



Identity Crisis in Ishmael Reed's Reckless Eyeballing

Dr. R. Krishnaveni
Assistant Professor
PG and Research
Department of English
L. R. G. Govt. Arts College for Women
Tirupur - 641 604
E-Mail ID: harishma83@yahoo.co.in

In *Reckless Eyeballing* Ishmael Reed attacks on what he calls the hypocrisies and contradictions of the feminist movement. It is an outrageously funny novel about a black playwright, Ian Ball, who has been sexlisted (equivalent to the 1950's blacklists of suspected communists). As the novel opens, Ball has written a new play, also called 'Reckless Eyeballing,' that he hopes will appease powerful New York white feminists and their black women supporters.

The novel is a caustic satire of literary politics. Reed castigated what he perceived as a conspiracy between white male publishers and black female writers to subjugate black men by incorporating negative depictions of them into their work. There is rarely any distinction between the polemical and the personal with Reed, who disdains the Olympian perch which most cultural critics have favored. And like many celebrated heavyweights, who spend half their careers announcing their impending retirement, he cannot stay out of the ring for long.

He has never been accused of judiciousness. In the 1980's and 1990's the subject of black feminism has exerted a fascination that has led him occasionally to make bizarre over statements and the reader should expect, his animus has taken the form of a novel, which conjures with a conspiracy theory in which black feminists are pawns of white feminists in their war against black males. The novel perhaps Reed's most controversial novel. According to Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times*, he lambasted both sexes as well as practically every ethnic and religious group.

Some feminists are especially outraged by the work because one of the Flower Phantom's victims, Tremonisha Smarts, bears a striking resemblance to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Reed's method in this novel as in his other novels was to deepen and clarify his narrative by making connections between his story and American history. For instance, he gave Tremonisha Smarts the same name as an assimilated black character in a Scott Joplin Opera. In this novel he also followed the comic plays about black manhood on the run.

In this novel with his typical shotgun satire, he sprays many targets especially New York women and Jews for dominating the political and culture discourse of the 1980's. His

protagonist, Ian Ball, a struggling playwright, shamelessly fawns on the feminists to get his work produced. The book is attacked as anti-Semitic and misogynist by some critics, while others claim that he retains his pre-eminent position as an African American satirist whose target this time is the cultural establishment.

Ian Ball, a black playwright was born and reared by his mother on the fictional Caribbean Island of New Oyo. He misses the easy life style and predictable character of what he calls the South. His first play produced in Manhattan, *Suzanna* was a great success but it was heavily criticised as sexist by feminist critics. Ian is staging his second play, *Reckless Eyeballing*. After Ian's friend and director, Jim Minsk, is viciously killed by a group of white racists and anti-Semites. He weathers the complex adversities of rewriting and restaging his play and in the process he undergoes an identity crisis.

The conflicting demands of the theater world complicate Ian's initial impressions of his talent and his fellow writers. Antagonistic male and female relations force Ball to re-examine some of his sexual attitudes. He changes his play drastically to make it conform to politically correct criteria. His honesty is questioned. Tremonisha Smarts is a playwright and a black feminist in his play. She is the first victim of the Flower Phantom, a mysterious masked man who attacks prominent feminists and shaves their heads. He is enlisted to help Ian rewrite his play, although she balks at certain arch revisions insisted on by the white feminist producer, Becky French.

He undergoes a last-minute anticonversion from feminism to rehabilitated black mother figure after successfully changing and directing Ian's play. Becky French, a director and white feminist refuses to produce Ian's play after the death of Jim Minsk, Ian's supporter. Finally, she enlists Tremonisha to rewrite the play and gets Ian to agree to have it sage in a much smaller venue. Jake Brashford, a black playwright's first and only play *The Man who was an Enigma* caused a sensation when it is produced many years before. Since that time, Jake has lived off gifts and prizes and has been unable to complete his second play.

Jake cautions Ian against giving in to whatever theatrical philosophy is prevalent at the time. Lawrence O' Reedy, a white detective with the New York police force is known as 'Loathsome Larry' for his violent attacks on criminals, particularly blacks. It proves to be his last case, as he dies with a speech during his police retirement party. Randy Shank, a black playwright's play *The Rise and Fall of Mighty Joe Young* is described as satire because of its idea that American Women Crave to be raped by a beast, he was put on a feminist blacklist in the 1960's.

Reed refuses to accommodate the demands of the new black aestheticians or mainstream white critics, and instead purports to bring his own school of literary method with him who is older and more ecumenical than the schools of either of his opponents. He ridicules others for being different and exclusive, while proposing his own 'aesthetic' as a different and better way of doing things. Unable to reconcile himself with white or black critics for the same reasons, colour, class, content and theme, he moves still further away from both by insisting that his third way of doing things Hoodoo is a valid literary method. White critics defame this method as commercial cooling (House) and black critics decry it as 'spurious' (Baker) which may say more about the critics standards of culture than such comments say about the relative merits of Reed's writing method.

Syncretic and synchronic in form, Reed's novels focus most on social circumstances which inhibit the development of blacks in American society. As satire is usually based on real

types, he draws from history and the news as non-fictional events to satirise America's mono-cultural arrogance. In *Reckless Eyeballing*, Reed occasionally produces genuine terror within farce -not at all an easy thing to accomplish.

The novel, however, may serve well as incantation or rage or as a literacy gauntlet hurled down, but its symbolism is heavy-handed and the spell suspending disbelief is often broken. Many of the characters are mere effigies tortured on the author's rack and made to issue the requisite confessions. Moreover, he seems to want his novels to be hard work. A devilishly funny plot line is obscured by arcane asides and sorties on ideological camps he wishes to demolish. Early on in *Reckless Eyeballing*, Larry Mccaffery observes that:

Throughout history when the brothers feel that they're being pushed against the wall, they strike back and when they do strike back it's like a tornado, uprooting, flinging about, and dashing to pieces everything in its path. (*Contemporary Literary Criticism* 301)

This passage provides a perfect entryway into Reed's novel, for like many other black men, he obviously feels that the brothers' are catching it from all sides and not just from the usual sources of racial bigotry, but from 60s liberals then turned neo-conservatives, from white feminists who propagate the specter of the black men as phallic oppressor and other racial minorities anxious to wrest various monkeys off their own backs. The central betrayers in Reed's new novel are blacks themselves, especially black feminists and artists whom he presents as having sold out and joined the white conspiracy to keep black men in slavery. So, in the novel, his striking back by creating a literary tornado, a book so irreverent and sweeping in its condemnations that it's certain to offend just everyone.

At the outset of his career, he has insisted that black experience cannot be contained in traditional white symbols and forms. To conclude, *Reckless Eyeballing*, like Reed's other novels, self-consciously appropriates aspects of familiar forms - in this case, the detective formula and the search for selfhood motif-but then demolishes these structures by introducing his own distinctive blend of discontinuity, verbal play and jive talk, and outrageous humor.

Works Cited

- Daniel, Punday. "Ishmael Reed's Rhetorical Turn: Uses of "Signifying" in *Reckless Eyeballing*". *National Council of Teachers of English, College English, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Apr., 1992), pp. 446-461.*
- Jones, Jacqueline. *Labour of Love, Labour of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family. New York: Vintage Press, 1985.*
- Ranveer, Kashinath. *Black Feminist Consciousness. Jaipur: Rupa Book Pvt. Ltd., 1995.*
- Reed, Ishmael. *Reckless Eyeballing. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.*
- Votteler, Thomas, ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism. Vol.74 Detroit: Gale, 1993.*
- Walker, Alice. "A Statement, American Scholar". In *Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Woman. No. 6, 1981. pp. 75-79.*

Notions Vol. 8 No. 1, 2017
5247, (e) 2395-7239

ISSN: (P) 0976-

Impact Factor 3.9531

ICRJIFR

Young, James O. Black Writers of the Thirties. U.S.A: Louisiana State University Press, 1973.