



RESEARCH PAPER

**Unmasking Identity: Analyzing Race, Gender and Societal Issues in
Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man***

Prof. Dr. Rajendra Prasad Bhatt

Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Far Western University, Mahendranagar,
Nepal

***Corresponding Author:** srpbhatt@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a reflective exploration of race, gender, identity, and systemic oppression in mid-20th-century America. The narrative follows an unnamed narrator who struggles to define his identity in a society that refuses to see him beyond racial stereotypes. This paper aims to analyze Ellison's *Invisible Man* by focusing on the metaphorical concept of invisibility, the intersection of racial and gender dynamics, and the protagonist's transformative journey. Employing thematic analysis approach and close readings of key episodes and characters, this study investigates Ellison's critique of societal hierarchies and cultural identity. By examining the novel's historical context and Ellison's own insights, it provides a deeper understanding of Ellison's works and messages about social oppression and identity. The findings of this study highlight the novel's enduring relevance in discussions of systematic marginalization, the struggle for self-definition, and the power of resistance. The protagonist's invisibility symbolizes the erasure of Black individuals in a racist society. The novel also explores the intersection of race and gender, highlighting how different forms of oppression shape identity. This research establishes *Invisible Man* as a cornerstone of American literature, resonating deeply with ongoing struggles for equality, freedom and social justice.

KEYWORDS Race, Gender, Invisibility, Systemic Oppression, Identity

Introduction

Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1953) is a influential piece of writing in African American literature. It encapsulates the struggle of an unnamed narrator whose identity is rendered invisible by societal constructs. As the protagonist remarks, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (Ellison, 1965, p. 3). The narrator journeys from the rural south to Harlem, seeking personal identity. He moves from a state of innocence to experience in which he gains consciousness. He passes through a series of dehumanizing and cruel trials. The cause of invisibility is his belonging to the black race. The narrative proceeds as he interacts with society and the people around him. Despite the places he goes and relationships he builds, the world continues to ignore him. In the beginning, he is invisible in a figurative sense, but by the end, he becomes literally invisible. Alan Bourassa in her work "Affect, History, and Race and Ellison's *Invisible Man*" remarks, "The myriad problems faced by the nameless narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: the cruel disillusionments he undergoes with Dr. Bledsoe, Mr. Norton, the Brotherhood, his loss of home, of ambition, of hope, of friends" (2). Bourassa highlights the narrator's struggles including betrayal, disillusionment, and loss, which lead his journey toward self-awareness. Invisibility serves as a metaphor for the oppression faced by African Americans. The narrator desires to construct his own identity in white male dominated society. By utilizing narrative techniques, Ellison critiques the systemic oppression faced by African Americans, addressing the themes of racial injustice,

identity formation, and gender dynamics. This paper aims to analyze these themes while contextualizing the novel within broader discussions of societal inequality.

Literature Review

Ellison's *Invisible Man* has been widely studied and analyzed by scholars and critics. Most of them have focused on the protagonist's transformative journey. Edith Schor (1993), in her work *Visible Ellison: A Study of Ralph Ellison's Fiction*, provides a compelling interpretation of the novel. She highlights the protagonist's journey and his evolution from a state of ignorance to one of profound self-awareness. Schor describes the narrative as a powerful depiction of both personal growth and social transformation, emphasizing that it traces the narrator's journey "from ignorance to knowledge and affirmation" (115). This journey not only symbolizes the protagonist's quest for identity but also reflects broader themes of societal change and African American people's struggle for self-identity and recognition. Similarly, Alan Bourassa (2006) draws attention to the significance of invisibility as a powerful metaphor for racial oppression in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. He explores how the condition of being unseen represents the systemic marginalization and dehumanization faced by African American people. Bourassa emphasizes the struggles of the unnamed narrator, who wrestles with a wide range of challenges stemming from his invisible status in society. These "myriad problems," as Bourassa describes, highlight the narrator's constant fight against prejudice, stereotyping, and a lack of recognition as a fully realized individual (p. 2). This metaphor not only illustrates the narrator's personal struggles but also serves as a broader commentary on the prevalent racial issues of the time in America.

Barbara Foley (2010) offers a critical perspective on the role of the Brotherhood in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. She views it as a symbolic representation of exploitative political ideologies. She argues that the Brotherhood, while initially presented as a progressive and inclusive organization, ultimately reveals itself to be manipulative and self-serving agency. According to Foley, the group's actions reflect a broader critique of political systems which prioritize their policies over the individuals. Through the narrator's experiences with the Brotherhood, Foley highlights how such ideologies often exploit vulnerable communities, undermining their autonomy and silencing their voices. The intersection of race and gender emerges as a central theme in Ellison's work. By providing a deeper layer to its exploration of identity and oppression, Shelly Eversley (2005) digs into the portrayal of female iconography in the novel. She examines how women are depicted and how their roles contribute to the broader narrative of power dynamics and systematic marginalization. Similarly, bell hooks (2004) focuses on the intertwined nature of patriarchal and racial oppression in America. She highlights on how systems of power simultaneously marginalize individuals on the basis of race and gender. These studies underscore the multifaceted nature of Ellison's works which offer an understanding of various forms of oppression in a racist society. By addressing these complexities, they provide valuable insights into the broader societal issues that the narrative seeks to evaluate.

Material and Methods

This study employs qualitative analysis technique by focusing on key narrative episodes, character development, and issue of invisibility in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Primary source of information is Ellison's *Invisible Man* from where textual evidences are drawn. Secondary sources are books, research papers, journal articles, theses, and internet sources relevant to this research. By examining key episodes such as the battle

royal, the protagonist's experiences at school, hospital and Liberty Paints, and his interactions with the Brotherhood, the present research seeks to elucidate the novel's critique of societal structures.

Results and Discussion

Racial Oppression and Identity Formation

In *Invisible Man* by Ellison, racism is a central theme. The protagonist lives in a segregated, racist southern society where African Americans endure the injustice and systemic oppression. They are conditioned to believe in the superiority of whites and accept servitude as the only way to coexist. At college, the protagonist experiences unfair treatment from white individuals, which leads him to grasp the true meaning of racism. The protagonist's journey from the segregated South to Harlem highlights the pervasive impact of racism. His grandfather's instruction to "live with your head in the lion's mouth" encapsulates the duality of resistance and submission required to navigate a racially biased society (Ellison, 1965, p. 16). This guidance reflects a survival strategy that African Americans adhere in a hostile world. He advocates that humility and submission are tools for black people to survive and progress. Recalling his experience at school, the narrator reveals, "On my graduation day, I delivered an oration in which I showed that humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress. (Not that I believed this — how could I, remembering my grandfather? I only believed that it worked.)" (Ellison, 1965, p. 17). This internal conflict highlights the struggle of maintaining a false identity to survive in a world which is dominated by oppressive forces.

After his expulsion from college, the narrator begins to spend time in the society. He gets strange experiences there. On a bus ride to New York, he instinctively sits in the back, despite the bus being nearly vacant. As he narrates, "I looked around for a seat away from them, but although the bus was empty, only the rear was reserved for us, and there was nothing to do but move back with them" (Ellison, 1965, p. 151). This scene illustrates the marginalization of black individuals, who are denied equal access to public spaces such as hotels, parks, schools, buses and so on. On the same bus, the narrator meets a veteran who understands and sympathizes with the struggles of African Americans in a racially segregated society. The veteran shares his experiences and offers the narrator important advice. He suggests him, "Be your own father, young man. And remember, the world is possibility if only you'll discover it" (Ellison, 1965, p. 156). This encouragement fuels the narrator's determination to succeed in the industrial world of New York.

Upon arriving in New York, the narrator gets a job at Liberty Paints. He is initially impressed by the factory, particularly by its iconic slogan: "KEEP AMERICA PURE WITH LIBERTY PAINT" (Ellison, 1965, p. 196). The factory produces the "whitest paint in America," but its manufacturing process is symbolic; ten drops of black paint are required to achieve the flawless white color. As described, "The idea is to open each bucket and put in ten drops of this stuff" (Ellison, 1965, p. 199). This metaphor reflects the dependence of American prosperity on the contributions of black people, whose labor is integral yet overlooked in the final product. The narrator notes that society often focuses on the surface, ignoring the contributions of black workers in their work places. He points, "Our white is so white you can paint a chunk of coal, and you would have to crack it open with a sledgehammer to prove it was not white clear through" (Ellison, 1965, p. 217). This statement indicates that black culture is assimilated but remains invisible beneath the dominant white culture.

The narrator's experience at Liberty Paints takes a dark turn when he suffers a severe head injury from a boiler explosion. He is sent to a hospital, where white doctors treat him as a test subject. The doctors ignore his pain. They use him in medical experiments, including electric shock treatments. The narrator recounts, "A flash of cold-edged heat enclosed me. I was pounded between crushing electrical pressures; pumped between live electrodes like an accordion between a player's hands" (Ellison, 1965, p. 232). He gets tortured under the supervision of medical officers. At hospital, when questioned about his identity, the narrator cannot respond due to his condition and black identity. As he narrates:

"What is your name?" a voice said.

"My head . . ." I said.

"Yes, but your name. Address?"

"My head – that burning eye . . ." I said.

"Eye?" (Ellison, 1965, p. 232).

Unable to provide his name or address at the hospital, the narrator is further dehumanized and reduced to an experimental object. Anthony S. Abbott (1981) explicates this inhuman treatment in his analysis of *Invisible Man*. He writes, "The doctors' questions about his name and the Rabbit song related to his origins aim to remind him of his African origins and his slave roots" (p. 231). Abbott's interpretation highlights the dehumanization and oppression faced by black individuals, even in spaces intended for healing. The narrator's journey highlights the systemic racism which is deeply rooted in American society. From the segregated bus to the exploitative work environment at Liberty Paints, and eventually to the dehumanizing hospital experience, the protagonist's struggles reflect the widespread dehumanization and marginalization of blacks in America. Despite their indispensable contributions, they are often rendered invisible, their labor and humanity ignored in favor of maintaining white dominance.

The protagonist's involvement with the Brotherhood also reflects the exploitation of simple-minded blacks. The narrator initially believes that the organization will help him overcome barriers of discrimination, isolation, and betrayal. As he describes, "It is simple; we are working for a better world for all people" (Ellison, 1952, p. 304). His intellectual speaking ability captures the attention of the organization, leading to his recruitment. He notes, "It was after all, a job that promised to exercise my talent for public speaking" (Ellison, 1952, p. 291). However, he very soon realizes that the Brotherhood prioritizes ideology over individual agency. He succumbs to the cycle of captivity and betrayal. He is exploited for his public speaking skills. His contributions are not valued but are manipulated to serve the organization's broader goals. All his actions are dictated by Brother Jack which highlight the organization's exploitative nature. The narrator observes that the Brotherhood evaluates him as a mere abstract symbol of his race rather than a human being. Barbara Foley (2010) argues in *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* that the Brotherhood serves as a stand-in for the U.S. Communist Party, with which Ellison was associated in the 1930s and 1940s. Foley contends that Ellison critiques the Communist Party for exploiting Black Americans under the pretense of fighting for justice and equality.

Invisibility as a Metaphor for Marginalization

As the protagonist grows up, he constantly makes inquiry about his identity. With the passage of time, he begins to understand the concepts of visibility and invisibility. He transforms himself from a visible man to an invisible one. He learns about

racial issues from his grandfather, who provides him crucial lessons on navigating a racially biased society. His grandfather emphasizes the need to adopt a dual identity to survive in a white-dominated world. As he advises, "Son, after I am gone, . . . 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, 1965, p. 16). His grandfather suggests him that African Americans should adopt two identities. On the one hand, they must pretend to conform, behaving as their masters expect. And on the other hand, they must internally harbor their resentment and bitterness, using the feelings to resist the false identity imposed upon them. This mask is both a shield for protection and a strategy for survival for blacks in an unjust world. The protagonist adopts this method, emphasizing submission and humility as means to advance the rights of African Americans. His approach stems from the belief that these strategies are necessary to achieve equality and gain recognition in America.

Invisibility becomes a powerful metaphor for the systemic erasure of Black identity and existence. The protagonist's realization that "people refuse to see" him highlights the broader societal tendency to overlook the people who belong to marginalized community (Ellison, 1965, p. 3). His act of literal invisibility, living underground and stealing electricity, symbolizes the extreme measures that marginalized individuals take to assert their existence.

Gender Oppression

Gender oppression is intricately woven in *Invisible Man*. The narrative, through the Battle Royal scene, exemplifies the objectification and dehumanization of women. The Battle Royal scene is indicative of the systemic oppression of women. In this event, a female dancer walks as a sexual object to shame and emasculate the black boys. The protagonist describes the woman as a "circus kewpie doll, the face heavily powdered and rouged, as though to form an abstract mask" (Ellison, 1965, p. 19). Her appearance is exactly constructed by the powerful white men attending the ceremony, highlighting her role as an object of sexual desire and control. Shelly Eversley, in her analysis of female iconography in *Invisible Man*, notes the symbolic role of the nameless nude woman. She states, "Ellison's artful description of the woman's symbolic role, like Monroe's pose, suggests complicity in a well-known and longstanding iconography of female difference and sexual objectification that critics have argued amounts to nothing more than a literary pinup (Eversley, 2005, p. 172). Eversley underscores how Ellison's portrayal of the woman appeals to sensuous imagery by reinforcing stereotypes that justify domination over both women and black individuals. Her presence reflects the systemic oppression faced by women within both patriarchal and racial hierarchies. Her manipulated image mirrors societal structures that perpetuate gender and racial inequality. The female dancer's position in the Battle Royal also shows the insatiable male desire for the female body and the persistent oppression of women in a male-dominated world.

Jim Trueblood's confession of raping and impregnating his daughter, Matty Lou, also illustrates the case of gender oppression. Trueblood narrates the act as occurring in a strange dream-like state, "when she grabs holt to me and holds tight. She didn't want me to go then—and to tell the honest to-God truth I found out that I didn't want to go neither" (Ellison, 1952, p. 60). Houston A. Baker (1980) argues that Trueblood represents the stereotypical "brutal black beast" whose actions are an expression of his masculinity through the sexual subordination of women (p. 34). Ellison presents this episode to confront the trauma of gender disparity at the heart of American society.

Sybil, the wife of a prominent Brotherhood member, represents the voice of repressed white women in the novel. Her desire to be raped by the protagonist is an expression of the racist fantasies encoded in their interaction. As she expresses, "Repression... men have repressed us too much" (Ellison, 1952, p. 519). Sybil criticizes societal norms that force women to deny their humanity, stating, "We're expected to pass up too many human things" (Ellison, 1952, p. 519). The protagonist's interaction with Sybil echoes his earlier experiences with the dancer in the Battle Royal. Both, black/white women's oppression highlights the intertwined nature of racial and gender hierarchies.

Conclusion

Ellison's *Invisible Man* stands as a revolutionary work in African American literature. It offers a profound exploration of race, gender, and identity. Through precise portrayal of systemic oppression and individual resilience, the novel exposes the enduring inequalities embedded in societal structures. By unmasking the protagonist's struggles, Ellison provides a comprehensive and deeply authentic depiction of racism and gender disparity in American Society. Employing a realistic approach and measured tone, the novelist reveals how racial discrimination is deeply rooted in the American psyche and how women are oppressed by patriarchal and capitalist ideologies. By paying attention to this intersection of racism and sexism, Ellison highlights the profound social crisis in American society. He believes that such systemic issues cannot be resolved through racial violence, blind flattery, or superficial achievements within a racist framework.

References

- Abbott, A. S. (1993). *Ralph Ellison's The Invisible Man*. World Library.
- Baker, H. A. (1980). *Blues, ideology, and Afro-American literature: A vernacular theory*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bourassa, A. (2006). Affect, History, and Race and Ellison's *Invisible Man*. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 8(2). 1-8
- Ellison, R. (1965). *Invisible Man*. Penguin Books.
- Eversley, S. J. (2005). Female Iconography in *Invisible Man*. In *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison* (pp. 172-187). Cambridge University Press.
- Foley, B. (2010). *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*. Duke University Press.
- hooks, b. (2004). *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. Routledge.
- Schor, E. (1993). *Visible Ellison: A Study of Ralph Ellison's Fiction*. Greenwood Press.
- West, C. (2001). *Race Matters*. Beacon Press.