

## **A Study of Culturalism in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada***

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### **Abstract**

*Black culture which is characterised by an autonomous social system, with its own values, belief systems, attitudes, behaviour and life-styles is not considered to be legitimate and authentic, by the dominant middle-class. Ishmael Reed is an unorthodox writer who has taken on the media, the writing establishment, feminists, politicians, blacks, whites and the African institution of higher learning. Flight to Canada (1976), Reed's inventive novel treats the American Civil War and slavery and uses deliberate anachronisms, suggesting the connection between past and present in a mixture of satire, allegory and farce. The novel is a playful reflection on the black literary tradition and its relationship to Western literary forms. While the novel, for a fleeting moment, upholds the vision of a postnational transformation, it finds out that the only forces at work then are those of cultural and economic imperialism. It recognises the subtle distinction between globalisation and transnationalism.*

**Keywords:** *culture, relationship, globalisation and transnationalism.*

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Cultures are virtually varied of 'long-term' coverage, against both external and internal threats-self-dissolution, loss of identity or repression, assimilation, attachment, or attack from neighbouring or foreign cultures-with all the positive and negative connotations of the cover-ups' thus produced. Cultures differ from one another primarily in the tenacity with which the 'cover-up' is maintained and the spacing and regularity of the intervals at which they cease to cover up, granting leeway to the ruptures in the illusion of growth.

The act of repeating in black culture finds its most characteristic shape in performance such as rhythm in music, dance and language. The Black Church must be placed at the centre of the manifestations of repetition of black culture, as the junction of music and language. Repetition in black literature is too large a subject to be covered here, but one may say briefly that it has learned from the 'musical' prototypes in the sense that repetition of words and phrases, rather than being overlooked, is exploited as a structural and rhythmic principle.

Black culture which is characterised by an autonomous social system, with its own values, belief systems, attitudes, behaviour and life-styles is not considered to be legitimate and authentic, by the dominant middle-class. Yet, most Blacks have spent a great portion of their early years by being socialised in predominantly Black institutions, and in learning the black culture which has been transmitted from generation to generation. These have been a general reluctance on the part of social and behavioural scientist to recognise the black culture to be as viable as the cultures of America are other minorities.

Ishmael Reed is an unorthodox writer who has taken on the media, the writing establishment, feminists, politicians, blacks, whites and the African institution of higher learning. He has been cited by critics the greatest contemporary African American literary figures of his generation. He is one of the most original and controversial figures in the field of African American letters. Based on the progressive stages of the Black Aesthetic in literature Reed has become a central figure in the new black aesthetic movement. As he believes that the black writers can bring something unique and approximately the profound depths of black music to fiction which has, an ineffable quality that is curiously black. He is a deeply committed novelist and a highly conscious artist.

*Flight to Canada* (1976), Reed's inventive novel treats the American Civil War and slavery and uses deliberate anachronisms, suggesting the connection between past and present in a mixture of satire, allegory and farce. It lampoons slave narratives and earnest works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It is the

best work of black fiction since Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

The major plot of *Flight to Canada* (1976) involves the escape of Raven Quickskill from his owner, Massa Arther Swille, and Swille's efforts to capture Quickskill. The historical Canada is the eventual destination where Quickskill and other slaves wish to arrive when they flee Virginia, but this historical Canada is not the heaven which the slaves think, and pray. Yet in the face of the depressing stories about Canada from his friends Leechfield, Carpenter, Cato and 40's, Quickskill does not relinquish his dream. For him, Canada is personified beyond the physical plane. It is a metaphor for happiness in the novel.

The novel is a playful reflection on the black literary tradition and its relationship to Western literary forms. A parody of the nineteenth century antebellum slave narrative, *Flight to Canada* is a wildly comic novel that reverses a number of the genre's formulas, in particular the association of freedom with the movement from south to north. The Narrator, Raven Quickskill, is an escaped slave who has returned south to tell the story of Uncle Robin, a loyal house slave.

Reed's *Flight to Canada* has dual aims and it seeks to analyse the novel as literature and as social commentary. The literary discussion is an analysis of point of view and time (as a function of plot) as says it is impact on character development. The social commentary is derived from the literary analysis point of view and time cause Reed's characters to illuminate reactionary and progressive aspects of African American political history. The following quotation from the novel's first chapter provides a useful way to frame this aspect, for it contains the nucleus of the conflicts that animate the novel:

Is there no sympathy in nature? Dawn, that's pretty name. Are people lost because the gods have deserted when they said they never would? They promised they never would. Are they concealing themselves to spite the mean – minded, who are too unimaginative to recognise the new forms they've given themselves? Are they rebuking us for our stupidity? They are mean and demanding. They want to be fed. (*Flight to Canada* 9)

This quotation posits a dynamic and dialectical relationship between the seen forces of current events, the world that is immediately perceivable, and the unseen forces of history as projected by the ancestors or the gods. That relationship is the central conflict in the novel and has three related consequences. The primary conflict from which the other two proceed occurs when characters are unable to see a symbiotic relationship between seen and unseen forces. Such characters become frozen in time, increasingly assuming that perception and reality have one to one

correlations. Science, theory, and imagination recede into a thickening and hardening consciousness that becomes non reflective and that loses its ability to adapt.

The novel takes a particular pleasure in emphasising the South as harbouring a primitive, medieval culture. It weaves threads between aristocratic, gothic nature, and immorality. There is an undercurrent of sexual deviance, as in Swille's incestuous attachment to his dead sister Vivian, which conjures up images of the House of Usher, or his collection of whips, which suggests the combination of sadism and masochism. Indeed, as his son's ghost reveals to his wife, he once flogged Queen Victoria, and has "gotten mixed up with this Lord Gladstone who's a friend of Marquis de Sade who is introducing some new pastime for the rich called Sadism" (*Flight to Canada* 127).

Since Gladstone is revealed as having made a 'pro-Confederate speech on the floor of Parliament', slavery is the elephant in this room full of degeneracy. Because Swille makes endless references to royalty, such as King Arthur, Queen Victoria, the King of Belgium, emphasising his close connections to them. The South is also associated with a different, promotional kind of social order. In a novel that implies connections between anachronisms and forms of national consciousness.

When Quickskill flees north, he supposedly enters the true, modern national space. During his visit to the White House, Lincoln's son congratulates him on his poem: his flamboyant entrance into both literacy and the literary world makes him a national institution. In quite a timely fashion, Beulah land Review agrees to publish his poem, paying him two hundred dollars and consecrating his status as a new writer in the modern nation.

Ironically, though, it is precisely this magical appeal of writing that brings him closer to modernity. He has a similar love affair with modern technology. When he meets Quaw Quaw again at a friend's party, she lures him to the den by appealing to his love for television:

"There's a television set. I will never forget how much you like television. You would keep it on without even looking at it. He quickly replies: I'm glad to know it's not there" (*Flight to Canada* 97).

But this world also quickly makes it clear to him that it defines itself through whiteness, and that he has no real place in it. As the Nevada Tracers on his trail make him move furtively from house to hotel to street, his newfound mobility becomes the symptom of an errant diaspora rather than a sign of free movement: "He kept walking against the shop windows, sliding around the corners. He was a fugitive" (*Flight to Canada* 76). His house sitting functions for various abolitionists signal his

aimless wandering through the country, even though it is so-called progressive spaces, without any sense of home or belonging.

His two co-escapees similarly do not fit within the modern nation, and each handles the situation in his own way. Unlike during slavery days, when he used to sell eggs on the sly, Leechfield can then participate in the modern market-place freely. He has bought himself from Swille, and considers himself free. Hence patching the sado-masochism the novel associates with the South and slavery. 40s resorts to the same strategies which the nation is using against him. He barricades himself in his houseboat with a rifle, participating in the very segregation that keeps him out. Unsurprisingly, Quickskill looks to Canada as a delivery from the effects of the modern nation.

The risk, in this case, involves any sort of narrow thinking and it is attendant forms of oppression. Before he crosses over, Quickskill gives an antislavery lecture in Buffalo, New York, during which he realises that some of the people in the audience wanted more fire. The black members in the audience are especially rude. He feels that they are judging him. Slaves judged other slaves like the auctioneer and his clients judged them that:

Was there no end to slavery? Was a slave condemned to serve another Master as soon as he got rid of one? Would he ever be free to do what he pleased as long as he didn't interfere with another man's rights? Slaves held each other in bondage; a hostile stare from one slave criticising the behaviour of another slave could be just as painful as a spiked collar - a gesture as fettering as a cage. (*Flight to Canada* 144)

In this clear indictment of black-on-black oppression, one hears Reed's resentment of what he sees as black nationalism's narrow-minded agendas, a frustration that, by the time he writes this novel, he had often vented publicly. In Black nationalism, he sees the risk of the same monolithic thought pattern that produced racism in the first place. As he and Quaw Quaw pickup their luggage and leave, they are fleeing any form of narrow nationalism.

The separation is sealed when Quickskill is leaving, Yankee Jack launches into an explanation of how he killed Quaw Quaw's brother. As the latter is protesting the racist and paternalistic statue of Theodore Roosevelt "sitting on a horse while a black slave and an Indian are obsequiously kneeling next to it, like the President's children" (*Flight to Canada* 154). The murder took place in the Museum of natural History, where he is then stuffed and exhibited in the lower floor, reinforces the image of a nation where racism is naturalised and even neutralised through sham

forms of reverence and contrition. Thus the chapter ends with a scene of ecstasy, in which an historical witness of fugitive slaves arrival on free soil changes his view of the people he has just transported. Transformation still seems possible.

Yet when the characters decide to get back to Emancipation, the United States city they had started their journey from, the novel might be said to make a turn backward in more ways than one. Obviously, the characters can seek emancipation through a new form of immersion in the nation. Here, the question is to what extent this retreat constitutes a source of transformation or, alternately, a return to and a confirmation of old or unchanged forms of national identity.

One might infer such a transformation from Robin's conclusion at the end of the novel, reflects approvingly on Quickskill's decision to return south, "Canada, like freedom is a state of mind" (*Flight to Canada* 178). But to what extent does not this insight reproduce Cato's assessment earlier in the novel that Canada does not exist and those who pretend it does are guilty of reactionary mysticism. Canada rather predictably does not fulfill the characters expectations. It is dominated by American corporations and reproduces American racism in all their unpalatable aspects. While the novel, for a fleeting moment, upholds the vision of a postnational transformation, it finds out that the only forces at work then are those of cultural and economic imperialism. It recognises the subtle distinction between globalisation and transnationalism.

To conclude, so this aspect of the novel reflects Reed's own paradoxical relationship to America as a nation. The paradox resides not so much in a love-and-hate relationship typical of members of marginalised communities. Rather, it stems from his combination of multiculturalism and American exceptionalism. This exceptionalism is used to describe the belief that the United States is an extra ordinary nation with a special role to play in human history.

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