

## DERRIDEAN APORIA AND AMBIGUOUS DISPOSITION OF THE NARRATOR IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN* (1952)

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to explore and analyze the ambiguous existence of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) while keeping in view Jacques Derrida's Deconstructive term, Aporia. This paper has focused on self, identity, past, and socio-cultural influences. Black nameless Narrator wants to be part of self-exploration and self-awareness but according to this Research, his decentralized and disoriented status in postmodern American society where he has been given the advice to run and to escape from his true uniqueness. In this paper, Derridean term, Aporia has been applied to examine his chaotic social and personal existence. This paper has also explored the physical and symbolic invisibility of the narrator and myopic response of society towards him. His invisibility wants to deconstruct the society and his identity but in doing so he fails in his struggle and decides to get hibernate. This paper has tried to trace the deep chasm between the Narrator and the society and tried to explore his ambivalent expression towards blackness and himself.

**Keywords:** Ambiguity, Aporia, Deconstruction, Hibernation, socio-cultural influences, chaos & invisibility

### INTRODUCTION

What does the term 'Identity' mean, and do we need one? Most people seem to think so. Some search for their true selves. The word identity means that the persons think of some skills, quality, or possession as being as aspect of what they call their *self* (my italics). People can identify with infinite range of attributes or things. Traditionally a large part of identity is derived from one's past, education and socio cultural in which one exists. Historically, identity is constructed by certain influences and affects which occur in a person's life or in a society in which he or she lives Socially, Individual has lots of identities and he/she cannot determine one identity for oneself. Identity is a continuous process as it is fluid, flexible and changeable and this determines the set of behaviors, thoughts, and expressions. This

process of self-exploration and self-awareness is quite prevalent in Postmodern African American Novelist Ralph Ellison's (1914-1994) *Invisible Man* (1952). Invisible expression of the narrator can be understood in terms of Aporia; a Deconstructive technique used by the French Philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). Deconstruction is to understand the text against its established interpretation and to dissect language from multifaceted perspectives. According to Derrida (1967/1977), Deconstruction is, "[the] destabilization on the move..., Destabilization is required for 'progress'....And the 'de-'of deconstruction signifies not the demolition of what is construction itself, but rather what remains to be thought beyond the constructivist or destructionist scheme" (p.77). Derrida believes

that Deconstruction confronts the language of the text to expose the possibilities of decentrality. According to him, this is neither a method, nor a theory, it's a process and this process reveals the universal instability of the text. Deconstruction, according to Bloom, (1979):

[is] post structuralist theory which was initiated by Jacques Derrida. It is a combination of the word "construction" and "destruction". Deconstruction does not know however, seek to destroy, rather it points out the limitless instability of language. Deconstruction is a complex process because meaning is contextually determined and since contexts are always changing meaning becomes indeterminate. (1979, p.34)

Bloom propounds that Deconstruction explores the meaning not in its prescribed context rather it goes beyond the boundaries to expand on the diverse multi textual interpretations. Deconstruction takes text not as an entity, but rather certain bits and pieces collected to make the interpretation more convoluted. Aporia is one of the major terms coined by Derrida which recognizes a sense of undecidability in the text. As Derrida believes, "[Aporia is] a point of undecidability, which locates the site at which the text most obviously undermines its own rhetorical structure, dismantles, or deconstructs itself" (1993, p.39). Etymologically, Aporia is from Ancient Greek 'aporos' which means way or passage. For Derrida, "Aporia is a non-road" (Force of Law, 1990, p. 947). Aporia projects the undecidability within the text and it makes the reading process complex for the reader as his job is to explore the chameleonic and multi layered interpretations of text, content, and context. Aporia is related to doubt and complexity as its major aim to explore the discourse with the intention of finding out the ambiguity and chaos. Invisibility of the Narrator

in *Invisible Man* is an Aporian state of his existence as throughout his novel, he is in search of himself, "I was looking for myself," he says, "and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer" (p.8). Narrator's Aporian expression and invisibility can be explored and examined while keeping his gory past, disillusioned and frigid present and undecidable future.

*Invisible Man* is an existential display of a black nameless Narrator who after escaping from riots and arrest has been living in a gutter for fifteen years while lighting thirteen hundred and sixty-nine bulbs. From the beginning till the end, this nameless individual quests for identity which he himself fails to define and understand. In the prologue of the novel, he declares, "I am the invisible man...I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (p.1). His definition of identity seems opposite to the white racist society in which he strives to survive. Taking with him his granddad's advice to be subservient to white people, "Overcome'em with yeses" (p.5), Nameless Narrator enters the new life and society in which he is confused and directionless. To him, identity seems to be a farfetched idea that he will not achieve under any circumstances, and he wants to know himself as he seeks to create identity for himself, "I was looking for myself asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer" (p.9). According to Derrida, "The ultimate Aporia is an impossibility of the aporia as such. The reservoir of this statement seems to be incalculable (Aporias, 1993, p.78) and "it does not conceal itself" (1992, p.21). Nameless Narrator has a strong desire for pure motion and identity, he wants to move forward yet the events and people in his life leads him to flux and nothingness. Narrator is in search of himself, and his real self is yet to be found which has been absolutely destroyed by his running from one place to another and finally gets hibernated. His invisibility has become a source of escape for

him, “And my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone ‘s way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So, after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an invisible man. (p.462). He yearns for archetypal American impulse which is occupied and dictated by the white supremacists Narrator struggles for the sense of continuity and by continuity he means wearing different masks, as Ellison says, In - ”Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke”:

We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals. (Shadow and Act, p. 58)

Ellison maintains this point of view that wearing mask is somewhat symbolic as Narrator tries to be benign and acquiescent and this pretentious disposition serves as a foil to keep his existence acceptable. Ralph Ellison defines the sad plight of young African American in post war and postmodern American society in his collection of essays, “I found greatest difficulty for a negro writer was the problem revealing what they truly felt, rather than serving up to what Negro supposed to feel and were encouraged to feel” (Shadow & Act, 1964, p.20). Ellison and his narrator both want to escape from the predetermined fixation, but the narrator seems to be totally clueless to develop a sense of permanence for himself. Ellison, in *Invisible Man*, while exposing the subdued otherness of the narrator, he reveals the sense of dysfunctionality through embedded in intertextual identity. As Ellison asserts, “it is an American theme, then nature of our society is that we are prevented from knowing who we are. It is still a young society, and this is an integral part of its development.” (p.219) Narrator’s relationship with the rest of the people both

black and white exposes his hampered communication as his interaction with the rest of the society turns to be nightmarish and farcical. The nameless narrator puts forward the record of his life. His Grandfather’s advice about his life establishes a confusing connection between his existence and individuality:

Son, after I'm gone, I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. (p.12)

Grandfather’s advice is quite self-deceptive and this misleading and malfunctioned expression of negro life keeps haunting him for his whole life and, according to him, people refuse to accept his identity as a human being. Invisibility and identity they seem interchangeable in *Invisible Man* as this expression expose the reality of nameless narrator as he purposelessly runs after centre, self, and absence of centre. Martinez Alfaro quotes Holquist to define the absence of centre and identity, “The self.. may be conceived as a multiple phenomenon of essentially three elements: a centre (I-for-itself), a not-centre (the-not-I-in-me), and the relationship between them (Holquist 1990, 29)” (Alfaro, 1996, p.272). By moving from one place to another and following Bildungsroman tradition in a quite unorthodox way demonstrates his efforts to be acknowledged and understood. He wants to discover himself as he says, “When I discover who I am, I ‘ll be free” (p.134). Throughout the novel, narrator wants to create an identity for himself, but he ends up in living underground while lightings up more than three thousand bulbs.

Narrator is not sure about his loss and achievement because he is torn between Grandfather's advice and the current condition of African American people during post war era. His version of reality has been tarnished by pretenses and the bitterness around him. In Harlem, he joins Brotherhood, and he realizes that identity is something fluid and can be identified with every object that comes across in his life as he asseverates, "For me this was not a city of realities but of dreams; perhaps because I always thoughts of my life as being confined to the South" (p.122). He moves from South to North he believes, "You could actually make yourself anew" (P.333). Narrator just realizes his space and identity in North, but he gets deceived by the false ideologies of White Supremacist and Black Brotherhood movement. His identity fails to opt a proper shape, so he reduces his identity to oblivion and purposelessness. Narrator wins the battle royal at his university which is one of the most important events of the novel and this demonstrates the total spiritual and metaphorical blindness and chaos towards humanity. In the prologue of the novel, Narrator explains his condition and blindness in a pungent tone:

That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (p.7)

Ellison's nameless narrator focuses on the false ideologies of life which he wants to pursue and even he himself is not sure what he desires to be. Ellison explicates the same condition and the struggle of an African American Black man in the preface to the collection of his essays, *Shadow and Act*, "I found the greatest difficulty for a Negro writer was the problem of revealing what he truly felt, rather than serving up what Negroes were supposed to feel and were encouraged to feel" (p.7). This bitterness is

evident in Narrator's expression too as his life and his struggles reflect the life of a common black individuals. Ellison through this narrator exposes the bitter reality that these black American are forced to run after their dreams and ironically, they never achieve them. Narrator, in the novel, after winning battle royal delivered a speech while smeared in his own blood. After this humiliating incident, he is given a recommendation letter in a calfskin briefcase and that the wording of that letter anticipates his future, "To whom it may concern, keep this nigger boy running" (p.36). This *running* (my italics) and *invisibility* (my italics) are one of the two major important themes in postmodern black American life because this sense of invisibility and futile pursuit of undefined ambitions exposes the reality of common black man.

In *Invisible Man*, the major concern is not only the atrocities of white man but the inconsistencies and the purposeless of black man. Black man as a narrator in this novel is not presented as a perfect person rather his behavior is a combination of inconsistencies and metaphorical shortsightedness. He is presented as an anti-hero, a representative of social and familial discrepancies. M.H. Abrams specifies anti-hero as, "the chief person in a modern novel or play whose character is widely discrepant from that which we associate with the traditional protagonist...antihero is petty, ingenious, passive, ineffective or dishonest" (p.11) Quinn also points out that antihero is "cowardly, weak, inept, or simply unlucky" (p. 28). Anti-hero of Ralph Ellison can be identified with Fyodor Dostevsky's (1821-1888) unnamed hero from *Notes from the underground* (1864), "we are so alienated from it that at once we feel a sort of loathing for real life, and so cannot bear to be reminded of it" (1864/2008, p.11). Narrator in *Invisible Man* is not only alienated from the society but also alienated from himself. He makes desperate attempt to make a connection between his past and past, instead he gets

entangled in the cobweb of Black Brotherhood and its deceptive approach. He was given advice by his grandfather, "Humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress" (p.17). He follows his advice and delivers speech in front of white people, but he realizes they are making fun of him as they laugh at him and insult him. After joining the organization of Brotherhood, he is told, "it's simple, we, we are working for the better world for all the people. It's that simple. Too many have been dispossessed of their heritage, and we have banded together in brotherhood as to do something about it" (p.298). The undertone of the above-mentioned statement suggests the duality of black people related to Brotherhood who want to bring change in society through violence and riots. This single statement exposes the reality of American racism as this organization is also run by white people and African Americans are used as puppet. Graham Allen points out, "...no utterance exists alone. An utterance ... may present itself as an independent entity...yet it emerges from a complex history of previous works..." (p.19). The utterance for the better world is a representation of disillusioned realm where every entity is lost and purposeless. The people of Brotherhood are torn between *Americanness* (my italics) and *Blackness* (my italics). W.E.B. Dubois uses the term "Double Consciousness" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) which means "two-ness" (p.24), according to Dubois "An American, a Negro: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (p.5). This ambiguity reveals his very aporian existence that is torn between past and present which both deal with the Narrator's chameleonic identity. According to Derrida, Aporia is "an interrogation of all that which is more than interrogation (Malpas & Wake, 2006, p.10). This interrogation and confusion are quite apparent in his behavior and approach towards the society, he states: "I was confused: Should I try to win against the voices out there?

Would not this go against my speech, and was not this a moment for humility, for nonresistance?" (25). Narrator is a deteriorated exposition of bildungsroman; he wants to be successful, running from one place to another, desperate to get a sound and peaceful place for himself.

In *Invisible Man*, Brotherhood creates an illusionary world in Narrator's life; Ras the Exhorter who later becomes Ras the Destroyer, Todd Clifton who is shot dead by white people and his funeral is arranged by the Narrator as nobody wants to remember Clifton. This insensitive approach of brotherhood shows a spiritual demise of confused identities, and they keep shuffling their entities as Dubois asserts, "two souls warring in one dark body" (p.28). Dubois' lost souls are in fact is the abandoned image of black man who cannot leave the old self and nor can adopt the new one. Dubois' words expose the relationship between the language and individual consciousness and this point can be strengthened by Mikhail Bakhtin's approach towards words and human consciousness, "...language for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and other...The word in language is half someone else's (p.110). Dubois' words resonate real American experience by a Black man who oscillates between pessimism and optimism, happiness and gloom, and thoughtfulness and anguish. When Ellison's nameless Narrator enters the brotherhood, he takes this paradoxical experience something positive, "This was a new phase, I realized, a new beginning, and I would have to take that part of myself ...For if I was successful tonight, I would be on the road something big" (253). Narrator is talking to the audience and to himself and he is uncovering his story, and by doing this he shares his puzzling attitude towards hopefulness. Narrator's choice of words typifies his desperate effort to get acknowledged and understood. According to Marcus Klein, the optimism of the narrator is, "desperate, empty, unreasonable and

programmatically" (p.109). Language used by Ellison's nameless hero uncovers social and cultural discourse to expose the inconsistencies deeply rooted in postmodern and post war American society. Derrida calls aporia "the ghost of the undecidable" (p. 24). Similarly, the language of *Invisible Man* reveals him the ghost of undecidable and he tries hard to make some sense yet fails in doing so and according to Barthes, "...text is a weapon against time, oblivion, and trickery of speech, which is so easily taken back, altered, denied" (1981, p.32). Ellison's hero uses his invisibility as an escape, he uses his words to get acknowledged but at the same time he shows his failure to understand himself.

Ralph Ellison puts African American Self in the center of the novel to show the decentrality within this black self. Black self in the form of nameless Narrator becomes both object and subject in the novel to realize the reader about the false ideology this nameless narrator is following. Ellison's presentation of Narrator's namelessness makes some failed attempt to be understood and to realize the deplorable conditions around him, but he fails in doing so. Ellison, through the bitter experiences of his hero, communicates the issues of black folk. In his essay, "Going to the Territory," Ellison points out, "We tell what Negro Experience is really is. We back away from the chaos of experience and from ourselves... We project Negro life in a metaphysical perspective...(p.80). The shade of chaotic experience can be observed through the episode of Battle Royal in *Invisible Man* as Ellison himself comments on his novel's one of the most horrific events which exposes evidently the black slave psyche:

Take the "Battle Royal" passage in my novel, where the blindfolded and forced to fight each other for the amusement of white observers. This is a vital part of behavior pattern in South,

which both Negroes and whites thoughtlessly accept. (p.75)

Ellison's own comments expose postmodern and post war bleak condition of American society where though slavery had ended yet they have failed to understand each other (both black and white). This reminds Bakhtin's point of view about the status of history and society, as Julia Kristeva says, "Bakhtin situates the text within history and society, which are seen as text read by the writer, and into which inserts himself by rewriting them" (1980, p.65). Ellison's detailed discussion of the Battle Royal event reveals the true black and white selves. Keeping in view Bakhtin's point of view, Ellison exposes both history and society, literal and metaphorical worlds of black and white. He also makes an effort to make a connection between the black and white strata of society by revealing their weaknesses and chaotic identities. The black Americanness in Ellison's *Invisible Man* is the story of the nameless hero makes a connection between the black folktales and contemporary American society. *Invisible man* at the same time is in search of identity and want to get an escape from identity. Nameless Narrator's complex reaction towards Jan Capek, in his article, defines Aporia, "aporia highlights the importance of thinking as a process to achieve knowledge not as a set of convictions but, rather, as a mode of dynamic perception of the world around the thinking subject in tune with the fluidity of the ever-changing world" (2019, p.2). So, protagonist's identity is torn between the reality and fiction, between thoughtfulness and symbolic shortsightedness, and between acceptance and escape. Graham Allen writes about the usage of language by African American, "The double-voicedness of African American writing...remains deeply rooted in the tension between standard... writing and the non-standard oral tradition of black communities. (p.169). *Invisible Man* reveals the universal

nameless existence of human beings in general and black man in particular.

According to *1 Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*, "From the Greek, meaning, literally, 'the absence of a passage', and hence a perplexing difficulty or state of being at a loss, aporia denotes in rhetoric a figure in which the speaker or writer expresses doubt (1999, p.184). The basic purpose of Aporia is to expose the gap and doubt to exhibit the problematic aspects of the discourse and the indifferent state, black and white, light and darkness have been set against each other, "the truth is the light, and the light is the truth" (p.7). To him, truth, reality, and purity do not contain any meaning. This self-contradictory statement by the nameless hero exposes two different approaches set by Ellison, first is truth has to become reality, but at the same time the status of truth can be tarnished by light which mean white man and the truth communicated by him must be chaotic for black people. As he points out later:

And now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure they were much the same each as tempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things look to me. I was simply a material a natural resource to be used. I had featured from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood and it all came out the same except, I now recognized my invisibility. (p.409)

Protagonist of *Invisible Man* is not sure of his status, his life and action, and he thinks about all the characters who have been or are around him and explore the uselessness of his existence and assumes his invisibility as an escape from the work he actually wants to live in. His Aporian existence makes his life shallow, fragile, and insubstantial. He oscillates between logic and irrationality

which can be called an Aporian Process. Christopher Norris focuses on the process of Aporia in his book on Derrida, "a text involuntarily betrays the tension between rhetoric and logic, between what it manifestly means to say and what it is nonetheless constrained to means" (1988, p.115). Ellison's Invisible character prefers and accepts to be invisible because this symbolic invisibility is itself another form of vision that nameless Narrator adopts in hibernation.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* focuses on the distorted human expression, an expression which has been overshadowed by the different influences, racial issues, and misconceptions about black and white selfish philosophies. This research has focused on the ambiguous and Aporian expression of the Nameless Narrator and his futile quest to be successful in life. His struggle has been explored while keeping in view Derridean Aporian technique to make the reader to understand the invisible sensibility exposed by Ralph Ellison.

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