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A Study of Racism in Ishmael Reed's *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*

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Abstract:

The significant feature of the literature of black writers is that their works serve as records of thoughts, words, feelings and deeds of blacks. Their words express the reality of being black in white America. Ishmael Scoot Reed is one of the most prominent authors in World literature. His novels revolve round the theme of isolation and identity, racism, black aesthetic and hoodooism. He writes about black people and black readers because they are closest to his heart. Reed characterises these 'character flaws' as 'field', that is, representative of lower-class blacks (field niggers) who lacked social decorum, are given to overt emotionalism, racism and who had a bent violent response. These characterisations seem oddly juxtaposed in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* with field qualities which are put in a positive light by Reed. The blacks as a group are relegated to an underclass in America by virtue of their race. The basic myth of racism is that white skin is superior, that white is more intelligent and more virtuous. Reed succeeds brilliantly in his novel finding a solution of racial dreams, in terms of fictional art.

Keywords: search for identity, racism, hoodooism, freedom and equality.

African American literature has generally focused on themes of particular interest to Blacks in the United States, such as the role of African Americans within the larger American society. It explores the very issues of freedom and equality which were long denied to Negroes in the United States, along with other themes like African American culture, slavery, and racism. A subgenre of African American literature which began in the middle of the ninetieth century is the slave narrative.

Before the 1960s several American literary establishments produced many an African American texts which presented the African American in a derogatory light. The Africans found this a threat to their self-esteem. During the 1960s African Americans strongly opposed the social, cultural, psychological and political institutions in America. They felt that these did not promote the original African values and beliefs. They wanted

educational institutions and literature to bring out something which was uniquely African American. The positive images of the blacks in America had to be accentuated.

African American writers express their vision of the world through the eyes of African American protagonists and are often concerned with their struggle of the protagonist to define themselves and to cease to be merely the passive object of forces beyond their control. Hence the works of the black novelists reveal added dimension to the appreciation of their own reality. The significant feature of the literature of black writers is that their works serve as records of thoughts, words, feelings and deeds of blacks. Their words express the reality of being black in white America.

These writers generally speak about search for identity and black aesthetics because of the common oppression by their own men and by the whites. This unity is based on the awareness that all black writers are oppressed personally, economically and socially. As African American writers have come into new awareness of their powers they have struggled to liberate themselves, and have enriched and expanded the international corpus of black literature.

Ishmael Scoot Reed is one of the most prominent authors in World literature. His novels revolve round the theme of isolation and identity, racism, black aesthetic and hoodooism. He portrays the lacerated self's struggle for freedom of speech and expression in an incarcerating milieu. He writes about black people and black readers because they are closest to his heart. His vision of a national literature is one that is Native American, Anglo-Saxon and African American.

Yet his place in the tradition is, as has been suggested, more than a little ironic. Reed has chosen to establish his presence as an artist not by repeating and revising the great black texts in that tradition, but by challenging the formal conventions that these texts share through the always fragile arts of satire and poetry. Reed's gift is for the outrageous, for giving vivid expression to cultural controversies very much in the air. He is one of the most underrated writers in America. Certainly no other contemporary black writer, male or female, has used the language and beliefs of folk culture so imaginatively, and few have been so stinging about the absurdity of American racism.

A note on the use of terms such as 'negro', 'black', 'African American', etc would be appropriate here. The term 'Negro' coined by the racists has derogatory implications. 'Blacks' especially with a capital 'B' has many militant connotations. At present 'African American' is widely accepted as it denotes the pride of race. As early as 1859 certain journals had the names, the *Anglo-African magazine*, *The Weekly Anglo African*. In them the concept of Anglo-Africans was set-up to project black pride and black self-awareness in contrast with Anglo-Saxons. But this term had not become popular.



Reed is not only one of the America's most gifted and innovative artists but also the leading promoter of black post modernist writing. In his novels, Reed breaks from the tradition of the pseudo-autobiography used by some major black writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. African American writers since at least the 1960s have attempted to engage textually the limitations of enlightenment reason. Unlike most white American post modernists and writers are not inclined to neglect moral and social issues, particularly racial issues, in their narrative. They are deeply concerned with fictive visions that focus on truths about the perversity of American racism and how that racism defines the African American as devalued other.

He refuses to accommodate the demands of the adherents and leading aestheticians of the black aesthetic, and confronts them by name. Further, he refuses to accommodate the tasters of the general public, black or white, which has limited expectations and boundaries for the American writer who is black, as in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*.

His *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974) is set in Berkeley, California, during the 1970's and revolves around Louisiana Red, a destructive mental state that afflicts certain black militants. The novel concerns LaBas's investigation into the murder of Ed Yellings, the black discoverer of a cancer cure and the creator of the Solid Gumbo Works, a business that uses 'Voodoo' (a religious cult involving sorcery and possession by spirits) to fight Louisiana Red. It involves a black radical feminist group called the Moochers, who conspire with white males to subdue black men.

This theme is prevalent throughout Reed's work and has prompted feminists to criticise him harshly. The novel also describes his advocacy of the black aesthetic and racism. Objecting to Reed's satire of black cultural nationalists in the novel, Baker wrote:

Reed considers himself one of the middle class achievers of Black American Culture, and he has lamented that the culture wants to destroy its achievers. Concerned primarily with his own survival, he turns on the culture and destroys it with satire". (*Black Literature Criticism* 1609)

The novel actually consists of three major story lines which, in keeping with the techniques of reflexivity and periodicity, coalesce toward the close of the novel to make its main point. The first and main story line is the tale of Ed Yellings and the Moochers. Ed Yellings is the industrious, middle-class black who is involved in 'The Business', an insider's term for the propagation of and experimentation in the spirit of Hoodooism.

Through experimentation, Yellings discovers a cure for cancer in his business, Solid Gumbo Works. Ed Yellings is hard at work to refine and market this cure, and cures for other aspects of Louisiana Red, the name given to all evil, when he is mysteriously murdered. Enter LaBas, Hoodoo detective, and the stage is set for the major

part of the actinia level (the plane of the narrative which includes the action movement) of the catalytic and cardinal functions of the novel.

The second story line, that concerning the tale of the Chorus, overlaps with the third story line, that of the effects of the mythical Antigone's decision to go against the dictates of the state. Chorus, here, is also symbolic of the black American in society who will not go away, even though they have been sublimated by more powerful forces to a minor role. He is never satisfied with this position, and wants to be placed where he believes he belongs and where he can succeed or fail depending upon his own merits.

In the course of the narrative Minnie, the head of the Moochers and the solipsistic daughter of Ed Yellings is symbolic of Antigone, and the Chorus appears to kill Minnie before she can literally kill him again. The scene takes place as Minnie and two other Moochers are about to hijack a plane on which Chorus is journeying to a theatrical engagement. All three aspects of the plot of the novel come together at this point as racism. As the sky-jackers move down the aisle, Minnie insults chorus:

'Well, what do we have here? Mr. Superstar. Big Nigger. I had seen your picture in Jet. Some kind of actor like you.'

Chorus fumed.

'Sell-out, Oreo niggers like you - I can't stand. Folk over and some of that money, you minstrel.' He laughed. 'Hey Andy, look what we have here. A minstrel all decked out in a white tuxedo'. (*The Last Days of Louisiana Red* 158)

After taking Chorus' money, they moved on, robbing some of the other passengers. She caught Chorus' eye and paused in front of him. She said she had seen his last performance and she also does not think it is 'relevant'. She started calling him obscene names, standing in the aisle with her hands on her hips. She went on and on, and every time he tried to get a word in edgewise, she would scream, 'YOU LISTEN TO ME, NIGGER. YOU LISTEN TO ME. LET ME FINISH. LET ME FINISH' (*The Last Days of Louisiana Red* 158-59). Chorus knew what he had to do because he would be damned if he is going through this scene again.

The symbolic nature of Minnie and her Moochers was clear, and that clarity was that enraged new black aesthetic critics such as Baker and Gayle. Reed was satirising what he saw as negative aspects of those leaders involved in the black liberation struggle of the 1960s, an unwillingness to allow any differing opinions by other blacks, an advocacy of violence, and exploitation of the people they are ostensibly trying to help.



Reed characterises these ‘character flaws’ as ‘field’, that is, representative of lower-class blacks (field niggers) who lacked social decorum, are given to overt emotionalism, racism and who had a bent violent response. These characterisations seem oddly juxtaposed in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* with field qualities which are put in a positive light by Reed. After all, it is the positive nature and the magical Hoodooist nature of the power of blackness in which overwhelms the practitioners of Louisiana Red.

Since race has been so interrelated in the history of America, which black writers have necessarily reflected the inter-racial relationship. The blacks as a group are relegated to an underclass in America by virtue of their race. The basic myth of racism is that white skin is superior, that white is more intelligent and more virtuous. Reed succeeds brilliantly in his novel finding a solution of racial dreams, in terms of fictional art. Reed in *The Last days of Louisiana Red*, through his conscious use of the impact of racism on the psyche of the African Americans, leads to the recognition of various possibilities.

To conclude, *The Last days of Louisiana Red*, Reed has shown clearly that the effects of the mythical Antigone’s decision to go against the dictates of the state. It is admirable that he has given voice to the black experiences—in their search for a place in American society. The novel revolves round the theme of slavery and racial oppression and it’s far reaching consequences. Reed forcefully stresses on the immediate need of the African Americans to realize their self so as to refute and defy the dominations of both, the whites and the blacks themselves. They must overcome these forces and subvert their negative moments to ameliorate their predicament.

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