



## Invisibility, Surveillance, and the Hidden Labor of Identity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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### Abstract:

This paper examines the intertwined dynamics of invisibility, surveillance, and the hidden labor of identity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's insights into racialized identity and colonial subjectivity, Michel Foucault's concept of surveillance and disciplinary power, and Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the analysis focuses on how identity is constructed, regulated, and contested in these texts. The essay argues that both texts anticipate and critically interrogate modern mechanisms of visibility, ranging from racial profiling to the self-regulation of identity under conditions of social scrutiny. Through a comparative literary analysis informed by cultural, postcolonial, and surveillance theory, the study examines how racialized and immigrant subjects negotiate their identities within social and institutional structures that alternately render them hypervisible and invisible. The study shows that the two novels highlight how both American and British contexts expose the persistent pressures of surveillance and marginalization in the construction of modern identity. By tracing the hidden labor required to navigate these environments, the texts underscore that identity is not a static possession but a performance, a negotiation, and a form of labor, often invisible to those who demand conformity. Thus, both Ellison and Smith reveal that the labor of identity is a hidden, continuous process shaped by social visibility, cultural expectation, and inherited histories.

**Keywords:** Invisibility, Surveillance, Hidden labor of identity, Panopticism, Multiculturalism.

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**Cite this article as:** Alkodimi, K. A. (2026). Invisibility, Surveillance, and the Hidden Labor of Identity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, *Arts for Linguistic & Literary Studies*, 8 (1): 651 -665.

<https://doi.org/10.53286/pbh0hm34>

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## الخفاء والمراقبة والعمل الخفي للهوية في روايتي "الرجل الخفي" لـرالف إليسون و"الأسنان البيضاء" لزادي سميث

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### ملخص

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية ديناميكيات الخفاء والمراقبة والعمل الخفي للهوية في روايتي "الرجل الخفي" لـرالف إليسون و"الأسنان البيضاء" لزادي سميث. وبالاستناد إلى رؤى فرانز فانون حول الهوية العرقية والذاتية الاستعمارية، ومفهوم ميشيل فوكو عن المراقبة والسلطة التأديبية، ونظرية جوديث بتلر عن الأداء، يركز التحليل على كيفية البناء المستمر للهوية وتنظيمها والمراقبة للصيقة من قبل المجتمع في هاتين الروايتين. تُجادل هذه المقالة بأن كلا النصين يستشرفان آليات الظهور الحديثة ويُخضعانها لنقدٍ لاذع، بدءاً من التنميط العنصري وصولاً إلى التنظيم الذاتي للهوية في ظل ظروف التدقيق الاجتماعي. ومن خلال تحليل أدبي مقارن يستند إلى النظريات الثقافية وما بعد الاستعمارية ونظريات المراقبة، تتناول الدراسة كيفية تعامل الأفراد المُصنّفين عرقياً والمهاجرين مع هوياتهم ضمن هياكل اجتماعية ومؤسسية تجعلهم، بالتناوب، مفرضي الظهور وغير مرئيين. وتُبين الدراسة أن الروايتين تُبرزان كيف تكشف السياقات الأميركية والبريطانية على حدّ سواء عن الضغوط المستمرة للمراقبة والتهميش في تشكيل الهوية الحديثة. ومن خلال تتبع العمل الخفي المطلوب للتكيف مع هذه البيئات، يُؤكد النصان أن الهوية ليست ملكية ثابتة، بل هي أداء وتفاوض وشكل من أشكال العمل، غالباً ما يكون خفياً عن أولئك الذين يُطالبون بالامتثال. وهكذا، يكشف كلٌّ من إليسون وسميث أن عمل الهوية عملية خفية ومستمرة، تتشكّل بفعل الرؤية الاجتماعية، والتوقعات الثقافية، والتواريخ الموروثة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الخفاء، المراقبة، العمل الخفي للهوية، المراقبة الشاملة، التعددية الثقافية.

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للاقتباس: القديمي، خ. أ. (2026). الخفاء والمراقبة والعمل الخفي للهوية في روايتي "الرجل الخفي" لـرالف إليسون و"الأسنان البيضاء" لزادي سميث، *الآداب للدراسات اللغوية والأدبية*، 8(1): 651-665 <https://doi.org/10.53286/pbh0hm34>

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## Introduction

In the modern metropolis, identity is seldom simply given; it is performed, policed and surveilled. In two seminal works, *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison and *White Teeth* (2000) by Zadie Smith, the mechanisms of visibility and invisibility, as well as watchfulness and internal labor, emerge as central to the construction of identity in racially and culturally stratified contexts. Ellison's unnamed narrator declares from the outset: "I am invisible, simply because people refuse to see me" (P 3). However, his invisibility is not a supernatural condition but a function of social structuring, being seen only insofar as one fits others' expectations. In a parallel yet distinct context, Smith's characters in multicultural London negotiate hybrid selves, fragmented roots and the relentlessness of cultural surveillance.

Both Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* are landmark novels that interrogate racial identity, visibility, and belonging within the modern city. They explore the complex negotiations of identity within racially stratified societies that demand visibility while policing it. Ellison's unnamed protagonist and Smith's multicultural community inhabit worlds where the gaze of others defines and distorts the self. Ellison's narrator, for example, experiences social 'invisibility', a condition of being seen yet unseen, as a product of racial ideology and systemic erasure. Half a century later, Smith's characters navigate multicultural London under subtler but pervasive forms of surveillance: the gaze of the state, the community, and even the family. Both contexts reveal that identity is not static, but rather performed, monitored, and continually worked on.

Both Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Smith's *White Teeth* introduced characters who struggle to be seen for who they truly are. They show how hard it is to find your own voice in a world that wants to silence you or put you in a box. While Ellison's unnamed narrator fights against a society that refuses to see him at all, Smith's characters struggle with a society that sees them only as stereotypes. By employing different narrative styles and examining distinct historical issues, both novels portray the ongoing struggle against being the 'Other'. The notion of black people's invisibility is a major theme in Ellison's 'experimental novel' *Invisible Man*, which raises questions about African Americans' existence, status, identity, and value in white American society. Indeed, it evokes the question of any black human existence, status, identity, and value in a world controlled and dominated by white people. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, on the other hand, offers a pointed critique of the existence and surveillance of immigrants in British society, using London as a microcosm to depict the existential dilemmas of immigrants in a multicultural setting.

However, while both have been widely studied through lenses of race, postcolonialism, and identity formation, comparative readings have largely overlooked how these novels depict the labor of being seen and the politics of surveillance. The study argues that both texts critique modern mechanisms of visibility, from racial profiling to the self-regulation of identity under social scrutiny. It focuses on ways in which racialized



subjects are rendered hyper visible under surveillance, yet invisible as individuals. It showcases how immigrant and racialized figures in Ellison's *Harlem* and throughout the American urban landscape, as well as in Smith's *London*, must negotiate not only how they are perceived or unseen, but also how they perceive themselves within regimes of power. By adopting *London* as a microcosm of a multicultural society, Smith's novel allows a comparative lens upon Ellison's earlier mapping of African American identity under systemic marginalization. Thus, this paper attempts to conceptualize the hidden labor of identity, the effort characters exert to manage their visibility or invisibility. In doing so, the essay establishes a comparative framework that links mid-century African-American and postcolonial British contexts through shared concerns of race, visibility, and recognition. This study thus offers a new comparative lens that situates both novels within ongoing global conversations about race, surveillance, and the politics of being seen.

This study draws on Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) to examine how racialized subjects negotiate the gaze and construct identity under conditions of visibility and surveillance. Fanon's analysis of the 'white gaze,' the compulsion to wear 'white masks,' and the psychic fragmentation of the colonized subject provides a critical foundation for understanding the labor of identity in both Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Smith's *White Teeth*. Building on Fanon, the study employs Michel Foucault's notion of panopticism to trace how surveillance operates socially and institutionally, and Judith Butler's theory of performativity to explore how identity is enacted and maintained through repetition. Reading these novels through theories of surveillance (Foucault), performance (Judith Butler), and critical race theory, this study illuminates how identity formation operates as a form of labor under conditions of social observation and control.

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) is a groundbreaking analysis of the psychological effects of racism and colonialism on Black people, particularly in French-colonized societies. Drawing from psychiatry, philosophy, and personal experience, Fanon explores how colonial domination imposes a 'white mask' on Black individuals, forcing them to internalize racist values, seek acceptance through assimilation, and experience deep identity conflict. Across the book, he examines themes such as language, sexuality, cultural alienation, and the white gaze, arguing that racism distorts both the oppressor and the oppressed. Fanon calls for a new humanism that transcends racial categories altogether and affirms genuine mutual recognition between people.

The study adopts a comparative literary methodology that combines close textual analysis with critical and cultural theory. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of surveillance and disciplinary power, Frantz Fanon's insights into racialized identity and colonial subjectivity, and Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the analysis examines how identity is constructed, regulated, and contested in *Invisible Man* and *White Teeth*. The analysis focuses on key narrative moments that dramatize visibility and invisibility, observation, and self-



performance, such as Ellison's battle royal scene as an inaugural spectacle of racialized visibility, and Smith's depiction of immigrant families negotiating British institutional spaces. By incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives, postcolonial theory and surveillance studies, the paper illuminates the hidden labor involved in maintaining identity within racially and culturally stratified societies.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* illustrates the challenges individuals face in asserting their authentic identities within a multicultural society in postcolonial Britain. In the novel, almost all the characters settled in London after the colonization of their own country and they were frequently mindful of their postcolonial identity. The narrative addresses the challenges faced by immigrants from Jamaica and Bangladesh who migrated to London in the aftermath of colonial rule, thereby highlighting critical questions and concerns surrounding the construction of identity. Magid, for instance, desperately struggles to comply "with social norms and expectations", in Culler's words (p 111). As a Bangladeshi son, he attempts to resemble English boys; he even changed his name, but finally he realized that accepting his roots supports him in constructing a healthy and strong identity in multicultural London. In this sense, Smith, through her characters, seems to suggest that a healthy identity can only exist by accepting their cultural history (Banaz, p 341). Banaz W. Ali, concludes that Smith also illustrates how English society faces difficulties in accepting the Other, or the immigrants, as their own. According to him, English people were unacquainted with the Other and did not know how to accept the unknown (P 341). As Culler claims (1997), the "fundamental identity of characters emerges as the result of actions, of struggles with the world, but then this identity is posited as the basis, even the cause of those actions". Culler further claims, "identity can be observed to be constructed or given ..." (p 111,113).

Banaz's view is confirmed by Tran Thu Tra (2013), who further observes, "having a migrant background myself, I find the novel a uniquely authentic and genuine portrayal of migrants' lives. Smith has managed to capture the everyday reality of migrant identities, their inner struggles with the insight of someone who knows and has lived through it". She sounds neither pitiable nor preachy, handling the subject with effortless poise, incisive wit, and a dazzling sense of humor (p 6). Beukema (2008), however, claims that *White Teeth* examines the masculine experience, both migrant and English, by reflecting on the complex effects of cultural history on identity construction. The text focuses on generational analyses of masculinity and changing social codes to emphasize that there is not always a solution to the problem of constituting one's gendered and cultural identity. Smith challenges social constructions of masculinity by dissecting the notions of cultural belonging and nationality and, in particular, by analyzing how masculinity is ruptured and distorted (both in behavior and in practice) in the various shifting historical narratives of identity (p 1).

Similarly, in *Invisible Man*, the hero embarked upon an allegorical search for himself. Longing to assert himself, within the Deep South of America, the hero attempted to pursue a scholarship to afford higher



education. But the white society perceived him as being inherently inferior and incapable (Rosetta Codling, p 19). W.E.B. Du Bois recognized the feelings of identity loss and detachment within the Black Diasporic self as a state of 'Double Consciousness'. According to him, this is the state of consciousness that African Americans must assume for survival. The African American must see his/her 'self' through the white lens of contempt and disdain in America. And he/she must, also, retain a sense of 'self' through a personal lens (as a dignified and honorable human being). Things are further complicated by the individual's attempt to reconcile the conflicting images (qtd. in Codling, p 18). Codling adds that this concept of Double Consciousness influenced nearly every writer within the realm of Black world literature. According to Codling (2011), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was shaped by an "awareness of this imposed, altered state of the Black psyche" (p 18). The author would have us understand that Jim Crowism/colonialism seeps into the soul of the victim so intensely that he/she lacks a true image of himself/herself. In pursuit of one's phantom, fleeting image, the victim is directed to the colonial mirror which reflects the disfigured image ordained by the oppressor. This, in short, was the narrator's crisis in *Invisible Man*. He could not see himself clearly at the beginning. (P 19).

However, as stated in Bloom's Guide (2008), "[h]e is invisible not because he is a 'spook'—literally unseen—but because he is a black man living in the racist atmosphere of America in the 1920s and 1930s, unrecognized because of his skin color" (P19). Beugre Z. Stéphane attempts to investigate how this "metamorphosis of black people from visibility to invisibility, at first based on white people's perception" is principally rooted in, and attributed to, skin color and to a particular notion of "Blackness" associated with Black people or African Americans. Creating a real problem of existence and identity for black people through the question: "do I exist?" (P 18). Stéphane concludes that in the Prologue to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the narrator explicates the novel's central metaphor by telling us that he is invisible because "[white] people refuse to see [him]." And this simple but important central metaphor shows that black people are moved from visibility in existence to invisibility in human existence and society simply by the way white people perceive them or see them through their inner eyes (P 32).

Existing scholarship tends to treat Ellison's narrative as a meditation on invisibility and *White Teeth* as a postcolonial narrative of multiculturalism. According to Taryn Beukema (2008), since its publication in 2000, *White Teeth* has generated a wide range of critical discussions with scholars focusing more on issues of race, multiculturalism, hybridity, and migrancy (P 1). However, little attention has been paid to how both novels explore the work individuals must perform to manage their visibility within racialized and surveilled societies. This research addresses the gap by asking: How do Ellison and Smith portray the labor of identity as a response to social surveillance and racial visibility politics?



### Invisibility and Surveillance: Performing the Self in Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Smith's *White Teeth*

Ellison positions invisibility not simply as social erasure but as a condition produced by surveillance and misrecognition. The narrator famously announces, "I am an invisible man" (P 3), a declaration that frames invisibility as something imposed by the white gaze rather than chosen. As bell hooks rightly observes, "[t]o be fully an object then was to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality" (P168). In 'Perception, Visibility, and Invisibility in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*', Stéphane points out that the refusal of such perception and invisibility constructed by racism, stereotypes, prejudices and the concept of white people's superiority will oblige black people to struggle for their visibility, their true existence, their identity and recognition by white people as an equal human being (P 18). As Frantz Fanon (1952) puts it, there is a fact that "[w]hite men consider themselves superior to black men" (P 12). Hence, the narrator's 'invisibility' is the effect of what he calls people's refusal "to see me" (P 3-4), a structural blindness that turns the Black body into an object of interpretation rather than a subject of autonomy. Throughout the novel, institutions, from the college to the Brotherhood, monitor and script his behavior, forcing him to perform identities legible to their interests. The narrator notes that he must "play the invisible music of [his] isolation" (P 11), signaling the performative labor required to survive within these surveillant structures. In doing so, the narrator appears to echo Fanon's claim that "Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect" (P 12). As Fanon mockingly puts it, "state it: For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white" (P 12). The novel thus exposes how systems of racial power produce a double bind; the protagonist must be seen to exist publicly, yet what is seen is never his self, only a projection. Ellison's rendering of the self as a fluctuating performance under watch prefigures later critiques of disciplinary visibility in modern society. The narrator's 'invisibility' operates much like Fanon's racialized subject in *Black Skin, White Masks*: both are constituted through hostile or distorting gazes that reduce them to a racial type rather than recognizing them as full subjects. Fanon describes how the Black subject is "fixed" by the white gaze, overdetermined from the outside, turned into an object of knowledge, fear, or fantasy. Ellison dramatizes this process narratively; the narrator is constantly seen, evaluated, and disciplined by white institutional, political, and social gazes (the Battle Royal, the college trustees, the Brotherhood), yet never recognized.

In the same vein, *White Teeth* examines how both cultural surveillance and the demand for coherent self-presentation influence minority identities in late-twentieth-century Britain. Smith frequently depicts characters who feel watched by society's expectations, whether national, racial, or religious. Irie Jones, for instance, who has "a dark complexion which she's trying to lighten by means of make-up, artifice" (P 200), struggles with the pressure to conform to an image of Black British femininity that others impose on her; she observes that everyone else seemed to know what she should be. Her obsession and quest for authentic social



visibility make her mother very concerned: “What’s up with you? What in the Lord’s name are you wearing? How can you breathe? Irie, my love, you’re fine – you’re just built like an honest-to- God Bowden – don’t you know you’re fine?’ But Irie didn’t know she was fine” (P 197). Like Irie, Millat “had to please all of the people all of the time” to fit in society.

To the cockney wide-boys in the white jeans and the coloured shirts, he was the joker, the risk-taker, respected lady-killer. To the black kids he was fellow weed-smoker and valued customer. To the Asian kids, hero and spokesman. Social chameleon. (P 199)

The descriptions of how he appears to white boys, Black boys, and Asian boys show that his identity is produced through constant social surveillance, each audience assigning him a role. Despite this hyper-visibility, his true self remains invisible, buried beneath the ‘anger and hurt’ of belonging everywhere and nowhere. That is to say, “underneath it all, there remained an ever-present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere” (P 199). Millat’s chameleon-like performances mirror Ellison’s narrator, illustrating how marginalized characters must navigate and are fragmented by the gaze of others. Arguably, *White Teeth* interrogates how cultural surveillance and the demand for coherent self-presentation shape minority identities in late-twentieth-century Britain. Smith frequently depicts characters who feel watched by society’s expectations, whether national, racial, or religious. This mirrors Fanon’s insight that the racialized subject is “overdetermined from without” and put on show, seen not for himself but in terms of the categories that the white man imposes” (Black Skin, pp. 109, 116). Characters like Irie and Millat negotiate their identities in response to these external pressures, performing roles that reflect societal expectations rather than fully self-authored selves. In doing so, these characters appear, in Fanon’s words, the slaves of their “own appearance” (P116).

In another situation, the teacher asks Millat what he listens to at home, casting him into a kind of cultural ‘test’. “Something you listen to at home, maybe?” However, “Millat’s face fell, troubled that his answer did not seem to be the right one. He looked over at his father, who was gesticulating wildly behind the teacher, trying to convey the jerky head and hand movements of bharata natyam, ...” (P 116). This shows anxiety about being judged and the pressure to conform to expectations. When his father tries to help by gesturing with ‘jerky head and hand movements’, Samad is performing a cultural stereotype (Bharata Natyam), actively shaping what kind of answer Millat should give. So, Millat is being surveilled (by his teacher and his father) and manipulated into assuming a particular identity. His sudden sense that his answer is not the right one echoes Fanon’s experience of being immobilized by an external gaze that evaluates and categorizes him before he can speak for himself. Millat’s situation de facto articulates precisely what Fanon describes as the psychic violence



of racial scrutiny, when he admits, "I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed" (P 116).

Likewise, Samad feels the panoptic force of cultural scrutiny as he insists on being a man of tradition, performing a fixed, idealized version of himself to satisfy both his imagined homeland and the British gaze. Smith's narrator remarks that "the past is always tense, and the future perfect," encapsulating the temporal surveillance that traps characters within inherited narratives (P 395). In *White Teeth*, as in Ellison's novel, visibility becomes a burden: to be seen is to be interpreted, categorized, and judged, and the labor of self-performance becomes essential to navigating a multicultural society that polices difference even as it celebrates it. Samad, for instance,

... had employed the best of his Western pragmatism, gone home and vigorously tackled the job with his functional left hand, repeating To the pure all things are pure. To the pure all things are pure ... secretly, silently; for he was, believe it or not, tortured by it, by this furtive yanking and squeezing and spilling, by the fear that he was not pure, that his acts were not pure, that he would never be pure ... (P 103)

Although physically alone, Samad experiences an intense sense of internal surveillance, imagining divine scrutiny that monitors and judges his actions. His repeated invocation of 'To the pure all things are pure' becomes a kind of performance, an attempt to project a purified version of himself to an unseen but ever-present authority. In this way, Samad's private ritual illustrates how identity in *White Teeth* is shaped not only by public expectations but also by internalized forms of watching. The self becomes something performed even in solitude. The fear that he is not pure suggests a self-fracture between the person he is and the person he feels compelled to enact. Thus, this showcases how invisibility in Smith's novel is complicated: being unseen does not free the character but instead intensifies self-monitoring and self-judgment. Samad's moment alone becomes a powerful example of surveillance turned inward and the performance of identity under the pressure of cultural and religious ideals, a dynamic that echoes, in a different register, the identity tensions explored in *Invisible Man*.

In *Invisible Man*, the narrator's comment "You're nobody, son. You don't exist--can't you see that?" captures the core of Ellison's concept of social invisibility (P 112). The protagonist's identity is not denied because he lacks substance, but because society refuses to acknowledge his humanity. His nonexistence is produced by a racial hierarchy that renders him unseen, unheard, and unrecognized. This idea is further emphasized when the same voice says, "[t]he white folk tell everybody what to think" (P 112). This showcases that dominant groups control not only institutions but also the framework of perception. This isn't just physical surveillance; it is cognitive surveillance, a regulation of thought and permissible identity. It implies that Black identity is constantly read, interpreted, and reshaped to fit white expectations. This very much



aligns with Fanon's observation that "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (P 110). As Michael Foucault (1995) implies, "[h]e is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication (P 200).

Ellison deepens the connection between surveillance and coerced self-performance by showing how the narrator internalizes the gaze that polices him. After he arrives in Harlem, he learns that the Brotherhood's ideological scrutiny is no less constraining than the racial surveillance he faced earlier; he reflects that he must 'sacrifice one's individuality' to satisfy the organization's demands. "You will have freedom of action -- and you will be under strict discipline to the committee", a Brotherhood member said. He further stressed, "Don't underestimate the discipline (P 278). This contradiction mirrors the larger tension of his social invisibility. The illusion of 'freedom' masks a structure in which surveillance regulates every aspect of his behavior. As the speaker warns, 'Don't underestimate the discipline,' it becomes clear that the narrator is not being invited to express himself but to submit to an identity crafted and monitored by the organization.

His contemplation over the sentence, "I had become 'more human'?", included in his public speech for the Brotherhood, reflects his concern about becoming a full human in a community that denies his humanity. Questioning himself about the source of that sentence, "[w]hat had I meant by saying that I had become more human?" exposes the paradox at the core of his invisibility (P 274). Physically, he exists, he labors, thinks, and desires, but the social world refuses to acknowledge his humanity. The very need to question whether he has become "more human" underscores how thoroughly racialized systems of surveillance strip him of selfhood. His body is relentlessly watched, categorized, and disciplined, yet his personhood remains unseen. Surveillance makes him hyper-visible as an object, while invisibility erases him as a subject. This is perhaps why he admits that "[his] task is that of making ourselves individuals" (P 274).

Although the Brotherhood claims to offer him visibility and purpose, it instead reduces him to what he later calls a "tool" (P 429), a functional identity stripped of personal agency. He admits, "[the] committee had planned it. And I had helped, had been a tool. A tool just at the very moment I had thought myself free" (P 429). This enforced transparency, being ceaselessly observed, evaluated, and corrected, becomes another mode of invisibility, for it denies the narrator the opacity necessary for authentic subjecthood. Ellison's novel thus illustrates a paradox fundamental to racialized modernity: visibility within dominant institutions promises recognition but produces conformity. Invisibility, while erasing autonomy, can also serve as a refuge from surveillance. In this sense, the Brotherhood functions like a panoptic system, in Foucault's view. That is to say, Brother Jack's constant evaluation, ideological scrutiny, and moral policing force the narrator to self-discipline. He must anticipate not only the Brotherhood's expectations but also how his speech, gestures, and even appearance will be judged, creating a continuous, hidden labor of compliance (Foucault, 1995).



Correspondingly, *White Teeth* explores how characters navigate identity through the tension between desired invisibility and imposed visibility. Millat, for example, experiences the weight of public scrutiny as he becomes entangled with "KEVIN", a group that disciplines its members through ideological watchfulness (P 256). He is described as always being looked at, a subtle indication of how his body becomes a screen for cultural anxieties about race, masculinity, and extremism. Conversely, Irie longs for a kind of controlled invisibility, a space where she can remake herself beyond the expectations of family and society. Her desire to 'slip out of her skin' signals the emotional toll of being constantly interpreted and categorized. By depicting characters who oscillate between resisting and seeking visibility, Smith reveals how multicultural Britain is structured by a pervasive surveillance that makes identity not simply lived but performed under pressure. In this way, her novel echoes Ellison's insights into the performative labor of marginalized selves navigating systems that look without truly seeing.

Indeed, Foucault's assertion that "visibility is a trap" (1995) offers a crucial theoretical lens through which to read the identity performances in both *Invisible Man* and *White Teeth* (P 200). In each novel, characters are rendered visible within racialized and institutional regimes that define them in advance, compelling forms of self-presentation shaped by external expectations. Their turn toward invisibility or strategically crafted performances thus emerges as a means of resisting the disciplinary pressures embedded in this coerced visibility. Foucault writes that "the major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (1995, p 201). In *Invisible Man* and *White Teeth*, characters similarly navigate racialized and institutional surveillance, performing identities in response to constant scrutiny. Ellison's narrator resists full visibility through strategic "invisibility," while Smith's characters adjust their behavior to meet social and institutional expectations. In both cases, visibility disciplines the self, shaping action and self-presentation even without overt coercion.

### **The Hidden Labor of Identity: From Harlem to Multicultural London**

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison reveals the exhausting, often invisible labor required for a Black subject to maintain a coherent identity under conditions of racial domination. This view is summed up when Brother Jack rebukes the narrator for asserting his own perspective. "You were not hired to think, ... Had you forgotten that? If so, listen to me: You were not hired to think", he says (P 363). Jack continues, "... the committee does the thinking. For all of us. And you were hired to talk". And when the narrator protagonist requests some space to express himself, "[b]ut what if I wish to express an idea?" Jack immediately responds, "We furnish all ideas" (P 363). In this sense, according to Fanon, Ellison's narrator is compelled to adhere to a prescribed political and racial identity. Fanon argues that Black subjects are constantly constructed and policed by the expectations of a white-dominated society. For Fanon, identity is not simply lived; it must be performed,



monitored, and negotiated, often at the cost of psychological and emotional stability. He writes, "I am being dissected under white eyes", capturing the feeling of being scrutinized and categorized by others rather than allowed to exist autonomously (Black Skin, p 116).

Drawing on Fanon's view, the narrator's journey through Harlem, in Ellison's text, illustrates how identity is not simply lived but continually worked on, adjusted, masked, and performed in response to the expectations of employers, political organizations, and the white mainstream. His admission that he has been compelled to "play the game" but not to "believe in it" (P 1119) suggests that identity becomes a form of labor shaped by external demands rather than internal desire. His performance tends to "incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the [White gaze]" (Goffman, 1956, p 23). This labor is most apparent in the way he constantly revises his behavior to conform to scripts imposed by the Brotherhood, the college, or the broader racialized social order. In Harlem, where visibility is both opportunity and threat, the narrator's identity work becomes a perpetual balancing act: to be seen means risking objectification, but to remain unseen means forfeiting the possibility of social agency. Ellison thus portrays identity formation as an unending struggle shaped by racial politics, ideological surveillance, and the pressures of assimilation.

In *White Teeth*, characters such as Irie, Millat, and Magid must navigate competing narratives of belonging, British secular modernity, parental nostalgia, and the multicultural nation's contradictory insistence on both difference and integration. Millat, for instance, navigates the expectations of his family, peers, and the broader multicultural society. His identity is policed by social institutions and cultural scripts, forcing him into continuous performance. Fanon's insight, that the racialised subject is never free from the gaze, illuminates Millat's anxiety and his repeated attempts to conform, resist, or manipulate the roles assigned to him. Irie's longing to 'slip out of her skin', or to remake herself, for example, captures the fatigue of constantly managing a self that must appear legible to family, school, and the wider society. "There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land. Nightmares and daydreams, on the bus, in the bath, in class" (P 197). This suggests Irie's struggle with belonging; she sees England but doesn't see herself in it. Smith, therefore, situates identity as labor not only for individuals but for communities that are expected to reconcile diverse cultural inheritances within a nation that celebrates multiculturalism while subtly demanding conformity. The novel ultimately reveals that the work of being oneself in modern London is shaped by the same pressures of visibility, performance, and surveillance that structure Ellison's Harlem. In this sense, these characters appear to reflect Judith Butler's notion "that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (Gender Trouble, p 33).

Ellison's narrator demonstrates that this hidden labor of identity is not merely a matter of social survival but also of self-possession and psychic resilience. He explains,



That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. (P 3)

Here, invisibility is both imposed and navigated: the narrator must constantly negotiate how he is perceived while sustaining his own sense of self. This passage captures the exhausting, often invisible labor required to maintain identity under the pressure of a society that refuses to see him fully, a labor that resonates with the struggles of individuals negotiating identity in other contexts, from Harlem to multicultural London. Butler's theory of performativity emphasizes that identity emerges through "a repetition and a ritual," rather than from any pre-existing essence. This framework illuminates how racial visibility in *Invisible Man* is produced through enforced social performance (Gender Trouble, 1999). Even as he navigates external expectations, he reflects on the tension between performative compliance and personal integrity, acknowledging that the very act of making himself legible to others comes at the cost of internal coherence. For instance, when he works for the Brotherhood, he realizes that he has become a "tool," whose individuality is subsumed under the organization's ideological agenda (pp. 429-38). This awareness underscores that identity labor entails constant self-monitoring, adaptation, and sometimes erasure of personal desires, a process that is both exhausting and invisible to those who benefit from his conformity. Ellison, therefore, suggests that the work of selfhood for marginalized individuals is inherently double: it must satisfy the surveillance of others while striving to preserve a sense of authentic selfhood. This paradox renders the labor simultaneously necessary and invisible.

In his book, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995) notes that the Panopticon "induces...a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (P 201). In *Invisible Man* and *White Teeth*, characters perform identities under constant social and institutional scrutiny, internalizing the labor of self-discipline so that visibility itself shapes their conduct. In Harlem, Ellison's narrator constantly negotiates his actions and words under the watchful eyes of social, racial, and institutional authorities, performing identities strategically to avoid misrecognition or harm. In multicultural London, Smith's characters similarly adjust their behavior, speech, and appearance in response to complex social and institutional expectations. In both contexts, the Panoptic logic renders self-discipline automatic: visibility itself shapes conduct, making the work of identity largely internalized, continuous, and largely unseen.



Smith, on the other hand, shows that labor of identity is complicated by the intersection of race, religion, and generational inheritance. Characters in multicultural London contend with social scripts that are both imposed and inherited: they must navigate the expectations of their parents' cultural traditions while also adhering to the norms of British society. This dual pressure creates a form of identity labor that is subtle yet profound, shaping choices in language, appearance, relationships, and ideology. Irie, for instance, who appears to be "unwilling to settle for genetic fate", is obsessed with the politics of appearance and belonging, losing weight, adjusting her hairstyle, and dressing in tight jeans, closely watching her weight to fit the social norms of English society. "Before. After. Before. After. Before. After. The mantra of the make-over junkie, sucking it in, letting it out; ...; waiting instead for her transformation from Jamaican hourglass heavy with the sands that gather round Dunn River Falls, to English Rose ..." (P 197). Irie internalizes the expectation to be simultaneously authentically Jamaican, English, and adolescent, demonstrating how identity labor can become a site of internal conflict as well as social negotiation. Magid and Millat, raised in the same household yet socialized in distinct environments, experience divergent pressures to perform particular kinds of masculinity and cultural allegiance.

Hence, Smith's novel, like Ellison's, illuminates the hidden, often unacknowledged work required to exist within a world that observes, judges, and categorizes according to inherited and contemporary social hierarchies. Foucault's view that "the body is directly involved in a political field; power has to invest it, mark it, train it...force it to carry out tasks" (1995, p 25), highlighting how identity is produced through disciplined, embodied labor. In *Invisible Man*, the narrator's movements, speech, and gestures are monitored and conditioned by racialized expectations, requiring him to perform self-presentation strategically. In *White Teeth*, characters in multicultural London negotiate complex social and institutional pressures, shaping their behavior, appearance, and even speech to align with cultural norms or resist assimilation. In both contexts, identity is not innate but laborious: the body itself becomes a site of effort, training, and negotiation, reflecting the hidden work demanded by social and political power structures. As Butler (1993) puts it, "[p]erformativity is thus not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (*Bodies That Matter*, p12). In line with Butler's theory of performativity, the identity performances in *Invisible Man* and *White Teeth* appear natural or spontaneous, yet they operate as reiterations of entrenched racial and cultural norms shaped and policed by institutional and social gazes.

## Conclusion

Thus, both Ellison and Smith reveal that the labor of identity is a hidden, continuous process shaped by social visibility, cultural expectation, and inherited histories. In *Harlem*, Ellison's narrator performs his



selfhood under the watchful eyes of institutions and ideologies that define him before he defines himself, demonstrating how racialized systems render identity both a site of struggle and a tool for survival. Similarly, in Smith's London, characters negotiate the pressures of multicultural expectations, parental legacies, and societal stereotyping, illustrating that identity work extends across generations and geographies. In both novels, selfhood is never purely private; it is enacted, observed, and interpreted within a broader social framework that both constrains and produces the individual. By tracing the hidden labor required to navigate these environments, the texts underscore that identity is not a static possession but a performance, a negotiation, and a form of labor, often invisible to those who demand conformity. This understanding lays the groundwork for examining how visibility and surveillance intersect with systemic power, a concern that extends beyond these texts to broader debates in literary and cultural theory. Read comparatively, *Invisible Man* and *White Teeth* reveal identity as a form of ongoing labor shaped by institutional scrutiny and inherited norms rather than individual self-fashioning. This perspective underscores the continued relevance of both novels for theorizing how literature exposes and contests the mechanisms through which recognition, belonging, and resistance are structured in racialized modernity.

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