



THE IDENTICAL/NON-IDENTICAL ELEMENTS IN RALPH ELLISON'S
INVISIBLE MAN AND TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

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Abstract

Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison are ambassadors of African American Literature. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* paved way for an era of African American writing and many a writers have imbibed the footprints embedded by Ralph Ellison in the oeuvre of English literature. There are numerous identical and analogous elements in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. The researcher has attempted to explore the same and derived at few findings like migration of the protagonist to North/ South leading to self-revelation, the influence of the ancestors, the role played by game in the lives of the protagonist etc.

Key Words: Ancestor, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon, Invisible Man

Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison have embraced the African American vernacular tradition and are hailed as the icons of African American literature. The central plot of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is Pecola being raped by her father and it is a rewriting of the Jim Trueblood episode in *Invisible Man*. "Morrison's plot serves as a feminist revision of Ellison's representation of Trueblood's violation of his daughter" (Thomas 3). The title of her novel *Tar Baby* is taken from *Invisible Man*. Similarly, the traces of *Invisible Man* are imprinted in *Song of Solomon* in many ways. The central theme of both the novels is quest for identity. The titles of both the novels reveal the identity of the protagonists. In Ellison's novel the hero discovers that he is an invisible man in the society. In Morrison's novel, Milkman's identity with his ancestors is conveyed in





Solomon's Song, "Jake the only son of Solomon... Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone" (SS 303). Many people migrate from South to North like the Invisible Man but they are isolated; Milkman's migration from North to South is solo but he enjoys communion with his ancestors.

The grandfathers play a dominant role in both the protagonists' lives. In *Invisible Man*, the protagonist tries to follow his grandfather's last words in his life without understanding the implications of them and so they create a negative influence on him. When he moves up North he affirms "I would smile and agree" (IM 120). He comprehends the real meaning as he matures. The grandfather acts as a prophet and cautions the Invisible Man about his future in his dream. Milkman follows the path of his great grandfather by flying. He has imbibed the passion for flying from his great grandfather unconsciously and realizes it only later. The Invisible Man consciously practices his grandfather's words. He moves away from his grandfather's place whereas Milkman moves towards his great grandfather's place. The former is followed by his ancestor and the latter is led by his ancestor.

The Invisible Man believes everyone in the beginning and that is the cause for his misery. He trusts the literal meaning of his grandfather's words. He has immense faith in Bledsoe, Mr. Norton and in the Brotherhood. As he is beguiled, he gets disillusioned. He becomes aware of it in the course of his journey. The problem with Milkman is that, he is sceptical about everyone and does not believe anything that is real. He distrusts his parents and cannot associate with anyone and he feels a sense of alienation. He comes to terms with reality in the course of his journey.

The concept of name is given prominence in both the novels. Since a person is identified by his name. There is a constant play of names creating a crisis in the identity of the protagonist. The Invisible Man is nameless. He is given a new name by the Brotherhood but it is not mentioned. He is referred to as new Booker T Washington by the Brotherhood; nigger by Bledsoe; lying traitor by Ras, he signs his name as Santa Claus on Sybil's belly, but his original nomenclature is ignored. In *Song of Solomon* the protagonist has two names; The name Milkman, given by the society is a symbol of mockery; another name, Macon Dead is the name which the son inherited from his father through mistake. Milkman does not like the name and Guitar says "Niggers get their names the way they get everything else" (SS 89).

Life is referred to as a game in both the novels. Guitar says to Milkman, "The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive and in the game, makes us do funny things" (SS 87). After realizing his connection with his forefathers, Milkman says to Sweet: "That's a game we used to play when we was little... Everybody but me. But I can play it now. It's my game now" (SS 327). The Vet instructs the Invisible Man to play the game but not to believe





in it. The Invisible Man always feels insecure of being played upon by others. Before his suspension from college he says; “Here she was playing with some silly secret code at the very minute my fate for the rest of my life was being decided” (IM 81).

Home is frequently highlighted in both the novels. The Invisible Man falls homesick often and feels for home due to the hostile treatment in the North, but Milkman feels at home due to the hospitality in the South. Home is the home for Invisible Man; “I found a home –or hole in the ground” (IM 5). Milkman heads his flight to Eternal home, the home of his ancestors.

Images connected to underground is predominant in *Invisible Man*. The protagonist commutes from South to North in a bus and goes to Harlem in a subway train. “The train seemed to plunge downhill” (IM 121). In the Liberty Paints he works in a basement under the supervision of Lucius Brockway. “It was a deep basement. Three levels underground” (IM 157). The Chthonian is the Brotherhood headquarters and it means underground in Greek. After Clifton’s death he wanders down the subway stairs seeing nothing, his mind plunges. His friend Clifton plunges into nothingness. Later when he runs for life, he plunges into a manhole and discovers his self. Images connected with flight are predominant in *Song of Solomon*. Milkman commutes from North to South in an airplane. He is always fascinated to birds and objects that can fly. He compares his great grandfather to an eagle, “He left everybody down on the ground and he sailed on off like a black eagle” (SS 328).

The Invisible Man and Milkman play on the words “I am what I am.” Invisible Man says “I yam what I am!” (IM 201). Milkman says “I am. God knows I am!” (SS 205). The protagonists are chased to death by their fellow Blacks. Ras warns the Invisible Man “the time has come” (IM 366). Guitar warns Milkman “Your Day has come” (SS 279). The invisible man is misinterpreted as Rinehart by the people and Milkman is misinterpreted as Macon Dead (his father) by Circe. This proves the masks worn by the heroes. The Brotherhood tries to wipe away the past of Invisible Man and give him new name. A member says, “that’s all past, dead” (IM 221). In *Song of Solomon* Sing, the grandmother of Milkman wants to wipe the past of his grandfather and make him accept the new name.

Both the protagonists in the course of their journey accept their past for it is their root. In *Invisible Man*, the hero discovers that history moves not like an arrow or objective, scientific movement but like a boomerang: swiftly, cyclically, and dangerously. “He sees that when he is not conscious of the past, he is liable to be slammed in the head with it again when it circles back” (Meally 103). He realizes that though it may be a burden it is a stepping stone to the future. Milkman identifies himself with the past. Before going to the South he could not associate with





his elders, but after going he even learns to sing Solomon's song and takes pride in it. Indeed "a palm tree is a fit subject for poetry" (Achebe 105).

Both the novels portray the dispossession of the Negroes in the form of eviction. In *Invisible man* an old couple is evicted off their home. In Morrison's novel, Milkman's grandfather is evicted from his farm, Lincoln Heaven. The Negroes are helpless and stand as vulnerable witnesses to the brutal murder of, Tod Clifton, in the former novel; and First Macon Dead in the latter novel. Brother Tarp carries the chain of slavery as a relic of his past in Ellison's novel and Pilate carries the bones of her father as an inheritance of the past. The Brotherhood in *Invisible Man* and Seven Days in *Song of Solomon* are organizations based on emotionless rationalization.

Blues and folklore are an integral part of both the novels. They are a source of comfort to both the protagonist. They are promoted by the women characters, Mary Rambo in *Invisible Man* and Pilate in *Song of Solomon*. Mary gives motherly affection to the Invisible Man and Pilate guards Milkman to reach his ancestors. Both the novels have mythic connections "The invisible man's odyssey is not to find a place or to re-establish harmony at home but to discover a self that is, if not in harmony with the world, at least in equilibrium with itself" (Deutch 97). The archetypal motif of descent followed by renewal or rebirth recurs significantly through the *Invisible Man*. In *Song of Solomon*, the tale of Flying Africans, who escaped slavery by flying back to Africa, is based on Angolan Gullahs folklore myths. The slaves either flew or jumped off their slave ships and as Africans believe in magic and supernatural elements they trusted that the slaves went to Africa.

Both the novels are based on the migration of the protagonists. Urgo argues that "the central theme, the overarching myth, the single experience, that defines American culture at its core is migration" (5). The invisible man moves on from one place to another. From the college in South he goes to Harlem, abodes in Men's House, then scrolls to the different trustees, Liberty Paints, The Chthonian, Harlem, Downtown and his basement hole. His experience of alienation and solitude and his threat for life make him to probe into self and he discover the truth, that he is an invisible man and so has to shed his false identity. In the end the Invisible Man relishes his freedom because he has understood that true freedom lies in accepting one's responsibility. By accepting his responsibility the Invisible Man feels elated because of the realization that even an invisible man, he could contribute to the well-being of the society.

Milkman also moves from one place to another. From Michigan he goes to Danville, Hunters Cave, Virginia, Shalimar, and Solomon's Leap. He gets clues from each place and thus unravels the mystery of his ancestors. Though he experiences hospitality at many places he is subjected to hostility and solitude at Shalimar and his life is in threat. He then realizes his





selfishness and discovers his real identity. He takes responsibility and helps Pilate in burying her father. "A deep sigh escaped from the sack" (SS 335). He fulfils the aspirations of his elders.

"A rolling stone gathers no moss." The protagonists due to migration become useful to the society. The Invisible Man though, in hibernation pledges to indulge in direct action which would be of real help to his fellowmen and Milkman is responsible for a healing of his community.

Thus, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* are analogous. It is evident that "Ellison is Morrison's necessary dilemma: the literary ancestor she can't quite live with and absolutely can't live without, whom it would be folly to reject or ignore" (Thomas 4).

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