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Conflict And Double Consciousness in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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Abstract

Conflict has been one of the greatest challenges that affect human relationship and coexistence. In a multicultural nation such as the United States of America, interracial conflict has been a dominant and recurrent one which has claimed many lives of the African Americans, and has also negatively affected their psychological makeup to the extent it has created what W.E.B. Du Bois called double consciousness. In view of the above, this paper examines the effects of racial conflict as enunciated in Du Bois's Principle of Double Consciousness and how Ralph Ellison appropriated this concept in his novel, Invisible Man in his argument for a genuine multicultural United States of America.

Introduction

Conflict has always been a part of human society and has continued to shape our perception of others as well as our human interactions. Man has always demonstrated a passionate desire to dominate others in one way or the other. This desire to dominate has continued to generate conflict which always plagues peaceful co-existence. It is in the bid to dominate that the imperative of racism, class division and other socio-cultural cleavages grow. This desire to dominate other people in turn generates the need to resist such domination. The resistance to domination comes in different forms and degrees and at different times. The crucial point for us is that literary creativity serves as a weapon for resistance against tyranny. This is even more potent in the case of African-American literature. It is in the context of the

foregoing that the history and the literature of African-American society can be well appreciated. In such a multicultural American society where policies and politics of difference engender tension for the purpose of domination, the literature will reflect such underlying racial tension engendered by the divisive policies.

At every turn of human history there exist the glory and challenges of life and people respond to them with diverse tools either to sustain the glory or to battle the challenges, and literature has always been and will continue to be a potent tool in this direction. Literature is the mirror of the sensibilities of human life and through its aesthetics and utilitarian values we appreciate every aspect of life from hatred, love, evil, goodness, sex, terrorism, racism, colonialism, insanity, slavery etc. If we recall the main assumption of mimetic theory of literature and the arts which is rooted in the work of Plato and which underscores that literature is a mirror of life, African-American literature is a representation of the negation of the ideals of the Declaration of American Independence. It is within this overall negation that we can appreciate the effects of multiculturalism and the relationship between double consciousness and representation in the work of Ralph Ellison.

Double Consciousness as Conflict

Indeed, due to racial sensibilities, almost every black person in America is a traitor in the sight of many white Americans, and as such they treat the blacks with disdain, suspicion and contempt. It is against this backdrop that one can appreciate Bledsoe's double standard attitude towards the protagonist and at the same time alienation and the invisibility of the protagonist of the novel. The problem of identity has been at the core of the bane of the growth of United States of America. Ordinarily, the multicultural nature of the

American society would have engendered more unity in diversity than what exists presently, but the reverse is the case.

Conflict could be between and within nations, races, individuals, and could also be within physical and psychological realm. The racial conflict in the United States of America between the African Americans and the whites has lasted for centuries and continue to assume different forms and magnitude without lasting solutions. The direct and greater adverse effect of this racial conflict is on the African Americans who are on the receiving side and either as individuals or a people. This does not in any way suggest that the larger society of the United States of America as a multicultural society is not indirectly affected by this racial epidemic. African American writers been part of the American society where this racial conflict exists appropriate this social fact in their literary works to fulfilling the aesthetic and utilitarian tasks of a creative writer.

The problem of double consciousness is the basic premise in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and this is vividly captured in the lamentation of the protagonist, invisible man:

About eighty-five years ago they were told that they were free, united with others of our country in everything pertaining to the common good, and, in everything social, separate like the fingers of the hand. And they believed it. They exulted in it. They stayed in their place, worked hard, and brought up my father to do the same. (8)

The above lamentation of the protagonist of Ellison's *Invisible Man* underscores the internal individual conflict induced by the racial conflict in the United States of America. This further draws our attention to Du Bois's view or idea of double consciousness. Indeed, the fundamental issue that affects the protagonist of *Invisible Man* is internal conflict between the

expectation of the whites of him and his innate disposition as a black person. Throughout the novel, this internal conflict affected his realization of his true personality and potentialities in a multicultural American setting hence his invisibility. This is why the Invisible Man laments “Still I was more afraid to act any other way because they didn’t like that at all” (18).

Ralph Ellison in his *Invisible Man* recreates and represents this world of racial conflict at the physical as well as psychological level of the individual and the society in general. *Invisible Man* recreates this fundamental problem of American society which is racism in vivid manner. Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is centered on the literary ethos of double consciousness which is predicated on conflict, dilemma, double vision of life, of culture, and validity, of existence and identity. Commenting on the subject matter of invisibility in *The Invisible Man*, Dianne Shoher states thus: “It is the riot that brings together for the Invisible Man a firm sense of who he is” (9). Shoher continues to posit:

It is in the darkness of the underground, the accidental escape into the depths of the earth that light dawns, and a revelation of independent, self-hood breaks through. Facing and conquering the fear of darkness that has crippled him from his youth, the invisible man [...] is reborn a new man [...] The spiritual symbolism is irrefutable. He emerges from the darkness having discovered and made peace with himself and the fragmented world around him. (9-10)

The degree of psychological and physical trauma the protagonist of the novel suffered due to the dialectics of double identity and double vision is overwhelming. However, at the end the protagonist discovers his true self and appreciates the value of diversity. This

moment of resolution in the novel carries Ellison's fundamental philosophy in the novel which is self-discovery.

Concluding her study, Shober avers that "*Invisible Man* is a universal text resonating with the disenfranchised ensnared by the artificiality of impersonal modern society" (10). She opines that "it speaks to the blindness and invisibility of human beings who clothe their nakedness by impersonating a counterfeit image of reality neon lit with false importance" (10). She argues that "it is also a testament of African American dislocation and dismemberment portioned out by the carving knife of white determinism and arrogant superiority" (10).

Shober reveals that:

Ellison brilliantly bridges the bitterness and pain inherent in invisible 'men' of all ethnicities. Like a soap-box preacher, he calls to everyone to know thyself, to acknowledge and appreciate who, what and where they are, to sculpt their identity with their own hands and be content with what they have independently crafted, a world, the invisible man suggests, in which diversity offers infinite possibility [...].
(10)

In Ellison's *Invisible Man*, racism is represented in multi-dimensional ways that is orchestrated in many areas of human interaction. In this novel, racial act is presented overtly or covertly in actions and inactions of both white characters as well as those by some black characters to the chagrin of the protagonist of the novel and even the readers. This pattern of representation perhaps among other reasons is used by the author to reflect the effect of racism in all facets of the American society and in turn present a double vision of life for the protagonist. For instance, the Brotherhood organization like other institutions in the novel which ordinarily is supposed to protect the interest of

the blacks against the white racist and evil acts is also presented as an institution that aids and abets racial act against the blacks in the novel. This scenario is advertently used by the author to reveal in vivid term the confusion and ambivalence the blacks face in such situation. As Reza Deedari and Mahdis Faghieh Nasiri rightly state, the Invisible Man “admits his invisibility at the very beginning of the story in the prologue” (1704). This is true as the Invisible Man’s statement validates it: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (3).

The author used the protagonist to advance the principle of double consciousness. The narrator has double identity just as the Brotherhood in the novel. The narrator physically and psychologically wanted and praised on one hand and on the other hand threatened and unwanted, hence his invisibility. Ironically, it is through his invisibility that his double vision is revealed.

Discussing the issues of double consciousness and identity with reference to Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Deedari and Nasiri aver that:

Double consciousness and identity crisis are interrelated. Therefore, in *Invisible Man*, the most conspicuous theme is its protagonist’s search for his identity; double consciousness is particularly noticeable. In fact, the sense of double consciousness is created in the Invisible Man due to his marginal position as an African American in American society. (1705)

Amplifying their argument, Deedari and Nasiri note that:

Another instance of the Invisible Man’s contemplation of his identity is when feeling alienated, he is walking in the streets of Harlem. Then, he encounters an old man who sells baked yams which are the favorite food for black

Americans in the South. Thus, he remembers home and feels nostalgic. Consequently, he starts thinking deeply about his identity and black consciousness (1705)

Deedari and Nasiri are right in their assertion above because the double consciousness is not an innate one; it is as a result of the “marginal position.” The principle of double consciousness is very central to Ellison in his reconstruction and representation of the African American problem, a problem he proffers solution to. Searching for true identity under the spell of double consciousness was invariably one of the lots of the protagonist of the novel.

Remarkably, Klara Szmanko highlights the influence of Du Bois's philosophy of Double Consciousness on Ellison's *Invisible Man*, also pointing out Ellison's contribution in his appropriation of the said concept: “the complaints of African Americans against continuing racial profiling and persistent segregation in American cities show that many African Americans do not feel fully embraced by American democracy” (105). “Even if socio-historical transformations have contributed to at least a partial displacement of the double consciousness formula and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*,” asserts Szmanko, “both remain seminal touchstones, not only shedding light on the African American experience, but also finding their way into the experience of other American minorities and their literatures” (105).

Szmanko reveals that:

Du Bois suggests that black people perform a balancing act in order to achieve internal unity. The maturing *Invisible Man* claims that African Americans are dispossessed of one eye, while Du Bois states that they are born with a veil. It is imperative that African Americans preserve their own vision. (106)

The philosophy of Double Consciousness as propagated by Du Bois has enormous influence in African American literature because its argument is drawn from the psychological exposures of the African American people under the racist American society. Every writer as we know is guided by a principle that illustrates his life experiences and shapes his underlying argument in his fictional world. A critical reading of Du Bois's principle of Double Consciousness and Ellison's *Invisible Man* will reveal a large degree of appropriation of the above principle in the novel *Invisible Man*.

Szmanko asserts that "Being tormented by "contradictory voices," an equivalent of Du Bois's unreconciled strivings":

[the invisible man] craves for unity. Du Bois encouraged African Americans to keep both of their selves. The Immature Invisible Man thinks that striving for true self-consciousness involves a partial erasure of one's self. He has not yet discovered that internal heterogeneity can be beneficial. (110)

The protagonist continues to reveal these tormenting experiences occasioned by split identity or double consciousness. Double consciousness creates morass of indecision in the mind and psyche of the African American Individual. Under the morass of indecision, the Invisible Man joined the Brotherhood to get recognition of the white people.

Szmanko argues:

The immature Invisible Man wants to build his identity upon exclusion, rather than on the inclusion of all its elements. Trying to blot out his past, he consistently attempts to negate part of himself. It does not occur to him that all layers of his identity are equally important. Instead, he introduces a

hierarchy of importance, rating his new self above his old self. (112)

Remarkably, Bledsoe, Brockaway, Mary and others never appreciated the conflict within his personality. They chose to see him and want him to see himself from the prism of their own sensibilities and personality. They all wanted him to build his personality within the purview of exclusion, prejudice, hate, racism, exclusion, and bigotry, rather than inclusion, love, mutual understanding, multiculturalism, and egalitarian sensibilities hence the double consciousness.

According to Szmanko, "the Invisible Man is not willing to appreciate the complexity of his experience. Unaware that all his experiences enrich him, sharpening his perception, he cannot capitalize on his misfortunes" (112).

"Allowing others to construct his identity," Szmanko tells us, "he practically fuses with the Brotherhood" (113). Szmanko posits that Invisible Man discovers himself after he embraces internal diversity emanating from the complexities of his experiences. This made him to finally recognize the relevance of the stages of life in the development of consciousness and that the experience of racism gave the Invisible Man deep insight into the nature or dialectics of cultural diversity, its cost and benefits (114).

The following lamentations from the *Invisible Man* validate Szmanko's contention: "they were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and they were me [...]" (383).

This gives credence to Szmanko's contention that the Invisible Man's rejection of self because of colour is like shooting oneself in the leg hence the Invisible Man's rejection of the white culture as the only standard culture. (119)

The following passage from the novel further authenticates Szmanko's argument:

This is why the Invisible Man in the novel embraces "diversity" instead of "conformity." Conformity for the Invisible Man forcefully draws the blacks to the white man's culture hence he strives toward colourlessness because America is "woven of many strands." (435)

The above point supports multiculturalism for which Ellison advocates unlike Du Bois who never proffered any solution for the problem of double consciousness. This is why Szmanko avers that diversity encourages understanding among people of different races in the United States (119).

Ellison's *Invisible Man* appropriates Du Bois's double consciousness and further reconstructs it for comprehensive, inclusive and egalitarian American society. In the novel, Ellison through the protagonist of the novel vividly reveals the futility of cleavages of racial sensibilities hence this expression. "... America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain ..." (435).

He rather sees himself from a multicultural standpoint, and this subtle, yet, enduring polemics of Ellison as represented is represented in his novel.

In Du Bois's view, there is no genuine self-consciousness for the blacks in the United States. The blacks in the United States see and judge themselves through the perspectives of the white who view the blacks contemptuously. The black man is torn between two worlds i.e. African and American. ("TheBestNotes") This is why Du Bois argues that double consciousness provides a "second sight" for the blacks and this hinders their programme towards national and natural identity. This is why he is of the view that blacks are the custodians of the problem of double consciousness or the

dehumanization of two souls striving for domination ("The Best Notes").

It is Du Bois's polemics under the principle of double consciousness that racial sensibilities against African Americans in the United States of America propel and force them to view themselves via the mirror or through the standpoint or perspective of the white people of the United States of America. Regrettably, the above white American perspective is negative, stultifying, and against the multicultural principles of the United States of America.

In the effort to resist the above world view as portrayed in the novel, the argument of the Grandfather to the protagonist comes into play and remains the guiding principle to overcome the problem of double consciousness at least temporarily.

Valerie Smith is of the view that the protagonist in *Invisible Man* tells the story of his search for identity which is at the risk of being destroyed by the racial onslaught of Mr. Norton, Bledsoe, and the Brotherhood. The antagonistic forces provide false names or unsuitable identities for the Invisible Man which is designed to control and make him assume false identity provided by others. Remarkably, the Invisible Man realizes the essence of life when he takes the responsibility of naming himself through the rendition of his own story (191).

This point is further illustrated by the sufferings of the protagonist of Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*: "Well, I was and yet I was invisible that was the fundamental contradiction. I was and yet I was unseen. It was frightening and as I sat there I sensed another frightening world of possibilities" (408).

In appreciation of the issues of blindness, invisibility and double consciousness, in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, David Price gives a cogent analysis of Ellison's appropriation of the principle

of double consciousness when he argues that the novel is couched on the principles of Double Consciousness. Ellison, according to Price provides a pattern of representation where the protagonist has dual roles as a narrator and the protagonist as well as a double role the Grandfather encouraged him to lead so as to curb the white supremacist system (29). This is also evidenced in the novel where the grandfather advises the Invisible Man: "I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'emswoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (13). "The grandfather's advice to deceive and accept a power structure where black people cannot change," Price continues, "and thus their participation requires a social identity disconnected from their true thoughts and feelings. "Therefore," as Price explains, "Invisible Man's education and schema for interpreting the world comes from a heritage that suggests one cannot have a true identity in the public, social world one is a part of" (29). The Invisible Man in the course of his identity variation and development came to understand that Norton, Emerson, Jack and the Brotherhood have the same agenda forcing their own reality upon him and he nevertheless recognizes his invisibility to them.

In view of the above argument as given by Price, one can appreciate conflicting visions of identity and values which the protagonist of the novel supports simply because of his colour as well as the advice the protagonist's grandfather gave him. The implication of the protagonist's grandfather's advice is that double identity is part of the solution of the problem of racism. This tends to give credence to what Ellison tends to argue in his *Invisible Man* which is that double consciousness has both advantages and disadvantages despite the fact that the

disadvantage outweighs the advantage. "The Invisible Man," according to Szmanko:

Stops striving for uniformity and recognizes himself as a multiple subject who welcomes internal heterogeneity. His conception of identity undergoes a major shift towards the end of the novel. At first he perceives identity as static, monolithic and immutable. The immature Invisible Man thinks that he can carve out his identity like a sculptor. Ellison sees identity as something much more ephemeral and not fully articulated. (115)

"The mature Invisible Man discovers that identity is dynamic, not static," continues Szmanko, "that life is a journey on which one meets their new and old selves, coming across different elements of one's identity. The Invisible Man as the mature narrator no longer wants to eradicate part of himself. He begins to appreciate all parts of his identity" (115).

From the outset of the novel, the protagonist of the novel is swayed within the dictates of the "white world" represented and regulated by Dr. Bledsoe. He relegates the advice of his Grandfather to the background. However, as the novel progresses, the protagonist began to appreciate the dominating force of racism and forced identity therein. This awareness provided a platform upon which he draws the inspiration to discover his innate personality and identity. Szmanko has it that Ellison had a firmer understanding of human identity than Du Bois because Du Bois concentrates only on the duality of the blacks which yields to "two souls," "two thoughts," "two unreconciled strivings," "two warring ideals," (115). However, Ellison examines and explores multiple identities or selves which yield more positive results of peaceful co-existence (115). Szmanko acknowledges Ellison's indebtedness to Du Bois's double consciousness. However, she is of the view that Du Bois

underestimates the part the blacks play in the racial construct of American society by reducing blacks to an object at the hand of the whites who are the agents of racism. For Szmanko, Du Bois presented blacks as docile instead of active subject that can resist whites.

Conclusion

The above summarizes the fundamental aesthetics of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and which in essence is a solution to American racial crises. Ellison's main character in his *Invisible Man* is torn between two conflicting and contradicting worldviews. The Invisible Man is estranged from mainstream American culture and this leads to double consciousness. Ellison's protagonist is portrayed in the novel as one whose identity is forced on him by the white racial society. However, he later made new discovery of himself when he goes underground. This made him to reconsider his real identity and that of the white people, hence the double vision. Invisible Man is driven by personal and societal frustrations into alienation, divided identity and solitude. He seeks identity and identification in the Brotherhood which, ordinarily, he is averse to, yet finds no solace or identity in the association; rather, he finds a contradiction. This situation and other racial values lead him to identify crises and contradictory existence.

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