask both of you, are you awake or sleeping? What is your pahst and where are you going? Never mind, take your corrupt ideology and eat out your own guts like a laughing hyena. You are nowhere, mahn. Nowhere! Ras is not ignorant, nor is Ras afraid. No! Ras, he be here black and fighting for the liberty of the black people when the

white folks have got what they wahnt and done gone off
laughing in your face. (Ellison, 1952:302)

At this period, Ellison recognises the imperativeness for African Americans
to look beyond what they see, as exemplified in the famous speech of Martin
Luther King Jr, "I have a Dream." Ellison re-affirms the need for each
African American to be invisible to the dishonest scales used in measuring
the status of black people and focus on the inner conviction of an
autonomous mind, spirit, body and race, and by implication, extending the
frontiers of their exemplary discovery to other races, white inclusive. By
this, the justification of the counter hegemonic stance of every African
American would be viewed from a holistic vantage position and appreciated
by the future generations of African Americans as a realistic practicable
endeavour.

Deconstructing Repressive Criticism in *Invisible Man*

There have been criticisms on the novel, *Invisible Man*, in which some must
be tolerated in this work. Many critics have disagreed with the view that the
novel is relevant to the overall discourse of African American discourse.
Their choice is not based on any subjective reason other than the need to
examine their views in an attempt at shedding more light on this work. In
1973, William Walling compiles a collection of divergent views on the
novel. Killens referred to *Invisible Man* as "a vicious distortion of Negro
life," (1) based on the perception of the novel not directly in conformity
with the protest tradition as popularised by the like of Richard Wright,
Chester Himes, Du Bois and many more. Another critic, Addison Gayle
insists that the novel is a negative view of racial identity, and concluded that
it is not an affirmation of the black man's humanity because "the fallacy of
the argument of *Invisible Man* and the fallacy of the argument of Invisible
Man are the same" (8). But perhaps the most malicious criticism comes from
Ernest Kaiser who basically describes the novel as a "meaningless
potpourri" which "doesn't make any sense." (84)

However, right from the most rational criticism, attempting to lending
credence to Bontempts' argument on the expectations of the Negro reader on
protest discourse, to the seeming sarcastic notion of Kaiser, these selected
criticisms of the novel do not have the vantage point and just limiting the
discourse of the novel to basically then contemporary issues of slavery,
black civil rights, racism, will be adversely incomplete, fractions of a whole.
Yes, the novel could be interpreted as complex streams of surrealism, from

its characterisation to its thematic preoccupations. But no! It is far from being "meaningless."

> It is inconceivable to me that a serious writer could stand aside from this debate or be indifferent to this argument which calls his full humanity into question. This is my answer to those who say that a writer should be writing about contemporary issues - about politics, about city life, about the last coup d'etat. Of course, these are legitimate themes for the writer but as far as I am concerned, the fundamental theme must first be disposed of...that their (African American) society is not mindless, but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity and self respect. And it is this dignity that many African (American) peoples lost and it is this dignity that they must now regain. (Achebe, 1978)

Although Achebe did address the role of the African writer, his message incontestably has a universal appeal. Ellison, through his novel, does frown at the prejudices that seem to choke the African American in the hostile world he lives in, but rather, as emphasised earlier on, focuses on the most pressing, relevant need - the psychological rebirth of the mind, the wholesome interpretation of the entire African American world, how he sees it, not how they (American imperialists) want him to see it. But since the experiences of black Americans also affect the whites or have been shaped, on way or the other by the white, Ralph's ideology transcends, perhaps much to his chagrin given the nature of the criticisms levelled against him, the prevalent theme of racism and civil rights.

Achebe (1978) continues: "The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing in human terms what happened to them, what they lost." To say that Ellison has not fulfilled this role is to deny the obvious. Though his style of writing may be questioned, some sort of deviation from the norm, it refracts the network of daunting complexities, affecting and rechanneling the lives of African Americans. As it is, *Invisible Man*, as a unique form of literature at the prime of the black American's struggle for socio-economic and political equality, is indeed a metaphor, unexpectedly invisible, but appropriate; a contrast from the seeming undeviating black

literary structure of dissension – protest literature.

Conclusion
From critiquing Ellison's *Invisible Man*, this study submits that being invisible has its advantages. While ignoring the applicable but saturated motif of the invisible man's plight of hiding in a whole with 1,369 bulbs of electricity at his disposal, the allusion at the beginning of the novel to a boxing match metaphorically describes the universal theme of invisibility, not only for African Americans but Africans too in that search to regain the lost self-respect alluded to by Achebe.

While black leaders and writers, in the likes of Marcus Garvey, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, among others, tried to breakdown the sturdy wall of racism, physical subjugation and oppression, Ralph Ellison simply slipped in, in his usual surrealistic manner, through the cracks in the hegemonic barricade with intense focus of achieving the same goal of black American liberation.

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