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**African American Literature and Ishmael Reed's Novels –
Hoodism**

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Introduction

African American literature is the body of the literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. The genre traces its origins to the works of such late eighteenth century writers. While African American literature is well accepted in America, there are numerous views on its significance, traditions, and theories.

To the genre's supporters, African American literature arose out of the experience of Blacks in America, especially with regards to historic racism and discrimination, and is an attempt to refute the dominant culture's literature and power.

African American writing is essentially a human and social document which deals with the experiences of Americans of African ancestry. In all, it makes a rich contribution to the fast growing corpus of critical response to African American literature.

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 African Americans in the United States, along with further themes like African American culture, racism, slavery, and a sense of home and the African aspects of Neo-hoodooism.

The Slave Narrative

A subgenre of African American literature which began in the middle of the nineteenth century is the slave narrative.

The fundamental fact about slavery is that it put some human beings arbitrarily into the power of others, legalising inequality among men in perpetuity. It is a rejection of human equality. From a rhetorical vantage-point, the story of slavery demonstrates unending and invariable resistance to slavery by the slaves, resistance both to the demands of their condition and to the culture of the masters.

Ongoing Reinterpretation

In a very real sense, slavery is an area of southern historical scholarship that seems to be in a perpetual state of reinterpretation and renewal. This observation holds true for Black fiction writers and African American literary critics. Slavery as a subject continues to hold a particular fascination at least in part because it provides the ground for the writers of critical and imaginative literature. Slavery was condemned as a menace to the peace and safety of the nation.

The lives of the Black men and women have always been sharply conditioned by white patriarchal society and the economics of slavery. The white woman was considered as a 'fir' for the role of mother and worker who would continually increase their owners' stock. As Black writers have liberated themselves from their slave past, a sense of the need for self-worth has awakened in their hearts. Black writers seek to explore their relationships through the frame work of family and community. Their preoccupation with the redefinition of man-woman relationship after liberation from their slave past needs a serious consideration.

During the last twenty years a significant number of African American writers went back to revise the story of slavery in their works and the critics of African American literature too reflected the background of the African American literary tradition with the slave narratives.

Cultural Heritage of Slavery

American slavery is a complex piece of social machinery systematically designed to produce maximum exploitation of Black slaves while simultaneously controlling every aspect of their behaviour. Of course the white masters used violence as a threat to control the slaves. Whites felt the need to dominate the mental life of the slaves.

The songs and tales that were the very essential part of the cultural heritage of the African American had been their sustenance during the days of slavery. Crushed under the weight of slavery and racial discrimination the African Americans were unable to produce any significant literary achievement before the 1960s. Gradually the awakening among the African American resulting in the Civil Rights Movement and the changes in America after the World War II brought about the production of many literary texts.

American Literary Establishments

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.

There were many factors which contributed to the development of the African American literary area. The economic and industrial developments in the north resulted in the migration of a large Black population from the south in the 1950s. Hence after the 1950s Black urban population increased. Many changes took place between the World War II and the early 1970s in America. Industrialisation and technological advancements established America as a supreme power.

New Modes of Self-expression

Blacks acquired new modes of self-expression. There was serious questioning of the traditional authority and certain belief in their activities. The authority of the church which was meekly accepted by the Black slaves of the south was not accepted by the Blacks who were growing up in the urban American industrialised society. The white domination was no longer accepted by the Blacks. The technological wonders like television and telecommunication facilities brought the people closer. Also the Black soldiers who took part in the World War II and had experienced freedom refused to be cowed down by the white supremacy.

The unemployment rates were more in the case of Blacks than the whites and the resultant economic depression resulted in racial riots. These riots and the availability of more information heightened the Civil Right Movement and Black power struggles which questioned the moral and political scenario in America. In the early 1960s the Civil Rights Movement gave an opportunity for the downtrodden to channelise their frustrations and grievances which gave rise to the American social movements.

Seeking and Establishing a New Identity

As a result of these social movements the African Americans started to exhume the myths and legends from their historical past. They differentiated themselves from the Americans in their dress, speech and life style. As a result of this rebellion the American ideological apparatus became more flexible and Blacks were given more opportunity in the political and educational field. In the literary field recognition was given to African literature. The African American audience was recognised as a significant part of the reading public. There was significant upsurge in the Black poetry and fiction. Discussions and reviews of the African American texts appeared in major review journals and magazines.

African American texts and collections were purchased by public, college and university libraries and were stocked by bookstores. English departments offered courses in African American literatures. Minority Writers were considered for national awards. N.Scott Momaday, a Kiowan Indian, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the novel *House Made for Dawn*. Minorities- oriented research was granted fellowship by major foundations.

The dominant American cultural system gave way to the emergent cultural and literary minority. The difference in the cultures of the minority groups like Blacks and Asians were accepted and the worth of their literatures were recognised. There was a rise of independent Black publishing houses, journals and magazines – Jihads, Broadside Press, The Third Press, Third World Press, Vintage Press, Yard Bird Press, Black Books Bulletin, Black World, Freedom Ways, American Literature Forum and the Journal of Black Studies. African American writers thus had an opportunity to cater to the Black audiences in particular.

The creative lives of African American writers have historically been stunted by the political, economic and social restrictions of slavery. For most of the time African American writers in America have been categorically denied not only literacy, but the most minimal possibility of a decent human life. Centuries of oppression and bitterness has awakened a sense of self-worth and determination. Though Black writers have been involved in the development of African American writing since its inception their work has been slow to win critical acclaim mainly because they are Black writers who belong to minority in both class and caste.

Characterization of African American Fiction and Writers

African American fiction is characterised by a conflict and superimposition of Whiteman's structures upon it. The socio-cultural impulses that inform Black writers' work reveal that emphasis is on the folk values and African American forms of expression which have sustained the Black culture and their individuality. It is as truer of African experience as of American.

African American writers express explicitly the need for self-expression because they have a different historical experience from that of the dominant group. Their work is important and they have made serious attempts to understand the vast unexplored areas of human experience. It is perhaps more relevant today than it ever was before because it is possible to view their work outside the limits set by white male critics and against the background of their Black tradition. More than this, they offer a fresh assessment of Black man-woman relationship which seems to grow out of traditional roles. Their treatment of the theme and approach toward it differ radically and, there is a common focus on the 'Black writers' experience.

Their work forces the people to reflect upon the history, economics and environment which condition the lives of the Blacks in contemporary American society. Their texts, with many different settings, are potential interpretations of Black ways and Black life styles. The economic system of the old south was an exploitative mode of production which dehumanised the African slaves and compelled them to pass generations in a milieu of dispossession on the other hand the white patriarchal society enabled the plantation owners to sustain a double relation of master and

father to their mulatto children and to participate in both Blacks and Whites itself. Over the past century southern Black literature has evolved from a relatively sparse body of writings, mainly imitative of European American literary forms and thematically focused on the plight of Blacks in the South to a sophisticated literary canon form into a whole distinct identity.

The Southern Black Novel

As the southern Black novel evolved, from the nineteenth into the twentieth century, its use of narrative voice blended with other features of southern Black narrative prose to produce a particularly southern point of view in the Black novel. For more than a century southern Blacks wrote numerous prose narratives, which in their variety conformed to the autobiographical mode. There have been the fugitive-slave narratives and the ex-slave narratives the spiritual, social, political and personal novel.

At times, real-life experiences and incidents were the backdrop for fictional characters, at other times real-life characters; become the nucleus around which fictional experiences and incidents are presented. Southern Black prose writers were so attracted to the autobiographical mode that in numerous prose narratives they drew a very thin line between fiction and fact.

Folk tales and aphorisms, sacred and secular music, and the religious orientation or world view of southern Blacks have all influenced language, under girded imagery and symbolism which, delineated characterisation, and motivated plot structure in the southern Black novel. Southern Black novelists as a group have thus made wide and varied uses of the cultural traditions of their region. The merits of southern Black literature have been widely acclaimed nationally and internationally.

Anti-slavery Movement

The emergence of African American literature has been a slow process connected in its beginning with the institution of slavery and antislavery stances. The antislavery movement was a powerful religious crusade, and religion played a far more important part in American life then than it does today. When the Anti-Slavery society was organised Theodore Weld opines:

The Bible was presented as irrefutable proof that Jesus taught a doctrine of universal brotherhood: that man was created in the image of God; and that slavery reduced him to a piece of merchandise to be bought and sold in the market place. (Joshna 120)

The Central Executive Committee opines:

God has committed to every moral agent the privilege, the right and the responsibility of personal ownership. This is God's plan. Slavery annihilates it, and surrenders to avarice, passion and lust, all that makes a life a blessing. It makes a life a blessing. It crushes the body, tramples into the dust the upward tendencies of the intellect, breaks the heart and kills the soul. (Elizur 120)

Slavery was denounced as a sin always everywhere and only sin, aside from the evils of its administration. Abolitionists demanded that slaveholders be excluded from the pulpits of Northern churches and from the privileges of the sacraments, and those Southerners who finally championed the cause of secession lingered long on this aspect of the cause for action.

African American Literature

African American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. The genre traces its origins to the works of such late eighteenth century writers as Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, reaching early high points with slave narratives and the Harlem Renaissance, and continuing today with authors such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker and Walter Mosley being ranked among the top writers in America.

Among the themes and issues explored in African American literature are the role of African Americans within the larger American society, African American culture, racism, slavery and equality. African American writing has changed over the centuries, so, too, have the focus of African American literature. Before the American Civil War, African American literature primarily focused on the issue of slavery, as indicated by the subgenre of slave narratives. It explores the very issues of freedom and equality which were long denied to Negroes in America, along with further themes like African American culture, racism, religion, slavery, and a sense of home.

African American Writers

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 African American 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 them, and have enriched and expanded the international corpus of Black literature.

Ishmael Scoot Reed

Ishmael Scoot Reed is one of the most prominent authors in World literature. Through his writings and other works, he is instrumental in bringing recognition to the genre of African American literature. His novels revolve round the theme of isolation and identity, Black aesthetic and hoodooism. He portrays the lacerated self's struggle for freedom of speech and expression in an incarcerating milieu. His accent is on the diversity of Black sensibilities, horrors of slavery, Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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modes of expression and independent thinking. He writes about Black people and Black readers because they are closest to his heart. He must accept that he tries to communicate all inclusive human experiences and conditions through the metaphor of slave experience.

Ishmael Reed's Narrative Aspects

Reed's narratives sing the praise of Black art, music, folklore in order to celebrate Black identity with the intention to rescue the qualities of resistance and excellence which helped them to survive slavery. He is far too talented to remain only a marvellous recorder of the Black side of provincial American life. One of the most striking aspects of Reed's style is the complex centralisation patterns of his narrative.

Reed's fictional practice goes beyond the system of definitions provided by traditional literary theories of narratology and centralisation. The notion of free indirect discourse, for example, cannot in a satisfactory way explain the way Reed combines narration and centralisation. Somehow his focalisers turn from mere media of filters into independent sources of information or narrators in their own right. Actually, in many instances, focalisation in the sense of mediation is abolished in his novels.

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 as a central figure in the new Black aesthetic movement because he believes that the Black writers can bring something unique-approximately the profound depths of Black music-to fiction which has, "an ineffable quality that is curiously Black" (Rubin 42). He is a deeply committed novelist and a highly conscious artist. As Lubiano observes:

His work remaps the terrain of African American cultural and social history and allows for a community of the imagination and, what is more, it interprets the ideology that produces the kind of world we inhabit. (BLC 68)

Origin of Neo-Hoodooism

Hoodoo is an American term, originating in the nineteenth century or earlier, for African American folk magic. Hoodoo consists of a large body of African folkloric practices and beliefs with a considerable admixture of American Indian botanical knowledge and European folklore. Although most of its adherents are Black, contrary to popular opinion, it has always been practiced by both whites and Blacks in America.

In the 1930s, some practitioners used the noun "Hoodooism" to describe their work, but that term has dropped out of common parlance. Folk magic is a world-wide phenomenon. The beliefs and customs brought to America by African slaves mingled here with the beliefs, customs, and

botanical knowledge of Native Americans and with the Christians, Jewish, and pagan folklore of European immigrants. The hoodoo tradition places emphasis on personal magical power and thus it lacks strong links to any specific form of theology and can be adapted to any one of several forms of outward religious worship.

Hoodoo versus Voodoo

Hoodoo is not the name of a religion or a denomination of a religion, although it incorporates elements from African and European religions in terms of its core beliefs. It is not at all correct to refer to African American hoodoo as Voodoo. Voodoo is a Haitian religion which is quite African in character. The word Voodoo derives from an African word which means spirit or God.

One reason for the confusion between hoodoo and voodoo is that the study of African American root work with respect to African systems of beliefs has only recently risen above the level of mere speculation. Older accounts of hoodoo tended to emphasize West African linkages, in part because that area of Africa was heavily traversed during the nineteenth century by English speaking Christian missionaries. Hence nineteenth century accounts of hoodoo by white authors call it Voodoo. However, by mid- twentieth century, with the publication of “Flash of the Sprit” (HAM 2) by Robert Farris Thompson, scholarly focus shifted to the Congo as the source of most of what anthropologists would call ‘African retentions’.

Neo-Hoodism

Neo-Hoodooism is the name Reed gave to the philosophy and aesthetic process he employs to take care of business on behalf of the maligned and the mishandled. Hoodoo the African American version of Voodoo. It is a misunderstood term that actually refers to traditional African religious practices. As they have reasserted themselves in the diaspora-appeals to Reed because of its mystery and its eclectic nature. Thus provides him with an appropriate metaphor for his understanding and realisation of art.

Needs of Neo- Hoodooism in Ishmael Reed’s Writings

Ishmael Reed needs Neo- Hoodooism in his writings because Neo-Hoodooism is, in many ways, a truly Black art, but at the same time, due to the undeniable mix of ingredients in the New World, it is also something else. Unlike those who argue for a Black essentialism, Reed sees this hybridity as a virtue, rather than a defect or betrayal. A deep immersion in Blackness is simultaneously an immersion in Americanness, given the extent to which, as a result of slavery and its aftermath. Africa helped to make America; and, considering the give-and-take of many other cultural influences is an experience of the unfolding of multiculturalism.

Leaving aside for a moment his contributions as an author to American literature, it seems safe to say that when the history of multiculturalism in the late twentieth century is written, Reed’s entrepreneurial and promotional efforts have played a meaningful role. One of his consistent gripes about militants of all persuasions is that they lack a sense of humour.

Reed's Iconoclasm

From the start, Reed's iconoclasm has been aimed not only at the Western tradition, which has attempted to monopolize the World at the expense of other versions of experiences, but at the Black tradition as well. The risk of censure and ridicule notwithstanding, Reed always has gone against the grain of the prevailing critical- polemical fashion-a sign of his fierce independence as an artist and thinker. He has insisted continually on his right to do things his own way, and possesses an uncanny skill at pinpointing the follies and inconsistencies of many aspects of our consensus reality.

Neo-Hoodooism is an undeniable mixture of ingredients of the New World. Instead of Black essentialism, Reed argues hybridity as a virtue. Reed's artistic vision is unique among African writers because his novels posit that Neo-Hoodooism, an African Voodoo derived aesthetic, evinces his post-colonial transformation of the English language, colonialist discourses, and imperial cultural systems into discourses of self-empowerment and self-representation.

In his writing, Neo-Hoodooism represents an attempt to rediscover pre-slavery and pre-colonial African languages and oral traditions to remedy the impact of physical and linguistic displacement that African Americans continue to experience in the United States. His novels are post-colonial writings whose production affects social, cultural, political, and historical contexts from African American, American multi-ethnic, Caribbean, African, Third-World, and global perspectives. Neo-Hoodooism is a post-colonial literary theory and a multi-cultural poetics. Reed reconnects the African diaspora to Africa within a global perspective.

Ishmael Reed's Literary Style

His literary style is best known for its use of parody and satire an attempt to create new myths and to challenge the formal conventions of literary tradition. His works have been criticized as incoherent, muddled, and abstruse, and hailed as multicultural, revolutionary, vivid, and containing a deep awareness of mythic archetypes. The aesthetic preoccupations of Neo-Hoodooism, his rubric work and methodology adapted from the African American folkloric tradition.

Neo-Hoodoo borrows from Ancient Egyptians ritual accessories of Ancient Egypt which are still sold in the House of Candles and Talismans and Stanton Street in New York, the Botanical Gardens in East Harlem, and Min and Mom on Haight Street in San Francisco which are the examples of underground centres found in ghettos throughout America. It comes in all styles and moods.

Hoodoo involved dancing, painting, poetry, in other words it is a multi-media, the kind of effect that he tries to get in his work and not only to desirable what he is doing, but also no one can put him in any other kind of bag. His work is different from that of a Christian novelist or a Christian poet or someone who is up-dating the Old Testament. Many of the Black writers have been influenced by Christianity and Communism.

Many of the African American writers broke away from these traditions and developed systems of their own. He can give us an example of cowboys and the West North African reference, in his work. He used western experience and western tales for his detective work. It focuses on an investigation that included several lucky breaks, though somewhat challenged. It is a classic example of his technique.

Hoodoo involves possession, art and food, dance, poetry, and all those things that have been going on a long time, and it has always been subversive Black and all the hoodoo people were in business and owned property which is a very important thing. Until the worker's paradise comes, people have to eat and they can support anyone who gives them jobs. And the people say, well the systems do not work, but the systems do work. White people got mortgages on their homes but it does not work for Blacks because of racism and so they get themselves in an impossible position. Hence, Hoodoo is a modern, sophisticated philosophy; it is always been open to the kind of change.

Reed's writing, although emerging as it does from a specific political, economic, social and cultural experience reaches out to the entire world, and has a good deal of relevance to the post colonial situations in India. He is the first one to write it down as Hoodoo, in a conscious attempt to use explanation. "Neo-Hoodoo" is international. He is ultimately reaching for a different set of aesthetic values in reaction to western literary standards. This particular subject surfaces periodically among academics in African American literary.

Thus, hoodoo as a literary method describes that human life can be made to have meaning and it aims at making a fictional art. An evolutionary pattern emerges and treats Neo-Hoodooism as the source of oppression for the Black people in white America. It believes that every man is an artist and every artist is a priest and it has seen a lot of things in this old world. A salient aspect of African American Writings in hoodoo is the view of joy and sorrow, love and hatred, courage and fear, life and death-the stuff with which great literature is made all over the world.

Conclusion

Reed's purpose in adopting the Neo-Hoodooism is an achievement of his writing because he is the high priest of Neo-Hoodooism, his philosophy of art and living derived from African religious practices and a select sprinkling of New World ingredients. Mere descriptions of his creative techniques fail to do justice to the results, which are often magical. Throughout this paper, I have analysed the satire of cultural politics and how Neo-Hoodoo aesthetics has been employed to attack the enlightenment ideas in the narratives under author consideration. Though, this paper aims at making an in-depth study of Hoodooism in Ishmael Reed's fictional art. An evolutionary pattern emerges as Ishmael Reed, treats Neo-Hoodooism as the source of oppression for Black people in white America. Neo-Hoodoo believes that every man is an artist and every artist is a priest and it has seen a lot of things in this old world.

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