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

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Dedication

To my family.
Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Tawfiq Yousif for his guidance and valuable help in the course of writing the thesis.

I would also want to extend my deep appreciation to the committee members.
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The Quest for African-American Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*  
and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*  
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Dr. Tawfiq Yousif  

Abstract  
This is a study of the quest for African-American identity in two novels:  
Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. It attempts to  
explore those stances in the two novels that promote and  
impede the quest for African-American identity within particular historical and social  
contexts.  

The study attempts to prove that the formation of African-American  
identity requires neither a total submission to a white system of values nor a  
total alienation from one's submissive past. A combination of a double  
vision can allow selves to emerge new and energetic.  

African-Americans are deeply concerned about defining and  
conjuring up images of themselves. The desire to be identified is an attempt  
towards forcing one's own self into certain community which refuses or  
declines from acknowledging that the other assumes a real presence. The  
quest for an identity is the pursuit of all people, but it is more pressing for
the disprivileged. For them identity becomes a defense mechanism. Simplification of the question of identity does not make communal integration any simpler. This is the basic theme that I try to unravel in both Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Male and female characters in the two novels are further agonized by their attempt either to adopt ready made identities, or overlook the importance of forming one. The Invisible Man and other African-American characters in the two novels realize the futility of their quest for identity when they perceive it in a shallow manner.

It has been one of the basic concerns of this study to underscore that identity is not a static concept or a one dimensional question. It alters as history does and shifts as positions do. It also merges with subjectivities and emerges new. Class, gender, religion, ethnicity, and geography are all constituents of identity. Yet, even those should not be taken as mobile or fixed. Understanding their workings and their liveliness is also conditional for the development of healthy identities. Many African-Americans in the two novels fall into the trap of fixities and hence are doomed to suffer when they fail to attain a sense of integration. It is important to emphasize that both novelists' concept of integration does entail a sense of submission or concession to a more powerful center or a more dominating group. It is rather grasping the essence of both experiences that of the self and of the other. This duality in vision is likely to be a source of enrichment.
Introduction

African-American novels are suitable sites for understanding the way historical occurrences shape and change the lives of African-Americans. Unfolding the different manifestations of oppression that African-Americans underwent during and after the so called Emancipation of the African slaves is a basic concern in this study. The study at hand aims at depicting the quest for African-American identity in two novels in the African-American literature, Toni Morrison's Pulitzer-Prize winner *Beloved* (1987) and Ralph Ellison's National Book Award winner *Invisible Man* (1952). Both novelists have been keen on depicting their contexts, realizing that a true understanding of the self is not dissociated from a perceptive understanding of one’s surroundings.

People are defined by their identities. Identity is a marker, it is a label that is composed of many elements, including social roles, gender variations, religious beliefs, ethnic belongings and others. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that there is "no clear core or centre which produces fixed identities, but rather a plurality of centres" (Woodward 21). This is mainly due to different political, economic and social ever-emerging factors. Members of the one group may be dislocated from their place of birth, like in the case of slavery, and have to endure new realities. Therefore, identity becomes more mobile, multiple and subject to change consequent to contextual changes.
African-Americans have been subjected to oppression by the whites ever since their uprooting from their mother land. If we trace the history of the African-Americans since the eighteenth century we witness millions of men, women, and children who were forced to leave their homes in Africa and cross the Atlantic Ocean in order to become slaves in the Americas. These facts shed light on black identity as shaped in an indigenous culture and unravel the outcome and confusion caused by such a reality (Gilroy 321-324).

These two novels can be interpreted as post-colonial since they focus on the colonial discourse that tends to enhance the objective side of the self rendering it powerless, subjugated, and objectified to the "Other", the colonizer. The thing that impedes the quest for an identity and renders it a problematic issue. This is due to the internalization of the white colonial discourse that causes members of the colonized subjects to adopt the ethical paradigm and the colonial morality of the imperial "Other", measure and judge members of their community with. This point is being discussed in the study in relation to two characters in the two novels, Paul D in Beloved and the narrator in Invisible Man. Both of them, at certain points, adopt ready made discourses and values cherished by whites and judge members of their race accordingly.

Ellison and Morrison explore in their narratives issues pertaining to the African-Americans’ quest for their identity. Their novels underscore the fact
that color, class, gender, and ethnicity are not-sufficient definitions of identity. They are such problematic categories that cannot be satisfactorily accounted for away from collective and personal histories that are affected by social, political and cultural dimensions.

Both novelists explore the theme of identity conflict called upon by one’s own perception of his/her own self and an outward-image that he/she is expected to assume. The African-American characters in the two novels, especially male characters, are shown to be struggling for an identity definition that surpasses white American definition of identity. At one stage or another, someone like the Invisible Man, for example, is led to believe that the only “correct” definition of identity is that conjured up by white values and codes of ethics—values set up and cherished by a so-called civilized nation. Fluctuating between one experience and another, he begins to realize the impossibility of espousing any such definition. For regardless of his conformity with to the white center and the concessions he makes, these centers will continue to look at him as peripheral, an outsider. However, a complete mergence or integration is never possible. Some characters in the two novels mature in a manner which enables them to perceive that an identity is not simply given as much as it is influenced by complex factors.

The kind of suffering that blacks undergo trying to construct and maintain a sense of selfhood under the pressure of the ‘oppressor’ (the white)
may lead to resorting to the same logic of domination. Frantz Fanon’s argument in this respect is very relevant to the concept of identity as pursued by Morrison and Ellison. Fanon exposes in depth the psychological dimension of the relation between the black and the white, or the superior. The blacks, he argues, have fallen into the trap of identity emulation rather than a true perception of one’s needs and specific history and context as a way for constructing an identity (145-148).

The two novels selected for the study show that the blacks remain the object of oppression, even after the Civil War and the Reconstruction era. The blacks will need to assert their history and acknowledge their sufferings. This acknowledgment can emerge either as a source for a true identity enrichment and empowerment, or as a hampering force if not positively reconstructed. In the two novels the protagonists tend to retell their own (his)stories, ‘self as subject.’ Morrison and Ellison, as African-Americans, narrate their own version of history. This time the marginal becomes the central by writing a counter narrative that defies the narrative of the more powerful. The master narrative that has always asserted the blacks’ inferiority so as to justify the need to subjugate them is being deconstructed. By telling their own stories the African-Americans rethink their past, reinterpret it and reconstruct it. This leads to a healing process which begins by self-discovery — the object of subjugation herewith, shifts into a subject and an action initiator.
The present study consists of an introduction, two chapters and a conclusion. I begin each chapter by projecting a plot summary and then offering a contextual discussion that promotes an understanding of “identity” as shaped by different realities, temporalities and circumstances. This naturally leads to emphasizing the importance of adopting a non-essentialist approach to understanding identity. According to this approach, identity is seen as having different elements which can be reconstructed in different situations. And even within the same situations, and within the same ethnic group, identities are not fixed; they change and emerge diverse according to every one's personal experiences (Woodward 11).

Thus, in the thesis I will try to avoid a conjuring up of a fixed identity or a stereotyped identity for all blacks or all whites. I have analyzed in each chapter different models of both white American and African American characters in the two novels to show how identities are composed of collective components and how each perceives of these components. In other words, being a mother is one element of a female's identity. But this is not to say that all mothers are alike. This applies to all other defining elements of identity. Moreover, I have attempted to show how white people and black people affect and build blocks in the lives of one another and contribute to the construction of the identities of members of the two races.

Gender as an identity marker has also been a recurring theme in the two chapters with different emphasis in relation to the two novels. Like any
socially constructed category, gender is constantly shifting and being redefined. How the characters in both novels perceive their manhood and womanhood in such different historical and situational realities has been one of the major theme in the two novels. The thesis shows how African-American men and women, during slavery, faced a blur of gender roles for the institution of slavery has rendered the captive body of the slaves almost genderless, but with exceptions. In the *Invisible Man* some African-American men sought their identities in an attempt to fulfill white male bourgeois standard of manhood.

Instances from both novels have been analyzed to show how bodies are inscribed, literally and metaphorically, by the oppressor to enforce his identity print on colored people. These inscriptions, as outlined in the study, are internalized by the oppressed and become, sadly enough, an inherent identity constituent. Those markers testify to the agonies of the past and contribute to the process of self-discovery.

*Beloved*, a novel written by a woman, accords a significantly wider space addressing women's experiences. However, representations of males in the novel have added to the credibility of the text simply because women in reality do not live their life in isolation from men. Much of the narrative space is devoted to handling Paul D's character and situation. He does not pass as a shadow leaving no trace. Morrison excels in depicting her male characters despite her emphasis on the development of her female characters.
Paul D triggers potential positive change in Sethe's life. The one complements the other and sheds light on the other’s text. Ellison, unlike Toni Morrison, has accorded a very small space for female characters and female experiences. White female characters in the *Invisible Man* are portrayed as other victims of the white male patriarchy who share with the black men the position of marginality. Therefore, oppressed members of the two races can find a common ground since they are affected by the same cultural and social dimensions which in return affect each individual’s identity construction.

By the end of each chapter, I have attempted to clarify the concept of subjectivity. A clear perception of the concept of identity requires dealing with the human subjectivity, which is an inward process involving deciphering the depth of one’s self and which is an important factor in the construction of identity in addition to some outward factors. Subjectivity is the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions which cause us to be who we really are. It is our feelings in relation to different positions within culture (Woodward 39), and the process within which the person becomes a subject, an actor, rather than an object that is being acted upon. Subjectivity has to do with one's own psychological make up. Individual events, emotional situations, crises, traumas, family ties, communal links, personal experiences and many others are the components which contribute to one's subjectivity. Subjectivity is the self's interaction with those component. It is
the way the "I" perceives the outer reality, and thus, causing the self to act or react accordingly. Many human actions are manifestations of their subjectivities. Where as the action is revealed, the real deep motive behind it is not always really exposed. Sethe, the protagonist in Beloved, commits an infanticide. We come to understand the motive behind this horrific act as she narrates and as she reveals how she perceives the previous parts of her past and the circumstances that led to that act. We understand how she changes from an object to a subject who acts instead of being acted upon after we delve into her deep self and innermost feelings and know how she perceives her oppressor and the unjust world she lives in.

It is a mistake to assume that subjectivity and identity are two different domains. They link and interlink. Sharing the same history and space and probably the experience is not conducive to one collective identity. It is subjectivity which renders identity an individual experience. People's reaction to the different stances and circumstances or situations is not indiscriminate. This is so since the workings of the human subjectivity are never linear or one dimensional.

In the course of my analysis of the two novels, the following questions have been addressed: To what extent have African-Americans been successful in developing their individual identities as opposed to the white man’s identity? On the other hand, is posing the previous question socially and humanly right in the first place? Should non-black people bother to ask


البحث عن الهوية الأفروأمريكية في رواياتئ..
المحبوبة لتوني موريسون والرجل الخفي لرالف أليسون

إعداد
دبكة محمود إبراهيم
المشرف
الدكتور توفيق يوسف
ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن مجموعة العوامل التي من شأنها إعاقة أو تسهيل البحث عن الهوية الأفروأمريكية، وذلك من خلال روايتين: الأولى المحبوبة لتوني موريسون، والثانية الرجل الخفي لرالف أليسون.

نتفرد كل واحد من الروايتين السابقتين بالتعامل مع قضية تشكيل الهوية وتعريف الذات ضمن سياقات تاريخية واجتماعية مختلفة، ذلك أن لكل رواية ظروفها الزمنية الخاصة بها.

تسعى هذه الدراسة أيضا إلى توضيح مدى الظلم الذي واجه الأفروآمريكين والذي أستمر إلى ما بعد الحرب الأهلية وفترة الاصلاحات وفقا للروايتين موضوع الدراسة. لقد شكل البحث الدورب عن هوية خاصة محورا أساسيا من محاولات العملين المذكورين، فقد واجه الأفروآمريكين صعوبة كبيرة في محاولتهم إثبات هذه الهوية بسبب ضعفهم أمام الرجل الأبيض الذي أعاق بشكل مستمر البناء الذاتي المستقل لهؤلاء الأفروآمريكين.

يبدو أن كلًا من أليسون وموريسون يؤكدان على ضرورة إعادة كتابة التاريخ لتنجح للأفروآمريكين الفرصة لإعادة تقييم وتحليل وفهم الماضي. ذلك أن هذه الإعادة من شأنها أن تظهر كيف يمكن للإنسان المظلم أن يستقبل هذا الظلم بروية جديدة معهله.

وكان واحدا من الأمور الهامة التي شغلت هذا البحث إظهار آثر خطاب الرجل الأبيض وأسلوب حياته وأخلاقه ومعاييره الخاصة على الأفروآمريكين من حيث تشكيل هويتهم وفهمها.
بعض الشخصيات في الروايتين تقع في مصيدة الرجل الأبيض، حيث يتمثل رؤيته الخاصة ويتبنى مرجعية الفكرية وأحكامه التي تحول دون بناء شخصية ذات هوية خاصة، الأمر الذي يؤدي إلى تقليل الآخر والبقاء تحت سيطرته.

وتغطي هذه الدراسة عدة على القصد الوظيفي من هذين العملين، والمتمثل في التأكيد على ضرورة إيجاد واقع جديد لهؤلاء المهتمين يسمح لهم ببناء شخصية مستقلة بعيدة عن الصوره التي يحاول الآخر أن يتوسل بما يجعلهم الأدنى مكانه.

يشعر كلا من الكاتبين أن الأفروآمركيين يمكن أن يمثلوا ذواتهم بذاتها لأن يقوم الآخرون بتمثيلهم، وذلك من خلال تعزيع روايتهم الخاصة بهم حسب ما تميله عليهم رؤيتهم وتاريخهم، مثل ما فعلته إحدى الشخصيات الرئيسية في المحبوبة (Beloved) حينما روت وأعادت رواية تجارب الماضي لأفراد أسرتها. أمّا في رواية الرجل الخفيف (Invisible Man) فلا تكتفي الشخصية الرئيسية في الرواية بسرد قصتها إلى القراء وإنما تكتبث على شكل سيرة ذاتية. الأمر الذي كرس عملية إكثاف ذاتية وتعزيزها. وبالتالي فإن رواية السيرة الذاتية يمكن النظر إليها باعتبارها ردا على رواية الآخر التي ساهمت وفترة طويلة في إعطاء صوره نمطية للرجل الأسود. وهي بذلك تشكّل خطاب الرجل الأبيض الرائع وترسي خطابا جديدا يفسح مجالا لتعريف جديد تصبح فيها الأنا هي المتكبّرة وليس المتكلم عنها، وبذلك أيضا يصبح المهمش هو المركزي عندما يكتب ذاته ويعبّر عنها.

وأخيرا فإن هذه الدراسة حاولت قدر الإمكان أن تلفت النظر إلى أن فكرة خلق الهوية لا يمكن أن تتحقق عن طريق الاستسلام للتمايز وأنظمة الآخر، ولا يمكن أن تتحقق من خلال الماضي المهمش وإنما يمكن أن تتم وتصبح حقيقية من خلال رؤية مزدوجة تتبّث منها ذوات ديناميكية جديدة.
Throughout her vividly told stories, Toni Morrison has brilliantly captured the woes of African-American people, while articulating and condemning the socio-political discrimination that they have undergone throughout history. Entheta/WikiCommons. But Morrison’s words articulated her own strength just as much as Welty’s: a pure uniqueness of voice and literary presence, a refreshingly originality in a world often plagued with mainstream plagiarism. The leading voice of contemporary American fiction belongs to a stunning wordsmith, a political activist, a passionate scholar and a devoted humanitarian. Abstract This research paper attempts to study the Negro problem of identity and existence in the postwar American Negro novel with special reference to the saga of survival and invisibility of a nameless young black man in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man. The core of this study tackles the desperate quest, this man living, in a blind, nihilistic, and a racist American world denies his existence, and reducing him almost to a non-entity making him ever more restless, possessed and exhausted. Discover the world's research. 17+ million members. Ralph Ellison’s 1952 classic Invisible Man follows one African-American man’s quest for identity during the 1920s and 1930s. Because of the racism he faces, the unnamed protagonist, known as “Invisible Man,” does not feel seen by society and narrates the reader through a series of unfortunate and fortunate events he undertakes to fit in while living in the South and later in Harlem, New York City. In 1953, Invisible Man was awarded the National Book Award, making Ellison the first African-American author to receive the prestigious honor for fiction. Buy it on Amazon. 6. Bel... Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 1987 novel Beloved puts Sethe, a former slave in 1873 Cincinnati, Ohio, in contact with the supernatural. Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved analyzed in the context of a survey of the African American experience of slavery, and discussion of selected slave narratives. The discrimination that continues to be the African American experience has brought forth in Toni Morrison one of the most significant voices of her race and age. She contends that the American history of slavery had been consciously “disremembered” [1] so that it is conveniently shrouded by a comfortable state of national amnesia. This is consistent with the view that the literary canon had not reflected African American scholarly achievement or artistic ability.