

Quest for Racial Equality: A Subaltern perspective in the select novels of Ishmael Reed

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Abstract

Ishmael Reed is an African American writer. He questions the colonists' imposed conventional accounts of history, culture, and identity. His novels range from the eighteenth century to the present, combining historical events, cowboy myths with modern technology and cultural clutter. He offers alternative perspectives that empower the subalterns, who are the people of color, the poor, the women, and the indigenous. Subalternity is a theme that he explores through various characters, settings, and genres. Subaltern is promoted through colonial palimpsestic practices overwhelming the history of the colonised and ex-colonised nations. His fictions vividly portray the particular social condition of black Americans and describes about VooDoo which in turn became Hoodoo, a syncretic religion, in his novels. He argues that VooDoo lies as the base for all religions and its aesthetics as an embodiment of age-old Culture. It undertakes to challenge preconceived absolutes and media-based realities regarding race, religion, and indigenous cultures by reviving the resourcefulness of African American heritage. His novels project the traces of slavery and history of the African American people. The plight of those people leads to subalternity which is nothing but a manifested form, a coterminous practice, called slavery. It witnesses dominance of colonialism. This paper attempts to bring out Quest for Racial Equality: A Subaltern perspective in the select novels of Ishmael Reed.

Keywords

Slavery – Race - History - Myth - Hegemony – Subaltern

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1. Introduction

Ishmael Reed, in his novels *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and *Flight to Canada*, presents a map of postcolonial regions in today's world. He depicts history as a struggle between the Subalterns, who are trying to gain recognition in a society that places them in an inferior position and deprives them of their dynamism. According to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in Section One of the Manifesto of the Communist Party, history is a conflict between two opposing forces in any society, with the privileged position oppressing the weaker one. This struggle is never-ending and can be open or hidden, as seen in colonized and ex-colonized countries. In this struggle, resisting subalternity is achieved by legitimizing the existence of the Subalterns, which is realized by urging the colonizers or their surrogates to recognize the Subalterns as individuals. By doing so, the Subalterns' existence is not only acknowledged but also consciously realized throughout history.

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight. (YBRBD 91)

The protagonist of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, the Loop Garoo Kid, is not a conventional, melodramatic, good character. He is depicted as a brutal Westerner who practices

voodoo and uses love and cruelty in tandem, marking the women he makes love to with a winged mouse. The Loop Garoo Kid uses his magical powers to trouble others and make their lives miserable. However, Reed asserts that his protagonist is not a villain: "Now, he wasn't always bad" (YBRBD 9). The Loop's character is compared to that of blacks who work in the field of resistance. Reed's protagonist is an attempt to keep his black history alive against the ongoing colonial movement to suppress black voices.

In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, the feudal hierarchy is a fact that gives reign to the colonizers and their surrogates. The Church in the novel is corrupt, inhibiting and disdainful of any sort of relief that might be found in practicing real art. Out of this suffocating ambiance, the Loop Garoo Kid flees, preferring to lead a bohemian life rather than returning to Rome. He has lost confidence in the Church and its promises, considering them ephemeral lies whose true face is soon uncovered. When the Pope visits the Loop in prison, he presents an enticing offer that meets all the demands of the Loop.

[The Pope]: Loop, he sent me to do the interrogating... I ask you one more time Loop, end this foolishness and come home. He built a special district for you, red lights, the works. He sent for some of your bohemian types to keep you and Diane company. You can start a commune if you want, get light, walk around nude, anything you want Loop, just so you satisfy the wench. [The Loop]: No dice, baby (YBRBD 166).

The Loop refuses because he knows that it is the Pope and his Superior who originally forced him to leave and it is the Pope who guides the Loop's enemies to capture him. Notably, the Pope's insistence on taking the Loop back to Rome and the Pope's subsequent frustration are not out of pity or care, but out of the fear of being humiliated at the hands of the Superior.

Ok, Loop, the worldly Pope said rising, I should know that when you have your mind made up on something, nothing can change it. When I get back he is really going to put me down. [The Loop]: How's that? [The Pope]: Make me crawl on my belly and kiss his feet. Some days Loop I can't stand the place. People singing the same old hymns and he sits there performing the familiar spectaculars – every day. I miss St. Peter's Chug-a-lugging fine brandy. With the gang jamming some strumpets. (YBRBD 166)

The surprise which is antithetical to whatever has been taken for granted, namely, the hegemony of the Pope and his position, is that the Pope is a Subaltern, too. Compared to the Loop, the Pope's real interest is art. Yet, he is not as courageous as the Loop; he cannot express freely his desires and feelings. The Pope has to bear the humiliation and mortify his senses and desires to which he nostalgically looks and yearns. The Pope's character deconstructs the logocentric image of a Pope as an almost supernatural and perfect creature who is about to be a demi-god. His active self-protection is a systematic scheme of obedience.

Considering the town of Yellow Back Radio, in the current materialistic world domineered by the capitalist Drag Gibson, religion does not only retreat to the rears but also becomes a useless subservient. Preacher Rev. Boyd tries hard to modernize the concept of religion to make it closer to the hearts of people. He assiduously connects it to dominant modern discourse. Preacher Rev. Boyd tries hard

with the kids and the town's heathen, how he'd smoke hookahs with them brats and get stoned with Chief Showcase the only surviving injun and that volume of hip pastoral poetry he's putting together, Stomp Me O Lord. He thought that Protestantism would survive at least another month and he is tearing up the Red-Eye and writing more of them poem trying to keep up with the times. (YBRBD 21)

Rev. Boyd tries to mingle with all the classes of society by imitating their language and approaching their tendencies. Yet, his efforts are not exerted for the sake of reviving the concept of religion as a source of relief, but for attaining a position of power in a civilization that neglects the religious discourse which has, for long periods, subjugated the Western culture and directed its motives and concepts. Remarkably, Preacher Rev. Boyd never succeeds because his piety is a sham guise of a corrupt personality pursuing mastery even if this might be conducive to the destruction of the essence and dictations of religion. Finding that there is not any possibility of winning back this lost mastery, Rev. Boyd, like everybody else, recognizes Drag Gibson as a Master under whose hegemony he might be granted some power. He never deters Drag

Gibson from committing atrocities but rather promotes Drag's ideologies and participates in the unjust fight against the Loop Garoo Kid.

Flight to Canada is a novel that explores the story of three fugitive slaves. The author, Ishmael Reed, uses Raven Quickskill, 40s, and Stray Leechfield to represent different aspects of the slave experience. Raven Quickskill embodies the radical slave lecturer and author epitomized by Frederick Douglass. 40s represents the stereotype of the militant revolutionary most often associated with Nat Turner. Stray Leechfield represents the more ambivalent figure of the minstrel performer.

In addition to the fugitive slaves, Reed narrates the stories of the master class and the "house slaves" who remain on the plantation. Uncle Robin and Mammy Barracuda are two characters who recall two central icons of forbearance and domesticity—Uncle Tom and the Mammy. Arthur Swille is the plantation owner who is presented as a polarizing figure. He is draconian and sadomasochistic and is set against Abraham Lincoln, whose benevolent and heroic role as the Great Emancipator is exaggerated and parodied. Reed uses most of these characters to unleash the power of zombie-like stereotypes. However, he also employs some of them—Raven and Robin, in particular—to evoke the spirits of slave ancestors. For Reed Emancipation "won't do us any good. He freed slaves in the regions of the country he doesn't control over, and in those he does have control over, the slaves are still slaves." (FTC 59)

Raven Quickskill is an upstart who believes he is entitled to freedom. He writes a poem to his master and heads to Virginia. While in the free North, he meets 40s and Stray, two other runaways from Master Swille's plantation, and warns them of the pursuing slave catchers. During Raven's stay up North, peculiar events take place back on the plantation. President Lincoln visits Master Swille and asks to borrow money to fund the war; Mammy Barracuda beats the mistress within an inch of her life; Master Swille is pushed into the fireplace supposedly by his dead sister's ghost; and the literate Uncle Robin and his wife Aunt Judy "inherit" the Swille plantation.

The poem, written by Quickskill functions as a prologue to the brief narrative and boasts of his escape from Swille's plantation, and shows how he returned several times. He sneaked to Swille's bed, drank from his wine cellar, slept with his prime Quadron, and poisoned his old crow. Quickskill uses his literacy to forge his freedom papers. He also alters Swille's books so that he has no invoices for newly purchased slaves. In short, like Reed, he rewrites history.

Reed uses a unique technique of merging history, fantasy, political reality, and high comedy in this revision of the classic slave narrative. He fuses fictional characters and historical figures, leaving the reader questioning whether certain people or events in the story are real, fabricated, or parodies of past figures. The relationship between Arthur Swille and Abraham Lincoln is a prime example of this. While Lincoln was the 16th President of the United States, Arthur Swille might

represent the consensus of the South or, more precisely, of Southern planters during the time of Lincoln's presidency.

Reed's technique seems to trivialize such grand narratives of history as that of Honest Abe the Great Emancipator, making such lessons in history seem less like grand, sanctioned narratives and more like fairy tales. Reed characterizes Lincoln as a man with a "general unkempt, hirsute and bungling appearance – bumping into things and carrying on" with his "yokel-dokel" manner of speech. Reed creates an arguably more accurate, although quite humorous, representation of the former president who tries to "play" both political sides and thereby save his position.

Flight to Canada offers a revisionist take on the American slave experience, turning the old telling on its head. The author's use of fictional and historical characters and events creates a thought-provoking and challenging work of literature that encourages readers to examine the past in new and different ways. Though the novel is primarily a slave narrative from the point of view of Raven Quickskill who is "the first one of Swille's slaves to read, the first to write and the first to run away" (FTC 23), he has to contest with two white enemies who are Arthur Swille, the plantation owner of the absurd Camelot who couldn't conceive of a world without slaves. That was his grand scheme" (FTC 177) and the pirate, Yankee Jack, who owns Emancipation city or "Jack's Plaza" (FTC 93). Though achieved in the end, Quickskill's quest for freedom and racial identity continues throughout the novel.

2. Conclusion

In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and *Flight to Canada*, history is represented almost according to the same method of the freedom fighters; exactly, making use of the direct experience of oral tradition and reviving the social rituals that interact with each other. The result is avoiding the introduction of homogeneous flat documentation of history and, accordingly, paving the way to an extensive aura of resistance based upon recognition. The title of both novels is a gateway to the use of history as a discourse of power-gearing resistance of subalternity. The binaries of Master/Subaltern and Self/Other appearing in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and *Flight to Canada* are rooted in the Hegelian notion of Unhappy Consciousness that took its historical material from the religious life of the Middle Ages and the mental attitude assumed under the dominion of the Roman Catholic Church and the Feudal Hierarchy.

Hence, Ishmael Reed critiques the government, the academia, the hypocrisy and manipulation of the media, and the radical movements in his novels. Ultimately his novels questioned the Western hegemonic rule over literary production and his characters are in a quest for racial identity.

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