

Reclamation of African-American Heritage in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*

D. Gnanasundar Sathrac

Assistant Professor

Dept. of English

Sri Vinayaga College of Arts and Science

Nagar - Ulundurpet

Villupuram

606107

gnanasundarsathrac@gmail.com

=====
Abstract

This paper attempts to concentrate on reclamation of African-American heritage in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) in the light of postmodern approaches. Reed represents a full spectrum of approaches to postmodern historical writing today, from the traditionally "realistic" to the radically anachronistic. Although Reed shares in the belief that history is textual and, therefore, available to him as material for his novel, he has very particular concerns for his brand of postmodern historical fiction, and the novel itself exemplifies diverse attitudes towards history.

Keywords: Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada*, History, African-American, Postmodern, Reclamation

From the early eighteenth century, history and literature have been considered separate and distinct narrative forms. Consequently, writers have approached - history with either reverence or hesitation. Historians revered the past, dedicating themselves to the recovery of its "truth," and historical novelists feared tampering with the "reality" that historians had given them. This tentative approach to history lingered into the contemporary age. Among the New Critics in the 1940s, for example, there was strong distaste for history, a feeling that history threatened the autonomy and purity of literature, and for a time the New Critics' achieved virtual orthodoxy in literary thinking. Historical ignorance and amnesia, therefore, became respectable mainstream attitudes. Not surprisingly, most of the major modern novelists shared in the ahistorical attitude, concentrating on the microscopic problems of the self or on isolated interpersonal relationships. But in the 1960s and 1970s, challenges to the accepted historical record and a changed concept of history itself provided the impetus for the reincorporation of historical material in contemporary fiction.

Ishmael Reed has also made a career out of examining the American past through his fictions, and he has become renowned in the process for his blatant revisionism. Reed's "revisions" of history are possible because he, too, views history as a text, and its documents as neither wholly objective nor completely "factual." But Reed's concern as a historical novelist is much more personally and racially oriented, centered upon his anger over the exclusion and/or appropriation of

an African-American history and literature by the white cultural establishment. For Reed, both the history and the literature of the Establishment are greatly lacking historical documentation, written by the dominant white culture, has marginalized the role of African-Americans to the point of non-existence; and the official canon of literature, also created by and for the predominantly white and Euro-centric culture, has denied and closed out the African-American writing tradition, which began with slave narratives. Therefore, Reed's major purpose in his novels is the reclamation and re-appropriation, in both history and literature, of the African-American experience.

Reed's concern with a re-appropriated and meaningful African-American past is especially evident in his fifth novel, *Flight to Canada* which explores through a rewriting of the slave narrative the history of slavery and its transformation into the present age. This novel is an excellent example of the extreme unconventionality in some postmodern historical fiction if only for its near-unrestrained use of postmodern practices such as parody, intertextuality, and blatant anachronism. But *Flight to Canada* is also perhaps the best model of a fully radical postmodern viewpoint, for Reed is by far the most radical in his approach to history and the most far-reaching in his content. Reed employs the techniques of the postmodern historical novelist with unprecedented zeal. Reed rejects verisimilitude and realism for the sake of social critique. To this end, Reed continually implies that the conventional historical record is faulty and incomplete because the contributions of African-Americans have been left out. In writing *Flight to Canada*, Reed is attempting to escape this "cultural slavery" by reclaiming the past, reshaping it to make central the black experience, which has been long marginalized, and pointing out that the racism and class-consciousness inherent in the Civil War era have not disappeared, but only changed form. Reed makes evident the misrepresentations and "errors" in the historical record and offers alternatives that are simultaneously absurd and viable: his interpretations are both provocative, obvious fictions and perceptive, bold analyses of American culture and history.

Reed's purpose as a postmodern historical novelist is more personal centred upon the belief that the body of African-American history and literature has been both excluded and appropriated by the white cultural establishment. Reed's use of history is, then, a method of reclaiming the whole of black cultural experience. Moreover, whereas Doctorow adheres largely to the traditions of historical fiction and strives to downplay any transgressions from the documented past, Reed intentionally foregrounds these transgressions and seeks to make them as apparent as possible. This self-conscious violation of the constraints upon historical fiction - a narrative method that Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, calls "revisionist writing" - is a common postmodern technique, but Ishmael Reed is perhaps its most blatant practitioner. An examination of Reed's writings is, therefore, integral to any consideration of postmodern historical fictions. But the combination of a personal concern with the reclamation of a cultural past and a blatant historical revisionism is best displayed in *Flight to Canada*.

Flight to Canada, set primarily during the Civil War era, offers us a version of the Deep South as a Camelot presided over by Massa (King) Arthur Swille, a sado-masochistic Virginian slave owner. Reed, however, has no sympathy for his historical setting or characters - Camelot is "the Wasp's Jerusalem" and Swille represents all that is Eurocentric and Negrophobic. In *Flight to*

Canada, Reed's sarcasm cuts deep, as in the following direct attack on Eurocentric historical myths: "Arthur and his knights [were] so refined that they launched a war against the Arabs for an objet d'art, yet treated their serfs like human plows" (15). Of course, since this situation is analogous to the treatment of blacks by whites, Reed is also showing his bitterness toward the oppressors of African-Americans.

The plight of the oppressed is embodied in *Flight to Canada* by the central character, Raven Quickskill. The novel mainly centres on Raven's escape from his slavery, his owner Swille's attempts at returning Raven to captivity, and Raven's experiences as a free man. For Reed, this simple plot is a metaphor which illuminates larger cultural issues: the history of slavery and the meaning of freedom for blacks, both then and now; the appropriation of a black history by white culture; the differing attitudes of blacks themselves towards both slavery and freedom; and, above all, the methods of reacquiring the past and achieving artistic freedom. In *Flight to Canada*, Reed has at his disposal material that is both epic (the Civil War itself) and tragic (e.g., President Lincoln's assassination), episodes that have provided an endless amounts of contradictory theses by historians and novelists. Thus, Reed is writing about control, of both fiction and history, and in doing so he strives to liberate the African-American experience from the shackles of conventional historical narrative.

The novel, *Flight to Canada*, begins with a brief narration by Raven, given in italics, which in places directly states what many postmodern historical fictionists, and Reed most especially, are now exploring in their writings; "Who is to say what is fact and what is fiction?" (7). Instead of accepting responsibility for the decision - a near impossibility anyhow, considering the often-contradictory nature of historical documentation - Reed keeps the reader asking, "Where does fact leave off and fiction begin?" and "Why does the perfectly rational, in its own time, often sound like mumbo-jumbo?" (10). However, the message is presented most emphatically by Raven's earlier assertion "It will always be a mystery, history. New disclosures are as bizarre as the most bizarre fantasy" (8). The eclecticism of *Flight to Canada* itself illuminates the truth of this statement.

In *Flight to Canada*, Reed attempts to wrestle the text of history away from those who would control it, i.e., Harriet Beecher Stowe and other abolitionists and historians who have "authenticated" slave narratives. Moreover, Reed is unwilling to allow white society to take historical credit for the freedom of the slaves or to further promote what he sees as a false history, i.e., that black slaves relied on the "Great Emancipator" Abraham Lincoln for their freedom. Therefore, in *Flight to Canada* we see Reed's characters liberating themselves, some through physical action and others, like Raven, through narrative.

Later in the novel, we learn Raven is actually writing the story of Uncle Robin, Swille's most trusted house slave. Raven, a fellow black man and slave, is asked to write Uncle Robin's story so that he may have the protection that Uncle Tom (i.e., Josiah Henson) did not have. Though Uncle Robin is modelled on Uncle Tom, Reed presents him much less superficially. Uncle Robin's public behaviour is that of the loyal and humble house-slave, but his private behaviour is manifest rebellion. His faithful, docile and unintelligent manner is only an illusion for the benefit of his oppressors; in

their absence, Uncle Robin cunningly plots against them. We are privileged, then, to see events and behaviors otherwise suppressed by an appropriated history.

Like Reed, Uncle Robin wants to clandestinely sabotage the establishment. His desires are realized at the end of the novel where we learn that he has gradually poisoned Swille over time with doses of Coffee-Mate and re-written Swille's will in his own favour. Uncle Robin's action may be seen as a linguistic short-circuiting of the process of dynastic inheritance, which suggests one of Reed's recurrent themes; the autonomy and continuity of (white) oppression can be broken, and freedom can be attained. There is ambiguity inherent in the term. For Uncle Robin, at this point, it is physical freedom, the complement of the more important spiritual freedom that he has had all along. In "The Black Image in the Black Mind Or *Flight to Canada*," Charles DeArman notes, "Freedom from the psychological, emotional, and intellectual cant imposed on [slaves] by their masters is the means by which to come to exist for one's self" (166). Uncle Robin has always known this. For him, slavery is a state of mind, one he escaped even in bondage.

Flight to Canada also illustrates that the stereotypical image of the black man as a heathen ignores the positive aspects of black diversity. Reed, therefore, fashions characters of many types, emphasizing that the slaves were not as one-dimensional as history and cultural stereotypes would lead us to believe. As we have seen, Raven, Leechfield, and 40s are each unique, individual characters. But Reed offers us as well the quintessential model of the historical slave in Cato, Swille's most loyal and dedicated servant, and perhaps the true Uncle Tom. To the other slaves, Cato is a "yellow Judas." Unlike Uncle Robin, his servitude is not feigned. All Cato's actions reflect his belief in the myth that all blacks must be -dutiful servants of whites, i.e., the social ideology of the Old South. In essence, *Flight to Canada* shows that Cato is his master's tool and surrogate he betrays his fellow slaves by informing on them, and he helps delete the "heathenism" of blacks by turning them onto the "Jesus cult" (53). Reed's sympathies obviously do not reside with Cato, for he has been mis-educated by white society into a belief that his race is somehow inferior. However, Cato does illustrate that the belief in racial inferiority may be ingrained in blacks; it has been perpetuated over the generations and has worked against the black masses by keeping them oppressed and subservient, even into the modern age. Essentially, history itself has shaped the collective mind-set. For perpetuating the belief in black inferiority, Reed points the finger of blame at blacks as well as whites, as is evident not only in his depiction of Cato, but also in his less than admirable portrayals of certain black characters in *Flight to Canada*.

Nevertheless, in *Flight to Canada*, Reed reserves the least flattering portrayals for whites, especially those associated with Swille, who are characterized as being either racist or ignorant or both. We see this illustrated in a scene in which two Nebraskaites who are working for Swille arrive in Emancipation City to claim Raven and return him to slavery. The Nebraskaites are familiar with Raven's poem and, in a surprisingly civil manner, discuss it with him, expressing their belief that it could not be autobiographical, for "that would have been too complicated for a slave" (63). By limiting the role of these two white men in this way, Reed is not only criticizing their views but also reversing the one-dimensionality imposed upon blacks by both history and literature. In short, Reed makes the white Nebraskaites into stock characters who can do no more than espouse conventional,

racist beliefs, which are, according to Reed, all too common and acceptable in contemporary American society.

Reed is far from ambivalent in his attitudes toward culture, and far from subtle in conveying them. Not surprisingly, his use of unconventional techniques to further his ambitious goal has not found easy acceptance. Because of his radical approaches to history and literature, Reed himself has been often dismissed for not being a writer of serious literature and his reputation is commonly subsumed under the often-derogatory euphemism of satirist. Although the eclecticism of Reed's work in general has led many critics to disregard it as mere farce and a forum for the author to display his virtuosity, such views ignore the intent behind a work like *Flight to Canada*. For Reed, and other postmodern historical novelists, many of the "facts" from history are both as fabricated and incredible as fiction. Fact and fiction overlap, and only when the two are juxtaposed, as they are in Reed's novel, can one see the similarities. And although Reed is self-consciously performing and parading his artistic abilities in his writings, his purpose runs much deeper than mere entertainment, and it is more profound. Reed is interested in a reformation of the imagination and the dominant cultural mindset. Reed's brand of revisionism thus makes use of history and foregrounds uncertainty in order to promote a viewpoint that helps collapse the Eurocentric and Negrophobia traditions in American culture. But Reed is also rewriting the past in order to destroy the traditional hierarchies of fact and fiction, thereby forcing us to challenge our acceptance of historical truths.

As *Flight to Canada* illustrates, writing in the novel is a means of escape to a better, if not perfect, world. And we cannot avoid the implication that this is true for the writer behind the novels, Ishmael Reed himself. In *Conscientious Sorcerers*, Robert Fox astutely suggests that such an endeavour is the "paradigmatic situation of the black literary artist in his/her struggle against silence and for self-definition" (71). In an analogous way, postmodernists such as Reed are acknowledging the fact that history itself may not be silenced - it forever struggles to be known. Their ironic recycling of prior forms, parodic reinterpretations of the past and intertextual transformations of history into fictional art give voice not only to this revision of history, but also to a new identity for Americans.

=====
References

- DeArman, Charles. "The Black Image in the Black Mind or *Flight to Canada*." *College Language Association* 33 (1989): 157-77.
Fox, Robert Elliot. *Conscientious Sorcerers*. New York: Greenwood P, 1987.
McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1987.
Reed, Ishmael. *Flight to Canada*. New York: Athenium, 1989.