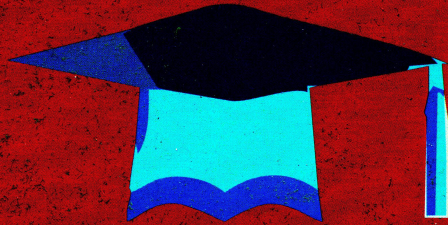


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**Democracy and Ethno-racism: Citizens under Bondage in
Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Timothy Aluko's *Wrong
Ones in the Dock***

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ABSTRACT

In Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Aluko's *Wrong Ones in the Dock*, ethnically of racially diverse societies with make-believe pluralism are vividly portrayed. These societies reveal indigenes that are virtually prisoners owing to the prevailing climate of falsehood and pretended democracy. Citizens here know the truth and the right behaviours, but are either too afraid of fragmented to own up. In the end, though justice and tranquility are delayed, it is clear that the status quo cannot be sustained since the people become aware and gradually bound to proffer workable and enduring solutions as a way to establish genuine democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria and the United States are good examples of diverse societies. The diversity is not restricted to the ethnic or racial sphere but transcends even religious and cultural boundaries. However, in spite of these diversities, which are necessary ingredients for genuine democracy, abuses of rights of citizens and outright denial of their freedoms prevail in some instances. Two clear cases of such perceived truncation of such freedoms and rights are eloquently depicted in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Timothy Aluko's *Wrong Ones in the Dock*. In the two texts, full-fledged citizens are reduced to the unenviable status of prisoners and scavengers owing to the atmosphere of falsehood and pretended democracy, which prevails in the societies so ably depicted.

In other words, the concept of democracy, which is highly treasured in these two countries, is threatened by the presence of excessive bureaucracy in

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one society and the prevalence of racism in the other. Ellison's and Aluko's novels reveal two unique societies stained by the active discrimination and ostracizing of an entire race owing to its skin pigmentation in the American setting and the extremely corrupt and sluggish judiciary and police abetted by the gullible public which connive to incarcerate the innocent while letting off the guilty in the Nigerian background. According to Anthony West:

Mr. Ellison's hero is a Negro of the South who starts out with the naïve illusion that what stands between him and the whites is a matter of education. He is given a scholarship to a southern Collège that has been endowed by Northern Philanthropists, and he goes to it in great delight, thinking that what he will learn there will pare away all his disabilities and disadvantages. He finds that the college cannot do that for him and does not even try to do it; it is concerned only with helping him make realistic adjustments to things as they are. He gets into a mess of trouble and is expelled. Before expelling him, the dean tells him just what the facts of colored life are... He is too young and too nobly stubborn to believe that this is the best that can be done with his life, and the rest of the book deals with his attempts to force the world to accept him on a pride-and-dignity basis, and with his final realization that he has to stay in the dark as an invisible man (Reilly, ed. 1970: 102 – 103).

The events in Ellison's novel when viewed in the light of the American Constitution (the Bill of Rights) and other accompanying democratic apparatus in the United States emerge as a dark testimony of the subversion of democracy. In Aluko's text, it is the truncation of justice through various subterfuges. For instance:

It was Gilbert Bassey who swung the axe, which accidentally killed his mother. But it is Jonathan and his son Paul who are arrested... Witnesses are unwilling to go to court and give evidence for the defendants. Sometimes it is because of fear of repercussions, and indeed one of the witnesses dies suspiciously in a road accident. Sometimes it is because of fear of scandal as in the case of Mark Abiola. Pastor's warden at St. Nicholas Church, who does not want his wife to discover that he was at Sissy Bintu's flat that night (Aluko's 1982: Backcover).

Invisible Man opens with the narrator who is himself invisible, hibernating in a basement in New York after his various encounters and experiences. The protagonist is invisible owing to his society's refusal to recognize him. He is hibernating in a bid to chart a new course for his life. What follows this introduction is a reliving of his past experiences by narrator. Thus, the end of the novel is its beginning. This method of introduction serves to highlight the upturned and confused state of existence of African-Americans in the United States at the time.

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Keith Byerman (1985) argues that the novel combines "traditional Afro-American themes and devices with the stylistic and structural methods of modernist literature" (11). He further states that:

Like Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright before him, Ralph Ellison addresses the problematic of black identity in a society that has consistently denied the validity of that identity. Like them, he seeks in the folk experience, some nurturing resource for his struggling, oppressed characters. But more than any of them, he finds in modern writing, including Joyce, Faulkner, and Hemingway, a means by which to symbolize these concerns. He quite consciously adopts the techniques of stream-of-consciousness, surrealism, literary allusion, and either lavishness or economy of style, depending on the particular effect he wishes to create (Ibid).

The American society described in *Invisible Man* is so confusing and intoxicating that the writer has to occasionally resort to elements of surrealism and the stream of consciousness techniques to measure the progress – or its lack, of the protagonist. Sometimes, too, the situation descends to the level of the bizarre as in the incestuous relationship involving the black folk hero, Jim Trueblood and his daughter Matty Lou. Owing to the mundane existence imposed on Blacks folks by the dominant white American environment, father, daughter and mother had to live in a one-room shack, which provided the compelling grounds for the incest to occur.

The Nigerian society also imprisons its innocent citizens owing to the incessant falsehood of its people. The gullibility of its police force and the ineptitude and corruption of its judiciary fare no better as matters are deliberately left to rot and fester in the hypocritical post-independence set-up. People are afraid to tell the truth to the police because they expect the police not to believe, but to arrest and torture them. Furthermore, endless delays and adjournments, which characterize the court system, scare off even willing witnesses from the police and the courts. The situation is so bad that lies are exchange for truths where witnesses are willing to testify:

A few days later we had information that alarmed us. The statements made to the police by Jonathan's co-tenants at Fasanya Street were most damaging to Jonathan's case. A number of the man had said that they were away from home when the fighting took place and that they had only been told about it by their wives and children. Those of the women who confirmed that they were in when the fighting took place said that they saw nobody hit anybody. A number of them had said that they saw nothing and heard nothing. One woman, however, a relation of the woman that died said that she saw Jonathan hit the deceased woman, also said that Jonathan hit his mother with a piece of iron and kicked her in the tummy till she fell. No one had said that he had seen Gilbert Bassey hold any dangerous weapon or that he had injured his mother, nor that she had fallen, hitting her head during the fall.

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The implication was obvious. If two people in their statements said that Jonathan hit the dead woman with a dangerous weapon and if no one said in his statement that he saw Gilbert Bassew wield a dangerous weapon or saw this hit his mother, though unintentionally, and that she fell and knocked her head on the floor, in these circumstances the hangman's noose originally hanging only loosely round Jonathan's neck was now obviously pulled tighter. That Jonathan might be hanged for a murder that he did not commit had up till now only been a remote possibility. But now it was no longer so very remote (Aluko 1982: 28).

Thus, the scenario portrayed appears more like the biblical Armageddon and Babel. Confusion and mistrust characterize that atmosphere, which is further underscored by acute hypocrisy among most of the people we encounter in the story. The society lady, Sissy Bintu Plamer for instance, lives a false life. She is a hypocrite to the core and elicits laughter and scorn from the conscientious reader. She sustains her horrid life style through promiscuous toying with other ladies' husbands. Therefore when her prized possessions are stolen from her, the reader does not fully join her in her clamor for 'justice' to be invoked on the so-called culprits.

The fake attitudes to issues and the prevailing untruth by many of the characters in *Wrong Ones in the Dock* recall similar manifestations by the trickster, Rinehart in *Invisible Man*. In Ellison's novel however, it is arguably the dominant racist American society which may have forced Rinehart to adopt the trickster mode among other chameleonic devices as strategies to survive. The protagonist too is a trickster and hypocrite of sorts as he accepts and relishes Mary Rambo's benign hospitality in a one-dimensional manner. He never returns to express his gratitude for her succor and sustenance of him in his very trying moments. Neither does he come back to pay his tenement dues which are long overdue. This is an example of unwarranted black exploitation of other blacks – even good-natured black folks like Mary Rambo. The Veterinary Surgeon's advice to the invisible man as he chauffeur's a rich, white trustee of the Southern Black College from where he is later expelled appears to be working for him:

But for God's sake, learn to look beneath the surface... 'Come out of the fog man. And remember you don't have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don't believe in it... Play it your own way... You're hidden right out the open. They wouldn't see you because they don't expect you to know anything, since they believe they've taken care of that... (Ellison 1952: 127 – 128).

In a society that prides itself as the leading beacon of democracy and civil freedoms, it is incomprehensible that so many undemocratic practices prevail; that a person is adjusted guilty from birth and is therefore hounded till death by the dominant establishment because of his skin pigmentation. Ignorantly, in his bid to survive in his pro-white society, the narrator – protagonist attempts to run away from his Negro folk roots. He 'runs away' from his family. He runs away from the incestuous folk character, Jim

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Trueblood. He further runs away from the benign black matriarch, Mary Rambo.

His whole movement from the South to the North is a movement away from his folk roots. As he becomes aware of the reality, he re-examines himself and starts to accept his black self and his folk roots. He, for instance, buys yams, which have been roasted along the streets of Harlem and eats with satisfaction. Yams are a folk relic. As he eats, he says: 'to hell with being ashamed of what you liked. No more of that for me. I am what I am... 'They're my birthmarks' I said. 'I am what I am!'" (260). The protagonist's encounter with the yams actually invigorates and frees him from previous inhibitions:

I took a bite, finding it as sweet and hot as any I'd ever had, and was overcome with such a surge of homesickness that I turned away to keep my control. I walked along, munching the yam, just as suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom – simply because I was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper. To hell with all that, and as sweet as the yam actually was, it became like nectar with the thought... What group of people we were, I thought why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked. Not all us, but so many... (258).

This experience effectively begins the protagonist's reconciliation with his African-American folk heritage. He now accepts and cherishes his ancestral relics and despises white exploitation of him and his race. As a further step in this reconciliation, he accepts the chain from brother tarp, a fellow member of the chthonian brotherhood. The chain symbolically links the invisible man with his past. While accepting the chain, he reasons that he is now part of the black heritage. The chain is likened to:

A man passing on to his son his own father's watch, which the son accepted not because he wanted the old fashioned time piece for itself, but because of the overtones of unstated seriousness and solemnity of the paternal gesture which at once joined him with his ancestors, marked a high point of his present, and promised a concreteness to his nebulous and chaotic future..... (John Hersey.ed.1974:146).

In *Invisible Man*, therefore, Ellison projects various characters and their preoccupations. Through this he shows their motivations, goals and efforts. The protagonist's encounter with these people sensitizes him into his great quest for something unique and enduring. Thus he stumbles upon his genuine Identity in the American society and becomes aware that only an affirmation of his true self can satisfy his longings. He also stops venerating whites that

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are really his oppressors. This happens when he realizes the absurdity of discrimination based on skin-color.

Like Aluko, Ellison acknowledges the absence of enduring democracy in his society. This results from the discrimination of blacks by whites. He however observes that African-Americans are a racial minority in the United States. Hence he suggests subtle methods for blacks to surmount difficulties in their setting. However, whether strategies such hibernation and invisibility are sustainable or practical is another matter. The narrator's 'invisibility', in a broader sense, is not peculiar or restricted to African-Americans. It equally embraces white Americans who segregate blacks:

The problem of identity and existence that Ellison poses transcends the issues of social justice and equity; it is not a question of 'the Negro problem' or 'race issues... we must all know who we are before we can be free – and there is no freedom for a white 'I' until there is freedom for a black 'Thou'. (126).

The single most telling factor against American democracy in Ellison's novel is the refusal by white to accord full, mutual recognition to blacks. This non-recognition results in the namelessness of the central character. Namelessness itself is a strategy; a protest against white discrimination of blacks. The Negro in *Invisible Man* is still nameless and therefore 'invisible' since he is viewed by the dominant white establishment as a figure instead of a human being:

The effect of the narrator's namelessness is to force us to create an identity for him through his experience and his words. He will not be tagged and thus dispensed with. Names in the story have significance, which is often explained in the text. True blood has engaged in incest. To bit (two-bits) is worthless, while jack is a one-eyed dealer of fates. To have a name in this story is to be categorized even when though complexly so. Like YHWH, whom he echoes in the "I am who I am" statement, the narrator will not be limited in his possibilities. He is define by his concrete begin within his fictional work, not by his label. Thus in telling his story he forces us into his history for our knowledge. Each incident recounted forces a redefinition of his identity, and because each has multiple leaves of meaning, he cannot be refilled. Thus the narrative itself becomes the alternative to a closed system (Behrman 1985:39).

From all indications, the American society portrayed in Ellison's text, though set in the early part of the twentieth century, is more organized and viable than the Nigerian one mirrored by Aluko's in *Wrong ones in the Dock*. Aluko's story which is set mainly in Lagos, Nigeria recall the sad event surrounding the nation's judiciary where cases are delayed unreasonably by excessive bureaucracy and where, often justice is miscarried. The event occurs sometime between the late '70s and early '80s. Both the high and low

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in the society are gullible and government institution is in a state of acute decay. This situation recalls Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* and the rotten chancery or court system with the bloated aristocracy of the regency in England in the mid 19th century.

Even when ample evidence (by way of witnesses and weapons) exists, the Nigerian judiciary and police ignore these and actually release the guilty from detention, while remanding the innocent in 'protective custody'. Indeed, it is not a strange thing that Gilbert Bassey who unwittingly killed his mother with an axe is set free, while Jonathan and Paul Egbor, two innocent persons are detained, and the case drag on and on with terrible untruths begin voiced to try to abort justice:

Gilbert Bassey, the unemployed son of the woman who died in the hospital, together with the two women in custody was released by the police after six days in the cells. That Gilbert was released was surprising news in itself. But what made it doubly surprising was the fact that Jonathan Egbor and his son Paul were not released. Here was the man, who everyone said they saw wield the weapon that felled his deceased mother, though accidentally, being let off by the police. Yet they continued to hold two men who everyone knew ought not to be held responsible for the death of the woman. The ways of our national police were in all ways like the peace of god which passed all understanding. (Aluko's 1982:35).

In the final analysis, although the two wrongly accused and detained fellows, Jonathan and Paul are "discharge and acquitted" upon being found "not guilty" the cause of justice is abused and neglected. The two innocent men, having already served an unwarranted term of imprisonment, are not assuaged or compensated, since it is touted that, "justice delayed, is justice denied".

.... I thought of the large number of witnesses to events who later invariably refuse to come forward to give evidence for fear of the harassment of the police and of relatives of accused persons, as well as the fear of the colossal waste of time. I thought of what must be a large number of cases that are being lost all the time by the prosecution for these causes. Then I combined this with the great shortage of able and experienced lawyers to work as state counsel in the ministry of justice. When through a combination of these causes a known criminal gets discharged and acquitted, he and his lawyers are carrying shoulders high by his relatives and supporters out of the court room. Another criminal has escaped through the gaping holes in our faulty judiciary system. Then I thought of irony of the particular case of Jonathan and Paul. In the case average run of criminal cases an inexperienced state counsel is matched against a more experienced able counsel who is defending a person who, in nine out of ten cases, has truly committed the crime for which he is standing trial. But he invariably gets discharged and acquitted

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due to technicalities, and the inadequacies of the prosecution. For every one criminal convicted in a magistrates' or High court in Lagos nine others get discharged and acquitted for this cause. Here was the case of Lagos State versus Jonathan Egbor and Paul Egbor. Here these two accused persons had not committed the crime for which they had stood in jeopardy of their lives for these twenty months! (183). Owing to the intrigues surrounding the Judiciary, the narrator analyses and reaches moral conclusions, which he shares with the readers. He is shocked at the level of ineptitude of the Nigerian Judiciary since even the Judge's verdict does not assuage him:

I find both the accused persons, Jonathan Egbor and Paul Egbor, not guilty. They are therefore discharged and acquitted'...
The judgment handed down by the judge absolved him from a crime he never committed. It set him free but could never, ever restore the twenty months and twenty-four days of his life that he had lost partly in police and partly in prison custody. Twenty months and twenty-four days in which he had been cruelly deprived of liberty and the right to live with his family and to move wherever he chose to move in his society. What the judge handed down was judgment without justice (184 – 185).

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it is amply apparent that the two societies portrayed in the two novels by the African-American and Nigerian writers are stained and in need of cleansing or purification. The democratic imports of the two national constitutions must be seen to be translated into practice. In other words, a radical implementation of the fundamental principles – the human rights and freedoms, of both the United States and Nigeria, is necessary for all times to act as a safeguard against future negation or truncation of the esteemed concept of democracy. The situation appears to be changing for the better now as the two nations march towards ultimate globalization and full empowerment of their citizens.

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