

The Fragmentation of the African Americans' Identity In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Dr. Maged Mohammed Abelfatah Hassan

Lecturer in English Literature (Novel and Literary Criticism)

At the Higher Institute of Languages- Sheraton

And Al-Alson Higher Institute

Abstract:

The current study addresses the identity crisis of black citizen in American racial society as it is cleverly introduced and emphasized in Ralph Ellison's best-selling novel *Invisible Man* (1952). Recognizing identity is one of the most popular themes addressed in the postmodern era in which man starts to question every aspect of his/her individuality, culture, and knowledge. The problem of the protagonist's quest in Ellison's novel is illustrated simply in its peculiar pursuit to figure out the real features of his individuality. The normal quest of a postmodern man is to realize his inner qualities and differentiate them from the surrounding background stressing his unique characteristics to be visible the others' perceptions. Consequently, the quest should consist only of two major stages, namely, perception and visibility. In Ralph Ellison's novel, the author' divides the protagonist's quest into three stages, that is perception, visibility, and hibernation in an underground secret place. The unnamed narrator, after realizing and understanding his unique qualities and features, could not prove their existence to the surrounding society whether the white masters or the black social organizations. This failure enforces him into his obligatory underground shelter where he attempts to reinvestigate his entire life. The current study investigates the peculiar quest of the unnamed protagonist with its three stages, namely, perception, visibility, and hibernation. The researcher will emphasize the significance of the third stage, which, according to the author, is the only hope to end the crisis of identity for black people in the American racial society.

Key Words: Identity- Black Race, Racial Society- African American- Ralph Ellison- Invisible Man- Postmodern Literature.

تشرذم هوية الزنوج الأمريكيان في رواية الرجل الخفي لـ رالف اليسون

د. ماجد محمد عبد الفتاح حسن

مدرس الأدب الإنجليزي (تخصص الرواية والنقد الأدبي)

بالمعهد الدولي للغات - شيراتون

ومعهد الألسن العالي

ملخص البحث

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تحليل أزمة الهوية من خلال التصوير المبهر للكاتب الأمريكي ذو البشرة السمراء رالف اليسون في تحفته الروائية الخالدة الرجل الخفي (١٩٥٢). فأزمة تحديد الهوية في زمن ما بعد الحداثة تعد من أعتى الأزمات الفكرية والفلسفية، التي تم تناولها في العديد من الأعمال الأدبية، لعل أشهر هذه الأمثلة الرواية محل الدراسة، والتي حاول من خلالها المؤلف الإجابة عن مختلف الأسئلة العصبية التي واجهها الإنسان في عصر ما بعد الحداثة بصورة عامة، والمواطن الأمريكي من أصول أفريقية في المجتمع الأبيض العنصري بصورة خاصة. والغريب في تناول رالف اليسون لأزمة الهوية هو إضافته لمرحلة ثالثة جديدة لحسم الماهية والقضاء على تشرذمها بين قوى المجتمع المختلفة، فالطبيعي أن رحلة تحديد الهوية تنقسم إلى مرحلتين وهما إدراك الهوية ثم فرضها على المجتمع، ولكن فشل المواطنين الأمريكيان من ذوي البشرة السمراء في فرض وجودهم المتفرد سواء على المجتمع الأبيض العنصري أو حتى المجتمع الأسود المتعصب، أظهر الحاجة إلى المرحلة الثالثة وهي مرحلة العزلة الإيجابية للتفكير والتأمل ومناقشة النفس. وعليه تقدم الدراسة الحالية محاولة لفهم وتحليل الرحلة الفريدة لتحديد هوية البطل المجهول في رواية الرجل الخفي مع القاء مزيد من الضوء على المرحلة الثالثة المقترحة من المؤلف باعتبارها الأمل الوحيد لوضع نهاية مقبولة لأزمة الهوية للمواطنين السود في المجتمع الأمريكي المعاصر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية- المواطنون الأمريكيان من أصول أفريقية- العرق الأسود- المجتمع الأبيض العنصري- أدب ما بعد الحداثة- رالف اليسون- رواية الرجل الخفي.

**The Fragmentation of the African Americans' Identity
In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
Dr. Maged Mohammed Abelfatah Hassan**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

**The Fragmentation of the African Americans' Identity
In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man***

1.0 Introducing the Study

The researcher in the current study will investigate the extravagant discrimination of African Black citizens in the racial white American society. The current study stresses the similarity between those African Americans and the other silenced and marginalized groups in the world including both women under the domination of the patriarchal society and the third world colonized nations under the domination of the first world colonizers. The study tackles the three stages of the narrator's quest to recognize his identity. His rejection of the prescribed roles imposed upon him by others pushed him into a position of invisibility in his society. The researcher will investigate the dilemma of the unnamed protagonist, through three different stages in his life, through which he is torn out between two extremes. On one side, there is his refusal to be treated like a slave in a country that has already criminalized slavery. On the other side, he is motivated by his high sense of responsibility towards the others to participate positively in the social life.

The author stresses the theme of the struggle of the black people in American society under the domination of the white race during the fifth and sixth decades of the twentieth century. Ralph Ellison portrays such struggle from a new perspective. He specifies that indicating that the black race struggle is not only for enjoying equal social and political rights with the white counterparts, but they also seek to stress their cultural and unique individuality, which is ignored and marginalized to the extent that they become invisible. The protagonist's recurrent use of words and phrases like "I am invisible", "my invisibility", and "invisible man" in the first pages of the novel prologue introduces the reader to this idea that dominates the entire novel through the unnamed narrator's quest to

figure out his identity. Published in 1952, Ellison's novel is an allegory for all the African Americans who escaped from the South with its poor environment and white race domination to the North dreaming of a more prosperous life in New York. According to Sean O'Brien, the novel shows traces of several contemporary literary texts, indicating their influential impact on the author. O'Brien specifies two major literary figures, namely, T.S. Eliot and Richard Wright that have guided Ellison in writing his masterpiece, which is, regarded as one of the most innovative literary works in American Literature (2019:83). As for Eliot, O'Brien states that most of his work, with an especial reference to his most famous poem "Wasteland" (1922) have many traces in the novel. Ellison himself admits that in all his writings he is in a constant search for a similar touch of Eliot's sensibility (Ibid: 84). Wright's influence is also obvious in the texture of the Ellison's novel, especially his protest outstanding novel *Native Son* (1940), his non-fiction work *12 Million Voices* (1941), and finally his short story "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1942). Nevertheless, Ellison states that a major difference between his novel and Wright's works is his generalization of the individual struggle to encapsulate the entire human race, not only the black one (Ibid: 100). In other words, Ellison states that in his writing, he is more concerned with art, not with the readers' expectations. Considering art will infuse the writer's imagination to reach the highest limits of human life while considering the audience's expectations will influence negatively the artist's pursuit to be limited to certain issues like injustice and social responsibility.

According to Jennifer D. Brody, Ellison introduces several questions regarding the identity of the black citizens, and their responsibility to share and participate in American life. The answers for most of those questions are concerned with showing the injustice life and false equality between the black citizens and the white masters after nearly a century of the American Civil War. The Declaration of criminalizing slavery that is politically supported by the election of Abraham Lincoln as a president gives false hopes for the African Americans to the possibility of

**The Fragmentation of the African Americans' Identity
In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
Dr. Maged Mohammed Abelfatah Hassan**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

establishing harmony among the various races of the American society (2005: 681). In the Epilogue, Ellison writes about the different strings of the American complicated social mixture that need to be put in one basket of social equality, transparency, and personal responsibility. Unfortunately, Brody states that the African Americans with their dark skin suffer from several types of inequality in various aspects of life including their careers, financial resources, political representation, health and sanitation, and finally education (Ibid: 682). The researcher will investigate all these examples by examining the three stages of the protagonist's quest to establish his unique identity by the end of the novel.

2.0 The First Stage: Recognizing the Identity under the Domination of the White Race

The whole story tackles the innocent and hopeless pursuit of a young black African American who simply attempts to achieve his identity in the American racial society under the domination of the white race. Baxter R. Miller states that, to stress this idea of the helpless pursuit of his protagonist, the author has the required skills and vision to locate the incidents of his novel during the pre-Civil Rights era. This period is characterized by the unjust civil laws that prevent the black American citizens from enjoying the same amount of freedom, social life, and even human rights in the same way that their white counterparts do (1898: 52). The only justification for these unjust civil laws is the color of the citizens' skin. According to Baxter, American society, especially in the South has restaurants that are not allowed for the black citizens to use (Ibid: 54). Even in the more merciful restaurants that permit serving the black race besides the white one, there are strict rules regarding dividing the restaurant in two separated parts including the tables, the toilets, and even the places where the customers wash their hands after eating. Baxter also specifies that the menus of those restaurants for black customers are ultimately different from those dedicated to the white master (Ibid: 55). This is based on the concept that those black citizens are inferior creatures that

could not share the same types of food with white human beings. Consequently, the separation in foods, entertainment places, schools, libraries, transportation means is necessary. This complicated and humiliating social background echoes the protagonist's pursuit to achieve his identity as a constructive member of his society who can participate in its progress and development.

The novel protagonist follows the strict rules of success and hard work to make others sense the visibility of his identity. Lawrence Jackson explains the dilemma of the narrator living in double standards society. This mentality of double standards functions to support and encourage the narrator's pursuits on the surface while it does its best to destroy his entire effort and humiliate the various aspects of his humanity on a deeper level. This point is summarized in the warning message that the protagonist saw in his dreams, as his grandfather says, "Keep This Nigger Boy Running" (32).

Timothy Parrish assumes that the pride in which the protagonist accepted his prize after he graduated from high school that contrasts sharply with the humiliation and degradation the narrator receives before getting it stresses the dilemma of his first stage in recognizing of his identity (2012: 5). The protagonist has improved his oration skills seeking to get a scholarship to join college. Ironically, he has succeeded in this simple quest. Nevertheless, the white masters did not dare to reward him for his hard work except after a humiliating show that includes three inhuman activities. Parrish gives a detailed description of the humiliating events of the celebration that includes being forced in participating in a naked box matching with nine of his classmates. Then he is forced to watch an exotic blonde dancer showing his hidden animalistic desires. Finally, he was forced to participate in an amusing activity with his classmates that is to collect fake golden coins placed on an electrified rug. Unknowing that these gold coins are fake, the innocent boys attempted to get the golden coins ignoring the massive pain caused by the electric shocks of the rug (Ibid: 6-10). The worthlessness of the coins foreshadows

**The Fragmentation of the African Americans' Identity
In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
Dr. Maged Mohammed Abelfatah Hassan**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

the insignificance of the protagonist's hard work to finish his education thinking that he has equal opportunities with his white counterparts. There is the sharp contradiction between the boy's sense of pride in receiving his gift and the several racial marks of his superintendent's speech while giving him the prize. The words are "boy ... take this prize and keep it well ... keep developing as you are and someday it will be filled with important papers that will shape the destiny of your people" (31). The superintendent is clear in choosing his words to make a clear separation between his people with their white skin and the boy's people with their dark color. However, the real problem is the sense of pride that the boy felt during this moment, which erases all the humiliation that he got since the beginning of the celebration.

James B. Lane investigates another significant point in this memory that reveals the young boy's dilemma. The prize itself is won by a lucky mistake on the part of the narrator. In other words, there is no relationship between the boy's hard effort to improve his oration skills and his reward (1973: 66). The only reason for his being rewarded with a scholarship to the state college for Negroes, is simply because the protagonist is lucky enough to replace the phrase "social equality" which he carefully chooses in his speech with another shinning phrase that he does not fully understand, that is "social responsibility". The reaction of the white audience to social responsibility is completely different from their reaction to social equality. The white masters believe that their mercy should make them responsible for their black slaves that is to guide them to live a prescribed life with no chance of committing any mistakes. Yet, this mercy is not massive enough to accept those slaves as equal creatures who share with them the various aspects of humanity. Those black citizens are, by no means, inferior to the white race. In guiding them, the white masters only try to reduce the harm of their existence.

Lane wonders about the real reasons behind the narrator's insistence and persistence to complete his quest (Ibid: 68). After

the several signs of humiliation and disgrace, which he received during the celebration of winning a scholarship to finish his college, the boy should quit his pursuit. He should listen to the warning message sent during his dreams from his late grandfather who guided him to open the briefcase again to find a note instead of his scholarship that reads, "Keep This Nigger Boy Running". This message makes it crystal clear that the protagonist's quest is pointless and hopeless. According to Lane, the purity of the protagonist's heart is the only obstacle that prevents him from understanding his position in his racial society (Ibid: 68). Whatever the number of hours, days, months and years, he could spend studying and working hard, he will never be on the same line with his white colleagues. This means that the protagonist could not fully understand his dilemma at that young age. The scholarship is not a prize for his excellent speech. It is an entrapment to control the black minds, especially the smart ones, and keep them under the white race's control. The scholarship is a worthless target, similar to the worthless gold coins. The prize only helps the narrator to accept the humiliating celebration thinking that he will win something eventually. He accepted being humiliated to win a scholarship to the state college for Negroes, exactly in the same manners through which he endured the electric shocks of the rug to get the golden coins. In both examples, the prize was worthless.

Sterling L. Bland explains that if the previous humiliating experiences while celebrating the protagonist's graduation from high school is not enough to break his illusion, his quest to recognize his identity will include other similar humiliating experiences (2017:139). In other words, the narrator still believes that, through increasing his hard work and improving his orations skills, he could easily achieve social equality in his racial society. Bland indicates that with the beauty of that belief, our protagonist started his college with a peculiar type of enthusiasm to achieve his sole goal of life that is to be free from the complicated dilemmas caused by his black skin (Ibid: 140). Ironically, this enthusiasm lost quickly its solid grounds when he found out that the seven letters he got, which are supposed to be recommendation ones to support

**The Fragmentation of the African Americans' Identity
In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
Dr. Maged Mohammed Abelfatah Hassan**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

him in his college education, turned to be a recommendation for his discharge from the college. If the white master's wish for his poor Niger not to complete his education, why they give him the scholarship in the first place. This is, of course, stressed with the narrator's dream of his grandfather's warning message regards the methodological mentality of the white racial society that is to keep this negro running all his entire life chasing the illusion of the so-called social equality.

According to Bland, the author gives the reader other examples supporting that tricky mentality of the white society to control their black slaves (Ibid: 145). This mentality is based on encouraging and motivating those black boys to keep running and chasing the chance to be equals with their white counterparts, and at the same time destroying indirectly all their attempts to achieve that equality. The first example is represented through the narrator's experience of working at Liberty Paints, a paint manufacturing plant. Bland stresses that the narrator only got a chance to have such a job because the white workers are on strike (Ibid: 143). This means that the black worker is only a secondary workforce for the white race. The dangerous atmosphere of the working environment indicates that those black workers are not only a second option for the owner, but they are also an experiment tool that can be used to test the safety of the work environment. This concept is stressed after the narrator's injury in a usual explosion in the workshop and his subsequent moving to the factory hospital. There, the white doctor used his injured body to test new medicine that could cause his death. Unfortunately, he did not die. After these incidents, the narrator concludes the first phase of his journey to recognize his identity. He is now standing at a crossroads in that journey suffering between two painful choices. The first one is to accept being a slave in American white society. According to this choice, the narrator should forget completely the concept of the free will of humanity. He should also reject the idea of having unique characteristics that could distinguish him from

other human beings. He has to close his eyes, shut his mouth and block his ears, accepting blindly everything the white masters are going to say and decide.

Bland explains that the second choice is to revolt against the domination of the white master by establishing companionship with the other black citizens to change the racial standards of their society (Ibid: 146). To make himself visible, the narrator has to unify himself with his fellow black citizen to stand in front of the domination of the white masters. The optic white color produced in the Liberty Paint plant includes invisible black drops giving the paint its final glamour color. The narrator will no longer accept being invisible like those black drops. He wants himself to be visible and to realize his constant contribution to his society. Consequently, he can achieve his initial target that is to have and enjoy social equality.

3.0 The Second Stage: Fake Visibility among the Black Social Organization

The Narrator started the second phase of his quest with his decision to move from the Men's House to Mary's House. For the first time in his life, the protagonist decided to face his illusion of trusting the transparency of the white masters in his racial society. He is no longer ashamed of his southern origins. He has learned a significant lesson from the first part of his journey. Accepting blindly the racial criteria of the white society will make him invisible forever. Society will never recognize his true identity. They will only see the cover that they put to hide his real identity. For them, he is only a southern Niger who should be under full control to make sure that he will never forget his place as a slave for the white masters. This slave can be educated, given a modern suit and hat to wear, provided with a good apartment to live and financed with a moderate salary to maintain his daily life, but he will remain always and forever a slave.

Bryan Crable assumes that the narrator is now aware of the importance of his past and his heritage, which he needs to fulfill a complete understanding of his identity. Consequently, the real start

**The Fragmentation of the African Americans' Identity
In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
Dr. Maged Mohammed Abelfatah Hassan**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

of the second phase, according to Crable, is when he decided to buy a piece of yam and ate it while walking in the street (2012: 3). The narrator said:

I walked along, munching the yam, just as suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom – simply because I was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper. To hell with all that, and as sweet as the yam was, it became like nectar with the thought. (214)

In this quote, the narrator declares his refusal of any standard rule of the white racial society including eating the food of the black race while walking in the street. In the first stage of his journey, such acts are forbidden as these standard rules are highly respected by the protagonist, aiming at achieving his sole goal in life that is to be visible to his society. He is now starting a new era in his life where he will face society with his true identity that he has previously covered under his fears, worries, and misleading respect. His later comment, "I yam what I yam", Crable explains, echoes a philosophical link to Rene Descartes's famous statement, "I think; therefore, I am". The author here stresses the protagonist's rational understanding of his origin and the surrounding environment (Ibid: 7). The narrator will always be a southern black citizen, and if the white society could not recognize his identity as a southern black citizen, so "to hell with all that".

Crable further adds that the author has located skillfully the incidents of the second stage of the protagonist's journey in Harlem, which is regarded in the traditional black literature as a "cultural Mecca" for the African American people (Ibid: 12). The protagonist's moving to Harlem can be regarded as a spiritual pilgrimage where he can find his peace of mind and true identity. Unfortunately, according to Ellison, who expresses his ideas and emotions about Harlem in a brilliant essay entitled, "Harlem is Nowhere", this was a fake pilgrimage. The central idea of that essay revolves around how Harlem, which was originally a sweet

dream, has transformed into a nightmare, dominated by the blindness and selfishness of the black social organizations, like Brotherhood. Ellison wrote: "Overcrowded and exploited politically and economically, Harlem is the scene and symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation in the land of his birth" (2003: 55). Here, Ellison states that the greedy and selfish selves of some members of the black race have changed the black's land of birth into an exile.

Robert G. O'Meally stresses the parallelism between the first two stages of the protagonist's journey to find out his true identity in the American racial society. As the first stage includes the humiliating celebration of the narrator's graduation from his high school, the second stage is marked with a party held by the Brotherhood at a hotel called Chthonian in which he has suffered from a similar humiliation (1980:25). For instance, Emma (one member of the Brotherhood organization and the party hostess) noticed that the narrator was not black enough, which could be considered equally racial in describing him as being black. Both remarks are humiliating. The protagonist is not only invisible to the white counterparts because of the blackness of his skin, but he is also invisible to the black people for being not black enough. The color of his skin is still the cause behind the dilemma of recognizing his true identity.

The second sign of the protagonist's humiliation is introduced when the Brotherhood gave him a new name that is Booker T. Washington. O'Meally states three important remarks regarding the narrator's new name (Ibid: 33). First, having a false name to start his career with the Brotherhood casts doubts regarding the organization's real activities. Giving false names to their members indicates that they are not official representatives of the black race. It also symbolizes that there is a hidden agenda behind their front image. This means that this organization is far from the narrator's expectations regarding his target in life, which is to be an effective and visible member of his society. The organization prefers to achieve its works and goals invisibly. Thirdly, in asking him to have a new name, the Brotherhood shows their preference for the

**The Fragmentation of the African Americans' Identity
In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
Dr. Maged Mohammed Abelfatah Hassan**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

organization's benefits more than the individual's interests. In other words, the narrator with the new name will be more effective to the organization while this new name will affect negatively his individuality. The narrator's inability to understand the significance of giving up his real name foreshadows his coming misfortunes with the Brotherhood, in the same way, he has suffered from the white master during the first stage of his quest to find out his identity.

In the narrator's second meeting with the organization, he gave them one of his passionate speeches that reflected his understanding of the effective participation of the black citizen in American society through the concept of disposition. To his surprise, the members of the organization criticized sharply his speech, not for being irrelevant or less passionate, but for being incorrect. The narrator was bewildered by that new concept of incorrectness. Consequently, Brother Jack, who has invited him to join the Brotherhood in the first place through being motivated by the passion of his speech, guided him to train in scientific rhetoric for four months with Brother Hambro. This training seems to be an obligatory step to help the narrator to start his career as a member of the Brotherhood and eventually become their spokesperson. According to Brother Jack, "There's a hope that [their] wild but effective speaker may be tamed [through training]" (284). Of course, the author's choice of the verb "to tame" is a sophisticated version of the verb "to enslave", used by the white masters.

O'Meally states that during the same night after that meeting, the narrator thought about the disappointment of the brotherhood members regarding his speech. These thoughts go parallel with his previous dream of his grandfather after the humiliating celebration in the first stage (Ibid: 36). Nevertheless, being awake that night indicates the positive growth of his consciousness. He thought:

Perhaps the part of me that observed listlessly but saw all, missing nothing, was still malicious, arguing part; the dissenting voice, my grandfather part; the cynical,

disbelieving part – the traitor self that always threatened internal discord. Whatever it was, I knew I'd have to keep it pressed down. I had to. For if I were successful tonight, I'd be on the road to something big. (271)

Here, the narrator chose willingly to hide any features of his identity that may be disapproved by the organization. He did not care to describe himself as a traitor. He deliberately shut down the voice of his grandfather, who has warned him previously from following his ambition through the game of the white masters. In this situation, he is not even ready to listen to a new piece of advice regarding his wrong trust in the Brotherhood. The difference between the two situations, namely, his dream of his grandfather who warned him, and his decision to shut down the voice without listening to what it is going to say, indicates, according to O'Meally, some sort of maturity on the part of the narrator (Ibid: 44). This maturity gives him full responsibility for the coming incidents with the organization. If the narrator was a victim of the white masters in the first stage of his journey, he is now sharing some responsibility for his coming wrong choices and deeds that follow his tragic decision of silencing his conscience, including the death of his friend, Tod Clifton.

The final part of the protagonist's second stage includes a tragic incident, similar to his injury in the factory explosion in the first stage. Nevertheless, the tragedy in the second stage is spiritual, more than physical as it includes the death of his friend, Brother Tod Clifton. The Narrator was astonished by the indifferent reaction of the organization towards the death of one of its members. None of the board attended the funeral. They even did not answer the narrator's several calls, the matter that has motivated him to act on his "personal responsibility" in organizing the funeral himself. This responsible act causes extreme anger on the part of the organization board. Here, O'Meally makes another parallelism between the first and second stages of the narrator's journey. The argument between the narrator and Brother Jack regarding using the term "personal responsibility" instead of the term "sacrifice" is similar to the previous argument between the

**The Fragmentation of the African Americans' Identity
In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
Dr. Maged Mohammed Abelfatah Hassan**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

narrator and the superintendent after using the term "social responsibility" instead of "social equality" (Ibid: 38). Both "personal responsibility" and "social equality" are two faces of the same coin. If the citizen enjoys any sort of equality, he should have a similar amount of responsibility towards his decisions and deeds. Similarly, if the citizen acts and decides according to the prescribed scenarios and plans forced upon him by the powerful organizations in his society, he has no responsibility towards any wrong deeds or tragic accidents like the death of one of his friends. Any loss, consequently, will be in a form of a sacrifice, as Brother Jack stressed several times during his argument with the narrator. This means that the narrator is a puppet whose strings are controlled by the social organizations in his community, like the Brotherhood. Those organizations have no respect or the least care for the individuals. They can sacrifice them easily at any moment, like Brother Clifton, for their benefits and goals.

The argument between the narrator and Brother Jack was the last stone between him and the organization that motivated him to move to his third and last stage of his quest, where he exiled himself from the society in an underground hideout, enjoying the light of 1369 bulbs. This light plays a significant role in helping our protagonist in understanding deeply and fully the complicated identity of being black in American racial society. Unfortunately, he missed such light in the first two stages of his quest, either because of his submissive ness to the domination of the white master with its double criteria or because of his blind trust in the Brotherhood Black organization with its hidden agenda.

4.0 The Third Stage: The Underground Hibernation "The End was in the Beginning"

The beginning of the third and final stage of the narrator's quest to figure out his own identity emerges with his falling into a manhole whose open was closed immediately after he fell. Alone in the darkness, the narrator, for the first time in his entire life, has stopped running. Immediately, he heard the voice of his inner

conscience, which he has previously silenced, telling him, "That's enough, don't kill yourself. You have run enough, you're through with them at last" (458). The narrator, while taking his breaths slowly, used the three matchsticks he was given to burn the items in his briefcase aiming at providing some light. Beugre Z. Stéphane states that each item in his briefcase stands for the previous chapters of his life indicating losing all the strings that may attach him to the past (2020: 21). With burning each item, the anger inside the narrator rises and magnifies, feeling the bitterness of the betrayal and exploitation he suffered throughout his entire life. According to Marta Figlerowicz, the symbolism of the static condition of the narrator refers to his clarity of vision. The previous states of running could not give him the chance to think or even reflect on the hidden intentions of the others, including both the black and the white races (2017: 99).

The protagonist's blind trust in the symbols of his society has been crashed when he stopped running. Now, he can sense life and reality from a new perspective. Consequently, he rejects his original idea to return to Mary's house seeking safety and shelter. Now, as being not running, he can easily understand that Mary's house is not safe anymore. Figlerowicz concludes that falling into this hideout is a merciful touch of fate that gives our protagonist the first chance in his life to stop running and think calmly (Ibid: 102). Falling asleep after finishing burning the items of his briefcase is a natural result after being running his entire life.

The horrifying nightmare he saw while sleeping is another symbol, according to Stéphane, of purifying his soul and subconsciousness from his previous sins and mistakes including his blind trust in the white master and his choice of silencing his suspicions about the Brotherhood's activities and goals (2020: 23). The narrator made the most important decision in his journey that is to stay underground. He said: "Here, at least, I could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet. I would take up residence underground. The end was in the beginning" (460). Figlerowicz explains that this sentence sums up the whole quest of the protagonist to find out his identity. The pieces of advice, which

**The Fragmentation of the African Americans' Identity
In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
Dr. Maged Mohammed Abelfatah Hassan**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

the narrator got from his grandfather on his deathbed, are the answers to all his dilemmas and wondering questions (2017: 104). Yet, this does not mean that the previous journey that the narrator has undergone is worthless and meaningless. Instead, it is like a full circle that the narrator has to experience until reaching the end to be able to understand fully his grandfather's advice. Ellison, by stating that the end is in the beginning, considers the fact that the identity quest of various individuals are similar in their forms, and relative in its details. This makes such quests obligatory. Consequently, when the narrator wrote his story, he intended to give guidance to his fellow human beings who may undergo similar circumstances like his. Stéphane specifies that writing the story does not mean that the others can avoid the several mistakes done by the narrator. Nevertheless, writing his story is like a beacon that can help his fellow human beings to rise from their mistakes and misfortunes (2020: 28). Life is a continuous process through which all human beings will commit mistakes and suffer from misfortunes. Sharing their pains and thoughts is significant, not for avoiding the misfortunes and the mistakes, but for motivating each other to rise after falling because of these misfortunes and mistakes. The narrator's final decision after writing his story is to rise and continue his fight with his society aiming at forcing the visibility of his individuality upon his society's norms and traditions.

Parrish addresses the same point by stating that there is no contradiction or mystery in the narrator's sentence "the end was in the beginning". It simply means it is a new beginning (2012: 22). Though the narrator ends his quest with a similar outcome to the beginning that is represented in his grandfather's deathbed advice, it includes different examples and stories from his grandfather's life experience. Consequently, the narrator's new beginning will be impossible except after reaching the end of his story based on his own experiences and mistakes. Life is a series of experiences and mistakes between a beginning and an end. It is only the lesson that

we learn, will be the tool necessary to build a new beginning, like the narrator.

Furthermore, Lawrence Rodgers assumes that in the novel epilogue, the author combines two struggling concepts that appeared to be separate from each other throughout the entire novel, namely, invisibility and blindness. The narrator wondered while hiding in his secret underground shelter about the reality of his identity that is torn out between invisibility and blindness. The big question, according to Rodgers, is what precedes the other, blindness or invisibility (1997: 6). According to the narrator, the two concepts are the basic motives for his life quest to find out his identity. He starts to fight the surrounding darkness by lighting one blub after another. The final number of the blubs he used in his secret shelter is 1369 ones that produce extremely intense light. According to Rodgers, this light leads the narrator to figure the ultimate truth regarding his identity between these two concepts (Ibid: 8). He is not invisible nor blind. He is a unique individual who fights for his identity in a racial society. He rejects all the prescribed roles imposed upon him by others. He sees only his inner personality. In talking to Mr. Norton in the subway, the narrator states his ultimate freedom, which is represented in his awareness of his position and place, unlike Mr. Norton who was competley lost in time and place. Consequently, his final decision to get out from the underground shelter is a vital moment as the narrator says "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (468).

Charles Banner-Haley indicates that the real identity of the narrator arises from his decision to be responsible for society, which gives him all the possible reasons to hide out and continue his hibernation (2004:160). Of course, it will be much safer for the narrator to remain in his secret hole, enjoying the power of owning a place, the warmth of light, which cost him nothing, and the blessing of quietness and peace of mind. Nevertheless, he cannot stand his hibernation that, despite being safe, is going to affect negatively his identity and social responsibility. He says, "I am invisible, but not blind" (461). If the racial society insists on

**The Fragmentation of the African Americans' Identity
In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
Dr. Maged Mohammed Abelfatah Hassan**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

ignoring his existence, though he steals the electrical power of 1369 bulbs, he will not accept that lack of attention. He is aware of his social responsibility towards his society that may or may not turn him into a visible identity in the future. Nevertheless, according to Banner-Haley, being visible is not the narrator's target anymore. His aim now is to be socially and personally responsible (Ibid: 163). In other words, fighting the concept of visibility will be worthless and pointless, as the power will be always with the others who can decide to see him or not. Yet, fighting blindness turns the power to be on his side, simply because he has the choice to open his eyes or turn on a blub. For example, the young boys in the boxing match were blindfolded, stressing their powerlessness. However, they all have the power to remove the piece of cloth and open their eyes. None of them did so because they were afraid of the others. Therefore, they choose to be invisible by choosing to remain blind. Similarly, Brother Jack has lost one of his eyes while fighting for the organization and the black people's rights. However, he chose to cover his sacrifice by replacing his lost eye with a fake one. This willingly choice makes his sacrifice invisible to the others. The narrator will not repeat those mistakes by preferring hiding underground where he can enjoy safety and warmth. He will perform his social and personal responsibility, which becomes more precious for him than his safety.

In the introduction of the political companion to the novel, Lucas Morel introduces a significant point regarding the third stage of the narrator's quest to figure out his identity. In the epilogue, the protagonist re-discuss one of the important pieces of advice that his grandfather gives on his deathbed, namely, "agree' em to death and destruction" (463). The narrator's initial interpretation of the phrase is to considers it as a sign of cowardice and submissiveness to others. Ironically, though he was ashamed of such advice all his entire life, the narrator has done nothing but following this piece of advice whether through his blind obedience to the white master's orders during the first stage of his quest or his blind trust in the

Brotherhood's requests in the second stage of his journey. Morel indicates that in the epilogue, the narrator concludes that there is a wide gap between saying "Yes" and saying "No" in communicating with others (2004: 11). The complexity of life requires something relative within these two extremes of acceptance and rejection. Human beings cannot be categorized with simple yes or no. The main problem of the narrator lies in his shifting between the acceptance of the others based on his complete trust in their intention and then his subsequent rejection of them after discovering their hidden realities.

In the epilogue, the author states that human beings vary on the scale of acceptance and rejection. The narrator concludes that:

America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It's 'winner take nothing' that is the great truth of our country or any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many — This is not prophecy, but description. Thus one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray. None of us seems to know who he is or where he is going. (465)

The previous chaos of life is a summary of the narrator's past life. Now he is completely aware of his current position and his future intentions. It is not a matter of black or white, good or evil, or honest and corrupt. All these contrasting values are represented in the relative values of humanity. The narrator's social responsibility is now to address and communicate with all human beings including the stupid and the racial. The narrator's story is no longer a fight between the invisible black race and the dominant white race. Instead, it is a call and a message for all human beings, regardless of the color of their skin.

**The Fragmentation of the African Americans' Identity
In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
Dr. Maged Mohammed Abelfatah Hassan**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

5.0 Conclusion

The three stages of the protagonist's quest to figure out his identity together should collaborate to draw a comprehensible picture of the black citizen struggle in the white racial society. The protagonist is torn between the domination of the white race and the blindness of the black race that both affect negatively the basic ethics of humanity represented in justice, equality and responsibility. The author shows how as simple wish of the narrator that is to be positively invisible to his community has turned into a sever nightmare in a world of greed and selfishness. However, human persistence to protect his identity is the only hope for the author to save our world form its eternal chaos. The narrator's quest is a universal message for all the oppressed and alienated individuals not to give up their social and personal responsibilities accepting to be invisible in their communities.

6.0 Works Cited

6.1 Primary Source

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. [1952]. New Y: Penguin Books, 1987.

6.2 Secondary Sources

Banner-Haley, Charles. "Ralph Ellison and the Invisibility of the Black Intellectual: Historical Reflections on Invisible Man." in *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope: A Political Companion to Invisible Man*, edited by Lucas E. Morel, 1st ed., University Press of Kentucky, 2004, pp. 158–70.

- Bland, Sterling L. "Narration on the Lower Frequencies in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*." In *Narrative, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States*, edited by James J. Donahue et al., Ohio State University Press, 2017, pp. 137-48.
- Brody, Jennifer D. "The Blackness of Blackness... Reading the Typography of *Invisible Man*". *Theater Journal*, 2005, vol. 57 (4), pp. 679-98.
- Buchwald, Dagmar. "'Let 'em Swoller You till They Vomit or Bust Wide Open': 'Doing the Para-Site' between Chaos and Control in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.'" *American Studies*, vol. 45 (1), 2000, pp. 73-90.
- Crabbe, Bryan. *Ralph Ellison and Kenneth Burke: At the Roots of the Racial Divide*. University of Virginia Press, 2012.
- Ellison, Ralph. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. Ed. John Callahan. New York: Modern Library, 2003.
- Engeman, Thomas S. "Invisible Man and Juneteenth: Ralph Ellison's literary Pursuit of Racial Justice." In *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope: A Political Companion to Invisible Man*, Edited by Lucas E. Morel, 1st Ed. University Press of Kentucky, 2004, pp. 91-104.
- Figlerowicz, Marta. "Basement: Ralph Ellison." *Spaces of Feeling: Affect and Awareness in Modernist Literature*. Cornell University Press, 2017, pp. 96-113.
- Foley, Barbara. "Beginning and Ending. Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*". Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 325-50.
- Isaacs, Harold. "Five Writers and Their African Ancestors." In *Conversations With Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma

**The Fragmentation of the African Americans' Identity
In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
Dr. Maged Mohammed Abelfatah Hassan**

مجلة وادي النيل للدراسات والبحوث الإنسانية والاجتماعية والتربوية (مجلة علمية محكمة)

- Graham and Amritjit Singh. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995, pp. 63–69.
- Lane, James B. “Underground to Manhood: Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.” *Negro American Literature Forum*, vol. 7 (2), St. Louis University, 1973, pp: 64-72.
- Miller, R. Baxter. "A Deeper Literacy: Teaching *Invisible Man* from Aboriginal Ground." in *Approaches to Teaching Ellison's Invisible Man*. Ed. Susan Resneck Parr and Pancho Savery. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1898, pp: 51-7.
- Morel, Lucas E. *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope: A political Companion to "Invisible Man"*, 1st Ed. University Press of Kentucky, 2004.
- O’Brien, Sean. “Blacking Out: Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and the Historicity of Antiblackness.” *Cultural Critique*, vol. 105, of Minnesota Press, 2019, pp. 80–105.
- O’Meally, Robert. G. *The Craft of Ralph Ellison*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1980.
- Parrish, Timothy. *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2012.
- Randal Doane. “Ralph Ellison’s Sociological Imagination.” *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 1, [Midwest Sociological Society, Wiley], 2004, pp. 161–84
- Rodgers, Lawrence. *Canaan Bound: The African American Great Migration Novel*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997

Stéphane, Beugre. Z. "Perception, visibility and invisibility in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man". International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Culture, 6(3), 2020, pp 18-35.

Walling, William. "Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: 'It Goes a Long Way Back, Some Twenty Years.'" Phylon 34.1 (1973), pp. 4-16.