RALPH WALDO ELLISON AS THE MAN AND THE WRITER

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Abstract

Ralph Ellison was one of the greatest scholar and writer. He was born Ralph Waldo Ellison in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, named by his father after Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ellison was best known for his novel *Invisible Man*, which won the National Book Award in 1953. He also wrote *Shadow and Act* (1964), a collection of political, social and critical essays, and *Going to the Territory* (1986). For *The New York Times,* the best of these essays in addition to the novel put him "among the gods of America's literary Parnassus." A posthumous novel, *Juneteenth*, was published after being assembled from voluminous notes he left after his death. He was at the tender age of 3. His loss left Ralph and his family struggling financially. From a young age Ida Millsap encouraged Ralph's habit of reading. She would bring along magazines and books from residences she cleaned at for him to read. Moreover, a black priest succeeded in giving African American people in Oklahoma City the opportunity to use the public library, a privilege which exposed Ralph to a different world entirely. Invisible Man was published in 1952 by Random House. It tells a story from a young black man's perspective who is struggling in New York. He feels misplaced, disappointed and traumatized by the injustices and racism in South Harlem. As a result the protagonist withdraws from society to a basement, becoming "invisible". In 1953, the Invisible Man won the National Book Award.

Key Words: Ralph Ellison

INTRODUCTION

Ellison grew up in Oklahoma, Texas. In the 1930's Oklahoma was a frontier state where Jim Crow's laws of segregation had not been entrenched and opportunities abounded. His father was an Emersonian. His mother was an admirer of Socialism and an activist who prepared him for the role of a leader of the African American masses. Ellison was an ardent admirer of Jazz and the Jazz musicians of his growing up years. A gifted musician himself, Ellison enrolled at Tuskegee institute, Alabama to study music. But the southern conservative atmosphere at Tuskegee inspired him to study the visual arts.

Ellison moved to New York where a chance meeting with the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes and novelist Richard Wright led him to associate himself with the Federal Writers Project established during the Depression years. Encouraged by Wright he started to contribute essays, reviews, and short stories to various periodicals like the 'Negro Masses'. He became the editor of "Negro Quarterly" and commenced writing his first novel "Invisible Man". Ellison was in the merchant marines from 1943-45 during World War II. After the war, he continued working on his novel which he completed in 1951. Published in 1952, "Invisible Man" was awarded the National Book Award in 1953. His essays, reviews and interviews published under the title "Shadow and Act" (1964) and "Going to the Territory" (1986) cover a range of issues concerning African American and on a wider scale American life and society. His second novel "Juneteenth" was left uncompleted due to his death in 1994.

Unlike Wright, Ellison grew up in a racially liberal environment. His Oklahoma Experiences' was one of white racial restraint. Oklahoma was then the new frontier state where discrimination had not yet taken a hard stance and there were plenty of opportunities for resident blacks to improve their economic status. It presented Ellison with a congenial to extend his intellectual scope, to become as he himself put it, a "Renaissance Man" - "Anything and everything was to be found in the chaos of Oklahoma; thus the concept of the Renaissance Man has lurked long within the shadow of my past… How we actually acquired it, I have never learned, and since there is no true sociology of the dispersion of ideas within the American democracy, I doubt if I ever shall. Perhaps we breathed it in with the air of the Negro community of Oklahoma City, the capital of the state whose Negroes were often charged by exasperated white Texans with not knowing their "place". Perhaps we took it defiantly from one of them. Or perhaps, I myself picked it up from some transplanted New Englander I had shined of a Saturday afternoon". (Shadow and Act.) Ellison's father, who died early, left him with an Emersonian heritage while his mother an activist deeply influenced him. Ida Ellison was a self-made woman, a stewardess in her church who put emphasis on action. She brought home records, magazines, and books discarded in the white homes where she worked as a maid. She made things available to her son like electric and chemistry sets, a roll-top desk and chair, and a toy typewriter. She was a political activist. She would remind Ellison, "If you young Negroes don't do something about things I don't know what's going to happen to this race". An enthusiastic supporter of socialism she often ended up in jail for opposing Jim Crow Laws.

Ellison had many white friends and black and white integration on a cultural level was widespread. There was social interaction with Indians. Downtown theatres were not segregated till the 1920s. Ellison grew up envisioning himself as a latter day "Renaissance Man" and incorporated desired symbols along with attitudes and values from blacks, Indian and whites. An avid reader, he had diverse reading material at hand. He identified with a cross section of the community. A formative influence on him was the jazz musicians of his youth. They were motivated by "the will to achieve the most eloquent expression of idea emotions through mastery of their instruments…the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through a musical tradition…that insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn

the best of the past and add it to his personal vision." (Shadow and Act, 189) This later played a significant role in the shaping of his social philosophy.

Ellison's move to the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to study music and his interaction with students, teachers, and local folk both black and white Alabamians, the heated pressures and the injustices, the demand to play stereotyped roles advanced his growth as a thinker and an artist. They helped him in forging an artistic consciousness. He developed personal restraint and the ability to withstand provocation. As he put it he found it relatively easy to "outmaneuver those who interpreted my silence as submission, my efforts at self-control as fear, my contempt as awe before superior status, my dream of faraway places and room at the top of the heap as defeat before their stifling, provincial world. And my struggle became a desperate battle which was usually fought, though not always in silence." (The Craft of Ralph Ellison, 10)

In Alabama blacks lived at their own cultural level. Citing the example of segregation in the theatres in Tuskegee he describes the arrangement as separate and equal. "In a double movie house in the town of Tuskegee…Negroes and Whites were accommodated in parallel theatres, entering from the same street level through separate entrance and with the Negro side viewing the same pictures shortly after the showing for whites had begun. It was a product of social absurdity and of course, no real relief from our resentment over the restriction of our freedom. I went to the movies to see pictures, not to be with whites. (The Craft of Ralph Ellison 10, 11)

Even in the face of Jim Crow policies he says he was able to escape the reduction and thus "was disciplined to endure the absurdities of both conscious and unconscious prejudice, to resist racial provocation and, how before the ready violence of brutal policemen, railroad "bullies" and casual white citizens, to hold my peace and bide my time in other venues like walking, reading, hunting, dancing and cultivating ideals. Even the black southerner was obsessively community-minded according to Ellison. The façade of black southern hospitality hid an intense defensive intolerance- "the personal warmth of black southerners is accompanied by an equally personal coldness, kindliness by cruelty; regard by malice… the pre-individualistic black community discourages individuality out of self-defense. Having learned through experience that the whole group is punished for the actions of the single member, it has worked out efficient techniques of behavior control…the member who breaks away... becomes a stranger even to his relatives' (The Craft of Ralph Ellison, 11).

To the black community at Tuskegee, Ellison was an outsider. He brought to Tuskegee a conviction about the "New Negro". He focused his attention on the realty of black American life, the promotion of black American art form in relation to their universal value. His aspiration was to extend the definition of black American life beyond the scope of the New Negroes of the twenties. Under the impetus of the New Negro movement and his own "Renaissance Man' ideal Ellison dabbled in several arts. i.e. music, poetry, painting, photography etc. Ellison admired Alan Locke and the concert pianist Harrison, as they provided vital links to the world of artistic

and intellectual pursuits of the highest order. He was also inspired by the power of Eliot's 'Waste Land" which led him to the study of classical and popular mythology, folklore etc. and their importance to his own identity as an American. He came to realize that he "had been involved in folklore black in Oklahoma" and that many of his concepts about life were shaped by folk rhymes, stories, dances, ritual and music". (The Craft of Ralph Ellison, 21) Writing became a crucial medium of expression to Ellison due to the aesthetic nature of literary power, the devices which could take judicious control of the mind and emotions. (The Craft of Ralph Ellison, 24)

Ellison's migration to New York and Harlem lured by the anticipation of greater freedom ended in the grim revelation that in reality it was all contrary to his high expectations. New York which flaunted the Negro American myth of freedom and Harlem which literature depicted as "a glamorous place, a place where wonderful music existed and where there was a great tradition of Negro American style and elegance "(The Craft of Ralph Ellison, 26), turned out to be in the heart of the city "overcrowded and exploited politically and economically" (The Craft of Ralph Ellison, 27). The psychology of the black residents of Harlem arose from the impact between urban slum conditions and folk sensibilities. The extremes of Harlem resulted from the abrupt shift from the feudal south to the vortex of industrialism in the north and the resulting bewildering mix of cultural factors i.e. the burgeoning creativity and the madness, the vaulting optimism and the psychopathic despair. However Harlem was being enriched by the diverse black American experience and culture. Millions of black migrants from all over the south down to the Caribbean brought their institutions upgrading Harlem as the cultural capital of black America. The 1940's saw Ellison immerse himself in Harlem's social, cultural organism, particularly the jazz scene. The depression years witnessed Ellison do many an odd job from a barman to a file clerk at a psychiatrist's clinic which all served to enrich his artistic consciousness and his study of modern psychology and the literature of Dostoevsky.

Ellison's introduction to Langston Hughes and Richard Wright flagged off his writing career. Under Wrights literary patronage he began to write articles, essays and short stories and reviews to local magazines. Wright was an active member of the communist party. Ellison was therefore introduced to his leftist it leanings. Ellison attended communist social gatherings staged in the rich homes of leftist supporters which were attended by famous radical American men of as Granville Hicks, Isador Scheider, Kenneth Fearing, Chifford Odets, William Rollins Jr., and Malcom Cowley. But unlike Wright, Ellison was unwilling to sketch the black American as the spirit-broken or indoctrinated produce of the external forces set against him. He began to envision black characters who were self-oriented about their environment and in control of it by positive action or by artistic consciousness and the forms of black art. By 1940 he realized that his view and purpose of fiction was radically different from that of Wright and other realists. His concern with the strengths of the black character, with style, with folklore, with black art forms, and with the history of the African American history as a "repository of values" replaced his enchantment with black proletarian characters, scared, battered and on the run.

Ellison is regarded as a militant integrationist. Ellison grew up in a racially liberal environment which creates the possibility of exploring fluidity between the white and the black races unheard of even in the North. It inculcated in him a continuing receptivity to the multi-racial scenario that crowded him. His single seminal novel *Invisible Man* is universalist in the sense that it examines inter-racial tolerance and acceptance, the essence of the American Dream. It incorporates African American folklore, black American artistic expressions like the blues, jazz etc.

Cultural values are often reflections of a society's political and economic situations. Besides political and economic system, art forms especially Music can be a motivating factor in cultural change and achievement. This is clearly seen in the long and turbulent history of the Black Man in America, where a combination of historical circumstance and cultural accidents has given the arts the role of a vehicle for social development. Most historians are of the opinion that the forcible transfer of the Black Man of the old world to slavery in the New, wiped out all but the faintest traces of African political, economic and familial institutions. These aspects of life were rigidly controlled by the White salve master. Yet some basic African tendencies in matter of religion and esthetics not only survived slavery, but were reshaped, nurtured and magnified in response to slavery and post slavery conditions.

Significantly, music not only retained many of its African characteristics but also became a useful second language for the Black Men. White slave masters unaware of the Black slaves subtle understanding of the English language, allowed them to develop a vocal music whose content was well disguised hostile comments. Many slave owners discouraged mournful singing on the grounds that it would impair efficiency. But there can be no doubt that musical expressions of despair often resounded in the slave huts out of ear short of the slave owners and overseers. As was case in native Africa, the Black Man's Music in America served a highly functional purpose. One of the popular forms of Black Folk Music is the "Blues". It had its roots in the mournful songs in the days of slavery. Black Folk Music also finds its roots in work songs, sung by the slaves in the fields. Throughout the in human ears of the post-civil War reconstruction Era, Music continues to be a prime emotional safety valve for the Black Man. The emotionally and spiritually rigid materialistic white protestant society of the late 19th and early 20th century little understood and cared about the emotionally expressive qualities of Music and Dance, Qualities which were central to the experience of the Black community.

Music was one of the most important. The Minstrel show of the 1860's Ragtime Music-a major stylistic inspiration for white musicians – Jazz in its various forms, Blues in its various forms, Rock Music, Soul Music all trace their source to simple Black Folk Music, dances and Humor. White America possessed the Black Man's Music but rejected the Black Man and ostracized him. They exploited the Black Man, adopting his art forms and enriching their own with them yet, denying the Black Man an equal standing in its society. With the emergence of Jazz in 1917 the pattern of White exploitation of the Black art forms entered a new phase. Jazz was not just another passing phase but virtually ushered in a new life style. Equally important, Jazz musicians were Black

performers with visible faces, identities and personal mannerisms. This however did not prevent white performers from helping themselves to what they wanted from black styles. Another form of White exploitation of Black Music was soon to begin.

At the close of World War-II, gray Black Jazz performers like Charlie Parker replaced Big band music with a complex form of Jazz called Bepop. It was at once adopted by white bands giving rise to a pseudo Jazz version called West Coast Jazz. Since the 1950's Black Musicians have tried unsuccessfully to break the chain of White exploitation and to make their music totally black, performable only by players who were routed by birth in Black culture – their goal being an open channel for expressing the complex emotions which seethed within them. Ellison changed the course of Afro-American literature by introducing a distinctly new black protagonist. His "Invisible Man" is radically different from the traditional militant characters. If Wright's characters are fallen, illiterate and inarticulate, Ellison's protagonist is educated with a high degree of self-awareness and articulation. In his 1981 introduction to a new printing of the novel, he mused why most protagonists of Afro-American fiction (not to mention the black characters in fiction written by whites) were without intellectual depth. Too often they were figures caught up in the most extreme forms of the human predicament but are seldom able to articulate the issues which tortured them… I felt that one of the ever-present challenges facing the American novelist was that of endowing his inarticulate characters, scenes and social processes with eloquence. For it is by such attempts that he fulfills his social responsibility as an American artist." (Introduction IM, 1981)

Invisible Man which won for Ellison the National Book Award (the first black author to receive it) recounts the epic journey of a nameless black protagonist from his familiar but oppressive home in the south to new dangerous freedoms in New York City. It is a story of Afro-American man who is in the danger of losing his sense of identity in a world of prejudice and hostility. He ends up hibernating in an underground cellar waiting for an opportune time. Before becoming free from all illusions, the protagonist narrates his experiences from a segregated community in the south to the liberal north. Education and class consciousness do not help him in his despair but only increase his hardships. Finally when he decides to put down his experiences in point he says, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you." (IM, 1)

The novel's life-denying concept of social and cultural invisibility is a radical diversion in the black man's quest for individual and independent identity. As Kirkland puts it:

> Invisibility is Mr. Ellison's central metaphor. It is a profound explanation of what it is like in the black experience to feel alienated. Ultimately, however, the metaphor of invisibility speaks for all or us…blacks, whites, women, homosexuals, the handicapped… anyone who sits at the margin of society, who feels voiceless, whose humanity is not acknowledged. It is a very commonly and widely used metaphor for that kind of situation where people are not seen as fully human (An American Journey).

By subjecting this invisibility to the penetrating light of the novel, Ellison's intention was to effect social change. Conversing with writer and critic Roger Rosenblate in 1973, Ellison expressed his point of view that, "the Invisible Man writes a story is his social bequest And I'll tell you something else. The bequest is hopeful." (Time, 1973) In the 1960's and 70's his vision of black and white fraternity put him in confrontation with black nationalist and black art movements and was condemned as an Uncle Tom.

Ellison did not accept the primitive and racially depressed stereotype of the black man by both black and white writers, sociologists and politicians. He emphasized that the African American race had created its own traditions, rituals and a history that became the source of comprehensive sense of identity. To Ellison, America was not just a racial battleground. It also offered a context for discovering authentic personal identity and created a space for the African Americans to invent their own culture. Black and white cultures are interlinked. The African American persona exercised a greater influence and impact on every facet of American life from music, language, folk mythology to lifestyles, sports, etc.

CONCLUSION

Ellison's single seminal novel *Invisible Man* and his collected essays titled Shadow and Act and Going to the Territory helped in transforming the American way of thinking about race, identity and Americanness. They helped define and clarify debates about race relations in America. Ellison was a Universalist. To him the predicament of the black in America served as a metaphor for the universal human challenge formulating a viable identity in an otherwise chaotic and often insensitive world. His thought process in finding answers to the human predicament influenced successive American writers from Toni Morrison and Charles Johnson Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller.

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