

Invisibilities and Identity Quest in *Invisible Man*

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Abstract: Ralph Waldo Ellison is recognized as one of the most important contemporary writers in America with the publication of his novel *Invisible Man*. Its great popularity in many countries is not only owing to Ellison's subtle use of symbolism, blues music, and black folklore, but also to detailed narrating of the life experience of a non-identity black youth reflecting deeply on invisibilities. There are a lot of "invisible" elements scattering throughout the novel, which reveal the protagonist's life problems and generalize on men's dilemma of alienation and identity loss. This paper focuses on explicating his invisibilities and ordeal of non-identity, and on probing the significance of his arduous quest for his identity.

Key Words: invisibility; existence; non-identity; quest

In *Invisible Man*, the author narrates the adventures of a young, nameless black man, as he moves from South to North America with cultural blindness. "I am an invisible man," he says in his prologue. "When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me."^[1] With such confusion about identity loss, he is determined to be in quest of his identity.

The novel is pretty eye-catching because of its attractive title "Invisible Man." How can a man be invisible may be the question of most readers. Accordingly, Ellison explains exactly in the very beginning of the 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. ^[2]

The subtle language clearly expounds that the reason why the black youth is invisible is that other people refuse to admit his most basic identity—existential identity, that is, identity as an equal human being.

Many black people believe a joke on themselves that they are too black to be seen in the dark, but from the analysis above, being invisible obviously results from lacking of existential identity. As Ellison once said, invisibility also sprang from the “great formlessness of Negro life” which produced personalities of “extreme complexity.” ^[3] Hence, invisibility in the novel is worthy of discussing.

The black youth is invisible not because he has a super power, nor because he is a vacuum person, but because his existence is ignored and disdained to consider. His real identity is not, of course, a ghost, however, he lives just like a ghost, nobody cares, nobody minds, and even nobody knows. Maybe because his skin is too dark to be identified, his voice is too low to be paid attention to, or he himself is indeed invisible? This is a question. He lives his invisible life as before and as usual. The man who bumps into him in the street wouldn't apologize to this vacuum man, and he takes part in the Brotherhood where what people care is only his voice and speech rather than his identity. Confronting the blindness of other people including both the white and the black, the invisible man at last lives in a basement where he is absolutely invisible and abandoned, even though he fits 1,369 electric bulbs. As a matter of fact, to be visible or invisible depends on whether others acknowledge the existence of the nameless man. The reason why he is invisible to others is that other people always consider him with preconception, and refuse to consider him as an equal man in the society. In this way, rather than “he is invisible,” “his existence is neglected” is more suitable.

However, from an existential perspective, the “invisible man” does not only imply “invisible to others,” but also “invisible to himself” by always ignoring his own right to choose freely, and being too submissive to be himself, and to make up his minds by himself. Therefore, the absence of existential recognition in the world

around him results in that he is deprived from not only visible identity but also the inner sense of himself. His grandfather's words impress readers a lot:

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 back 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. ^[4]

His grandfather wants to tell the black youth that being obedient is the only means to preserve his own essential identity, and although the nameless boy wants to obey the advice, "I didn't know what my grandfather had meant but I was ready to test his advice. I'd overcome them with yeses and undermine them with grins" ^[5] he does not fully understand his grandfather's words. He knows that yeses and grins are masks; however, he does not realize that without knowing fully who he is, he is still nothing but a mask and he is invisible to himself. In the black college, he is a good student but just like a chessman of the president, nobody acknowledges his existence; in New York, he is an arduous worker, but he still accepts no existential identity, because he has no freedom, the freedom to choose and to make decisions; in the Brotherhood, there's no doubt that he is a tool of the community, what they need is merely his voice, not his mind; in the riot, what a pity, he is recognized as Rinehart. He has various identities in different situations, but no one is his real existence. His "lost identity" is shown not only that he lacks of existential identity, but also that he even owns no name. However, Barthes has different understanding as follows:

In principle, the character who says "I" has no name ... in fact, however, I immediately becomes a name, his name. In the story, I is no longer a pronoun, but a name, the best of names; to say I is inevitably to attribute signifies to oneself; further, it gives one a biographical duration, it enables one to undergo, in one's imagination, an intelligible "evolution," to signify oneself as an object with a destiny, to give a meaning to time. ^[6]

In brief, as far as Barthes is concerned, “I” itself is not a common pronoun but a concrete name of the protagonist.

Besides the invisibility of the invisible man, there are many other “invisibilities” well-knitted spreading all over the work. Bumping into a man by accident, the black boy is insulted, for which he demands apologies. To his surprise, “when it occurred to [him] that the man had not seen [him], actually; that is, as far as [the man] knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare.”^[7] This experience discloses the phenomenon that people around treat the protagonist with invisibility indifferently. At the royal battle, all the black youth are blindfolded and forced to fight with each other for the coins on the electrical rug. Their being folded exposes that the black youths have no identity and are not hoped to find their true existential identities. In the Black college, there is a bronze statue of the college founder whose “hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hand, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave”^[8]; what has puzzled us is that nobody could make sure whether the founder is untying or covering the cloth on the eyes of the black youth. Simultaneously, we can not admittedly tell whether the function of the college is to enlighten or deceive the black people, and this doubt is proved again when the black boy is compelled out of school for an innocent mistake. What’s more, absurd enough, the priest of the college, whose duty is to lead and illustrate people to the correct way of life, is blind; with the holy mission of fighting for equality, a leader of Brotherhood unexpectedly has an artificial eye. While all the blindness and invisible symbols depict an absurd and ludicrous world where many men wear sunglasses in order that they would not admit the existence of the “colorful” persons and would not be recognized as well. By and large, the rich implications of the “invisibilities” deserve readers’ probe.

Recognizing the lack and significance of the existential identity, the protagonist in *Invisible Man* should spare no effort to be in quest of it. He turns to be a modern Hamlet, “To be or not to be” is a question, similarly, to exist or not to exist, and to be himself or not to be himself are big questions for him. From the beginning to the end, he keeps on looking for the answers to the questions. Most of the time, the narrator is not an active agent; instead, forces and events, seemingly

beyond his control or awareness, push him into new and complex situations.

With no freedom and subjective right to choose, the invisible man, taking on a succession of identities, is forced to undergo an increasingly intense succession of experiences: his suffering the battle royal; being forced to fight with others for the amusement of white men; being victimized by the cynical college president Bledsoe who, not only kicks the black boy out of college, but also gives him sealed letters of recommendation so as to “help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler”^[9]; and his being cheated in the Brotherhood. In the course, he attempts to find his real nature by doing what he is asked to; he attempts to gain his existential identity; he attempts to reaffirm his initial innocence in the corruption of the history; and he attempts to restore the traditional value of his nation. Although he finally escapes underground, we cannot say he fails, because he does his best to be a good student in the college, to be a hardworking worker in the paint factory, to be an outstanding member in the Brotherhood, and all his deeds are the best proof of searching for his existential identity. Undergoing the countless heavy blows in life, the protagonist becomes more and more mature, from the ignorance of knowing whether he has an identity, to questioning for whether having an identity, for which the turning point occurs when the protagonist sleeps in the hospital, asking himself “who am I,” then to trying hard to look for his identity, and at last he finds out that he has no identity. Just like the moths’ exuviations, the black boy peels off his so-called identities or superficial veneers layer and layer till his essential identity appears. Just as what the author narrates:

A huge iridescent bubble seemed to enfold me. [...] I was laved with warmer liquids. [...] The sterile and weightless texture of a sheet enfolded me. I felt myself bounce, sail off like a ball thrown over the roof into the mist, striking a hidden wall beyond a pile of broken machinery and sailing back.^[10]

The “red bubble” is uterus, and “warmer liquid” is blood, and the description above is, actually speaking, the rebirth of the protagonist. When he emerges from this amniotic sac, his umbilical cord is severed, “[he] felt a tug at

[his] belly and looked down to see one of the physicians pull the cord which was attached to the stomach node, jerking [him] forward”^[11] and he is reborn. There is no doubt that “the umbilical cord” stands for new life, the moment doctors cut the cord from mother’s stomach forebodes the independence of the baby, in other words, from that second, he should live by himself, and no one could breathe for him, eat for him, or live for him.

In Chapter Eleven, the doctors asked “What is your name?” “Who are you?” “What’s your mother’s name?” ... These questions, as a matter of fact, are asked for the protagonist, stimulating him to start searching for his existential identity. “You are a new man,” the doctors pointedly tell him, which emphasizes his rebirth again. While, since it is a flashback novel, the identity issue floats onto the surface in the first paragraph of the first chapter:

All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naive, I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer.^[12]

He realizes that except himself nobody can tell him his essential identity and help him to find his existential significance. The only way is to make choices at his free will and take on his duty responsibly, which is also what an existential protagonist should do.

“Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”^[13] The last sentence enlightens the essential theme and purpose of the novel. With no identity, the black boy, as a matter of fact, represents everyone in the world. The statement “If you are no one, you are at the same time potentially everyone”^[14] makes sense. In the novel, “I” is a pronoun referring to the nameless boy himself, however, everyone can call himself “I,” and in this sense, “I” can also stand for all human beings; the questions “Who am I?” “What do I live for?” have perplexed human beings thousands of years since there were human beings. The day mankind existed, the questions appeared, and if human beings don’t ask such questions, they are not real men, for a dog will never ask “Who am I?” No

matter born in what countries, with what colors, everyone experiences the desire to make suitable sense of the particular world he engages in from moment to moment, and the fundamental aspect of this process is striving to understand who he is, where he comes from, and what kind of person he wants to be in the future. This issue of searching for existential identity is central to every human being. Houston Baker once said in *In His Black Literature in America*, "The protagonist is not only a black man, but also a complex American searching for the reality of existence in a technological society characterized by swift change."^[15] However, he can be raised into a higher level to represent all men; correspondingly, his quest for identity is neither the privilege of the protagonist in *Invisible Man*, nor of the black people, but of all mankind. The story is united by the protagonist's constant quest for success and identity, but the invisible man is profoundly each of us, living with embarrassment and frustrations. The nameless boy is not free, but no one is really "free"; the nameless boy has to hide his true feeling and opinions, but every one of us has to endure the unfair treatment and evaluation with duplicity. It is said that human beings are chessmen, never knowing how the God will play. Thus, by means of the novel, Ellison encourages people to find themselves, and understand the true value of one's lives, and his aim is not to cast a warm light on anyone, but to stimulate everyone to seek for the harsh light of truth. Compared with human being, being a real human is more important. In the novel, though the protagonist can breathe, speak, and do everything what human beings can, he is ignored, looked down upon by others. In addition, he has no right to choose, he has no freedom in spirit, therefore he is not being a real man, but at most a puppet. In "*Ellison: 'Keep That Nigger-boy Running'*" Phyllis Rauch Klotman says as follows:

[...] *Running Man* most clearly reflects both positive and negative aspects of running, and whose protagonist epitomizes the experiences of both the black and white *Running Man* of the twentieth century. For *Running Man* is twentieth-century man, fleeing from invisibility (nonidentity) toward a visibility (identity) which he has at least some role in shaping. Invisibility in Ellison's novel is due only to color, or its absence, but to the fact that such is the human condition, the fate of man impotent in the face of the powerful dehumanizing forces of contemporary society.^[16]

From the above words, it is not difficult to find the same viewpoint between Klotman and the writer of this paper that the nameless boy is just the spokesperson of all modern people, who are confused by the outside world and more and more apathetic persons helplessly and pessimistically, but are still looking for ways to settle the problems. In this absurd society, we can be dumb followers, but also best leaders; we may be living death but also dead living. For every one of us, the pursuit of existential identity is to find one's essential human nature and to realize one's value of existence.

The nameless youth in the novel suffers from alienation and non-identity. In a not dissimilar way, in our society, more and more people are facing alienation and identity crisis for complex physical and social reasons, such as affectionate identity from our parents and lovers, trustworthy identity from our friends and companions, confident identity from ourselves; even for the homosexuals, they need acknowledgment of their love from the whole society. Conclusively speaking, *Invisible Man* with subtle language, powerful symbolism and profound theme deserves to be an immortal work attracting more and more readers' attention, and the quest for identity is an everlasting achievement for all human beings.

Notes:

- [1] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random House Inc., 1952, p. 3.
- [2] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random House Inc., 1952, p. 3
- [3] Quoted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 114. Edited by Hunter, Jeffrey W, and Schmitt, Deborah A., Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1999, p. 132.
- [4] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random House Inc., 1952, p. 17.
- [5] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random House Inc., 1952, p. 439.
- [6] From Sandra Adell's essay "The Big Ellison's Text and Intertexts: Eliot, Burke, and the Underground Man" qtd. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 114. Edited by Jeffrey W Hunter, Deborah A Schmitt, Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1999, p. 118.
- [7] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random House Inc., 1952, p. 4.
- [8] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random House Inc., 1952, p. 36.
- [9] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random House Inc., 1952, p. 187.
- [10] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random House Inc., 1952, p. 233.
- [11] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random House Inc., 1952, p. 238.

- [12] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random House Inc., 1952, p. 15.
- [13] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random House Inc., 1952, p. 568.
- [14] Quoted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 54. Edited by Marowski, Daniel G., and Matuz, Roger, Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1989, p. 130.
- [15] Quoted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 1. Edited by Riley, Carolyn. Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1973, p. 95.
- [16] Quoted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 54. Edited by Marowski, Daniel G., and Matuz, Roger, Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1989, p. 132.