

Post Modern and Contemporary Fiction of Ishmael Reed

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Postmodern fiction is a carnivalesque interweaving of styles, voices and registers which disrupts the hierarchy of literary genres. It can be defined as a riotous cacophony of conflicting discourses. It uses fantasy and myth as means of comprehending reality. It violates conventions of genre and decorum. It represents the flowering of menippean satire, a seriocomic genre that mixes modes and menippean attire, a seriocomic genre that mixes modes and comprehends multiple styles and voices. The indeterminacy and non-closure that the Post-Modern fiction prefers invites reader's response and so the reader plays a significant role in Post-Modern novels. The goal of the Post-Modern fiction is to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of text. To this extent, Ishmael Reed provides an important and major continuity and juxtaposition between the "Mainstream" Post-Modern and contemporary Black fiction, after the 1960's phase called "art phase".

Ishmael Reed, an original satirist and practitioner of the experimental fiction, is the most widely reviewed African-American male writer since Ralph Ellison. He has been labelled an allegorist, satirist, science fiction writer, Black Aesthete revisionist, radical satirist, science fiction writer, Black Aesthete revisionist, radical chauvinist and traitor. He is not only one of America's most gifted and innovative African-American artists but also the leading promoter of black Post-Modernist writing. Along with Amiri Baraka he is also the most controversial writer. Whereas Baraka's controversy stems from his political ideologies, Reed's source of controversy is his parody of even the most sacred beliefs of the Americans. Reed is a black satirist. Robert Scholes remarks thus: "He is a black Juvenal a man to whom satire comes as naturally as breathing" (89).

Like Juvenal's Sixteen Satires, Reed's texts consist of strident attacks on the vices, excesses and follies of contemporary American society. In an interview Reed explains that his use of satire is well within the African-American literary tradition. "I use a persistent non-western form of satire. The way the persecuted got back at the exploiters. You see a lot of examples of this in the African-American Masks" (90). Reed exploits the myth of American Dream and the myth of Horatio Alger success story in *The Freelance Pallbearers*, the myth of the Wild West, the frontier experience and the myth of Seven Cities of Cibola in *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*, the Osirian myth and the Grail myth in *Mumbo Jumbo*, the Antigone myth in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, the Tlingit myth and Raven myth in *Flight to Canada* and Rastafarian myth in *The Terrible Twos and The Terrible Threes*.

Reed works primarily through caricature of type movements and attitudes. Reed in one of the interviews says that his figures are types on the model describes his characters as being cartoons when the cartoon is seen as a caricature, a boiling down of a person to the essential element. The caricatures Reed develops to get to see ourselves, a conventional technique adopted by satirists, develop into metaphors of wide scope and imaginative power. He isolates a character from others by its essential qualities. E.RajaRao observes that by emphasizing the flatness of character he links it to a character in a fable.⁶⁴ The caricatures Reed develops to get to see ourselves, a conventional technique adopted by satirists, develop into metaphors of wide scope and imaginative power. He isolates a character from others by its essential qualities. E.RajaRao observes that by emphasizing the flatness of character he links it to a character in a fable. ⁶⁴ The names of the Characters always indicate their nature. Though Reed does believe in essences in a developing, changing self the characters in his fiction do not change. He looks for the 'essence' in a person which distinguishes him from others. He attempts to extract those essential qualities like someone "making a doss in West or East Africa. Keith E.Byerman remarks that Reed's types serve the purpose of his satire which is directed more toward exposure than reformation.

Reed's type characters lack even limited psychological depth. Their personalities reside solely in what they say and do in an individual style. They all talk alike discursively rather flatly, and their conversations are always conceptual disputes. Naomi Jacobs remarks thus: 'Dress rather than movement or features physically distinguish them. Embodying impulses not strictly personal they have ideas but no personalities' (123). Unlike the characters in the realistic or naturalistic fiction of Richard Wright, in Reed the condition and the feelings of the characters are not determined by the social environment or material conditions. They are not individualized. They do not grow and show self realization. They are nothing more than grotesque caricature of black men and women.

The historical sense of time in Reed's discourse is based on traditional African concept of time where past, present and future merge. In an interview Reed remarks that Voodoo says that past is contemporary and the time sense is akin to the time one finds in the psychic world where past, present and future exist simultaneously. He conceives time as a circle of revolving and evolving events, past and present overlap as though they are simultaneous. The narrative structure based on such special conception of time offers Reed a way to construct historical causes and parallels for the present day events he attempts to write in his novels. It also takes the narrative out of the routine and the dull. His use of multileveled, discontinues, episodic time, anomalies, incongruities, anachronism promote the comic effect. It also serves as a means of sharpening his Menippean satire. The games played with time, character and form serve to point out the deceptiveness of conventional perception by foregrounding its arbitrary nature. The synchronicity of Reed's narrative roots the works in a more contemporary reality. This also leads to the text's self-reflexivity. It takes several simultaneous events seemingly unrelated and arranges them so that they later coalesce to further the ends of the plot.

The anachronic setting in some of his novels does serve as not merely a simple funny backdrop for a minstrel show but it suggests the clustered paraphernalia of the past, present and future which are interchangeable. The disruption of linear time also serves to negate the sense of history as a linear evolution and means of progress. In his novels Reed playfully stretches language to the farthest limits of meaning while still pursuing an aesthetic discourse that is at once an attack on realistic poesis and a defense of his Neo-Hoodooism. The unrestrained artist can endlessly transform reality through a play of language-forms. James R.Lindroth remarks that Reed organizes his aesthetic discourse around the polar opposites of realistic mimesis and playful artistic improvisation. Reed's desire to explore the African-American tradition as well as his act of rebellion against the constraints of Western Literary tradition is reflected in the language he employs. George E.Kent remarks that Reed's prose is flexible, easy in shifts of great and capacity to move on a variety of levels. His style is a conscious style.

Reed's art is syncretic and he extends the notion of syncreticism into the level and texture of language he uses. He creates a kind of contemporary bathetic language whose principle rules of discourse are taken from the streets, popular music and television. He mixes formal language with colloquial language. Reginald Martin remarks that syncreticism as a literary method helps Reed pull together from all existing language levels and discourse possibilities, and thereby create the fictive illusion of real speech. The emotive effect is bathetic, evoking humour. The language he uses mirrors contemporary discourse-structure. Reginald Martin remarks that incongruous mixing of Standard English with dialect and slang. Such an incongruence of the two types of language provokes what may be called cathartic humour through bathetic construction.

In his fiction Reed adopts both verbal and non verbal medium as a narrative discourse. He not only uses iconographic words but iconographic figures, drawings, photographs, symbols to promote discourse. His aim is less to tell a story than to create a new form of language. Reed subverts official language through idiosyncratic spelling, capitalization and word play. He sharpens the subversion and his philosophical rebelliousness with free use of the vocabularies of Hoodoo and jazz improvisation. James R.Lindroth remarks that the language Reed locates at the centre of his aesthetic discourse is the improvised language of the rebellious individual artist such as Loop Garoo Kid. Like Barak, he uses language less as a medium for rational communication than as a way of mesmerizing readers by sounds and rhythms. In his use of language, Reed moves away from Euro-American logocentricism to African-American phonocentricism. His fiction is distinguished by a dynamic playful language that encompasses a variety of forms of language from Black English Vernacular to White English vernacular to academic English. He combines the qualities of African-American dialect with slang and western jargon and while in the process, raising the former to the literary language, he intensifies the poetic nature of his prose. He repeatedly uses unorthodox spelling which somehow does manage to represent the phonetic value of the correctly spelled word and thereby creates not only a greater rhythmic and poetic force in his prose but maintains a kind of linguistic consistency which often forces us to question the value and logicity of Standard American English. Reed's works suggest the ways and means with which the suffocation of Western rationalism can be countered. The vehicle for the liberation from the Western suffocation is the Third World and the coloured people that make it up with their ties to pre-rational history, their alleged belief in the hidden powers of Nature and their respect for the mystery of the individual. The black person, in particular, is a special carrier of the ancient sensibility, the impulse to laugh and to sing and admit the forces that support his life. Reed believes that the African – American artist is the most powerful liberator for he is similar to the necromancer. Reed believes that by reclaiming the primordial rituals, lack Americans and the Third World's people purge themselves of Western conditioning and will ultimately regain their freedom and mythic vision. He projects the Blackman, though a victim of Western rationalism, as a natural man with innate spirituality and in practical harmony with his environment.

As an African American writer, Reed conceives his writings as spells or conjures which can cast charm on the enemies and can affect the world by manipulating symbols of it and thereby bring about actual changes in the world. The contemporary black writer's treatment of slavery reveals a tense relationship between anti-foundationalism of Post-Modernism's stance on history and Black Nationalist goal of reclaiming that past. Postmodernism as a discourse emphasizes the distinction between the real events of the past from our access to it through the discursive representation. As a result, the historical fiction normally is associated with postmodernism. One of Reed's outstanding attributes is his consistent advocacy of powerful, innovative, and neglected writing—not just by people of color but by white people as well. This might seem surprising to those who associate Reed with the combative, anti-white aesthetics and politics of the cultural nationalist program, but it is important to understand that Reed's involvement with the Black Arts movement, through his membership in the Umbra Workshop, was a complex one that can be described as both participatory and adversarial. It is true to say that Reed is a vigorous promoter of African-originated modes of being and performance, which he uses to challenge established canons of judgement and achievement, but a careful assessment of his work over three decades reveals that his pro-black position never was a dogmatic one. If much of Reed's work constitutes an intertext through which "the blackness of blackness" can be read, he nevertheless insists that this "blackness of blackness" cannot be categorized or prescribed. In Reed's view, the black element reveals the permeable nature of American experience and identity, but he also acknowledges the permeable nature of blackness; thus Reed actually belongs in the company of those for whom notions of "mainstream" and "margins" are falsely dichotomous. Reed insists, for example, that a black writer steeped in tradition is a "classical" writer. At the same time, Reed's postmodernism enables him to take in everything at once, so to speak, so that conventional ideas of form and genre are contested, as well as canonical considerations.

Neohoodooism is the name Reed gave to the philosophy and aesthetic processes he employs to take care of business on behalf of the maligned and the mishandled. Hoodoo—the African American version of voodoo, a misunderstood term that actually refers to traditional African religious practices as they have reasserted themselves in the Diaspora—appeals to Reed because of its "mystery" and its eclectic nature, thus providing him with an appropriate metaphor for his understanding and realization of art. Reed's best statements concerning the workings of neohoodooism can be found in his first book of poetry, *Conjure* (1972)—especially "Neo-Hoodoo Manifesto," "The Neo-Hoodoo Aesthetic," and "catechism of neoamerican hoodoo church"—while the most successful actualizations of neohoodooism as a practice are his novels *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), the aforementioned *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Flight to Canada* (1976). Neohoodooism is, in many ways, a truly "black" art, but at the same time, due to the undeniable mix of ingredients in the New World, it is also "something else." Unlike those who argue for a black essentialism, Reed sees this hybridity as a virtue, rather than a defect or betrayal. A deep immersion in blackness is simultaneously an immersion in Americanness, given the extent to which, as a result of slavery and its aftermath, Africa helped to make America; and, considering the give-and-take of many other cultural influences, an immersion in Americanness is also an experience of the unfolding of multiculturalism.

Literature, it seems safe to say that when the history of multiculturalism in the late twentieth century is written, Ishmael Reed's entrepreneurial and promotional efforts will be seen to have played a meaningful role in demonstrating the degree to which we are artistically as well as demographically—a nation of nations. There is no exaggeration to say that Reed is a great improviser, a master of collage with an amazing ability to syncretize seemingly disparate and divergent materials into coherent "edutainments"—forms of surprise, revelation, and frequent hilarity. However, those who focus primarily on how funny or unfunny his works are miss the point of Reed's rollicking revisions, his apparently loony "toons"—which is to employ humor as a weapon in the very serious enterprise of exposing human excesses and absurdities, and, at the same time, to remind us of the dangers of taking ourselves and our cherished opinions too seriously. The risk of censure and ridicule notwithstanding, Reed always has gone against the grain of the prevailing critical-polemical fashion—a sign of his fierce independence as an artist and thinker. He has insisted continually on his right to do things his own way, and possesses an uncanny skill at pinpointing the follies and inconsistencies of many aspects of our consensus reality. Although Reed prefers to ride ahead of the herd, he is viewed in certain quarters as conservative, even reactionary—a judgement of his own position that he satirized in "The Reactionary Poet" in his third collection of poems, *Secretary to the Spirits* (1978).

References:

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