Nature of Bildungsroman in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*

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Abstract: This work “Nature of Bildungsroman in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man” aims at studying the changing facets of the Bildungsroman which primarily accounts for the growth of the young hero in the respective novels. It shows how the Bildungsroman does not go a long way because of the interference of society in the hero's progress. The obstacles in the way of the hero's success are beset by the hostile authorities of the establishment, because of which the Bildungsroman gives into the Labyrinth which has been as difficult for the hero as the Cretan Labyrinth.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Quest for Identity

This paper aims at establishing *Invisible Man* as a Bildungsroman with a labyrinthine mode. The pattern is generally that of the quest for identity, the birth of the individual out of the chaos of experiences. The action is seen as a series of initiations that lead the protagonist to self-realization at the end. Ralph Ellison has divided the novel into three parts which “represent the narrator's movement from..., purpose to passion to perception” (Ellison 177). He also calls the book “a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality” (Ellison 177). Like the heroes of all labyrinth-literatures, the nameless protagonist in the novel begins his career in a Southern town as an innocent boy and moves in search of progress and education toward the North. With his movement from the South, a region well marked by a hierarchical system and cultural past he denies the temple-like south. He opts for the struggle with the inimical forces which are the embodiment of the Minotaur.

The novel, however, explores the road to the North as the historical road to freedom. The whole journey looks like a labyrinth. Towards the end of the novel, the labyrinth terminates with a wholesome vision. Though the nameless hero is not able to bridge the gap between the inside and the outside world, he gets back his lost memory and reconstructs a vision of his own. As a Southern black, he gets reunited with his historical past with his legacy of slavery and suffering which lends him a profound sense of wisdom. He comes to recognize the actual shape of reality - virtually limitless, ambiguous, and chaotic. Such a realization of his is possible only because of his strong racial past.

The novel involves a series of increasingly debilitating confrontations between its anonymous hero and several outward forces and institutions. In each initiatory experience, he accepts an illusion, which is imposed upon him from without. He remains visible to the degree that he can be made to accept an essentially static and prescribed view of the world around him and his place in it. “The major flaw in the hero's character”, as Ellison has remarked in an interview in “The Art of Fiction”, “is his unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him by others as a way of success, and this was the specific form of his innocence. He goes where he is told to go; he does what he is told to do...” (Ellison 214). In his “Prologue,” the narrator acknowledges that this has been the case. As the nameless protagonist recalls his past:

All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they are often in contradiction, and even self-contradictory. I was naive. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions that I and only I, could answer. (Ellison 17)

The nameless hero of Invisible Man is a true Bildungsroman hero in the sense he starts his life with the expert advice of his grandfather. The young inexperienced hero abides by the advice, the full implication of which he could not understand at once. Nevertheless, he was keen on the essence of the adage which urged the hero “to keep up the good fight”. Like all Bildungsroman heroes, the nameless hero of Invisible Man is exposed to the dialectic of initiation at the threshold of his life. He finds initially the possibilities of his achievement by confirming the ethics and norms of the whole establishment. The smoker scene is the first crucial initiatory experience of the hero's boyhood with its vision of blood, violence, chaos, and humiliation, it turns out to be a nightmarish initiation rite. With nine other blackboys she is asked to watch a “stark naked” blonde dancing sensuously in the middle. Some of the white citizens threaten the boys if they don't look and some others threaten if they do. He is shocked at the discovery of his strong libidinal drives, yet at the “same time, he is disgusted by the whole spectacle as he expresses, “I felt a wave of irrational guilt and fear” (20).

With this, the frightening rite of initiation is not completed. He is forced to participate in the Battle-Royal, a vulgar and brutal ritual, along with a group of other Negro boys. On his graduation day, he is invited by the superintendent of Schools to deliver a speech at the ceremonial gathering attended by the prominent businessmen of the town. He regards this invitation as a case of self-importance and a triumph for the whole Negro community.

He ‘visualized’ himself “as a potential Booker T Washington” (19). Before giving the speech he is forced to fight with the blindfolded colored boys for the amusement of the white spectators.
He is also compelled to pick his reward in gilt coins from an electrified mat. But, he suffers everything to give his speech. Ironically enough the only prophecy born out of the dark bloody arena is a speech on The Virtue of Humility. Through this severe humiliation he learns a valuable yet painful lesson as he confesses: “Ignoring the shock by laughing as I brushed the coins off quickly, I discovered that I could contain the electricity – a contradiction, but it works”(27). This constitutes his first step in understanding the dying grandfathers’ adage. Inspite of all the humiliation gets; at the hands of the brutal white businessmen, he delivers his speech which is reminiscent of Booker T. Washington's famous Atlanta Exposition Address. In a kind of Freudian slip, he substitutes; 'social equality' for 'social responsibility,' in his speech and it arouses uproar in "the smoker". He receives as reward for his speech,a scholarhship to study in a SouthernNegro college.Heisalso given a calf-skin briefcase which heistold will someday "befilledwithimportant papersthat will helpshapedestinyofour people”(31).In anightmare,at theend of this episode,hefindis his grandfather telling him to readthe inscription in his briefcase: “To whom It May Concern,”I intoned. I keep This Nigger Boy Running”(32). And ironically, this nightmare proved to be the only reality in his life. But like the true hero of the Bildungsroman he halfbelieves in the warning of his grandfather and sets out onhis ‘voyage’/Journey to the North.

His experience is another example of Bildungsroman novels, where a series of experiences lead to a sense of wisdom of the positive kind. Here, at the second stage, the initiation occurs when he is expelled from the black college where he had begun to feel at home for the first time in his life. He feels himself a part of the great institution which was founded for the advancement of the Negroes. His crime is that he inadvertently introduces the White philanthropic patron of the school; Mr Norton, to the seamy side of black life around the campus.

As the Bildungsroman hero, the nameless narrator has been well taken care of by Mr Norton who provides the first of various fixed and imposing assumptions about society. A benevolent social manipulator, Mr Norton instills new hope and faith "in him as he tells the hero with conviction that his destiny is bound up with the Negroes. ‘You are my fate’” he tells the appreciative hero. “I mean that upon you depends the outcome of the years I have spent in helping your school. The hero feels himself a part of the great institution which was founded for the advancement of the Negroes. His crime is that he inadvertently introduces the White philanthropic patron of the school; Mr Norton, to the seamy side of black life around the campus.

In his obsession with the dreams of upliftment in the whole society, he hardly makes, any attempt to understand his fellowmen in the black situation. He is shocked to hear the story of Jim Trueblood, a poor black sharecropper who has fathered his daughter's child and that he has no sense of repentance for his sin. Through this outcast Ellison offers the first model for his hero's education. Here the hero is completely under the illusion of the patronage of the white trustee, Norton, whose incestuous desires for his own daughter remain largely unconscious. His activity as benefactor of the Southern Negro only masks the source of such passion. At this stage, the hero looks upon the primitive innocence of or True blood with shame. Even this encounter with the grim reality of the black life fails to educate him in the true sense of the term.

The black American hero as a true Bildungsroman protagonist totally submits himself to Dr Bledsoe, the ruthless Negro educator. He rightly adopts him as his model. He admits: “…he was the example of everything I hoped to be. Influential with wealthy men all over the country: consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but two Cadillacs, a good salary and a softy good-looking and creamy-complexioned wife” (86). The hero confesses about his strong faith in this pragmatist black man: “I...believed him. I...believed without question his illustrations of the good which came from following the Founder's path. It was my affirmation of life...” (90). The hero thus lives in the cocoon of his illusion of a fixed and limited vision of reality.

The hero's acceptance of the punishment inflicted on him by Bledsoe is totally in conformity with the Bildungsroman tradition. He is still in the pathway of progress. He barely remonstrates when Bledsoe dismisses the veteran discovers his Invisibility in the given situation, the black American hero does not accept it and fights to return to the serenity of Norton's vision dismissing the veteran's charges as crazy.

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Another dreadful initiatory experience is waiting to drag him further. Ellison provides another purveyor of clues to let the hero know about Bledsoe treachery. He comes to the full understanding of his duplicity through Mr Emerson; whom the hero meets in New York. He reiterates the fundamental truths about the real; condition of a black man in the white world just in the tone of his late grandfather: "The only trouble with ambition is that it sometimes, blinds one to realities” (151), he tells the narrator, “To help you I must disillusion you...” (153). He then puts to the hero a question: "Aren't you curious about what lies behind the face of things?” (154). But the hero refuses to accept the burden of his grandfather’s legacy as earlier due to the guilty feelings of his conscious alertness to the challenge. “I'm not bothered about all the other things, whatever they are,” he tells Emerson. “They are not for me to interfere with...I know what's sent for me” he insists, or at least Dr Bledsoe does...” (154-55).
The real labyrinth begins from the point of his meeting Emerson, the junior. The innocent hero is shocked beyond imagery to hear the letters of Bledsoe as it reads, "help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopefuistrator" (156). The content of this letter echoes that of the dream he has seen earlier, "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (32). That is exactly what happens to this boy in the novel. Now the naive nigger boy first sees himself as deceived and betrayed as he asks again the same painful question himself, "What did I do?" "I always tried to do thing..." (57). His response is again wholly ironic.

At this point, Invisible Man reaches a structural and thematic climax as "the hero faces a cathartic disillusionment. For the first time in his life he learns to react a sense of revolt creeps into his heart, as feels like-killing Bledsoe. "When I stopped, gasping for breath, I decided: that I would go back and kill Bledsoe. Yes, I thought, I owe it to the race to and to myself. I'll kill him" (159). The pain is so intense that suspicions begin to register even; in the charity provided by Mr Emerson: "Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan. What was young Emerson's plan and why should it have included; me? Who was I anyway?" (159). But however, the hero's journey does not end here, it takes on a form of endless journey, a labyrinth with no destiny.

The hero's painful initiation continues in Harlem. He manages to get a Job in a big concern called Liberty Paints Factory whose trade slogan is: “Keep America pure with Liberty Paints” (160). He is employed as an unskilled hired labourer whose work is to pre paint according to the given for formula. Here, "the slave-driver, Kimbro, blatantly imposes his will upon the black hero "You have to follow instructions," he says, "and you're going to be doing things you don't understand... You just do what you're told and don't try" to think about it (62-63). Again, his experience with Lucius Brockway, the half-crazy Uncle Tom character he works at the liberty Paints Factory leads him to take the first step towards Self-education. Brockway is the engineer - and chemist Who instructs the hero to pour ten drop of black liquid into a bucket of "Optic White" and to stir till it becomes invisible. Thus, these ten drops of black liquid 'stand for the American Negroes who constitute one-tenth of the total population of America. The negroes make themselves invisible to keep America pure, they act as the scapegoats for all its sin. For the first time the hero rejects the view of Lucius Brockway. The latter's philosophy, "If you're white, you're right" (178), is simply unpalatable to the black American protagonist. Nevertheless, he realizes that he has been trained to accept the foolishness of such old men as this, even when (he) thought thow clowns and fools..." (184). He is dismayed at the fact that Brockway's attitude towards white people is that of subservience and gratitude. "For one of us to join one of them damn unions," he tells the hero, "is like we was to bite the hand of the man who teach us to bathe in a bathtub!" (186). Brockway says, "We are the machines inside the machines" (177). Brockway's strange turbulent kind of Uncle Tomism drives the hero to rebel for the first time. The treatment the black American hero is subjected to is an initiation of great importance. It leads him to total bewilderment. The injured hero is kept in a kind of glass and nickel cage in the Factory Hospital and is treated as a guineapig. He is put into an electrical machine for a surgical treatment. The treatment is a torturous one. He is born again as it were.

One of the significant signs of the labyrinth is the resultant loss of memory which happens to the initiatory protagonist. Initiation does not have a wholesome effect on the hero. It brings damage to the body and mind of the hero. The nameless hero of Invisible Man remembers nothing of his past. This is loss of the original self is an important step in the labyrinthine quest of the victim hero. It leads to a characteristic loss of direction as the hero rightly confesses, "I had lost my sense of direction" (210). This reinforces the theme of the quest for identity. "the doctors in the Factory hospital ask him a series of questions to see whether there is a change of identity: What is your name?.... Who are you??.... Was your mother??.... Was Buckeye the Rabbit?.... Who, who was Brer Rabbit? (195-97)

The boy can't answer any of these questions though the last two arouse his anger and a fierce desire to get away all these tension. But, he realizes that his freedom is not free from the question of identity. He begins to work through a painful process of self-assessment: He can dimly realize the contradiction in reality that his grandfather's advice had earlier surfaced but had no means to overcome it. Now he can scan the world through the eyes of Sledsoes, the Nortons and the Emmersons. He at once recognizes the docility of Brer Rabbit and his incessant struggle to fight against the odds. He unashamedly accepts his black identity and his Southern origins as Joe Christmas does just before his death in Light in August

Towards the end of his career, the black American hero is introduced to an initiatory experience which leads to the victimization of the hero in another extreme. The hero is brought to bear with another character Ras, the Exhorter who stands for the militant black nationalism as a sharp contrast to the hero. Each accuses the other of misapprehending the true nature of the reality around him. He responds to Ras by retreating more defensively into the Brotherhood.

His innocence still persists as he resigns to the Brotherhood as wholeheartedly, as to the illusory benevolence of Norton or Bledsoe. This proves the way for the betrayal and sacrifice of Tod Clifton, a friend and colleague of the narrator. Like the narrator, Clifton attempts to dismiss Ras's rantings as insane and is involved in a violent physical class with Ras. Soon after the fight, he leaves the Brotherhood and sells the obscene Sambo dolls for his bread and wine. These dolls project at only the image of the submissive, grateful irresponsible, grinning, filthy, obscene docile and castrated Negroservitor, but also the relinquishing the legacy of the black American culture.

The death of Tod Clifton and the hero's disillusionment with the Brotherhood make him sever all connections with in the benevolence of the illusory world around him. He realizes that the people of Harlem are out of time and out of step with history. For the first time he wonders whether history is scientific: "What if history was a gambler instead of a force in a laboratory experiment...? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile...!

(355).
It is at this critical juncture Ellison introduces the last of his glimpses regarding the proper understanding of reality in the character Rinehart. When his purpose of living is virtually shattered the black hero adopts a simple disguise and is quickly mistaken for a man, who, significantly, has not one identity, but several. The answer to all these questions comes gradually and painfully as he realizes the significance of Rinchart's existence: "His world, was possibility and he knew it," he says. He was years ahead of me and I was the fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which, we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity and Rine the rascal was at home" (401). Rinehart has learned to live with the essential chaos which his grandfather's legacy has brought him to understand.

In his attempt to provide a correct understanding of the world, the veteran pleads with the hero which falls in terms of his grandfather's legacy. His voice, echoes that of Trueblood who too urges on him. These instructions are but an echo of the grandfather's-sphinx-like riddle which haunted the protagonist throughout his journey, "The old man's-words were like a curse" (18). When things go in favour of him, he feels guilty as though he were unconsciously obeying his grandfather’s advice.

For him, it finally proves to be more than a bit of subversive advice for dealing with the white world. The hero takes a long-time to understand this difference of the apparent from the real. Only in his Epilogue can the hero bear the full weight of his grandfather's legacy. It is no longer possible for the hero to return to any part of his old life. There are only two alternatives before him; to move ahead or to stay underground. As in the other labyrinth literatures he has absolutely no choice of direction, even he cannot get lost inside the maze of experiences. He illuminates the hold with 1,369 lights tapping the electricity from Monopolated Light and Power. The illumination stands for the enlightenment he has finally achieved. Towards the end of the novel the anonymous hero not only turns back to his racial past, but also gets connected with the human race. Thus, in this respect Invisible Man can be read as a drifting away from the labyrinth as well. This text, no longer having a negative stance at the end takes the hero to a positive understanding of the human race.

Thus, the nameless, hero with a comprehension of the multiplicity of reality is able to connect the inner with the outer fringe. It seems that his initiation is not yet complete, as he would be "here until I was chased out" (460). But, it is in the cellar itself he has sharpened his sense of perception, he realizes that he is invisible not blind" (464). Here, at this point, It is rightly pointed out that his face is turned towards society, a positive stand in the hero's development. It's a social act" Ellison insists in an interview with Allen Geller "It is not a resignation from society but an attempt to come back and to be useful" (159). The invisible man thus comes to recognize his social responsibility. He will not strive for a world of colourlessness. He comes to the final understanding of the pain and pleasure, of the agony and the ecstasy of being an American Negro.

REFERENCES


