



The Failure of the Afro-American Dream in the African American Literature

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Abstract

The present research paper aims to explore the failure of the Afro-American dream in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* which highlights problems of identity, invisibility, racism and disillusionment within a white supremacist society. Besides, as an African American author, Ellison portrays the complexity of the African American identity through his protagonist's struggling journey of self-discovery from ignorance to disillusionment. In order to highlight these themes, the author employs diverse forms of oral tradition including songs, stories, and sayings which can be considered as weapons to voice the sad realities that African Americans were experiencing in a segregated society. Hence, this paper relies on an interdisciplinary approach that takes from both literature and culture in order to explore and analyze the different aspects of oral tradition and how can these forms help to communicate the desperate quest for visibility and equality and to examine the representation of the Afro-American dream within a racially segregated context.

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1. Introduction

African American literature is conceived as a mirror which reveals all the melancholies that have been experienced by African Americans in the land of America. This literature emerged during the 18th and 19th centuries and knew prominent African American authors who emerged to express their feelings, to expand their ideas and to portray their inherited culture through both prose and poetry. In this vein, they relied on the use of orality as an important aspect that enriches their literary writings and bestows them with rewards of authenticity, eligibility, diversity and vivacity. Ralph Ellison is one of those African American writers whose novel *Invisible Man* illustrates the best example of this dilemma that had been experienced by his protagonist, an African American man, through his long journey of self-discovery. Accordingly, this research paper aims to explore and analyze the desperate quest of visibility and equality in a segregated society and to examine the representation of the Afro-American dream within Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*.

2. Depiction of the Afro-American Dream in Literature

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The idea of the American dream reveals a deeper understanding, it highlights three important rights that each citizen may ensure; liberty, dignity and equality. In this context, the American historian and writer James Truslow Adams refers to the concept of equality in his book *The Epic of America* (1931) where he announces: “all men are created equal with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” (Adams, 1931, p. 07). He describes the American dream as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (Adams, 1931, p. 214) According to him, the American dream depicts the full ability and opportunity of citizens to achieve their goals regardless of their origins or ethnicity. However, African Americans were for a long time deprived of this dream because they experienced frustrating realities to achieve their full citizenship. Martin Luther King once states: “we must accept finite disappointment but never lose infinite hope”. These words reveal that African Americans have to resist all disillusionments and frustrations that they faced but never lose hope about their Afro-American dream.

Besides, this dream represents an obstacle for all Africans who eagerly anticipated its fulfilment in the new world. Among the earliest narratives which depicted such agonizing endurance was *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) that depicts a painful journey of the protagonist Equiano on a slave ship to the New World where the author crafts an authentic image about this travel and reveals his suffering as being a property of an officer, then sold as a commodity to a Quaker who converted him to Christianity and taught him reading and writing. Equiano could, finally, gain his own freedom and became a successful sailor and important activist in the abolitionist movement. Therefore, the Afro-American dream is mirrored clearly throughout this narrative from a slave illiterate man to a free educated, and successful activist. As further example of authors who engaged with the painful experiences of African American people is Booker T. Washington who explores the Afro-American dream within his autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901) with an emphasis on the importance of earning equality and respect within the American society and that the Afro-American dream will soon be realized. Hence, he depicts white supremacy in America as a hard exam that African Americans should pass by, but this exam will soon have an end.

After the end of the civil war in 1865 and the reconstruction era in 1877, the Afro-American dream started to get gradually its results. After the abolishment of slavery, many African American authors moved, at once, to mirror other less cruel, yet aggressive issues; including all kinds of injustice, racism and public lynching crimes. These social issues have been well documented by the civil and women’s rights activist Ida B. Wells in the form of pamphlets entitled *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases* and *The Red Record* which were published in the 1890s and which portray the grim lynching as a public punishment performed against the African Americans who were supposed to be convicted of a crime in which they may often be innocent. Such harsh punishment was inflicted on victims with the aim of terrorizing all the African Americans who were opposing segregation and seeking to achieve both justice and equality. Hence, this kind of punishment knew its end by the emergence of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in 1909, intending to fight lynching, violence, injustice, oppression, segregation

and white supremacy and willing to spread among the African Americans; justice, equality and equity as the core concepts of their Afro-American dream.

Moreover, dignity is also classified among the most important points of the Afro-American dream. This theme has been tackled within the novel of Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* published in 1993 which took part during the 1940s. It tells the story of the protagonist Jefferson who spent his long journey waiting for his execution for the murder of a white man he didn't commit. By the end, a while before being executed, he realized that he is eligible for dignity and respect. Accordingly, this novel attempts to draw attention to the issue of equal justice that was unfortunately ignored among African Americans in the American society during the 1940s when African Americans were still dreaming of dignity, respect, and equality.

This novel demonstrates, too, the ongoing punishment that the protagonist was always receiving in jail. This was the reason which led him to perceive himself as being an animal: "what justice would there be to take this life? Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this" (Gaines, 1993, p. 08) He, hence, unveils the whites' abhorrent attitude towards African American people as being similar to animals. Furthermore, in order to help soften his painful thoughts, another character tried to convince him that he used to be a good and brave man by telling him: "I want you to show them the difference between what they think you are and what you can be. To them, you are nothing but another nigger-no dignity, no heart, no love for your people, you can prove them the wrong". (Gaines, 1993, p. 191). Hence, with these calming words, the protagonist succeeded to overcome his negative thoughts and frustrated feelings. Therefore, all of these rooted themes in the Afro-American dream have been communicated by African American authors through diverse pieces of literature to mirror their miserable life putrefactive with trauma, pain and oppression that they endured in a white dominated society.

3. The Insertion of Oral Tradition in African American Literature

African American writers inserted several aspects of their oral culture in their literary writings to voice their melancholies, and agonizing memories and more importantly to keep alive their heritage and to maintain their culture. In this context, Barksdale and Kinnamon attest: "it is clear that whatever literature survived (...) was oral in nature, not written". (Barksdale and Kinnamon, 1997, p. 02) According to them, oral literature is conceived as the form of expression which can survive for a long time because it includes an authentic oral lore which holds an interesting knowledge that can be transmitted from one generation to another. Besides, African American authors have successfully combined the standard English language with Ebonics, an African American dialect, to improve their works and give them vitality and authenticity.

More than that, Ebonics is used in literature to differentiate between characters' social classes and their educational levels. Authors employed Ebonics to describe both their joys and melancholies, and to express their nostalgia and memories and eventually, to show their folklore which defines their identity. Accordingly, these authors diffuse their oral traditions vernacularly by using Ebonics as their main diction within both prose and poetry. Henry Louis Gates defines this

term in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* as one which “refers to the church songs, blues, ballads, sermons, stories and (...) hip hop songs that are part of the oral, not primarily the literate tradition of Black expression”. (Gates, 2004, p. 03) Besides, Folk literature or oral literature was first coined by Thomas John Thorns who says: “because of the simplicity of the lives of the folks and second, they were considered incapable of producing anything that may be considered “literature” in the same sense that one would see the works of Shakespeare”. (Qtd in Etyang, 2010, p. 03) In this sense, African American authors wanted to make their folk literature popular around the world since it gave them opportunity to be heard and provided its readers with an authentic image about their daily life.

In this respect, the English novelist Angela Carter proclaimed:

For most of human history, literature, both fiction and poetry, have been narrated, not written – heard, not read. So, fairy tales, folk tales, stories from the oral tradition, are all of them, the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labor created our world. (Carter, 1990, p. 09)

According to her, African American oral literature pictures its people’s culture, history and identity.

Among the African American writers who enriched their novels with the use of oral traditions, Harriet Jacobs and Toni Morrison, published two worthy masterpieces entitled *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* and *Beloved* to combat the burden of slavery as experienced by the female characters. To illustrate this point, Jacobs inserts a story about her grandmother in the following way:

She [author’s grandmother] was the daughter of a planter in South Carolina, who at his death, left her mother and his three children free, with money to go St. Augustin, where they had relatives. It was during the revolutionary war, and they were captured on their passage, carried back and sold to different purchasers. Such was the story my grandmother used to tell me. (Jacobs, 2001, p. 05)

This story reveals the failure of the Afro-American dream because the female characters are portrayed to be deprived of the freedom granted to them by their father. However, they have lost their dreams when they were captured.

Morrison’s protagonist Sethe endured the same heavy weight of slavery, she had the courage to kill her daughter as a way to free her. She, thus, used singing as a weapon to resist the agony imposed on her and on her sisters. Morrison describes this incident as follows:

They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like [...]. 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” (Morrison, 2007, p. 259 – 261)

This scene unveils the power of music which consoles the enslaved women’ suffering. It thus depicts the struggle for the Afro-American dream. Accordingly, these authors gave great importance to the oral transmission of their culture which holds noteworthy lessons.

4. Analysis of Ralph Ellison’s Novel *Invisible Man*

Ralph Ellison’s protest novel *Invisible Man* was published by 1950s, a period which witnessed the emergence of civil rights movement with a revolutionary vision about racism and social injustice. In this respect, Ellison's novel voiced and unveiled the grim reality that was sweeping the African American society. He enriched his novel with several aspects of his oral traditions including songs, sermons, and sayings delivered in a special diction called Ebonics. These oral traditions hold values, morals, feelings, thoughts and even codes that African Americans want to reveal. Through the integration of these oral traditions, the author wanted to convey specific themes about the quest for identity and the desire to attain the Afro-American dream to be able to enjoy the same rights as white Americans: liberty, equality and dignity. Hence, diverse themes had been communicated, too, as disillusionment, blindness, racial discrimination and ignorance.

Invisible Man is a bildungsroman novel which highlights the psychological and moral growth of the main character by passing through all the bleak situations of renunciation, devaluation and discrimination that an educated African American faced in the American society. In this vein, the American writer Erik Sundquist states: “no book ... sums up the psychological and cultural effects of segregation in the United States more than Ellison’s” (Sundquist, 1995, p. 02) He considers Ellison’s novel as the best example of literature which highlights the miserable life of African Americans. Ellison opens his novel with a prologue in which he tackles the concepts of invisibility and blindness. Due to his black skin color, he uses the concept of invisibility to refer to himself as an invisible man and he adds the concept of blindness to refer to white people who refused to see him as an equal human being. This is why, he prefers to remain invisible through the whole novel with neither a name nor an identity. Hence, both concepts depict the tormenting psychological situation that African Americans were dismally enduring. Throughout the novel, the narrator strives to overcome the white people who have badly influenced his life. This is why, at the end of the novel, he prefers to remain underground in the hole rather than moving outside and experiencing such rejection from white people.

Within Ellison’s novel, there is a kind of terrible reality that was existing among African Americans who were not guaranteed the same rights. This case has been portrayed throughout all conflicts that had occurred between African American characters for the sake of pleasing the dominant leaders who used to be African Americans rather than white Americans. This kind of struggle was repeatedly depicted in the novel, first, with the African American Superintendent Dr. Bledsoe who expelled the protagonist from college, second, at the Battle Royal where many African American students were supposed to fight each other blindfolded as a way to amuse the audience,

and third, when an African American rival asked to lynch the narrator during a Harlem riot. As a result, the Afro-American dream of equality seems to be confronted many times among African Americans within a white supremacist society.

The notion of the Afro-American dream was demonstrated, too, in the quest for identity that the narrator spent all his journey searching for, among diverse institutions, communities and groups where he used to be always invisible to other characters. This is why, he preferred the underground to feel himself visible and able to understand himself. For this reason, he emphasized the importance of achieving identity as the true aspiration for all African Americans without exceptions and that all African Americans should behave equally within a white dominated society as a way to reach progress and fulfilment within the American society. Hence, they believed that they have to struggle in order to move forward towards the Afro-American dream of equality.

5. Depiction of the failure of Afro-American dream in Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* through the use of orality

Ralph Ellison was so influenced by jazz music which pushed him to combine skillfully the arts of narrative and poetry in order to create an impressive fictional work rich of African American music. He, accordingly, preferred to fill his narrator's hole with music

There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music, I want to feel its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body. I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing 'What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue'. (Ellison, 1952, p. 10-11)

According to this quotation, the narrator wanted to reveal that except music understands his feelings of being a black man and only throughout it, he can express himself.

Though Ellison's novel gifted his protagonist with several opportunities but he had been always disappointed among white characters as well as African American characters. The protagonist got the first disappointment within the Southern college where he received a scholarship to study, he had been expelled by an African American superintendent for a trivial reason. Besides, the second disappointment happened at Harlem in a company dominated by a white boss where the narrator was working as an orator after realizing that he had been used as a tool for the advancement of the company. This is why, he confessed that remaining underground will make him, avoid all such disappointments and disillusionments: "I could only move ahead or stay here, underground. So, I would stay here until I was chased out ... I would take up residence underground" (Ellison, 1952, p. 571) By the end of the novel, after confronting many obstacles, the narrator chose to disguise in a fantastic figure who holds different identities including a runner, a reverend and a gambler. As a reaction, many people mistook him for being Rinehart, the preacher whose pamphlets had been found by the narrator throughout which he had focused on invisibility. Hence, he realized that being multiple identities can represent an independent life. So, this is why he had been disguised just to live independently for a while and to enjoy all kinds of visibility, liberty, equality and dignity as the main pillars of the Afro-American dream.

5.1. Folk Songs

Ellison presents his novel as a musical one overwhelmingly inspired by the blues and jazz music. Albert Murray describes it as follows:

Invisible Man was par excellence the literary extension of the blues ... as if Ellison had taken an everyday twelve bar blues tune (by a man from down South sitting in a manhole up North singing and signifying about how he got there) and scored it for full orchestra... and like the blues, and echoing the irrepressibility of America itself, it ended on a note of promise, ironic and ambiguous... (Qtd in O'Meally, 1980, p. 84)

Ellison enriches his novel with music that can communicate his characters' feelings. Music, for him, can be seen as a means of consolation and release. In the novel, Ellison incorporates some lyrics taken from a song by his favorite singer Louis Armstrong: "What did I do to be so Black and Blue" (Ellison, 1952, p. 14) This borrowing, hence, reflects the racial rejection that Louis Armstrong was feeling. For having a dark complexion too, Ellison employs this quote to refer to his protagonist who holds the same feelings of racial discrimination, invisibility and rejection within a white supremacist society. Accordingly, Ellison has chosen a blues voice to mirror the same dilemma of all African Americans.

In the novel, Ellison adds another musical verse, considered as a song of praise: "lead me, lead me to a rock that is higher than I". (Ellison, 1952, p. 99) which is performed by students at the southern Negro college to refer to the African Americans who used to pray for and to plead to God, seeking help. Thus, rock is used to refer to God as a powerful refuge which provides protection for the African Americans. Ellison later adds a song of hope sung by Dr. Bledsoe and his students:

'Meaning HOPE!

'Of hardship and pain:

'Meaning FAITH!

'Of humbleness and absurdity:

'Meaning ENDURANCE!

'Of ceaseless struggle in darkness, meaning:

'TRIUMPH ... (Ellison, 1952, p. 106)

These lyrics reveal the struggle for the Afro-American dream in the lives of many African Americans who endured painful experiences, ignorance and humility within a white dominated society but they hold, too, a big hope towards the attainment of their goals. Therefore, all types of music provide release to the African Americans' tormented psyche.

5.2. Popular Sayings

“No matter how biggity a nigguh gits, the white folks can always cut him down”. (Ellison, 1952, p. 48) It is a popular saying used by Ellison to reveal that how much an African American may advance and reach determined goals, he will be defeated by the white Americans. Hence, this Popular saying reveals the failure of the Afro-American dream through the whites’ supremacy and domination.

“Win greater happiness with whiter complexion” (Ellison, 1952, p. 212), Ellison reveals that belonging to the white race is admired, cherished and desired. This saying reflects, too, the failure of the Afro-American dream under the influence of the whites’ supremacy and privilege.

5.3. Folk Stories

5.3.1. The Protagonist’s Story

Ellison’s novel portrays the folk story of the unknown narrator who has neither a name nor an identity. He had passed through gloomy steps of disillusionment, delusion, discrimination, unconsciousness to reach reality by attaining his consciousness. Unfortunately, his inability to express himself is the main reason for his rejection by society. He could neither take a decision nor accept something by satisfaction. Thanks to his courage and patience, he could discard all these rejections by remaining underground. Hence, the protagonist’s story reveals the failure of the Afro-American dream.

5.4. Oral Rhetoric

Oral rhetoric refers to a speech delivered during special event. The author integrates an eulogy during Clifton’s funeral: “when he was alive, he was our hope, but why worry over a hope that’s dead” (Ellison, 1952, p. 369) These words reflect disillusionment as the main aspect of the failure of the Afro-American dream. There is another rhetoric delivered by the narrator after joining the brotherhood company: “SISTERS! BROTHERS! WE ARE THE TRUE PATRIOTS! THE CITIZENS OF TOMORROW’S WORLD! WE’LL BE DISPOSSESSED NO MORE!” (Ellison, 1952, p. 280) This quote reveals the struggle for the Afro-American dream within American society.

5.5. Figures of Speech

Ellison enriches his novel with diverse aspects of figurative language in order to revive the African American culture and bestow it vivacity and vitality within literature.

5.5.1. Symbolism

Ellison integrates the aspect of symbolism in his novel: “the sugar cane plantations depicts another dreadful image, “the hounds chasing Black men in stripes and chains” (Ellison, 1952, p. 191). This image reveals the humility faced by African Americans and which further emphasizes the failure of the African American dream.

5.5.1.1. The Brief Case Symbol

Another case of symbolism has been portrayed by the author throughout the novel, when the narrator had been graduated from the high school to pursue his studies within the Southern Negro college. He handled a brief case during his whole journey of self-discovery but by the end of the novel, when he realized all his hoaxers' intentions, he preferred to remain in the hole rather than confronting these unfaithful faces. So, he burned all his brief case's documents as a way to light his hole. Hence, this action of burning all his documents reveals a failure of his Afro-American dream since he couldn't realize his targets.

5.5.2. Metaphors

"I rubbed my eyes, and they felt sandy as though all the fluids had suddenly dried" (Ellison, 1952, p. 156) This metaphor is used to refer to all disillusionments that the narrator has passed by.

"We were burned in the same oven" (Ellison, 1952, p. 237). This metaphor highlights the idea that all African Americans endured the same burden of racial discrimination within America.

Therefore, the failure of Afro-American dream is mirrored within these metaphors through the loss of hope.

5.5.3. Paradoxes

"I rushed from the house extremely agitated but determined to get away from my hot thoughts into the chill air." (Ellison, 1952, p. 211) The narrator desired more independence to escape the ignorance and rejection that he had experienced in the American society.

"They are living but dead." (Ellison, 1952, p. 236) The narrator is referring to African Americans who though they were alive, they were dispossessed from all their rights.

"I felt more dead than alive." (Ellison, 1952, p. 411) To refer to the narrator who seemed unconscious about the irony that his swindlers used to irritate him.

Accordingly, the failure of Afro-American dream is portrayed through all these aspects of dispossession of rights, rejection and ignorance from community and also through irony that was received from white Americans who used to be supreme authority in the American society.

6. CONCLUSION

Ralph Ellison succeeded in fusing his indigenous oral lore and the narrative form in order to craft a real depiction of his people's struggles and hardships, aspired to dreams like justice and equality. He describes his protagonist's long journey of self-discovery, and the challenges he has faced, to end up accepting his invisibility and remaining underground. In the novel, Ellison emphasizes the theme of invisibility which had haunted the protagonist's whole journey. His novel reflects, thus, the failure of the African American dream with the main character who at last realizes

that the African American dream is not within his reach and that he remained invisible in the eyes of American people who used to be always blind as a way to reject his existence.

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