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## **On Invisible Man And Invisible Women**

Ralph Ellison shows a common ground, in *Invisible Man*, between black men and women of both colors within the context of oppression, de-valuation, and discrimination. In his novel, both men and women are invisible to the eyes of those who are blinded by power and by the worship of power. Like the colored boys of the South, women too find themselves “stark naked” in the ring for a battle royal of their own and ridiculously helpless wait before the unseeing eyes of the others and their mercy. Throughout the novel the narrator is repeatedly thrown together with a female figure, whether that be a “magnificent blond” (19) with an “American flag tattooed upon her belly” (19) or an unsatisfied wife whose husband is a chief figure in the Brotherhood. This repeated twosome appearance identifies two of the victims of invisibility in the power worshipping capitalist society.

Invisibility, according to Ellison, occurs with the incapability or unwillingness to see the person as an independent person who has a place on earth for reasons of his own, with his full faculties recognized and recognized as an equal human being. Invisibility is the un-recognition of the person, who is visible only as an element in the environment to be used as “a mark on the scorecard of” (95) an agenda that does not belong to that person. Invisibility denies the person the right and opportunity to find himself and be himself as best as he can, and strips the person of his own past, present,

and future within a “machine” resulting in “a change of personality” (236) in order to fit him into that external agenda.

How do the women fall in this category in this novel as invisible human beings? Although we do not get a detailed account of how the female characters in the novel have become invisible and how they feel about it, we do get a sense of how akin the narrator and the women whom he comes across with are in terms of their status as objects to be used, as a national resource to be exploited, as the units of able bodies void of soul, spirit and personality. The tattooed American flag on naked blond dancer, for example, is carefully chosen as to indicate which country she is made in and serves to. She is there not as an independent human being with her personality and free will, she is there as an object and there to be treated as an object, nothing more. Nobody really sees *her*. They are only aware of the sight of an anonymous creature that is known to provoke and arouse certain senses, certain urges in men. And she is supposed to do that not as a human being but as the collection of body parts that is capable of doing that whether she likes it or not, whether she tries it or not. Just because she is put out there, in other words, blond and naked, she will provoke and arouse certain urges in men even if she doesn't wish to have those affects, even if she hates every one of the persons in the room. Not surprisingly the narrator notices “the terror and disgust in her eyes” (20) as she is tossed in the air amongst the raging men.

The invisibility of women and the narrator seems to be tied together with the same tread. The liberation of one of the invisibles from the world of invisibility will pull out the other invisible as well, knotted and tangled up to the destiny of each other. Mr.

Norton informs the narrator that he is “bound to a great dream and to a beautiful monument” (43) while explaining him “why [he became] interested in the school” (41) and showing him a photograph of his daughter. In the center of Europe, somewhere between Italy and Germany, Mr. Norton’s daughter had “already fad[ed] away” (43) and Mr. Norton preserved the idea that giving a direction to the new generations of black people in the form of education would be constructing “a living memorial to [his] daughter” (45). Despite what he believed was an act of good-will and a monumental charity in the memory of his daughter, however, Mr. Norton did not see the members of the new black generation as individuals following their own authentic courses in their lives but more like representatives of his redemption from guilt in the forms of “three hundred teachers, seven hundred trained mechanics, eight hundred skilled farmers, and so on” (45). They are “the fruits produced” (45) by the fields that are funded by him and quality-controlled by meticulously selected Dr. Bledsoes. Moreover, and more importantly in terms of this paper’s topic, it is doubtful that Mr. Norton had actually seen his own daughter. He had taken little notice of her state of health and went on his tour as merrily as before with his Lolita whose nature to him was “not of this world” (42). “She was too pure for life, (...) too good and too beautiful” (43) But was she herself? Unnoticed, besides her beauty, “she collapsed” while “attending an embassy party” (43), before the eyes of representatives of other countries. Despite his love for her and despite his guilt over her death for many years, it is very doubtful that he ever really saw her as a human being with a life course of her own and not as “some biblical maiden, gracious, and queenly”, as some magical beauty which he “found it difficult to be believe her [his] own” (42).

Since Mr. Norton failed to recognize his daughter's true state and nature, even after many years that followed the tragic event, it is not surprising that he also failed to recognize the narrator, his destiny, in the New York City subway. Mr. Norton was "lost" (577) and was asking the narrator, "the lost, the invisible" (577), for directions. Mr. Norton's destiny's tread was blatantly crossing the tread of the narrator and Mr. Norton still failed to recognize it, still condemning both of them to invisibility, not knowing who he or the young man was.

The warning question of the veteran, the former doctor at the Golden Day, found its answer in that subway. "And would you recognize it if you saw it?" (94), the vet had asked. Although Mr. Norton's answer is "Why, of course I would" (94), "you will hardly recognize it", is the vet's prophecy and his prophecy is fulfilled. "It is very fitting that [they] came to the Golden Day" (94). Because there, at the Golden Day, we have a wild collection and mingling of the crazed invisible men in the uniforms of war veterans and the prostitutes of the Golden Day, impersonal objects of desire, used and abused for and by the urges and agendas of others, and all of them invisible, invisible by large and invisible to each other. Even Mr. Norton is invisible since he is "not a man (...) but a God, a force" (95). As for the women of the Golden Day, not only they are there not to be seen but to be used as off-loading reservoirs made up of blood and flesh but also they probably found their way to Golden Day because they had been invisible for most of their lives by most of the people around them. And their invisibility is not solely based on their color but also on their gender, making them akin with white women. Perhaps this natural juxtaposition of oppressed men and women in R. Ellison's mind that assigns the narrator to downtown to give lectures on the issue of women.

The white women, the narrator gets in close contact with them via the Brotherhood. Especially when he is assigned to downtown “to lecture (...) on the Women Question” (406). But the real issue of women, even of white women and even of white women in the Brotherhood, is their invisibility and the narrator exposes this issue as he gets acquainted with both the Brotherhood and the women within. One of the major points to note here is that there is no woman seen as one of the decisions making figures in the Brotherhood.

The first white woman he gets ‘intimate’ with is the wife of a certain “Hubert” (411), a nameless ‘she’, a neglected wife, as was Sybil, the second white-woman, a “misunderstood married woman” (515), drunk and profoundly confused with her own fantasies. Although in the Brotherhood, neither of these women seems to have any solid attachment to or literacy of the ideology of the Brotherhood. When the nameless one approaches him, “Teach me the beautiful ideology of Brotherhood” (415), more than a deeper knowledge of the ideology, she seeks a link to what she sees as his “primitive” (413) power, to feel the “tom-toms beating in [his] voice”, its “naked power” (413) vibrate in an other level with her. She doesn’t see a man, existing independently of the organizational link to the Brotherhood and its ideology, but a primitive power with whom she fulfills her fantasy of “feeling (...) security” (413) and fear. She is also some sort of practical asset for the Brotherhood, as an attractive and seductive female again. Here the invisible woman used against the invisible man to blur his sight and forget about Harlem until he is useful again in that district. The glass eye of Brother Jack, or others higher yet through the glass eye of Brother Jack, see to it, with the distortion of

the glass that filters out the personalities and souls of their subjects, male and female, white and black, that the battle royal goes on as they had planned.

Even they, the women of brotherhood in downtown, worship power, “they are taught to worship all types of power” (520), and perpetuate the reciprocal invisibility. Sybil’s desire to be mock-raped (or perhaps even raped for real) lies in the impulse to be desired by the great powers, and thus perhaps find some form of confirmation of her visibility, even if what is visible is void of soul, spirit, and personality. And, as an invisible woman, she doesn’t see the Invisible Man; he is an object for her to fulfill her fantasies, which are based on the myth that is created to strip black man of their personalities and enwrap them around fit-all categorical cloth: black man? Stay away or you’ll be violated. They are brutes. It’s “a new birth of a nation” (522) all over again.

In the capitalist machinery where alienation of human beings to themselves is one of the fundamental columns and also one of the major consequences of exploitation of majority for the interests of the minority, the race is not the sole problem, but the gender and even beyond gender and class, it is a problem that rises from the contradiction between societal classes. In the time and geography where the narrator’s tale takes place, white men may be the ruling force but in the grand scheme of things ordinary white men and women are also exploited and take their place in the battle royal arena. Besides, the battle royal that human beings are set to fight exists in all parts of the world whether ruled by white, yellow, or black men.