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A Quest for an African American Identity in
Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Toni
Morrison's *Beloved*

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A Quest for an African American Identity in
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Declaration

I hereby declare that the substance of this dissertation is entirely the result of my investigation and that due reference or acknowledgement is made, whenever necessary, to the work of other researchers.

I am duly informed that any person practicing plagiarism will be subject to disciplinary sanctions issued by university authorities under the rules and regulations in force.

Date: April 11th, 2016

Signed: Mrs Mansour Boukhtache Fatima Zahra

For the soul of my beloved father.
God bless him.

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Abstract

This dissertation is concerned with the issue of African American identity formation in two important contemporary novels: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Toni Morrison *Beloved* (1987). While our purpose is to investigate the ways in which the theme of identity is treated in the two novels, our hope is to bring forth their distinctiveness in the African American literary tradition. By exploring the theme of identity in the two novels, I examine the thematic features which reflect the common concerns of the writers as well as the stylistic devices through which they support their thematic preoccupations. By comparing the two novels, we aim to explore the writers' redefinition of African American identity by taking into account their experimentation at the level of both form and theme.

Taking our theoretical bearings from Contemporary Narrative and Critical Race theories, our first chapter is a review of traditional as well as contemporary perspectives on African American identity. This chapter postulates that even though the novels descend from the tradition of early slave narratives, *Invisible Man* and *Beloved* open upon new possibilities for the study of African American identity. While tackling the disillusionment of both writers with American ideals, we examine the experimentation of the authors in their novels by focusing on Ellison's transcendence of the protest fiction adopted by his generation of African American writers and Morrison's breaking away from historical closure that is sung by the mainstream American literature.

The second chapter of this thesis tries to trace the African American journey towards self-definition. In both novels, the characters undertake the same painful inner journey. While *Invisible Man* has to confront his black predicament and past humiliations to construct his identity, Sethe in *Beloved* has to delve into the recesses of a silenced past and deconstruct an imposed identity to free herself. In the last chapter we examine the formal devices that are used by the writers to support their thematic concerns.

In the conclusion, we find that the narrative mode of writing adopted by the two writers is highly capable of producing a subversive artistic statement through its form

and content. The African American identity is not a static concept but changing developing through time and experience.

Introduction

African American writers have increasingly shown particular interest in the theme of identity. From early slave narratives to contemporary African American writings, developing a strong sense of self or personal identity has been their major concern. African American identity, therefore, has its wellspring in the early slave narratives. These autobiographies indicate the slave narrators' successful independent assertion of an identity of their own construction in defiance of the strictures unquestionably controlling their self-portraiture. It is through the authentic representation of their lives, their dreams and their hopes that the freed slaves claimed their humanity and constructed their identity.

Actively opposing the stereotypes often prevalent in mainstream literature, these early narrators vigorously opened a new literary space for the representation of blacks in literature. With politically charged hopes, these narrators challenged restrictive definitions of the Black American often portrayed as a submissive, a defenseless even a primitive being. In this way, early slave narratives were significantly deemed central to the construction of the African American identity.

The deleterious impact of the widespread misperception and misrepresentation of African Americans was first broached by W.E.B DuBois. In his *Souls of Blacks Folks*, W.E.B DuBois lamented the predicament of the Black in America and expressed his discontent with the Southerners practice implying that Blacks were a problem in society. These systematic barriers of exclusion and discrimination, what Dubois refers to as the 'Veil'¹ narrowed the Black Americans' vision, allowing them a greater perception of the reality of racism, and precluding them from a range of freedoms. Seen in this way, one could consequently argue that the estrangement of the blacks is but a reflection of the white dominant discourse.

Indeed, the notion of racial difference, which shaped European literature from the period of Renaissance to the modern age, constitutes a major part in the making of American culture.² Slavery and racism were but a manifestation of this racial

¹ Du Bois, W.E.B *The Souls of Black Folks* Oxford University Press 2007, p 08

² Frances Smith Foster and Cassandra Jackson say in an article entitled: "Race and Literary Politics" that "The myth of race has been and continues to be a persistent factor in shaping American culture." and that "the notion

discourse. And long before this, Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* is another byword for these racial theories. Jefferson believed that each racial group had qualities and potentials for success and claimed that with the help of the white man, blacks could move "towards their reestablishment on an equal footing with the other colors of the human family."³ The latter declaration does not imply that this man was an advocate of slavery, though he was a slaveholder; but rather gives us an image of how racist theories reverberated upon the American society and constituted the American historiography concerning race.

In other words, the mainstream discourse was based on a racial hierarchy in which whiteness was assumed as the vertex of the American society. In this way, "silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse"⁴, as Toni Morrison puts it. While one group of the nation assumed a paternalistic role, another group was denied a voice and deprived of "a true self-consciousness". As a marginalized group, his only way of looking at itself is "through the revelation of the other" or what Dubois calls in his *Souls of Black Folks* "Double Consciousness".

Dubois's concept of "double consciousness", the distorted perception of the self, became the image with which the African American was portrayed by African American writers in the turn of the century. Indeed, those writers took up the task of raising the black American above the "object" allowing him to give a more authentic image of his "self". Yet, in the earliest period this project of resisting the hegemonic representation, the hallmark of the African American literary production was based on "protest fiction". African American writers have picked up the techniques of naturalism and determinism, in their protest fiction, portraying the Black American as angry and outraged at his circumstances. Furthermore, and in response to an extremely hostile culture, virulent racism and racial violence, many African Americans advocated the "Back to Africa Movement." Other writers, however, sought assimilation into the American culture.

of racial categories was central to the construction of a national identity", quoted in Paul Lauter *A Companion to American Literature and Culture*, Blackwell Publishing, 2010, p. 317.

³ Thomas Jefferson, quoted in Paul Lauter *A Companion to American Literature and Culture*, Blackwell Publishing, 2010, p. 317

⁴ Morrison, Toni *Playing in the Dark : Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* Vintage Books, 1993, p. 9.

The twentieth century novelists studied in this dissertation adopted the narrative mode to explore the painful search of one's individual identity in a society that denies them their rights as humans. The novels under study i.e. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning *Beloved* (1987), articulate subversive visions which challenge dominant notions defining the African American existence. In this respect, we will try to show the various factors that are behind the conflict between the individual and society as well as the individual's inner conflict. We endeavor to explore how both writers tackle the formation of African American identity. In addition to comparing the two works, I tend to shed light on the continuities and discontinuities between these two contemporary novels and the early slave narratives. Though many critics agree that contemporary African American writers take over the same issues broached by the slave narrators, I attempt to argue in this study that they differ from them in some respects.

In "The Site of Memory," Morrison notes that slave narrators "were silent about many things, and they 'forgot' many other things," and affirmed that her job is "to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'"⁵. Here, it must be pointed out that the context in which Ellison and Morrison wrote their novels is different from their predecessors. Slave narrators were born into slavery and they wrote autobiographies which tell their journeys to freedom whereas Morrison's and Ellison's heroes live in post-bellum America. Then, Morrison's and Ellison's task is to unveil what is left unsaid and bring them to the surface to account for them. Nevertheless, Ellison is less preoccupied with historiography when compared to Morrison. In other words, while Morrison stresses the importance of filling in the gaps and omissions in African American history which is crucial to their identity, Ellison focuses more on the African American distorted perception of themselves and how to envisage ways to overcome this psychological problem for the sake of a sound identity.

The focus will be on the disillusionment felt by African Americans with the American society as well as the pain of narrating and confronting a traumatic past as brought forth in *Invisible Man* and *Beloved* respectively. We could perhaps

⁵ Morrison, "Toni Morrison's Site of Memory" in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 2d ed., ed. William Zinsser (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p. 91.

characterize the years following the end of the Civil War extending to the initial ramblings of what would come to be known as the ‘Harlem Renaissance’ as the Dickensian binary opposition’’ The best of times, the worst of times’’. In other words, the Reconstruction seemed to confirm to African Americans that America would at last keep faith with its promise of equality and liberty; yet, African Americans still did not fully enjoy their American citizenship. Black Americans encountered rampant racist prejudices in their attempts to integrate into the larger American society; the black who was identified as an object of servitude in slavery turned into an object of hate during the period of reconstruction and blackness was associated with enslavement and subordination.

Ellison’s and Morrison’s heroes seek neither utter separation nor blind assimilation. They both strive for “fuller participation in the society which [they] share with whites”⁶ and are committed to claim both their Americanness and Africanness. Both protagonists seem to fail in their attempt to lead a normal life, in the first place, due to their desire to beat back the past as in the case of Sethe, or neglect his past experiences and refuse to reflect upon them as in the case of invisible man. Before the protagonists could set out a journey for finding their true selves, establishing a connection with the past was inevitable and indispensable to the act of identity formation.

In both novels, the protagonists’ past experience has an immense impact on the formation of their individual identities. Though Ellison’s novel centers around the construction of identity of a male character and Morrison’s *Beloved* is primarily concerned with women, significant aspects of the African American reality in the novels are dealt with similarly: the distorted perception of one’s own self and the alienation of African American due to the racism they encounter. Both writers point out the dangers of repressing one’s past and therefore portray characters that are engaged with their past histories in their struggle for disalienation and in their quest for identity.

⁶ Ellison, Ralph *Shadow and Act* Vintage International, 1995, p. 270. Hereafter, all references to this work will be cited in the discussion as (S&A).

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) is a first person narrative. The nameless protagonist is the narrator who reflects upon his experiences from underground. The entire narrative is told by invisible man at the expense of his former self; a naïve liberal who is ready to accept others' definitions for the sake of becoming a leader and spokesman. His desire to succeed blinds him to his reality and that of his society. In this way, the narrator's successive disillusionment with institutional power constitutes the overall form of the novel.

In fact, Ellison's overriding preoccupation was with the adequate representation of the black American. For him, the African American was often portrayed as the victim and was rarely "drawn as that sensitively process of opposites, of good and evil, of instinct and intellect, of passion and spirituality, which great literary art has projected as the image of man." (S&A 26) In *Invisible Man*, Ellison sought to redress these omissions and was determined to go beyond deterministic terms which both black and white writers alike have used to interpret black culture and identity. In this way, Ellison swerved from naturalism and protest fiction adopted by most Black American writers of the mid twentieth century including his friend Richard Wright.

It should be pointed out here that Ellison's divergence from protest fiction has been the target of harsh criticism and worse than that; it was seen as a betrayal of the long tradition of black militancy. The generation of Black writers during Black Arts Movement reprimanded *Invisible Man* for its lack of protest. Arnold Rampersad, claimed that: "Wright wrote fiction as a Negro should. Ellison had shirked his responsibilities."⁷ Irving Howe is also another critic who accused Ellison of abandoning the cause of black Americans and the task of black writers. As a result, this work argues that Ellison tried to avoid portraying another stereotypical character as he thought that much modern writing failed to acknowledge the universal complexity shared by African Americans as well as whites. We will thus see that Ellison did not seek blind assimilation as he was accused of but he rather aimed at depicting the African American as a complex human being who is good and bad and who is disillusioned in this modern world in the same way the white American is.

⁷ Williams, Yolanda *I cons of African American Literature* Greenwood Press, 2011, p. 206.

A disillusionment of nearly the same kind is highlighted by Morrison in her novel *Beloved*. The novel problematizes the concept of freedom as it reveals how hard it is for former slaves Sethe and Paul D to have sound lives in the wake of decimating and pervasive personal histories. Both are marked by the legacy of their individual experiences with American slavery. The conditions of enslavement in the external world are revealed to have profound effects in the individual internal world. And since slave narratives are silent about many things as Morrison contends, probing deep into the consciousness of the individuals in order to access their interior lives via imagination becomes her urgent task. In *Beloved*, for instance, despite the characters' freedom, their thought and actions are still haunted by their memories of their earliest and formative experiences as someone else's property. As Sethe pithily puts it: "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another."⁸

From this short view of Ellison's and Morrison's preoccupations, it seems that both writers' perspectives as a black man and a black woman cause them to reconceive much that has been at the centre of American literature: its engagement with the past, its peculiar type of innocence and its quest for freedom. In their respective novels, these themes reappear as illusory and as a set of assumptions and goals that we have thought to be universal, but that are in fact the product of a particular cultural system. The miracle of the two writers' works, however, is that it is never merely angry or polemical, but always about human beings trying to stay alive, trying to negotiate a living space where sanity and even pleasure might be possible.

In their literary project, narration is the central activity in *Invisible Man* and *Beloved*. It is not merely Ellison's and Morrison's own voices, but the project of the characters mainly. I am bound, therefore, to see in the novels under study how the act of narration is linked inextricably to the formation of identity. In his critical book of sociology *Identity Formation, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis*, Pr Charles G. Levine contends that: "Identity is a product of the person negotiating

⁸ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved* 1st ed. New York: Vintage International, 2004, pp. 111-112. Hereafter, all references to this work will be cited in the discussion as (B).

passages through life and reflecting on these actions. These reflections can then culminate in the creation of "stories" or "narratives" that explain past actions.’’⁹

In our analysis we shall operate from two theoretical premises developed by the French and the American critics Paul Ricoeur and George Lipsitz. Insights from Dubois’s theory developed in *The Souls of Black Folks* and Edward Said’s cultural theory will also be borrowed. Our selection of this theoretical corpus is due to the fact that its authors’ investigations of the concept of identity fit in well with the perspective of our study. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur draws a parallel between the act of narrating a life story and the construction of identity. According to Ricoeur, the affirmation of meaning, the formation of identity, understanding and gaining self-knowledge is the by-product of the act of narration. Telling stories from their own perspectives allows the characters gain a better understanding of their situation and use this comprehension as a tool to empower their selves and redefine their identities.

What is inextricably related to the act of narrating is the act of exercising ‘‘ a counter memory.’’ What is meant by ‘‘counter memory’’ is an engagement and a reconnection with a painful past where the African American endeavors to speak the ‘‘unpseakabke.’’ In the present study, we will use this concept as developed by a critic active in the field of Critical Race Theory Georg Lipsitz. The theoretical framework that Lipsitz proposes rests upon the assumption that exploring the terrain of past histories is a strategy for transcending the boundaries of the dominant culture and thus a way of reclaiming lost identities. ‘‘Counter memory’’ Lipsitz contends ‘‘ focuses on localized experiences with oppression using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience.’’¹⁰

Particularly relevant to our thesis is Morrison’s notion of ‘‘literary archeology’’ and Ellison notion of ‘‘hope’’. These, I believe, are the very notions that establish the writers’ distinctiveness in African American literature. While most African American authors, in the mid twentieth century, resorted to determinism to convey the African

⁹ Levine, Charles. G and Coté, James. E *Identity Formation, Agency, and Culture: A Social Psychological Synthesis* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers London, 2002, p. 49.

¹⁰ Lipsitz, Georg *Time Passages, Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 223.

American reality as hopeless and identity as static. The writers under study were more experimental in their novels. In other words, Ellison and Morrison fashioned multilayered narrative to speak the black story that had gone untold by offering an alternate version of identity. Their visions are better elucidated in their books of criticism. In his *Shadow an Act*, Ellison insists that ‘‘ reality was far more mysterious and uncertain, and still, despite its violence and capriciousness, more promising.’’¹¹ Significantly, we are interested in looking at the way he makes his character search out the truths of his past and shake off all imposed identities. In much the same way, Morrison, in her *Playing in the Dark*, coins ‘‘literary archeology’’ and ‘‘rememory’’ by which she seeks to imagine the interior lives of slaves which is not captured in the early slave narratives. In these books of criticism, Ellison and Morrison are bound to unsettle and dismay all those writers who grew rigid with the fixed concept of the American Negro as trapped agony incarnate. Their criticism and their notion can give us a framework for understanding the complex ways in which the African American forms his identity.

Through their respective works, Ellison and Morrison encourage their protagonists to resist the silence imposed on their voices. Both writers portray African American characters who overcome all the obstacles on their ways to rediscover their identities via the process of narration. Interestingly enough, the writers’ perspectives works are somehow analogous to postcolonial vision in the way they insist on the revision of history.

It is at this juncture, I might note that the experience of African Americans could be deemed relevant to postcolonial issues as the necessity to develop strategies of resistance to persisting forms of domination. Postcolonial theory points to the counter discourse developed by decolonized writers to oppose the monolithic discourse. It is also at this juncture that I note that postcolonialism intersects with narrative theory in the sense that both approaches assume that narrative is a way of asserting identity. Edward Said says, in this account, that ‘‘stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method

¹¹ Ellison Ralph *Shadow and Act*, op. cit., p. 104.

colonized people use to assert their identity and the existence of their own history’’¹². What has been denied can be retrieved back through the process of narration.

African American experience is shown as universal in the two novels of our study. Their predicament is the same as that of all the formerly oppressed people who still grapple with a traumatic past. In this sense, Ellison stresses the notion of ‘‘the basic unity of the human experience’’¹³. Likewise, Morrison universalizes the African American experience in her depiction of the downtrodden people. In this regard, Edward Said admits that he admires ‘‘the remarkable universalizing of the African-American experience as it emerges in such brilliant detail in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.’’¹⁴

The aim of this research is to find out and study how Ellison and Morrison portray the African American quest for identity. We will endeavor to show that the formation of African American identity requires neither an entire submission to the whites’ system of values nor an utter estrangement from one’s shameful past.

To implement our research, we shall rely on the following outline: the dissertation is made up of three chapters; each chapter deals with both authors and their respective works. The first chapter will deal with the concept of identity in relation to three other important concepts in the African American literary tradition: narrative, counter memory and double consciousness. My endeavor in this chapter is to highlight the continuity of the theme of identity in contemporary African American writings in general and in the novels under study in particular focusing mainly on how these contemporary writers borrowed from slave narratives for the creation of their novels and, at the same time, to show the shift in the way these contemporary novelists investigate the same theme. This brief overview of the main concept of this study, African American identity, will be followed by a study of the main concerns of the two authors in which we show their distinctive visions. In this regard, I will attempt to examine how the authors’ preoccupation with identity becomes a lens through which the authors perceive issues that are prevalent in American society. In the second

¹² Said, Edward *Culture and Imperialism* New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1993, Introduction xii.

¹³ Ellison Ralph ‘‘The World and the Jug’’ in *Shadow and Act*, op. cit., p. 123.

¹⁴ Said, Edward *Culture and Imperialism*, op. cit., p. 334.

chapter, dealing with the quest of identity in the two novels, I shall demonstrate the processes that impede and promote the African American's search for identity. Chapter three will undertake an analysis of the narrative style applied in the texts by the two authors, focusing mainly the narrative strategies used by Ellison and Morrison to support their thematic preoccupations in *Invisible Man* and *Beloved* respectively. I shall attempt to demonstrate how the act of narrating is inextricably bound up with the achievement of African American identity. In other words, I shall stress the inseparable relation of form and content. I shall also examine how African Americans use narratives as a way of self-empowerment that defines the personal voice of their identities. Thus, in this work I shall consider the extent to which Ellison's and Morrison's treatment of the theme of identity is identical yet dissimilar in some points. I concern myself mainly with demonstrating how Ellison and Morrison are fairly close in their preoccupations in the way their respective protagonists reflect on their past actions and revise conventional structures. Moving beyond the confines of anyone construct or ideology is high on both writers' agendas as their novels will reveal.

Our dissertation will be closed with a conclusion restating the main results of our work. It will shed light on Ellison's and Morrison's redefinition of African American identity and their resistance of dominant modes of representation. In addition, our conclusion includes a brief look at the distinctiveness of Ellison's and Morrison's fictions in post-bellum America.

Chapter One

Re-conceiving African American Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Though *Beloved* and *Invisible Man* are novels about slavery and racism respectively, they are not a call for the abolition of slavery or a protest against racism, as they are two stories narrated to twentieth century audience. They are mainly stories of a black female slave and a black male spokesman who develop awareness of their inferior status in a racist America, which ultimately awakens them and forces them to develop a quest for freedom and psychological wholeness.

The purpose of the present chapter is to highlight the process of re-conceiving African American history and identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as well as the basic concepts used to discuss these two works. By re-conception, we mean a redefinition of African American identity. In the two novels, Morrison and Ellison revisit African America identity and give new perspectives as to what is to be an African American. The two writers, in fact, construct a relationship between narration and the achievement of identity that redefines traditional perspectives on African American identity as static and presents it as changing developing through time and experience.

By linking the act of narration to the achievement of identity, Ellison and Morrison place their protagonists in a tradition of Afro-American letters that originated with the slave narratives of the turn of the nineteenth century. Narrating their stories from their own perspectives rather than allowing the dominant modes of writing do it for them, the early slave narrators repudiated the claims that Black Americans were unintelligent or subhuman. They proved that Black Americans were capable of artistic production and thus possess "civilized minds." And though these narratives strove to voice the injustices of slavery and end slavery, "they were silent about many things"¹⁵, as Morrison puts it.

The first part of this chapter is; thus, devoted to an exploration of the ways *Beloved* and *Invisible Man*, as contemporary African American narratives, differ from their predecessors the slave narratives. I rely in this on Henry Louis Gates's study of slave narratives. Then, I shed light on Ricoeur's Narrative theory, Dubois's concept of

¹⁵ Morrison, "Toni The Site of Memory" in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 2d ed., ed. William Zinsser (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p. 91.

“Double consciousness” as well as George Lipsitz’s concept of “Counter memory”. The last part of this chapter is concerned with the vision of the two novelists.

1. The Concept of African American Identity

1.1. Narrative and African American Identity

“... We achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existences into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. The Self is not a static thing or substance, but a configuring of personal events into a historical unity which includes not only what one has been but also anticipations of what one will be.”¹⁶

Donald Polkinghorne

When discussing African American identity construction, there is no way not to persistently return to slave narratives. In fact, the construction of the self is a major theme in the early slave narratives of antebellum America. In other words, the ability to re-create the self through storytelling is a mode of writing that was adopted by the ex-slaves as a strategy to reclaim their shattered identities. Seen in this way, slave narratives occupy an important place not only in the making of African American literary tradition but also in the spectrum of autobiographical writing.

Directly linked to the act of recollecting and narrating is the act of exercising memory. Referring to the centrality of “remembering” for the history of African Americans, Toni Morrison heralds the slave narratives as key texts for tracing the archive of Black self-identity:

A very large part of my own literary heritage is the autobiography. In this country, the print origins of Black literature (as distinguished from the oral origins) were slave narratives. These book-length narratives (autobiographies, recollections, memoirs) of which over a hundred were published, are familiar texts to historians and students of Black literature.¹⁷

As the quotation implies, slave narratives are the precursors of later African American narratives. In their writings, and as part of this tradition, contemporary African

¹⁶ Polkinghorne, Donald. *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* The state university of New York 1988, p. 150.

¹⁷ Cited from ¹⁷ Kanneh, Kadiatu. *African Identities: Race, Nation and culture in Ethnography, Pan-Africanism and Black Literatures*. London and New York Routledge, 2002, p. 66.

American writers give life accounts of the subaltern to disclose the devastating psychological and sociological effects slavery and racial oppression have had on the African American sense of identity. In the same way, they mourn their lack of ancestry; a shared sense of culture and identity with which to envision the future.

Notwithstanding the affinities between the two modes of writings, contemporary Black American narratives diverge, to some extent, from their predecessors. In his exploration of early slave narratives, Henry Louis Gates points out to their distinctiveness in his book *The Slave's Narrative*. According to Gates, the very promise of early slave narratives is to ‘‘to give a picture of slavery as it is.’’¹⁸ In this way, slave narrators exercise a ‘‘neutral memory’’ and thus record truth as it is and narrate events as they really happened. Contemporary African American writers, on the other hand, were interested in the re-interpretation of this truth and in the rearrangement of these events to discern how they have culminated into what they exist now. Exercising a memory, which is not ‘‘neutral’’, the contemporary narrator is ‘‘not a passive recorder but rather an active shaper’’¹⁹, as Gates puts it. The narrator, thus, uses his memory creatively not for the sake of arranging events as they happened but to give meaning to these events, for what matters is not what happened but understanding how and why it has happened. Memory, in this way, gives significance to the events narrated that are given away in the narrative not chronologically but according to a meaningful pattern.

Gates strengthens this view by drawing on Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative. Gates sorts out the place of time and memory, as explored by Ricoeur, in the African American narratives. In ‘‘Narrative and Hermeneutics’’, Ricoeur contends that ‘‘Poiesis’’²⁰, or the act of ‘‘shaping’’ or ‘‘making’’, ‘‘both reflects and resolves the paradox of time’’, and goes on to say:

It reflects it to the extent that the act of emplotment combines in various proportions two temporal dimensions, one chronological and the other non-chronological. The first maybe called the episodic dimension. It characterizes the

¹⁸ Gates, Henry Louis Jr. Davis, Charles T. *The Slave's Narrative* Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 150.

¹⁹ Ibid p. 149

²⁰ Poiesis is used by Paul Ricoeur to refer to ‘‘shaping’’ or ‘‘making’’. The term has been developed by Hayden White in his *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Gates points to the latter definition in *The Slave's Narrative*. P. 150

story as made out of events. The second is the configurational dimension, thanks to which the plot construes significant wholes out of scattered events.²¹

Thus, since a slave narrative's argument resides in the fact that the events narrated really happened to the narrator, this narrative is marked by the dominance of "the episodic dimension" which is "chronological". It would be thus worth considering Gates's conclusion drawn from Ricoeur's above quote:

I should imagine that any reader of slave narratives is most immediately struck by the nearly total lack of any "configurational dimension" and the virtual absence of any reference to memory or any sense that memory does anything but makes the past facts and events of slavery immediately present to the writer and his reader. Thus the ex-slave narrator is debarred from the use of a memory that would make anything of his narrative beyond or other than the purely, merely episodic, and he is denied access, by the very nature and intent of his venture, to the configurational dimension of narrative."²²

In a slave narrative, events are thus given one after the other in a chronological order and are thus instantly made known by the reader. In a contemporary African American narrative, however, the reader is responsible for making meaning out the events which are given to him in a non-chronological order as we shall see in *Invisible Man*; and he sometimes knows more than the character as in the neo-slave narrative of our study *Beloved*. And unlike the ex-slave slave narrator, whose nature of narration precludes him from a memory responsible for the "configurational dimension" that construes significant wholes out of scattered events", contemporary African American writers, have access to a memory intertwined with "imagination" or what Ernest Cassirer calls a "symbolic memory". The latter is defined as "the process by which man not only repeats his past but also constructs this experience. Imagination becomes a necessary element of true recollection."²³

What should be made clear here, and what Gates point to as well, is that if a slave narrator does not exercise this "symbolic memory" in his narrative, it does not mean that he does not exercise it at all. "Of course ex-slaves do exercise memory in

²¹ Ricoeur Paul "Narrative and Hermeneutics". Gates took Permission from Ricoeur to cite from this paper. Quoted from *The Slave's Narrative*, P150

²² Gates, Henry Louis Jr. Davis, Charles T *The Slave's Narrative*, op. cit., p. 155.

²³ Ibid., p. 151. I am using the term along the lines developed by Ernst Cassirer. Gates drew on Cassirer in his study of the slave's narrative.

their narratives’’²⁴, but they do not do it the way contemporary African American narrators do. The latter use this symbolic memory to bring the past to the present, but for a slave narrator and because of the premise according to which he writes, there should be nothing cryptic about memory. It would otherwise be a failing narration that cannot be assumed to be a truthful record of events. In this, Gates writes: ‘’The ex-slave writing his narrative cannot afford to put the present in conjunction with the past (with very rare significant exceptions) for fear that in so doing he will appear, from the present, to be reshaping and so distorting and falsifying the past.’’²⁵

Emphatically, the most obvious distinguishing mark between slave narratives and contemporary African American narratives is the kind of memory exercised. For the sake of recording the truth of slavery and thus boosting the cause of abolition, a slave narrator is guided and he is not free to use his imagination. On the contrary, a black American in post-bellum America has an abundant possibility in using this imagination to explore the unaccounted for and the abstruse effects of the institution of slavery on the slaves and their descendants. Valerie Smith expounds upon the distinctiveness of contemporary African American narratives and how, as successors of slave narratives, these contemporary narratives offer new perspectives to its readers. Smith writes:

‘’The twentieth and twenty first century writers of these works of literature possess a measure of creative and rhetorical freedom unavailable to the freed and fugitive slaves who wrote narratives during the ante-bellum period. Moreover, the contemporary authors write from a perspective informed and enriched by the study of slave narratives, the changing historiography of slavery, the complicated history of race and power relations in America and throughout the world during the twentieth century, and the rise of psychoanalysis and other theoretical frameworks.’’²⁶

This view asserts that the slave narrative has therefore served as an essential model for African American writers who, informed by these narratives, have embarked on the reconstruction of a past, probing deep into it to find its occluded parts. With great fineness, these writers linked Black Americans, who has lost access to the past because

²⁴ Gates, Henry Louis Jr. Davis, Charles T. *The Slave's Narrative*, op. cit., p. 151.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Smith Valerie. ‘’Neo-slave Narratives: The Critical Context ‘’ p.169. in Fisch, Audrey *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* Cambridge University Press, 2007

of the atrocious violence as well as the intentional burial of this very same past, with a past left unspoken. In telling different stories, and telling the same story differently, contemporary African Americans narrators set more solid dimensions for the Black American identity groping closer to a mystery of a truth, a truth buried within a veiled past.

The authority of the unsaid over the said constitutes a major component in the works at hand. The repressed parts of one's life are of course parts of his identity. False interpretations and identity distortion may be inevitable if the story is left untold. In our investigation of the novels, we see how Ellison and Morrison deconstruct a stable existing identity and restore self confidence in a newly established one. The nameless narrator in *Invisible Man* and Sethe in *Beloved*, who are unable to confront their oppressors in real life, convert their experiences into narratives to determine what construction should be placed on them. Morrison makes it clear in *Beloved* that leaving things unsaid will certainly jeopardize one's identity: "That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up." (B 295)

Narrative, thus, allows a space for the determined subject to produce a newly positive identity. Donald Polkinghorne, a narrative theorist drew on Ricoeur to define identity as "recollected self in which the more complete the story is formed, the more integrated the self will be."²⁷ It might be interesting to quote Paul Ricoeur, too, who has pointed out that a narrative not only "gives form to what is unformed"²⁸, given the fact that many stories are left "untold" in history, but helps in "raising them to the case the rank of case histories"²⁹. From the retelling of repressed stories, the subject can make an actual story that emphatically marks his personal identity. As for this point Ricoeur writes:

This narrative interpretation implies that a life story proceeds from untold and repressed stories in the direction of actual stories the subject can take up and hold

²⁷ Polkinghorne, Donald. *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, op. cit., p. 106.

²⁸ Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative* Volume 1 Chicago University Press, 1983, p. 72.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 74.

as constitutive of this personal identity. It is this quest for identity that assures the continuity between the potential or inchoate story and the actual story we assume responsibility for.³⁰

It is in this light that we would consider what has been for so long the fundamental theme of African American literature: the construction of an African American identity provoked by the encounter with the past. Without question, the existential predicament presented by this encounter is directly associated with history; the enigmatic present is experienced as an unsettled sequel of an overwhelming history. It is in this sense that African Americans are devoid not only of a secure sense of being in history but also a sense of belonging to the world. Hence the need for constructing this fractured sense of belonging is to be pursued through narrative. In this way, reconstructing history and therefore rendering the African American as agents in history is imagined. History represents the substance upon which the African American imagination is called upon to work and more importantly narrative affords the plausibility of this process of reconstruction.

Let us now turn to one of the basic dimensions pertaining to the exploration of the relationships between narrative and identity. Drawing on Freud psychoanalysis, Donald Spence, in his discussion of the notion of the ‘‘Self’’ as a storyteller, offers a new dimension of the relationship between identity and narrative. This is what Spence refers to as the ‘real thing’’ of the past. In his discussion, Spence wishes to separate ‘‘historical truth’’ and ‘‘narrative truth’’. Through the telling of the past, a storyteller creates a new narrative. This new narrative was still close to the real thing but the truth that mattered was not the historical truth but what Spence calls ‘‘narrative truth’’. For Spence, ‘‘ there seems be no doubt that a well-constructed story possesses a kind of narrative truth that is real and immediate and carries an important significance for the process of therapeutic change.’’³¹ Likewise, our concern in this study is not on ‘‘historical truth’’ or what has really happened but on ‘‘narrative truth’’ a story on what has happened.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Polkinghorne, Donald. *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, op. cit., p. 119.

A creative shaper rather than a mere recorder of events, a narrator relies on and is fed by his counter memory. Aware of the power of historical images in shaping human interactions, Dubois was the first to forge an African American counter memory. Historical memory, Frances Yates has argued in *The Art of Memory*, have been employed in service of dominant ideologies, groups, or philosophies. To counter this memory, Dubois's had launched a persistent project of contending against America's mainstream historical memory in his *Black Reconstruction in America*. In illuminating American historiography by forging an African American counter memory, Dubois "was a self conscious creator of black counter memory".³² Here we come back to Dubois's dilemma of two-ness which, as David W. Blight contends, "might have the potential to deny true self consciousness", but "the black historian/artist, like all historical outsiders, had a unique vantage point"³³. Dubois in his *Souls* calls upon this historian/ artist and regards him as this new voice, new storyteller, new scholar, whose "strivings" might liberate American memory from the past as "the nation has not yet found peace from its sins".³⁴ Two of those artists Dubois was pinning his hopes on, I believe, are Ellison and Morrison, for their unique vision did not only liberate the African American memory from its traumatic past but gave the African American new prospects for the future.

1.2.COUNTER MEMORY AND AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

" Learning the truths of history for marginalized groups demands a complex negotiation between the legacy of historical events that effect everyone and the partial and limited accounts of those events that make up the historical record as authored by dominant groups."

George Lipsitz

"Collective memory is conceived as the outcome of interaction, a conversational process within which individuals locate themselves"

Ron Eyerman

³²Fabre, Genevieve and O' Meally, Robert *History and Memory in African-American Culture* Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 46.

³³ Ibid p. 49

³⁴ Du Bois, W.E.B *The Souls of Black Folks* op. cit., p. 10.

Exploring the process of African American identity formation involves the construction of “counter-memory”. It is important to keep in mind that this identity formation is grounded in memories of slavery not so much as a personal experience but as a collective remembrance. Whether or not one had experienced it, slavery defined one’s identity as an African American; it was why an African was in America. Being “son of slaves” or “son of former slaves” is an identification which is made available as a collective memory to unite all blacks in America. Though this collective memory makes references to past historical events, the meaning of these events is interpreted from the black’s perspective.

It is important to note that in post-Reconstruction American, a distinction imposed itself between the collective memory of the minority group of blacks and the dominant majority of whites, the writers of history or rather the dominant discourse. Seen in this way, the memory of slavery by Americans of African descents is what George Lipsitz calls “counter-memory”³⁵. Drawing on Foucault’s notions of “counter history” and “counter memory”, Lipsitz, active in the field of Critical Race Theory and studies “counter memory” in accordance with the African American identity, develops a distinct notion of “counter memory” different from that of Foucault.³⁶ “Counter memory”, Lipsitz contends, “forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past”³⁷. As far as Americans of African descents are concerned, this “counter memory” is a sort of investigation in which the engagement with the past is transformative, to wit: the black American opens up to interrogation by perspectives hidden in his past.

³⁵ Lipsitz, George *Time Passages, Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Lipsitz, in this book, gives a thorough analysis and description of the concept of “Counter Memory” and describes it as “a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal” P. 213

³⁶ Lipsitz draws on Foucault’s notions of “counter history” and “counter memory”, but develops the latter differently. While Foucault contends that “counter memory must record the singularity of events outside of the singularity of any monotonous finality” (cited from Lipsitz’s book P 213), Lipsitz argues that “counter memory grapples with tensions between grand historical narratives and lived experiences.”. Thus, Lipsitz does not refute totality all together, as Foucault does, but describe “counter memory” as record of singular events that disputes with the totality of this “monotonous totality”. In the context of the African Americans, it would be impossible to assess the formation of their identity, in isolation, apart from the white dominance. Any refute of the connection between the dominant and the demonized “could just easily obscure real connections, causes, and relationships” p. 214.

³⁷ Lipsitz, George *Time Passages, Collective Memory and American Popular*, op. cit., p. 213.

“Beating back the past” (B 86) is substantially an agonizing experience. Actually, the effect of reconnecting to a painful past, invoking suppressed memories, and speaking the “unspeakable” is certainly traumatic. One does not wish to remember or grapple with his shameful experiences, yet it is through this remembrance that those voices that were condemned to silence can reflect on the incomprehensible violence that pervaded their lives, cover up and repair their wounds. Collective sharing of past experiences offers a healing power for the one’s sense of the self and that of the group. Arguing over how these collective confrontations with the past heal the self and how this memory functions, Morrison writes:

“No one speaks, no one tells the story about himself or herself unless forced. They don’t want to talk, they don’t want to remember, they don’t want to say it because they are afraid of it- which is human. But when they do say it, and hear it, and look at it, and share it, they are not only one, they’re two, and three, and four, you know the collective sharing of that information heals the individual... There is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there’s a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it can be digested in a manner in which the memory is not destructive. The act of writing the book, is a way of confronting it and making it possible to remember.”³⁸

Seen in this way, this counter memory plays a crucial role in subverting epistemic inequities that condemn the lives of oppressed people to oblivion. Yet, it would be important to note that “country memory in this sense” as, Lipsitz argues “is not a denial of history, only a rejection of its false priorities and hierarchical divisions”.³⁹

“Counter memory” Lipsitz explains “focuses on localized experiences with oppression using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience.”⁴⁰ “Counter memory” is not a rejection of history but a reconstitution of it. It allows the African Americans to enter histories from which they have been locked out. As Lipsitz argues:

“Counter memory surpasses history and myth, that it transcends the false closures of linear history and the destructive ruptures and divisions of myth to create an active memory which draws upon the pluralities of the past and the present to illuminate the opportunities of the future.”⁴¹

³⁸ Taylor Guthrie Danille K. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* Mississippi University Press, 1994, p .248.

³⁹ Lipsitz, George *Time Passages, Collective Memory and American Popular*, op.cit., p. 223.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 213.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 226.

Lipsitz here points up the significance of exploring the terrain of counter memory as a strategy for transcending the boundaries of the dominant discourse. What is also worth emphasizing is that story-telling that gives life accounts as they really were cannot challenge the dominant discourse; on the contrary, they are just a way of repeating it. On the other hand, storytelling that employs insights and the passions of the voiceless whose histories have been suppressed from history can serve as a powerful tool which boosts an imaginative reconstitution of the marginalized experiences. Through this counter memory, the African American is promoted to the place of observer, definer, and historical judge. ‘‘The task of remembering’’ as Pierre Nora puts it, ‘‘makes everyone his own historians.’’⁴² As important as it is, therefore, to consider counter memory as a potential element in the African American literary tradition is to read the African American novel as a historical novel that moves beyond the confines of conventional constructs. Seen in this way, counter memory is not a retreat from history but rather an intervention. In this way, counter memory might be thought of as ‘‘residual’’ meanings, which, Raymond Williams argues, existed in the past but still ‘‘have significance because they represent areas of human experience, aspiration, and achievement, which the dominant culture neglects, undervalues, opposes, represses, or even cannot recognize.’’⁴³ Once residual practices are recognized, they are distinctively ‘‘incorporated, as idealization, fantasy or as exotic’’⁴⁴ features of dominant culture. Through the process of counter memory, African American story resists the normative closer and enunciate itself with a full disclosure, a process which marks the authority of the African American narrative.

1.3. DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS AND AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

‘‘the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his towness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two

⁴² Fabre, Genevieve. O’Meally, Robert, op. cit., p. 291.

⁴³ Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 124.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”⁴⁵

In both novels, *Beloved* and *Invisible Man*, the characters’ painful search for identity stems from their distorted self-perception. Both writers argue that a distorted perception of the self do have a deleterious impact on self consciousness and hence on identity. This unsound perception of the self is what Dubois refers to as “Double consciousness”. It should be noted that Dubois’s perspective on Black American identity is one of the most distinct and striking features of the African American literary tradition. Dubois demonstrates the construct of the African American double subject as a social reality. In other words, the American Negro is caught between two struggles to define himself. Entrapped in these two contradictory souls, Dubois claims that this struggle is “unreconciled”.

Therefore, in *The Souls of Blacks Folks*, this dual identity is articulated as an enduring nature of the African American consciousness. Historically, this dual African American identity is forged out of the enforced confrontation between two spheres, the African and the European. In her study of Black identity in relation to Africa and the African diaspora, Kadiatu Kanneh contends that the conception of “double consciousness” by Dubois as the inner “double aimed struggle”⁴⁶ of the African Americans, permits the conception of ambivalent turbulent subjectivities:

The split between the ‘American’ and the ‘Negro’ is revealed, throughout Dubois’s text, not as confrontation between a direct and unattained manifestation of an African self with an American subjectivity, but as a clash between a racial being and a national identity which prove to be politically and socially incompatible”⁴⁷

Thus the duality or “twoness”, Dubois alludes to, is more than a mere confrontation between two conflicting ontologies, African and American, grounded on physical differences and cultural peculiarities. In other words, Dubois’s construct of double consciousness is not a reference to biculturalism as some critics might suggest; it

⁴⁵ Du Bois, W.E.B *The Souls of Black Folks* , op. cit., Introduction. xiii

⁴⁶ Ibid cited in “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” p. 9. Here Dubois, contends that after Emancipation, “the Black’s turning... in hesitant and doubtful striving has made his strength ..., to seem like weakness. Yet it is not weakness, - it is the contradiction of double aims. The double aimed struggle “[my emphasis]

⁴⁷ Kanneh, Kadiatu. *African Identities: Race, Nation and culture in Ethnography, Pan-Africanism and Black Literatures*, op. cit., p. 65.

rather highlights a sort of ambivalence towards the American nation-state, a desire to obtain equality of opportunity and recognition in a larger American capitalist society. Put differently, Dubois tries to prove, through this theory of ‘‘Double Consciousness’’, black self worth and rejects the contempt to which the black is subject to: ‘‘He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.’’⁴⁸

This dilemma of two-ness, Du Bois contends, prevents the American Negro from developing ‘‘a true self consciousness’’. Dubois deems this double consciousness to be the inevitable fate of African Americans; ‘‘ One ever feels his twoness-an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts two unreconciled strivings.’’⁴⁹ In his *Souls of Black Folks*, Dubois discusses the concept of Double Consciousness. Shut out from the world by ‘‘a vast veil’’, African Americans are compelled to see themselves from the eyes of the others while the others refuse to see them as individuals. Using Dubois’s imputation of Double consciousness to American Blacks, later African Americans writers are able to assess the frailty of a consciousness which perceives itself to be in exile. Interestingly, in chapter two of this thesis, we are going to argue that Ralph Ellison does not reject Dubois’s double consciousness. In fact, Ellison departs from this double burden yet offers a solution to Dubois’s irreconcilable double consciousness.

Notwithstanding the discrepancy between Ellison’s and Dubois’s perspectives on Black identity, what they share, at bottom, is their rebuke of Booker T. Washington’s notion of idealism.⁵⁰ Dubois, indeed, devotes a whole chapter in his critique of Washington: ‘‘Of Mr. Booker T Washington and Others’’ and so does Ellison in *Shadow and Act*. In his chapter on Washington, Dubois critiques Washington’s take on the issue of Black leadership. While Dubois promotes education and envisages it as the ultimate goal for the black American and as a means of progress, Washington gives

⁴⁸ Du Bois, W.E.B *The Souls of Black Folks*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

⁵⁰ In *The Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois contends that Washington’s ‘‘submission and silence as to civil and political rights, was not wholly original.’’. In this chapter, I do not go further in discussing Ellison’s view on the issue. I rather made the link between the two views.

greater emphasize on industrial training and counsels the Black Americans to give up their insistence on civil rights and “concentrate all their energies on industrial education”⁵¹; a project that Dubois could not put up with. In his disapproval of Washington’s policy of racial accommodation, Dubois contends that Washington’s programme concentrated on economic growth at the expense of a development of social and intellectual consciousness.

Dubois’s direct indictment of Washington’s programme which accepts the acquiescence of African Americans finds its counterpart in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. The protagonist, as we shall see in chapter two, adopts this Washingtonian assimilationist tendency that leads him to nowhere. Due to this acquiescence, his journey is full of humiliations and disappointments. He is under the spell of his superiors till he stops following the dictates of the others. Through this stern refute of this reductionist’s policy, Dubois contends that: “The worker must work for the glory of his handiwork, not simply for pay; the thinker must think for truth not for fame. And all this is gained by ceaseless training and education.”⁵²

It is worth noting here that some critics in their study of Dubois’s construct of Double consciousness contend that it is this class of Black elites that Dubois refer to by his “double consciousness”. In their longing for material wealth and the white’s approval at the expanse of the race’s cause, these elites are torn between these two “unreconcilable striving”. In his sociological study of Dubois *The Soul-Less Souls of Black Folk: A Sociological Reconsideration of Black Consciousness as Du Boisian Double Consciousness*, Paul C. Mocombe concludes that Black American identity is dual and pathological only in relation to this class of elites. In his interpretation of Dubois’s self consciousness, Mocombe asserts that:

...the desire of the liberal black bourgeoisie to seek equality of opportunity, distribution and recognition in the American capitalist social milieu amidst their

⁵¹ Du Bois, W.E.B *The Souls of Black Folks* , op. cit., p.39. The full citation is: “Mr. Washington distinctly asks that black people give up, at least for the present, three things, —First, political power. Second, insistence on civil rights. Third, higher education of Negro youth,— and concentrate all their energies on industrial education, the accumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South.” Dubois did not like the fact that Washington “ insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run.” *The Souls*, p. 40.

⁵² Ibid., p. 61.

contempt for that milieu because they are "cursed and spitted upon" and prevented from achieving that equality or integration. It is this purposive-rationale DuBois captures with his construct against the conservative bourgeois economism Booker T. Washington, who sought economic gain for the black masses in a separate and racial position of their own."⁵³

Therefore, in their pursuit of the American Dream, African American elite fail to integrate effectively into the American society. And if Dubois blames racism for this, Ellison condemns the African American self-perception for being deceivable. For Ellison, the African American cannot move ahead unless he ceases to "see himself through the revelation of the other world."⁵⁴ The narrator of *Invisible Man* finds out that, no matter how educated you are, being compliant leads you to nowhere.

2. The Vision of Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison:

In his famous review of *Ulysses*, T.S Eliot broaches the new form of the modern novel making an appeal for writers to pursue this "modern form"⁵⁵. As an exemplar of the modern formal experimentation, Joyce's narrative is deeply reflective. It is much concerned with consciousness and the working of the human mind, less with the external objective events. Eschewing the straight chronological ordering of material, the modern novel tends toward a more complex handling of time; the action of involuntary memory as a prime force behind the narrative. It is indeed in his "dissatisfaction with the form", that Joyce's novel is "formless"⁵⁶. Interestingly, what Joyce himself proposes is to do what Eliot described as Joyce's intention to give "shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history"⁵⁷.

Not satisfied with the standard documentary history, contemporary African Americans, embark upon the project of giving shape and significance to the Black experience in America. In this study, we discuss how Toni Morrison and Ralph

⁵³ Mocombe, Paul C. *The Soul-Less Souls of Black Folk : A Sociological Reconsideration of Black Consciousness as Du Boisian Double Consciousness*. University Press of America, 2009. PP. 58-59

⁵⁴ Du Bois, W.E.B *The Souls of Black Folks* , *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁵⁵ John Fltecher and Malcolm Bradbury in ' *The Introverted Novel* ' state that *Ulysses* seeks a modern form. In Bradbury, Malcolm and McFarlane, James *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*. P. 405

⁵⁶ Eliot, T.S "Ulysses, Order and Myth" <http://people.virginia.edu/~jdk3t/eliotulysses.htm>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Ellison assume the mantle of rewriting history and reconstructing the African American identity. Memory and imagination are all tools with which to fuel their narratives.

Both writers contemplate on the African American experience, revisit it and tell it from an African American stand point. In this way, Ellison and Morrison deconstruct history as they reconstruct it. In other words, in *Invisible Man*, Ellison attempts to deconstruct an existing stable racial identity. In the same way, Morrison in *Beloved* reconstructs lost identities and evokes powerful feelings of bewilderment, loss, and longing for ancestral roots. In essence, through this distinct endeavor to re-interpret the past, Ellison's and Morrison's main concern is to establish a method by which to understand the past better.

In *Invisible Man* and *Beloved*, Ellison and Morrison, while fully engaging the social milieu where the protagonists dwell, address the psychologies of the complex characters that are rendered as ‘‘subjects in process’’⁵⁸ In dealing with the African American identity as a changing developing process, both writers address other complex issues. Both endeavor to tell a unique African American story, a story which has been denied voice in the mainstream literature or a voice which spoke less freely in the early slave narratives. Thus, despite rooting in the African American literary tradition, both writers have a unique scheme to reconstituting the Black American identity.

In what follows, I discuss the vision of the two writers: Ellison's eschewal of the protest fiction adopted by most African American writers and Morrison's decolonizing vision.

2.1. THE VISION OF RALPH ELLISON

"When writers write about politics, usually they are wrong. The novel at its best demands a sort of complexity of vision which politics doesn't like. Politics has as its goal the exercise of power-political power-and it isn't particularly interested in truth in the way that the novel form demands that the novelist must be."

⁵⁸ This phrase “ subject in process ” (“ sujet en procès ”) is used along the lines developed by the French feminist theorist, Julia Kristeva, in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) and *Powers of Horror* (1982) , where the self is portrayed as speech act, always involving a negotiation between mind and body.

In 1965, *Invisible Man* was acclaimed by a group of American scholars and critics as “the best single novel of the post war period”⁵⁹ in America. In writing about the novel, one inevitably crosses paths with literary critics who view the novel as a proof of black artistic possibility. Black critics nevertheless, attacked the novel for its “failure to carry on the ‘protest’ tradition exemplified by Richard Wright’s *Native Son*.”⁶⁰ More striking in this context, are Ellison’s essays collected in *Shadow and Act* which is an overt criticism of Richard’s fiction. In his rejection of black protest fiction and the constant depiction of blacks as all encompassing victims pondering their oppression, Ellison repudiated fiction and non-fiction writers who assume that “unrelieved suffering is the only “real” Negro experience, and that the true Negro writer must be ferocious.” (S&A 111)

For Ellison, “there is also an American Negro tradition which teaches one to deflect racial provocation and to master and contain pain. It is a tradition which abhors as obscene any trading on one’s own anguish for gain or sympathy.” (S&A 111) This intriguing reaction, at least for his generation of Black writers, to the protest fiction and the representation of the Black American as an everlasting sufferer “springs not from a desire to deny the harshness of existence but from a will to deal with it as men at their best have always done”⁶¹, as Ellison explained. In other words, Ellison was not intent, like the other Black writers on generating the Whites’ guilt, but was in a pursuit of greater artistic freedom and human agency. As such Ellison was able to relocate himself outside the prevailing ideological confines of Afro-American art dominant during his creative life. In this attempt to step outside the logic of the victim status, Ellison divorced himself from the Black intellectuals who relied fundamentally on the redefinition of identity vis-à-vis an African American victim status.⁶²

⁵⁹ Kostelaetz Richard, “An interview with Ralph Ellison” (1965) in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, eds. Grahma, Maryemma and Singh, Amritjit Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1995. p. 87

⁶⁰ Watts Gafio Jerry, *Heroism and the Black Intellectual Ralph Ellison, Politics, AND Afro-American Intellectual Life*, (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994op. cit., p. 77.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² The victim status as explored by Watts Gafio Jerry is an ideological construct used by Black writers (he cited Richard Wright as an example) to induce Whites ‘guilt. Gafio defines the victim status as “a metaphorical paradigm that describes an ideological discourse that mediates the conflict for mutual recognition that lies at the

Ellison's unique and subtle vision made him a subject of a fierce criticism.⁶³ In his attempt to defend his personal vision and to counter all arguments accusing him of a filial betrayal for abandoning the task of the Negro writer and rejecting the path laid down by most Black writers, Ellison notes in the *Harper's* interview that he never wrote "the official type of writing". "I wrote" he says, what might be called propaganda - having to do with the Negro struggle - but my fiction was always trying to be something else: something different even from Wright's fiction.... Anyway I think style is more important than political ideologies."⁶⁴

Despite Ellison's unequivocal resistance to the political, one cannot fall in the generalizations that art, for Ellison, cannot be political. To remove all doubts, one must read Ellison's 1954 comments to Vilma Howard about the social function of art: "I recognize no dichotomy between art and protest... If social protest is antithetic to art, what then shall we make of Goya, Dickens, and Twain?" (S&A 169) One must rightly wonder here: how can one concurrently eschew politics and countenance social protest? Providing an answer to this question is no easy matter and some may see some discrepancy in Ellison's statement. Certainly, he is "a master of ambivalence and nuance" as critic Jerry Gafio Watts notes in his study of the writer's works. This nuance, I cannot deny, is what makes Ellison a difficult one to read, at least for me. But, I believe that, by probing deep into the heart of Ellison's writing considering his perception of how a novelist is "interested in truth" that one finds the answer. Ellison determined his criterion for what it means to be a novelist in an interview for the BBC with Richard Kostelaetz stating that:

the good novelist tries to provide vivid depictions of certain crucial and abiding patterns...by reducing the chaos of human existence to artistic form. And when successful he provides the reader with a fresh vision of reality. For then through the symbolic reaction of his characters and plot he enables the reader to share

heart of the oppressed-oppressor interrelationship." The victim status", Gafio further states, "hinges on the desire of the victimized to obtain from the victimizer recognition of their victimized status and the willingness of the victimizer both to accept the victimized as their creation and to grant to the victimized the desired recognition. In the process, the humanity of the victimized is supposedly affirmed, but the superiority of the victimizer is not challenged." Ibid, p. 17

⁶³Irving Howe, a left winger critic and the editor of *Dissent* magazine, castigated Ellison for his rejection of the protest fiction and evoked Richard Wright as the embodiment of the true exponent of the black cause in fiction

⁶⁴ Larry Neal, "Ellison's Zoot Suit" in Callahan, John F. *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A casebook* Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 89.

forms of experience not immediately his own. And thus the reader is able to recognize the meaning and value of the presented experience and the essential unity of human experience as a whole. This may, or may not, lead to social change... But, it is, nevertheless a form of social change, and an important task. Yes, and in its own right, a form of social power.⁶⁵

Seen in this way, *Invisible Man* is itself this form of social power as it articulates a desire that makes all its readers relish and thus acknowledge their common humanity. What Ellison aimed at, in the novel is, transcending the politics of social protest by universalizing the experience of Black Americans. The Blacks' plight in America is presented as a universal dilemma. As Anne Seidlitz puts it "Ellison saw the predicament of the blacks as a metaphor for the universal human challenge of finding an identity in a chaotic and indifferent world."⁶⁶ And if the Negro experience is void of hope in the protest novel as it deals with what Howe calls "plight and protest", in *Invisible Man*, this experience is full of "infinite possibilities."⁶⁷ Thus, unlike Wright who believed that novels are "weapons", Ellison saw that "even when most pessimistic and bitter", true novels "arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at that core. Thus they would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject." (S&A 114)

And thus one can claim that Ellison downplayed the importance of political engagement as a necessary prelude to artistic opportunity. Ellison, indeed, did not take a straight forward political stand in dealing with the Black experience in America for he rejected narrowing down the possibilities of freedom for the American Negro to rage and protest literature that presents the Negro in an incessant need for the White to affirm his humanity. Ellison claims to be, as Gaffio puts it, "the black writer who is less concerned with appealing to the Whites than in creating art that affirms black life."⁶⁸ Instead of creating works that "plead the Negro's humanity" (S&A 174),

⁶⁵ Kostelaetz Richard, "An interview with Ralph Ellison" (1965) in Grahma, Maryemma and Singh, Amritjitp *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, op. cit., p. 97.

⁶⁶ Seidlitz , Anne, "Ralph Ellison: An American Journey" URL: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/American_masters/database/ellison.html, 2005

⁶⁷ Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man* 2nd ed. New York: Vintage International, 1995, p. 576. Hereafter, all references to this work will be cited in the discussion as (*IM*)

⁶⁸ Watts Gafio Jerry *Heroism and the Black Intellectual Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life*, op. cit., p. 108.

Ellison's project is to take what is of "great value" in the "Negro culture" and "create of it the uncreated consciousness of their (blacks) race." (S&A 317)

Seen in this way, Ellison's project was an integration of the blacks into the American society without necessarily putting in "the victim status", for man "cannot live in a state of reacting" (S&A 316), as Ellison puts it. Simply put, Ellison sees the African American heritage as a part of the greater American culture. In this integration, consciousness is what matters for Ellison, not an "unquestioning willingness to do what is required" (S&A 177) nor "revolt". In this context, Gaffio has eloquently discerned Ellison's distinctiveness in the African American letters: "Politics meant everything to Wright. Culture means everything to Ellison. He neither attempts to scare Whites with images of brute Negroes, like Wright, nor does he champion an image of blacks as morally superior beings, like Baldwin."⁶⁹

Basically, Ellison does not deny the debilitating conditions of the Black in America. On the contrary, *Invisible Man* is an unrelenting representation of the Black under dehumanizing conditions, and, more importantly, it is a statement of the human triumph over this plight. Thus, Ellison does not make a clear cut distinction between art and protest. His approach is, indeed, twofold: the principle of the novel is a transmutation of protest into art. In his response to Howe's review of the novel, Ellison writes:

If *Invisible Man* is even "apparently" free from "the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country", it is because I tried to the best of my ability to transform these elements into art. My goal was not to escape, or hold back, but to work through; to transcend, as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they deal. (S&A 137)

If Black characters, in most African American writings, are angry and inarticulate as a consequence of their oppression, the protagonist of *Invisible Man* is educated and articulate. Ellison believed that the African American demeanor is far from the unsophisticated picture presented by both black and white writers and sociologists. In this sense, Ellison asserts the richness of the African American heritage and claimed it to be part of a larger American culture. His view was not of a Black "separatist"

⁶⁹ Ibid.

neither of a passive assimilationist. Simply put, Ellison asserts the importance of mutual cultural enrichment between American blacks and whites. Seen in this way, Ellison was able to transcend the prevailing stereotypes and the self-imposed limitations of the black writers who based their fiction on the victimization of the blacks by the white man. Emphatically, Ellison's aim was to debunk "Negro alibi,"⁷⁰.

In *Invisible Man*, in other words, it is power, not pathos which concerns Ellison, for he believed that "what is needed in our country (America) is not an exchange of pathologies, but a change of the basis of society." (S&A 317) Thus Ellison, unlike most black writers, is interested in the way a man confronts his individual doom rather than in the background of that doom. The Black American, for Ellison, is "no mere product of his socio-political predicament. He is a product of the interaction between his racial predicament, his individual will and the broader American cultural freedom in which he finds his ambiguous existence." (S&A 112) In various ways, Ellison in *Invisible Man* and equally in other non-fictional works, sets the richness of the black American experience with the ability of that individual to questionably absorb the values of the Western culture against what Richard Wright calls "the essential bleakness of black life in America."⁷¹ Not foregrounding this "bleakness" does not make of Ellison "an unaware of the black plight", as some critics claim. What he is saying is that this "bleakness" exists but it is not the essential part of his experience, and that his experience is part of the American story. In other words, "the basic unity of human experience" (S&A 123) is what Ellison insists on. For him, it would be very limiting for the African American to keep mourning his status for being black and protesting injustice. The African American should rather focus on his self concept, Ellison writes:

For even as his life toughens the Negro, even as it brutalizes him, sensitizes him, dulls him, goads him to anger, moves him to irony, sometimes fracturing and sometimes affirming his hopes ...it conditions him to deal with his life and with himself because it is his life, and no mere abstraction in somebody's head. (S&A 112)

⁷⁰ A term coined by Robert Pen Warren in his depiction of the Negro writer's attitude towards the white. In case of his failure, the black writer assumes the victim status, putting the blame on the white man. See "The Unity of experience", Robert Pen Warren in *Ralph Ellison*, Harold Bloom. Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010, p. 200.

⁷¹ Wright, Richard. *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945, p. 33

In many places, Ellison's theory of "the basic unity of human experience" is linked with his vision of hope in being an American: "The diversity of American life is often painful, frequently burdensome and always a source of conflict, but in it lies our fate and our hope." (S&A 127) And as for the problem of the American Negro, Ellison highlights that the solution "lies only partially in the white man's free will". "Its full solution", Ellison asserts, "lies in the creation of a democracy in which the Negro will be free to define himself." (S&A 304) After all, democracy needs not, as Ellison affirms, a character who acts in passive compliance with traditional roles. Democracy needs "the development of a conscious, articulate character." (IM xx) Thus, the type of character Ellison projects necessitates not a mere embrace of a certain role with particular basic qualities but a conscious projection of identity. If we can comment on Ellison's evasion from the victim status handled by most black American writers, we can say that he defines identity as what one does not what one is. "Identification, after all", to put it in Ellison's words, "involves feelings of guilt and responsibility." (S&A 189)

A growing number of critics have argued that those critics classifying *Invisible Man* as "the finest product of integration movement"⁷² do not do justice to the writer's imaginative vision. Ellison's avowed desire to avoid writing another "racial protest novel" does not mean that he is unprotesting. It is, indeed, as Julia Eichelberger argues in her seminal work *Prophets of Recognition*, "through his artistry that Ellison sharply criticizes American culture and exposes the omnipresence of the ideology of domination."⁷³ Indeed, the protagonist's search for identity shows that this ideology identifies the African American as a "cog in a machine" (IM 396) to be dominated. Furthermore, the novel demonstrates that the longing for democracy needs not be naïf: "My mind fought desperately for acceptance. Nothing would change matters. They would shift me and investigate and I, still believing, still bending to discipline, would have to accept their decision." (IM 407)

⁷² Arthur P. Davis. Quoted in Eichelberger, Julia. *Prophets of Recognition : Ideology and the Individual in Novels By Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow, and Eudora Welty Southern* Literary Studies Louisiana State University Press, 1999, p. 27.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 28

The fifth edition of the Macmillan Anthology of American Literature lauded the writer for not limiting his work to protest:

"Invisible Man has been criticized as insufficiently militant. In a sense, this criticism is true, for the novel is both so subtle and so complex that it lacks the immediate emotional impact of, for example, Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*. Ellison's *Invisible Man* is based on a set of symbols, on the conscious use of myth, and on historical allusions . . . [and] is not, therefore, merely a racial protest novel. Ellison's intellect and his artistic imagination are too complex to stop at the presentation merely of anger and militancy, however justified. His aim was broader."⁷⁴

2.2. THE VISION OF TONI MORRISON

"'Along with personal recollection, the matrix of the work I do is the wish to extend, fill in and complement slave autobiographical narratives.'"

Toni Morrison ("' The Site of Memory'", p. 99)

We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily "not-there"; that a void may be empty but not be a vacuum

Toni Morrison ("' Unspeakable Things Unspoken'", p. 136)

In chapter two of *Beloved*, Morrison represents a scene through an imperial subject's eyes: Schoolteacher, a white slave holder, instructing his nephews "to put [Sethe's] human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right" (*B* 193). Morrison's novel presents schoolteacher as a "definer" (*B* 225), one who seeks to fix others into inferiority in order to preserve his superiority. Words like pickannies, horse, gone wild, spoken in relation to Sethe, reveal a sense of superiority and are expression of a racist discourse that dominates official history. This hegemonic discourse which rests upon defining, categorizing and pinning down is what Morrison seeks to debunk in her novel *Beloved*.

Referring to early slave narrators like Douglass and Jacobs, Morrison remarks that "'in shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position of alleviating it, they were silent about many things, and they forgot many other

⁷⁴ Ibid, Quoted in Julia's *Prophets of Recognition*, op. cit., p. 26.

things.”⁷⁵ For Morrison, the slave narrators exercised an intended omission of trauma as a defense mechanism against embarrassing memories. In writing their accounts, slaves aimed to persuade their whites counterpart that they were good and that they were worthy of a free life. The horrors of slavery were kept veiled. Elaborating on the critical aspect of these accounts, Morrison argues that these slaves did not speak of their “interior” lives.

Undoubtedly, slave narratives “influenced abolitionists”, as Morrison states, yet “while freeing the narrator in many ways, did not destroy the master narrative.”⁷⁶ Determined to pierce through the depth of history and make this absence visible, Morrison affirms that “My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate.”⁷⁷ In speaking the unspeakable, Morrison presents slavery as more than a physical reality. Despite her escape from the bondage, Sethe is haunted by a past that she fears to remember “because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver's inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries” (B 69) Denver, thus, crippled by her mother’s fear, and kept distanced from this past, cannot interact with her community.

Morrison’s fiction is thus a way of looking at “a kind of truth”⁷⁸ not facts which are found in the traditional slave narrative. Facts are different from truth because as, Morrison states:

“facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot. So if I'm looking to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it (which doesn't mean that they didn't have it); if I'm trying to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left to part the veil that was so frequently drawn, to implement the stories that I heard - then the approach that's most productive and most

⁷⁵ Morrison, Toni “The Site of Memory” op. cit., p. 91

⁷⁶ Morrison, Toni “Romancizing the Shadow” Toni Morrison *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* Vintage Books, 1993 p. 51. Hereafter, all references to this work will be cited in the discussion as (PID)

⁷⁷ Morrison, “Toni The Site of Memory”, op, cit., p. 91.

⁷⁸ In her fiction, Morrison explains that she takes “images” as her central route. By “images”, Morrison means “the remains” that were overlooked. Unlike slave narratives that “move from the event to the image that is left”, Morrison asserts that “the images comes first” and tell her “what the memory is about”. In the “Site of Memory”, Morrison contends that these images are her route “to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth.”

trustworthy for me is the recollection that moves from the image to the text. Not from the text to the image.”⁷⁹

Obviously, the slave narrators, and because their circumstances were different from that of a contemporary slave narrator, pass down a history which is full of facts but not truths and for this reason Morrison argues that those early slaves have left many things unsaid about their lives. This is mainly due to two reasons that are highlighted by Morrison in her article ‘The Site of Memory’. The first one is that: ‘The milieu,... dictated the purpose and the style.’ The second is that ‘popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience.’⁸⁰ *Beloved*, however, being penned in totally different circumstances from that of early slave narratives, represents a facet of slavery that has been kept unknown.

Beloved represents slavery as a part of the Western hegemonic discourse. If "white people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle," as Stamp Paid is made to reflect, Morrison demonstrates that it "was the jungle white folks planted in them" (B 198). In *Beloved*, Morrison not only rips "the secret spread of this new kind of white folks' jungle [that] was hidden, silent, except once in a while when you could hear its mumblings in places like 124" (B 199), but narrates a story that is “disremembered, unaccounted for” of slaves made mute in the white discourse and thus makes visible uniquely African American experiences that did not take place in the national discourse before.

Despite orienting her texts to the African American experience, Morrison makes crucial a white presence. To this extent, *Beloved* stages the presence of whites through the vestiges of oppression. In this way, Morrison brings to our attention racist cultural assumptions that not only justified slavery but distorted and even destroyed the lives of many. Emphatically, inserting this domineering ideology into her text is but a strategy to subvert it.

⁷⁹ Morrison, Toni ‘The Site of Memory’, op. cit., pp. 93-94.

⁸⁰ Ibid. One example of the occlusion of the slave’s most horrific part of his experience is seen in Douglass’s confession: "But let us now leave the rough usage of the field ... and turn our attention to the less repulsive slave life as it existed in the house of my childhood.”

Similarly, recent critics, in fact, have read the reproduction of the dynamics of oppression and the evocation of past degradations as a deliberate strategy of subverting the patriarchal discourse. Those critics affirm that the re-enactment of oppression and dehumanization should not be regarded with shame or disgrace; it is a process which seeks, in Michelle Massé's words, "undermine domination from within it."⁸¹ In *the Name of Love* for example, Masse reads the replication of oppression as an indirect strategy of subversion. Subversion, unlike, overt attack, Massé states "Subversion,..., with its letter-perfect miming of what ideology demands, has a secret knowingness. It takes the tools of oppression and renders them impotent."⁸²

In *Beloved*, Schoolteacher's characterization of Sethe as an animal and his writing down these animal traits in a book is but an echo of a master text and a proper management of blacks that dominates the scientific discourse of the Enlightenment that prevails in the Western discourse of White's supremacy. Through the character of Schoolteacher, Morrison wants to show us how whites use writing in a detrimental way perpetuating the most demeaning caricature of blacks. The novel thus clarifies the ways in which writing itself served as a justification for racism: the whites' knowledge becomes a truth that is passed down to generations and blacks are thus held fit for slavery because of their lack of written cultural traditions.

Significantly, Morrison points to the dangers of writing and how blacks become the object of white narrative through the written medium thus calls attention to writing as a powerful tool in undermining that discourse. In this way, Morrison's characters grapple with a past which denied them selfhood and seek means by which to express their selfless past. In so doing, Morrison "suggests a mode of African American authorship that directly challenges both the absence of African Americans in works by white American authors and contemporary literary theories", as put by Anita Durkin.⁸³

⁸¹ Masse, Michelle. *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992, p.250

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Durkin, Anita "Object Written, Written Object: Slavery, Scarring, and Complications of Authorship in *Beloved*" in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison's Beloved* Bloom's Literary Criticism, an imprint of Infobase Publishing, 2009, p. 175.

In addition to exploring the psychological and physical horrors of slavery, Morrison attempts what Matus Jill calls in her book, “an imaginative testimony” through the figure of a ghost, of those who left this world without passing down their stories, to “the Sixty Million and more” to whom the novel is dedicated. Emphatically, memory is crucial in her project of rewriting history, yet Morrison points out that “memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of people. Only the act of the imagination can help me.”⁸⁴

In *Beloved*, the past is made available by an imagined narrative. Writing the past, in historian Michael Roth's words,

is one of the crucial vehicles for reconstructing or reimagining a community's connections to its traditions. This is especially true for groups who have been excluded from the mainstream national histories that have dominated Western historiography, and who have suffered a weakening of group memory as part of their experience of modernity.⁸⁵

Morrison, thus, as an African American writer within the American literary tradition, reconstructs national memory and thus interrogates the national identity. Her literary project, in Gurleen Grewal's words, “has affinities with the tasks of historiography.”⁸⁶ Grewal goes on to say “Morrison rewrites the nation from a perspective committed to what has been excised. Her novels mean to revise dominant historiography, reconsidering the scene of colonial violation from the inside, from subaltern perspectives hitherto ignored.”⁸⁷ As a postcolonial project, thus, Morrison's *Beloved*, brings to surface a number of postcolonial issues on a close reading. Satya Mohanty elaborates on Morrison's postcolonial project in *Beloved*:

In including contemporary critics, Anita opens another debate which might not be in a direct connection with this part of my thesis. However, Anita sheds light on Morrison's argument in what concerns the exclusion of Black American from white discourse. She also stresses Morrison's contention on the failure of contemporary critics in recognizing the ways in which white authors construct their texts against blackness. Anita writes: “white American authors encode the exclusion of African Americans in their texts, and critics, in reinforcing this exclusion, define “quality” literature as that which excludes, so that the “standard” of American writing becomes the impetus to ignore, to “ghost” the African American presence”

⁸⁴ Morrison, “Toni The Site of Memory” op, cit., p. 92.

⁸⁵ Roth, Michael S. *The Ironist's Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History* Columbia University Press, 1995 p 10.

⁸⁶ Grewal, Gurleen *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison Southern Literary Studies* Louisiana State University Press, 1998. p. 19

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 8

"[Beloved] is one of the most challenging of postcolonial texts because it indicates the extent to which the search for a genuinely noncolonial moral and cultural identity depends on a revisionary historiography. We cannot really claim ourselves morally or politically until we have reconstructed our collective identity, reexamined our dead and our disremembered. The project is not simply one of adding to one's ancestral line, for . . . it involves fundamental discoveries about what ancestry is, what continuity consists in, how cultural meanings do not just sustain themselves through history but are in fact materially embodied and fought for."⁸⁸

Thus, Morrison's quest for identity depends on 'revisionary historiography'. According to her, like to other postcolonial writers, there is a past which took place and it has to be narrated despite the Westerners' claims of historical objectivity. In other words, the Westerners not only oppressed people but put their history on the margins. In this way, the Western discourse is at the centre, unquestioned, as Edward said puts it:

because the West acquired world dominance, and because it seems to have completed its trajectory by bringing about 'the end of history' as Francis Fukuyama has called it, Westerners have assumed the integrity and the inviolability of their cultural masterpieces, their scholarship, their worlds of discourse; the rest of the world stands petitioning for attention at our windowsill.⁸⁹

As a writer and a historian, Morrison minutely interweaves the issues of centre/margin in *Beloved*. The African American past is silenced and to reclaim it, she not only rebukes the master discourse but also 'examine(s) the dead and dismembered'. In this project, Morrison adopts Magical realism as new mode of expression and as a way of 'exposing a discourse of difference.'⁹⁰ Through the Gothic figure of *Beloved*, Morrison 'breaks the silences' of the African Americans and recovers their lost history. The Gothic figure of *Beloved*, in Ana Nunes's words, 'functions as a means of translating the absences of African American history into tangible presences.'⁹¹ In her path of 'destroying the master narrative', then, Morrison projects Magical Realism as a decolonizing device.

⁸⁸ Satya Mohanty, "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition," *Cultural Critique*, XXIV (Spring, 1993), p. 67.

⁸⁹ Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*, op. cit., p. 259.

⁹⁰ Edwards, J. *Gothic Canada: Reading the Spectre of a National Literature*. Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 2005, p. 18.

⁹¹ Nunes, Ana, *African American women writers' historical fiction* Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 139

In sum, both Ellison's and Morrison's dissatisfaction with the prevailing modes of representations prompted them to take a new challenging route. So far we have discussed how Ellison opted out the constant portrayal of Blacks as merely the victims of their social reality and created instead a character that is as complex as his white counterpart. We have also argued that Morrison chose to write a historical novel so as to address the omissions left both in the dominant discourses and in the early slave narrative. In chapter two of this dissertation, we shall deal with how the formation of African American identity pervades the two novels thematically.

Chapter Two

Invisible Man and *Beloved*: ‘’Looking at the Self that is
No Self’’: The Black Predicament and the African
American Journey towards Self-definition

This chapter deals with an analysis of the theme of identity in the two novels. It includes an investigation of the predicament of African Americans as well as the ways in which the writers flesh out the central theme. This chapter is divided into two parts. My endeavor in the first section is to explore Ellison's three main components of the African American identity: "consciousness", "complexity" and "responsibility". In the second part, we discuss Morrison's concern with the relation between history, memory, community and identity.

1. *Invisible Man*: The Black Predicament and the Search for Identity

In his introduction to *Invisible Man*, Ellison wonders why African American protagonists are always caught up in all forms of social struggle but rarely able to articulate issues that bothered them. For him, the real predicament of the blacks lies in their inability to grasp three important concepts: consciousness, complexity and responsibility. Unlike most black writers of his generation, Ellison was interested in the "creation of conscious, articulate character(s)" who is able to fulfill his "social responsibility as the American artist." (*IM* xx) Invisible man lived in a long state of false consciousness because of his psychological blindness. This made him prey to all kind of ideologies that not only manipulated him but also defined who he was. His realization of his blindness combined with his recognition of the complexity of life and of the individual ushered in his transformation into an artist who becomes at the centre of his life and the definer of his identity. His later declaration reflects this transformation and perception of the "complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that had brought [him] here still running, and knowing now who [he] was and where [he] was and knowing too that [he] had no longer to run for or from [them]." (*IM* 559) This, I argue, is an attainment of a kind of self-knowledge that will make him cast out all imposed definitions and form his identity. When is this self-knowledge attained? It is eventually achieved when he becomes aware of his blindness. By gaining an understanding of his individual complexity, invisible man is firmly set on the roads towards recovery.

1.1. Psychological Blindness:

“ He'll do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset.”

(IM 95)

“The false consciousness distorts the reality”

Edward Said (*Culture and Imperialism* 249)

Invisible Man can be considered as an exploration of Dubois's Double Consciousness. Ellison's technique creates an inner struggle by combining the act of “striving” for a better self with the experience of seeing oneself “through the revelation of the other world”. The narrator passes through a series of identities that are less a function of his personal histories than of the ways they toe a line to his beholders. IM receives benefits because of his talent as an orator. But this talent is not self-sufficient, in that it is dependent on white benefactors. In this regard, Steven Tracy contends that Ellison's exploration of double consciousness arises out of his “constant recognition that for a Negro, talent, ability, and accomplishment are not self-sufficient guarantees of success or security.”⁹² The shackles of this absurd reality, which are the direct implications of the Jim Crow laws, weakened the protagonist sense of self. In other words, racism seeped deep into his souls so intensely that they lacked true images of themselves and succumbed to the definitions of the others. Moving from one person or group's sense of him as image to another's, IM's success leads him to nowhere but to further disappointments. “ To the extent that identity is the composite of what one is able to do or be”, Tracy carries on saying, “ identity itself for the Negro is thus revealed always to be potentially fragile, tenuous, illusory.”⁹³ A distorted self perception as such renders invisible man psychologically blind to his reality and to the hypocrisy of all the figures of power he met.

⁹² Tracy Steven C. *A Historical Guide to Ralph Ellison* Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 157.

⁹³ Ibid.

In addition to his lack of a strong sense of self, due to racism and his estrangement from his Black culture, and dependency on a white system of values, invisible man underwent a deficiency that made him self-alienated before his awakening to his reality:

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 were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory....I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I could answer. (IM 15)

Like Dubois, Ellison, therefore, highlights the impact of the Veil or racism on the psychology of the Blacks and points out to the way it badly affects the psyche of the blacks and hence their vision. He says, in this regard, that “there is an argument in progress between black men and white men as to the true nature of American reality. Whites impose interpretations upon Negro experience that are not only false but, in effect, a denial of Negro humanity.” (S&A 301) In this way, both Dubois and Ellison agree upon the fact that African American double consciousness and their inner blindness stems from the willful white sightlessness.

From the foregoing discussion, we can delineate how Ellison’s exploration of the pernicious implications of double consciousness is identical to Dubois’s stance. In their consideration of the effect of Double consciousness, Ellison and Dubois seem to be of the same opinion that this concept thwarts an authentic self-perception. Judith Tabron, one of the critics who have commented on the treatment of Double consciousness in *Invisible Man*, wrote:

But DuBois is in complete agreement with Ralph Ellison about the dual vision that haunts (and in Ellison's work, hampers) the black man in America, and the double-consciousness of which they speak do not seem to offer them any political advantage or even tool for survival. Double-consciousness, as DuBois sees it, works against survival rather than enables it. It contributes more to suffering than to pleasure.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Tabron, Judith *Postcolonial Literature from Three Continents Tutuola, H. D., Ellison, and White*. Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York, 2003 pp161-162

This suffering and pain is shown in the novel as invisible man struggles relentlessly to please figures of power. He lives what Ellison calls “a lie” as he continues to follow blindly their dictates thinking that he is deceiving them and that this was the only way to success. This lie, this self-deception is, indeed, a direct impact of double consciousness. Unlike Dubois, however, Ellison offers a solution to the “irreconcilable conflict” of the two identities and argues against the static identity type Dubois pointed out to. The double consciousness of reliving one’s story as both narrator and a participant is Ellison’s substantial argument, as shall be argued later.

Coming back to the disastrous effect of “Double consciousness”, I argue that unless the protagonist is able to break free of the social expectations and embrace a self definition based on his assessment of his experience, he will remain unable to go outside the circle of imposed identities. I would, also, like to point out that Ellison seems to presume that double consciousness becomes an African American legacy that African Americans should break with. He substantiates his claim by presenting a character that appears only one time but his advice looms large on the protagonist’s pre-enlightened life. This character is the grandfather who passes on an advice which, in addition to the definitions imposed on the protagonist by whites, defined his role in society and affected his decision making. The grandfather destructive-submissive standard becomes a source of conflict and uncertainty in the life of the protagonist who narrates that this advice:

became a constant puzzle which lay unanswered in the back of my mind. And whenever things went well for me I remembered my grandfather and felt guilty and uncomfortable. It was as though I was carrying out his advice in spite of myself. And to make it worse, everyone loved me for it. I was praised by the most lily-white men of the town. I was considered an example of desirable conduct—just as my grandfather had been. (*IM* 16)

This revelation, it should be pointed out, was made after his enlightenment and after his rejection of all identities through the process of narration which will be detailed later. But at this point in time, we can argue that this advice is a replica of double consciousness that affects every aspect of his thinking

preventing him from forming his own opinions and thus suppressing his identity. Furthermore, such standard makes him fall prey to all the figures he meets and blind to his values and qualities.

Directly linked to his double consciousness, is the protagonist's sheer naiveté which obstructs him to the white men's sexual perversion. Invisible man notices that Norton listened to Trublood's story of incest with "envy and indignation" (*IM* 51), yet he directs all his attention to the act itself. Thus, instead of detecting Norton's incestuous desire when he was talking about his daughter and when he was listening carefully to Trueblood's story of incest, the protagonist is blinded by the myth of their goodness and fails to see the depraved appetite of Norton.

In much the same way, the protagonist fails to detect the sexual sick conduct of the white males in the previous episode of the Battle Royal which is itself a symbol of slavery. As it begins with the brutal wrestling of blacks who are forced to fight each other, the Battle Royal seems an affirmation of the black savagery from which slavery as an institution claimed it was helping Africans and is also seen as a metaphor for the brutality of this institution. In this scene, Ellison focuses on the way blacks are objectified and rendered as animals that are watched upon to satiate the sexual appetite of the whites. By forcing the blacks to watch a blonde's naked body, the white men attempt to transfer their animalistic sexual desire to the black boys who consume the blonde's body and erect under the greedy eyes of the white men. The latter, ironically, deny their sick sexual insanity. This denial of uncomfortable aspects of their humanity displays the white men's psychological blindness. Ellison, in this way, sheds light on the white men's psychology to reveal the inability of the protagonist to detect the whites' frail mindsets and thus denotes his own psychological blindness.

To further probe the role racist labels plays in destabilizing the protagonist's state of mind, fracturing his identity and causing his inability to see beyond the racist images peddled by the American society, Ellison

juxtaposes blindness with clarity of vision. Unlike the protagonist whose psychological blindness begets his facile acceptance of racist assumptions that makes him adopt any imposed identity, the veteran whom he met is self-consciousness and possesses greater insights into the ways of the world. The veteran is the first character who describes the protagonist as “invisible”, “an automaton” (*IM* 95), ‘a thing and not a man; a child, or even less—a black amorphous thing.’ (*IM* 95) More importantly, when addressing Mr. Norton, the vet not only mockingly depicts the protagonist, but speaks freely and openly to Mr. Norton in a way that frustrates IM and makes him feel very uncomfortable. “He has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose”, said the vet to Mr. Norton. “But”, the vet continues:

he fails to understand the simple facts of life. Understand. Understand? It's worse than that. He registers with his senses but short-circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn't digest it. Already he is—well, bless my soul! Behold! a walking zombie! Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!" (*IM* 94)

Despite this direct and poignant description, the protagonist fails to see the way the vet attempts to dismantle his naïve understanding of society. This blindness, one may say, stems from his fear of thinking that freedom of expression could be risky and ruin his career. According to him, “the vet was acting toward the white man with a freedom which could only bring on trouble” (*IM* 93). At this point of time, the protagonist surrenders his identity to the misperceptions of those in power by accepting their vision. His fascination with the world of those in power prevents him from getting the vet's message and he significantly admits that he “could understand the vet's words but not what they conveyed.” (*IM* 93) The vet, ultimately, points out to the protagonist's sightlessness telling Mr. Norton that “He'll (IM) do your binding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset.” (*IM* 95)

The extent of IM's blindness, and of the success of his manipulators, is reflected upon only when IM goes underground and reviews all the papers in

his briefcase. This happens only after IM is disillusioned by the real goals of the Brotherhood. When IM finds out that the Brotherhood planned the riot breaking in Harlem and thus sacrificed Blacks for the sake of its propaganda, he came to the conclusion that his submission made him a tool in the hands of those in power. *“And I had helped, had been a tool. A tool just at the very moment I had thought myself free. By pretending to agree I had indeed agreed, had made myself responsible for that huddled form lighted by flame and gunfire in the street”* (IM 553), he admits. This acknowledgement of his responsibility for his conditions validates his attainment of a piercing vision. His blindness, he explains, resulted from *“the true darkness . . . within [his] own mind”*. (IM 579) And it is not until the protagonist overcomes his inner blindness and espouses a true self assessment of his experience not based on majority definitions that he starts understanding his identity. And throughout the novel, this lack of understanding of one’s self and inner blindness are interrelated with the inability to understand individual complexity. In this sense, the protagonist will be unable to form his identity unless he confronts these two intertwined issues.

1.2. Individual Complexity

“I don't suppose I judged. I am certain I did not judge in quite so conscious a way, but I think I felt more complexity in life, and my background made me aware of a larger area of possibility.”

Ralph Ellison

In “Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity”, an essay written in 1946 when Ellison was in the process of writing *Invisible Man*, he asks why contemporary writers had failed to create “characters possessing the emotional, psychological and intellectual complexity which would allow them to possess and articulate a truly democratic world view?” (S&A 37) This speculation, in fact, arises from the simple fact Ellison was unsatisfied with the way Blacks were represented in American literature. As discussed before, Ellison hints that determinism and the portrayal of the

Blacks as victims would limit their possibilities as human beings. He rather insisted on individual responsibility and hoped to create “ characters possessing a greater insight into their situations.” (S&A 37) As seen in the novel, the narrator’s painful self discovery forces him to recognize the contradictions as well as the possibilities inherent in the “ principle on which the country was built.” (IM 574) Hence, maintaining a simplistic view of humanity, before his enlightenment, is another factor that inhibits the narrator from understanding his American society.

Through his contact with some Black characters, the protagonist comes to learn that his folk past is crucial to understanding his identity. His aversion to his cultural legacy, at the beginning, impedes him from possessing what Ellison calls “ the full, complex ambiguity of a human being.” (S&A 25) Hence, his rejection of his legacy signals his dislike of complexity. As the narrator contemplates on his past experiences, he realizes that the fear from confronting the complexities of life and all the profound unease that it might well breed prevents him from perceiving life incisively. A better example for the protagonist’s repudiation of his folk community is his attempt to identify himself with the “*rich man reminiscing on the rear seat*” when remembering the “*black mob that seemed to be waiting . . . with blank faces*”. (IM 39) His heritage, thus, becomes associated not with pride but with shame. Obviously, in the final stage of his identity formation, IM regretted rejecting his heritage saying that “*I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed.*” (IM 15) At this stage, however, invisible Man’s lack of understanding of his culture as well as the complexities and possibilities of human life leaves him incapable of conceiving his situation properly.

Invisible Man needs to understand his relationship not only to the powerful white people, but also to his own and to people of his background. He tends to think that he can have smooth relationships with white people, relationships that are uncomplicated by issues of race. He believes in the “

myth of their goodness, and wealth and success and power and benevolence and authority'' (IM 99) and disregards powerless people of his background. Ultimately, it takes him many bitter moments to realize that he *''was in the cards''* (IM 15) of those figures of power, and that it is from the downtrodden people that he can really learn something and gain a proper understanding of the world and the powers that governs it. Certainly, IM tells the reader about his new understanding of the world at the end of his process of maturation when he says:

now I better understand my relation to it and it to me. I've come a long way from those days when, full of illusion, I lived a public life and attempted to function under the assumption that the world was solid and all the relationships therein. Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health. (IM 576)

Nonetheless, in the first phase of his life, IM has difficulties with accepting the complexities of life. This is seen in the Trueblood's episode when IM, overwhelmed by the white man's image and so worried about his own, fails to detect Mr. Norton's concealed desires when Trueblood recounts his dream-driven act of incest.

Trueblood, as his name symbolizes, is *''true to his blood''* and appears to realize that his identity is determined by the complex experiences he has undergone. He has a story that defines him against the identity that others attempt to impose upon him. When the white officials learned the story of incest Trueblood committed with his daughter, they view his action as one instance of black savagery that confirmed the stereotypes that permeate American culture. His construction of his dream-sin, however, allows no such simplistic assumption. His well-crafted tale describes how his atrocious rural existence, the warm sensuality of his reminiscences, and his terrible segregated life combine to beget his disgraceful, yet unintentional act. As Valerie Smith puts it, in her analysis of Trueblood's episode, *''* He acknowledges the complexity and ambiguity of his situation: being both

guilty and not guilty of incest.’’⁹⁵ Furthermore, he takes responsibility for his action and describes his readiness to submit to physical punishment by his wife. We can also see how Trueblood turns to his heritage and heals himself by singing the Blues so as to face his wife’s fury and his community’s ostracism. He eloquently confesses: “I ends up singin’ the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain’t never been sang before, and while I’m singin’ them blues I makes up my mind that I ain’t nobody but myself ” The narrator echoes his words after his enlightenment when he proclaims, “ I am nobody but myself,” (*IM* 15) yet he only achieves this understanding after bitter experiences. Hence, by telling and retelling a tale of his own creation, Trueblood not only provides the protagonist a model for creating a sense of identity independent of what a set of assumptions requires but also offers him ways of surviving and confronting the pain of life by embracing his folk tradition including songs and storytelling.

Because he fully believes that things are what they appear, invisible Man does not learn from Trueblood episode in the first phase of his life, and thereby continues to act upon the assumption that everything is logical and that, in order to win his way into the white society, he must accept the definitions of himself as handed down by the others. Trueblood, in the other hand, despite his actions, does not submit to the definition imposed by the others but relies on his folk traditions to fortify himself against general opinion and face the pain of life. Somehow we feel that this character’s sense of self unsettles the protagonist who, in an attempt to maintain his view of life, evades the contradictory aspects of his nature. We come to see the behavior of Invisible Man as the expression of a state of “passive acceptance of current code’’⁹⁶. It is a result of the incapacity to grasp the meaning of his culture and an attempt to appease to powerful and assimilate into their system of values. Generally speaking, it is a dilemma whose root lies in rejecting his

⁹⁵ Smith, Valerie ‘’ The Meaning of Narration in Invisible Man ‘’, op. cit., p.210

⁹⁶ Beth, Eddy. *The Rites of Identity: The Religious Naturalism and Cultural Criticism of Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison*, op. cit., p. 9.

culture and his inability to see the disjunction between the way things are and the way they are supposed to be.

So the main idea that Ellison is suggesting here is that African American culture equips blacks with means of understanding the world. Here we come back to Ellison's basic principle in his response to critics who accused him of assimilation. Ellison, as Kenneth Warren, puts it in his discussion of the novel, sees blacks as "the fulfillment of something ancient" when facing racism and, thus, they do not break with the past but "embody it"⁹⁷. One should not misunderstand the author's intention though, he is not preaching for a going back to a mythical past. Indeed, in the novel, one recognizes the author's consciousness of the unlikely retrieving of this bygone past, and the confession that "to embrace uncritically values which are extended to us by others is to reject the validity, even the sacredness, of our own experience." (S&A 166) Seen in this way, Invisible Man needs to shed his established assumptions so as not to fall in the trap of blind assimilation and the fragility of its falling apart definitions. At the same time he needs to take that part of his culture that gives him a sense of identity. We can say, to use Edward Said's words, that "the fortifications of identity brought to us by our culture, whereby we can confront the world defiantly and self-confidently"⁹⁸, will eventually help IM in his integration into the American society.

In many ways, Ellison's novel affirms his belief that integration does not lie in total assimilation but means a participation of "a conscious, articulate citizen" (IM xx). To put it differently, respecting one's experience for Ellison, means stepping out from imposed definitions and rising above any single body of thought. Accordingly, throughout his journey of discovery, IM acquires a true self consciousness that accepts no philosophy completely. By having his character believes firmly in the principles of his country thinking that rewards awaits the virtuous, yet deceived and disillusioned at the end of

⁹⁷ Warren, Kenneth W. "Ralph Ellison and the Problem of Cultural Authority" Duke University Press, boundary 2, Volume 30, Number 2, Summer 2003, (157-174) p. 162.

⁹⁸ Edward Said *Culture and Imperialism*, op. cit., p. 320.

each of his experiences, Ellison seeks to show that American ideals have been corrupted and that African Americans need to question and confront such values as they are part of their complex experience.

This can be seen in Ellison's allusion to the distortion of Emersonian ideas. Indeed, it can be argued that Ellison's choice of Emerson in the novel is twofold. First, Ellison hints at the extent Emerson's ideals of individual potential were misread and shallowly understood. Mr. Norton, the white paternalistic figure, identifies himself with Emerson claiming that his work with the college, his "first-hand organizing of human life" (*IM* 42), cognates Emerson's mission. "Out of a sense of my destined role," Mr. Norton says. "I felt, and I still feel, that your people are in some important manner tied to my destiny." (*IM* 42) When the vet asks him what he meant by destiny, Mr. Norton answers that destiny means "the success of my work, of course". This revelation shows the capitalistic intention of Mr. Norton whose hidden aim is to exploit his fellow black citizens and at the same time contradicts the core of Emerson's teachings. The latter eschews any implication that man can control the destiny of his fellow men. So unlike Emerson's idealistic notions of individual freedom, Norton's materialistic view makes him conceive the advancement of blacks solely in terms of his own success. When Mr. Norton asks the protagonist whether he is acquainted with Emerson, the latter seems ignorant. "I am a New Englander, like Emerson." (*IM* 41), Mr. Norton replied. Here comes Ellison's second urge; African Americans must embrace Emerson's meditations on the possibilities of human mind, the sacredness of one's experience and his self reliance. The protagonist's ignorance, however, makes him fall prey to Norton's hypocritical intentions.

Much like Emerson's ideas in his essays, Ellison's individualism against a hostile society gave rise to the notion of freedom void of social conditions. This notion of freedom assumed that regardless of social circumstances, the individual would still have to make choices governing his or her life. Deterministic vision, however, would limit such possibilities, perpetuate

racial stereotypes and does not reflect the complexity of African American experience in America. Indeed, the narrator's revelation in the prologue demonstrates his achievement of a better understanding of the world; "the world moves by contradictions", he remarks. When he jettisons his simplistic view of his life, the narrator attains a heightened perception, a concept that will be discussed later, of his condition and of the world:

No indeed, the world is just as concrete, ornery, vile and sublimely wonderful as before, only now I better understand my relation to it and it to me. I've come a long way from those days when, full of illusion, I lived a public life and attempted to function under the assumption that the world was solid and all the relationships therein. Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health. (*IM* 576)

As a matter of fact, after he gains Dubois's true self consciousness and grasps the complexity of his experience, the narrator decides to overthrow all the mentors who tried to bend him to their will. He realized that each of them had a hidden "passion to make men conform to a pattern." When he realizes the complex and disturbing truths of his experience, he learns that each of those white and black figures alike "were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used." (*IM* 508) His gradual understanding of reality opens his eyes on the dangers his death might present. We can assume that by defying death, *IM* not only asserts his undefeated will and affirms the hope of a spiritual rebirth but more importantly rejects the limited possibilities of his life and denies those in power the possibility to determine his end:

knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine. I stood there, knowing that by dying . . . I would perhaps move them one fraction of a blood step closer to a definition of who they were and of what I was and had been. But the definition would have been too narrow; I was invisible, and hanging would not bring me visibility . . . (*IM* 559)

Therefore, it can be argued that the Invisible man speaks instead of all African American. His new enlightened vision makes him immune to the forces that tried to determine his identity and makes him free himself from any defined ideology. Interestingly, he rejects the roles imposed on him by his mentors for the more fruitful role of the artist and thus relies on the power of the pen to write a narrative that “gives form to what is unformed”.⁹⁹

1.3. Fulfilling “Social Responsibility as the American Artist”¹⁰⁰

“But my world has become one of infinite possibilities. What a phrase—still it's a good phrase and a good view of life, and a man shouldn't accept any other; that much I've learned underground.” (*Invisible Man*)

By creating a character who, in the midst of overwhelming environmental pressure, struggles to disengage with the chaos his psychological blindness and alienation from his culture have created and crafts a story that concentrates on his humiliating experiences and his false conception of the world, Ellison reminds us that African Americans must assume responsibility for their own conditions. Invisible Man, indeed, admits this when he says: “*I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me.*” (IM 575) Contemplating the culminating images of his experiences, the narrator becomes aware of his invisibility. “*The very act of trying to put it all down*” the narrator says “*has confused me..... So it is that now I denounce and defend. I condemn and affirm, I denounce because though implicated and partially responsible, I have been hurt to the point of abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility.*” (IM 579)

Ellison called *Invisible Man* “the portrait of the artist as a rabble – rouser.” (S&A 179) And thus we cannot see his last act of going underground as concealment into darkness or a retreat from society but rather a rising of a voice and a transformation of a young African American leader from “*ranter to writer.*” (S&A 57) In this regard, Ellison writes: “I assumed that by

⁹⁹ Ricoeur Paul *Time and Narrative* Vol 1 The University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 72

¹⁰⁰ Ellison, Ralph *Invisible Man* (xx)

finally taking the initial step of trying to sum up the meaning of his experience, he had moved to another stage of his development.”¹⁰¹ The narrator, thus, develops a sense of artistic responsibility that makes him see the world better and form new ways of conceiving it.

Emphatically, in going underground, the narrator accepts the challenge of transforming his experiences into a form of narrative. One might claim that this underground image symbolizes failure and the end of choices. *Invisible Man*, however, allows no such assumption for the narrator promises that he will show up again: “Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out. I must emerge.” (IM 580) An important analysis of the underground image that pertains to our study is Gunilla Theander Kester’s which states that” In African American culture and history , the underground is a double sign, which marks both the end of slavery and a new beginning; it signifies both closure and rupture, both death and rebirth”¹⁰². One can thus assume that the act of narration is itself a rebirth.

The narrative offers him direction and there is nothing to guide him but his mind. “In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the mind” (IM 580), the narrator says. Ellison’s insistence that “unity which is formed by the mind’s brooding over experience and transforming it into conscious thought”¹⁰³ bears resemblance to Ricoeur’s statement: “to narrate a story is already to reflect upon the events narrated.”¹⁰⁴ Ricoeur further states that “It is this quest for identity that assures the continuity between the potential or inchoate story and the actual story we assume responsibility for.”¹⁰⁵ The

¹⁰¹ Ellison, Ralph, quoted in Ralph Ellison “On Initiation Rites and Power: A Lecture at West Point” in John F. Callahan *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: a Casebook*, op. cit., p. 340.

¹⁰² Gunilla Theander Kester. *Writing the subject: Bildung and the African American Text* American University Studies, New York : P. Lang, 1995, p. 31.

¹⁰³ Ellison, Ralph, quoted in Robert G. O’Meally “The Rules of Magic” in John F. Callahan *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: a Casebook*, op. cit., p. 157.

¹⁰⁴ Ricoeur, Paul *Time and Narrative* Vol 2 The University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 61

¹⁰⁵ Ricoeur, Paul *Time and Narrative* Vol 1, op. cit., p. 74.

narrator's development in the novel is toward individuality via critical self understanding, and therefore finds himself on the threshold of self-discovery.

The narrator supplants his original dependence on various political ideologies with his reliance on his act of narration. He intimates that he believed in the American Dream but he realized that he limited himself by fully embracing certain political ideologies: "I started out with my share of optimism. I believed in hard work and progress and action, but now, after first being "for" society and then "against" it, I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of the times." (IM 576) This attitude, indeed, signals the protagonist maturation and probably echoes the quest of Ellison who, as discussed in chapter one, wished to create a character capable of "playing upon possibility, a strategy through which the individual projects a self-selected identity and makes of himself a work of art."¹⁰⁶

Actually, the act of narration and the confrontation with a submissive past is no easy task. The protagonist wrestles with his previous experiences pondering deeply how each of his beholders succeeded in imposing his own will on him. He realizes that if he does not reach a self-understanding through narrating his story, he will possibly forget his humiliations and repeat his mistakes again: "so why do I write, torturing myself to put it down? Because in spite of myself I've learned some things. Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled "file and forget," and I can neither file nor forget." (IM 579) This self-scrutiny opened his eyes to the fact that, not only his mentors were deluding him but also his blind reliance on some futile set of ideas.

The fact that the protagonist's adoption of a Washingtonian submissive attitude, in an attempt to impress figures of power, got him nowhere shows a lot between its lines. As discussed before, Ellison rebukes Booker. T

¹⁰⁶ Ellison, Ralph, quoted in Beth Eddy *The Rites of Identity: The Religious Naturalism and Cultural Criticism of Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison*, op. cit., p. 9.

Washington for his obsequiousness. We can assume that by having his character follow and see himself “as a potential Booker T. Washington”, only to find in the end that he made himself vulnerable to the authority of others, Ellison points out to the dangers of the commitment to such political philosophy. As we see, the only way the narrator could gain economic security introduced by Washington, is through his endurance of the mistreatment condoned by his society.

Recollecting the images of his college year, the narrator intimates to us that he “*believed in the principles of the Founder with all [his] heart and soul*”. (IM 99) Who was the founder of the college and what were his principles? The answer, inferable from the details of the text, is Booker T. Washington. The narrator’s remembrance of the statue of the Founder demonstrates the danger inherent in his ideas. When describing the way the Founder was lifting a veil above the face of a slave girl, the narrator inquires: “*I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding.*” (IM 36) This scene, indeed, is meant to be a critique, Ellison and before him Dubois, lodged against Washington’s compromises and his “program of industrial education, conciliation of the South, and submission and silence as to civil and political rights”.¹⁰⁷

Actually, the “veil” Ellison associates with the Founder and by extension with Washington creates for the Black American, according to Dubois, double consciousness as he is “born with a veil ...in this American world—a world that yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see through the revelation of the other world”.¹⁰⁸ Hence, the protagonist’s commitment to the Founder’s policy and his desire to follow his path underscores the dangers of his devotion. Indeed, Washington’s position as a humble

¹⁰⁷ Dubois *Souls of Black Folks*, op. cit., p. 33.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, introduction xiii

submissive orator of his race is occupied by IM. When he is first introduced to the members of the brotherhood, IM is presented as “the new Booker T. Washington” (IM 305) In this sense, IM is laboring under the illusion that there is no other way to succeed other than working in terms the Washingtonian policy suggests.

In this way, Invisible Man’s blunder represents the repressed humanity which Washington thought could be set aside.¹⁰⁹ As mentioned before, Washington personifies the submissive African American leader that Ellison had called into question. It is to be mentioned here that Ellison- who did not like the fact that African American characters were “without an intellectual depth” (IM xix) wished to create characters who could be able to “articulate the issues that tortured them”.(IM xix) Seen in this way, Invisible Man’s transition from the rote learning of Washington to the complex writing of his confession is to be seen as a form of conscious self assertion that is basic for his quest for identity. In the course of his development, the narrator’s own speech making gradually evolves from reproducing Washington’s discourse to a greater self-reliance. Put differently, his speech on humility as “the very essence of progress” is superseded by his recognition of responsibility and his engagement in a self-evaluation that lead to his underground retreat. The underground, one might argue, will be the best place for his meditation and self assessment as he “could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet” (IM 571). One might well say that, Ellison uses the underground setting to express a theme that goes to the heart of African American tradition; it is the intense desire for freedom from the destructive influence of manipulating powers and in this context it is both the White culture as well as some extremist black ideologies. Melvin Dixon says, in this regard, that the underground is “the region in slave songs that lies ‘down in the lonesome valley where individual strength is tested and autonomy

¹⁰⁹ In the *Souls of Black Folks*, Dubois reprimands Booker T. Washington, who was an influential black American leader at that time, for his accommodationist stance and his emphasis on industrial education and silence as to civil rights. In other words, Washington called for the successful submissive African American that both Dubois and Ellison castigated in their writings.

achieved, becomes, in modern texts, a stage for self-creating performances and for contact with black culture.”¹¹⁰

In this way, Ellison’s protagonist achieves an understanding of his individual and cultural complexities through his art of narration. His ultimate way of reaching a creative end was accomplished through his task of writing down his story which could possibly evolve only after his embrace of the accumulated weight of his forebear’s experiences. One could possibly argue that through this process of narration, the narrator learns that inner freedom is possible by simply learning to transcend failures and fulfill his artistic responsibility. In fact, I share Valerie Smith’s assumption that “The character of the artist in Ellison’s non-fiction corresponds to the portrait of the protagonist of *Invisible Man*.”¹¹¹ Ellison hoped that African American artist should not plead their humanity but rather make meaning out of their experiences:

We do become writers out of an act of will, out of an act of choice: and what happens thereafter causes all those experiences which occurred before we began to function as writers to take on a special quality of uniqueness. If this does not happen then as far as writing goes, the experiences have been misused. If we do not make of them a value, if we do not transform them into forms and images of meaning which they did not possess before, then we have failed as artists. Thus for a writer to insist that his personal suffering is of special interest in itself, or simply because he belongs to a particular racial or religious group, is to advance a claim for special privileges which members of his group who are not writers would be ashamed to demand.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Dixon, Melvin *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro America Literature* University of Illinois Press, 1987, p. 4.

¹¹¹ Callahan, John F. *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: A casebook*, op. cit., p. 15.

¹¹² Watts Gafio, Jerry *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), P28

2. *Beloved*: Delving into the recesses of the Black Self and the Pain in Narrating

The aim of this section is to pinpoint the three interrelated themes with which Morrison explores the African American identity: history, memory and community. With these three major concerns, Morrison demonstrates how African Americans can resist imposed definition and definitive identification and embark on a journey of self-definition. Sethe, a black woman with no voice or text, has no history. Carrying a heavy burden, a text dominated by an oppressive master text, Sethe grapples to transform her fragmented images into a meaningful narrative. Accordingly, in this section, I will attempt to show how, with the help of her community at the end of the novel, Sethe succeeds in transforming her ‘rememories’ (B 43) of a traumatic past into a history that represents the unspeakable in a counternarrative that deconstructs official history.

2.1. Writing the Unwritten History

There is an "uncanniness" about his past that a present occupant has expelled (or thinks it has) in an effort to take its place. The dead haunt the living. The past: it "re-bites" [il remord] (it is a secret and repeated biting). History is "cannibalistic," and memory becomes the closed arena of conflict between two contradictory operations: forgetting, which is not something passive, a loss, but an action directed against the past; and the mnemonic trace, the return of what was forgotten.

More generally speaking, an autonomous order is founded upon what it eliminates; it produces a "residue" condemned to be forgotten. But what was excluded. . . re-infiltrates the place of its origin—It resurfaces, it troubles, it turns the present's feeling of being "at home" into an illusion, it lurks—this "wild," this "obscene," this "filth," this "resistance" of "superstition"—within the walls of the residence, and behind the back of the owner (the ego), or over its objections, it inscribes there the law of the other.

— Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies*: The Discourse of the Other

"History is always written wrong," wrote Santayana, "and so always needs to be rewritten."¹¹³ In much the same way, Morrison has been engaged in a project over what to say about African American's past and how to say it. Accordingly, her fifth novel *Beloved* focuses around what Robert Penn Warren calls the "undocumentable inside" of history. As a historical novel, the novel challenges versions of history established by the white hegemony. Based on a true story, the novel combines historical research with imaginary elements in order to revisit the past. At the same time, the work centers on the lives of the downtrodden, those who remained outside the pages of history. Like Ellison, who envisaged a character that assumes the role of the artist Ellison describes in his essays, Morrison creates a character who acts like the historian who must liberate her present from the shackles of the past constructed in history.

In *Beloved*, Morrison challenges historical records or what Edward Said calls "the imperialist power that would otherwise compel you to disappear or to accept some miniature version of yourself as a doctrine to be passed out on a course syllabus."¹¹⁴ She uses literature as a means of recreating a historical record that never existed or was destroyed and also as a way of including in the American history the stories of those who were silenced. Certainly, Morrison's increased consciousness of black invisibility in historical records is reflected in her commitment to revisit the American history and her ability to demonstrate the importance of knowing one's history in determining one's identity.

Morrison seems to agree with Gabriel García Márquez when he says that "Our America" has been written "with a white hand". Accordingly, her novel is a Black story that problematizes the history of the United States. Indeed, her distinctiveness as a writer lies in her ability to represent the terrors that are beyond the capacity of literary expression. What it that we do not know about

¹¹³ Quoted in Fabre Genevieve and O' Meally, Robert *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, op.cit., p. 3.

¹¹⁴ Said, Edward *Culture and Imperialism*, op. cit., p. 334

the slaves' lives and it is neither written in the American records nor in the slaves' narratives? The answer lies in the events that take place in the novels as well as the dedication of the novel. Morrison dedicates her novel to the "Sixty Million and more". (B epigraph) Who are those sixty millions? This number denotes, I claim, those people Morrison wants to give voice to; the "*disremembered and unaccounted for*" (B 323); those who failed to survive the Middle passage; the women and children who left no written records.

While I suggest that Morrison is filling the gaps that were left by her predecessors the slaves narrator, I should further say that she approached slavery from an inner perspectives. This means that she focused more on the psychological scars of this experience and the repression of personal trauma. In fact, Morrison presents characters whose unwillingness to remember transforms their daily existence in "*the day's serious work of beating back the past.*" (B 86) It is this reluctance to remember and the inability to articulate the past ("*How can I say things that are pictures?*" Beloved asks) (B 248) that ultimately keeps Sethe "*loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day.*" (B 83) Nonetheless, the past haunts the present and the characters are obliged to confront this traumatic past through the bewildering character of Beloved.

Beloved is the most perplexing character in the novel. At some points in the novel, she appears as the incarnation of the ghost of the Sethe's murdered daughter. At other point, we conceive it as the embodiment of the spirit of the slaves whose voices went unheard during slavery and thus their testimonies are not present in the traditional accounts of slavery. It is this ghost, thus, that Morrison employs to represent the traumatic past that the African Americans fear to confront as well as a missing past. Through her interaction with the characters, the ghost allows a reconstruction of slave history from an African American woman's perspective. In the presence of the ghost Beloved, Sethe is compelled to explain the dynamic that allowed her to kill her baby child rather than see her return to slavery. In this way, Sethe gets the reader to

sympathize with her and understand her act of infanticide and ultimately sees death as a better alternative than slavery. What should be noted here is that, to put it in Ashraf Rushdy's words: "Morrison insists on the impossibility of judging an action without reference to the terms of its enactment—the wrongness of assuming a transhistorical ethic outside a particular historical moment."¹¹⁵ And he continues: "Alone Beloved allows the reoccurrence of this 'historical moment'".

The novel is based on a real event which occurred in 1856 when a runaway slave Margaret Garner chose to kill her infant daughter rather than have her enslaved. Yet, the novel is more than a mere replication of the Garner story. In the process of editing the Black Book, a collection of "original raw material documenting our life"¹¹⁶, Morrison discovered the painful event of infanticide and decided to start from that act and imagine the interior life of the mother who committed it and her quest for freedom. Indeed, Morrison reconstructed imaginatively the life of Margaret Garner. To put it simply, Morrison was not interested in recording Garner's life as she lived it but rather opted for the freedom of inventing the lives of the characters and thus be accessible to them. So she turned the fragments of the Garner's story into a new creation that explores the complexities of the life of the slave mother and those surrounding her act. Obviously, Morrison believed that no one has the right to judge the slave mother's action including herself except the daughter she killed. Then the latter inserts herself into the narrative.

In this way, Morrison creates the unwritten history of African American people. Seen in this way, the novel compels us to ask the following questions: How does the history of slavery shape the identities of African American people? And how might those identities be reconstructed in order to overcome that history and begin building liberatory selves? As a possible key to this

¹¹⁵ Andrews, William L. and McKay, Nellie Y. *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A casebook* Oxford University Press, 1999, p 47

¹¹⁶ Morrison, Toni "Rediscovering Black History in What Moves at the Margins: Selected Nonfiction" University Press of Mississippi, 2008, p. 43.

problem, we can turn to Ricoeur who considers that “ narrative function” is “ ultimately to be defined by its ambition to refigure our historical condition and thereby to raise it to the level of historical consciousness.”¹¹⁷ The latter, Ricoeur explains, implies “the twofold sense of our consciousness of making history and our consciousness of belonging to history.”¹¹⁸

Since history has been written through the perspective of the dominant white American society, this led to the disappearance of an African American “historical consciousness” resulting in an identity crisis. Reclaiming their history means regaining their sense of belonging and reconstructing their African American identity. By inserting the spirit of the dead daughter, history is made possible. It is now the role of Sethe the mother, working on “beating back the past”, to confront the past rather than push it back and learn how to alter her life history.

One might ask now, how can Sethe, the troubled mother, refigure her history in a way that allows her to overcome her dreadful past and form her identity? According to Ricoeur, the “ ordinary people, often denied the right to speak by the dominant form of discourse” form their identity through a “refiguration” of their past. “Refiguration” Ricoeur explains it as “re-enactment”. “To reenact does not consist in reliving what happened”, Ricoeur contends, but implies “rethinking” which “ contains the critical moment that requires us to detour by way of the historical imagination. “ In the novel the presence of the ghost forces Sethe to reenact the critical moments of her past, but she suffers before finally altering her history. Actually, *“every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver’s inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries.”*(B 69)

¹¹⁷ Ricoeur, Paul *Time and Narrative* Vol 3 University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 102.

¹¹⁸ Ibid p. 6

Before demonstrating how this ‘refiguration’ of the past is presented in the novel, we should note here that Ricoeur designates two other important aspects of a narrative along with the aforementioned one: ‘prefiguration’ and ‘configuration’ precede ‘refiguration’.¹¹⁹ First, ‘prefiguration’, according to Ricoeur, means ‘a reference back to the familiar pre-understanding we have of the order of action.’ In this sense, the prefigurative stage in *Beloved* is presented in Sethe's physical violation and infanticide. The ‘configurative’ aspect, according to Ricoeur, is ‘an entry into the realm of poetic composition.’ In the novel, this stage lies in her storytelling. And finally, ‘refiguration’ which is a new configuration by means of this poetic refiguring of the pre-understood.’

Sethe started to tell her own story of difference. Even though she was ostracized from her community for killing her daughter, she succeeds in reconfiguring a story of infanticide into a story of mother-love. It should be noted that the act of murder is written from many perspectives including those of the slave owner schoolteacher. ‘*Now she'd gone wild*’, schoolteacher tells his nephew who overbeat Sethe and continues: ‘*think, just think, what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education. Or Chipper, or Samson. Suppose you beat the hounds past that point that away, Never again could you trust them in the woods or anywhere else.*’ (B 176) She is just presented as the animal that loses control when beaten and that is why, in his opinion, she has killed her daughter. Yet, Sethe defies schoolteacher’s discourse by refiguring her own discourse and shows her act of killing as an act of resistance and as a way of denying schoolteacher any possibility to control the daughter’s destiny. ‘I stopped him’, Sethe, tells Paul D, ‘*I took and put my babies where they'd be safe,*’ (B 193)

¹¹⁹ We should mention here that Ricoeur reworked Aristotle’s concept of ‘mimesis’ by which the latter means ‘imitation’, i.e. ‘plot is an imitation of action.’ According to Ricoeur, plot is more than mere ‘imitation’; it is ‘the ordering of the events’ and he divided it into mimesis1, mimesis2, and mimesis 3 which refer to ‘prefiguration’, ‘configuration’, and ‘refiguration’ respectively.

And in the same way, Sethe explains to Beloved, "[N]o one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper" (B 296). Sethe defies Schoolteacher's historiography, a historiography that marks her as half human, half animal. "No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (B 228), Schoolteacher orders his nephew. But Sethe denies Schoolteacher any possibility to classify her daughter. Hence, in her storytelling, we come to see Sethe's infanticide as a way of liberation; she saved her daughter through cutting her throat because she did not wish to see her oppressed the way she was oppressed. In this way, Sethe turns a story of oppression into a story of liberation through her recounting the past. More importantly, Sethe's historical discourse is shaped by her process of narration and by reconfiguring her story, Sethe reconstitutes her identity. To put it in Ricoeur's words: "narrative constructs the durable properties of a character ... by constructing the kind of dynamic identity found in the plot."¹²⁰

In sum, Morrison reconstructs history through the perspective of African Americans rather than through the perspective of the dominant culture. *Beloved*, challenges the notion that the end of slavery brings about freedom by depicting the psychological trauma represented in the repression of the past. In learning to live with her past, Sethe is not only healing her present but also enables the reader see that part of history shut down from him.

2.2. 'Rememory' and the Rise of a Voice

Yet no slave society in the history of the world wrote more - or more thoughtfully - about its own enslavement.

Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory"

¹²⁰ Ricoeur, Paul *Narrative Identity* in David Wood *On Paul Ricoeur Narrative and Interpretation* Routledge London and New York 2003, p. 195.

“Memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant”¹²¹, wrote Morrison. In creating a novel which complicates an area of historical knowledge, Morrison points out that the novel is not about slavery per se but about what she termed “national amnesia.”¹²² In other words, the novel is about the African Americans who did not find the opportunity to speak, those “anonymous people called slaves”¹²³ as well as the 60 millions who died in the middle passage in their way to America. In fact, when reading the novel, one feels more than a mere observer but rather a witness to a history of love, of desire and of hope of those silenced people, those forgotten.

As discussed in the previous section, *Beloved*’s return marks a beginning of a process of connections with the past. One might ask: How do Sethe and the other character do this? Obviously, it is their dependence on their memories which the novel describes as “rememory”. The latter seems haunting rather than desirable because of Sethe’s attempt to “beat back the past”. Sethe describes her “rememory” when she explains to her daughter Denver that one’s experience can be remembered by someone else:

“I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place— the picture of it— stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.” “Can other people see it”? asked Denver “Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes.” (B 43)

This memory is haunting because it does not belong to this former slave but belongs to the enslaver as Sethe puts it and this is why she tries to escape it. She explains to Denver that their memories are dangerous because they belong to their former masters:

¹²¹ Morrison, “Toni The Site of Memory”, op. cit., pp. 91, 92

¹²² Taylor Guthrie, Danille K *Conversations with Toni Morrison* Mississippi University Press, 1994, p.257

¹²³ Ibid.

It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there--you who never was there--if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over--over and done with--it's going to always be there waiting for you. That's how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what." (B 43-44)

Thus, as long as Sethe considers that her memory belongs to the oppressor, she can never be free. Only when she reconstructs her memory, can Sethe reconstruct her identity. How is this possible? In many ways, the repressed memory that keeps Sethe trapped into a traumatic past needs to turn into a recuperative power that heals the self and redefine the identity of the African American.

So when the spirit of the murdered daughter returns, Sethe is forced to jump into the abyss of her painful memory, a memory of oppression and exploitation, and turns it into what George Lipsitz calls "counter memory." The latter is defined as "a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate and the personal".¹²⁴ In this way, Sethe, scared by her submissive past, a past that hurts in every mention of it, has to remember it once and for good. She comes to understand that "*More it hurt more better it is. Can't nothing heal without pain*" (B 92), as Denver, the white girl who helped Sethe deliver her baby, puts it. Thus, when Sethe recounts the act of infanticide, she had us understand that she is not the animal Schoolteacher was describing and "*She ain't crazy. She love those children. She was trying to out hurt the hurter.*" (B 276)

Seen in this way, Sethe discloses new perceptions of the past as she grapples with the dominant history of slavery. Her counter memory becomes an emancipatory tool that defines her identity as an African American. Lipsitz says in this regard that "Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives. It forces revision of existing

¹²⁴ Lipsitz, George *Time Passages, Collective Memory and American Popular*, op. cit., p. 213.

histories by supplying new perspectives about the past.”¹²⁵ Accordingly, Sethe’s counter memory does not preclude the dominant discourse but operates with in. Sethe, simply, gives an alternative point of view to her memory of oppression to let out what was hidden as desire, thinking and feelings. To put it in Lipsitz’s words, “Counter-memory focuses on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience.”¹²⁶

Counter memory in *Beloved* takes the form of storytelling. Sethe tells a story of her desire to sew a wedding dress. By telling how eager she was to be beautiful in her wedding and how creative she was in sewing her dress, Sethe attests her humanity and defies the dominant discourse that denigrated her and deprived her of expressing her desire. Counter memory, thus, speaks of desire: “*The desire, let alone the gesture, to meet her needs was good enough to lift her spirits to the place where she could take the next step.*” (B 112) Sethe’s telling bespeaks a yearning for love and happiness that was denied and a collective gathering that African Americans were deprived of. Things she could only express when her memory is allowed to work:

"I never saw a wedding, but I saw Mrs. Garner's wedding gown in the press, and heard her go on about what it was like. Two pounds of currants in the cake, she said, and four whole sheep. The people were still eating the next day. That's what I wanted. A meal maybe, where me and Halle and all the Sweet Home men sat down and ate something special. Invite some of the other colored people from over by Covington or High Trees--those places Sixo used to sneak off to. But it wasn't going to be nothing. They said it was all right for us to be husband and wife and that was it. All of it."Well, I made up my mind to have at the least a dress that wasn't the sacking I worked in. So I took to stealing fabric, and wound up with a dress you wouldn't believe.... Now Halle was patient, waiting for me to finish it. He knew I wouldn't go ahead without having it. (B 70)

This determination to get a dress validates her sense of self, and undermines the oppressor’s assumptions that blacks had no desire. In this way, Sethe

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

rejects the dominant definition of African Americans and establishes her self-definition.

2.3. Community and the Healing Process

In *Beloved*, Morrison insists on the role the African American community and family play in the individual's psychological healing. Sethe's loss of her family is part of her tragedy and her willingness to have one reflects her thirst for psychological wholeness. Also, when Sethe is ostracized by her community for committing infanticide, she almost went mad when interacting with the baby ghost. In other words, she could not bear facing her past alone. The horrors of this past are too traumatic that one cannot confront them alone. It is only when her community let her in again and gave her a hand that Sethe is able to accept her past and become a psychological sane.

Therefore, individual struggle in the novel appears as endless and unbearable. Despite of her attempt to confront the ghost and hence her past alone, Sethe is vulnerable and unable to attain a full self liberation. She cannot move forward and have a normal life as long as her community isolates her. Isolation is seen as a devastating factor that stems from the community's unwillingness to forgive. For the black community, keeping the members of a family alive in a slave society is seen as an act of resistance. Thus, Sethe's act of defiance is incomprehensible and seen as betrayal to the community's moral code and a reason to be punished for as it affirms the whites' assumptions about the blacks' savagery.

As a matter of fact, Sethe is alienated and confronts the ghost alone. In this regard, one could claim that the spirit's function in the novel is twofold. First, it is necessary for the remembrance of the past and its unresolved parts as it defies Sethe's wish to forget and functions as a spur to her repressed memories. But it is also dangerous and consuming as her presence wears Sethe's out and drives her almost to insanity. What makes it worse for Sethe is her estrangement from her society. And as the community is linked to the

individual's empowerment according to Morrison, a withdrawal of its support can leave the African American weak and unable to develop an identity of her/his own. Thus, to see one's self as an empowered self within a community rather than an inferior object within a dominant society is central to the development of the African American identity. Hence, a distance from this community is shown in the novel as threatening even to the wisest person in it like Baby Suggs:

after five years of freedom given to her by her last child, who bought her future with his, exchanged it, so to speak, so she could have one whether he did or not--to lose him too; to acquire a daughter and grandchildren and see that daughter slay the children (or try to); to belong to a community of other free Negroes--to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed--and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance---well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy. (B 209)

Here, just like Sethe who is excluded from her community for committing infanticide, her mother in law Baby Suggs is also left alone. These awful disappointment and imposed alienation are too great for the characters to endure. But unlike Sethe who is, at first, unable to transcend the shame of her experience goes into self-alienation, Baby Suggs, who had given up seven of her eight children to slavery, knew how to put the heart back together.

Baby Suggs represents the "Holy Redeemer" (B 222) whose great suffering in slavery taught her how to endure life's greatest pains. She sustains herself by spreading love in her community and by delivering sermons that were healing to those African Americans former slaves scarred by slavery. She is keen on giving "*advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone.*" (B 161) She has "*The heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word.*" (B p 212) She learned from her experience that the Whites can take control over the black self when the latter has no self-esteem. She, thus, exhorts them to love "*flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass,*" because "*Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it.*" (B 103)

Interestingly enough, Sethe is aware that *"anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up."* (B 295)

In fact, engaging into society and loving one's self is a process of healing that Sethe must undergo to free herself from the shame of the past. Obviously, Sethe's guilt of killing her daughter and the subsequent exclusion from her community keeps her psychologically enslaved despite the eighteen years of freedom. Although she did not come back literally to slavery, she remains enslaved in a painful past as the community gives up her support after the murder: *"those twenty-eight happy days were followed by eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life."* (B 204) Sethe, thus, lived only twenty eight days of "unslaved life" as she was participating in the community's life. She

had had twenty-eight days ... of unslaved life.... Days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done: of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better.... All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and decide what to do with the day.... Bit by bit ... along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another. (B 111-112)

Despite of being free, Sethe's alienation and her attempts to lock away her past is psychologically damaging and blocks her identity development. Sethe carries with her a sense of being a commodity or an object because

in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. (B 27-28)

Community support is the only way by which Sethe can reach a full self-liberation. It is only when the local women unite to exorcise the ghost and help Sethe out that she is eventually redeemed. The voices of the women

together joined to break the effect of oppression and link Sethe again to her community. It is as if the women's prayers took Sethe from death to rebirth. The women of her community

Together they stood in the doorway. For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (*B* 308)

It may have become clear now that both Ellison and Morrison belong to a group of writers in America for whom writing is an artistic mode for self expression. As we have seen, both writers come to terms with the predicament of African Americans in America and the solution that must be embraced by them. As discussed in this chapter, the writers explore the theme of identity by bringing out those stances that promote and impede the quest for an African American identity. We have traced the way the writers use their narratives as a liberating tool where the African American moves from invisibility and silence to enlightenment and self discovery. The next chapter deals with the formal devices through which the writers pinpoint their thematic concerns.

Chapter Three

Narrative Strategies and the Quest for Identity

The present chapter concerns the stylistic as well as formal devices through which Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison support their thematic preoccupations. To this end, I shall discuss the two novels as a neo slave narrative and an African American Bildungsroman respectively to emphasize the generational continuity with earlier African American literary tradition. Nonetheless, I shall demonstrate the uniqueness of the works in tackling the African American identity formally and stylistically. This will be followed by a study of how the two writers adopted these two modes of writing to underpin their thematic concerns. Special attention will be given to the tragicomic and the grotesque through which Ellison and Morrison respectively pinpoint their thematic preoccupations.

1. *Invisible Man*: Narrative Strategies

1.1. Narrating Life, Constructing Identity in *Invisible Man*

“If I am to fulfill the writer’s basic responsibilities to his craft, then surely I must insist upon the maintenance of a certain level of precision in language, a maximum correspondence between the form of a piece of writing and its content, and between words and ideas and the things and processes of this world.”

(Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p 125)

“I can be free only to the extent that I detect error and grasp the complex reality of my circumstances and work to dominate it through the techniques which are my means of confronting the world.” (Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p 125)

Because Ellison began writing *Invisible Man* at a moment of great disenchantment with black writers ‘modes of representations of their own group’¹²⁷, it should come as no surprise that the novel sought to redress this omission by offering an alternative that expresses Ellison’s determination to ‘explore the full range of American negro humanity.’’ (S&A 17) For Ellison, a sociological interpretation of the Negro American’s experience, with its emphasis upon the crashing influence of the

¹²⁷ Ellison, as I previously explained in chapter 1, spoke out his dissatisfaction with the Black writers’ ways of representing their own groups and pointed out that “the terms with which we have tried to define ourselves have been inadequate”. (*Shadow and Act*, p. 18) The ideological tendencies, Ellison, further states render him less free. In this sense, he explains that he “can be free only to the extent that I detect error and grasp the complex reality of my circumstances and work to dominate it through the techniques which are my means of confronting the world.” (*Shadow and Act*, p. 125) This is, indeed, the same task that Ellison sets his protagonist to.

environment, not only ‘‘distorts that reality’’ (S&A 125) but obscures ‘‘the full complex ambiguity of the human.’’ (S&A 25) As an American and Negro, Ellison was preoccupied more with the psychology and consciousness of Black Americans less with ‘‘black anger’’ and ‘‘clenched militancy’’. Because he felt that Wright’s sociological attitude precluded the possibility of exploring the full range of American Negro humanity, Ellison’s narrative proposes a psychological narrative form which the narrator is given the possibility to ‘‘transcend his condition through art.’’ (S&A 130)

In her essay ‘‘The Meaning of Narration in Invisible Man’’, Valerie Smith points out that ‘‘the character of the artist in Ellison’s nonfiction corresponds to the portrait of the protagonist of Invisible Man’’. Though the novel is by no means a story of Ellison’s own life, onto his protagonist he projects his own sense of the artist’s responsibility. Ellison’s description of the African American artist in his nonfiction provides us with insights into the development of the Invisible Man. Put differently, if Ellison describes the artist, as Valerie Smith puts it, ‘‘always in opposition to the restraints of received literary traditions’’¹²⁸, the protagonist’s successive disillusionment with institutional powers which constitutes the novel is the overall form of the narrative.

Invisible Man is an exploration of the experiences and consequences of appeasement and duplicity. In pursuit of his quest to become an orator and a leader, the protagonist tries to satisfy figures of authority- Norton, Bledsoe, and the Brotherhood- who impose false identities upon him. Choosing to live according to the dictates of others, Invisible Man loses his autonomy and suffers repeated betrayals. Only when he assumes responsibility of naming himself by telling his own story does Invisible Man find the true meaning of his life.

As Kerry McSweeney points out in his study of Invisible Man, *Invisible Man: Race and Identity*, a distinction should be made between’’ the younger, experiencing self who participates in and/or observes the events recounted in the narrative and the

¹²⁸ Smith Valerie ‘‘ The meaning of Narration’’ in Callahan, John F. *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: A Casebook*. Op. cit., p. 189.

older narrating self who does the telling.”¹²⁹ The novel employs a first person narrator where the voice of the “I” as a narrator is to be distinguished from that of the “I” as a character. The narrating self addresses the reader directly in the prologue and epilogue. In the former, the narrator explains that he feels “the compulsion to put [his] invisibility down in black and white.” (*IM* 14) In other words, the whole process of narration is a cathartic experience where the narrator both states his opinions firmly without being directed by any manipulative voice and also discharges his emotions to enable the reader understand why he came to be living underground in hibernation, “snarled with the incompatible notions that buzz within my brain.” (*IM* 14) The twenty five chapters in between the prologue and epilogue pertain to the experiencing self or IM the character. In these chapters, the narrating self tells the events that happened to IM the character from his high school graduation to the day he decided to go underground. It is patent that the narrating self is in control of these past events, for they are told from its perspective. Thus IM the narrator has the power to restrict the point of view of IM the character and re-create with minimal interpolation what the experiencing self did and thought in the past.

At the beginning of chapter two, for example, when the statue of the college founder removing the veil from the eyes of a kneeling slave is described, it is undoubtedly the voice of the narrator seeing the scene “in my mind’s eye”, who is “unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place.” (*IM* 36) Such reflections could hardly be those of IM the character, who at this point of his story is wholly blind to the real face of the other characters in his pursuit of his dream. These characters are those exploiters who have manipulated him and directed his life to the extent that he lost his real self. Each one of these characters represented, for IM the character, the image of the perfect man who “had the power of a king, or in a sense, of a god.” (*IM* 45) Even though he is given signs of their dishonesty, IM the character is never suspicious of any of them and follows blindly their directives till the death of Tod Clifton where IM the character understands how false a face the world presents.

¹²⁹ Kerry, McSweeney *Invisible Man: Race and Identity* Twayne Publishers. Boston, a division of G.K HALL & Co, 1988, p. 27.

IM the character thinks that by following the advice of his dying grandfather- a war veteran- and the college president Dr Bledsoe (both advice him to feign humility while being deceptive), he will acquire authority over his people and become a leader. Both figures instill the belief of duplicity as a necessary precondition of achievement in the mind of the protagonist and thus manipulate his self-understanding. Likewise, the veteran Invisible Man meets in the Golden Day, and who is aware of the world's deceptions, tells the protagonists that he must learn to be duplicitous. By learning to be deceptive, the protagonist unknowingly becomes self-deceptive. Yet, the protagonist deludes himself into thinking that he is clever enough to play any game without believing in it.

Spending his first days in the college, which IM describes as "the flower studded wasteland" (*IM* 37), miming these figures' steely meekness, the protagonist never learns to be skeptical of the face the world presents. Being so devoted to the myth of social uplift as embodied by his college, the protagonist never questions its principles. In this blind pursuit of his dream, the protagonist takes Bledsoe, the Black president of the college, as his model and wishes to achieve his success no matter how. For the protagonist, Bledsoe "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." (*IM* 101)

And even upon realizing the façade of Bledsoe's obsequious demeanor when he changes his facial expressions before entering Norton's room replacing wrath with placidity, the protagonist does not take action; for fear that it lessens his chances of remaining in school. The protagonist was shocked to see "Bledsoe stopped and composed his angry face like a sculptor, making it a bland mask, leaving only the sparkle of his eyes to betray the emotion that I had seen only a moment before." (*IM* 102) This swift change confirms the protagonist's suspicions that Bledsoe hides dishonesty under a veneer of humility. The disjunction between Bledsoe's guise and notions are right there for the protagonist to take. He, however, does not want to believe that inconsistencies are possible.

When he learns that Bledsoe intends to expel him from the school as a punishment for taking Norton to the slums and letting him meet Trueblood, the incestuous sharecropper, although he is not responsible for this event, the protagonist forces himself into meekness and accepts punishment: “What I did was unintentional, but I'm in agreement with my punishment.” (*IM* 148) In this way, “He would rather misunderstands his own experiences than see it as a lesson about the disjunction between the way things are and the way they are supposed to be”¹³⁰, as Valerie Smith puts it. He never wishes to be cross with any of those figures who might help him realize his dream. Instead of gaining awareness of his experience, he recasts the events in such a way that he is responsible for Norton’s meeting with Trueblood and his accident in the Golden Day and convinces himself that he deserves suspension:

Somehow, I convinced myself; I had violated the code and thus would have to submit to punishment. Dr. Bledsoe is right, I told myself, he's right; the school and what it stands for have to be protected. There was no other way, and no matter how much I suffered I would pay my debt as quickly as possible and return to building my career. (*IM* 147)

When IM the character tries to make sense of Bledsoe’s punishment, he opts for fitting his experiences into a logical explicable context. To put it another way, when he clings to the college’s system of beliefs, IM the character feels that his life is more ordered and safer, and that this set of beliefs bestowed a meaningful identity upon him. Only this order can provide meaning for him. He cannot relate events neither can he exercise any kind of complex reasoning or see the grip this group of figures hold on him because, at this point, he defines his life in relation to others and accommodates himself to their visions. When he says he “I would pay my debt as quickly as possible and return to building my career” (*IM* 147), he expects that the passage of time will turn his humiliations into a rite of passage. Instead of considering the sources of his humiliations, he relies solely on the passage of time thinking that time will sweep his humiliations away.

¹³⁰ Ibid, Valerie Smith “The meaning of Narration” in Callahan, John F. *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: A Casebook*, op. cit., p. 196.

This ‘‘linear vision’’¹³¹ of IM the character, or following blindly ‘‘the path placed before [him]’’ (*IM* 146), is what makes of his first disillusionment a sterile one. Although he finds out the real content of the letters written by Dr Bledsoe and hence recognizes that the values upon which the school was founded are a sham, he is again tempted by the principles of the Brotherhood. To adhere to the latter’s principles, he has to deny all the lessons he has learned from his first experiences. The Brotherhood tactics are so similar to those he has rejected, yet his need for a system and for a place blinds him to this fact. By changing his name and offering him a new beginning, the Brotherhood cuts IM the character of his past and thus imposes a false identity on him. ‘‘I was dominated by the all-embracing idea of Brotherhood. The organization had given the world a new shape, and me a vital role. We recognized no loose ends; everything could be controlled by our science’’. (*IM* 382) The narrating self admits that IM the character consciously pressed his ‘‘dissenting voice’’ (*IM* 335), stopped himself from doubting and removed all skepticism of the organization’s real intentions and aims:

I would have to take that part of myself that looked on with remote eyes and keep it always at the distance of the campus, the hospital machine, the battle royal—all now far behind. Perhaps the part of me that observed listlessly but saw all, missing nothing, was still the 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 that I’d have to keep it pressed down. (*IM* 335)

Not only does IM the character repress his dissenting voice but also contains his emotions. He tries to appear placid and freezes his emotions, like ‘‘ice which my life had conditioned my brain to produce’’. (*IM* 408) This justifies his placidity when Brother Wrestrum grows suspicious of him and accuses him of betrayal. Although he is innocent, he tries to justify the other’s reprimand. Ironically, he convinces himself that reprimand is a sign of faith in him:

And, after all, I told myself, the assignment was also proof of the committee’s goodwill. For by selecting me to speak with its authority on a subject which elsewhere in our society I’d have found taboo, weren’t they reaffirming their belief both in me and in the principles of Brotherhood, proving that they drew no lines

¹³¹ Valerie Smith calls this pattern of thinking forward into the future without considering the mistakes of the past as ‘‘a linear vision’’

even when it came to women? They had to investigate the charges against me, but the assignment was their unsentimental affirmation that their belief in me was unbroken. (*IM* 438)

Believing blinding in the Brotherhood claiming that this organization gives him a sense of identity, IM the character wonders why Tod Clifton has chosen to substitute the organization for selling Sambo Dolls on the street corner : “ Why should he choose to disarm himself, give up his voice and leave the only organization offering him a chance to "define" himself?” (*IM* 433) At this point, IM was so concerned with any authority or ideology that would give him meaning that he was blind to their truth. As he considers the nature of Clifton’s death, IM the character begins to question the significance of Blacks as a race within the Brotherhood. He remarks that Clifton “Knew them better” (*IM* 443) than he did. Probably, his realization that the Brotherhood was indifferent the Blacks’ needs forced him to leave the organization. Once he perceives that the organization has never been interested in the betterment of his race, he realizes that, as a person, he does not exist outside the narrowly defined role within the organization and that he will have an identity in the Brotherhood only if he gives up his ability for creating the meaning of his life for himself. “I had looked past him until Clifton's death had made me aware. What on earth was hiding behind the face of things? If dark glasses and a white hat could blot out my identity so quickly, who actually was who?” (*IM* 493) It should come as no surprise that selling of the dolls is in itself symbolic. Even though it is not explicitly stated in the text, Ellison draws our attention to the fact that Blacks were no more than mere puppets in this white communist organization which, like other white organizations, does nothing but exploits them.

IM the character’s realization of the real face of the Brotherhood marks his last disillusionment. This realization ushered in a new period of reflection. Before this time, IM the character was forced not to think, for the organization made it clear that “you are not hired to think” (*IM* 469), since “the committee does the thinking for all of us. And you were hired to talk.” (*IM* 470) Thus, it became clear that he has to relinquish a great part of himself for the sake of others. Like Bledsoe and Norton, the Brotherhood treated him if he did not exist:

Here I had thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men . . . For all they were concerned, we were so many names scribbled on fake ballots, to be used at their convenience and when not needed to be filed away. It was a joke, an absurd joke. And now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure. They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same—except I now recognized my invisibility. (*IM* 508)

Now that the “obscene swindle” (*IM* 507) of the Brotherhood and all his past humiliations and indignities rise to his consciousness, “all past humiliations” are accepted as “precious part of my experience” (*IM* 507) and

for the first time, leaning against that stone wall in the sweltering night, I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me. It was as though I'd learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became, even if they conquered the world, could take that, or change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it. (*IM* 507)

One way of describing what is happening in this important passage is that the consciousness of narrating self is at last beginning to become that of the experiencing self. This time is when IM, disillusioned and started to exercise a reflexive consciousness, decided to go underground to narrate his story.

By choosing to go underground and relive his own story, IM relinquishes the meaning generated by other ideologies in favor of a one that is basically self-generated. Being both a narrator and participant in his own story empowers him more than his earlier duplicity did. In this regard, Valerie Smith points out that:

“The double consciousness of simultaneously playing and undermining the game proved implausible. But the solution to the problems of identity and authority can be found in the double consciousness of reliving one's story as both narrator and protagonist.”¹³²

¹³² Valerie Smith “The meaning of Narration” in Callahan, John F. *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Casebook*, op. cit., p. 209.

Thus, when the narrator comes to grips with his past experiences, he finds out his invisibility. Invisibility, as Ellison states, “is not a matter of being seen” but “a refusal to run the risk of his own humanity.” (S&A 179) It is only when IM learners that you “have to think for yourself” that he takes responsibility over his life.

Two important characters from whom the protagonist acquired the art of narrating are Trueblood and Brother Tarp. Though rebuked by Blacks as well as whites for his crime of incest, Trueblood provided the protagonist models for creating a sense of identity independent of what an organization or a collective set of assumptions requires. Brother Tarp, too, is aware of his identity as the sum up of the complex experiences that has undergone. Because he “said no to a person who wanted to take something from him” (IM 387), he lost his family and was put into jail. He shares the story of his imprisonment with IM and gives him a link from a chain he was forced to wear as a prisoner. Both the chain and the story he tells IM are ways in which Brother Tarp keeps his past with him in the present. They remind him of “what they’re really fighting against.” (IM 388)

Trueblood, who tells his own story of incest, influenced deeply the narrator into telling his story, too. Though disgraced by both Blacks and Whites, Trueblood tells a story of his own creation asserting his own sense of identity. Instead of allowing convention to determine his action, Trueblood refuses, as Selma Fraiberg puts it, “to hide behind the cowardly deceptions that cloak sin; he faces the truth within himself.”¹³³ “Narrating, in other words, helps Trueblood understand that he can have a grip on his life. In this regards, Valerie Smith contends that Trueblood:

understands, as the protagonist comes to learn, that he can control the meaning of his life if he converts his own experiences into a narrative and therefore determines what construction should be placed on them. His well-crafted tale prefigures the protagonist’s autobiography, a text that endows with meaning events that seemed random as they were “lived” by imposing artistic form on them.¹³⁴

¹³³ Selma Fraiberg, “Two Modern Incest Heroes” Partisan Review 5-6 (1961) p. 659

¹³⁴ Valerie Smith “The meaning of Narration” in Callahan, John F. *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: A Casebook*, op. cit., p. 196.p. 210

When he narrates his story, he relives it and he understands that it was the atmosphere of the evening and the dreams it triggered that prompted him to initiate intercourse before he was entirely conscious. His narrative thus helps himself transform himself from guilty to innocent mainly with his will to accept blame.

Like Brother Tarp and Trueblood, *Invisible Man* takes responsibility for his actions and comes eventually to terms with his experiences. After choosing to narrate them, he no more considers his experiences as insignificant. He decides that his experiences make up who is and that his identity is the sum up of these experiences. He realizes that denying one's past is denying one's self and that his experiences "were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me". (*IM* 507) Significantly, Ellison associated the act of narrating with the formation of identity. "By linking the narrative act to the achievement of identity, Ellison places his protagonist in a tradition of Afro-American letters that originated with the slave narratives"¹³⁵, as Valerie Smith puts it.

1.2. *Invisible Man* as an African American narrative of Bildung

As far as the genre of the novel is concerned, *Invisible Man* can be seen as a narrative of Bildung¹³⁶, a story of a young artist's perilous maturation and coming of age. Ellison adopts elements of the classical Bildungsroman to recount the process of growing black and male in American, a process of personal growth different from that in the classical Bildungsroman. "Bildung" as defined in Jill Twark's work *Humor, Satire, and Identity: Eastern German Literature in the 1990s* means "finding oneself

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 191.

¹³⁶ In her discussion of the African American narrative of Bildung, Gunilla Kester, uses the German word Bildung to separate the classical Bildungsroman and the African American novel of Bildung. Both are novels of personal growth. Yet the Bildungsroman is founded on the belief of progress and the coherence of selfhood. In Kester's words, the classical Bildungsroman "strives to inscribe a view of the subject as a singular entity proposing a growth of the subject from one fixed state of mind to another. ...The protagonist always meets influential strangers who help him when he is on the brink of a catastrophe" The African American narrative of Bildung, on the other, "attempts to create a space for the subject of history in the world thus to enable and empower the African American double subject in the world and in history. It includes a painful recognition of the subject's lack of control over his or her own subjectivity"

and in the process gaining independence from the dominating powers of nature, society, and culture.’’¹³⁷

If the white protagonist in the classical Bildungsroman is ‘‘a master of his being’’¹³⁸, the black American, as depicted in the African American narrative of Bildung, is forced to see through the eyes of the others. The maturation process of IM who aspires to become a leader is painful. The story details the transition of a black sensitive young artist from the darkness of blind ignorance and naivety to knowledge and enlightened self awareness. ‘‘In my novel the narrator’s development’’, Ellison says, ‘‘is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment.’’ (S&A 173) Furthermore, the protagonist is a nameless man constantly searching for an identity and questioning his existence. The namelessness of the protagonist is significant. In choosing to portray the experience of a nameless man, Ellison aimed at universalizing this experience. In this sense, the whole story can be seen as an allegory of the predicament of the black leadership. ‘‘Effective leaders’’, indeed, is what Ellison was concerned with. But before IM could reach this stage of development where he could become this effective leader, he had to cast aside the blinkered identity the college offered him. The painful recognition of his invisibility marks his disillusionment, the end of his naivety and thus the final stage of his development:

I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man! (IM 15)

Pain and disillusionment have brought with them valuable insights. Yet, IM meets with many setbacks before choosing to go underground to meditate his experiences and ‘‘*think things out in peace.*’’ (IM 571) He undergoes what Geta, in her study of the Bildungsroman, calls ‘‘initiation rites’’, a distinctive characteristic of the African American narrative of Bildung. ‘‘The black bildungsroman’’¹³⁹, Geta

¹³⁷ Twark, Jill E. *Humor, Satire, and Identity: Eastern German Literature in the 1990s* Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG Berlin, 2007, P. 129

¹³⁸ Gunilla Theander Kester. *Writing the subject: Bildung and the African American Text* American University Studies, New York: P. Lang. 1995 p. 57

¹³⁹ Geta uses the word black bildungsroman instead of the African American narrative of Bildung.

contends, ‘‘has "rites and rituals" as part of its structure. This could mean prescribed action, routine, or pattern in the initiation process.’’¹⁴⁰

The narrator then begins to tell his life history, a series of initiations into various figures of power and institutions, each ending in shocks, betrayal, and a loss of control. The first of these experiences takes place in chapter one, when the narrator, the high school valedictorian, is asked to give his speech on black humility as the “*very essence of progress*” (IM 17) to a gathering of his town’s leading white citizens. After this speech, IM is forced to participate in a boxing game or “Battle Royal”. The latter, Ellison claims, “is a ritual in preservation of caste lines, a keeping of taboo to appease the gods and ward off bad luck. It is also the initiation ritual to which all greenhorns are subjected.” (S&A 174)

The next initiatory episode occurs when he is expelled from the Black college. After an incident, the president of the college, Dr. Bledsoe, reprimands him and sends him away with letters of recommendation to influential White patrons in the North. Before his expulsion, IM dreams of his grandfather asking him to open his brief case and take the envelope inside it out. When IM does so, he finds a letter written in it “*To Whom It May Concern, Keep This Nigger-Boy Running*” (IM 33). It is only a dream, but it aptly foreshadows his future life.

The narrator’s journey from South to North is, on a metaphorical level, from ignorance to knowledge. His painful initiation continues in Harlem, though. As a worker in Liberty Paint Factory, IM rebels and gets into a fight for the first time during which he blacks out. In one of the most surreal episodes in the novel, IM wakes up with the aid of an electrical apparatus. He can remember nothing but he comes upon an important insight: “*I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I’ll be free*” (IM 243) He then gives up the role of a meek Negro and he stop being ashamed of his heritage.

¹⁴⁰ LeSeur, Geta *Ten Is the Age of Darkness The Black Bildungsroman* University of Missouri Press, 1995, p. 25.

IM thinks that he, at last, has gained a full insight about his predicament and that he can now become an effective leader. Becoming a leader in the Brotherhood has reassured him but he is again disillusioned when he finds out that the Brotherhood are only using him and that this organization has never been interested in the Blacks but aims at serving its only own interests. Significantly, IM realizes that he was mistaken and realizes that what he gained was not full insight but only half-insight. After this painful recognition of the true face of the Brotherhood and his witnessing the death of one of its black members, without the organization preventing his death, IM decides to go underground.

It is from underground that IM relates his story. But rather than making the cellar the symbol of the protagonist downfall, Ellison recasts it into hibernation. Hibernation, IM defines at the beginning of the novel which is its end, is ‘*a covert preparation for a more overt action.*’ (IM 13) Furthermore, the very act of narrating his story proves that the underground is not a closure to his experiences but a platform from which he will speak. In this way, ‘the cellar is more in the nature of a temporary purgatory than a permanent inferno’¹⁴¹, as Geta says. Many critics, indeed, point to the culturally different meanings of the underground image in the European and the African American traditions. Thus, if the underground image symbolizes psychological failure and the end of choices in the European culture, it stands for rebirth in the African American tradition. In Gunilla Theander Kester words, the underground image has ‘a double meaning, which marks both the end of slavery and a new beginning; it signifies both closure and rupture, both death and birth.’¹⁴²

Ellison uses the Bildungsroman formula to foreground what critics call the ‘mis-education of Negroes’¹⁴³ who, in their process of the integration into the American society, lose their self-identities and become invisible. Indeed, Ellison’s achievement, through using the Bildungsroman formula, is twofold. In addition to exposing the dangers of accommodationist policy of some Black American leaders, Ellison brings to

¹⁴¹LeSeur, Geta *Ten Is the Age of Darkness The Black Bildungsroman*, op. cit., p. 78 .

¹⁴² Gunilla Theander Kester. *Writing the subject: Bildung and the African American Text* op. cit., p. 31

¹⁴³ Shadi Neimneh ; Fatima Muhaidat ; Kifah Al-Omari ; Nazmi Al-Shalabi ‘Genre, Blues, and (Mis) Education in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*’ Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture Vol. 8, No. 2, 2012, pp. 61-72

light the erasure of Blacks from both the American society and the white discourse. To put it in Klaus Martens 'words: "Ellison exposes the Bildungsroman-formula as ideological and exclusivist, he implicitly unmasks the white appropriation of enlightenment ideals and the erasure of black demands for authenticity."'¹⁴⁴ This is not an attack upon white society, for Ellison has openly acknowledged his debt to Eliot and Joyce who "made [him] conscious of the literary value of [his] inheritance" (S&A 58), but rather a critique of the misguided forms of education of blacks advocated by both white and some black leaders. Loosing oneself in an attempt of integration through education is a futile process that cannot help blacks move forward.

1.3. *Invisible Man: From "Purpose, to Passion, to Perception"*¹⁴⁵

It isn't the prose, per se, that worries me; it's the form, the learning how to organize my material in order to take the maximum advantage of those psychological and emotional currents within myself and in the reader which endows prose with meaning; and which, in the writer, releases that upsurge of emotion which jells with conceptions and makes prose magical.

Ralph Ellison

"I'm no hero and I'm far from the top; I'm a cog in a machine."

Invisible Man

Ellison's preoccupation with the form came as a result of his disappointment and objection to the protest fiction produced by Wright and endorsed by Howe and other critics. In his essays *Shadow and Act*, Ellison describes these representations as more sociological than literary that "encourage the downgrading of literature in favor of anger, protest, and clenched militancy." (S&A 134) "Most of the social realists of the period", Ellison contends, "were concerned less with tragedy than with injustice. I wasn't and am not, primarily concerned with injustice but with art." (S&A 69)

¹⁴⁴ Martens Klaus *Pioneering North America : Mediators of European Culture and Literature* Würzburg Königshausen & Neumann, 2000, p. 196.

¹⁴⁵ In his description of the narrator's search for identity, Ellison highlights these three sections that he had borrowed from Burke's model of tragedy.

As Ellison wrestled with the content of his novel, he devised a carefully articulated skeleton for the body of the narrative adopting Kenneth Burke's model for tragedy. Both Burke and Ellison, indeed, argues that the content of the work and its structure enjoy an intimate relationship. Insisting on how narrative form and content interrelate, Ellison organized his work a "three-part division." "These three parts", Ellison explains, "represent the narrator's movement from, using Kenneth Burke's terms, purpose to passion to perception. (S&A 176-177) He goes on to say:

These three major sections are built up of smaller units of three which mark the course of the action. . . . The maximum insight on the hero's part isn't reached until the final section. After all, it's a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality. Each section begins with a sheet of paper; each piece of paper is exchanged for another and contains a definition of his identity, or the social role he is to play as defined for him by others. But all say essentially the same thing, "Keep this nigger boy running." Before he could have some voice in his own destiny he had to discard these old identities and illusions: his enlightenment couldn't come until then. (S&A 176-177)

Ellison's nameless hero exemplifies the tragic hero "who included himself in his indictment of the human condition." (*IM* xviii) The tragedy of the hero is that not only his society rejects him but also the hero misleads himself repeatedly not to rule but to be ruled. Ellison elaborates on the hero tragedy explaining that "the major flaw in the hero's character is his unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him by others as a way to success, and this was a specific form of his innocence." (S&A 177) Significantly, the protagonist's movement from naivety to enlightenment comes with his realization that his thoughts are not his own.

Purpose is the first concept in Ellison's organization of his tragic narrative. Throughout the course of the narrative, we can see that the protagonist obsession over the purpose he envisages blinds him to the fact that his social role is always defined by the others. In this sense, Michael Hill elaborates on Burke's concept of purpose "In Burke's structure for tragedy, purpose "constitutes the illusion of being able to act"¹⁴⁶. This illusion, in fact, constitutes most of the narrator's early experience. From his first valedictory speech where he makes the white hear what they want to hear to

¹⁴⁶ Michael D. Hill and Lena M. Hill *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man A Reference Guide*, op. cit., p. 20.

the Battle Royal where he is forced to fight other black boys for the amusement of white audience to his involvement with the Brotherhood, the protagonist is laboring under the illusion that pleasing the others is the key to success.

“Each section starts with a sheet of paper”, Ellison writes. Being obsessed with his dream of becoming a leader, the protagonist was never able to connect these set of “sheet of paper” that have defined key moments in his life. The protagonist turns a blind eye to the letter he finds in the mail box saying “ Do not go too fast. Keep working for the people but remember that you are one of us and do not forget if you get too big they will cut you down” (*IM* 383) so much the same way as he does to the letter of recommendation written by Bledsoe “Please hope him to death, and keep him running.” (*IM* 194) Instead of seeing this as a way of controlling him, IM is afraid that one of the members of the Brotherhood disapproves of him. He is thus still caught in the predicament of being defined by the others. This second phase of his experiences is to be associated with Burke’s concept “Passion, which Michael Hill elaborates upon as “ the predicament of being acted upon and suffering, the circumstance of working tirelessly only to find self-sacrifice on the other end.”¹⁴⁷ Even though IM ponders for a long time the letters and his own conditions, he has not yet reached “maximum insight.” (*S&A* 177)

Perception is the third and final section of the protagonist’s journey. This section starts when IM starts to question the principals of the Brotherhood. This signals his loss of faith in this organization. Basically, it all starts with the death of his friend and the other member of the organization brother Tarp and if the other sections started with written messages in sheet of papers, this one started with the “paper doll” Clifton had been making dance. Seeing his friend, a former member of the Brotherhood, downgraded to a Sambo seller strikes the IM odd and made him displeased with him in the first place. But witnessing his death in the street like a miserable after devoting all his life for the Brotherhood which gave no importance to his death made IM suspicious of this organization and forces him to re-access the forces controlling him. “Burke describes perception as a new awareness of the forces that govern the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 28.

world’’¹⁴⁸, Micheal Hill writes. Discovering the truth about the Brotherhood philosophy is, in fact, what IM has been working on for the rest of his journey. He becomes aware that he has been duped by the organization which instilled him the idea that he was ‘‘hired not to think’’ (*IM* 496) and thus defined him. But after he reaches perception, he no longer allows the others to define him. After rejecting the Brotherhood’s view, he no longer aligns with figures of power immediately. Refuting Ras the Exhorter’s idea of the necessity of destroying the whites is a case in point. The character of Ras the Exhorter, who symbolizes the separationists advocates of the movement of Back to Africa, could not get a hold on the protagonist as he had on many African Americans despite the fact that the protagonist is aligned with no figure of power now. IM rather resorts to a hole where he confesses that his reflections constitute a lesson of his life and realizes that now he has a full conception of himself as well as the world around. ‘‘ the purpose that he originally imagines for his life and the misguided passion for action that lead him down a path of further self compromise finally give way to his perception of American society’’¹⁴⁹, Michael Hill insists.

Freed of all the illusions and imposed names, IM ends his journey in underground and the novel ends in the epilogue, a closing frame device. The three stages of this journey reveal the success of the venture that IM describes in the epilogue: he uses literary expression to ‘‘to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of [his] certainties’’ (*IM* 581) of life. Writing down his life has also illuminated him and made him admits his complicity in his own misfortunes. He not only realizes that freedom is ‘‘nothing but knowing how to say what [you] got up in [your] head’’ (*IM* 11) but also admits responsibility for his own actions. ‘‘An ability to "accept one's fate" is established. This, in a general way, is the explanation of the "catharsis" of tragedy’’¹⁵⁰, Burke writes. Though he acknowledges that he is ‘‘implicated and partially responsible’’ (*IM* 579) for his condition, he explains that he has been badly hurt, ‘‘hurt to the abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility.’’ (*IM* 579) And though, for the moment, the ground seems his only possible place, the novel concludes

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁵⁰ Burke, Kenneth *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* Louisiana State University Press 1941, p. 320.

on a note of possibility. “But my world has become one of infinite possibilities” (*IM* 576), *Invisible Man* says. Taking up his life underground is the escape phase while the epilogue predicts a positive integration with society.

Ellison’s indebtedness to Kenneth Burke who discards the traditional conception of tragedy is thus considerable. Like Burke, Ellison blends tragedy with comedy to alleviate the tragic atmosphere and thus highlight an innocent, yet a growing, awareness of his character. Ellison has permeated his novel with comedy and explains, in his introduction to the novel, that his hero “managed to emerge less angry than ironic.” (*IM* xviii) Ellison works from Burke’s understanding of comedy as a way that “should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate end would not be passiveness but maximum consciousness. One would “transcend” himself by noting his own foibles.”¹⁵¹ “Maximum consciousness”, by which Burke might well refer to a person’s movement toward self- knowledge, seems to parallel *IM* phrase in the epilogue after reaching a full awareness of his mistakes “Infinite possibilities”. The hero is thus tragicomic who “has transcended the state that characterized him at the start.”¹⁵² In this way, the underground is not a point of ritual death but a point of transcendence. Through comedy, Ellison succeeded in subverting existing stereotypes of blacks. Blending elements of the comic and the tragic, Ellison “made it impossible to simply pity the protagonist, and subsequently increased the reader’s ability to see beyond racial identity”¹⁵³, as Lawrence Jackson puts it.

2. *Beloved*: Narrative Strategies

2.1. “Breaking Silences”, “Speaking the Unspeakable”: Morrison’s Concern with Historical Unspeakability

"Without significant exception, the universalizing discourses of Europe and the United States assume the silence, willing or otherwise, of the non-European world. There is incorporation, there is inclusion, there is direct rule, there is coercion. But there is only infrequently an acknowledgment that the colonized people should be heard from, their ideas known"

¹⁵¹ Ellison, Ralph. Quoted in McSweeney, Kerry *Invisible Man: Race and Identity* G.K HALL & Co, 1988, p. 122.

¹⁵² Burke, Kenneth “Dialectic of Tragedy” in *A Grammar of Motives* University of California Press 1969 p. 38

¹⁵³ Bloom Harold, *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man* Infobase Publishing, 2008 p. 56.

Edward Said (*Culture and Imperialism* p 50)

“ Silence in and about the subject was the order of the day. Some of the silences were broken, and some were maintained by authors who lived with and within the policing strategies. What I am interested in are the strategies for breaking it”

Toni Morrison (*Playing in the Dark* p 51)

Being denied a voice in history and diving into the realm of the unspeakable, Morrison revisits the Black American subjectivity by engaging in the reconsideration of the dominant modes of discourse; proposing new modes for the sake of “breaking” these “silences”. In her narrative project of exploring the horrific African American experience and traumatic selfhood, the Black American experience is presented as incompatible with the dominant modes of discourse. As the latter denies the oppressed a voice, Morrison foregrounds the necessity for the Blacks to speak for themselves. “breaking” the “silences” in history goes along with the re-examination of the dominant modes of discourse.

Seen in this way, Morrison articulates the African American experience as uniquely traumatic experience of the slave representing the dominant modes as imperialistic and exclusionary and thus inadequate to portray the horrific realities of slavery. In so doing, Morrison dismantles dominant notions of subjectivity by highlighting the dehumanizing effect of the racism inherent in these modes of discourse stemming from the Enlightenment ideology of classification. Deeming these racist modes inappropriate for the articulation of the Black experience, Morrison explores new modes of expression in conveying the slave’s experience. In presenting these alternative modes of representation, Morrison delves into the domain of the “unspeakable” in order “to give the past a different reading, to represent Black American experience not simply as it has been measured by dominant norms [...] involves a reinvention of tradition and of dominant language tropes”¹⁵⁴, as Abdellatif Khayati puts it.

¹⁵⁴ Khayati, Abdellatif. “Representation, Race, and the 'Language' of the Ineffable in Toni Morrison's Narrative.” op. cit., p.313.

Beloved is thus a counter-discourse to the expressive modes of power which have long excluded the Black voice and formed it as the Other. Through the portrayal of Schoolteacher, Morrison voices her rebuttal of the Enlightenment thinking. Schoolteacher is represented as the embodiment of this rational racist thinking, going around with “a notebook” in his hands, wherein he characterizes his characters and classifies them into categories with the very ink that Sethe makes for him. Using a dehumanizing language, Schoolteacher instructs his nephews on selecting slaves showing them how ‘to put [Sethe’s] human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right.’ (B 228) Schoolteacher’s stance, thus, encapsulates conventional mode of thinking, that categorizes and pins down in order to reduce and subjugate the Other, that Morrison seeks to overturn.

Morrison’s novel presents Schoolteacher as a ‘definer’ (B 225) who seeks to fix blacks to into inferiority so to preserve his superiority. In inciting his students to divide the slave into “human” and “animal” features, his disruptive logic is an example of what Morrison considers to be an expression of dominance. This arrogant mode of expression is also seen when Schoolteacher reprimands his nephew for maltreating Sethe. Ironically, his worry is not out of compassion for Sethe but because he conceives her as an animal who goes wild when overbeaten; he asks his nephew to think “just think - what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education.” (B 176)

Morrison’s critique of the white discourse points at this whites’ manipulation of the Africanist narrative¹⁵⁵, and how “that narrative is used in the construction of a history and a context for whites by positioning history-lessness and context-lessness for blacks”. (PID 53) Emphatically, in evoking the reasoning behind the institution of slavery and grappling with the “unspeakable” for slaves, Morrison feared that *Beloved* would be the least read novel because “it is about something the characters

¹⁵⁵ Morrison, Toni “Romancizing the Shadow” Toni Morrison **Playing in the Dark : Whiteness and the Literary Imagination**, op. cit., p. 53. Morrison explains that the Africanist narrative is the story of a black person, the experience of being bound and/or rejected.

don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean, it's national amnesia".¹⁵⁶.

This fear to deal with a traumatic past is clear from the way the characters willingly repress all memories of the past; Sethe keeps everything at bay "because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver's inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries" (B p 69) But Morrison turns the very implausibility of remembering the past into a plausibility of telling and narrating. And by breaking the silences, Morrison's demonstrates that confronting the past is healing and thus "liberating", for "you can see what it is that has destabilized you. You know what has gone down beneath the cracks."¹⁵⁷. The Black has thus to make his voice heard in literature and in history and record his own story which took no shape in the master discourse. The latter, Morrison contends, has turned the black voice unheard creating what Morrison calls the "the silence of the black person". In this regard, Morrison points out that "Blacks don't speak for themselves in the texts. And since they were not permitted to say their own things, history and the academy can't really permit them to take center stage in the discourse of the text in art, in literature."¹⁵⁸

Thus, in Morrison's view, access to the African American self has been limited, for "silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse." (*PID* 9) An aggravating fact, for Morrison, is that the African American has been imagined as "the Africanist Other" (*PID* 16) and this ultimately led to what she calls "the projection of the not me." (*PID* 38) It is for this reason that Morrison deems the founding literature "dour", "troubled", "frightened" and "haunted", and sorely "antithetical" to "the American dream". (*PID* 35) She goes further to liken the oppression found in Founding literature with the oppression and limitation to freedom seen in the Old World and she thus wonders: Why should a young country repelled by

¹⁵⁶ Angelo Bonnie "The Pain of Being Black: An Interview with Toni Morrison" (22 May 1989) reprinted by permission in Taylor Guthrie Danille. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* Mississippi University Press, 1994 p. 257

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 266.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 262.

Europe's moral and social disorder, swooning in a fit of desire and rejection, devote its talents to reproducing in its own literature the typology of diabolism it wanted to leave behind?" (*PID* 36) Oppression and exclusion mark thus the Founding literature; the Africanist persona is present in that literature "decidedly not American, decidedly other", as Morrison puts it. (*PID* 48) The Black American is shaped as the other by the white imagination and thus as a character he, ironically, nurtures it. For this reason, Morrison contends that "Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities" and "slave population was understood to have offered itself up for reflections on human freedom in terms other than the abstractions of human potential and the rights of man." (*PID* 38) The African American is thus present in American literature denied of humanity not as an American but as an African stranger.

Not content with merely critiquing the reductive nature of the master discourse, Morrison addresses alternative modes of expression and 'being' that are consistent with the black experience. Morrison's straightforward alternative is "an exploration of anxiety imported from the shadows of European culture." (*PID* 36) It is to be mentioned here that Morrison has always drawn connection between slavery, the Enlightenment and Western historiography asserting that it is on the same bases the Enlightenment projected the African as the other and accommodated slavery that the Western Historiography did. The strategy through which Morrison endeavors in exploring this anxiety is "the powerful imaginative way". As its name indicates, this strategy is not a mere realistic representation of reality but a way in which not just the characters or Black Americans or even we as reader face an unimaginable, inaccessible, horrifying past. Morrison aims in this way "to record them (past misfortunes) so as to prevent their repetition through exposure and inoculation." (*PID* 36) To be it differently and preferably again in Morrison's words: "One of the things that are important to me is the powerful imaginative way in which we deconstructed and reconstructed reality in order to get through."¹⁵⁹ Interestingly, Morrison leaves a space for the reader's imaginative power because her aim is "to have those characters, move off the page and inhabit the imagination of whoever has opened herself or

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p 252.

himself to them.”¹⁶⁰ Fiction, Morrison, states” is the product of imagination”, yet “fiction is not random”¹⁶¹, she insists. In this way, Morrison uses fiction to get the African American, who is formed as the other in the Western discourse, have access to their silenced past. One way of making this past present, for Morrison, is through the use of the Gothic.

The Gothic text is a site where unspeakable things are spoken. As a literary tendency rather than a genre¹⁶², the Gothic defies the Western modes of representation which pervade the American narrative. It is marked by the return of past histories of shame, humiliation, violence, and oppression, of things that should be gone. In other words, the Gothic tendencies “express a profound anxiety about historical crimes and perverse human desires that cast their shadow over [...] the sunny American republic”¹⁶³, as Eric Savory puts it. Savory draws on Foucault’s discourse analysis to substantiate on the liberating nature of the Gothic. Eric Savory writes:

Foucault thus enables us to establish three things about Anglo-American society in the nineteenth century. Repression in the form of direct silencing was a powerful force; discursive structures exacerbated repression by policing desire rigorously; and the pleasures generated by scientific discourses made things still worse. (Eric Savory 1998, p 28)

Releasing the repressed and exploring the foreclosed topics is a primary concern of the Gothic. As Savory puts it: “Gothic can help heal the wounds of repression by putting into play what silencing, denial, and infantilization tried to police.” (Savory 1998, p 28) He goes on to say that” the gothic can allow for the voice of the culturally repressed and hence act out a resistance to the dominant culture”. (Savory 1998, p 130) Morrison’s text, for instance, enacts the past so that, as Savory puts it, “the voice of the dead slave can act as a means of insisting on the presence of history.” (Savory

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 253.

¹⁶¹ Morrison, “Toni The Site of Memory”, op. cit., p. 93.

¹⁶² Savory, in his definition of the Gothic, contends that rather than the gothic is a fluid tendency rather than a discrete literary “mode,” an impulse rather than a literary artifact” pp6 He also writes: “gothic cultural production in the United States has yielded neither a “genre” nor a cohesive “mode” but rather a discursive field” p. 1

¹⁶³ Savory, Eric and Martin, Robert K. *American Gothic : New Interventions in a National Narrative* Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1998 p.168

1998, p 130) In this way, Morrison rebuts the 'history-lessness' for Black American posited by 'whites'. (*PID* 53)

In its disruption of the master narratives, the Gothic significantly disrupts notions of identity as "the national "self" is undone by the return of its repressed Otherness",¹⁶⁴. The Gothic's disruption of identity is corroborated by Teresa Goddu who asserts that the Gothic tendency "discloses the instability of America's self-representations" and "exposes the artificial foundations of national identity."¹⁶⁵ Morrison dismantles the traditional notions of identity as a fixed subject by presenting the Gothic figure of Beloved not a single identity but a conflation of many. In the novel, Beloved appears as the materialized presence of Sethe's murdered daughter as well as those slaves who did not have the chance to speak. In the opening of the novel, the narrator tells us that "124 is spiteful, full of a baby venom" (*B* 3) suggesting that Beloved is Sethe's murdered daughter. Beloved is also scared on the neck which reinforces the idea that she is Sethe's murdered daughter. On the other hand, in one of her monologues, the Gothic figure of Beloved gives us an account of a slave ship experience, representing all the slaves:

I am always crouching the man on my face is dead . . . in the beginning the women are away from the men and the men are away from the women storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men that is when I begin to be on the back of the man for a long time I see only his neck and his wide shoulders above me . . . he locks his eyes and dies on my face . . . the others do not know that he is dead. (*B* 211-212)

The Gothic figure of Beloved, thus, represents an individual trauma as well as a communal traumatic one. Beloved, in one of her monologues, repeats that her "self" is merged within Sethe's: "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing" (*B* 284). The very fact that one self is "not separate" from the other is antithetical to the Enlightenment's conception of the self as unique.

In dismantling conventional norms of identity, the Gothic reinforces the limits of language in revealing certain truths. These limits occur as linguistic disruptions

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p.1

¹⁶⁵ Goddu, Teresa A. *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, p. 10

which challenge the stability of identity as the newer self emerges out of the older one. Seen in this way, the Gothic is about things that are difficult to articulate and are therefore inexpressible. Savory point to this inarticulateness in the Gothic explaining that “the [...] things [...] beyond representation that [...] demand our attention, that compel us to explanatory language but resist the strategies of that language”¹⁶⁶. Speaking about Morrison’s *Beloved*, Justin D Edwards contends that “horrific experiences of colonization and slavery cannot be easily articulated in a comprehensible language. Racial violence, then, points to the continual eruption of indecipherable languages that attempt to utter the memories of the slave”¹⁶⁷ Sethe who committed infanticide in order not to allow her daughter return to slavery cannot put an explanation of such an act into words. When Paul D shows her the clipping about her daughter’s murder asking her for an explanation, the narrator tells us that “Sethe could recognize only seventy five printed words[...]but she knew that the words she did not understand hadn’t any more power than she had to explain” (*B* 190) Thus, the clipping is unable to contain Sethe’s motivation. Words seem worthless and incompatible with her experience. Through this unspeakability, Morrison highlights the traumatic experience of silenced slaves.

If “the United States assumes the silence of the non-European” as Said puts it, Morrison’s literary project is to “break” this “silence”. The history *Beloved* represents, though it cannot be fully reconstructed, it must be acknowledged. Indeed, a great danger is inherent in narration as we see that Sethe almost falls into madness when she delves into her past but maintaining the silence would have been more damaging to her identity. In recognizing that “anything is better than silence” (*B* 143), we witness a transformation of an African American woman from a stage of invisibility into a stage of self definition.

¹⁶⁶ Eric, Savory p.169

¹⁶⁷ Edwards, J. *Gothic Canada: Reading the Spectre of a National Literature*. Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 2005, p.119

2.2. “Her Best Thing, Her Beautiful, Magical Best Thing”¹⁶⁸: Magic Realism as a Decolonizing Device

“Whatever popularity the slave narrative had-and they influenced abolitionists and converted antiabolitionists- the slave’s own narrative, while freeing the narrator in many ways, did not destroy the master narrative. The master narrative could make any number of adjustments to keep itself intact.”

Toni Morrison (*PID* 51)

“ghosts offer an alternative to the established reality, celebrating the diversity of the real. Literature must be pluralist, in the same way as society should be, as Morrison claims. This implies the relativization of truth and reality; there is not one single reality but several realities, nor is there a single truth but several truths. On the other hand, the recurrent journeys into the past through ancestral characters and ghosts entail the breaking of a linear narrative prescribed by the Western literary canon.”¹⁶⁹

In “Breaking Silences”, “Speaking the Unspeakable”, we discussed how the gothic, in *Beloved*, emerges as a narrative strategy that represents a lost history. In this way, *Beloved* shares with other postcolonial works the preoccupation with the gaps in historical records and highlights how the dynamics of slavery condition the lives of the oppressed. As discussed before, Morrison, in *Beloved*, tries to explore what has not been told about the African American experience. Here we can ask what are the truths about the African American experience that have not already been spoken?

Beloved combines the magical and the real to evoke the past. According to Morrison, Magical Realism is “another way of looking at truth” and thus challenges the assumptions of a dominant way of looking at things. Morrison thus projects Magical Realism as a decolonizing strategy in a postcolonial context. In recreating a past, however painful, Morrison undermines the ideological basis upon which it has been constructed by the dominant discourse. An example of such assumptions is that the slave life was good for some. In *Beloved*, Sethe is called an “animal” when she slaughters her daughter. When *Beloved* comes back from the dead and lives with Sethe, we come to understand this murder as an act of love, which she explains saying: “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe.” (*B* 193) Sethe would rather see her

¹⁶⁸ Morrison, Toni *Beloved* p. 296

¹⁶⁹ Jackson, Rosemary. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. New York: Routledge, 1981. Print, p. 45

babies dead than see them as slaves. Actually, she proves that the horrors of slavery are beyond imagination and cannot be lived. Not only does she destroy the claims that slavery is good for Africans but she makes us see infanticide as an act of resistance when she says: "I stopped him" (B 193) Sethe who has been the victim of a dual oppression, sexist and racist, lives in an alternative world with the presence of a ghost to take over racial claims. Morrison thus uses Magical realism not only to put her text in historical reality for which there is no record but to demolish the dominant discourse.

From what has been discussed, one might say that Morrison uses Magic realism not only to right the wrongs in history but as a method with which African American identity is reconceived. If the post slavery period is considered as postcolonial, one can argue that magic realism is a decolonizing device. Edward Said suggests that magic realism, as a way of resistance, challenges the colonial authority and redefines identity:

As one reads "magic realists" like Carpentier, who first describes it, Borges, García Márquez, and Fuentes, one vividly apprehends the dense interwoven strands of a history that mocks linear narrative, easily recuperated "essences," and the dogmatic mimesis of "pure" representation. At its best, the culture of opposition and resistance suggests a theoretical alternative and a practical method for reconceiving human experience in non imperialist terms.

This "theoretical alternative" which is magical realism makes of existing truths relative ones. Incorporating a ghost into the narrative makes us perceive a new reality. Besides, formal fragmentation that goes along with magic realism parallels the state of alienation and fragmentation that characterizes the African American in post bellum America. *Beloved*, as a non linear narrative, blurs the boundaries between past and present to bridge the gap between occurrences of the past and those of the present. She begins each chapter in the present then she returns to the past. And when the gothic figure of Beloved gains a bodily presence, the reader is confronted with conflicting interpretations of events and characters. By blurring lines between the dead and the living, Morrison attempts to defy preconceived notions of what is considered as true. Beloved is who Sethe thinks is the return of her murdered daughter. She is also a survivor from the horrific Middle Passage as is revealed through one of Beloved's monologues and a victim of sexual oppression as suggested by Stamp Paid.

This sense of doubt experienced by the reader or what Faris calls ‘unsettling doubts’¹⁷⁰ constitutes one of the major elements of the magic realist narrative. Morrison’s construction of this sense of doubt does not aim to confuse her readers but to have them participate in the creation of meaning. The transgressive power of *Beloved* lies in the fact that when the world of real is indefinite, then all assumptions of truth become less certain. As a magical realist narrative, *Beloved* unsettles the reader’s perceptions of reality. Thus, since it disrupts the reader’s habit of getting a finite truth from the text, it increases its participation in the text. This seems to be the very intention of Morrison in writing *Beloved*: ‘My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and I think that is what literature is supposed to do.’¹⁷¹

2.3. *Beloved* as a Neo-slave Narrative

The neo-slave narratives that mimic the original first-person slave narratives frequently focus on issues of individual identity. The writers of neoslave narratives often emphasize the interiority or psychology of the slaves and new world slavery, a topic frequently overlooked in the original narratives, which took as their mandate to describe the institution of slavery itself ‘¹⁷²

I have dwelt at some length on narrative strategies in the early slave narratives as well as its successor, the contemporary African American narrative, or what has come to be called the neo slave narrative. This contemporary narrative of slavery may be seen as a generational continuity with earlier African American literary tradition. Seen in this way, the publication of the first neo-slave narrative, Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*, in 1966 set a new form of representation that would come to pre-dominate the African American novel for the second half of the twentieth century.

This body of work, which takes slavery as its subject, contains a rich array of formal devices for conveying the story. In fact, what is remarkable about these contemporary narratives of slavery is how experimental the authors have been in developing various forms to tell a story. Given the paucity of available materials from

¹⁷⁰ Faris, Wendy B. *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, op.cit., p. 7

¹⁷¹ Toni Morrison, quoted in Claudia Tate, ed., *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983), p.125.

¹⁷² Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann *Writing African American Women: An Encyclopedia of Literature by and about Women of Color, Volumes 1 and 2* Greenwood Press, 2006. p. 674

the slaves' perspectives, these writers of neo slave narrative, in their historical task, not only capture the kind of spirit also evinced in the antebellum narrative but also give a fresh impetus to the African American literary tradition. Through this experimental innovation in historiography, the writers of neo-slave narratives confronted the challenge of recovering the lived experience of enslavement- what Toni Morrison in *Beloved* calls "unspeakable things unspoken" and "not a story to pass on".

Combining elements of fiction with historical truth, these writers were able to tell what was difficult to tell. Their task was to dig deep into the psychology of the oppressed and put what was once "unspeakable" into writing. Notwithstanding the different perspectives with which these writers of neo-slave narratives approach the American chattel slavery, they all tend to illustrate the centrality of history and memory to individual, racial and national identity. Slaves in these novels posit their memory as a crucial documentary force in history in response to white cultural appropriation.

Beloved is but one narrative, among other slave narratives, that set as its main task the recuperation of voice and body by challenging appropriation and commodification. As Morrison remarks in an interview with Marsha Darling, the process of writing the book propelled her to spice up historical research with the resources of the imagination; only then could she get at the story of the infanticide of a slave child from the child's perspective:

I did research about a lot of things in this book in order to narrow it, to make it narrow and deep, but I did not do much research on Margaret Garner other than the obvious stuff, because I wanted to invent her life, which is a way of saying I wanted to be accessible to anything the characters had to say about it. Recording her life as lived would not interest me, and would not make me available to anything that might be pertinent. I got to a point where in asking myself who could judge Sethe adequately, since I couldn't, and nobody else that knew her could, really, I felt the only person who could judge her would be the daughter she killed.¹⁷³

In this way, Morrison struggled to give voice to historically muted subjects of slavery. By doing so, Morrison wished to give her readers an access to the slave's past. For

¹⁷³ Valerie Smith "The Neo-slave Narrative" in Fisch, Audrey A. *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*, op. cit., p.174.

strategic purposes, Morrison deliberately altered the original account although the novel is based on a real-life story of a slave mother. This revisionist strategy is in fact a key characteristic of the neo slave narrative. In fact, most of the authors who took up and addressed this episode of the American past adopted a narrative strategy for telling the stories wherein slavery acts as the historical episode that inhabits and haunts the present. What is important now is to explore the significance of this body of work of the African American fiction. An important point pertaining to our general debate over the issue of African American identity concerns what these authors of neo slave narratives say about black subjectivity. Why have Toni Morrison and other authors of slave narrative chosen to represent slavery as a subject from which to approach Black American identity?

Before answering such a pertinent a question, I believe that a lucid elucidation of the term 'neo-slave narrative' should be made here. This contemporary African American novel is undoubtedly indebted to the first form of representation for people of African descent in America. Like its predecessor, the neo slave narrative dwells on the black self understanding of his/her situation. The term 'neo-slave narrative' was first coined in 1987 by Bernard W. Bell in his book *The Afro-American Novel and Its Traditions*. Borrowing from Robert Scholes, Bell uses the word *fabulation*¹⁷⁴ to refer to this new body of literature achieved by experimenting with different combinations of parable, satire, legend, fable and ritual in a postmodern romance. Calling this African American narrator as a contemporary romanticist or fabulator, Bell comments on his experimentation and creation of the 'neo slave' narrative. He writes:

Some contemporary black fabulators combine elements of fable, legend, and slave narrative to protest racism and justify the deeds, struggles, migrations, and spirit of black people. Although the use of black folklore, especially music, speech, and religion, is didactic, contemporary black fabulators rely more on the artifice of the storyteller and humorist than on social realism to stimulate our imagination, win our sympathy, and awaken our conscience to moral and social justice. The power of

¹⁷⁴ Scholes defines fabulation as: "a less realistic kind of narrative; more shapely, more evocative; more concerned with ideas and ideals, less concerned with things." See: Robert Scholes. *The Fabulators* (New York: Oxford University Press), p.12.

faith, messianic hope, self-reliance or direct action, and the lynching ritual are central motifs of this hybrid form.¹⁷⁵

In this sense, the neo-slave narrative is a site where African American writers evoke and invoke slavery as a powerful landscape on which to reconsider, rewrite and re-envision history.

If the early slave narratives evolved as responsive writings that had to reply to the most virulent and racist arguments presented by proslavery debates, the neo-slave narrative, adopting the same responsive nature and the same conventions as the early slave narrative, challenges history. By the power of their imagination and by being free to use that power, as opposed to slave narrators writing under the strictures of slavery, contemporary slave narrators create fiction from fact by approaching slavery from a myriad perspectives embracing a wide range of styles of writing, all attempting to redefine the African American identity. In this regard, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu points out that “these novels reexamine and reinvent the African American experience as a part of a literary process that points toward a revision and re-definition of black identity from an imaginative perspective.”¹⁷⁶

In this exploration of facets of the experience of the enslaved self that, in the slave narrative remained in the realm of the unspeakable, contemporary black American writers transform the fragmented past into what Margaret Walker calls the “muscle and flesh for the real and living bones of history”¹⁷⁷ “Many of these narratives”, as Beaulieu notes, “were written to fill in the gaps and recover the silences often left in the original slave narratives and as such engage with themes of history, memory, and identity.”¹⁷⁸ When Sethe recounts her past dehumanization and indignities, in the process of shaping an idea of herself, she insinuates that such things were never told before: “This is the first time I’m telling it and I’m telling it to you because it might explain something to you although I know you don’t need me to do it. To tell it or even think over it”. (B 227-228)

¹⁷⁵Bernard W. Bell. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987 p. 285

¹⁷⁶ Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann *Writing African American Women: An Encyclopedia of Literature by and about Women of Color, Volumes 1 and 2* op. cit., p. 412.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 413

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 673

Memory, as discussed before, is another crucial component in the neo slave narrative as it is related to the way the narrative shapes its pattern. Interestingly, Beaulieu says that memory is “a critical issue not only because the way one remembers shapes the structure of the narrative but also because it is crucial to the reconstruction of an unwritten past.”¹⁷⁹ Melvin’s Dixon’s in his analysis of the black’s writer’s use of memory goes further to say that “memory becomes a tool to regain and reconstruct not just the past but history itself.”¹⁸⁰ As the locus of memory, the neo-slave narrative allows history to claim space in a single text. In this way, the neo-slave narrative becomes a site where memory rewrites history and, ultimately, a site where the African American identity is redefined. Yet, this memory is not sweet. This memory troubles as it liberates.

When we take the concrete example of Sethe in relation to her past actions we feel the heavy weight of her trauma. Though she ran from the terrifying life of slavery, she was confronted with a painful memory that kept her a prisoner of her past. Now she is free to do what she wants and say what is on her mind, yet she is still haunted by a past that clearly wears her out:

Sethe's crime was staggering and her pride outstripped even that; but she could not countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy. Daily life took as much as she had. The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out. Slave life; freed life--every day was a test and a trial. Nothing could be counted on in a world where even when you were a solution you were a problem. (B 302)

Being a “problem” when you are free recalls Du Bois’s statement that African Americans are a problem. The meaning of freedom is, thus, problematized. Sethe cannot enjoy fully her freedom until she understands that the past is not “something to leave behind.” Only when she assumes responsibility of her story, she gains an understanding of herself and her history. This is seen when finally Sethe, after days of living with Beloved, decides to leave her and join the rest of the women of her community: “Now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them

¹⁷⁹ Ibid p. 413

¹⁸⁰ Melvin Dixon “The Black Writer’s Use of Memory”. In *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, edited by Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally p. 19

and leaving *Beloved* behind. Alone. Again.” (B 309) Alone signifies that Sethe grasped her past and she is able to unlock herself from it. She knows herself better now and is more decisive of how to head sanely towards the future. By overcoming her past and dominating her history, she achieves self-realization.

In *Beloved* and other neo slave narratives, the self is the creator of her remembered experience. By the telling a story of those experiences, this self seeks order and meaning in her/his past. By overcoming her past and dominating her history, Sethe redefines her identity and prevents others from defining her. Morrison says in this regard: “One way to benefit from the lessons of earlier mistakes and past misfortunes is to record them so as to prevent their repetition through exposure and inoculation.” (PID 36) Memory and imagination are, thus, tools with which to revisit identity. Albert Stone in his book *Autobiographical Occasions*, argues that the neo slave narrative like any other African American autobiography is an “act of memory and imagination”. This text “remodels the past into a narrative shape which necessarily resembles chronicle, fiction, ...[b]ut is also and simultaneously 'history' [that] recreates a past shared with others, one [that] actually occurred and [was] not simply imagined.”¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ Albert Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts: Versions of American Identity from Henry Adams to Nate Shaw* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. p. 3

Our examination of the formal features of the two novels, lead us to reach some conclusions. First, by putting emphasis on the structure of the novels, we have noticed that both writers set an intimate relationship between form and theme. The formation of identity goes hand in hand with the development of the narratives. The nameless narrator's journey in *Invisible Man* from blindness, illusions, and accepting the definitions handed down to him by others added to his suffering, disillusionment and eventually his enlightenment and self discovery follows Burke's model from "passion to purpose to perception." We have also shown how magic realism in Morrison's work is employed right when Sethe is emancipated and thinks she is finally free and completely self-liberated to reveal about her psychological traumas left by slavery.

Second, we have established the ways in which both Ellison and Morrison mark their distinctiveness as African American writers and have shown that their novels mediate what Callahan calls "the unresolved dilemmas" of African Americans. Through the study of the form of the novels, it has been shown that the writers revisited African American identity in a way they rejected all faulty assumptions and static definitions.

Conclusion

Descending from the tradition of early slave narratives yet deflecting away from their main concerns, this study shows that *Invisible Man* and *Beloved* are two contemporary African American narratives that have opened new possibilities for the study of African American identity. While early slave narrators were involved in the cause of abolition and wrote for its sake, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison shape the African American experience so that *Invisible Man* and *Beloved* pick up where these early narratives leave off.

The attempt along this study was to show how narratives are used by “marginalized people as methods to assert their identity and the existence of their own history.”¹⁸² To this end, we have followed Narrative approach (Ricoeur) and Critical Race theory. Using this theoretical framework, this thesis has focused on the representation of African Americans in post bellum America, their predicament and describing the extent to which they are able to empower themselves in patriarchal America.

We have assumed that even though the two writers wrote in two different periods of time, their main purpose was the same. Both writers deal with the same theme: the quest for an African American identity in the white dominated American society. We have seen that though they are united under the scope of the African American literary tradition that arose mainly from the desire to counter the assumptions of a culture that predominated America from antebellum era to modern times, Ellison and Morrison give a unique representation of the African American experience. In articulating the African American identity with all its density and complexity, Ellison and Morrison challenge existing modes of representation. The signal accomplishment of Ellison and Morrison as writers is that they managed to transcend stereotypical representations of African Americans. They were not so much concerned with the social effects of race as with greater universal themes of love, desire, hope and individual responsibility.

¹⁸² Said, Edward *Culture and Imperialism*, op.cit., Introduction xii

Given the fact that the two works are written by two African American authors, male and female, at two different historical and social circumstances, this thesis has inevitably touched upon some similarities and differences between the two works. Actually, this comparison has been done, to some extent, at the level of form and content.

At the level of content, we have seen that in both novels, the characters' painful search for identity stems from their distorted self perception. Both writers argue that this psychological deficiency, an end result of a long history of humiliation and oppression, has a dire impact on their consciousness and hence identity. In this regard, we have taken into consideration Dubois's construct of "Double Consciousness". We have seen that this "double consciousness" prevails in the two novels as both protagonists have this "sense of always looking at the self through the eyes of others." Later, we argued that the African American cannot move ahead unless he ceases to "see himself through the revelation of the other world."¹⁸³

This study has revealed that although firmly grounded in the cultural heritage of African Americans, both works transcend narrowly prescribed conceptions of African American identity, exhibiting universal patterns and images. We have seen how both writers stress the burden of individual responsibility for his or her own fate.

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison not only shows the tragedy that befell the African American male elite but also denounces overtly stereotypical representations of the African American that denies him of any psychological or intellectual depth and complexity. For Ellison, such a portrayal of the African American as the revolting always on the defensive or the victim is a simplistic view that limits the possibilities of the African American as a human being and leads to the disintegration of his identity.

¹⁸³ Du Bois, W.E.B *The Souls of Black Folks* , op. cit., xiii

Morrison's work is also a stark representation of the socio-historical circumstances of the African American reality. Morrison's dissatisfaction with the way things are presented in the early slave narratives gave birth to her fifth novel *Beloved*. "No slave society in the history of the world wrote more- or more thoughtfully about its own enslavement"¹⁸⁴, she wrote. She, thus, suggested using magic realism as a decolonizing device. Morrison's strategy is to rely on "the powerful imaginative way"¹⁸⁵ to explore the horrifying past. Creating the ghost and integrating it in the story of Margeret Garner is not done at random. We have seen how this ghostly creation pushes the characters to speak the unspeakable. In this way, Morrison delves into an inaccessible past and thus revisits both the African American history and its identity.

In *Beloved*, the theme links the antebellum period to the post bellum one. Morrison focuses on the psychological scars of slavery and the repression of personal trauma. In a slave society, the salvation of the African American from the shackles of slavery is perceived through the support of community. Sethe, who loses this support after she committed infanticide, carries a double burden after emancipation. She is not only estranged from her community but is also obliged "to start the day's serious work of beating back the past." Though free, this burdensome life drives her almost mad. When the ghost shows up, Sethe is obliged to confront her past. She reconfigures a story of infanticide into a story of mother love. This is exactly the beginning of her inner journey and the confrontation with what she disliked the most in her past, a past that is justified as outrageous in the master discourse. Along with the support of her community, Sethe writes her own story. Morrison's main concern is twofold. The African American experience is to be judged from an African American stand point and not from the

¹⁸⁴ Morrison, Toni "The Site of Memory in Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir", op. cit., p.90.

¹⁸⁵ Taylor, Guthrie Danille. K *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, op. cit., p. 252.

white's man standards. Furthermore, an individual psychological healing and self discovery is inseparable from communal support.

The clash between African folk tradition and the white system of values in postbellum America is a central issue developed by Ellison in his novel. Actually, we have argued that the Invisible Man's blind assimilation and his acquiescence to figures of powers bring about his downfall. "Trueblood", who serves in the novel as a model for Invisible Man who is true to his blood, offers the protagonist ways of sustaining himself and confronting the pain of life by embracing storytelling, an important feature in his folk tradition. Basically, we have argued that the clash between separatist tendencies and integrationists ones is another bewildering factor that impedes the narrator's quest for identity. By bringing together these two major forces, Ellison broaches the predicament in which the African American finds himself as he struggles to survive in a world where each force tries to impose a version of reality on him.

Yet, in the case of the African American male, caught between two social forces, blind assimilation stands in his way towards liberation. Ellison's intention in *Invisible Man* is not to condemn his character's behavior but to address the issue of social responsibility of the African American as the American artist and his role in determining his destiny and make his own choices. Ellison creates a character that follows the path of Booker T Washington only to find himself rebuked for his submissive attitude. Ellison deems Black leadership that signifies naïve optimism as inadequate for the African American. Adopting such stands cannot give a true image of the African American. When Invisible Man reverts to writing his story, he removes all "the miniature version of himself", (Edward Said) and fashions out his true identity. To put it in Ricoeur's words: "Narrative constructs the durable properties of a character."

At the level of form, we have seen that Ellison's disappointment with the protest fiction endorsed by many African Americans made him very careful about his narrative structure. Such narrative arrangement of "three part division" is meant to challenge the conventions of naturalism that presents the African American reality as always painful and therefore challenge the mainstream literature. By using Kenneth Burke's model of tragedy from "purpose, to passion, to perception" to represent his narrator's movement, Ellison subverts existing stereotypes of African Americans and puts African American literature on universal bones. We have seen that *Invisible Man* does not simply die at the end as many blacks do, but undergoes a movement from naivety to enlightenment through the three stages modeled by Burke. These three parts of this journey are to be summed up as the passage from illusion to suffering to disillusionment. We have read this narrative technique not as a critique of racism, for this does not interest us but as a commentary on the futility of illusory foundations on which *Invisible Man*'s life was built. Seen in this way, Ellison truly made us see beyond racial identity.

Another subversive narrative strategy that has been explored in this thesis is magical realism. In injecting the gothic into her neo-slave narrative, Morrison aims at challenging historical closure by revealing certain truths. By giving voice to the silenced slaves, Morrison delves deep in the inexpressible and inaccessible. As said before, Morrison's desire to unveil the harsh reality came out of her dissatisfaction with the existing modes of representation. Actually, Morrison makes the dialogue between past and present possible and by exploring the connections between memory and identity. We have argued that formal fragmentation expresses the disruption and fragmentation of African American identities. In fact, one might claim that making *Beloved* a hard novel to read is itself a strategy that Morrison uses to express the inability to articulate the experiences of slaves.

This study has explored the way Ellison and Morrison use their narrative strategies to support their thematic concerns. One needs to mention

that critics who attacked Ralph Ellison for his deflection from the protest fiction overlooked the possibility that the African Americans could be as psychologically as complex as other groups of Americans. There are many writers who are willing to describe the ugliness of the African American reality, but the uniqueness of Ellison and Morrison lies in revealing hope beneath the surface of black America.

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ملخص

البحث عن الهوية الإفريقية الأمريكية في الرجل الخفي لـ رالف إليسون و محبوبتي لتوني

موريسون

تتركز هذه الأطروحة حول موضوع عملية تكون الهوية الإفريقية الأمريكية في روايتين معاصرتين: الرجل الخفي لـ رالف إليسون (1952) و محبوبتي (1987) لتوني موريسون. إذا كان هدفنا هو البحث في الطرق التي عولج فيها موضوع الهوية في الروائيتين ، أملنا يظل قائما على إبراز مدى تميز الكاتبان في الأدب الإفريقي الأمريكي. سنقوم من خلال استطلاعنا لموضوع الهوية بدراسة تحليلية لمضمون الروائيتين و كذا بدراسة الأسلوب و الآليات السردية التي وظفها الكاتبان لتدعيم أفكارهما حول موضوع الهوية. كما نسعى من خلال مقارنة الروائيتين الى إعادة صياغة الهوية الإفريقية الأمريكية و ذلك بالأخذ بعين الاعتبار التجارب التي يقوم بها الكاتبان على مستوى الشكل و المضمون.

بالاعتماد على النظرية السردية الحديثة و نظرية العرق النقدية يراجع الفصل الأول وجهات النظر التقليدية و المعاصرة للهوية الإفريقية و الأمريكية. هذا الفصل يكشف أنه على الرغم من كون الروائيتان تنحدران من أدب الفن السردى للرقيق (العبيد) إلا أنهما يفتحان آفاق جديدة لدراسة الهوية الإفريقية الأمريكية. بمعالجة خيبة أمل الكاتبان بالمثالية الأمريكية , نتناول التجريب الأدبي الذي يقوم به وذلك بالتركيز على تجاوز إليسون للأدب الإحتجاجي الذي عرف به معظم أدباء جيله من

الإفريقيين الأمريكيين و كسر موريسون لنهاية التاريخ التي يعزف بها الأدب الأمريكي التقليدي.

في الفصل الثاني نتتبع الطريق الى اثبات الهوية في كلا الروايتين. تمر الشخصيتان بنفس الصراع الداخلي المؤلم فبينما يجب على الرجل الخفي مواجهة المأزق الذي يعيشه السود و كذا إهاناته السابقة من أجل تكوين شخصيته ، تقوم ساذ في محبوبتي بالرجوع و التعمق في ماضيها الصامت من أجل فك الهوية التي فرضت عليها و بالتالي تحرير نفسها بطريقة شاملة. الفصل الأخير يتناول الأسلوب و الآليات الأدبية التي يدعم بها الكاتبان مضامينهما.

و في الخاتمة، أبرزنا أن الكتابة السردية الحديثة للكاتبين قادرة على صياغة تصريحات متمردة من خلال الشكل و المضمون و إذا فالهوية الإفريقية الأمريكية ليست بمفهوم راكد ثابت بل هي تصور متطور متغير مع الزمن و التجربة.