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Power, Culture, and history in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* through a New Historicist Lens

القوة، الثقافة والتاريخ في رواية الرجل الخفي لـ رالف إليسون من خلال النظرية
التاريخية الجديدة

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Abstract:

This research examines Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* from a New Historicist perspective, emphasizing the relationship between history, culture, and power. The study explores the protagonist's experiences in the white-oppressed society of 1940s and 1950s America. It reveals how institutionalized power systems influence Black identity and invisibility. The political organization in the book, the Brotherhood movement, represents past abuses of Black political organizations as Ellison critiques outsiders' appropriation of African American causes. Additionally, African American resistance to assimilation into white culture is depicted through cultural elements. The research employs a qualitative approach based on textual analysis, using a New Historicist framework that links the novel's events to historical contexts. Ultimately, Ellison's commentary on racial oppression, invisibility, and the ongoing struggle for Black identity in America is highlighted through the novel's engagement with historical events.

Keywords: African American culture-Brotherhood- New Historicism- *Invisible Man*-culture.

المخلص :

يتناول هذا البحث رواية الرجل الخفي لـ رالف إليسون مع التركيز على العلاقة بين التاريخ، الثقافة والسلطة. تتناول الدراسة تجارب بطل الرواية في المجتمع الأبيض المضطهد في الأربعينيات والخمسينيات من القرن العشرين في أمريكا. تكشف الدراسة كيف تؤثر أنظمة السلطة المؤسسية على الهوية السوداء والاختفاء. وتمثل المنظمة السياسية في الكتاب، الإخوانية، الانتهاكات السابقة للمنظمات السياسية السوداء حيث ينتقد إليسون استيلاء الغرباء على قضايا الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تظهر مقاومة الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي للاندماج في الثقافة البيضاء في الكتاب من خلال المكونات الثقافية. استخدم البحث نهجًا نوعيًا يعتمد على تحليل النصوص تحليلًا تاريخيًا بالاستعانة بالنظرية التاريخية التي تؤكد أنه لا يمكن فصل الأدب عن التاريخ وأن دور الأدب في الغالب هو تجسيد الواقع من خلال شخصيات تحمل أسماء وهمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الثقافة الأمريكية الأفريقية-الأخوة، التاريخية الجديدة-الثقافة- الإنسان الخفي.

1. INTRODUCTION

The article aims to analyze Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* from a historical perspective. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison offers a comprehensive exploration of culture, power, and history. The novel portrays the complex dynamics of racial power structures in mid-twentieth-century America, where cultural and political forces shape the protagonist's identity. Ellison critiques the ways in which power marginalizes African Americans. Through the lens of New Historicism, readers can observe Ellison's engagement with historical context, emphasizing how literary narratives are intertwined with historical events, positioning the novel as a site of resistance and a critique of cultural oppression.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 New Historicism

Early in the 1980s, a literary philosophy known as "New Historicism" came into being, highlighting the connection between literature and historical setting. It sees novels as products of their times, both influencing and being moulded by social, cultural, and political factors. This method frequently looks at intertextuality, power relationships, and ideologies inside historical contexts¹. Another critic defined New Historicism as a critical method opposes the formal and linguistic analysis's restricted focus and rejects the strict emphasis on close reading, which ignores the text's larger values and external context.²

New Historicism also is a literary philosophy emphasises the importance of culture and history in understanding literary works. It says that by analysing writings, readers may get a deeper understanding of the social and political dynamics of the period in which they were written. Literary works reflect the cultural and political context of the time they were written. This theory is expanded upon by New Historicism, a subgroup of Historicism, which views literature as an active agent in the making of history. It rejects the idea that history and literature can be clearly distinguished from one another, claiming

that this division is erroneous and arbitrary. According to New Historicism, literature is closely entwined with history, both reflecting and depending on it. This method also takes into account the literary works' cultural settings, which include the prevailing discourses and rhetorical devices of the age.³

2.2 The Emergence of New Historicism

New Historicism known as a movement in 1980s arose, and Stephen Greenblatt popularised the phrase in *Genre* in (1982). It takes inspiration from Clifford Geertz, Michel Foucault, and Louis Althusser, among other poststructuralist philosophers. Althusser promoted an approach that reveals intricate, multiple meanings through his symptomatic reading method, which investigates underlying ideological tensions inside texts. This approach had an impact on the New Historicists. The perspective of New Historicism regarding texts as products of social forces and power structures was influenced by Foucault's discourse and power theory, which highlights the discontinuous nature of history and the fluidity of power relations. New Historicists were also influenced by Clifford Geertz's symbolic anthropology, particularly his "thick description" approach, to examine culture via in-depth, interpretative accounts of activities, performances, and events. In other words, Collectively, these theories emphasise how difficult it is to fully understand texts due to their complexity and relationships to history, ideology, and society.⁴

2.3 Key Concepts of New Historicism

2.3.1 Historical context

New Historicism looks at a novel in the context of its time, highlighting the author's history, the readers' reactions, and the critic's viewpoint. By fusing political and cultural aspects, it analyses the text's background and places it in historical perspective. In New Historicism, "context" is substituted with "con-text," emphasising how history and literature are interwoven. A text or group of texts that support the primary text under analysis is referred to as a "con-text"⁵.

2.3.2 Cultural context

Culture is an important component to take into account while analysing the causes of historical continuity since it changes gradually and is impacted by past events. This theory is supported by a number of studies that show how historical upheavals may have a lasting impact on the distribution of cultural features. Terry Eagleton asserts that a literary piece traverses several cultural and historical settings, not just the author's own⁶.

2.3.3 Power Structures and Ideologies

Literary works have a close relationship to the society in which they are set, having been influenced by the political and social currents of the day. They are shaped by the dominant philosophies, values, and beliefs of the time and do not exist in a vacuum. Literature is a product of its historical setting because its topics, characters, and narratives may be influenced by the beliefs, power dynamics, and cultural standards of a given age. Because a work reflects the ideologies of its surroundings, it can provide insight into the political and social dynamics of the era in which it was written literature⁷.

2.3.4 Intertextuality

Literary and nonliterary materials are regarded equally by New Historicists, who reject the notion that one is more significant than the other. Rather, they see all texts as related, with one reading influencing the interpretation of another. This method highlights the idea that all textual sources may be analysed in light of one another 'since they are all a part of a bigger system'⁸.

3. Review of Literature

The review of literature explains how literature exploring Power, Culture, and History in the Novel via a New Historicist lens which emerged in the latter half of the 20th century. It examines literature by taking into account the historical and cultural context of the period in which it was written and placed. When analysing *Invisible Man* in the context of the historical power struggles and cultural tensions of mid-20th century, in which Ellison's

investigation of race, identity, and invisibility takes on a deeper significance.

Houston A. Baker's "Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory" examines how Ellison highlights the novel's struggle with Black identity's constraints under American power systems. Baker's research demonstrates how past abuses of Black political and social movements are reflected in the Brotherhood's exploitation of the protagonist. Additionally, Baker addresses the constraints of Black identity under American power systems, with specific reference to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and delves into the cultural dynamics of African American literature, especially as seen through the blues.⁹

Michael Rogin's "Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot" (1996). The novel's interaction with African American art forms like jazz, which turns into a place of resistance against mainstream American society, is one of the cultural dimensions of Ellison's work that Rogin's New Historicist method illuminates¹⁰.

Eric Sundquist's "To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature" (1993). In this work, Sundquist examines the representations of historical characters, racial violence, and power relations in Ellison's *Invisible Man* and other important African American writings. He links them to the larger historical backdrop of racial oppression in the 20th century by examining how Ellison criticises the suppression of African American narratives and the manipulation of those narratives by dominant white cultural forces.¹¹

A New Historicist analysis of *Invisible Man* demonstrates the book's intricate exploration of history, society, and power. It enables academics to see Ellison's writing as actively influencing the historical and cultural conversation about race, identity, and invisibility in America rather than just seeing it as a mirror of the

sociopolitical climate of its day. Viewed through this viewpoint, *Invisible Man* is both a monument to the ongoing fight for visibility and self-definition and a critique of the structural mechanisms of power that have traditionally marginalised African Americans.

4. New Historicist Analysis of *Invisible Man*

Before analyzing *Invisible Man* through the lens of New Historicism, it is important to provide an overview of Ralph Ellison's life and a summary of the novel. This will enhance the understanding of the novel's events and connect them to the historical context.

4.1 About the Author

The greatest writers in America. Alfred Ellison, his paternal grandfather, was born into slavery in South Carolina and rose to prominence as the town marshal of Abbeville during the Reconstruction era. But strong white leaders like David Aiken undermined his authority, and Alfred lost his job and split with the Democratic Party following the 1876 election. Lewis, Ralph's father, participated in the Spanish-American War as a member of the US Coloured Infantry before quitting the army for defying an officer's orders. He and his spouse relocated to Oklahoma, a state renowned for its all-Black communities and chances for African American growth, in search of better prospects. When Ralph Ellison moved to New York in 1936 to further his studies at Tuskegee and find employment, his literary career officially started. There, he got to know notable people including Richard Wright's mentor, Langston Hughes, and Alain Locke. Ellison published his first major piece in *New Challenge* magazine with Wright's help. Up to his death in 1994, he pursued a literary career that lasted over six decades while still living in New York¹².

4.2 The Summary of the Novel

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is the story of an anonymous Black narrator who finds it difficult to define himself in a society that is deeply racist. His journey from the South to Harlem is chronicled in

the book, as he encounters institutional prejudice, treachery, and his personal marginalisation in American culture. Through his exploration of several social and political beliefs, ranging from Marxism to Black nationalism, the narrator comes to realise that he is invisible due to society's refusal to acknowledge his uniqueness. He eventually comes to terms with himself and decides to use his invisibility as a kind of resistance. Ellison uses a combination of surrealism and realism to examine topics of race, identity, and power while criticising racism in the United States.¹³

5. New Historicist Analysis

The key to doing a New Historicist study of an African American literary work is to look at how the historical, cultural, and social settings of the time the work was created reflect in, influence, or are reflected in it. I'll use Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man* as an example to show how New Historicism may be used.

5.1 Historical Context

Understanding the political and social overtones of *Invisible Man*, which was published in 1952, requires knowledge of the historical setting. Significant events occurred during this time, such as the emergence of the civil rights movement and the post-World War II era. The novel's relationship to radicalism in the early years of its creator, Ralph Ellison, is noted by critic Hobson in his essay "Invisible Man and African American Radicalism in WWII," and it offers a prism through which to view African American social struggle after World War II. Ellison's *Invisible Man*, according to Hobson, provides an alternate basis for African American social action, especially once the protagonist loses faith in the Brotherhood—a metaphor for socialist or communist forces. According to some, the book foreshadows the kinds of civil rights movements that would take shape in the decades that would follow its release, while also reflecting the continued potential for social improvement. Furthermore, according to Hobson, the novel's ambivalence—its hesitancy or uncertainty

regarding the proper balance between political action and artistic expression, or between individual and collective freedom—reflects the larger tensions African Americans encountered regarding the Communist Party and their experiences during World War II, as well as the nuanced ways in which they responded to radicalism, group identity, and political activism during that era¹⁴. In other words, New Historicism aims to connect the text with these wider socio-political events. Analyze how Ellison's portrayal of the "invisible" protagonist matches the reality of African Americans who, at the time, were made politically, socially, and culturally invisible by mainstream culture.

5.2 Cultural Context

A New Historicist approach would focus on how Ellison incorporates African American cultural elements, particularly music like jazz and blues, which are recurring motifs in the novel. Critic James Hobson suggests that *Invisible Man* is primarily seen as a story of individual and racial self-creation, framed through its connections to African American cultural traditions, such as folk practices, jazz, and blues¹⁵. On the other hand, Thomas Schaub notes the novel's link to radicalism but argues that Ellison downplays detailed historical representations.

5.3 Power Structures and Ideologies

The study of New Historicism focuses on the ways in which power functions in society. In *Invisible Man*, power is demonstrated by organisations such as the Brotherhood, which purports to advance social justice but in the end manipulates the protagonist's identity for political ends. The theme of assimilation into a larger structure becomes significant following the yam scene, especially with respect to the Brotherhood's influence on the protagonist, who first meets Brother Jack after making an impromptu speech during the eviction of a Black family. Jack is impressed by the speech's form rather than its content, and this encounter marks a turning point in the protagonist's development: when violence

threatens, his "shock-absorbing phrases"¹⁶ defuse the situation and align him with the white evictors' cause.

The narrator joins the Brotherhood movement because it offers him his dream job as an orator, allowing him to pursue leadership through speech; ironically, Jack recruits him after his speech contradicts what the Brotherhood claims to represent. Jack sees potential in the protagonist's raw, unfocused eloquence, which he believes can serve the organization's goals¹⁷. This highlights the tension between the protagonist's individuality and the organization's manipulation.

5.4 Intertextuality

In contrast to W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, which examines the inner conflict African Americans experience as they navigate a society that imposes an external identity on them, Ellison's novel critiques Booker T. Washington's ideas of assimilation and self-reliance through the character of Dr. Bledsoe, who uses white power systems for his own benefit while perpetuating the systemic oppression of Black people. Ellison reflects this struggle by depicting the protagonist's ongoing struggle with invisibility, as he deals with both societal expectations and his own sense of identity¹⁸.

Ralph Ellison shows a more nuanced relationship with the white literary tradition than Douglass did with his replication of the American archetype. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison both satirises and revises the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the namesake of the author, with a focus on the Emersonian notion of U.S. imperialism based on white supremacy. However, Ellison does not completely reject Emersonian ideas; he consciously applies and revises Emersonian philosophies to his novel¹⁹.

6. CONCLUSION

Invisible Man, according to a New Historicist interpretation, shows how Ellison's book actively shaped cultural discourses about race, identity, and power in

America in the middle of the 20th century, in addition to being a product of its historical setting. It is possible to demonstrate how closely literature is linked to history and society by concentrating on the historical and cultural factors that influenced the work and how it both reflects and critiques those influences.

7. Footnotes:

¹ Lyu, Xiaotang (2021). "An Introduction to New Historicism." *2021 6th International Conference on Social Sciences and Economic Development (ICSSED 2021)*, Atlantis Press, Vol. 6, p.01.

² Sharma, Rajani (2014). "New Historicism: An Intensive Analysis and Appraisal." *Indian Review of World Literature in English*, India, Vol. N 10, p.02 .

³ Khan, L., & Khan, R. A. M. (2024). "Power Structure and Socio-Political Milieu in Ellis's The Forgotten Cottage: A New Historical Study." *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences*, India, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 377.

⁴ Lyu, "An Introduction to New Historicism," pp. 1-2.

⁵ Prendergast, as cited in Ramadan, F. A. R. (2019). "Narrative Structure and the Representation of History in Leila Aboulela's The Kindness of Enemies: A New Historicist Approach." *CDELTA Occasional Papers in the Development of English Education*, India, Vol. 68, No. 1, p. 31.

⁶ Terry Eagleton as cited in Ramadan, F. A. R. (2019). "Narrative Structure and the Representation of History in Leila Aboulela's The Kindness of Enemies: A New Historicist Approach." *CDELTA Occasional Papers in the Development of English Education*, India, Vol. 68, No. 1, p. 31.

⁷ Khan & Khan, 2024, "Power Structure and Socio-Political Milieu in Ellis's The Forgotten Cottage: A New Historical Study." p.376.

⁸ Pawlak, S. (2019). *A Work of Speculative Fiction: Intertextuality in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*, Bachelor's Thesis, Faculty of English Literature, [University Name], 2019, Part , p. 3.

⁹ Baker, H. A. (1984). *Blues, ideology, and Afro-American literature : a vernacular theory*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago.

¹⁰ Rogin, M. (1996). *Blackface, white noise: Jewish immigrants in the Hollywood melting pot*. Univ of California Press. California.

¹¹ Sundquist, E. J. (1993). *To Wake the Nations:*

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¹² Yemisi, A. (2012). "Ralph Ellison." *The Literary Encyclopedia*, United Kingdom, First published 16 June 2003, last revised 20 March 2012. pp.2-5.

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¹⁴ Hobson, C. Z. (2005). "Invisible .1 Man" and African American Radicalism in World War II. *African American Review*, 39(3), p.355.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.355.

¹⁶ Ellison, as cited in Kovařík, T. (2019). *Triangulating agency: Identity, society, and politics in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Bachelor's thesis). Charles University, pp. 10–11).

¹⁷ Callahan, as cited in Kovařík, 2019, pp. 10–11).

¹⁸ Raju, Nalli (2013). "Understanding Ralph Waldo Ellison's Invisible Man in the Light of Contemporary Post-Structural Critical Approach." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, India, Vol. 1, Issue 1, pp. 114.

¹⁹ 岡島慶, & オカジマケイ. (2016). Tradition of Ambivalent Estrangement: Democratic Intertextuality in Frederick Douglass's Narrative and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. *目白大学人文学研究*, 12, pp. 177-190.

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