

The Representation of Blacks' Struggle for Social Integration in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

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Abstract: In scrutinizing Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, I have discovered how black characters who still feel rejected and unseen in the white man's world, fight for their acceptance and visibility in the United States. This fight, the author argues, is led through speeches, marches, sit-ins, riots, and sabotages as nonviolent and violent strategies to pave their way to their acceptance in the United States with their black color. These strategies, added to their will and determination, establish the encroachment between fiction and history in Ralph Ellison's novel.

Keywords: Blacks, Whites, Struggle, Nonviolence, Violence, Fiction, History, The United States.

Introduction

Published in 1952, *Invisible Man* is one of Ralph Ellison's novels painting the starting point of Blacks' struggle for social integration embodied by an anonymous character who is eager to know not only his identity, but of all black Americans in the United States. This invisibility is certainly what pushed the author to entitle his novel "Invisible Man". In this narrative, the concept "integration" is viewed as black characters' search for identity and recognition as true American citizens in the United States, which they think, is also theirs, because built up with the blood and sweat of their ancestors.

My choice of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* for this paper is justified by the author's representation of "nonviolence" and "violence" as black characters' strategies for their acceptance by their white counterparts on the American soil. These two opposed strategies used by them for their integration have deeply attracted my attention. What is true is that this paper is not the first work to be realized on this novel. For, Howe Irving who first scrutinized it, considers it as "a soaring and exalted record of a Negro's journey through contemporary America in search of success" (Howe: 1952, 1). In this analysis, I am especially interested in finding out how Ralph Ellison's narrative appears as the reconstruction of Blacks' experience of social struggle in the United States. This means that I establish here the intertwining between fiction and history in *Invisible Man* that urges me to put the following question: Is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* the representation of Blacks' nonviolent and violent struggle for their social integration in the United States? To answer this interrogation, I hypothesize that complaints, speeches, marches, sit-ins, riots, and sabotages are some of nonviolent and violent strategies used by Blacks for their full acceptance as true American citizens in Ralph Ellison's fiction.

Knowing that the novel under my scrutiny is linked to the American history, I find it necessary to resort to the new historicism. For, "New historicism is the fact of reading literary and non-literary texts as constituents of historical discourses that are both inside and outside of texts" (Gallagher, quoted by Evrim Dogan: 2005, 82). This means that a work of literature, whatever it is, is influenced by the author's time, circumstances, and environment.

Two main points are examined in this paper. The first is linked to black characters' nonviolent struggle for integration in the United States. The second studies their violent acts for the same objective.

1. Black characters' nonviolent struggle

In *Invisible Man*, the first sign of black characters' struggle for their recognition and acceptance as full American citizens appears through the narrator's complaint about his invisibility. In fact, he wonders why he is never viewed as a man like any other citizen on the American soil. Instead of being seen with respect and value, because he also possesses a mind, he is, however, mocked, humiliated, rejected, and victimized because he is black. This blackness, he argues, makes Whites refuse to see him: "I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids. I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible simply because people refuse to see me" (IM, p. 3). This

quotation suggests that to be black in the American society is synonym of rejection and exclusion from the mainstream society.

The exclusion of Blacks which the narrator calls “invisibility” is not new to them, because they have long been treated as second zone citizens who have no rights in a world ruled by Whites. This position leads many of them to resist the white man’s opposition. For they think, killing themselves would not change their situation, as the narrator argues: “I was invisible and hanging would not bring me to visibility, even to their eyes, since they wanted my death not for myself alone but for the chase I’d been on all my life” (IM, p. 539). One understands that the narrator is presented here as the embodiment of all black Americans who suffer the Whites’ racist system. When he argues that they want his death not for himself but for the chase, he wants to tell the reader that no Black is excluded from this racial situation. For him, all Blacks are inferior citizens, and as such, they deserve an unequal treatment to Whites. What is important is that this view does not appear as a hindrance to their fight for social integration. Apart from complaints viewed as a form of struggle for recognition by their white counterparts in the American society, speeches are another emergency exit to claim their American citizenship: “Speeches began. First an invocation by a Negro preacher, then a woman spoke of what was happening to the children. Then came speeches on various aspects of the economic and political situation” (IM, p. 328). This quotation attests of Blacks’ determination to raise several issues through the deliverance of different speeches as a way not only to attract white authorities’ attention to the situation they are in, but to tell them how they are capable of social achievements.

When the narrator, for example, raises the question of economy and politics, he simply wants to remind the reader of the way Blacks are excluded from important matters concerning the American nation. This means that the denunciation of Whites’ wrongs over Blacks in economy and politics is for them a claim to integrate the American society. What is worth knowing is that Ralph Ellison’s mention of speeches as a powerful weapon for Blacks’ struggle for integration is a way to recall history reconstructed within his fiction. For, such speeches were also delivered by actual-historical figures like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King who were Blacks’ leaders during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s:

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood... (King, quoted by Carson & Sheppard: 2001, 85).

This passage evidences not only the interplay between fiction and history in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, but also the awakening of Blacks on their wrong conditions imposed to them by their white counterparts who ironically call them brothers and sisters. The desire to eradicate Whites’ wrongs over Blacks inhabits the latter to the extent that they find marches as another important way to attract the attention of the nation’s leaders as well as international institutions settled to solve problems of the world:

Upon hearing that one of the unemployed brothers was an ex-drill master from Wichita, Kansas, I organized a drill team of six-footers whose duty was to march through the streets striking up sparks with their hobnailed shoes. On the day of the parade they drew crowds faster than a dogfight on a country road. The People’s Hot Foot Squad, we called them, and when they drilled fancy formations down Seventh Avenue in the springtime dust they set the streets ablaze (IM, p. 366).

As it can be seen, the narrator’s mention of this passage is significant, for it shows Blacks’ bitterness about racial discrimination and segregation they are victim of in their ancestors’ land. The participation of many black characters in the march in order to fight for their freedom is another proof of their determination to ban segregation in places of limits such as restaurants, schools, and latrines exclusively reserved to Whites. Their nonviolent struggle against these injustices is more evident in the passage below:

Let’s go in and pray. Let’s have a big prayer meeting. But we’ll need some chairs to sit in, to rest upon as we knell. We’ll need some chairs! Here are some chairs down here, a woman called from the walk. How about taking in some chairs? Sure, I called, take everything. Take it all, hide that junk! Put it back where it came from (IM, p. 270).

One understands that Blacks’ determination to invade a public church is not maybe the desire to praise God, but a claim for justice denied to them for years. The sentences “take it all, hide that junk!” and “Put it back where it

came from” evidence the refusal of Blacks to live under the domination of Whites. When the narrator says that they will need some chairs to sit in, he simply wants to show how motivated they are to challenge Whites who may come and chase them away. Such a challenge ignoring the punishment reserved to any black American who attempts to resist segregation in the United States, shows Blacks’ eagerness to change the American society through nonviolence. This is, for them, a powerful method, because no one is shot dead, no material is damaged, and no one is hurt.

Ralph Ellison, However, is not the only novelist to account for Blacks’ nonviolent struggle for integration in the United States. Ernest James Gains, too, in *In My Father’s House*, raises the question of this struggle through the main character, Phillip J. Martin who reminds his black brothers and sisters that their fight must be peaceful. He, for example, extols them to express their discontent to Whites when they are less paid than Whites in Albert Chena’s factory where they are hired:

It took us years to get Mr. Chanel to hire black people in the first place, he said. Now, after he hires them he don’t want to pay them nothing. When we go up there Friday we go’n make it clear. Either he pay the black workers the same he pay the white, or we march before the doors (Gains: 1978, 35).

The very last sentence of this passage is an illustration of Blacks’ discontent to the Whites’ wrongful attitude towards them. For, their decision “to march before the doors” shows that they are no longer ready to live under the domination of their white counterparts who still exploit and reduce them to nothingness. Julius Lester, too, in *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* depicts almost the same situation: “If you are Negro, the world is to be dreaded and avoided because it is poised to kill you if you dare make the same assumptions about your existence that Whites do about theirs” (Lester: 1994, 101). This quotation evidences the absence of true democracy in the United States, for Lester tries “to denounce the American constitution which does not respect the fundamental rights of Blacks as human beings” (N’zambi-Mikoulou et al: 2017, 1413).

What we must understand is that in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Blacks’ nonviolent struggle appears as a simple claim for their American citizenship. This claim has not really met the demands of Blacks. To obtain human and civil rights denied to them, they find no alternative than using violent strategies, as examined in the subtitle below.

2. Black characters’ violent struggle

Being faced to the refusal and resistance of Whites to accept them as true American citizens with the rights to enjoy the full fruition of the American democracy and be judged according to the content of their knowledge, regardless of the color of their skin, Blacks decide then to shift to violence. This means that when a black American is beaten, hung, lynched, or killed because of his or her disobedience to the white man’s orders or laws, Blacks respond to such a barbaric behaviour by beating back or killing Whites. For Blacks, it is high time to apply the motto stating that “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” in order not only to fight for their freedom, but to prove Whites that Blacks also represent a force capable of challenging them with physical and violent strategies. In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison describes this racial fight through Tod Clifton, a black-male character who starts beating his white brothers to express his disenchantment about segregation:

But you see, there was a rally and some hoodlums tried to break up the meeting, and in the fighting brother Tod Clifton got holt to one of the white brothers by mistake and was beating him; thought he was one of the hoodlums, he said (IM, p. 381).

In this passage, the author demonstrates Blacks’ anger against their white counterparts who always take them for granted. Such an attitude of Whites towards Blacks is what pushes Told Clifton to beat this white character in a very cruel way without knowing his social belonging. The narrator’s expression “by mistake” recalls the reader of some white Americans’ engagement in the Blacks’ side to ban segregation and discrimination in the American society. Unfortunately, this engagement is sometimes objected by some Blacks who no longer rely on their allies because of the latter’s betrayal to them. That is why they do not hesitate to beat any white American before them, be him ally or opponent. This fight for justice in the United States is thus seen as an opportunity for Blacks to avenge their black brothers and sisters dead in the battlefields. The narrator illustrates this revenge through Destroyer, a strong-black character who calls for violence and organizes attacks in the streets during the funerals of Ras Exhorter, one of their brothers:

Don't you realize that we have only a handful of disciplined members? Today the funeral brought out hundreds who'll drop away as soon as they see we're not following through. And now, we're being attacked on the streets. Can't you understand? Other groups are circulating petitions; Ras is calling for violence (IM, p. 483).

The interrogation "Don't you realize that we have only a handful of disciplined members?" shows that Blacks who have long been disciplined and nonviolent in the struggle for democracy on the American soil, are now fed up with this attitude and find it better to respond to the white man's violence with violence. That is why Exhorter's death is, for Destroyer, a great opportunity to fight back the white man. For Blacks, any attempt of Whites to insult or give a bad name to a Black is likely to bring about fighting, for they are no longer ready to accept such humiliations from them.

The narrator explains that in the process of social integration, Blacks shift to more damageable deeds. They assemble themselves in the streets in huge groups to cause sorrow, and spread their rage to classify glasses of shops and stores, rendering the selling impossible while causing an economic decrease to the Whites' affairs. Some Blacks become fully armed and exchange shootings with the white policemen: "The crowd was working in and out of the stores like ants around spilled sugar. From time to time came the crash of glass, shots; fire trucks in distant streets" (IM, p. 519). Ralph Ellison illustrates here Blacks' sabotage to prove their discontent about segregation and injustice in the American society. When the narrator, for example, says that they are "like ants around spilled sugar" he just wants to let the reader know how numerous they are in the streets of the United States to seek for justice through violent actions.

Blacks' violence is not limited to the destruction of shops and stores, but continues to be observed with the burning of houses and public administrations and the hunting of white policemen as a way to get white Americans recognize their American citizenship. What makes Blacks attack the police institution is their awareness about its support of the Jim Crow system. Such a chaotic atmosphere of the cities of the United States is illustrated by the narrator as follows:

I cut out, man. A building two doors away started to burn and they had to git the fire department (...) Say, look what's coming, he said, pointing, and I looked through the dark to see a squad of white helmeted police charge forward and break for shelter as a rain of bricks showered down from the building tops. Some of the white helmets, racing for the doorway, turned to fire, and I heard Scofield grunt and go down and I dropped beside him, seeing the red burst of fire and hearing the shrill scream, like an arching dive, curving from above to end in crunching thud in the street (IM, pp. 531-532).

This passage shows how Blacks are really determined to clash the country down and install an atmosphere of chaos if only their white counterparts refuse to grant them the rights denied to them for years in a land of freedom and justice. What reinforces their motivation in this fight is their desire to integrate the American society with all rights as Whites. Knowing that such a fight opposing two races is likely to bring about a heavy loss of life, the author mentions some characters who were killed by Whites because of their position for democracy in the United States. Through the narrator's account, he, for example, describes the circumstances in which Tod Clifton is murdered:

His name was Clifton and they shot him. Isn't that enough to tell? Isn't it all you need to know? Isn't that enough to appease your thirst for drama and send you home to sleep it off? Go take a drink and forget it. Or read it in the Daily News. His name was Clifton and they shot him, and I was there to see him fall. So ii know it as I know. Here are the facts. He was standing and he fell. He fell and he kneeled. He kneeled and he bled. He bled and he died (IM, p. 438).

As it can be seen, the author's description of the circumstances in which Clifton is mercilessly killed shows the degree of criminality of the American police. Through this black character, Ralph Ellison invites the reader to understand that Blacks are not only rejected, but also victimized and reduced to nothingness. For, they are gunned like wild animals. What is more pitiful and shocking is the fact that they are forced to witness the killing of their black brothers. This is exactly what Martin Luther King calls "a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit" (King: 1961, 41). Such a cruel attitude of Whites towards Blacks, added to their awareness of having few guns than Whites, makes them be reluctant to continue fighting with violence:

They moved up around the horse excited and not quite decided, and I faced him, knowing I was no worse than he, nor any better, and that all the months of illusion and the night of chaos required but a few simple words, a

mild, even a meek, muted action to clear the air. To awaken them and me. I am no longer their brother, I shouted. They want a race riot and I am against it. The more of us are killed, the better they like (IM, p. 538).

This passage evidences that Blacks are more killed than Whites who give no credit to them. By rejecting violence, they simply want to appease the tensions observed between the two races. This rejection attests of their difficulty to win a fight for freedom and justice over a well-armed race which is strongly opposed to the conception of racial mixing. This means that Blacks' fight for integration within the American society has not come true with the use of violence, for many of them have realized that violence brings nothing but conflicts and deaths. But, what is important to understand is that if Blacks have failed to win the fight with the use of violence, "Whites' social injustice against them has been, however, one of the main causes of the failure of the American Dream" (Massala & Mitati: 2019, 17).

Conclusion

At the term of this analysis, one understands that Ralph Ellison's account for Blacks' nonviolent and violent struggle for integration in the United States in *Invisible Man* is unquestionably drawn from the American history. For, Blacks' peaceful strategies such as speeches, marches, sit-ins, and violent strategies namely riots, sabotages, and fight are powerful weapons which have enabled them to attract the attention of Whites so as to apply justice in all the sphere of the United States, especially after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. What is true is that the search for Blacks' recognition and acceptance as full American citizens has been a failure with the use of violence against the white man. They have later on found satisfaction to their expectations thanks to peaceful methods, as did Martin Luther King in the 1960s. The reference to such a Blacks' fight against their white counterparts' injustice, added to the strategies used, makes me confess that Ralph Ellison has succeeded in exploring the literary issue which consists in incorporating history into a work of fiction.

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