

Tradition, Folklore and its Contingency in Ishmael Reed's *The Terrible Twos*

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Abstract

*Literature can be any work of writing by the author, most of the works would be imaginative, and it could take the form of poetry, prose, or fiction. Recent theorists have argued that literature has been not virtuous from the factors outside. African American literature has been created in the United States by the writers of African descent. African American literature has been written about, by and at times it has been written in particular for African American people. This unique genre was started during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ishmael Scott Reed a most notable twentieth-century African American writer was born at a place called Chattanooga, Tennessee on February 22nd, 1938. Tradition influences the culture of an individual, it has a purpose, in every culture, there are many tales narrated by the ancestors and those tales are told and retold. All these stories from the part of literature which has been considered as the traditional literature, these stories have been passed down through many generations. This research paper has focused on the tradition and its impact in Ishmael Reed's *The Terrible Twos*.*

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Introduction

African American literature has been created in the United States by the writers of African descent. African American literature has been written about, by and at times it has been written in particular for African American people. This unique genre started during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ishmael Scott Reed a most notable twentieth-century African American writer was born at a place called Chattanooga, Tennessee on February 22nd, 1938.

Reed along with his family, at the age of four, moved to a place called Buffalo, in New York. These places become very lucky for Reed because in those places he was evidenced as a great and talented writer. Reed was born as a son of Henry Lenoir and Thelma Coleman. His interest in the newspaper reporting made him to have a regular Jazz column in the *Empire State Weekly*, a local black newspaper further he got the opportunity at the early age of fourteen.

Tradition transfers the essential values and these values are considered to be precious and it has passed on to generations after generations. Tradition has a relative process between the incredible innovation in the cultural heritage and it is based on the preservation of it at the same time. In African American tradition there are always links between the past and the present moreover the bondage would be the combination of cultural memory. Human beings need social experience to learn their tradition and to survive.

Traditions exist to be learned by the individual, the habits and beliefs of the particular person prove not to be inborn, and it is learned by the person during the course of the social experience. Initially, a person would not be aware of the idea of values, morality, race, religion, or love and hate, it is only after the birth, an individual, through the surrounding, learns things gradually. Through this process, a human is transferred into a person who has the capability to face the world.

Tradition taught people their deepest fears and hopes, it acts as the essential one and builds an individual's belief much stronger, and it develops them as a strong individual in the society. Through this, the people become even closer to their loved ones. Tradition provides an individual a healthy change. It transforms an individual into a robust man and it gives all the strength to an individual to achieve.

Tradition indicates the value and the quality of the concept, in the information which has been discussed among people. "Everyone's idea about the past reflects the concerns of the present" (Painter 3). Tradition has not been proven and it has never been disproven. It prevails as the main subject of study in literature and in various fields such as biology, anthropology, and also in archeology. Tradition describes

about a belief or behavior, it exists as the form of the artistic heritage of a typical culture. Tradition has been the belief or custom instituted by the society, it includes religious dominations and it has been passed down through the generations. The generations would share history, customs, culture, and the tradition that remains as the body of teaching.

The concept of tradition holds the roots from the previous time and it has also touched the field of political and philosophical discourse. In various fields, it owns different names. Painter is of the view that “African-American art developed alongside African as well as African-American history, both continually reflecting black Americans’ approach to Africa” (3). In the sector of Art, the tradition has been used to decide the appropriate display of the art form to its originality. To provide it in a detailed description, when discussing about the performance of the traditional dance, the guidelines were dictated based on the rules and regulations of the composition. The performance has been given much importance rather than the preferences of the performer of the particular dance.

The tradition that Reed has discussed about vary in its type, most stories of tradition which Reed spoke about have similar characters. This simple technique helps the readers to understand the issue about which Reed has discussed about. Most of the main characters in his fiction tackle the mission which could not be accomplished in such an easy way. The traditional values that the characters respect help them to achieve things in a rapid manner. Painter opines that “African cultures may not have survived whole in the New World, but they have left a deep imprint” (4). In most of Reed’s fiction, there has been a touch of African culture. The main aspect which has been very challenging and fascinating was the vast historic and geographic range.

Reed through his writing has provided the readers an opportunity to learn about various traditions. Reed’s works are unique and the traditional values and information he has discussed in his books have given an entirely different diagonal and ideas to the readers. This complete chapter focuses on the various traditions handled by Reed in his novels. The characters in Reed’s books suffer a lot to achieve success in their mission moreover most of the characters have the mission to overcome the evils which prevail in the society.

In *The Terrible Twos*, Reed has discussed about the traditional practices of Christmas, Reed has concentrated on the Christmas during the year 1980. The Christmas during the year was very hard for common men. The climate was frozen, it was terribly cold, people behaved in a selfish way. The president and his men enjoyed their Christmas. Reed expressed a secret plan of men at the oval office

called 'Operation Two Birds' which would kill the surplus people of the place and the blame would be on Nigeria. Pinckney has stated his view that "A highly original satirist and writer of experimental fiction, Reed is best known for novels that assail aspects of Western religion, politics, and technology" (1608).

Reed has discussed about the Christmas during the year 1980, in the complete novel, *The Terrible Twos* Reed has disclosed about the traditional climatic condition during the Christmas. Reed has opined that "Some said that it was the coldest Christmas in memory as —40-degree temperatures blew down from the Arctic" (TWOS 3). Everyone knew that the Christmas would always have cold weather, the Christmas during the year 1980 had abnormal signs. The climate was freezing cold and a pandemic of sleepiness and drowsiness affected the people.

Reed has stated about the Christmas time, generally people will be very happy and men would expect a gift from Santa Claus. "The president-elect says he wants Santa to leave him a tractor but isn't sure Santa can get it down the chimney. He [President] leaves out milk and cookies for Santa anyway" (TWOS 4-5). Without any difference from the elders to the youngsters, everyone would enjoy the gifts received from Santa Claus. Likewise, even the president-elect has been very happy despite the freezing weather and he has expected a tractor from Santa Claus. It was not possible for Santa to bring it through the chimney and the president-elect has left milk and cookies for Santa, he also followed the tradition of Christianity that has been to offer dishes for Santa.

Ms. Charlotte Ford is cozy. She is eating well. The family can't make it to ski country this year and so they will settle for a Christmas dinner in their New York townhouse. Lunch will be served at 2:00 P.M. There will be twelve guests, six at two tables. They will eat off of china plates. They will dine on chestnut soup and turkey. For dessert, they will enjoy chocolate soufflé and mince pie. The atmosphere will be "warm and congenial." There will be two kinds of wine, red and white. (TWOS 5)

Through the above lines Reed has observed about the Christmas Eve of Ms. Charlotte Ford, since her family could not be able to make it that time to ski country, the members have arranged for dinner in the New York townhouse. Reed has elucidated about the family's arrangement for their dinner and lunch and about their guests, Reed has induced the readers to have the dishes along with Ms. Charlotte Ford's family by listing the distinct dishes. Traditionally, people invite their friends and relatives to provide a feast during the Christmas. According to their social categorization, the people join together to celebrate auspicious events.

Reed has defined few situations in his novel that have been similar, he has stated that "Oswald Zumwalt lifted the pot's lid and dipped the ladle into the steaming hot pea soup. He opened the oven door and examined the turkey which was beginning to turn brown. The rice was becoming Fluffy. He was about to prepare a salad when Jane walked in" (TWOS 29). Reed has pointed out a character named Oswald Zumwalt. He was preparing few dishes namely, rice, soup, and turkey. While Zumwalt was about to start preparing salad, his beloved wife Jane entered. It has been the time where everyone enjoyed their Christmas feast. For that particular Christmas, Zumwalt has invited his boss for the dinner.

Reed analyzed about the winter season that it has been the mummer's season, he has stated that during winter the snow covers the land as like in mime the actors usually cover their face with color or with mask. "Winter is the mummer's season because it covers the earth with a mask" (TWOS 35). Since the particular year's Christmas was very cold the land was covered with snow. All, the land was frozen in a way that the people could not face the terrible cold.

"Mummy," he [President] said, "what's that you have in your hand?" She gave him the package. "Well, what do we have here," he said, opening it. "Jade cuff links. Thanks, dear, but Christmas hasn't even arrived."

"My dearest darling," she said, "every day has been Christmas since we've been together. . . . (TWOS 47)

Reed has depicted the tradition of giving gifts during the Christmas Eve, when the president was seated in his oval office, his wife arrived. President has the habit of calling his wife a mummy moreover she came inside with the tiny object which was wrapped with glossy paper. When the President opened it, he felt happy about the gift and the President stated that Christmas has not arrived but President's wife replied that it has been always Christmas for them when the two are together.

"I [President's wife] have to light the White House Christmas tree. They just delivered it from Alaska and all of the decorations are up" (TWOS 51). After her time spent with her husband, she went out informing the president that she leaves to light the White House Christmas tree and during that year the Christmas tree has arrived from Alaska. She further informed that all the decorations are being made for it. Christmas has been the time for decorations. People have the habit of decorating their Christmas tree, Reed has explicated about the decoration of the Christmas tree in the White House which happens every year.

"And now, gentlemen, we'd like to spend the next hour discussing Operation

Two Birds” (TWOS 59). Reed has disclosed about the use of code words, it has been in usage that from the olden days people use code words to discuss their secret mission in a public place. Here, in his novel, *The Terrible Twos* Reed has exposed about the character Bob Krantz who has been explaining to the delegates about the mission which has been named ‘Operation Two Birds’. This has been the plan in which the members of the group plan to destroy surplus people in the society and to blame Nigeria for the cause. Reed has interpreted about the drastic plan of the men at the oval office.

Reed has described about a situation in which the reporter Jamaica Queens clarified to Nance Saturday about the character black peter. “A small dark Spanish page boy who traditionally serves Saint Nicholas. He was some sort of porter. He carried Nicholas’s bags. But in some versions, Nicholas carries his bags. There was always a question about who did what for whom” (TWOS 81).

Jamaica has stated about Black Peter that he has been a dark person and a Spanish page boy. Black Peter has been the one who traditionally serves Nicholas. Black Peter has been a kind of porter and he carried the baggage of Saint Nicholas. The service of Black Peter and Saint Nicholas has always been in confusion, since the details about them were passed on by people to their future generations.

Zumwalt was with the reporters, when his servant Jack frost came and informed about the act of Santa, he was shocked. “People were rolling over one another in the streets, leaping and grabbing at the bills that were floating down from Santa’s room” (TWOS 86). Reed has illustrated about the gift which Santa gave to people, it has been the tradition in which Santa came and left gifts under the Christmas tree. In *The Terrible Twos*, Reed has stated about the Santa who throws bills from the building which the people took from the street where the bills flew. Even the people who worked in the hotel and the people who stayed in the hotel also bend down to take the bills, which have been thrown down from the hotel room.

Reed has stated about the speech of Santa at Time Square, in this speech Santa fixates on the poor condition of the country. “Santa Claus continues. Look at all of the people homeless, wandering the streets. Suppose one of them was Jesus Christ. Would you say no to Jesus Christ? Would you lock the door of the church and freeze the Lord out?” (TWOS 95-96). Santa has described in his speech that people are not helping others and the Santa puts a question to people that if Jesus Christ comes and asks for help will the people close the door of the church and let the Lord freeze outside. The speech of Santa has touched the people and it stirred their emotions.

Paravisini has explained about Reed's description of the novel *The Terrible twos* as "equating the selfishness and destructive tendencies of the United States with those traditionally displayed by two-year-old children" (1609). The people in the novel *The Terrible twos* behaved in a very selfish way and the people possessed destructive tendencies. According to Paravisini's perspective, the characters were displayed like two-year-old children by Reed.

While the President's physical self sat in a dark blue bathrobe monogrammed with the Presidential seal, his spirit-plasm flew hand in hand with St. Nicholas, out the window, and soaring above the Treasury Department building, the Taft Monument, the Washington Monument, the J. Edgar Hoover Memorial Building. (TWOS 108-109)

Reed has presented about the President and an incident in which he was visited by Saint Nicholas. The table was filled with tranquilizers, drugs, and whisky. The president was in the bathtub and only the physical body was inside, the President has lost his consciousness. Through the window, the President saw Saint Nicholas floating in the air. Reed has focused on the time in which the saintly figures came to visit the people. The saintly figures made the people to realize the happenings around them.

"He [President] said that within the last twenty-four hours God had sent him a revelation and that now he knew what he must do" (TWOS 142). On the day of Christmas, the president went to John's house to offer the gifts to his family members. The servants found a change in the behavior of the president after the visit of Saint Nicholas. The President behaved in a very kind way and the President promised that he would give workers a raise in their pay. The President further informed that the God has given him a revelation during the last twenty-four hours and therefore he understood the work he must do. Reed has proved the traditional belief in which people believed that, the sacred people visit common men to show cast the truth in people's eyes.

"He [President] then gathered the gifts and placed them under our Christmas tree. We heard him outside, walking down the stairs singing Jingle Bells" (TWOS 142-143). President visited John's house, first, the inmates did not like it but after listening to President's talk the inmates understood that he has changed, all the workers felt happy. After his times spend with the family, the President left the gifts he brought to them, under the Christmas tree. The President left the house singing jingle bells song, Reed has discussed the tradition of Santa offering gifts, that Christmas was very special for the family of John because the members received a gift from the President for that

particular Christmas.

“Hundreds of tiny little lights whirled about the room, until a figure stood before him. It looked like some kind of priest. The priest walked with the aid of a staff” (TWOS 147). Reed has described about Zumwalt who has been inside the Santa’s room, he was thinking about his past life. When he was deep in his thoughts he felt the lights which were tiny whirled about the room, he looked someone like a priest.

“The hotel chaplain, I [Zumwalt] think he was. He [Chaplain] said that it was never too late to begin again. He persuaded me to turn myself in” (TWOS 148). Zumwalt was in the midst of lights the reporters were asking various questions to him, to all their questions he answered that he has decided to quit the North Pole. Before leaving the place when a reporter asked how he has changed his mind, he defined that the reason behind his decision was the hotel’s chaplain. Zumwalt revealed that the hotel’s chaplain has advised him that even then he has time to start from the beginning, listening to the advice Zumwalt has decided to start afresh life. Reed has explicated that even the people decided to change their minds and to start a new life after their self-realization. The changes happened in people’s life due to the visit of sacred figures.

Reed has described about a character Rex who has been visited by Saint Nicholas, Reed states that “He [Saint Nicholas] said that he was thrown in jail once for slapping Arian, the priest of Alexandria, in the face for insisting that Jesus was a man like any other man” (TWOS 169). Rex explained to Vixen that Saint Nicholas helped him to get out of the place where he was tied up by the Nicolaites.

Rex stated an incident which was narrated by Nicholas, that, Nicholas was thrown inside the jail for slapping Arian, who was the priest of Alexandria, for insisting that Jesus was a man like another man. Reed has described about the situation in which Christ helped Nicholas to get escaped from the torment. Nicholas revealed the situation in which God has helped him to come from the lock, Nicholas has discussed about the incident when he helped Rex.

“That night, Jesus and Mary visited him [Saint Nicholas] in jail and when the Saint told Jesus he had been thrown in jail because of his love for the Lord, Jesus set him free” (TWOS 169). When Saint Nicholas was in a terrible condition in jail, the miracle happened to him because of the love he had towards the lord, Jesus set him free. Rex informed Vixen that Nicholas has visited him and talked to him for hours together and it created many good changes in him and his life. Reed has disclosed about the situations in which the saintly figures provide good changes in people’s life by visiting them.

After Rex has been visited by Saint Nicholas, he came to meet Vixen who has been hospitalized and the couple united together. "They [Rex and Vixen] would wage a war against the bosses, and the subzero people, the heartless Scrooges who had driven the poor out into the cold" (TWOS 169). Rex said that he has planned to offer good things to people. Vixen proposed that she would also join his service and together the couple decided to wage a war against their bosses and would oppose the people who have driven the poor into the cold. Reed has analyzed that the people who are visited by Saint Nicholas change their minds to help people who are in the dire need of help.

While Nance was at a phone call, he viewed a man in a bishop's hat and the man was wearing a gown. "He [Nance] was staring at a man in bishop's hat and gown who was flying above the roof of the building across the street. His speed accelerated until the flying figure was out of sight. Nance rubbed his eyes" (TWOS 178). To Nance's surprise, the man he saw was flying above the roof of the building in the street, Nance rubbed his eyes to make it sure. Reed has discussed about the situation in which Nance does not believe in the visit of Sainly figures. Saint Nicholas appeared in front of Nance and he could not believe it and rubbed his eyes. Reed has discussed about the situation in which Saint Nicholas appeared even before the people who were not his believers.

In *The Terrible Twos*, Reed has described the Christmas during the year 1980. The President Dean Clift has been in his own world till he has been visited by Saint Nicholas. On the other side, the men who are looking after the state affairs are planning to destroy the surplus people by the plan named 'Operation Two Birds'. Reed has also disclosed about Nicolaites a group from which the imposter Black Peter, because of his talent as a ventriloquist, does body snatching and turned terrible twos Christmas as a strange one.

Oswald Zumwalt who was working for Northpole Corporation, quits it, because he has been visited by Saint Nicholas, and he changed his mind to get out of the business tactics. Reed has demonstrated about the different groups who do not change their mind and continues to do their hard work towards their mission. The imposter Black peter has successfully played the part of Santa Clause. He has well played the trick as a ventriloquist, through the corpse of Snow Man.

In all these novels Reed has demonstrated about the groups in which people work to succeed in their mission. The group members follow their traditions through which the members are categorized socially. The characters in the fiction are categorized into diversified social groups, thus the group to which the members belong to, contribute

to people's social categorization. The members of the particular group know their category and after knowing their category the members of the group try to adapt to the situation of the particular group. The tradition that people follow help them in various means to achieve their success.

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