

## Semiotic Portrayal of Marginalized Identity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to trace the use of semiotic resources which frame social and individual identities. The theory of social-semiotics highlights the social and cultural practices which transmit ideologies, generate power and frame identities. The theory of social semiotics is applied to explore the semiotic signs which construct the oppressors and oppressed identities in a social setup. Moreover, African theory (Black Existentialism) is applied further to show the retaliation of the subjugated against power dominated domains in society. Qualitative research paradigm is taken up as a prime research methodology that has guided data analysis. The data is analyzed through the socio-cognitive method of Van Dijk. The data consists of lines from Invisible Man that provide an evidence of social semiotic signs which shape individual and group identities. Conclusions are thereby drawn, answering the formulated research questions, successfully achieving the objectives. Ralph Ellison's Invisible man exhibits the semiotic signs which determine human behavioral pattern and further shows the strife of silenced subaltern invisible man for self-attainment and freedom.*

**Keywords:** Logonomic, Invisible Man, Semiotics, Identity, Hegemonic Discourse, Ideologies

### Introduction

Human identities get shaped and constructed in society through social discursive practices. Identities get shaped in discourse through certain semiotic signs which give meaning to the social practices. The 'signs' assign power to certain groups in a social setup and thus construct and shape identities on different levels. The power gets generated by 'semiotic' signs in a social practice. How does discourse shape identity through semiotic signs? What are the discourses and human behavioral patterns which construct identities of center and margin? How does the shaped invisible identity strive to be visible in a social setup? Directed by these research questions this research paper aims to analyze the prevalence of the semiotic signs which signify human practices in specific social and cultural setup and which try to explain meaning making as a social practice. The 'signs' in a social setup infuse certain ideologies to frame identities of center and margin and these signs get expressed by discourse through human behavioral patterns. The discourse (texts) has a dialectical relationship with the context as the semiotic signs are the element of social discursive practices which have a dialectical relationship with human behavioral patterns (Wodak, Meyer, 2001, p. 163). The text selected for this

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research paper presents a complete social scenario in which the semiotics signs function in construction of identities, infuse ideologies and generate hegemonic power. The semiotic signs have a constitutive effect on identities and their relation among the group. The primary focus of this study is to explore the semiotic signs which form identities as center and margin and further struggle for the visibility of an *Invisible Man* in a social and cultural setup. The social influences on personality are constitutive which affect human behavioral patterns. The significances of this research paper lies in the exploration and investigation of the discourse which influences individuals and groups and generate power on one hand and racial discrimination on the other. The investigation of this topic could be very vast but the present study is delimited to the analysis of some passages from the novel *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. The identity of *Invisible Man* is framed invisible through the hegemony of the ideologically driven power relations. The social semiotic resources transmit ideologies in a social setup, generate power and construct identities as the identity of the African American invisible man is constructed, marginalized and silenced as a subaltern in a social setup. Language is a discursive practice and the truth gets constructed in the very process of discourse as the *invisible man* gets marginalized and silenced so in the same very way he gets a voice through the semiotics signs and retaliates for his existence and visibility.

### **Research Rationale and Focus**

The primary focus of this study is to explore the different dimensions of semiotic signs in a social practice which construct meaning and frame identities. It also investigates the relationship between the powerful and powerless, visible and invisible and finally the strife of the invisible to get visible in the domain of power in society. It focuses on the stereotyped pre-supposed set patterns which are constructed through hegemonic centricism of the arbitrary relationship between the dominant and subordinate.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Discourse shapes identities through semiotic signs. The social signs make meaning in social setup. The social signs are considered semiotic resources which individuals use and acclimatize to make meaning. Van Leeuwen (2005) in his *Introducing Social Semiotics* elucidates the social signs which make meaning in society and thus frame identities. According to Leeuwen, the signs are semiotic resource which are the “artifacts we use to communicate, whether they are produced physiologically-with our vocal apparatus; with the muscles we use to create facial expressions and gestures, etc-or by means of technologies” (p.3). The ideologies in a social setup are conveyed and transmitted through semiotic resources and determine power relations. The way signs make meaning are dependent on the situation and culture. The thoughts which are produced in mind are also semiotic resources because they prove to be the signifiers of some signified object the relation of which is always arbitrary. Hodge and Kress (1988) argue that the system through which the semiotic resources function determines human behavioral patterns both on the point of production and reception and they name it as

‘Logonomic system’ (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p.3). Logonomic system is the control mechanism of the transmission of thought as a semiotic resource. There is always a strong dialectic relation between the text and context which occurs through semiotic actants. HovardSkaar (2007) in his research article ‘Digitalized story-making in the classroom- A social semiotic perspective on gender, multimodality and learning’ elaborates the issue of social semiotics which gives meaning to the social experience of the individuals and thus construct identities in a certain specific manner. He highlights the issue of boys’ and girls’ narrations and their learning process and elaborates the social process which constructs identities of gender. Meaning making in a social set-up involves culture and society as individual behavior patterns cannot be determined in isolation but are solely synchronized with culture and society. Skaar highlights the role of social semiotics which differentiates the learning process of one gender from the other in the same classroom as gender gets shaped by the discourse of society.

The transmission of ideologies and generation of power which construct individual and group identities gets framed by the **Relational** and **Actional** semiotic models. Relations semiotic models are the classification of objects and actions as social agents. Actional model on the other hand, specifies forbidden and permitted acts and behaviors of the individuals. The discourse and the message specify a strong relationship between the subject and object at the very moment of production. The meanings get constructed through semiotic signs. Clodagh Ni Chearbhair (2012) in his article ‘semiotic discourse analysis of *Prison Break*’ illuminates the meaning making of signs which construct identities. Chearbhair (2012) argues that the process of meaning depends on language and language in itself is made of signs. He further elucidates the meaning making in a social practice by Suassarian model of signifier, signified, langue and parole. Chearbhair talks about the uniforms of guard and inmate as signifiers of identity of the powerful and subordinate which are constructed and framed through the semiotic signs. The uniform of the guard in *Prison Break* is a sign of power, whereas, the uniform of the inmate is the sign of subordinate; the relation of both is arbitrary which determines each other’s role in a social setup (as cited in Chearbhair, 2012). The identity gets shaped by different symbols, signs and discourses and those meanings are organized with **metasigns** which usually show the relationship of the transparent signs in a process of constructing identity. Semiotic structures focus both on the presence of signs as well as the absence of signs which play a significant role in transmission of ideologies. The meso, micro and macro structures with actional and relation signs frame individual identity and group identities. Aline Medeiros Ramos (2008) in her “Social Semiotics and memory in Contemporary Jewish American Literature” raises the issue of national and cultural identity which gets constructed by the meso, macro and micro semiotic signs in a social setup. She illustrates the social praxis and discursive praxis of Norman Fairclough which highlight the issue of ideologies for power generation. The identities get framed by interdiscursive practices within a social group.

The semiotic signs which construct and frame identities are the main focus of my paper and the identities of margin once constructed as a marginalized periphery identity gets into existential crisis because of the extreme ideological suppression and hegemonic centricism (Sartre 1992, p. 16). The articulation of hegemonic discourse in a social setup

infuse hegemonic ideologies for the maintenance of power and that power as a result subjugates a group of people to exercise the power over them and to stabilize the power relations. Garcia Marquez (1978) in his novella *The Sad and Incredible tale of innocent Erendira and her Heartless Grandmother* elucidates the semiotics resources which create the identity of innocent Erendira as a subjugated subject. By the hegemonic centricism of her cruel grandmother she becomes a prostitute at the age of fourteen and falls a victim to the existential crisis. She loses the sense of her Being and identity and becomes a puppet in the hands of the power, in the hands of her grandmother. Marquez (1978) highlights the semiotic, micro and macro, structures which transmit certain ideologies and generate power to the powerful as is in the case of grandmother and subjugate the opposites such as Erendira and thus construct powerful and powerless identities in a social setup. Leslie Marmon Silko (1986) highlights the same issue of existential crisis of Native Americans in his work *Ceremony* in the representative character of Tayo. Tayo's identity is constructed with the hegemonic centricism and dialogicality of the discourse of the powerful group of Euro-Americans. The character of Tayo suffers the pangs of being a part of the Native Americans and ends up in PTSP (posttraumatic stress disorder) (Silko 19). The ideologies of the power made him deprived of his real identity and he undergoes through existential crisis. The identity of both suppressed and oppressor get constructed through the semiotic signs and power of discourse.

The identity's existential crisis results in angst and anxiety. Angst and anxiety are the reactions to the discourse of power which make individuals vulnerable to react and thus make them suffer 'nothingness'. Hedigger elaborates the issue and says that 'nothingness' and 'selflessness' is the result of the orders of discourses which exercise power over the subjugated (as cited in Steven, 2010, p. 17). Nietzsche terms it 'nihilism' in which an individual gets detached from his own identity and tries to escape the world. Paul Sartre's (1949) *Nausea* discusses the same issue of the Angst and anxiety of the protagonist Roquentin who feels no difference in his personality and in the non-living objects (as cited in Stevenson, 2010, p. 14). Discourse has different effects in a social context on the psyche of individuals and the socially constructed identities get conditioned to the hegemonic superiority of the suppressors. Toni Morrison (1990) highlights the angst and anxiety of her characters in the novel *The Bluest Eye*. Cholly, Pecola Breedlove's father in *Bluest Eyes* impregnates her because of the existential crisis, the angst and anxiety leads him to abuse his own daughter sexually is the reaction to the ideologies of white Americans which subjugated African American in Euro American society to such an extent that they end up with such deteriorating sexual acts and abuse their own children.

The angst, anxiety and nihilism are the state of mind which gets established by the social and cultural discourse practices. Some identities in a social setup do not get themselves conditioned with the stereotype orders and retaliate one way or the other and strive for freedom. They think out of the stereotyped box of the world and react to 'recontextualize' their identities. Facticity is the dictum of existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, who defines facticity in his book *Being and Nothingness* and elucidates the idea of an individual's identity as 'in-itself' and 'for- itself' 'the subjective and objective

reactions of individual in social discursive practices (p.8). 'In-itself' is the strife of individual to attain individual identity in the social setup and doesn't submit to the domains of power. 'For-itself' is the individual who gets conditioned to the social practices of power and submit to the authority. The existentialists believe in the 'in-itself' part of the human identity as it strives against the imposed identities and struggles to get an existence and get visible in the social setup. 'In-itself' being of human strives to recontextualize his identity as a free soul gets determined by the semiotic resources. Du. Bois (1998) a black existentialist strives for the recontextualized identity of African Americans and accused the idea of 'double-consciousness' by the white Americans and stood against the white-gaze of seeing the world as he says: "*Measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity*" (p. 5). *The recontextualization of identity is determined through the semiotic signs in a social practice as the social semiotics are the 'Actant' elements which determine individual and group identities in a social setup.*

## Research Methodology

This paper aims to analyze Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* through the lens of Van Dijk's socio-cognitive method of critical discourse analysis. Van Dijk's approach focuses on the triangular dialectical relationship of discourse, cognition and society. Van Dijk's Socio-cognitive approach focuses on the individual and social cognition which through a dialectical relation construct identities of center and margin. Discourse is a social practice which infuses ideologies and generates power and frame identities, which get framed through social semiotic signs in a social setup. Social semiotics theory of Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress is applied to explore the semiotic signs which construct oppressor and oppressed identities in a social setup. Moreover, Africana theory (Black Existentialism) is applied to further show the retaliation of the subjugated against power domains in society.

## Data Analysis

Semiotic structures and resources transmit ideologies and generate power and thus construct identities. The process of identity construction takes places through different semiotic signs which frame identities on different levels such as on macro, micro and meso levels. The analytical framework I have used for my research paper is social semiotics which constructs identities in a social setup and existentialism which strives for individual identity in a social discursive practice. Van Dijk's method of socio-cognition is used which elaborates the relation of discourse, society and cognition. *Invisible Man* is the story of an African American man who has become invisible because of the biased behavior of the Euro-Americans. The racial prejudice which is delivered through different social signs construct a social reality of the African-Americans as subjugated, inferior, silenced subjects in the social setup of United States of America. *Invisible Man*'s identity is constructed as an invisible man in the social practice with the different semiotic resources and with the power of discourse such as the narrator of the invisible man is marginalized with the hegemony of the Euro-Americans in the American society and his identity is shaped as an 'invisible' man in the society who is not seen by the world as he says (1999),

*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. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus shows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination-indeed, everything and anything except me (p.3).*

The *Invisible Man* is alienated from the society with semiotic resources and semiotic micro and macro structures and suppressed to such an extent that he has lost the sense of his identity by the world and feels himself invisible in the world, deprived of his sense of existence. The trauma of the lost identity is very much obvious in these lines of the *Invisible Man* who wants to be seen, but in fact says that everything is seen to the world except him. The social practices of the society, the ideologies of the Euro-American which promoted segregation influenced the psyche of the invisible man to such an extent that he leaves the world and goes to hibernate underground and ignites 1,369 bulbs in that room underground. The alienation is created through the semiotic resources and their arbitrary nature as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure that the signifier and signifier's relation is arbitrary, the sign and their decoded meanings are arbitrary (Hodge and Kress, 1988, p.18). The relation of the spoken words of the *Invisible* are the signifiers of his signified thought. A thought, according to Peirce, too is a semiotic sign (Hodge and Kress, 1988, p. 88). The social semiotic signs which transmitted Euro-Centric ideologies, promoted segregation and subjugated the African Americans psychologically. The words uttered by the invisible man about his invisibility are the 'context model' as Van Dijk (1991) elaborates the relationship of cognition, discourse and society and relationship of dominant and suppressed. Van Dijk (1991) argues that the relationship between the social structures and the discourse structures is the mental representation of the center, periphery and 'Us' and 'Them' (Ahmadvand, 2012) so is said by the *Invisible Man* that people come to see him through the lens of prejudice and segregation so what they see is only his surrounding, or their own pre-mental images of the African-Americans and they deny to notice 'invisible man'. The image of Invisible man as an African American is the pre-conceived and pre-supposed notion of the society about African Americans which is framed through the relationship of the personal and social cognition.

Semiotic signs, structures and resources framed invisible man's identity as a 'silenced subaltern' in the Euro-centric dominated society. The relationship of the 'invisible' man to the society is that of a suppressor, suppressed, subjugated and ultimately silenced by the social practices. The silenced subaltern communicates through different semiotic signs to the society to be heard by the society. The invisible man cuts off from the outer world who refuse to see him and goes underground for self-attainment and communicates to the audience and readers through the music of Louise Armstrong 'what did I do to be so black and blue'. According to Leeuwen and Kress (2001) musical resources are semiotic modes for communication. The segregation of the African Americans is because of the ideologies promoted by the Euro-centric society. The 'KuKluxKlan' (1865 to 1970's), Jim Crow and lynching are social and historical semiotic

resources and structures which framed a hegemonic structure and centricism. The barbarous lynching of the African Americans, and the cruel segregations all infused stereotyped ideologies of suppressed African Americans and segregated them as a marginalized object. The identity of an 'invisible' man communicates to the world through the semiotics of music and says (1999),

*Strangely satisfying experience for an invisible man to hear the silence of sound...I have illuminated the blackness of my invisibility-and vice versa. And so I play the invisible music of my isolation...you hear this music simply because music is heard and seldom seen, except by musicians. Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility? (p. 14).*

The silence of the sound is significant to the silence of the 'silenced subaltern' whose identity is constructed by the discourse of society. The cognitive relationship of the silence with sound is that of personal and social. The social cognition influences the cognition of individual 'invisible man' and hence frames a hegemonic marginalized identity. The relationship of society and individual is two ways as elaborated by Van Dijk (1991) the society affects individual and in response gets affected by the individual too (p. 23). The invisible man /pushes a white man because that man calls him with an insulting name is the reaction to the communal ideologies. Invisible man's escape from the outer world is a self 'alignment' in isolation. The music of silence is reference to the societal injustice and inequality to the individuals. The relationship of silence and music is relational mode of semiotics which results in actional modes and the 'Invisible' man reacts to get rid of the outer world and tries to be invisible and silent and enjoys the music of silence in his isolation. Invisible man as a representative of the African American identity wants to hear the sound of silence because he is silenced as an African American race in Euro-Centric society. The relationship of the signs of the 'sound of silence' is arbitrary in nature sheds light on the relationship among the personal and social cognition of the individual and society and the power structures which are created through discourse.

The ideologies are transmitted through certain semiotic signs in the Euro-American society and the novel *Invisible Man* exhibits different ideological signs which shape human behavioral patterns. The coin box in the novel is made of a black man who eats coins greedily and covetously. The image of an African American is stereotyped as a barbarous and greedy slave through certain semiotic structures and discourses. The white people mock them of being black as the chapter 'Royal battle' illustrates the semiotic structures which form black stereotyped identities as a marginalized silenced subaltern. These semiotic signs determine human behavioral patterns in a social set up such as the black boys made to wrestle with one another in battle royal by the white guys and the way a white lady dances and seduces the black boys deliberately to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree are all the 'signs' which construct black identity as a stereotyped social actor hence set behavioral patterns. Ellison (1999) uses blindness as an epithet to highlight the blindness of the world. The black boys in Battle Royal are blindfolded by the whites to mock them and to make fun of the helpless situation of the black boys as Invisible man says "Blindfolded, I could no longer control my motions' had no dignity

tumbled about like a baby or drunken man... A glove connected with my head, filling my mouth with warm blood. It was everywhere” (p. 22). The sense of dignity of the invisible man is snatched by the discourse of Euro-American. The behavioral patterns of the subjugated as well as the dominant are determined through the power of discourse which transmits certain ideologies through semiotic resources to exercise power. The behavioral patterns of the white people have constructed the identity of invisible man as a silenced subaltern in the dominant Eurocentric society.

The first two questions of this study revolve around the construction of silenced subaltern identity through semiotic signs in a social setup. The third research question of this study revolves around the existential strife of a silenced subaltern in a dominating society to recontextualize his identity and his crave to be heard and seen. The invisible man's escape to the underground is a state of 'nihilism' where he loses the sense of his identity and considers himself as 'nothing'. The state of 'nothingness' is framed through the discourse of power of the white society as the very words of the letter of *Invisible Man's* grandfather say “Keep this Nigger Boy Running” (Ellison, 1999, p. 33). The White discourse constructed the marginalized identities, silenced them and made them invisible of their own very existence. Frantz Fanon (2005) in his *Black Skin White Masks* elaborates the same issue and says,

*The white man is convinced that the Negro is a beast...face to face with this man who is different from himself, he needs to defend himself. In other words, to personify the other. The other will become the mainstay of his preoccupations and his desires (p. 159).*

The identity of African American as a 'beast' is socially constructed with the white ideologies like 'kill the savage, save the man' and 'sacred duty to civilize the negro'. *Invisible Man* as an emblem of black 'annihilated identity' retaliates to the Euro-American society for his existence. Van Dijk (1991) believes in the strong relationship of discourse, cognition and society which get effected by one another (p. 18) so is the case with the *Invisible Man* whose identity is socially constructed through the discourse of society but who raises his voice against the suppression as in the last chapters of the novel we find *Invisible Man* gets sexually attracted to the white lady which is not a mere sign of sexual excitement but a dire desire to eradicate segregation by eating the fruit of forbidden tree. The suppression of the individual results in different psychological disorders such as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder which is very much visible in many characters of the novel *Invisible Man*. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is the control of actions and feeling such as the obsessive thoughts about sex, religion and about relations by the circuits of brain the Orbital Cortex (front part of brain) and Basal Ganglia (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 20). True blood in the novel tells the beneficiary of the institution Mr. Norton that he dreams to have physical illicit relations with his daughter is the Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder of the African American individual. True blood depicts the overall distorted psyche of the societal pressures on the subjugated race of African Americans.



*Invisible Man* strives for the existence of his whole community as he is a representative silenced subaltern of the African Americans in a Euro-Centric society. *Invisible Man* highlights the collective sufferings of the whole race through one representative character of invisible man as Nelson Mandela (1995) in his autobiography says "I saw that it was not just my freedom that was curtailed, but the freedom of everyone who looked like me" (p. 624). The invisible Man is invisible because he has lost his identity in the white American world and doesn't have a personal identity of his own. The whole life of the *Invisible Man* is the reflexivity of African American individuals and their cognitive relationship with the discourse of society. Invisible man strives to repair his identity in situated practices with his subjectivity as he wants to hibernate in the underground room so that to come with a new enthusiasm to fight the white dominant world as he says while listening to Louis Armstrong's 'what did I do to be so, black and blue' he becomes afraid as the song asks him for facticity and to recontextualize his identity as he says (1999),

*"At first, I was afraid; this familiar music had demanded action, the kind of which I was incapable, and yet had I lingered there beneath the surface I might have attempted to act. Nevertheless, I know now that few really listen to this music (p. 12)."*

The invisible man hibernates to get armed emotionally to react to the dominating society for his freedom. The action which the song of Louis Armstrong wants him to do is the self-attainment of his individual identity. He becomes 'in-itself' being of Jane-Paul Sartre to strive for his individual identity and existence as he says "a hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" (Ellison, 1999, p. 13). A Negro in the white dominating society is always in combat and conflict with his self-identity as well as his imposed identity. The white world plays with the 'identity' of black people and Ellison ironically illustrates this issue of the framed dominant identities of the Euro-American in contrast to the suppressed identities of African Americans. Ellison elucidates the social practices which construct situated identities metaphorically and says the white identity needs essence of blackness as an essential part to turn out white as he uses the figurative significance of 'Optic white' in the Liberty Paints Plan and says that the 'optic white' color comes out when mixed with the chemicals of dead black color. The difficult work in the Liberty Paints is all done by the black laborers and the profit goes to the white class as their identity is constructed through the social practice as superior beings in the society. The triangle of society, discourse and cognition works very well in the metaphorical work of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The world of the Invisible Man is an atrocious and appalling world of rebuff, denial and refusal which he retaliates and repairs it with 1,369 bulbs to get it lightened symbolically. The socially constructed identity of superior white infuriates black mind and he challenges it by asking questions as Frederick Douglass (1996) asks this question in his autobiography and says,

*"Why am I slave? Why are some people slaves, and others masters? How did the relation commence? These were the perplexing questions which began now to claim my thoughts, and to exercise the weak power of my mind...by some means I have learned from these inquiries, that*

*'God' up in the sky made everybody; and that he made white people to be masters ...and black people to be slaves (Bassey, 2007)."*

The imposed identities of African Americans do speak and strive for their identity as the Invisible man who is framed as a silenced subaltern in white dominating society, speaks through semiotics signs to be seen and heard by the white dominating society.

## Conclusion

The 'signs' in a social setup infuse certain ideologies and thus frame identities of 'center' and 'margin' and these signs get expressed by discourse through human behavioral patterns. The discourse (text) has a dialectical relationship with the context as the semiotic signs are the element of social discursive practices which have a dialectical relationship with human behavioral patterns. Invisible man who is framed as a silenced subaltern in white dominating society, speaks through semiotics signs to be seen and heard by the white dominating society. The discursive practices of society influence the cognition of the invisible man and turns him invisible and frames him as a 'silenced subaltern' in the social retaliates and strives hard to be heard and seen in the society.

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