The Invisible Man: An Alien in New York Searching for Identity

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Abstract

Alienation is a frequently discussed issue of modern society in general and contemporary sociological research in particular. It has been considered as an indication of personal disappointment and frustration with some particular structural entities of the community. This disappointment and frustration originate from a basic responsibility of society towards the demands and requirements of its members. African-American or black people in the USA were subjected to racism as well as segregation and they struggled for equal civil and judicial rights. Even though he was criticized about not personally participating in rallies and protests organized in support of the rightful cause of his people, Ralph Ellison lent his support to the prevalent social, political and aesthetic issues concerning his people in the significant body of his work. This article attempts to focus on this struggle of black Americans in order to achieve recognition and identity and most importantly, to portray their isolation and alienation in the process of achieving their civil rights simply as Americans in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Alienation, Segregation, Identity, Freedom

Özet

Yabancılaşma modern toplumda genel olarak ve çağdaş sosyolojik araştırmalarda özellikle sık tartışılan bir konudur. Toplumun bazı özel yapısal oluşumlarıyla birlikte kişisel hayal kırıklığı ve hüsranın bir göstergesi olarak kabul edilmiştir. Bu hayal kırıklığı ve hüsran toplumun kendi üyelerinin istek ve gereksinimlerinden dolayı olan bir temel sorumluluğundan kaynaklanmaktadır. ABD'de yaşayan Afrikalı-Amerikalılar veya siyahi insanlar hem ırkçılık hem de ayrışmaya maruz kalmaktaydılar ve eşit sivil ve kanuni haklar için mücadele etmişlerdir. Kendi insanlarının haklı davasını desteklemek amacıyla düzenlenen mitingler ve protestolara bizzat katılmadığı için eleştirilen Ralph Ellison, kendi halkını ilgilendiren yaygın sosyal, siyasi ve estetik konulara olan desteğini eserlerinin önemli bir kısmında vermiştir. Bu makale Ralph Ellison'un *İnvisible Man* romanındaki siyahi Amerikalıların tanınma ve kimlik elde etmek için mücadelelerine odaklanmakta ve en önemlisi Amerikalılar olarak kendi sivil haklarını elde etme sürecinde yaşadıkları soyutlanma ve yabancılaşmayı tasvir etmektedir.

Key Words: Yabancılaşma, Ayrım, Kimlik, Özgürlük

1. Introduction

We inhabit in a world which witnessed technological innovations that have been inconceivable and unthinkable for earlier societies: it is the era of space exploration, of high-speed communication, and of biotechnology. However, we never felt this much powerless and felt exposed against the forces we have brought into existence. Never before have the products of our sweat and toil intimidated our own being: this is also the era of nuclear tragedies, global-scale climate change, and genocides. People can grow sufficient crops to gratify the needs of every individual living on Earth. But millions of lives are still affected by famine and devastated by disease. In spite of our

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ability to have power over the natural world, our society is ruled by uncertainty as economic crises and regional armed conflicts destroy people with seemingly overwhelming force of natural mishaps. The more crowded our cities become, the more our lives are defined by feelings of alienation and estrangement.

Therefore, many literary figures painfully experience alienation and isolation from the social institutions that surround them. Some characters, like Holden Caulfield in Jerome David Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye,* feel isolated and alienated from their own respective societies. Others, like Tommy Wilhelm in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*, experience detachment and alienation from their closer relations, including members of their families, and people they consider to be dear and nears. Yet other literary figures, like Jake Barnes in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises,* feel detached from the religious institutions; sometimes this kind of detachment goes to the extent that the character or characters experience detachment and alienation from God. Perhaps the most intense type of alienation is demonstrated by literary characters such as Meursault in Albert Camus's *The Stranger,* who experiences alienation and detachment from anything and everything with which he gets in touch: whether it is his family, his community, and the entire modern life. Increase in the number of fictional characters who suffer from alienation and detachment is an outcome of the everyday life struggle various people with feeling of being detached from, rejected by, and unrelated to other fellow human beings or social organizations that define and guide us. This feeling of alienation is a prevailing power, one that drags people toward negative sense of self-regret, exposure, and cruelty, but that can also lead to the positive outcomes of self-analysis and deep realization. The Invisible Man in Ralph Ellison's novel learns to accept his situation and manages to delineate himself from his predicament and succeeds in finding his identity at the end of the book.

Various sociologists, including Erich Fromm, Emile Durkheim and Melvin Seeman, generally link alienation with the 20th century, and, in fact, modernism, started approximately at the beginning of the twentieth century through roughly 1965, stresses that the individual and society are on bad terms with each other since people highly relied on science and technology to bring comfort and happiness into their lives, and left their respective rural communities in search of those scientific and technological comforts, but they were trapped in urban isolation when they severed their ties with their native countries. Modernism rendered our relationships with one another as well as with social organizations such as school, work-place, religious institutions, and family weaker, led us to be more and more self-reliant and egocentric in our rational reasoning, and thus trapped us in the deeper pits of alienation. Blance Gelfant, in her article entitled "The Imagery of Estrangement: Alienation in Modern American Fiction," asserts that "alienation is the inextricable theme of modern American fiction" (Gelfant, 1973, p. 295). Of all the prevalent themes in literature, theme of alienation is one of the most emotional and touching themes for people residing in USA. Ephraim Mizruchi states that "alienation has for a long time been a dominant idea in the writings of nineteenth and twentieth century men" (Mizruchi, 1973, p. 111). Nobody can understand it better than dark-skinned people how it feels to be isolated, to be detached from others, and to be split

up within the self. Alienation has become the outcome of the oppression black people had endured when they were plucked from their native lands and were dumped to distant lands by slave ships in order to be slaves. Even after the abolition of slavery, black people were deprived of social and legal rights which white people benefited from. Alienation has become a constant element in the literature produced by black people. Thus, this essay aims at clarifying the complicated concept of alienation by providing a working definition and, then focusing on the effect and extent of alienation in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*.

2. Literary Depiction of Alienation

The concept of alienation occupies a notable place in the history of sociology as well as in contemporary study especially on the relations between human beings. Interest in this complex term of alienation originates from a basic responsibility in society's reaction to the needs of its members. Many sociologists, including Bernard Murchland, began to consider prevalent concept of alienation as a critical development in modern daily life. This concept is strikingly and vigorously demonstrated by the very title of David Riesman's book called *The Lonely Crowd*. The 'crowd' consists of people closely linked together in order to generate an organic life. In the 'lonely' crowd, people are detached and alienated from each other and thereby links or connection act like shackles. Estrangement and hatred replaced human contact and mutual tolerance. The alienation increases as the bonds get tighter just like in an underground metro train and the tighter the commuters are cramped, the more aggressive becomes their pushing and poking for private space for freedom. People adapt aggressive and hostile attitudes towards one another even though they are supposed to get in contact with each other to satisfy their own needs. As a result, individuals do not only become alienated and estranged from others, but also from their own selves.

The term 'alienation' can be explained in these plain and simple words. The prevalent meaning of alienation that comes to mind is a state of being detached or separated from someone or something. In the field of psychology, it indicates an individual's psychological detachment from his/her community. In this regard, the alienated person is estranged and isolated from fellow human beings, and this psychological detachment finds its expression in neurotic breakdown when it reaches to an extreme. Alienation, in the words of Bernard Murchland, can reveal itself in several "disorders such as loss of self, anxiety states, anomie, depersonalization, rootlessness, and meaninglessness, isolation, and lack of community" (Murchland, 1971, p. 4). Alienation is on the foundation of these diseases, and it negatively affects people's relations with their environment, community, their past-life, and social organizations, and their relationships with each other in particular. According to Murchland, "this condition is obvious in segments of their society—among the poor, blacks, women, students, individuals, works, the mentally ill, and dope addicts, etc" (Murchland, 1971, p. 8). On the other hand, in his book entitled *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm discusses the state of alienated person, and asserts that "he has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts – but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys" (Fromm, 1990, p. 120).

3. Alienation in *Invisible Man*

Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man,* published in 1952, is one of the most enduring, ambitious, and important American novels. Ellison attained international reputation with the publication of *Invisible Man*. The novel handles various diverse social and mental themes and makes use of numerous distinct symbols and metaphors. Harold Bloom states that Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* "represents the outstanding African American achievement in the arts to date, except for the musical accomplishments of Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, and Bud Powell" (Bloom, 2008, p. 7). He further comments that *Invisible Man* "competes with the work of Thomas Pynchon and Philip Roth as the most distinguished American prose fiction since the death of William Faulkner" (Bloom, 2008, p. 7). The tale of *Invisible Man* is a sequence of personal encounters through which its gullible protagonist discovers, at the expense of his disenchantment and revulsion, the aspects of the world. The book manages to capture the entire image and picture of the American experience. It integrates the evident and noticeable themes of alienation and racism.

The title of Ellison's *Invisible Man* evokes concepts of isolation and desperation so intense that, in a way, they will deteriorate the health and soundness of the human spirit. Invisibility suggests inhabiting a world which hinders person's involvement. The invisible man is able to see and notice other people around himself/herself, but he/she goes unnoticed; he/she is highly conscious of a universe in which his/her existence is disregarded, annulled and rejected. Thus, invisibility emerges as the extreme and the highest form of alienation. Invisibility and alienation come to indicate both inclusion and exclusion of a person from his/her own world, to be aware of what he/she cannot tell. Since alienation is not a natural or positive condition, it has come about for a reason, usually the result of a complex of factors. Alienation is particularly devastating to black people. In traditional Africa, everyone belongs to a group, everyone functions in harmony with his or her group. Torn from their homeland and forced to endure the most vicious form of racism, black Americans suffer a uniquely agonizing alienation. It is this phenomenon that informs Ellison's *Invisible Man* and defines its central image of invisibility.

The problem of racial alienation is the dominant theme in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. There is a prevalent and definite segregation between influential and wealthy whites and subjugated, pathetic and impoverished blacks. In his novel, Ellison firmly asserts: "I am an Invisible Man" (Ellison, 1995, p. 15). He realizes from his unpleasant experiences that being black in America within the duration of the end of the Civil War and the 1940s meant to stay in a confined space, an "alien nation" tormented by racial discrimination and prejudice. African-American author and orator Booker T. Washington was ready to consent to the racial alienation as he uttered in his 1895 Atlanta speech: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (as cited in Mays, 339, p.339). Thus Washington, one of the Invisible Man's intellectual counselors, supported the segregationist law of "separate but equal." Washington also asserted that "the wisest among [his] race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all

the privileges that will come to [them] must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing" (as cited in Mays, 338, p.338).

For black people, alienation is especially overwhelming. In a traditional African setting, everybody is a member of a tribe and works industriously for the betterment and welfare of it. Taken away from their native country and made to experience the wicked kind of racism, black Americans underwent an incomparably painful alienation. It is this phenomenon that characterizes Ellison's *Invisible Man* and interprets its primary symbol of invisibility. In discussing the dimensions of alienation in this novel, two aspects of alienation will be dealt with: double consciousness and double vision. Sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois proposed a condition which has always troubled black Americans. He defines double consciousness as such:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois, 1965, p. 12).

Therefore, double-consciousness is a negative notion. It is an anomaly, strife, and a conflict between the American identity and the Blackness of black Americans, between the role they are supposed to play for existence and their grasp of who they actually are. This is exactly what the sagacious elderly grandfather of Ellison's nameless protagonist indicates when he advices him in his deathbed,

> Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open (Ellison, 1995a, p. 16).

The protagonist, who looks like his Grandfather, is seriously bothered by these words, which he fails to comprehend, but which torment him all the way his uncommon journey into invisibility. For the Invisible Man, double-consciousness has caused alienation on various levels. The first level is alienation and estrangement from the vast American society. White Americans fail to see him but rather see the idea of his personal mistaken beliefs:

> ... I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only by surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything and anything except me (Ellison, 1995a, p. 3).

The protagonist's alienation is clearly manifested in chapter 10 of the book dealing with the paint factory. The perplexing duality of being both inside and outside is clearly displayed there in this chapter. The sign outside the factory reads as "Keep America Pure With Liberty Paints," ironically

blending the word liberty, which is revered in the American myth, with the horrible objective of the Ku Klux Klan to 'purify' America. The paint factory chapter illustrates the protagonist's alienation and estrangement from American community. The mysterious black liquid must vanish in the white paint; Lucius Brockway must stay detached and away from the center of activity. He is imperative and yet unnoticed; inside and yet outside.

The unnamed narrator of *Invisible Man* battles with his perception of manhood as an American and how acclimatization could be a rapid practice of gaining acceptance in community. In his article "'I Yam What I Am': Naming and Unnaming in Afro-American Literature,'" Kimberly Benston writes that "the refusal to be named invokes the power of the Sublime, a transcendent impulse to undo all categories" (Benston, 1982, p. 4). Yet, things are not that simple and he discovers that acclimatization can transform into completely different human beings. He fights with other character's concept of being a Black in America until eventually he comes to see the defects in their logic. Dr. Bledsoe, for instance, a reputable member and leader at the narrator's college, has strived his whole life to adapt and to meet with the demands of the prevalent culture. He states "I's big and black and I say 'Yes, suh' as loudly as any burrhead when it's convenient," and he admits that "the only ones I even pretend to please are big white folk" (Ellison, 1995a, p.142). Even though the Black society regards Bledsoe as a measure and a symbol of success, he had to sacrifice his own self, his ethics, and his integrity and his honor in order to obtain the so-called 'respect' of Whites who only use him for their own purposes. However, Dr. Bledsoe does not completely comprehend how little authority he really holds, nor does he begin to realize how defective his own reasoning is. He states that "Negroes don't control this school nor white folk either. True they support it, but I control it. When you buck against me, you're bucking against power, rich white folk's power" (Ellison, 1995a, p.142). He is subsequently under the command of the power of the wealthy white people, because it is their moral standards that he is eventually trying to fulfill their expectations. He convinces himself that he is in control, but, in reality he is not. In addition, not only does Dr. Bledsoe replenish the Invisible Man's head with incorrect ideas of how to survive in America as a man, his grandfather, too, instructs him on how to debilitate Whites by fitting into the stereotyped concept of Blacks that White people already have of them. Author Valerie Smith holds the opinion that Invisible Man partially dismisses the values Bledsoe stands for and states that

> Considering him utterly insignificant, the college president resolves to destroy the protagonist's career, despite his innocence, in order to save the image of the school. The protagonist finds Bledsoe's logic incomprehensible, if not nonexistent; he therefore distances himself from the traditional American values Bledsoe embodies in order to preserve or create his own identity (Smith, 1988, p. 36-37).

On his deathbed, the narrator's grandfather tells him to "live with [his] head in the lion's mouth" and he further continues "I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (Ellison, 1995, p. 16). The Invisible Man held the opinion that this tactic might actually work, but it was not

until in college that he started to doubt the wisdom and virtue of his grandfather's words. His grandfather's method of debilitating whites was devoid of practicality and realism. It is true that Blacks could try to meet with the demands of White people and turn into stereotypical figures but in reality hating Whites inherently, and thus they would end up doing the exact similar things that Bledsoe had been doing. The narrator had no intention to become "the most perfect achievement of [someone else's] dreams...The mechanical man!" as the war veteran at the Golden Day tavern had sarcastically mockingly labeled him (Ellison, 1995a, p.94). Therefore, he gradually started to notice the existing defects within his education and how he was being educated by an establishment which advocated the ideologies of people who were nothing like himself.

Invisible Man deals with the issue of what it indicates to be invisible: the narrator states "That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those whom I come in contact" (Ellison, 1995a, p.3). Earlier in the book, Ellison indicates that the narrator considers himself to be in a world abundant with blind men and sleepwalkers who fail to see him for actually what he is. In a *Paris Review* interview, Ellison states:

> In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility. He leaves the South and goes North; this, as you will notice in reading Negro folktales, is always the road to freedom-the movement upward. You have the same thing again when he leaves his underground cave for the open (as cited in Callahan, 2004, p.41).

The novel, *Invisible Man* is, among other things, is a narrative of an intellectual's battle to discover and to utter his voice in American society. Probably the most difficult part of this battle, as Ellison suggests, is the intellectual's conformity with these personal feelings of alienation and detachment. In the epilogue section of the book, the Invisible Man contemplates on his earlier efforts to 'fit in' by striving to accept the opinions of others – interpreting that he could neither adapt traditional views nor completely isolate himself from them, therefore he finds refuge in a basement; but he comes back to the immediate necessity of his mind to be creative and perceptive in order to explain the confusion and distinctiveness of human emotions. The Invisible Man comes out of his self-prescribed isolation in order to document his struggle and to narrate his tale – a tale that seeks to make sense of the diverse and irregular patterns of the American experience.

In addition to the narrator's alienation from his native place of birth, he is also detached and alienated from his own people, the black community. The narrator's alienation from the black people and from his native place of birth constitutes a part of a third stage of alienation. In other words, he is self-alienated. He is a detached and segregated person and for him, the elements that make up the Self are incomplete. Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness has falsified his own idea of who he really is. Unlike his grandfather, who was wisely conscious of what was pretension and what was pure truth, the unnamed narrator recognizes the descriptions of a malevolent society. Therefore, he chooses, in this sense, to stay nameless and invisible. But double-consciousness does not offer a complete image of his dilemma. His alienation consists not only of double consci-

ousness but also of double vision. It is the capacity to recognize both what is inside as well as outside the culture. Richard Wright describes this concept in his novel, *The Outsider*:

> 'I mean this,' Houston hastened to explain. 'Negroes, as they enter our culture, are going to inherit the problems we have, but with a difference. They are outsiders and they are going to know they have these problems. They are going to be self-conscious; they are going to be gifted with a double vision, for, being Negroes, they are going to be both inside and outside of our culture at the same time... They will not only be Americans or Negroes; they will be centers of knowing so to speak. . . . Now, imagine a man inclined to think, to probe, to ask questions. Why, he'd be in a wonderful position to do so, would he not, if he were black, and lived in America? A dreadful objectivity would be forced upon him (Wright, 2008, p. 164).

The narrator's double vision prospers during the course of the novel as he gets rid of all the fantasies that have been blurring his perception. The procedure is distressing, but it yields a capacity to perceive. The Epilogue section of the novel includes the sagacity and knowledge that are yielded by invisibility. The protagonist eventually starts to comprehend his grandfather's advice and to view himself as well as all black Americans in relation to this country, its degeneration and its potentials. It is this double vision which renders it possible as well as essential for him to re-surface above the ground. He admits that he will still stay invisible, but, like he says, "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (Ellison, 1995a, p.581).

Freedom involves a state of realization or coming to terms with the basic absurdity and alienation experienced by man as an inherent part of being in the world. The tale of the Invisible Man reflects, in a satirical and ironical manner, on this development of self-realization. If the episodes that challenge the Invisible Man are dissimilar in style to those of the entangled Roquentin in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, then both the characters are exploring the similar existential outcome and striving to design a course of action in spite of Nothingness. But, freedom does not come so easily, and is only attained by appropriate sacrifices according to the existentialist point of view. Ellison's Invisible Man, in indirect fashion, is granted the chance to be the existential hero of Andre Malraux. This defining moment takes place when the Invisible Man declares his desire to put an end to this and states, "Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (Ellison, 1995a, p.581). This self-realization will play a crucial part in his attempt to overcome his sense of alienation and estrangement and grant him a wider perspective to judge people and their actions.

Identity may be stated as the unique characteristic given to any individual, or shared by each and every member of a specific social class or category. It is defined as "the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*). This identity helps us to identify ourselves in respect to others to the degree what members of society mutually hold with one another. Malcolm Little, named as Malcolm X by the master/father who left him to his insignificant being, expresses his discomfort about the identity stolen from him and further states the following:

> As long as you allow them to call you what they wish you don't know who you really are. You can't lay claim to any name, any home, any destiny, that will identify you as something you should be, as someone you should become: a brother among brothers (as cited in Davidson, 2003, p. 128).

One of the central themes in Ralph Ellison's writing is the search for identity, a search that he sees as central to American literature and the American experience. Almost every literary character in the book alleges to be the Invisible Man's guide. A passionate minister attempts to persuade the narrator that Bledsoe, the Machiavellian college president, is the Negro's "present leader" (Ellison, 1995a, p.132). And even before Bledsoe, the narrator was informed that there was a significant college founder who shouldered the responsibility of the people and became "[his] leader" (Ellison, 1995a, p.133). Much further in the book, the narrator, during the course of a Negro rebellion in Harlem, picks up a voice stimulating the Negros to have the intention and the power to fight: "All they need is a leader" (Ellison, 1995a, p.268). The narrator himself urges the Negroes to get organized and "follow a leader" in the course of the rebellion (Ellison, 1995a, p.276). Getting more and more perplexed about who his guide might probably be, the young protagonist, noticing some teenage Negro zoot-suiters on the underground subway, speculates whether they, under their shady and ambiguous looks, in fact, might possibly be "the true leaders" (Ellison, 1995a, p.441).

In *Invisible Man,* identity is related to the unnamed narrator's self-impression, his aspiration and his perspective of his own community. It is also connected with race and social status, and it becomes clear at the end of the book that the Invisible Man's blackness and distress pave the way for his preference of invisibility. In his essay entitled "Hidden Name: Complex Fate," Ralph Ellison describes that "We must learn to wear our names within all the noise and confusion in which we find ourselves. They must become our masks and our shields and the containers of all those values and traditions which we learn and/or imagine as being the meaning of our familial past" (Ellison, 1995b, p.148). Then, the narrator seeks for some sort of firm power all over the novel to guide him to liberty or visibility. He, at first, desires to pursue an outer force in his endeavor to discover a noticeable identity and to have his identity determined for him by others. Thus, white men, symbolizing social institutions committed to 'molding' history, insist to be the Negro's leader. The narrator's perception of the phrase transforms toward the concluding pages of the book as he admits that it is not possible to reclaim his identity by conforming to the bidding of outer powers which have taken the leadership. In the course of the chaos of another rebellion, more destructive than the first, he listens to a passionate Negro called Dupre shouting orders to his men to torch down a building. An onlooker calls out: "He's a bitch, ain't he, buddy? He always like to lead things, and always leading me into trouble" (Ellison, 1995a, p.543). The protagonist realizes his own share in these wrongdoings and eventually finds out that there is no leader that he can pursue, but only himself. He should take his own decisions and shape his own fate. To do it differently will result in his deeper involvement in the chaos. It is this perception of truth that stimulates him to alienate and estrange himself from the company of others to reflect on his own actions and accept full responsibility for his wrongdoings.

French psychiatrist and writer Frantz Fanon's exceptional book entitled *Black Skin White Masks* sums up Ellison's allusion of ill-shaped identities and subjugation. Fanon delicately puts it: "A normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world" (Fanon, 2004, p. 463). He further continues that: "The Negro is unaware of it as long as his existence is limited to his own environment; but the first encounter with a white man oppresses him with the whole weight of his blackness" (Fanon, 2004, p. 466). This existential quest for identity and meaning, usually causing a horrifying attack of disorientation and perplexity, are the common themes that Ellison attempts to deal with. Given the immediate flight or fight response first described by physiologist Walter Bradford Cannon, Ellison might be depicting a character whose scarcely controlled temper and hostility, to some extent, reflects his own temper and hostility. Malice and repugnance could be burning through his pen. Norman Mailer calls Ellison "a hateful writer," and asserts that "Ralph's mind, fine and icy, tuned to the pitch of a major novelist's madness, is not always adequate to mastering the forms of rage, horror, and disgust which his eyes have presented to his experience" (cited in Allen, 2007, p. 25). This unrestrained obsessive rage is ghastly depicted in the "Prologue" when a white man accidentally hits Ellison's unnamed narrator. The man begins to curse him despite apologizing for that harmless strike. The Invisible Man attacks him requiring an apology, but the abusive man carries on to fight back and use foul language. The narrator relates this account as such:

> I kicked him repeatedly, in a frenzy because he still uttered insults though his lips were frothy with blood. Oh Yes, I kicked him! And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat, right there beneath the lamplight in the deserted street, holding him by the collar with one hand, and opening the knife with my teeth—when it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually; that he, as far as he knew was in the midst of a walking nightmare! And I stopped the blade, slicing the air as I pushed him away .... He lay there, moaning on the asphalt; a man almost killed by a phantom. It unnerved me. I was both disgusted and ashamed .... Poor blind fool I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man (Ellison, 1995a, p.4).

At the conclusion of the book, the Invisible Man demands an identity that would defend him from those who would try to torment him. The protagonist's choice of invisibility is of a destructive kind because it demands the very same space, the space of the disregarded and unseen, one that others had transferred him earlier in order to achieve their own profit. He can demand this identity as a redeeming force because his beliefs and aspirations have converted from the intention to become individually strong and dominant to understanding the absurdity of truth that is quite noticeable from his state of invisibility. The unstable and wavering nature of identity is associated with the narrator's self-realization in numerous parts of the novel. Invisible Man admits that he has not been seen as a man but as an object and ultimately comes to discover that for Norton, Emerson, Jack and the others, "[He] was simply a material, a natural resource to be used" (Ellison, 1995a, p.508).

The identity of invisibility that the protagonist prefers at the end of the novel has both advantages as well as disadvantages. The greatest advantage connected with the Invisible Man's invisibility is the liberty he experiences from not taking part in the tyrannical hierarchical value systems established by financial status and skin color. For the protagonist, invisibility is also an alienating and isolating situation. At the end of the book, he admits that writing down his observations had enabled him to recognize certain order in the chaos and disorder prevalent in his society. This recognition causes him to state that he will surface and live on the ground again. He will put an end to his hibernation and get rid of his invisibility; but still it is also obvious that he seems to be trapped between two voices in his head. As he declares:

> Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge. And there's still a conflict within me: With Louis Armstrong one half of me says, 'Open the window and let the foul air out,' while the other says, 'It was good green corn before the harvest' (Ellison, 1995a, p.581).

The Invisible Man does prefer to stay outside the confirmed and traditional social limitations, and his capacity to obtain his liberty is associated with society's desire to contribute to his invisibility in accordance with his skin color and financial status. Thus identity is both a personal claim and a relational contract based on social assumptions. It is quite suitable that in this book where identity is of primary importance, the protagonist's name, one of the clearest signs of identity, stays mysterious and concealed.

Stanley Edgar Hyman asserts that the Invisible Man is not "a smart man playing dumb," but rather, he is actually dumb, or, more precisely, he is excessively and humorously naïve (Hyman, 1963, p. 297). Although Bledsoe and others inform him, he does not even realize the distinction between the way things are and the way they are assumed to be; or, in other words, he fails to recognize that there is a wide division, especially for blacks, separating America's ideals or sacred document, such as the Bible, from the people who actually behave against one another. The Invisible Man realizes that his attempts to stop being a runaway apparently fail; in fact, they persistently yield results just against his own intentions. For example, his graduation address gathers him no admiration or prestige but embarrassment and a mouthful of blood; the scholarship leads him downwards and into more extreme desolations and frustrations; his efforts to gain the white trustee's trust and support bring him dismissal from college instead; his attempts to inspire his own people towards the path of brotherhood causes him to betray Harlem and assist in flaring a widespread rebellion. He, in some aspects, is a buffoon, "skidding around corners and dashing down alleys, endlessly hurrying in search of whatever it is that can sanctify human existence" (Lewis, 1953, p. 148). He is the ever-convenient mark of qualified jokers' tricks: Bledsoe's letters, Jack's note along with his strange and disguised smiles can be regarded as cruel play of this kind. These fundamental incidents prepare him for a community of viciously rapid changes, phony pretences, frustration and detestable humor. As a careless tool, the Invisible Man secures his place in a very long line of American innocent characters and sincere pursuers of success and achievement.

His naivety is quite enough to label him as a dejected and desperate alien and include him in the Hall of Fame of the alienated figures in American literature.

Another dimension of the Invisible Man's alienation lies with his emigration from the South to the North. His desperate attempts to discover his own identity yield no results, or, at least, bear the fruits that he had not wished to acquire. John Callahan claims, in an Introduction to *Flying Home and Other Stories,* that Ellison had written in the margins of a draft of *Invisible Man*, "You have to leave home to find home" (Callahan,1996, p.xii). There is an ironical overtone in these words for the Invisible Man: he departs from home to go to college, the venue where he says "[he] possessed the only identity [he] had ever known" (Ellison, 1995a, p. 99). But, however, this identity does not really belong to him, and the college is neither a place where he can call home. Ending up extremely lonely in a hole in the ground is not a traditional style of the American dream of home-ownership, and yet his hole is the perfect home for him, at least, for now. In this sense, a home is like having an identity: something a person makes rather than simply resides. The narrator's trip to the North in order to discover or create his new home is a trip away from security, and yet it is also a trip into a world where liberty is more comprehensive and identities are more fluctuating and flexible. In the "battle royal" scene, the narrator and other black boys were ordered to pummel one another and were made the subject of white men's entertainment. The streets of Harlem come to be an enormous scale repetition of the Battle Royal scene, where the only choices people are offered are "either run or get knocked down." The mechanical instinct of struggle or flee response compels the narrator into running and ultimately lands him safely in a hole. He is not like Clifton, who died in action, yet he also cast off outside history. He ceases to run, and thus breaks the prophecy from his grandfather's vision that associates him to the control of others:

> Knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine (Ellison, 1995a, p.559).

Finally he is ready for the self-knowledge which he has been pursuing from the beginning of the novel, a knowledge he can only find out when he is completely isolated contemplating on his culture like a modern version of Henry David Thoreau. For Ellison, the putting on a mask will not help the cause of black people; he thinks the American identity is founded on a joke. He states:

> For the ex-colonials, the declaration of an American identity meant the assumption of a mask, and it imposed not only the discipline of a national self-consciousness, it gave American an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearances and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that sense of the past which clings to the mind. And perhaps even an awareness of the joke that society is man's creation, not God's (as cited in Trimmer, 1972, p.254).

Those, who believe in real authenticity or in the existence of final cause, condemn masking as unreliable, as a rejection of identity; and thus, they are certainly duped by the joke. In his article called "The Color of Memory: Reading Race with Ralph Ellison," W. James Booth comments on

Ellison's account of American identity, and states that "American identity is woven of the presence of blackness as something alien but otherwise invisible, and of the silence that surrounds whiteness. Both serve to make identity something riddled with amnesia and falseness, a past yet to be faced" (Booth, 2008, p.689). Ralph Ellison also declares in his article called "The Golden Age; Time Past," that "our memory and our identity are ever at odds, our history ever a tall tale told by inattentive idealists" (Ellison, 2003, p.237)

4. Conclusion

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a misfit and an outsider in a superior civilization like those of Fyodor Dostoevsky's and Richard Wright's protagonists. But, contrary to Dostoevsky and Wright, Ellison's estranged main character, hidden underground, incorporates his experiences and proposes better choices. The major characters in these three novels, for various reasons, lead isolated and alienated lives from the community and contemplate upon the significance of their respective lives. Wright's Fred Daniels flees through a manhole after he was wrongly charged with the murder of a white woman. After careful contemplation of various groups in his underground lodging, he arrives at an existentialist resolution that life is meaningless and chooses to surrender himself as a way of admitting responsibility for the vicious nature of the human predicament. The underground man in Dostoevsky's novel illustrates his alienation and estrangement from his own community by alleging to be a "sick," "spiteful," and "unattractive man" who practiced his own will power by preferring to avoid communal establishments and leading an individualistic and solitary life. The Invisible Man, however, manipulates his setting to rise to a spiritual reflection of light figuratively illustrated by the extravagant lighting in his new abode. Although he resides in a place of darkness, he has managed to overcome it by acquiring enlightenment, which enables him to see the "principle." Contrary to other two major characters, Ellison's Invisible Man devices a new course of action. Having identified the racial and philosophical diseases of American society, he makes use of his narration to "give pattern to the chaos," to alter the image of America the founders had in their minds (Ellison, 1995a, p.580). He eventually realizes his grandfather's advice: "I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (Ellison, 1995a, p.16). The grandfather attested the principle, and his grandson accepts it through his broad analysis of it. It is a remarkable moment of epiphany for him.

The novel *Invisible Man* reflects life in early fifties and grapples with Negro identity mutually agreed in the idea that "understanding of life is far more significant than self-consciousness of race" (Hughes, 1953, p. 148). On the other hand, Margaret Just Butcher asserted that:

> The releasing formula is to realize that all human beings are, basically and inevitably, human, and that even special racial complexities and overtones are only interesting variants... The inner tyranny must be conquered now that the outer tyranny of prejudice and intellectual ostracism is being relaxed (Butcher, 1957, p. 148).

Probably the most renowned of the Negro critics, J. Saunders Redding expresses his genuine wish in his book entitled *On Being a Negro in America* and states that: "I hope this piece will stand as the epilogue to whatever contribution I have made to the 'literature of race.' I want to get on to other things" (Redding, 1960, p. 26). But the same author admits a decade later that Negro authors should have certain responsibilities before their community: "The human condition, the discovery of self. Community. Identity. Surely this must be achieved before it can be seen that a particular identity has a relation to a common identity, commonly described as human" (Redding, 1960, p. 8). However, it was from this peculiar Negro situation that Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin had come to emerge, and this crucial case has bestowed their fiction some particular resonances.

The book illustrates Ralph Waldo Emerson's optimism and Du Bois's democratic morality; it indicates Martin Luther King's warning and image of social justice. Like Du Bois and King, Ellison also surpasses the invocation of suffering and visualizes an American relieved from the chaos and shadows of the past life and relishes freedom for all its population. From this respect, Ralph Ellison's innovative book is an attempt on the description of American society. In an effort to describe the country, the Invisible Man looked for the descriptions of those who had described it in the past: Jefferson, Emerson, Melville, Douglass, Du Bois and many others. In going through those authors' works and then composing his own, the Invisible Man eventually casts off his self-imposed alienation and isolation. The textual references to the notable historical and literary figures illuminate the Invisible Man's dark path and provide him a sense of direction. He no longer feels disoriented or bewildered. He will eventually emerge out of his basement hideaway and blend in with the people. The ending of the novel becomes a new beginning for the Invisible Man. He is not the same person he was in the beginning. He surfaces as a transformed and changed person. Ralph Ellison's works, including his masterpiece *Invisible Man,* manage to deserve readers' attention, not just because they illuminate *Invisible Man*, but also they illuminate, in their own right, the world as Ellison saw it, and the world as the readers of the novel continue to see it today.

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