ISSN: 2637-6067 DOI: 10.6918/IJOSSER.202509_8(9).0011

African American Identity' Absurdity and Erratic Visibility in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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Abstract

This essay explores the identity formation of Black intellectuals in postwar America through an analysis of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1953). Drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy, it examines the protagonist's pursuit of subjectivity within a racist and nihilistic social order. By foregrounding African American urban experience, the novel challenges universalist approaches to racial oppression, emphasizing instead the necessity of self-affirmation and authenticity as foundations for meaningful belonging.

Keywords

Existentialism, *Invisible Man*, Black Literature, Identity.

1. Introduction

In *The Inconvenient Indian*, Thomas King imparts a crucial reminder: "Once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told" [1]. Storytelling, as King suggests, is a malleable art form with both constructive and destructive potential [2]. It shapes perceptions, influences cultures, and alters historical understandings. Ralph Ellison's was written to question received American narratives and argue for greater political democracy within the tense socio-political landscape of 1953. The novel reflects the complexities of African American urban experience, where established cultural forces pose distinct challenges. Its protagonist suffers repeated disillusionment through encounters with figures such as Dr. Bledsoe, Mr. Norton, and the Brotherhood, and endures the loss of home, ambition, hope, and friends [3]. Scholars offer differing interpretations of this invisibility. Sandra Adell argues that it results from "mutual invisibility and mutual projection across racial lines," where one may become "not only seen as 'invisible' but also potentially 'by suspecting himself to be so'" [4]. Similarly, Armengol notes that it stems from "a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come into contact" [5], suggesting that the protagonist is trapped by social constraints that render him unseen or devalued—highlighting the powerful influence of norms and prejudice on individual identity and social status. His struggles are deeply embedded in cultural, societal, and historical legacies.

W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in The Souls of Black Folk: "Up the new path the advance guard toiled, slowly, heavily, doggedly… He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another" [6]. This striving for self-definition resonates with Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist view: "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism…Man exists, and then he defines himself" [7]. Sartre's philosophy illuminates the protagonist's struggle to define himself against a society that denies his visibility. As Sartre argues, "The look of the other reveals to me my own being as an object, and it makes me aware of my own existence as a subject" [7]. Viewing the protagonist's trajectory through existentialism allows a deeper understanding of his journey toward authenticity. It underscores

ISSN: 2637-6067 DOI: 10.6918/IJOSSER.202509_8(9).0011

the importance of self-assertion as a potential path for African Americans confronting urban marginalization, while acknowledging the unique challenges each individual must face.

2. Absurdity of African Americans' Life Experience

According to Sartre, "Nothingness can annihilate itself only on the foundation of being; if nothingness can be given, it is neither before nor after being, nor in a general way outside of being." [7]. This implies that nothingness can only be understood in relation to existence—it does not precede, follow, or exist independently of being. This connection gives rise to a profound absurdity within African-American experience. In *Invisible Man*, for instance, Dr. Bledsoe severely castigates the protagonist, accusing him of damaging the school. Although the protagonist believes he was only following Mr. Norton's instructions, his explanations are futile within the racist social framework. His existence is negated and overlooked, as if trapped in a state of nothingness imposed by external social forces, resulting in a deprivation of meaning. Alan Bourassa argues that "'history' and 'race' […] propel the narrator from identity to identity, from white to black, from loyalty to betrayal, from recognition to invisibility" [3]. The protagonist's "being-in-itself" within a racist society is filled with absurdity. Prejudices constrain his existence, while nothingness erodes his potential for free development. He struggles within a "wild topography" of socio-political power, mirroring the fragile boundary between nothingness and existence. Society's definitions act as shackles, suffusing his search for cultural meaning with absurdity. His self-awareness is blurred and his existence swayed by the void of others' prejudice, exemplifying an absurd existence disrupted by nothingness.

As Marcellus Blount observes, "Hovering at the margins of self-awareness, the individual struggles to occupy some center of cultural meaning within the feral terrain of social and political power" [8]. Individuals aspire to realize cultural value, yet the social environment is uncertain and arduous, like wild terrain. This struggle reflects a profound socio-cultural dilemma. The protagonist's disillusion is captured in his outburst: "Suddenly I couldn't stand it. 'Look at me! Look at me!' I said. 'Everywhere I've turned somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my good—only they were the ones who benefited. […] Hambro looked at me as though I were not there'" [9]. His identity is not self-determined but imposed from outside, echoing Sartre's idea that "being is, being is in-itself, being is what it is." The narrative transcends racial specifics to convey a universal humanistic struggle, illustrating Ellison's fusion of existential themes with African American experience. Hilary Greaves notes that "An existential risk is a risk of an existential catastrophe. […] This much is relatively clear" [10]. Sartre's doctrine contends that individuals are "doomed to be free"—a freedom often misunderstood, yet foundational to his ethics. It is the source of both one's actual situation and transcendence.

The protagonist moves from "being-in-itself" to "being-for-itself," gaining awareness of his existential condition. Although society pushes him toward nothingness, rendering him invisible and stripping him of identity, his self-awakening and self-creation rebel against this negation. From an existential view, this rebellion is tragically set against a socially entrenched nothingness—an absurd perception deeming Black lives worthless. Through this confrontation, he moves toward "being-for-itself," seeking light within darkness. Each step is absurd and arduous, yet reveals existence's resilience. Despite marginalization, he begins a conscious process of self-creation through decisions and actions. This aligns with Sartre's "being-for-itself," which defines itself through consciousness and agency [7]. Unlike passive "being-in-itself," it is dynamic and capable of creating meaning—the very essence of consciousness. The protagonist's narrative exemplifies the existentialist belief that individuals are endowed with the freedom and responsibility to shape their own essence through meaningful actions. As Sartre states, "Freedom is not a gift, but a burden. It is not a privilege, but a responsibility. Man is free to choose, but he is also responsible for his choice. He cannot escape his Freedom, and he

ISSN: 2637-6067 DOI: 10.6918/IJOSSER.202509_8(9).0011

cannot avoid his responsibility" [7]. The individual does not challenge ideology because it is itself ideology's proudest achievement [3]. Ellison produces a subversive discourse reflected in narrative, theme, and language, depicting a character deprived not only of identity but also of social space and agency [2]. The protagonist's invisibility transcends the physical to symbolize resistance against dominant ideologies that seek to silence him. This invisibility initiates a dialogue with power, turning the novel into a space where marginalized voices confront and engage with the powerful. Foucault's reflection in Madness and Civilization offers a framework for analyzing these racial and social dynamics: "We have yet to write the history of that other form of madness, by which men, in an act of sovereign reason, confine their neighbors, and communicate and recognize each other through the merciless language of non-madness" [11]. Here, "sovereign reason" represents powerful social institutions that incarcerate African Americans within a cage of nothingness—deprived of agency, labeled as the 'mad other,' and subjugated by a system whose rationality is both plausible and fundamentally absurd. Within this nihilistic environment, the protagonist's defiance and his dialogue with dominant ideology represent a rediscovery of existential meaning and a rebuttal of socially imposed absurdity. As SY Ousseynou notes, "Foucault's metaphorics and metonymics of carcerality offer a lens through which the powerlessness, otherization, and invisibility of African Americans can be analyzed in Ellison's fiction" [2]. Through a Foucauldian lens, characters are transformed into captive subjects, emphasizing a subjugated subjectivity intensified by Ellison's central theme of invisibility. By the end, the protagonist's transformation from an object of others' perceptions to a self-asserting subject is not only personal but a profound commentary on the human condition and the necessity of self-determination.

3. Invisibility in African-Americans' Being-in-itself

The narrative begins with a series of adverse events that force the protagonist to question the bitterness of his fate and the essence of life, provoking a fundamental existential inquiry [12]. Eager to assert his identity, he embarks on an introspective quest. Initially, he aspires to find employment in the North and continue his education, embodying ideals of upward mobility and enlightenment. This youthful idealism is marked by fervent optimism, albeit with a growing awareness of the gap between emancipatory ideals and the stark realities of American society [3]. As Anderson notes, "Ellison himself calls [the protagonist] 'a Negro and an American, a member of the family and yet an outsider'" [13]. Bearing the lessons of the headmaster and a briefcase filled with letters of recommendation, he ventures toward New York, symbolizing his earnest effort to forge a path in the metropolis.

His attempts to secure employment and establish connections are met with repeated rejections, reflecting a deepening existential struggle. In Sartre's terms: "Bad faith is faith. It can not be either a cynical lie or certainty - if certainty is the intuitive possession of the object. But if we take belief as meaning the adherence of being to its object when the object is not given or is given indistinctly, then bad faith is belief; and the essential problem of bad faith is a problem of belief" [7]. Aligned with this philosophy, the protagonist's journey is marked by a profound loss of self. His adherence to authority—epitomized by the black principal Dr. Bledsoe—constitutes a relinquishment of agency. This is starkly revealed when Bledsoe declares: "Don't be kind, sir… You can't be soft with these people. We mustn't pamper them. An accident to a guest of this college while he is in the charge of a student is without question the student's fault… Return to your dormitory and remain there until further notice!" [9]. Bledsoe's hypocrisy sparks the protagonist's disillusionment and initiates his quest for independence. This resonates with Sartre's interpretation of the gaze: "Sartre interprets the gaze of the other as an attempt to define and determine someone. This gives rise to a 'struggle of the gazes' where one exposes oneself to the gaze of the other while simultaneously attempting to withdraw from it—and

ISSN: 2637-6067 DOI: 10.6918/IJOSSER.202509_8(9).0011

while reversely trying to fixate and govern the opponent" [14]. The protagonist's subsequent employment at a paint factory marks a pivotal chapter in his narrative, symbolizing a departure from his previous life and an attempt to redefine his identity. "Emerson's Self-Reliance is a way of being where every individual is their own authority, spiritually, socially, and politically" [15]. Drawn from Emerson's philosophy, one's subjective relationship with spirituality is the primary avenue through which truth and meaning may be accessed. Nonetheless, the protagonist's cultural identity remains enigmatic, as evidenced by the suspicion he encounters from unionized and non-unionized workers, underscoring the complex dynamics of integration and the persistent search for a coherent sense of self.

"I lay in my room with my eyes closed, trying to think. The tension gripped my insides. Then I heard someone coming up the hall and stiffened. Had they sent for me already? Nearby a door opened and closed, leaving me as tense as ever. To whom could I turn for help?" [9] . The protagonist's inner turmoil is highlighted by his painful realization that speaking his truth leads to disapproval, while adopting false views or flattery earns him acceptance. As Alan Bourassa argues, "To weigh in on the side of the personal is not at all to reject or escape the mechanistic ideology of history, but simply to become its pawn" [3]. This contradiction reflects the societal forces that suppress his voice, revealing the difficulty of self-expression within an oppressive environment. His immersion in Harlem's culture marks a reconnection with his Black heritage, leading to profound self-discovery. "And now as I struggled through the lines of people a new world of possibility suggested itself to me faintly, like a small voice that was barely audible in the roar of city sounds. I moved wide-eyed, trying to take the bombardment of impressions. Then I stopped Still" [10]. Witnessing an elderly Black couple evicted from their home due to poverty and official neglect, he confronts the harsh reality of racial and economic injustice. This moment, occurring "just before and after he crosses well demarcated personal thresholds" [3], sparks deep introspection. He faces the divide between his true self and the self-deception he has accepted.

As Sartre explains: "Bad faith does not hold the norms and criteria of truth as they are accepted by the critical thought of good faith. What it decides first, in fact, is the nature of truth. With bad faith, a truth appears, a method of thinking, a type of being which is like that of objects; the ontological characteristic of the world of bad faith with which the subject suddenly surrounds himself is this: that here being is what it is not, and is not what it is" [7]. Within the Brotherhood, the protagonist's search for identity reaches a crisis. His emotional speech ignites the crowd but violates the group's doctrine. Asserting his individuality is seen as a threat, revealing the emptiness of the identity imposed by the Brotherhood. Sartre observes that: "We must not understand by the future a 'now' which is not yet. If we did so, we should fall back into the in-itself, and even worse we should have to envisage time as a given and static container" [7]. This realization aligns with Sartre's view that human existence is not static but oriented toward transformation. The protagonist's rejection of the Brotherhood's assigned role clarifies his invisibility and marginalization within a system of cultural hegemony [9].

In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the protagonist's journey reflects existential dilemmas articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre in Being and Nothingness and Notes for a Moral Philosophy. Sartre's assertion that "We are doomed to be free" captures the paradoxical nature of human freedom—a condition often misunderstood, encompassing both burden and possibility. As Oliver Muller notes, "Visibility subverts the seemingly clear distinction between subject and object. We incorporate our (potential) objectivation and reification in our self-concept—in the sense that even mere attempts to objectify us and our respective withdrawal have a significance in our self-reflective processes. As subjects, we are objects" [14]. Ellison's protagonist embodies this existential conflict, struggling to affirm his identity within societal constraints. His search for meaning mirrors the human condition, where self-affirmation often leads to disorientation.

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This aligns with Sartrean philosophy, which emphasizes the tension between individual autonomy and existential absurdity, marked by the weight of choice and inherent isolation.

Sartre argues that "being-seen-by-the-other" reveals the truth of "seeing-the-other" [7]. Müller further suggests that visibility makes us beings constituted by alterity: "We 'are' the others' gazes" [14]. The protagonist's odyssey illustrates an existential metamorphosis from "being-in-itself" to "being-for-itself," marked by growing awareness of his condition and active efforts to shape his identity through choice and action. This transition reflects Sartre's "being-for-itself,"defined by the urge to transcend current being and refuse static identity. Unlike "being-in-itself," which denotes unselfconscious existence, "being-for-itself" embodies the potential for self-creation inherent in consciousness [7]. Sartre maintains that consciousness gives meaning to existence, forming the core of "being-for-itself." The protagonist's narrative affirms the existentialist conviction that individuals possess the freedom—and responsibility—to shape their essence through deliberate and meaningful action.

The protagonist's educational sojourn at Tuskegee College and the subsequent disenchantment with the machinations of the white southern aristocracy vividly delineates the intricate ethical quandaries inherent in existentialist philosophy. Initially driven by the aspiration for egalitarianism, his compliance poignantly exemplifies the moral conundrums associated with traversing domains of power disparity and ethical obscurity. Sartrean existentialism presents a radical departure from conventional ethical literary criticism, advocating for the primacy of liberty over duty. According to Sartre, responsibility is an emergent property of the exercise of free will, fundamentally concerning the individual's culpability in articulating their core identity [7]. The crux of moral assessment is perceived to reside in the veracity of the volitional act, with any conduct that encroaches upon autonomy being deemed morally reprehensible and a manifestation of 'mauvaise foi'. Sartre's emphasis on the intrinsic liberty of choice over its moral propriety underscores the imperative of leading an unfeigned and genuine existence. In the culmination of the discourse, Ralph Ellison's magnum opus, *Invisible Man*, serves as a compelling exemplar of the existential odyssey as theorized by Jean-Paul Sartre. The narrative arc of the protagonist is marked by a profound evolution, transitioning from a mere object constrained by societal impositions to an empowered subject who actively claims and asserts his own identity. This metamorphosis is a personal transformation and a potent critique of the human condition, emphasizing the ethical necessity for self-determination and autonomy. The novel delves deeply into the intricate dimensions of identity, liberty, and authenticity, offering a mirror to the challenging pursuit of self-realization within a societal framework fraught with racial bias and social inequity. The protagonist's odyssey, which reaches its zenith during his tenure in New York, delineates an existential trajectory from a state of non-existence to one of authentic existence. This progression mirrors Sartre's existential paradigm, which evolves from an initial state of existence to one of transcendence, ultimately culminating in a state of actual existence. Sartre points out, "It is value as transcendence; it is what we call beauty. Beauty, therefore, represents an ideal state of the world, correlative with an ideal realization of the for-itself; in this realization, the essence and the existence of things are revealed as identity to a being who, in this very revelation, would be merged with himself in the absolute unity of the in-itself " [7]. Furthermore, the protagonist's journey illuminates the nuanced interplay between African American and Caucasian cultures and his individual grappling with the quest for significance and genuineness within these cultural dynamics. This exploration is not merely a narrative device but also a profound philosophical inquiry into the complexities of the self in society.

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4. Visibility in African-Americans' Being-in-itself

Existential thought, in general, is not a simplistic denial of all combined human effort. We are conscious and free and must live with personal choice, and with that comes responsibility [17]. Only when a person rooted in his own national culture, his own background, and his own life groups can he realize the value of their own lives. After experiencing his dehumanized life in the mode of being-in-itself, he finally awakens. He begins to pursue his authentic self and realizes the responsibility that he should take and humanitarian Freedom. He extends the influence of the Brotherhood and increases its popularity among the blacks. After the unexpected disappearance of Brother Tod Clifton, he suddenly and surprisingly returns to Harlem. His behaviors lead to the dissatisfaction of the pagans. Upon witnessing a series of vicissitudes within the Brotherhood and a multiplicity of responses within the community, the protagonist, while threading his way through the crowd, initiates a process of formulating fresh perspectives and anticipations about the future. In the development of the novel's plot, the protagonist is faced with numerous difficulties and choices. He stands at a crossroads, his mind clouded with uncertainty and the weight of the challenges before him. The world around him seems to close in. Just then, an incipient realm full of possibilities starts to show up on the horizon. It could very likely show his hidden desire to get out of the current trouble and find a new way. As if a glimmer of hope is breaking through the darkness of his situation, "And now as I struggled through the lines of people a new world of possibility suggested itself to me faintly, like a small voice that was barely audible in the roar of city sounds" [9]. Ras the Destroyer and his followers are dissatisfied with the *Invisible Man* as a brotherhood. As an accomplice, there is a conflict. They storm the Brotherhood and cause chaos. Ras tries to enlighten the protagonist and Clifton, hoping that they stand with him in making Harlem a better place for the Negro. Ras tells the two young men that once the white leaders of the Brotherhood feel that they are no longer helpful to them,, they will abandon them. The Brotherhood is an organization that demands absolute obedience. Everything you do and say must be done according to the rules of the white man and the members are entirely unable to have any ideas of their own. The protagonist and Cliff are just tools. However, at this point, the subject is unconscious.

To the seriousness of this problem, the hero is successful in his work in Harlem, and the black masses mean a lot to him. But he is unjustly accused by the organization's head of being an individualist, an opportunist, and a conspirator who seeks to assert his personal power, for which he stops working in Harlem and goes to the South Side of New York City to do women's issues. The hero narrowly escapes being killed by Ras. He dives into a manhole to avoid being mugged by a group of white thugs and falls asleep. Where can the protagonist find his true self? After experiencing the white trustees, the black college, the "Liberty Paint Company," the "Brotherhood" which disregards the interests of the black community, and Ras's race-supremacist organization, the protagonist's future remains bleak [3]. He is still unable to break free from the stereotypes set by white society for African Americans [16]. Sartre assumes that men should determine their own essences and define their own existence through their free choices [7]. He wakes up to find himself in a dark, underground passage from which he can't escape and decides to stay. Here, he tries to understand what has happened to him and then writes his story. The narrative illustrates this when it states, 'the invisible man's definition of 'the mind' is remindful of the Zen conception of the 'here and now'. The protagonist's path to self-realization in *Invisible Man* is intricately linked to Eastern ideologies, particularly Zen, which emphasizes living in the present moment. The narrative illustrates this by stating, "The invisible man's definition of the mind is neither his mind in the past nor the Emersonian conception of self." This Zen-inspired mindset enables the protagonist to move beyond the existential void and towards an authentic existence, embodying the transformative power of Eastern philosophy in shaping one's reality [13]. The novel ends with an Epilogue in which the

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hero decides to come out of his hole. He is ready to rejoin society because he knows and understands himself now. He begins his struggle for black rights. In this sense, the hero establishes his free and responsible image as Sartrean existentialist hero instead of a total victim. As Sartre says, "it must of necessity exist also in itself, must perpetually renew Its existence by itself" [7]. By making his free decisions not to exist as he used to be, the invisible finally realizes that he is condemned to free, and he refuses the image that the whites put on him.

5. Conclusion

The protagonist's journey in the narrative is a continuous oscillation between the depths of tragedy and the heights of hope, ultimately leading to a profound realization of life's unending duality. This journey reflects the existential struggle to find meaning amid chaos, a theme central to Ellison's philosophy. As the protagonist states:

"But only partially true: Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you" [9]? In the Epilogue, his resolve is encapsulated in the declaration: "I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless." This marks a pivotal moment in his quest for identity, illustrating the existentialist urge toward self-realization through trials that test the human spirit.

The narrative culminates in the epiphany that "America is woven from many materials... Our fate is to become a whole, yet maintain our diversity" [9]. This insight acknowledges both the nation's complex tapestry and the necessity of confronting its contradictions. The protagonist's evolution—from pursuing selfhood to understanding the social fabric—exemplifies resilience and the search for meaning. Throughout, his experiences forge his character. He navigates the dynamics between aspiration and reality, discerning self-worth through determination. The novel serves as a critique of racial injustice, showing that true dignity arises from cultural rootedness. By discarding illusions and confronting his authentic self, the protagonist actualizes his existence. *Invisible Man* stands as a bridge between modernism and postmodernism, traversing diverse cultural narratives. As argued in "Toni Morrison And Ralph Ellison's Oraliture: Writing Fiction Against The Grain," postmodernism in authors like Wright, Walker, and Morrison explores multiple knowledge systems and cultural paradigms [2]. Ellison's synthesis of aesthetic and intellectual traditions enriches the novel's exploration of identity, making it a foundational text in African American literature and the discourse on self-construction.

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