

## **The Role of Gothic Elements in Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo**

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### **Abstract**

*During the late 18<sup>th</sup> century there appeared a very new form of literature, which was very popular and the one is considered to be popular even in this contemporary world, all the age groups are very much interested in mysterious writings, such type of mystery writings come under Gothic Literature. This form of writing provokes the readers to read more, the readers are inspired to the core and they get tremendous enthusiasm when they read such writing. One such analogous writing is Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo; in this fiction Reed inspires the reader's interest by introducing a psychic epidemic named Jesgrew. The people who gets in to this, start doing things which are anomalous. It is very essential to note that this Jesgrew is considered to be an anti-plague, because it give a fresh and energetic feel to the host, throughout the book it plays the major aspect. Reed starts with the society which gets affected by this Jesgrew, then he confers the wrecked fate of characters and then he brings in the Egyptian myth through Osiris and Isis. Reed makes it luminous that, haunted feel at any circumstance could be rectified only with complete power of the human mindset; it becomes the root of all such feels. This research paper will illustrate on the super natural elements in the fiction Mumbo Jumbo and the connectivity of such element during the history and in the contemporary world. This is attained by exploring Myth and Psychoanalysis.*

**Key words:** *Myth, Haunting, Possess, loa, Gothic, cathedral, Plague.*

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Gothic writing is considered to be a category of literature, this kind of writing explains about the situations which are not pleasing; it provides combination of horror, murder, ghost, death and so on. Frequently the places discussed in this kind of writings would be very dark and gloomy, even it would discuss about the ancient times and secrets.

Adam Burgess is of the opinion that “In the Gothic novel, the atmosphere will be one of mystery, suspense, and fear, the mood of which is only enhanced by elements of the unknown or unexplained.” Ishmael Reed in his fiction *Mumbo Jumbo* explains about the atmosphere which is filled with mystery and a mysterious plague which gets in to different places and affects the people in that place. He also discuss about murders, he epitomize the darkness by elaborating Egyptian myth.

The characters in Gothic writings would be both optimistic and pessimistic. The optimistic characters would fight against the super natural elements which are projected in the fiction and the pessimistic characters will get frightened and end up in disaster. The word Gothic provides the foremost priority to the Castles, in this fiction Reed talks about a Cathedral which is named as *Mumbo Jumbo* cathedral, Papa Labas is the central character in the fiction who leads this cathedral and he helps out people during their annoyed conditions. He travels in his automobile which is very unique in style, and he helps other people whole heartedly. He is a very popular figure in Harlem.

Daesha is of the opinion that “The use of supernatural themes has enabled others to create a reality for their thoughts, fears and beliefs of both the world and the human mind.” Reed through his character Papa Labas, states that the plague Jesgrew could not be stopped at any point, it is like life itself, it is only based on the mindset of the people who believe in it. The character Abdul who has acquired knowledge in reading Egyptian language, reads from the book of Thoth, but according to his mindset everything in that particular book are hypocritical.

“In the Groove Bang and Jive Around Room people are rubber legging for dear life; bending over wards to admit their loa.” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 49). These lines describes the haunted feel one will get when getting in to the cathedral of Papa Labas, in his cathedral people in different rooms practice different things like yoga positions, where the assistants take care of the people, who are in practice. In one particular room there are twenty two trays which are filled with different foods and they are especially for the Loas.

John Bowen has stated in his article, *Gothic Motifs* that “The Gothic world is fascinated by violent differences in power, and its stories are full of constraint, entrapment and forced actions. Scenes of extreme threat and isolation – either physical

or psychological – are always happening or about to happen.” Ishmael Reed explains about Loas in his fiction, the loas get furious when they are not satisfied, they possess different people and through them they will get their needs satisfied.

Feeding the Loas is considered to be an important work, in the cathedral of Papa Labas. The loas will possess different people and the appropriate treatment will be given to the particular person who got possessed by the loa, the treatment is to block the person becoming hysteric. Reed discuss about supernatural events when he explains about the past history of the influential character in the fiction papa labas.

“Some say his ancestor is the long Ju Ju of Arno in eastern Nigeria, the man who would oracle, sitting in the mouth of a cave, as his clients stood below in shallow water.” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 23) when the author talks about the past of Papa Labas, he explains that his grandfather came in to America in the slave group through which Africans came in to America, a cruel planter purchased his grandfather and he was found hanged himself after some days. Reed makes it a point that most of the slave owners end up in atrocious fates. “A succession of slave masters met a similar fate: insanity, drunkenness, disease and retarded children.” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 23).

Daesha is of the opinion that “The differences between today’s society, what is currently believed to be physically and mentally abnormal, and that of history, aren’t that wide-spread apart. There are still many outlooks on the forces of the supernatural, and how they merge with everyday life.” According to Labas Jesgrew is the one which will not leave without achieving its need. In the fiction Jesgrew is the one which is not natural and it is beyond human control, Reed through this plague leaves the audience to complete mystery and apprehension.

“He said he saw Nkulu Kulu of the Zulu, a locomotive with a green and black python entwined in its face, Johnny Canoeing up the tracks.” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 5). When a distinct patient is inquired about what he see, he gives a very disparate answer that he could see a snake which is entwined it its face and he states that he could even listen to various musical instruments. The feel of the patient is ultimately unexpected, he says that he feel like he is in the heart of Africa. Rudolf valentine the Mayor of New Orleans worries much about this plague which creates a haunting feel to the people, since the election is coming up. The doctors who work on it says that, when they try to treat this, it appears in the neighborhood and it plays hide and seek with them.

Ishmael Reed apart from examining this plague, he brings in a dreadful murder in the public place Port-au-prince which is in the popular city of Haiti, when one reads about this murderous situation, which is executed by Buddy Jackson and his

men, will get dismayed for some time. “The broker and his friend, a few moments before engaged in a penetrating analysis of the economic implications of the Haitian occupation, lie dead, bubbles forming on the broker’s lips. ½ his companion’s torso lies next to him.” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 23).

Apart from the mysteries like Jesgrew and murders in the fiction the author also brings suspense through a group called Mu’tafikah which arranges a meeting in a three storey building in “Chinatown”. The meeting takes place in the basement of the building, when all the members of the group is present, the author reveals to the readers that Berbelang is also a part of that group, they have looted so many things from different places of the world, and the things are to reach the pacific and from there they will take it to the concern places. “They are to be sent to a contact “Frank” somewhere in the Pacific Islands who will in turn ship them to their rightful owners in Asia”. (*Mumbo Jumbo* 82).

Reed has explained about the murders in a way that, it will leave a obsessed feel after one reads it, one such murderous situation in the fiction happens at 2 a.m in the streets of Harlem, Hinckle and Herbut asks about the anthology to Abdul, he denies stating that he doesn’t has one, Safecracker reveals a pistol and takes Abdul near the safe, but when he turns, Gould hurts him with the dagger, which is later taken out by vompton. Both Hinckle and Gould together murders Abdul in need of Anthology but they could not make it up.” Abdul swings Gould around but cries out in pain as the dagger pierces his back.” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 95). When these disasters happens at one side of the city, Jesgrew grows severe, the vibrant Jesgrew starts affecting even the domestic animals, but people who took it excoriate, with held their believes and the churches elongates it sermons in the late nights to put off this Jesgrew.

Murder plays an important role in this novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, it happens because of hatred and vengeance. By throwing some light on Egyptian myth the author discloses the death of Osiris, it appears to be a complete mystery, but it is the known fact that his brother set was in outright jealous on Osiris. This clearly explicates that reprisal exists in the human mind since the ancient time period and this precise character in human becomes the cause of utmost catastrophe.

“Biff Muscwhite brings the cord about her neck and puts all of his strength behind it, squeezing it, until Charlotte drops lifeless to the floor.” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 124). Charlotte gets stunned because of the news that Berbelang is dead. When Biff comes, she asks whether he who killed Berbelang, Biff takes a cord from his pocket and rounds it in charlotte’s neck and he strangles her to death but when the cop

comes, Biff says that, she had been strangled and he saw a man escaping through the fire exit. When the cop finds that it is done by Biff, he plans to transfer the cop, so that he would be free.

The author discusses about the situation in which a character named Earline gets possessed by a loa and after that getting treated, “He touches the back of her left hand softly; she digs her nails in to his right hand, she is tense like a cat.” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 127). she behaves in a violent way scratching the hands of Labas who tries to soothe her, Black herman plays tricks like changing her scarf to a snake, to which she doesn't get scared, later he manages to put out the loa from her body, he informs the assistants to offer her the magical bath after she wakes up. Ishmael Reed shows the violent behavior of the girl who got possessed through the character Earline, Earline does not believe in all these, but towards the end of the fictions she states that she is interested to know all these mysteries, and she believes in Jesgrew.

Benoit Battravile is the man from Haiti, his room is in red and black color, in his room on the table there are instruments which will be in the temples of Osiris and Isis of Egyptian culture., a complete night the person discuss about the Knight templar therapy and the difference between south America, North America & African rites, when in the morning Labas inquires about the profound knowledge of the man, he explains that they were actually talking to a seminar, actually in his place it was Agwe the God of sea who spoke. “You actually have been talking to a seminar all night, Agwe, God of the sea in his many manifestations, took over when I found it difficult to explain things. (*Mumbo Jumbo* 138).

Reed points out that, Osiris learned the alchemical dance and came to Egypt back, his brother Set was annoyed because of his brother's talent, Set always concentrated in invading and the clerical tasks, but Osiris stopped the practice of Cannibalism. Set got upset that Osiris makes good match with Isis their sister on whom he is interested in. Osiris further explains the steps, and it is written by Thoth, so that he will teach the dance from the text and he notes it down, thus the first anthology was made by the first choreographer, this is the black sacred book which plays the major role in the complete fiction. “The eating of barley wheat and corn spread through Egypt like a prairie fire and the and the people began to do the Black mud sound, to do alchemical theater (“theater of the Black country”), and that got Set even more annoyed.” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 162).

Moses who is the adopted son of Thermuthis, manages to get the book from Koptos, based on the information from Jethro. He successfully brings the book with him to Egypt but it was not helpful to him because he did not took it on the right moon day, because of that he got the evil side of the book, later the Knight Templars built

the head quarters of solomon's temple and through which the book reaches the Templar Librarian, he plans and executes, through which the book gets circulated and at last it was burnt in to ashes by Abdul, who believes that everything in the book are unreal.

“Exorcism becomes Psychoanalysis, Hex becomes Death Wish, Possession becomes Hysteria.” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 213). Reed takes the audience to think in depth regarding the Egyptian myth, but through the character Abdul brings in the practical side of the society, Exorcism and possession could exist only if the human mind believes in it and provide a space to let it happen, Abdhul talks about the practical part that, the things mentioned in the sacred book are erroneous, it is according to his behalf, where as Earline towards the end of the fiction says to Labas that she believes in Jesgrew and she like to visit places like Orleans, Haiti, Brazil and all over south to learn about the ancient cultures. She even disclose to Labas that she neglected to feed the loa, inspite of his continuous instructions.

“Pop, you know I neglected to replenish the altar's 21<sup>st</sup> tray for many days.

That might have has something to do with you being touched that way.” (MB 206).

Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo jumbo* is filled with Gothic elements like, mysterious plague, sacred black book, murders and exorcism, the characters in the novel deals the complex situations with their mind power, Papa Labas believes in all these, even at the end of the fiction the character is in the mindset that the Jesgrew could not be stopped, it can emerge at any time. Earline who does not believe in these mysteries, changes her mind to believe these supernatural elements after a realistic situation in her life. Ishmael Reed uses supernaturalism in his fiction *Mumbo Jumbo* to explain that the human life is filled with good and evil perspectives, and these perspectives are beyond human power, the human beings can only accept and deny them it would be done based on their mindset. Even an atrocious fate could be turned around with enlightened wisdom and optimism.

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