

An Analysis of Existentialist Feminism in *Invisible Man*

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Abstract

Since the domestic scholars began to pay attention to *Invisible Man* in the 1980s, they have only focused on the protagonist and the men around him. However, there are few studies on female characters, and the exploration of African American female characters is still left blank. The protagonist encounters all kinds of women in the process of exploring his identity, but most of these women have no name and no sound. This essay aims to apply the existentialist feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir to the discussion of the unfair treatment that American women suffered in the patriarchal society through a comparative analysis of the images of three white women and four black women in the novel, so that to improve the understanding of the history and social status of American women, as well as the race and gender issues.

Keywords: Existentialist; Feminism; *Invisible Man*; African American female

1.Introduction

Invisible Man is a novel written by Ralph Ellison (1913-1994), a famous African American writer. The novel had gone through seven years of work before it was published. Since its publication in 1952, the novel has been well received in American society and literary circles. In 1953, it won the National Book Award and the Chicago Defender Award. The novel tells the story of a black youth suffering from racial discrimination in a white dominated society and trying to find his own identity. During this process, he met all kinds of white women and black women. However, most of these female characters are nameless and don't even have the chance to speak up for themselves.

Since the publication of the novel, many scholars have studied it from many perspectives such as theme, race and ideology. However, most focus on the protagonist and other male characters, while few of them have explored the female characters, especially the black women in the novel. The first foreign scholar who saw *Invisible Man* from the perspective of gender is Sylvander (1975). She believed that the female characters in the novel reflected the stereotype of twisted white American men. Adopting Sylvander's perspective, Stanford (1993) classified these female characters by dichotomy. In contrast, there have been domestic scholars paying attention to *Invisible Man* since the 1980s, yet few analyses of the female characters in the novel have been made. Liu Xiaojie (2011) borrowed Stanford's dichotomy to analyze the five main female characters in the novel. Xu Liping (2012), in her Master's thesis, discussed the images of the nine female character in the novel from the perspective of feminism, and analyzed the forming of these female.

Apart from that, *Invisible Man* has much more worthy of exploring. According to Xu Liping's classification, most of the mother figures in the novel were black women, while most of the prostitutes were white women. It can be seen that Ellison held a different view about white women and black women. Therefore, this thesis classifies seven main female characters of the novel into white women and black women, then makes a comparative analysis of them from the perspective of existentialist feminism and probes into the fate of

women of different races and the reasons why they became the “others” in society, so as to acquire a greater depth of thinking on the issue of women liberation and provide a different angle for the interpretation of the novel.

2. Persecution of White Women

2.1 Materialization -- blonde dancer at the fighting ring

More than 20 women appear in the narration of the novel, most of them are nameless and unvoiced, as if they were invisible. To some extent, the silence kept by the women are the product of male oppression. The character that represents it well in the novel would be the naked blonde lady in the fighting field.

In the first chapter of the novel, the protagonist was invited to give another speech at a meeting gathered by important white people in the town due to his previous speech at the school, and was also asked to take part in a royal battle. In the center of the room stood a blonde lady, stark naked. Looking at her, the protagonist could not help but feel a wave of guilt and fear. In the apartheid South of the United States, black men who stared at white women would be lynched, or even be punished by death. So black men in the South were well aware of the ban that had been carried out for centuries, that was why the protagonist felt such way when he was looking at the blonde. However, he was still deeply attracted by her, his eyes could not help looking. “Had the price of looking been blindness, I would have looked,” he expressed. And later, the author spilled much ink on the features of the blonde, saying that *her hair was yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll, her face heavily powdered and rouged as though to form an abstract mask* (Ellison, 1984:19). This implies the fact that men in the novel tend to dehumanize women when they observe them. “*I noticed a certain merchant who followed her hungrily, his lips loose and drooling.*” (Ellison, 1984:20) It showed that the blonde just served as a tool to satisfy man’s carnal desire. Although her eyes showed terror and disgust, she continued to dance in the pursuit of men. The blonde lady played a role of the “seductress”, but in fact, she has been materialized into a “sex toy” to the white men, a *Forbidden Fruit* to the black men that reflected their desire and fear, while her own true thoughts had nowhere to be told.

2.2 Temptation -- Emma, the “paper tiger”

Emma was a fashionable woman who wore a strong perfume and a diamond brooch pinned to her lapel. These details signified her much higher status, compared with other women in the novel. At the sight of Brother Jack, Emma’s hard, handsome face broke into smiles (Ellison, 1984:303), which showed that Emma attached great importance to her image in Brother Jack’s mind. For a long time, many women had been living in a world of men, forgetting that they were each born as an individual. There were two reasons for that. First of all, men gazed at women with a strong sense of will of self, which was not that kind of gaze that *Others* would have towards the *Subject*. And after receiving such gaze, women not only failed to realize it, but also changed themselves according to the judging of the gaze.

When the protagonist attended the gathering Brotherhood for the first time, he overheard Emma saying to Brother Jack, “But don’t you think he should be a little blacker?” The protagonist got very angry and thought, “Who is she, anyway, Brother Jack’s wife, his girl friend?” So when the protagonist felt that he had been unfairly treated by Emma, he instantly judged her identity from the men around her, eventually with male superiority to deal with the threat he felt from this woman by thinking, “I’d like to show her how really black I am...” (Allison, 1984:306) Once, the protagonist was dancing with Emma in the Hades building, Emma pressed her body to him, and suddenly the protagonist was full of lust, and instead of pulling away, Emma held him tighter. Here, she completely took on the image of a *Tempter*. She was active and bold, hoping that the protagonist would become one of her “preys”.

Besides, from the conversations between Brother Jack and Emma, it can be seen that Brother Jack's attitude was of a commander towards Emma. For example, "Emma, the Bourbon!"(Ellison, 1984:305) "And I suggest, Emma, that you make it your interest too..."(Ellison, 1984:306) Also, his speech at toasting, "To the Brotherhood of Man... to History and to Change,"(Ellison, 1984:314) which showed that Brotherhood did not acknowledge the role of women.

In a word, Emma was a *Tempter* with a complex inner world. She yearned and tried to be an independent individual without sacrificing her own personality. However, her confidence only remained on the surface and could not cover up her inner weakness.

2.3 Distortion -- Sybil, the "nymphomaniac"

After the protagonist saw the true face of Brotherhood, he finally accepted the fact that he was one of the invisible men. So he decided to acquiesce all this and then got under it. As for acquiring information, he decided to take advantage of a woman to solve the problem. There were three reasons why he chose Sybil. First, she was the wife of the rather authoritative member of Brotherhood. Second, the protagonist had been hinted by her "friendship" several times. Last of all, she seemed very lonely. The plan went well as the protagonist predicted, and they agreed to meet at the protagonist's house the next day. However, the protagonist found that Sybil had no interest in politics and did not know what his husband was plotting, therefore could not provide anything useful.

When the protagonist wanted to send her away, Sybil revealed her strange sexual fantasies. She thought of herself as a nymphomaniac and had always wanted to be raped by black men, but she thought women like her needed to control herself on this matter. The reason was that Sybil thought, "Men have repressed us too much. We're expected to pass up too many human things" (Ellison, 1984:527). Sybil's opinion was not without foundation. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir pointed that out exactly, "To be feminine is to show oneself as weak, futile, passive, and docile. The girl is supposed not only to primp and dress herself up but also to repress her spontaneity..."(Beauvoir, 1998:387). These characteristics the society forced on women have become a kind of social norms in generations of civilization, which makes a lot of women receive such education since childhood. Therefore, before they can form their own independent thinking, these characteristics have internalized, thus aggravating a series of difficulties of women surviving in society. Many girls grow up with contradictions and go through a lot of chaotic situations. Some of them will might show some abnormal behaviors in the process, and some even suffer from neurosis, Sybil's strange sexual fantasy is one of its manifestations.

Apart from that, Sybil commented that his husband talked about the rights of women all day long, but did not even really understand the needs of women. From Sybil's words, it was obvious to see that white men claimed that they were fighting for women rights, but in fact they were just sugarcoating the reality with false images.

Life is hard, even so for the white women. It is just hard to imagine the social status of the black women who are persecuted for their race, gender and class.

3.The Shackles of Black Women

3.1 Freedom -- The old black woman

The first female character in the novel was an old black woman in the hallucination after the protagonist smoked marijuana in the hole. She told the protagonist that she was full of love for her master. First of all, from the old woman's address to her husband, *master*, we can see that in the mind of the black women, they are the property of their husband. This kind of master-slave relationship has a long history. When black people arrived in America as cheap slaves, they were deprived of their basic human rights. The life of black women was even

more difficult. In the marriage, black men could legally take charge of the property and income of his wife, and even use violence to punish his wife. In such environment, black women, without receiving any proper education, began to develop a distorted perception. They believed that they should always be loyal to their husbands and obey their command.

However, it is in human nature that one longs for freedom. Sartre's theory of subject freedom holds the view that "*freedom does not need to be pursued, it is born unavoidable and without optional, it is the destiny of human beings*". (Du Xiaozhen, 2007:140) In the following dialogue, the old woman told the protagonist that she loved freedom more than her husband. But when the protagonist asked the old woman what freedom was, which surprised her. This showed that she had not given a thought on this problem. It is just in human nature to seek for freedom. And what is freedom? Beauvoir did a lot of metaphysical thinking on the issue of the freedom of women. She believed that freedom for women was actually for women to establish reciprocal and equal relationship with men, so as to be treated equally in social situation. However, self deception and current situation of women trapped themselves in the position of the Others, a situation established by men, which became the biggest obstacle to women's freedom.

In the end, the old woman killed her master, which meant she had attempted to challenge the patriarchal social system and set an example for black women, encouraged them to speak up for themselves, resisted oppression and pursued freedom. However, it was merely an hallucination of the protagonist, an hallucination that reflected the reality. The situation of African American women in reality was as contradictory and illusory as hallucination.

3.2 Endurance -- Trueblood's pregnant wife and saughter

Trueblood's daughter, Matty Lou, was a typical female character deeply influenced by men's thinking. First of all, when the protagonist faltered to tell Mr. Norton that Trueblood's daughter was pregnant but without a husband, Norton "reassured" him by saying, "Oh, I see. But that shouldn't be so strange. I understand your people..." (Ellison, 1984:60). Since the time of slavery took place, the fertility of African American women had been used to be exploited, but they were in no position to fight back. And in the end, these men put the charges against the black women, giving them the stereotype image of having lust and desire (Qi Rongqing, 2011). Therefore, in the eyes of the white people, it was not surprising that black people would have committed such a scandal, and it was not worth mentioning that black women were pregnant before marriage.

Secondly, Trueblood said he didn't like the idea of that guy hanging around his daughter and strongly opposed their being together. He did not see his adult daughter as an individual, but as an object that had to be controlled by himself. The otherness of women was solidified in this circumstance, they could not freely decide their marriage or their own destiny. After Kate, Trueblood's wife, found out that her daughter had been raped by her father during his dream, she cursed him madly and wanted to murder him. But at her daughter's pleading, she eventually allowed Trueblood back into this family, for he was the main source of the family income. Under the influence of patriarchal culture, women were only the property of men. Because they had to count on men economically, so whenever men did unforgivable things, women had no choice but to swallow their anger, while people like Trueblood, on the other hand, could get away with punishment after doing such a vile thing. Instead, he got a lot of help and support from white people. This unequal treatment showed the tragic fate of African American women, who had no other choice but to endure.

3.3 Mary Rambo -- maternity

Mary Rambo was a black woman who had a great influence on the fate of the protagonist. The name *Mary* was the name of Jesus's biological mother. Mary in the novel also played a similar role. *Mother* and *black nanny* were the most common words found in black women literature, which were essentially the product of slavery, reflecting the "multiple cross oppression" from race, class and gender.

When the protagonist dragged his body out of the tunnel and fainted in the streets of Harlem, most people just went on their own way, while the "big black woman" stopped to care for him and said that he must be taken care of by a woman for a while. "...so just come on and let me do something for you like I hope you'd do something for ole Mary in case she needed it.."(Allison, 1984:253). This showed that although all her actions indicated her physical and spiritual independence, and she could always help others, she still had a deep sense of insecurity about herself.

Later Mary took him home and told the protagonists that only by relying on themselves could they change the world. She hoped that the protagonist could take the lead in raising the social status of their race, but she did not consider being part of the change on her own. From that it could be seen that black women had recognized the racial problems in the society and had thought about changing the situation. However, the relationship between the two sexes in society was not to create otherness to each other. In this society, the female became the absolute *Others*, failing to establish their subjectivity worth. In addition to the oppression of men, most women were fine with curling up in the safeness of otherness, unwilling to take risks to break through the restrictions given by society. So they inevitably become the *Others*.

4. Conclusion

From the above analyses of the white women and the black women in the novel, it could be seen that although the oppression of white women in society came only from gender discrimination, the impact on their mind and body was irreversible. In the long history of mankind, patriarchy, as the mainstream culture, controlled people's thoughts, and came up with social division of labor for different gender, and the idea of women being the second sex. At the same time, patriarchy was also used by most men as a tool to control and oppress women. When the things went on like this, women were naturally forced to internalize the male-dominating principles under the oppression of patriarchal system. Therefore, women were marginalized in the traditional concept, and lost the right to speak in the patriarchal society. Like the blonde lady, they became the "silent white women". They needed to digest their own "invisibility" in the society and to find the meaning of their own existence. Under such pressure, some women, like Sibyl, had to develop twisted mentality; some women, like Emma, tried to become part of the elite, but still couldn't deliberate themselves from the instructions of men.

In addition to the gender discrimination suffered by white women, African American women also suffered from racist oppression and class exploitation. Like the old black women in the prologue, black women were more eager to seek freedom and human rights than other races. But, due to the long-term oppression, they could not even understand the freedom they had been longing for, so they spent a hard and painful life in the chaos of seeking it. In this society, black women not only undertook the same work as black men, but also took responsibility for all the housework. At the same time, their fertility and sexual potential were being fully exploited. Still, the society gave more wages to the men than the women in black family, which made the black men the main source of family income. Like Trueblood's wife and daughter, women could not afford their financial independence or the freedom of marriage, and they silently suffered from the physical and mental torture imposed by men. But with the development of society, some black women began to regain their financial independence. Like Mary Rambo, they possessed an optimistic attitude and hoped the world would be a more harmonious place. However, due to the long-term oppression of gender, race and class, they did not have the courage and enthusiasm to change the social ideology on their own. On the contrary, they accepted the idea that only men could change the world and hoped that men would strive to become "racial leaders".

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