

PORTRAYAL OF SLAVERY IN ISHMAEL REED'S *FLIGHT TO CANADA*

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Abstract

Flight to Canada (1976) depicts an American Civil War-era slave escaping to freedom via bus and airplane. By establishing the link between the narrative of Raven as an escaped slave and the late-twentieth-century practices of social, economic, and aesthetical discrimination of black artists, Reed combines his personal experience with the satire of the times. Reed's novels depict human history as a cycle of battles between oppressed people and their oppressors. Reed's novel can be defined as a post-modern narrative going beyond the historical representation of particular details towards a critique of the American slave system in general. The present paper tries to analyse the portrayal of slavery in *Flight to Canada*.

Key Words – Slavery, Aesthetical Discrimination, Post-Modern Narrative, Slave System, Surrealism, Satire, Political and Racial Commentary.

Most of the African American describes past slavery and their culture. Basically African American literature focused on the issue came to be known as slavenarratives. Slave's story of oppression and liberation were clearly portrayed in the history of African American people. A sketch of African cultures and the slave trade due to which many of the Africans lost their freedom were depicted in the works of African American writers. The writers also said about how the people had survived during the period of misery and trouble and also of how the African – American people had escaped from slavery. There are many good writers in this genre. Ishmael Reed is one such significant writer.

Ishmael Reed, in full Ishmael Scott Reed, (born February 22, 1938, Chattanooga, Tennessee, U.S.), American author of poetry, essays, novels, and plays who was perhaps best known for his fictional works, which were marked by surrealism, satire, and political and racial commentary. Reed's novels depict human history as a cycle of battles between oppressed people and their oppressors; the characters and actions are an antic mixture of inverted stereotypes, revisionist history, and prophecy. *Flight to Canada* (1976) depicts an American Civil War-era slave escaping to freedom via bus and airplane. In his novel, Ishmael Reed hazes the boundaries between the prose and poetry as well as the past and the present to express his satirical criticism of the legacy of slavery even after its official abolishment. By establishing the link between the narrative of Raven as an escaped slave and

the late-twentieth-century practices of social, economic, and aesthetical discrimination of black artists, Reed combines his personal experience with the satire of the times.

From the opening pages of his narrative, Ishmael Reed uses the category of time to create a link between the historical condition of slavery and the oppressive cultural environment of then-contemporary culture, which discriminated against him as a black writer. The novel starts with a poem entitled "Flight to Canada," in which the protagonist Raven Quickskill tells a story of his escape from slavery. "I flew in non-stop/ Jumbo jet this a.m. Had/ Champagne/ Compliments of the Cap'n/ Who announced that a/ Runaway Negro was on the/ Plane..." (3). There is a tinge of autobiography in the novel's protagonist, Raven Quickskill. Quickskill is a poet, and it is his writing that helps him to escape slavery on a Virginia plantation. The Civil War ends before Quickskill actually leaves, but his master, Arthur Swille, pursues him anyway. Swille is a seductive villain. A powerful international businessman and financier, he deals with both sides in the war, and treats President Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, and Generals Lee and Grant like toadies. The scenes with Lincoln produce some of Reed's most enjoyable satire. Reed's Lincoln is a bit of a hick, and his assistance to the slaves is shown to be political expediency. Nevertheless, Reed makes him likable: He defends his wife against cruel attacks by Swille, and though he takes Swille's money, he does not trust him. Lincoln's assassination is presented as Swille's revenge for freeing the slaves.

Raven, who acts as the author and the protagonist of the poem at the same time, tells about his past in an ironic key, making fun of the tragic episodes of history. This poem demonstrates Reed's attempts to reconsider traditional slave narratives. By intertwining the story of Raven's escape and his own searches for creative liberation, the author of the novel establishes the relationship between the subdual of African Americans under the system of slavery and the cultural practices of the twentieth century restricting the civil rights of black artists.

By comparing the cultural practices of commodification and exploitation of African Americans within the two historical periods, Reed juxtaposes his own destiny as an African American writer in the late twentieth century with Raven's situation as a slave narrator. Thus, the author uses the category of time to create the link between the practices of material and spiritual slavery and criticize its legacy in the late-twentieth-century community.

Reed in his *Flight to Canada* focuses on connecting the phenomenon of slavery with its aftermath in the form of contemporary discriminating practices. Criticizing the current legacy of slavery, Reed views the past in retrospection. On the other hand, the two distinct historical periods discussed in Reed's novel are closely interrelated.

According to Arthur, all slaves are the agents of disease. This statement helps the reader comprehend the extent of racial discrimination deeply rooted in the early centuries. The dark-skinned people are slaves, and they bring diseases because they are a bad omen. The following lies said by Arthur reveal this idea:

"Exactly, Robin, that disease-causing Negroes to run away. Of course, I'm not a sentimentalist. I won't sleep until they have returned. I mean, I am the last man to go against science, and if a slave is sick, then he must be rejuvenated – but can't just permit anyone to run over me like that." (89)

The depiction of nineteenth-century realities provides a valuable historical context, shedding light upon the preconditions of contemporary cultural practices. Reed's novel can be defined as a post-modern narrative going beyond the historical representation of particular details towards a critique of the American slave system in general. In that regard, Reed's work can be referred to as an example of new black aesthetics, confronting the traditional stereotypes characterizing middle-class blacks. Reed, as a black artist, does not allow his origin and cultural heritage to frame his destiny and tries to overcome the restrictions created by the dominant capitalist culture.

Analyzing the dangers posed by the commodity culture, Reed also discusses the ways in which this culture can be manipulated. For instance, Raven's poem "Flight to Canada" becomes a commodity, bringing Raven as its author a celebrity status. This aspect of self-promotion is satirized in the poem: "Passengers came up/ And shook my hand/ & within 10 min. I had/ Signed up for three

anti-slavery/ Lectures. Remind me to get an/ Agent” (3). Therefore, Raven is depicted as not only a slave narrator but also a cultural player who makes attempts to manipulate the existing commodity system to take advantage of it.

The quest for economic, social, and aesthetical liberty as the central theme of the novel *Flight to Canada* produced a long-lasting impression. By juxtaposing the narration of an escaped slave with his personal experience as a black artist, Reed blurs the lines between the past and the present to create a satirical critique of the dominant commodity culture and the preserved legacy of slavery.

The novel has a sort of cops-and-robbers feel to it, since during this time in America, slaves who escaped to the North were allowed to be captured and returned to the South. That's why Raven needs to make it all the way to Canada to be safe. The effect is that much of the novel involves chase sequences where Swille's men attempt to capture Raven.

While much of the novel is social satire, a major theme is the power of literature itself to emancipate. Reed, like Raven, has freed himself with his words, despite the ridicule of white and black enemies and misunderstanding friends. For a black artist, however, there is a further barrier: the dominant white culture that suppresses black art by ridicule, theft, and denial. Part of what Reed has achieved in *Flight to Canada* is returning the story of the escaped slave to its rightful owners, the former slaves themselves. Josiah Henson's autobiography foundered in obscurity; Harriet Beecher Stowe made it famous but by whitewashing it into sensationalism aimed at a white audience. *Flight to Canada* corrects Stowe's distortion, not by re-creating the clinical facts but by skewing it in another direction, providing the slave's-eye view through one hundred years of history.

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