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Ralph Ellison's *Invisible* Man in the Light of Homi K. Bhabha's Concept of Third Place

Abstract

Ralph Ellison's powerful work *Invisible Man* reflects the position of African Americans in American society at the beginning of the twentieth century. Their difficulties and struggles are clearly portrayed through the life journey of Invisible, the narrator, who is also in continuous search of his own identity. Taking this into consideration, this paper will attempt to analyze Ellison's novel in the light of Homi K. Bhabha's concept of Third Place. It will seek to demonstrate how the concepts of non-belonging, in-betweenness, homeliness, and mimicry developed by Bhabha within the postcolonial theory clarify the narrator's positioning, his individual and communal identity, as well as his 'quest' for the self, considering how Invisible has to face and endure the complex situation of being defined by society as a "strange" being, prone to marginalization and rejection. In other words, it will show how the society in which the narrator lives try and, somehow, succeeds in shaping his identity, by defining his position in society primarily in the light of the white people's behavior towards him, as it is the case of their blinded approach towards any individual of color. The paper will also demonstrate that the challenges the narrator - as an exemplification of colored people – faces, are rooted in a changing and evolving society that exists in a Third Space and imposes a hybrid identity for the narrator and not only.

Key words: *Invisible Man, Third Space, identity, non-belonging, homeliness.*

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Introduction

Invisible Man, a social and political novel by Ralph Ellison, tells the story of a young man who does not identify himself but whose narration provides the reader with a loyal picture of the life of the poor young African Americans living in the south of the United States in the 1930s. Published in 1952, not long after the victory of the US in World War II and at a time when the struggle of colored people against the Jim Crow laws was at its height[3], the novel also sheds light on how African Americans were prey to discrimination and how they were segregated and marginalized in a society dominated by the mindset of a white supremacy. The reality of colored people was conditioned by the rules and ideologies of the white community and the journey of the narrator is a representation of an imposed style of life and choices that make him face a struggle of personality and identity, a problem that every member of the colored community seems to have faced at least once in the period Ellison attempts to fictionalize.

Taking these into consideration, this article will analyze Ellison's *Invisible Man* in the light of Homi K. Bhabha's concept of Third Place, referring to identity shaping and defining concepts, such as non-belonging, in-betweenness, homeliness, and mimicry, developed by Bhabha in his seminal work *The Location of Culture* (1994). Thus, the analysis in this light of the narrator's positioning, his individual and communal identity, as well as his 'quest' for the self will strive to demonstrate that the experiences Invisible, as a fictional exemplification of his community, undergoes make him prone to marginalization and rejection. Simultaneously, it will be shown that the society in which the narrator lives, somehow, succeeds in shaping his identity by defining his position in society primarily in the light of the white people's behavior towards him, as is the case with their blinded approach towards any individual of color.

In a relatively ironic manner*, Invisible Man,* through the story of a fictional young African American gentleman in the 1930s, relates the experiences faced by a community whose skin color defines the unfortunate and difficult path of life. The novel is set mostly in Harlem, the neighborhood where the Harlem Renaissance, the artistic and intellectual movement which contributed to the development of African American culture, started. In relation to this, scholar Ernest J. Mitchell emphasizes that although there are "[c]ountless variations, […] the underlying narrative remains the same: the 'Harlem Renaissance' was a movement of black

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[3]Jerrold M. Packard. *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow*, US: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003, 21

artists that began in the 1920s and 'failed' shortly thereafter."[4] To Mitchel, in spite of its debatable success, the Harlem Renaissance helped to portray how African American culture was understood by white Americans, it integrated black and white cultures, and also it set the stage for the Civil Rights Movement years later. This not necessarily amicable cultural encounter and the impact it had on American society are pictured in *Invisible Man* from the perspective of the narrator, whose journey into adulthood and maturity also shed light on the experiences and struggles of the non-white community in the country where they were born and lived.

Besides being a multifaceted account of an African American, another aspect that adds to the significance of the novel is the fact that it uses extensive imagery to depict American life and culture: Luke D. Mahoney states: "Ellison's powerful use of accurate and detailed imagery depicting the many aspects of black American life and culture in *Invisible Man* are the hallmarks of its success and widespread acclaim".[5]

Ellison to a great point also describes his life journey through this work, and this makes it even more reliable. Mahoney claims: "Ellison delved into the lives of black Americans living in Harlem, and personally witnessed the effects migration, slavery, industrialization, racism and segregation had on his culture."[6] That is, the novel not only manages to reflect issues such as racism-based segregation, slavery-rooted poverty, and segregation-nurtured Othering, but also the dimensions of being a man of color in a marginalized colored community. Mahoney continues:

> Ellison sews together the previously separate identities of the intellectual and the rural, black Americans from the North and the South. His aim in doing this is to not only challenge the mainstream American opinions of black Americans, but to repair the cultural rift between these two conflicting aspects of culture identity in the black American community.[7]

In other words, *Invisible Man* manages to "bring together" the non-white community, whose members were positioned against one another, either because of their background or experiences in either rural or urban areas of the North or the South, as a mode of exposing

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[4] Ernest Julius Mitchell, "'Black Renaissance': A brief History of the Concept." *Amerikastudien/ American Studies* 55, no. 4 (2010): 642.

[5] Luke D. Mahoney, "How Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man Retold the Story of the Black American Experience for the Cultural Mainstream," *Inquires Journal/Student Pulse* 7, no. 10 (2015): 2.

[6] Mahoney, "Invisible Man Retold the Story of the Black American Experience," 2.

[7] Mahoney, "Invisible Man Retold the Story of the Black American Experience," 2.

their lack of unity and of repairing the cultural rift among non-whites. Ellison's famous novel, thus, pinpoints the underlying issues that nurture the division among the African American community and clarifies their position, challenging the stereotype that colored Americans are less educated, less intellectually adept and less capable of integrating into society as a people that can fully exercise their human and civil rights.

Mahoney also underlines that "[D]uring this time in history, many black Americans are faced with what appeared to be a one-way-or-the-other decision: to choose to retain the cultural identity of their past, or shed that and adopt the cultural identity of Mainstream America."[8] Hence, during the first decades of the 20th century, African Americans seemed to have been in front of a dire choice: a choice between their cultural existence and an easier path towards a more decent future. This is exactly the sort of choice the narrator of *Invisible Man* is faced with, although, for a certain period of time, obviously, he opted for the wrong one. Upon understanding that his journey could have been totally different, Invisible observes, "[W]hat and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do?"[9] Hence, the choice imposed on Invisible by the white-dominated society, which was to give up his cultural identity, besides being impossible to achieve, was also a path that led to failure.

As it is obvious in Invisible's disappointment, at a given point, every individual needs to belong, to take a side, to be identified, and to make choices in compliance with his social existence, that is, his identity. From this perspective, *Invisible Man* does not only provide a voice for the marginalized. It is also a call—a message—to those who have tried to manipulate and hide the truth, and to those who have not wanted to accept or have closed their eyes in front of the injustices colored people have been subjected to. And although *Invisible Man's* focus was the United States during segregation, its message is more encompassing. It demonstrates how this part of history has been written and how the white and colored community have contributed in their peculiar ways to its writing. It serves as a reminder of the African American struggle and of their undeniable contribution to art, culture, literature, and every other aspect of American life.

From a different perspective, *Invisible Man*, as the account of a common man, is about an individual's search for a sense of belonging and feeling safe and accepted. The struggle of

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[8] Mahoney, "Invisible Man Retold the Story of the Black American Experience," 2.
[9] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 206.

Invisible should obviously be seen through the lens of marginalization; he is a member and literary representative of the non-white community of people with fewer rights who, in order to fit in with society, had to shape their identity in compliance with the imposed requirements. Thus, *Invisible Man* is a story that contains a considerable number of events that reveal the real face of American society at the time, especially the way this society has constructed ideas and violated the real freedom of the non-white. The protagonist is inevitably puzzled by and feels insecure when faced with reality. It is not the propagandized coexistence of a diversity of cultures. Instead, it is the clash of this concept with long-established racial relations and the rigid rules it imposed on society. Invisible struggles to succeed but is faced with racist rejection. He feels threatened because of his color although his actions are not culturally-triggered or culturally-identifiable. Indeed, he attempts to behave as any young citizen of a free country. It is the structure of society that places him in such a difficult position, and he does not feel as if he belongs to any cultural community. He is neither black nor white; he is just in-between.

Invisibly Third Space Dweller

Taking into consideration the narrator's experience and search of his own identity and the predominating sense of non-belonging that characterizes his quest, it could be maintained that Homi Bhabha's theory of Third Space—Hybridity theory—would provide viable and valuable insights on the novel but would also shed light on the experience of the African American community. The concept 'Third Space' derives from sociology and cultural theory and refers to a dynamic "*in-between* space" in which "cultural translation" takes place."[10] Coined by Bhabha in his seminal work *The Location of Culture* , "Third Space" is a concept in postcolonial theory that examines the state of "in-between"[11]. Another definition of the concept was provided by Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper. To them, Third Space, "a difficult and risky place on the edge, in-between, filled with contractions and ambiguities, with perils but also with new possibilities," "containing more than simple combinations of the original dualities.[12]

Hence, the 'Third Space' as a hybrid space, found and borrowing from two original "first spaces," develops autonomously to turn into a "product" – a space of its own standing. This

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[10] Homi K Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).
[11] Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.
[12] Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper, *Place and Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1993).

theory rejects binaries and creates a new space that serves as an area that develops when two or more individuals and cultures interact, and it questions and challenges the concept of defined cultural identity. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha clarifies that "the transformational value of [third space….] lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One* […] *nor the Other* […] *but something else besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both."[13] Thus, 'Third Space' undermines "the binary thought and essentialist identities produced by colonial knowledge."[14], as pointed out by Jefferess. It deconstructs the binary of 'the self' and 'the other', and, the colonizer and the colonized.

In the present, it is difficult to defend the existence of pure cultures, as people live in a globalized world where everyone and everything is interrelated. Globalization and hybridization are also interrelated and this leads to a mixed culture and diverse way of living. Colonialism and globalization have fueled cultural interaction, providing our world a dynamic Third Space, or turning it into one. According to Papasterigiadis, for Bhabha, hybridity is the process by which the colonial power attempts to transform the identity of the colonized people within a uniform global framework, producing something recognizable and new.[15] From this perspective, the Third Space is the hybridity which characterizes and can be relied on to analyze individuals, languages, ethnicity, society, cultures, race and several more elements and interrelations. This provides opportunities for new spaces, in mostly everything people are and do, as interrelations have come to define human nature.

Taking into consideration that interrelations of all sorts demand negotiation between both original positions, Bhandari claims:

> The cultural negotiation in the third space undermines the total and absolute power of the colonizer. The colonized subjects resist the total subjugation to the colonial authority in their ambivalent retention, which creates a gap between the expectation of the colonizer and the response of the colonized.[16]

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[13] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 28.

[14] Jeffress, D. (2008). *Postcolonial resistance: Culture, liberation and transformation*. University of Toronto Press. P 28

[15] Nikos Papastergiadis, "Tracing Hybridity in Theory," in *Debating Cultural Hybridity Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Antiracism*, ed. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed books Ltd, 2015), 257-281.

[16] Bahadur Nagendra Bhandari, "Homi K. Bhaha's Third Space Theory and Cultural Identity Today: A Critical Review," *Prithvi Academic Journal* 5 (2022): 173.

Therefore, cultural negotiation in the Third Space denies the existence of any absolute power which prevents or strengthens the colonizer. This being the case, the subject colonizer is provided with the 'space' to resist.

In Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the narrator is the one who states his struggles from the very beginning of his fictional journey, and this voicing, just like his being African American (in his country of birth), makes him a "Third Space dweller". Bhandari states that "Bhabha's third space fails to make a decisive intervention to subvert the relation of exploitation for economic and social justice for the underprivileged."[17] The narrator in *Invisible Man* is a "Third Space dweller" also as an underprivileged citizen - in Bhandari's terms -, he struggles to achieve economic and social justice. Taking this into consideration, the three main elements that can be considered in analyzing the narrator through the concept of Third Space or Hybridity are: identity, non-belonging and mimicry.

Invisible's Identity

Identity is, obviously, the set of traits what define an individual. In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* the position of the narrator and his struggle to build his own identity is noticed from the very beginning. The very first paragraph in the prologue point to this:

> I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids -- and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.[18]

The narrator claims that he is invisible, not because of any physical condition, but because others refuse to see him as an individual. Either as form of reaction or obedience to this approach, Invisible does not share his name with the reader. By making him anonymous, Ellison turns the young into the symbol of any non-white young man that lived in the American society of the 1930s and faced the hardships and discrimination which had significant impact on any individual belonging to the "non" communities. Considering Bhabha's theory of Third Space, the uncertain identity in the Third Space, as a product of two different spaces is in parallelism with the uncertain identity of the narrator which creates place for invisibility. He is stuck between the African American and white community, which leads

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[17] Bhandari," Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space," 175-176.
[18] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3.

to confusion, stemming mostly from the different perspectives that African Americans have related to their position in the society.

Another example of this is the narrator's grandfather, who advices him to exaggerate his servility toward the whites as a mode of acceptance. However, the exaggeration of his servility would shape the narrator's identity, turning him into the person the society wants and expects him to be. Invisible contemplates: "I didn't know what my grandfather had meant, but I was ready to test his advice. I'd overcome them with yeses, undermine them with grins, I'd agree them to death and destruction. Yes, and I'd let them swallow me until they vomited or burst wide open. Let them gag on what they refused to see."[19] The narrator is advised to fit in the society as a way towards a better life and the achievement of his dreams. As part of the African American community in white-dominated society makes the narrator feel the tension and struggle to identify himself; he is between the spaces that he forcefully rejects but, in fact, are the ones that identify him. In spite of his appearance and the facts that he is prejudged and feels invisible, he has to come to terms with white supremacy. Moreover, he is expected to adapt their lifestyle in order to fit in society. In other words, the narrator is stuck in his own skin; whatever he decides to do or stand for, he finds himself in a Third Space of "both … and" as much as "neither…nor", a condition of hybridity clearly shown in the fact that he does not know where and if he belongs.

In relation to Invisible's condition, university professor and scholar Thorpe Butler states: "He cannot stand being a black American, especially in the rural South. Rejecting his racial identity means suppressing much of his own past experience."[20] It should be noted that Invisible is actually rejecting his believed identity; this is to a degree a rejection of his fixed identity. The approach of the two identities he is exposed to creates diversity in his identity. This is clear in the light scholar Easthope reads Bhabha's theory. He observes: "Bhabha claims there is a space 'in-between the designations of identity' and that this 'interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy."[21] From this perspective, the narrator's rejection of his

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[19] Ellison, Invisible Man, 394.

[20] Thorpe Butler, "What is to be Done? - Illusion, Identity, and Action in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man," *CLA Journal* 27, no. 3 (1984): 318.

[21] Antony Easthope, "Homi Bhabha, Hybridity and Identity, or Derrida versus Lacan," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 4, no. 1/2 (1998): 145.

African American identity and his – at times, brutal - confrontation with the white identity forces him into a struggle for self-discovery.

The narrator's journey to discover its identity is not easy, he has to face humiliation. He won a scholarship to college, but, then, he was faced with betrayal. He started working in low-paid job, became part of the Brotherhood, met new people and encountered different situations and even tried to follow his grandfather's advice. He was also offered by Brother Jack to take a new name and start a new life, if he would become part of Brotherhood: "I was swept into the large room and introduced by my new name. Everyone smiled and seemed eager to meet me, as though they all knew the role I was to play."[22] Obviously, he adopted various survival methods, but none of them worked for him fully. As Invisible eventually comes to understand the roles and identities society tries to impose on him only define more forcefully his belonging in the Third Space, that is, the non-space.

Invisibly In-between

This leads one to another concept that is to be found in *Invisible Man*: in-betweenness. Bhabha observes that "to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres."[23] So, the narrator gets stuck between home and unhomeness; he does not feel home neither within the African American community, nor is he possibly accepted by the white one. He is caught between two clashing cultures and the feeling of unhomeliness makes him feel in-between, and, at times, he is stuck between the choice to keep his status as one of the members of the African American community or to achieve his aims, such as education and to construct a new way of belonging for himself. The narrator's in between existence is more clearly defined when compared to the other characters. He meets several other African Americans who have different views related to the society. Ras the Exhorter is an extremist who wants to overthrow the white supremacy; he strives for this and wants Invisible to join his gang. On the other hand, Invisible's grandfather suggested he relied on servility toward the whites because, to him, this was the only way in which he could succeed. Dr. Bledsoe, the African American president of the college where Invisible was a student, claims that non-whites should adapt the manners of the whites. Yet, he does not seem to be promoting their true enlightenment. Besides being stuck between two races, two cultures, two identities and two different paths

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[22] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 241.
[23] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 25-107.

for the future, the narrator does not find any other role model or palpable advice. The moment he falls in the hole he claims:

> Why, if they follow this conformity business they'll end up by forcing me, an invisible man, to become white, which is not a color but the lack of one. Must I strive toward colorlessness? But seriously, and without snobbery, think of what the world would lose if that should happen. America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It's "winner take nothing" that is the great truth of our country or of any country.[24]

Even though the sense of unhomeliness is present in the mind of the narrator, he reflects and understands that more important than any sort of success or victory is not to lose his sense of identity, even though this means the accepting of his complex identity, shaped by the circumstance and the society of the time as it is. According to Huddart, Bhabha somehow rejects stable identity associated with national form.[25] So, a complex identity, as the narrator is characterized, is product of in-betweenness and non-belonging, and the narrator feels the sense of unhomeliness because his own culture is always seen as "the Other".

Invisible Mimicry

Mimicry is another element discussed by Homi Bhabha. To him, mimicry is a strategy of colonial powers' emblematic desire for an approved, revised Other.[26] Mimicry is when colonized people imitate the culture of the oppressor, in this way the oppressor will have a recognizable "other". This is exactly what happens in the *Invisible Man*; the narrator is expected to act like the whites in order to be somehow accepted or rejected less. From this standpoint, although the white community is discriminative towards African Americans, the oppressed latter has to deny its culture, tradition, behavior and values for some sort of acceptance This is clear when the incident with Mr. Norton is taken in consideration. Upon his request, the narrator shows the wealthy white man the African American neighborhood, where he happens to see the "real black life". In relation to this, Dr. Bledsoe is furious at the narrator and states: ""Norton is one man and I'm another, and while he might think he's satisfied, I know that he isn't! Your poor judgment has caused this school incalculable damage.

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[24] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 447.
[25] David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha* (London: Psychology Press, 2006), 69.
[26] Peter Childs and R.J Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Postcolonial Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 129.

Instead of uplifting the race, you've torn it down."[27] So, by pretending to be covering the reality of the life and situation in which African Americans are found, Dr. Bledsoe is among those who takes care that in the eyes of the powerful white community everything looks perfect. He strives to camouflage the issues within his community in order for them to look as the whites think they are.

As pointed above, Invisible is quite intelligent and mannered, which, at the time, are presumed to be whites' qualities. This is reminiscent of Bhabha's words on Frantz Fanon. According to Bhabha, Fanon found identity somewhere between his black body and his white education, like those who are 'almost the same but not quite'.[28] Similarly, the narrator of a black a skin has the skills and education associated with the white community and tries uselessly to fit in by adapting the rules and culture of the white community, what turns him into a perfect "not white, not quite".

Also, "mimicry repeats colonial presence at the place of authority where resemblance is denied in a process of recognition, as the colonized are almost the same as the colonizers, and disavowal (but not quite)."[29] The narrator is not comfortable with the identity forced on him. After acquiring a new name, once he was recruited by the Brotherhood, Invisible feels tense: "Little worries whirled up within me: That I might forget my new name; that I might be recognized from the audience."[30] His pondering is also elusive of the insecurity one feels when forced to be who he is not. In other words, his attempted mimicry does not satisfy him; he imitates but never feels like fitting in.

Conclusion

To conclude, the theory of Third Space indicates two or more cultures interacting and creating a product which has its own qualities except what it has taken from both cultures. The narrator in the *Invisible Man* is someone who struggles for his own identity, as the white supremacy controls and shapes his way of living. Being African American creates in him a sense of in – betweenness, and he does not know where he belongs and does not feel home neither within the African American community nor within the white one. Thus, he is a non-belonger; someone who reflects a complex identity, who during his journey tries to find himself, tries to

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[27] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 110.
[28] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86.
[29] Childs and Williams, *An Introduction to Postcolonial Theory*, 132.
[30] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 259.

take the roles that the society imposes on him, doing what others want him to do and acting the way they want him to act, but still does not find his direction. He, like other African Americans is part of the Third Space, someone who searches for his belonging and realizes that his belonging is the "new (non)space". Also, mimicry serves as a reflection of what the narrator faces, the oppression to surpass his own identity and the impact that his origin has on his life opportunities, leading him to doubt his identity and to the need to hide it. So, the narrator of *Invisible Man* is a faithful representative of what Third Space stands for.

His journey is a testimony of preferring "blindness" in order to adapt and achieve success in life because society cannot accept values of an individual who is a member of a community which is not like "theirs". Every choice has a cost, the position the narrator overtakes makes him weak and strong at the same time, but neither way is right for him. He is not just an African American man, who has lived in a period when self-denial meant hope to achieve well-deserved chances and when he was obliged to adapt in the society; otherwise, his marginalization would be carried on. Most importantly, Invisible is the narrator of the story of any African American who desperately needed a Third Space to know that he belonged.

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